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Iran in Africa and Its Influence Portfolio: South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda

Irán en África y su portafolio de influencia: Sudáfrica, Zimbabue y Uganda

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Abstract

This article examines Iran's foreign policy toward Africa (2018–April 2026), with particular attention to the early effects of the war that erupted on 28 February 2026 between Iran, the United States, and Israel. It argues that Africa serves Tehran primarily as a political arena: widening diplomatic room for maneuver, generating legitimacy, and sustaining interlocution through an influence portfolio composed of official diplomacy, Global South platforms, public diplomacy/soft power, and selective strategic ties. Rather than treating the war as evidence of a consolidated reorganization of Iran's Africa policy, the article reads it as an initial stress test that makes existing mechanisms more observable: reputational caution, segmentation, legalistic public language, and higher sensitivity toward visible security cooperation. Through three cases—South Africa (BRICS and visibility thresholds), Zimbabwe (bilateral density and institutional follow-up), and Uganda (functional ties, NAM, and domestic segmentation)—the article shows that Iranian influence is uneven and depends on each partner's political value, domestic calculations, and the exposure costs amplified by war.

Keywords: Iran; Africa; foreign policy; BRICS; Global South; soft power; segmentation.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la política exterior iraní hacia África (2018–abril de 2026), con especial atención a los efectos iniciales de la guerra iniciada el 28 de febrero de 2026 entre Irán, Estados Unidos e Israel. Sostiene que África funciona para Teherán principalmente como arena política: ampliar margen diplomático, producir legitimidad y sostener interlocuciones mediante un portafolio de influencia compuesto por diplomacia oficial, plataformas del Sur Global, diplomacia pública/poder blando y vínculos estratégicos selectivos. Más que presentar la guerra como prueba de una reorganización consolidada de la política africana de Irán, el artículo la entiende como una prueba de estrés inicial que vuelve más observables mecanismos preexistentes: cautela reputacional, segmentación, lenguaje legalista y mayor sensibilidad frente a la cooperación de seguridad visible. A partir de tres casos—Sudáfrica (BRICS y umbrales de visibilidad), Zimbabue (densidad bilateral y seguimiento institucional) y Uganda (vínculos funcionales, NAM y segmentación doméstica)—el artículo muestra que la influencia iraní es desigual y depende del valor político de cada socio, de sus cálculos domésticos y de los costos de exposición amplificados por la guerra.

Palabras clave: Irán; África; política exterior; BRICS; Sur Global; poder blando; segmentación.

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1. Introduction

Africa has gained centrality in contemporary international politics not only as a terrain of geopolitical competition, but also as a space for legitimation, public diplomacy, and alliance diversification. For Iran, that centrality is particularly relevant because the continent offers room for maneuver to sustain interlocution, contest narratives of isolation, and signal that external pressure has not eliminated Tehran's diplomatic agency. This reading, however, requires caution after the strategic shock opened by the military escalation that erupted on 28 February 2026. The war did not create Iran's African policy, but it altered the costs attached to different forms of visibility and therefore offers a useful stress test for observing how Iran and its African partners manage controversial relationships under pressure.

In the first days of the conflict, the African Union Commission expressed deep concern about the escalation and the risk of regional spillover (African Union Commission, 2026). South Africa—a central case in this article—framed the situation as a threat to international peace and security and called for restraint and respect for international law (The Presidency, 2026; DIRCO, 2026). These early reactions do not prove a durable reorganization of African positions toward Iran. They do, however, reveal the type of public language, reputational caution, and legalistic framing that become more salient when the costs of association with Tehran rise.

The article asks how the 28 February shock appears to affect Iran's influence portfolio in Africa and what responses it generates among African partners as the reputational and strategic costs of relations with Tehran increase. Given the short post-war window covered here, the hypothesis is deliberately formulated as an expectation based on early evidence rather than as a claim about consolidated trends. The article expects that the conflict will not eliminate Iran's projection in Africa, but will make some mechanisms more visible: lower-exposure instruments—official diplomacy, Global South forums, and public diplomacy—become relatively more valuable, while visible strategic signals become more costly. African partners, in turn, are expected to respond less through full alignment or rupture than through segmentation, preserving selective channels while moderating public tone and avoiding visibility thresholds.

Methodologically, the article combines a comparative analysis of three cases with a synthetic map of other African settings to avoid excessive generalizations. The aim is not to

measure influence as control or domination, but as the capacity to sustain presence, legitimacy, and interlocution under adverse conditions. The synthetic map is used for external plausibility, not as a substitute for systematic case comparison.

In this article, the term "influence portfolio" (or simply "portfolio") is an analytical category used to describe a set of instruments that Iran activates flexibly in Africa, rather than a single, linear strategy. That portfolio includes official diplomacy (visits, memoranda, commissions), Global South platforms, public diplomacy and soft power, and selective strategic ties. The concept is intended to capture variation across instruments and partners without assuming that every contact produces alignment or that every public caution implies rupture.

