



Middle East Africa Research Institute

# TIES TO TEHRAN:

South Africa's Democracy  
and its Relationship with Iran





A Report by

# **The Middle East Africa Research Institute**



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# 1. Executive Summary

This report presents a critical examination of South Africa's enduring and often controversial relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

At its heart lies a fundamental contradiction: South Africa, a country that has built its post-apartheid identity on the pillars of democracy and human rights, continues to engage in strategic partnerships with regimes that undermine those very values.

South Africa's relationship with Iran, after the dawn of democracy in 1994, is underpinned by shared narratives of post-colonial struggle and anti-imperialist discourse. Iran has not been a trade partner of great significance, but the two countries found common cause in international organisations like the Non-Aligned Movement and BRICS.

However, this partnership raises serious ethical questions. Iran, once a nation that experienced a grassroots revolutionary uprising, quickly transformed into a rigid theocracy. The Islamic Republic today is characterised by widespread human rights violations, systemic repression of dissent, and the brutal enforcement of religious norms. Its foreign policy has become increasingly aggressive, relying on a network of militant proxies – commonly referred to as the “Axis of Resistance” – to project influence across the Middle East, often at the cost of regional stability.

South Africa's continued diplomatic and economic engagement with such a regime reveals striking contradictions in its foreign policy. While the South African constitution champions democratic governance and individual freedoms, its foreign alignments frequently favour authoritarian regimes, especially those that share its anti-Western, Pan-African, and South-South ideological leanings. These alliances challenge South Africa's image as a principled actor on the global stage.

The commercial and strategic ties between the two countries remain robust. Trade has included oil, petrochemicals, and various engineering services. Defence cooperation has also taken place, with Iranian naval ships making port visits and memoranda of understanding signed between military officials. Furthermore, there have been recurring allegations that Iran has sought to tap into South Africa's nuclear expertise, raising concerns within the international community.

Perhaps the most controversial element of this bilateral relationship is the MTN affair. MTN Group holds a 49% stake in Irancell, Iran's second-largest mobile operator. This investment is entangled in allegations of bribery, manipulation of South African foreign policy, and violations of international sanctions.

While the company denies any wrongdoing, the scandal has cast a long shadow over its reputation and over South Africa's role in the matter. It remains a matter of litigation.

The international implications of South Africa's engagement with Iran are substantial. Its alignment with Tehran has strained relations with Western allies and raised concerns about sanctions evasion and financial greylisting. These associations threaten South Africa's economic stability and global diplomatic standing.

South Africa's ongoing alliance with Iran illustrates the tension between ideological solidarity and democratic principle. Though framed as a gesture of post-colonial unity, the relationship increasingly appears to contradict South Africa's professed values. In maintaining ties with a regime accused of terrorism, repression, and nuclear ambition, South Africa risks its credibility on the global stage – and willingly places itself on the wrong side of history.

## 2. Introduction

“South Africa has taken aggressive positions towards the United States and its allies, including accusing Israel, not Hamas, of genocide in the International Court of Justice, and reinvigorating its relations with Iran to develop commercial, military, and nuclear arrangements.”

Thus read a portion of an executive order issued by United States president Donald Trump on 7 February 2025.<sup>1</sup>

The only questionable word in that passage is “reinvigorating”. South Africa has had very close relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran for decades.

In a media statement on 13 June 2025, South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) expressed “profound concern” about attacks by Israel against military targets in Iran, but was silent about retaliatory attacks by Iran against civilian targets in Israel, or Iran’s overt support of the Hamas invasion of Israel on 7 October 2023, and its sponsorship of terrorist organisations in the region collectively known as the “Axis of Resistance” against Israel and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

**In this and a myriad other ways, South Africa sides firmly with Iran, a pariah state that is internationally sanctioned over its dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons, the brutal suppression of internal dissent against its strict theocratic regime.**

Its sponsorship of terror groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, the former Ba’athist regime in Syria, the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, and various Palestinian militant groups, all of which conspire to destabilise the Middle East, menace Sunni-majority

countries, and pose an existential threat to Israel.<sup>3</sup>

That it does so may be somewhat surprising to the outside observer. After all, South Africa has, since 1994, been governed under an African National Congress (ANC) majority, and since 2024 under an ANC-led coalition government.

The ANC has been internationally lauded for bringing an end to the oppressive system of apartheid, and bringing about the country’s first democratic elections in 1994.

