Another Crescent for Iran to Exploit

written by Asher Fredman | 28.05.2024

While the United States and Israel focus on threats from the Iranian-dominated Shia crescent stretching from Lebanon to Yemen, Tehran is quietly laying the groundwork for a second Iranian crescent that will soon pose a grave threat to U.S. interests. In Africa's strategic Sahel region, Iran is taking advantage of Western weakness to deepen its economic and military influence, access critical materials, threaten moderate regimes, and undermine Israeli-Arab normalization.

The U.S., Israel, and their allies must take bold steps to counter this growing threat before it is too late.

The Sahel region has suffered widespread instability since 2020. Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, Gabon, Chad and Sudan have all seen coups or the rise of military governments, driven by economic difficulties, governmental mismanagement, frustration over continued Islamist terror, and in some cases, growing hostility towards the West. The U.S. has distanced itself from these new governments, creating a void which Iran, Russia and China have been eager to fill.

In Sudan, for example, Iran is seeking to take advantage of the ongoing civil war in order to expand its military presence. Sudan, under the leadership of Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, current chair of Sudan's Sovereignty Council, joined the Abraham Accords with Israel in October 2020, in return for U.S. promises of support. However, after al-Burhan dissolved Sudan's governing council in 2021, the U.S. backtracked on its promises and pressured Israel not to upgrade its relations with Khartoum. This lack of Western support contributed to the eruption of the devastating Sudanese civil war in 2023.

Al-Burhan continues to desire to move Sudan closer to the West and has no illusions about the Iranian regime. However, in the absence of Western support, he has been left with little choice but to turn to Tehran for the security assistance and aid necessary to defeat the rebels. Iran was willing to quickly provide Sudan with military support, while asking to establish a naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast. Such a base, together with those of Iran's Houthi proxy in Yemen, would

give Iran far-reaching control over one of the world's most vital waterways. To date, Sudan has resisted the Iranian request, but it is not clear how long Khartoum will be able to withstand Iranian pressure.

Iran is also seeking to expand its influence in Niger, home to 5 percent of the world's uranium output, a vital resource which can serve Iran's illicit nuclear program. There are indications that Iran has already taken steps towards acquiring Nigerian uranium. Similar efforts by Iran to deepen its ties are taking place in Mali, Burkina Faso, and other countries of the Sahel.

In addition, Iran has set its sights on Chad, which reestablished ties with Israel in 2019 but has since become disappointed by the lack of Western assistance, as well as on Mauritania, a vital gateway to Africa for Iran's bitter rival, Morocco.

A crescent of Iranian influence in the Sahel would allow Tehran to destabilize Egypt and threaten Israel and Saudi Arabia in a pincer movement from the north and south. Just as Iran and its proxies have sown terror and destruction across the Shia crescent stretching through Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, a second Iranian crescent would enable Tehran to further spread instability and violence.

Of course, Iran is not the only threat to Western interests in the Sahel. Russia has been quickly filling voids created by the exit of Western troops, sending former Wagner fighters and other military personnel to assist the new governments. China, too, continues to offer ready economic assistance to the region's leaders, who are desperately seeking solutions to their countries' socioeconomic woes.

The U.S. and its allies now face a choice. They can continue to distance themselves from the governments of the Sahel, while reducing or cutting off economic and military support. The result will be greatly increased Iranian, Russian, and Chinese influence in the region. The ayatollahs in Tehran will expand their efforts to create a new Iranian crescent, which will pose a grave threat to U.S. allies such as Israel, Egypt and Morocco, while giving Iran access to critical resources and undermining the Abraham Accords.

Instead, the U.S. and its allies, including Israel, should find ways to work with the region's governments and deliver on previous commitments, while continuing to urge these countries to improve their records on democracy and human rights. Such a strategic approach would help counter the expansion of Iran's nefarious influence in the Sahel, and prevent disastrous consequences for Africa, the

Middle East, and regional peace.

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