2. Literature Review and Contribution

Interest in Africa within the study of Middle Eastern powers' foreign policies has grown, but it has done so unevenly. There is a sizeable body of work on the African activism of actors such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Israel, where the emphasis tends to fall on investment, infrastructure, security, or competition over strategic corridors (Özkan, 2012; Özkan & Akgün, 2010; Verhoeven, 2018). By contrast, the Iranian case emerges with less analytical density and, when it does appear, it tends to be captured by two biases: (a) a predominantly security-oriented reading and (b) a reading that reduces Iran's Africa policy to the need to "circumvent" isolation and sanctions (Lefebvre, 2019; Lob, 2016; Shahvar, 2020; Keynoush, 2021; Bagheri & Lob, 2022; Balci, 2026; Shariati & Rasouli, 2024). Both biases are partially correct, but insufficient. They are correct because Iran does operate under external pressure and because, at certain moments, it has sought to introduce selective strategic signals. Yet those readings leave in the background what, for Iran, is often the more immediate payoff of its African presence: legitimacy, interlocution, and narrative. Put differently, the useful question is not only "what does Iran get" in material terms, but "what can Iran do politically" with its African relationships at moments of high international vulnerability. Part of the recent literature, although from different approaches, converges with this intuition: Africa appears as a space to widen diplomatic margins, sustain a South–South narrative, and produce "proofs" of international interlocution, rather than as a single or coherent axis of foreign policy (Shahvar, 2020; Keynoush, 2021; Shariati & Rasouli, 2024).

In terms of temporal evolution, several works stress that Iran's presence has not been linear or constant. Some approaches periodize the relationship and interpret it as a scramble shaped by external conjunctures (sanctions, regional rivalries) and by shifting priorities within Iran (Lefebvre, 2019). Others adopt a more comparative lens by presidencies—for instance, contrasting Ahmadinejad's activism with lower intensity under Rouhani, including the idea of a relative disengagement in 2013–2021 (Zweiri & Manjang, 2020; Bagheri & Lob, 2022). Along similar lines, more recent analyses seek to operationalize the drivers of the relationship (ideology, market needs, strategic resources) using data on high-level visits, reinforcing the idea of an Africa policy composed of impulses and windows rather than a unified strategy (Balci, 2026).

A second recurrent gap is the simplified treatment of African agency. Many analyses assume that African partners align out of affinity, economic interest, or external pressure. This article proposes a more realistic alternative. Many African governments segment their relationship with Iran, accepting some components (diplomacy, sectoral cooperation, culture) and limiting others (visible security). This mechanism speaks to broader debates on hedging, non-alignment, strategic autonomy, and foreign policy diversification, although it is not identical to any of them. Hedging, for instance, stresses the management of risks and the avoidance of exclusive alignment (Kuik, 2021). Segmentation, as used here, is narrower, it refers to the practical separation of relationship tracks with a controversial partner in order to preserve benefits while limiting exposure. This approach also avoids relying on Sunni–Shia sectarian explanations. The argument does not require that cleavage to explain the observed behavior. Indeed, even the literature that examines cultural or religious diplomacy tends to describe a broader repertoire (diplomatic, media, educational) that cannot simply be reduced to confessional alignments, even if the debate sometimes drifts in that direction (Atmaca, 2017; Alibabalu & Sarkhanov, 2023).

A third limitation in the available literature is the tendency to describe Iran's Africa policy with static labels ("influence," "penetration," "alliances") without specifying mechanisms or evidentiary thresholds. This article focuses on simple mechanisms: visibility thresholds, segmentation, and the partner's differential political value. In doing so, it avoids two errors, assuming that politico-symbolic cooperation is equivalent to a strategic alliance, and assuming that public caution implies the absence of a relationship. Here, works that

explicitly question the idea of coherent and sustained "strategic partnerships" between Iran and Africa are useful, pointing to the absence of evaluative frameworks and dependence on implementers' initiatives or conjunctures (Shariati & Rasouli, 2024). The article also draws on the soft power and public diplomacy literature, but adapts those concepts to Iran's more limited repertoire. Soft power is conventionally associated with attraction (Nye, 2004), while public diplomacy emphasizes communication, relationship-building, and institutional presence (Melissen, 2005). In the Iranian case, these tools are less about broad cultural attraction than about maintaining routine contact, political recognizability, and a claim to diplomatic normality under pressure.

At the same time, there is a strand particularly relevant to this article's "portfolio" framework that is not purely security-focused. Work showing how Iran has instrumentalized cooperation and development as a tool of diplomatic insertion, Lob (2016) demonstrates empirically that, in certain periods, "developmentalist" activity (for instance, through Construction Jihad) was an especially effective means to establish relationships and project technical capacities; and a longer-term reading connects that dimension to the ambitions and constraints (hegemonic constraints) of Iran's Africa policy (Lob, 2016; Lob, 2026). This type of work is key to the argument because it allows us to conceptualize Iran's presence as a portfolio of tracks (development/civil sector, official diplomacy, soft power), not as a single security vector.

There is also literature more focused on subregions or cases that help to organize the map. The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea appear as spaces where Iran seeks to extend strategic depth and resist pressures from rivals, but with uneven results and high visibility costs (Corda, 2021; Marsai & Rózsa, 2024; Verhoeven, 2018). At the opposite extreme, Iran's relationship with South Africa has been treated as a case of normative tensions and contradictory foreign-policy principles, useful for thinking about "thresholds" and political costs when the relationship becomes visible (Onderco, 2016). And, in a more material register, there are studies that examine opportunities, limits, and patterns of exchange and dependence in Iran–Africa trade, helping to explain why certain tracks are activated or weakened as a function of sanctions and state capacity (Chimarizeni, 2017; Lob & Yilmazkuday, 2025).