South Africa’s new constitution<sup>4</sup>, first adopted in 1996, was widely hailed as a model liberal rights-based constitution that enshrines equal rights for people regardless of their race, ethnic origin, religion, language, gender and sex, sexual orientation, and protects them from the arbitrary exercise of state power and human rights abuses. These rights are not consistent with Iran’s theocratic rule, which since its foundation in 1979 has stood accused of human rights violations, atrocities, and genocide.<sup>5</sup>

In its public-facing rhetoric, the government of South Africa adopted the traditional African principle of ubuntu, which asserts that our humanity is rooted in, and derives from, the humanity of others. This principle has been central not only to the domestic nation-building mythos, but also to foreign policy.<sup>6</sup>

To quote a seminal white paper published by the DIRCO in 2011: “Since 1994, the international community has looked to South Africa to play a leading role in championing values of human rights, democracy, reconciliation and the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment.

1. *Addressing Egregious Actions of The Republic of South Africa. Executive Order. The White House. 7 February 2025.*  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/addressing-egregious-actions-of-the-republic-of-south-africa/>
2. *South Africa condemns Israeli attacks on Iran. Department of International Relations and Cooperation. 13 June 2025.*  
<https://dirco.gov.za/south-africa-condemns-israeli-attacks-on-iran/>
3. *Drums of War: Israel and the “Axis of Resistance”. Report no. 97. International Crisis Group. 2 August 2010.*  
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/israelpalestine/drums-war-israel-and-axis-resistance>
4. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. 1996.*  
<https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996-04-feb-1997>
5. *“Atrocity Crimes” and grave violations of human rights committed by the Islamic Republic of Iran (1981–1982 and 1988): Detailed findings of Mr. Javaid Rehman, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UN OHCHR). 17 July 2024.*  
<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/iran/20240717-SR-Iran-Findings.pdf>
6. *The Ubuntu Principle in the Internal and Foreign Policy of South Africa. Ekaterina Emelianenko. African Journal of Inter-/Multidisciplinary Studies, Vol. 5, No. 1. 1 March 2023.*  
<https://journals.co.za/doi/full/10.51415/ajims.v5i1.1161>

South Africa has risen to the challenge and plays a meaningful role in the region, on the continent and globally.

“South Africa’s unique approach to global issues has found expression in the concept of Ubuntu. These concepts inform our particular approach to diplomacy and shape our vision of a better world for all.”<sup>7</sup>

The Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be described as a model of “a better world for all”, and contradicts the South African government’s stated values of human rights and democracy in every way.

It makes pragmatic economic sense that South Africa would seek to ally itself, for commercial and trade reasons in a multilateral world, with the BRICS nations – which besides South Africa comprises Brazil, Russia, India, and China – despite the questionable democratic and human rights credentials of those larger economies.<sup>8</sup>

It is not immediately clear, however, why it maintained close ties with Iran, nor why it took the lead in inviting Iran, alongside Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, to join BRICS in 2023.<sup>9</sup> (Argentina withdrew its application to join when Javier Milei became its president in December 2023<sup>10</sup>).

Iran has not been a particularly significant trade partner of South Africa since before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, when Iran was a major supporter of, and oil supplier to, the apartheid government.

After the Revolution, Iran cut ties with the apartheid government, and became an ally of the ANC liberation movement, which would go on to govern South Africa after democratic elections of 1994. The same DIRCO white paper also states alternative tenets on which its foreign policy is based. These do not necessarily align with the values of human rights, democracy, reconciliation and ubuntu expressed elsewhere, and in some cases, conflict with them. They do, however, explain the drivers of foreign policy towards Iran.

To wit: “In terms of South Africa’s liberation history, its evolving international engagement is based on two central tenets, namely: Pan-Africanism and South-South solidarity. South Africa recognises itself as an integral

part of the African continent and therefore understands its national interest as being intrinsically linked to Africa’s stability, unity, and prosperity. Likewise, the 1955 Bandung Conference [a fore-runner of the Non-Aligned Movement] shapes our understanding of South-South cooperation and opposition to colonialism as a natural extension of our national interest.”

**It is this notion of solidarity among anti-colonial powers, and South-South solidarity against what is seen as the imperial exploitation of the West, that has seen South Africa establish close relationships with undemocratic or anti-democratic regimes in countries like Russia, China, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela and Palestine, even if the diplomatic and trade relations cost of these relationships are high.**

This paper aims to trace the history of commercial, military, and diplomatic relations between South Africa and Iran. It will analyse key foreign policy drivers, examine UN voting patterns, discuss the role of the South African telecommunications giant MTN in bilateral relations, and consider the role of key government figures.