The February–March 2026 war shock allows these arguments to be translated into initial expectations. On the one hand, the war raises the cost of associating with Iran; on the other, it

increases Iran's need to sustain legitimacy and frameworks of interlocution. The combination of both forces makes the Iranian portfolio more observable: low-cost instruments (high-level diplomacy, institutionalized contact, and public diplomacy) should become relatively more valuable, while visible strategic ties should become more costly for African partners. This tension appears both in institutional African reactions (African Union Commission, 2026) and in national responses, such as South Africa's (DIRCO, 2026; The Presidency, 2026).

In terms of contribution, the article offers three inputs. First, it proposes an operational framework (influence portfolio, segmentation, and visibility threshold) that allows the Iran–Africa relationship to be read without falling into economistic or exclusively security-driven reductionisms. Second, it introduces the 2026 war as an initial stress test that makes certain mechanisms clearer, without claiming that a consolidated post-war pattern can already be demonstrated. Third, it combines case studies with a synthetic map of additional African evidence, strengthening external plausibility without turning the text into an exhaustive Africanist exercise.

The expected outcome is not to close the debate, but to offer a detailed and verifiable explanation that can be extended to other cases and other conjunctures: how Global South diplomacy operates when a major conflict raises the costs of visibility; and how segmentation strategies are expressed in an environment where the symbolic (legitimacy) and the strategic (security) can come into tension.

3. Analytical Framework and Research Design

This article analyses Iran's relationship with Africa as a problem of political influence under constraints. Influence is not understood as control, domination, or automatic alignment, but as the capacity to sustain presence, legitimacy, and interlocution in settings where association costs can rise quickly. This limited definition is important because many observable traces of Iran's Africa policy—visits, memoranda, conferences, statements, institutional committees—do not by themselves prove deep influence. They are treated here as evidence of access, framing, recognition, or institutionalized contact. They become analytically relevant when they show patterned continuity, are politically framed by the actors involved, or generate costs that require management. To operationalize this idea without relying on purely material measures, the text works with four definitions.

First, influence portfolio: an analytical category used to capture the flexible repertoire of instruments that Tehran activates depending on the type of partner and the context. The portfolio includes (a) official/interstate diplomacy (visits, memoranda, commissions, statements), (b) public diplomacy and soft power tools (culture, education, narratives, institutional presence), and (c) selective strategic ties (gestures in security or maritime cooperation) whose payoff is mainly political and symbolic, but whose cost can surge if they become too visible. The point is not that Iran always applies the three tracks, or that all of them generate the same level of influence. The argument is that Iran combines, prioritizes, and adapts them according to partner value and exposure costs.

Second, segmentation: the typical way in which many African partners manage ties with an actor under high international controversy. Segmentation implies accepting cooperation on some tracks (for instance, civil-sector cooperation, diplomatic contact, or a Global South narrative) and limiting others (especially visible security), or sustaining discreet channels while adopting a prudent or legalistic public language. Unlike full alignment, segmentation preserves autonomy; unlike rupture, it preserves contact. It is therefore close to, but more specific than, broader concepts such as hedging or non-alignment (Kuik, 2021).

Third, visibility threshold: the point at which a relationship ceases to be manageable as diplomatic continuity and begins to generate domestic or external political costs. In this article, a threshold is identified empirically when one or more of the following signals appear: public controversy, parliamentary or media criticism, official inquiry, institutional review, diplomatic distancing, damage-control language, or a marked shift toward legalistic public framing. The South African episode linked to BRICS+ naval drills (January 2026) is the clearest example of this mechanism, but the same criteria guide the interpretation of the other cases.

Fourth, soft power/public diplomacy: used here in an operational sense, not as "mass cultural capacity." In the Iranian case, soft power should not be read simply through the conventional language of attraction (Nye, 2004). It tends to be low-intensity but politically useful; it produces routine contacts, normalizes interlocution, and allows presence to be sustained when visible strategic cooperation becomes more costly. Public diplomacy, in this sense, refers less to persuasion of broad publics than to relationship-building, institutional presence, and the production of diplomatic normality (Melissen, 2005).

On the basis of these definitions, the study design is built. The article uses a qualitative comparative design with episode tracing across three main cases and a synthetic map of secondary cases. The comparative logic is one of contrast: countries are selected because they offer different political value to Iran, activate different visibility costs, and reveal different forms of African agency under a war shock. The cases are therefore not intended as a representative sample of Africa, but as analytically differentiated modalities of Iran's portfolio.

South Africa represents the case of multilateral prestige and visibility, it provides Iran with access to a high-symbolic-value Global South setting such as BRICS, but it also shows clear thresholds when the relationship moves toward visible security.

Zimbabwe represents the case of bilateral density and political affinity, it provides receptivity and, above all, the capacity for institutional follow-up (commissions, reviews, re-visits), with less global prestige but greater bilateral continuity.

Uganda functions as an intermediate case, it combines functional cooperation and non-aligned diplomatic sociability through NAM, while also showing how war can expose mixed signals and domestic fragmentation inside a partner state.

Table 1: Comparative logic of the three main cases

Case	Political value and dominant track	Visibility risk, post-28F signal, and comparative contribution
South Africa	High-symbolic-value Global South setting: BRICS-related prestige, diplomatic normality, and selective strategic signaling.	High risk when cooperation becomes security-visible. The naval-drills inquiry and post-28F legalistic language show the visibility threshold of high-prestige ties.
Zimbabwe	Bilateral density and political receptivity: MoUs, commissions, re-visits, and civil-sector cooperation.	Medium/lower risk unless framed as explicit alignment. Public caution after 28F suggests continuity under prudence and the limits of symbolic evidence.

Uganda	Functional access and NAM sociability: practical cooperation plus non-aligned multilateral infrastructure.	Mixed risk due to domestic coherence. Contradictory political and military signals show domestic fragmentation as a limit to Iran's political leverage.

Periodization is part of the design. The article works with two windows: 2018–27 February 2026 and 28 February–April 2026. The year 2018 marks the beginning of a new stage for Iranian foreign policy following the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear deal (JCPOA) and the launch of the "maximum pressure" strategy (reimposition and tightening of sanctions) by the Trump administration. That structural change reshapes Tehran's incentives to diversify partners and seek extra-Western legitimacy, and it offers a clear baseline against which to compare the 2026 shock.

The second window functions as a preliminary "stress test". If the war raises reputational and political costs, we should observe (a) greater public prudence and legalistic language among African partners, (b) greater relative relevance of low-exposure instruments (official diplomacy, Global South forums, and public diplomacy), and (c) higher sensitivity to visible strategic gestures. Thus, the war is not only context; it is an event that makes the threshold/segmentation mechanism more observable. Given the short window, however, these observations are treated as early signals rather than as evidence of durable realignment.

Empirically, the article privileges low-ambiguity evidence and hierarchizes sources: (a) official African and multilateral statements to capture public frames and positions, (b) international news agencies for basic facts and chronologies, (c) local sources for domestic nuance, treated cautiously when they express signals rather than consolidated state positions, and (d) Iranian official or diplomatic sources as evidence of Iranian framing and intention, not as neutral proof of effective influence. The synthetic map (Section 7) serves an external plausibility function. It prevents the argument from depending only on three cases without turning the text into an exhaustive Africanist study. Public evidence is uneven across African countries; the war increases informational noise; and "influence" cannot be measured as control. The article's wager is therefore more modest, to offer a verifiable explanation of how an influence portfolio may be recalibrated under war shock, and how African segmentation appears when visibility costs rise.

4. South Africa: BRICS, Global South Legitimacy, and Visibility Thresholds

South Africa occupies a singular place in Iran's African relations because it combines international prestige, political visibility, and membership in a multilateral framework of high symbolic value such as BRICS. For Tehran, this does not amount to automatic support, nor does South Africa operate as a simple transmission belt from Iran to the BRICS as a whole. Its value is more mediated and contingent. It offers a setting in which Iran can project diplomatic normality, Global South belonging, and the capacity for interlocution in an adverse environment (BRICS Brasil, 2025). In the logic of the influence portfolio, South Africa represents the track of multilateral prestige, a partner that provides narrative and status more than material dependence.

South Africa's main value for Iran does not lie in hard bilateralism, but in the framework and the political symbolism around it. BRICS amplifies the message that Iran is not completely isolated and that it can insert itself—at least symbolically—into alternative architectures of political coordination. This is the "high visibility" dimension of the portfolio. It produces legitimacy and reduces the costs of interlocution by allowing the relationship to be presented as part of a wider Global South sociability, rather than as an exceptional bilateral tie. Yet precisely because the framework is visible, it can also generate costs when the relationship moves from diplomatic sociability to security signaling (BRICS Brasil, 2025).

4.1. From Prestige to Cost: the BRICS+ Naval Episode and Post-28F 2026 Segmentation

The same relationship that produces legitimacy also displays limits when it crosses a visibility threshold. The episode of the "BRICS Plus" naval drills in January 2026 is central because it makes that mechanism observable. It should not be treated as proof that South Africa had become strategically aligned with Iran; rather, it shows how a relationship that is manageable at the level of multilateral sociability can become politically costly when translated into visible security cooperation. Influence depends not only on how many contacts exist, but on how costly it is to make them visible.

China, Russia, and Iran launched "BRICS Plus" naval exercises near Cape Town, framed by the South African government as maneuvers oriented toward maritime cooperation. That

framing reveals an explicit attempt to keep the episode in a "technical" register, avoiding its reading as a geopolitical positioning. However, domestic controversies erupted, showing that the executive did not fully control the political meaning of a visible security signal (Reuters, 2026a). On 16 January 2026, it was reported that the South African Ministry of Defense opened an inquiry into Iran's participation to determine whether President Ramaphosa's instructions had been ignored or misinterpreted (Reuters, 2026b). This turns the drills into a "critical event", it is not only maritime cooperation, but a case in which the visibility of a tie with Iran activates domestic mechanisms of control, review, and damage management (Reuters, 2026b).

Analytically, the episode reveals the threshold in three ways: (1) it reclassifies the relationship—once the tie moves into visible security it ceases to be read as diplomatic routine; (2) it triggers domestic contestation over meaning, raising the cost of sustaining the signal; and (3) it produces institutional containment, because once the threshold is reached the relationship requires explicit damage-control mechanisms (Reuters, 2026a; Reuters, 2026b).

Importantly, this occurs before the war of 28 February 2026. Its analytical value therefore doubles, it anticipates that, under tension, even a tie of high symbolic value (South Africa/BRICS) faces limits when cooperation becomes strategically visible. After the outbreak of war, that threshold does not disappear; it becomes more sensitive. This logic is reinforced by South Africa's post-28F 2026 positioning, it called for restraint and respect for international law, mainly Article 51 of the UN Charter but without mentioning any specific country (The Presidency, 2026), and expressed "deep concern" about escalation in the Gulf and the risk of regional widening (DIRCO, 2026). For the article's argument, the sequence is consistent with segmentation, South Africa can sustain the Global South/BRICS frame and, simultaneously, adopt prudent and legalistic language when the reputational cost of association with Iran increases. The case therefore contributes to the comparison by showing the upper limit of symbolic value. Prestige matters, but visible security cooperation can activate containment and damage-control mechanisms (DIRCO, 2026; The Presidency, 2026).

5. Zimbabwe: Bilateral Density, Political Affinity, and Institutional Follow-up

Zimbabwe is a key comparative case because it represents a modality of Iranian projection different from South Africa's, less multilateral prestige, but greater bilateral density and, above all, a tie that Tehran can present as functional and institutionally followed up. In an

influence portfolio, not all partners are valuable for the same reasons. South Africa is valuable for platform (BRICS) and global visibility; Zimbabwe is valuable for political receptivity, a narrative of solidarity under pressure, and the possibility of sustaining continuity through commissions and periodic reviews without turning the relationship into a high-profile geopolitical gesture.

5.1. The 2023 Package and What It Reveals about Iran's "Portfolio"

The structuring episode for the case is the visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Harare (July 2023), at the end of his Africa tour. Iran and Zimbabwe signed 12 memoranda of understanding, including the announcement of a tractor manufacturing plant involving an Iranian company and a local partner, as well as cooperation on energy, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and R&D. The number of agreements indicates that Zimbabwe presents itself as a partner willing to materialize the relationship in a broad package, not only in political declarations (Reuters, 2023b).

The Iranian foreign ministry's communiqué allows the scope of those documents to be specified and, in doing so, reinforces the relevance of the case for the argument. According to official information, the package included cooperation on oil and energy; telecommunications; social security and insurance; labor and employment; higher education, science and research/technology; agriculture and fisheries; food and medicines; medical equipment; occupational safety; child protection; empowerment of persons with disabilities; as well as the specific agreement between Iran Tractor Company and Zimbabwe Magai Company (Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

This is crucial to avoid economizing the case. What matters is not only that productive sectors appear, but that the package creates a civil-sector bureaucratic density (labor, social protection, health, education/science) that may function as an infrastructure of continuity. This should not be overstated as evidence of concrete policy effects in all areas. The evidentiary value of the package is more limited but still important, it shows access, political receptivity, and an institutionalized repertoire of low strategic-cost tracks, which are more likely to survive when visibility thresholds in security rise.

The domestic Zimbabwean framing helps explain why that package is politically viable. Official coverage presented the MoUs as a deepening of ties between two countries that

perceive themselves as targets of Western sanctions, justifying cooperation as an exercise of sovereignty and autonomy. That framing matters because it suggests the relationship is not only technical, but also politically legitimable for the receiving leadership (The Herald, 2023).

5.2. Evidence of Follow-up and Institutional Continuity

The second reason why Zimbabwe deserves to be a central case is that there are verifiable traces of follow-up—something that is often absent in purely declarative relationships. These traces do not by themselves prove deep influence, but they do indicate that the relationship has institutional routines beyond a single presidential visit. The text highlights three signals:

1. Prior infrastructure: before Raisi's visit, the relationship was already channeled through a Joint Permanent Commission on Cooperation (JPCC), with reference to a 9th session held in Tehran in 2023. This suggests we are not facing an improvised relationship, but an existing institutional track (The Herald, 2026a).
2. High-level re-visits: the presence of Vice President Constantino Chiwenga in Tehran (April 2024) to lead Zimbabwe's participation in the Iran–Africa International Economic Conference, presented as continuity of the 2023 MoUs, is evidence that the relationship had political—not only bureaucratic—follow-up (The Herald, 2024).
3. Mid-term review: the preparation of a mid-term review of the Joint Commission (December 2025), with an assessment of progress and the setting of new priorities, is the best indicator of continuity: agreements are not only announced, but also evaluated and reprogrammed (TV BRICS, 2025).

In sum, Zimbabwe represents the bilateral-affinitarian modality of the Iranian portfolio, a partner useful not for global prestige, but for political receptivity and the ability to sustain a tie through continuity mechanisms. Its value for Iran is therefore not that it provides a strategic alliance, but that it helps preserve the image and practice of diplomatic normality under pressure.

5.3. Post-war: Public Caution and Plausible Institutional Continuity

The outbreak of the war between Iran, the United States, and Israel tends to raise the reputational cost of associating with Tehran and favors more cautious public responses. In

Zimbabwe's case, the government adopted a prudent register by signaling that it was closely following developments after the attacks (The Herald, 2026b). This evidence is limited and should not be read as proof of a consolidated post-war adjustment. It does, however, fit the segmentation mechanism: public tone becomes cautious, while the relationship's low-exposure infrastructure—commissions, civil-sector cooperation, follow-up diplomacy, and participation in multilateral or economic formats—can plausibly be preserved. Precisely for this reason, the 2024–2025 follow-up matters. It suggests that Zimbabwe has institutional channels that may allow continuity through visibility adjustments rather than abrupt discontinuity.

6. Uganda: Functional Ties, Non-aligned Sociability, and Domestic Segmentation under War

Uganda functions as an intermediate case because it combines three elements that together make it especially useful for an analysis of an influence portfolio under war shock. First, it is part of the same 2023 diplomatic impulse (Raisi's tour) and allows observation of a low-profile functional relationship. Second, as chair of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), it offers a Global South sociability setting that reduces the costs of interlocution for Iran. Third, after the outbreak of war, the case shows mixed signals and, above all, domestic segmentation —not only between states, but within the political–military apparatus itself. This does not necessarily indicate a coherent Ugandan strategy; it may also reflect domestic fragmentation or weak message discipline. Either way, it complicates Iran's ability to politically capitalize on the relationship.

6.1. Functionality (2023): Density without Strategic Visibility

During Raisi's visit to Uganda in July 2023, four agreements were signed and cooperation in areas of practical interest was discussed (Reuters, 2023a). The importance of the episode, from the article's framework, does not lie in technical detail but in the type of tie that is being built: a relationship presentable as civil-sector and development cooperation, with a low symbolic charge of alignment.

In comparative terms, Uganda plays a different role than Zimbabwe. While Harare lends itself to a broad package with a more explicit political component, Kampala fits better as a partner where Iran can seek density through the accumulation of practical agreements. In the

article's language, this functional track creates channels, contact bureaucracies, and diplomatic routines without necessarily raising the visibility threshold. This does not prove influence in a strong sense, but it does show the kind of low-exposure access that becomes more valuable when reputational costs rise.

The reference to Iranian support for a planned refinery should be read as an indicator of functional logic, not as an economistic variable. An offer of technical expertise has a specific political payoff: it signals state capacity despite external pressure; enables cooperation that can be justified as "technical"; and opens sustained interlocution (ministries, agencies, firms) that tends to survive crisis conjunctures better than visible strategic signals (Reuters, 2023a).

6.2. NAM (2025) and War (2026): Global South Infrastructure and Mixed Signals

Uganda assumed the NAM chairmanship for 2024–2027 and organized ministerial meetings in Kampala that explicitly affirmed Global South solidarity. In a communiqué of 15 October 2025, the Ugandan chair presented the mid-term ministerial review meeting as a space for coordination and reaffirmation of principles such as sovereignty, equality, and non-interference (NAM Uganda Chairmanship, 2025). For the argument, this matters because Iran seeks not only bilateral ties but also platforms where contact and narrative are less costly.

From Iran's perspective, forums such as NAM perform a structural function, they reduce the cost of interlocution by enabling bilateral meetings on the margins of multilateral gatherings; they facilitate photos and statements without each interaction having to be justified as an exceptional bilateral decision; and they offer a discursive frame in which Iran can present itself as part of a constellation of states that claim autonomy and criticize unilateralism. In short, NAM functions as political infrastructure to sustain presence and legitimacy when other portfolio tracks become more sensitive.

War, however, reveals the limits of the Ugandan case as a stable partner. In March 2026, President Museveni stated that Uganda would not get involved in wars he described as tribal wars between Jews and neighbors, in the context of coordinated U.S. and Israeli attacks against Iran (Bagala, 2026). In parallel, Uganda's military chief publicly stated that Uganda would join the war on Israel's side if Israel faced defeat (Demir, 2026). Uganda's analytical value lies precisely in this coexistence. It reveals a mechanism related to, but distinct from, interstate segmentation: domestic fragmentation. Under war shock, contradictory signals inside the

partner state increase uncertainty and reduce Iran's ability to leverage the tie politically. Thus, Uganda is not simply a case of segmentation by design; it is a case in which functional ties and non-aligned sociability coexist with fragmented domestic signaling.

Uganda thus contributes to the comparison a type of relationship that is neither multilateral prestige (South Africa) nor bilateral affinitarian density (Zimbabwe), but a combination of functionality, non-aligned sociability, and domestic ambivalence. That mix is especially useful for the argument because it shows how, under wartime conditions, visibility costs can emerge not only between governments, but also within the political arenas of partner states.

7. Synthetic African Map: Extensions of the Portfolio beyond the Three Cases

To avoid the argument depending exclusively on three cases, this section offers a synthetic map of other manifestations of the Iranian portfolio in Africa. Its function is limited and explicit, it provides external plausibility and illustrates variation beyond the three main cases. It does not test each case with the same depth, nor does it treat all examples as equally probative. The examples below show that the portfolio's three tracks (political diplomacy/narrative, selective strategic ties, and public diplomacy/soft power) appear with different weights across African countries and forums, while the war appears likely to increase segmentation and the cost of visibility.

At the platform level, Nigeria is a useful example. Nigeria is part of the D-8 group—the Developing Eight—along with Iran and six other Muslim-majority countries: Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Turkey (Reuters, 2024a). In June 2024, a D-8 statement called on the United States to lift its veto on full Palestinian membership in the United Nations, showing how the regional agenda (Gaza/Palestine) projects into Global South frameworks where Africa is also present (Reuters, 2024b). After the 2026 war, a D-8 summit planned in Indonesia was postponed because of the conflict, illustrating how escalation reshuffles even peripheral multilateral diplomacy (Reuters, 2026d).

At the bilateral-institutional level, Cameroon illustrates low-profile political institutionalization. In February 2025, an Iranian diplomatic site reported the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding for a Joint Political Committee between Iran and Cameroon, as well as meetings between the Director General for Africa and the Cameroonian foreign

minister (Embassy of Iran, Abidjan, 2025). Also in Cameroon, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported its delegation's presence at the Council of Foreign Ministers meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in Yaoundé in August 2024, reinforcing the idea that Iran uses African forums and venues to sustain narrative and contacts (Iran MFA, 2024).

Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo show a pattern of discursive legitimacy framed around sovereignty and non-interference. Iranian sources reported a meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran and Mozambique in Kampala in October 2025, on the margins of the NAM ministerial meeting (Mehr News Agency, 2025). In March 2025, an Iranian statement also supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the role of African solution mechanisms (Mehr News Agency, 2025b). Both examples point to the use of Africa as a stage for political positioning rather than as a space for hard alliances.

Namibia and Senegal illustrate the use of diplomatic memory and bilateral commissions. In 2021, Iran's foreign ministry reported a meeting with Namibia's foreign minister in which Iran underscored its historic support for the country's independence and Africa's place in the foreign policy of the new Iranian administration (Iran MFA, 2021). In Senegal, the Iran–Senegal Joint Economic Commission was reactivated in December 2023 after more than a decade, with agreements in agricultural, scientific, and cultural areas (Tasnim News, 2023).

Angola shows a double register, (a) as a potential economic interlocutor; and (b) as a symbol of African institutional visibility within Iran's agenda. In November 2024, Iran's embassy in Pretoria reported a meeting between the non-resident ambassador and the president of the Angolan Chamber of Commerce, highlighting cooperation possibilities (Embassy of Iran, Pretoria, 2024). And in February 2025, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted a message on X highlighting Iran's role as an observer to the African Union and congratulating Angola on assuming the organization's presidency (Iran MFA, 2025).

An additional element of this portfolio, combining public diplomacy and politico-business sociability without relying on hard alliances, is the Iran–Africa conferences organized in Tehran. In April 2024, Iran's presidency presented the Second Iran–Africa Economic Conference as a sign of political will to deepen ties, and Raisi explicitly framed the meeting as an expression of that will despite external pressures (President.ir, 2024). Beyond the economic

component, these events function as a device of diplomatic visibility: they bring delegations together, facilitate contacts, and reinforce a South–South cooperation narrative.

The 2026 war does not eliminate this type of instrument, but early evidence suggests that it may change its relative payoff, it may gain value as a low strategic-cost channel (contact and narrative) and lose value if interpreted as explicit political alignment. For the argument, the key is not whether these conferences replace other relationships, but how they broaden the repertoire of interaction when visibility thresholds in the strategic domain become stricter.

In this sense, Iran–Africa conferences help nuance the debate on influence, they are not a substitute for alliances, but they are a mechanism to produce diplomatic routine and selective visibility. In segmentation terms, they allow many African partners to participate in a relatively technical or economic cooperation format without necessarily assuming visible strategic commitments. That makes them especially useful in periods of high tension, when the costs of visible security rise and political space is sought through alternative channels.

For this reason, in the post-2026 setting, it is more plausible to expect a shift toward these kinds of formats than toward high-profile strategic demonstrations, although this remains an analytical expectation rather than a consolidated trend.

Taken together, these mentions suggest that the Iranian portfolio operates in layers: (a) platforms and diplomatic sociability (BRICS, NAM, D-8; and forums where Africa appears as a venue, such as the OIC in Yaoundé); (b) low-profile bilateral institutional mechanisms (political committees, joint commissions); and (c) a discourse of sovereignty and legitimacy. In the post-28 February 2026 context, the expected pattern is that Iran will privilege low-cost tools and that African partners will intensify segmentation, avoiding overly visible strategic signals. Table 2 summarizes these examples while distinguishing between stronger evidence of institutionalized ties and more modest indicators of diplomatic contact or symbolic positioning.

Table 2: Iran's Africa influence portfolio: track, evidence, and post-28F 2026 reading

Country	**Dominant track**	Evidence/status	Post-28F reading

South Africa	Multilateral prestige (BRICS) + strategic threshold	BRICS+ naval drills and inquiry (Reuters, 2026b); official statements (DIRCO, 2026). Status: strong episode-based evidence.	High symbolic value for Iran; high sensitivity when visible security is involved.
Zimbabwe	Bilateral affinity + diplomatic density	12 MoUs (Reuters, 2023b); follow-up mechanisms; public caution (The Herald, 2026b). Status: moderate evidence of institutionalized contact, not proof of deep policy effects.	Bilateral receptivity, but post-war public tone tends toward prudence while low-exposure channels may continue.
Uganda	Functional ties/NAM + mixed signals	4 agreements (Reuters, 2023a); NAM (NAM Uganda Chairmanship, 2025); 2026 signals (Bagala, 2026; Demir, 2026). Status: moderate/indicative evidence.	Domestic segmentation/fragmentation reduces Iran's ability to leverage the relationship politically.
Nigeria	Global South sociability (D-8) + high-level diplomacy	D-8 and Palestine agenda (Reuters, 2024a; Reuters, 2024b); summit affected by war (Reuters, 2026d). Status: platform-level evidence.	Multilateral interaction continues, but platforms become more sensitive to escalation.
Cameroon	Low-profile political institutionalisation	MoU Joint Political Committee (Embassy of Iran, Abidjan, 2025); OIC in Yaoundé (Iran MFA, 2024). Status: indicative institutional evidence.	Low visibility costs; useful to keep channels open during wartime.

Mozambique	NAM/Global South + diplomacy	Foreign ministers' meeting in Kampala (Mehr News Agency, 2025). Status: modest diplomatic-contact evidence.	Favors discursive continuity; low strategic exposure.
DRC	Discursive legitimacy (sovereignty/non-interference)	Statement on sovereignty and territorial integrity (Mehr News Agency, 2025b). Status: symbolic/framing evidence.	Low-cost signal; adds narrative more than alliances.
Namibia	Diplomatic memory + historical legitimacy	Bilateral meeting and historical support (Iran MFA, 2021). Status: symbolic/diplomatic memory evidence.	Long-term symbolic capital; discreet in wartime context.
Senegal	Joint commission + sectoral diplomacy	Joint commission reactivated (Tasnim News, 2023). Status: moderate institutional evidence.	"Technical" cooperation can continue, avoiding visible strategic components.
Angola	Economic channel + African institutional visibility	Chamber of commerce (Embassy of Iran, Pretoria, 2024); AU observer (Iran MFA, 2025). Status: indicative economic/institutional evidence.	Potential low-risk partner; beware over-visibility during war.
Kenya	High-level diplomacy (2023 tour) + sectoral cooperation	Start of the 2023 Africa tour and MoUs (Reuters, 2023a). Status: indicative diplomatic evidence.	Example of pragmatism; tends toward segmentation to avoid external costs.

Source: Author's elaboration based on various official sources and news agencies

8. Conclusion

This article argued that Iran's relationship with Africa is better understood as an influence portfolio, rather than as a uniform "Africa strategy", aimed at producing legitimacy, sustaining interlocution, and widening diplomatic margins under adverse conditions. The war that began on 28 February 2026 does not refute that premise. It provides an initial stress test that makes the portfolio more observable because it raises the exposure costs of ties with Tehran and makes public tone, instrument selection, and visibility thresholds more politically sensitive.

The comparison between South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda suggests three main results. First, Iranian influence in Africa is differential, it depends on the partner's political value and on the cost associated with making the relationship visible. South Africa offers multilateral prestige (BRICS) but shows limits when the tie crosses into visible strategic terrain; Zimbabwe provides bilateral density and institutional continuity, useful for sustaining receptivity even under greater public caution; Uganda shows a functional and intermediate modality, marked by ambivalences and mixed signals that reduce Iran's ability to leverage the tie politically. Second, early evidence suggests that the war increases the cost of the visible strategic track and makes low-exposure instruments (official diplomacy, Global South platforms, and public diplomacy) relatively more valuable. Third, African agency is expressed not only as reaction to Iran, but also as selective instrumentalization. Governments preserve channels that serve their own diplomatic, economic, or autonomy-oriented objectives while avoiding gestures that raise exposure costs.

The synthetic African map reinforces this reading by showing that the portfolio operates in layers beyond the three cases: (a) platforms and diplomatic sociability (BRICS, NAM, D-8 and forums hosted on African soil), (b) low-profile bilateral mechanisms (political committees, joint commissions), and (c) a recurring narrative of sovereignty, non-interference, and South–South cooperation. Under post-28F 2026 conditions, the most plausible pattern is not the disappearance of the tie, but its movement toward lower-exposure formats and greater public ambiguity, with variation depending on each partner's domestic context. This remains a cautious inference because the post-war window examined here is short.

In explanatory terms, the argument rests on three dynamics observable in the available public evidence: (1) an intensification of Iran's search for interlocution and legitimacy beyond

the Euro-Atlantic axis; (2) the existence of visibility thresholds that make strategic gestures more costly and activate institutional containment or discursive prudence; and (3) the possibility of domestic fragmentation among African partners, producing contradictory signals and complicating linear readings of the "Global South" as a bloc. Taken together, this suggests that Iranian influence in Africa does not disappear with war, but becomes more selective, more dependent on each partner's political value, and more conditioned by exposure costs. The article therefore offers a framework for studying influence under pressure, while leaving open the need for future research once post-war patterns become more empirically consolidated.

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