It will illustrate the dilemmas and moral conflicts that old loyalties and murky business ties create for South Africa’s post-apartheid foreign policy, and document how it is that South Africa ended up on the wrong side of history, siding with one of the world’s major repressive, authoritarian, terror-funding pariahs.



Deputy Secretary General Nomvula Mokonyane meet Iranian Ambassador Mansour Shakib Mehr to discuss enhancing ANC-Iran relations Feb 2025

7. *Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu. DIRCO. 13 May 2011*  
<https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/building-better-world-diplomacy-ubuntu>
8. *South Africa’s BRICS membership: A win-win situation? Stuenkel Oliver. African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, Vol. 7, No. 7. 12 September 2013.*  
<https://academicjournals.org/journal/AJPSIR/article-full-text-pdf/451A2CC40712>
9. *The underestimated implications of the BRICS Summit in Russia. Hung Tran. Atlantic Council. 1 November 2024.*  
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/the-underestimated-implications-of-the-brics-summit-in-russia/>
10. *Argentina won’t join BRICS as scheduled, says member of Milei’s transition team. Associated Press. 30 November 2023.*  
<https://apnews.com/article/brics-argentina-milei-mondino-e428ca065e093ccb5ecad5d19bc5963d>

# 3. Historical background: from Shah to Revolution

## 3.1. Relations under the Shah

South Africa and Iran maintained a close and strategically driven relationship during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, particularly throughout the 1970s.

The country had played host to the Shah's father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, when he was forced to abdicate in favour of his son during World War II. At the invitation of then-prime minister Jan Smuts, the elder Shah lived at 41 Young Avenue in Parktown, Johannesburg, from 1942 until his death in 1944.<sup>11</sup>

The partnership between apartheid South Africa and what was then the Imperial State of Iran was shaped by mutual economic interests, geopolitical calculations, and shared anti-communist sentiments.

Under the Shah, Iran aligned itself with Western powers and sought to counter Soviet influence in the Indian Ocean region. South Africa, governed by the apartheid regime, was similarly positioned as a Cold War ally of the West. Iran established a consulate in Pretoria in 1970.<sup>12</sup>

Both nations viewed their cooperation as a means to bolster regional stability and safeguard their respective interests. The Shah's government, despite facing criticism for engaging with the apartheid state, prioritised strategic and economic considerations over political ideology.<sup>13</sup>

Although Iran had been a founder member of the Organisation for Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which in 1973 imposed an oil embargo on Western countries that had supported Israel during the Yom Kippur War, including South Africa, it also saw Arab petroleum producers as Soviet-aligned political and commercial rivals.

It sought to support anti-communist countries in Africa, and became a major oil supplier to the continent, and to South Africa in particular. Several high-level visits in both directions cemented close, but discreet, co-operation agreements.<sup>14</sup>

Between 1974 and 1978, despite the sustained OPEC embargo, Iran was South Africa's primary oil supplier, accounting for over 90% of its crude oil imports.<sup>15</sup>

In 1971, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) partnered with the South African Coal, Oil, and Gas Corporation (Sasol) and France's Elf Aquitaine (now called TotalEnergies) to establish the National Petroleum Refiners of South Africa (Natref) refinery in Sasolburg. It owned a 17.5% stake. Iran committed to supplying 70% of the refinery's needs for two decades.<sup>16</sup>

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11. *Royal Jo'burg*. Hamilton Wende. *Mail & Guardian*. 17 September 2010. <https://mg.co.za/article/2010-09-17-royal-joburg/>
  12. *Why Iran's nuclear program would not exist without South Africa*. Jeremy Luedi. *Radio Free South Africa*. 29 January 2018. <https://www.radiofreesouthafrica.com/why-irans-nuclear-program-would-not-exist-without-south-africa/>
  13. *South Africa and Iran in the Apartheid Era*. H.E. Chehabi. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4. 30 June 2016. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03057070.2016.1201330>
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. *Chapter 10, Pahlavi Iran's Relations with Africa*. Robert Steele. Cambridge University Press. 13 June 2024. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/pahlavi-irans-relations-with-africa/southern-africa/B2E1B3E37DE7A3D6012A02F3248F65EE>
  16. *South Africa and the Middle East*. Michael B. Bishku. *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17 No. 3. 22 September 2010. [https://www.academia.edu/3712368/South\\_Africa\\_and\\_the\\_Middle\\_East\\_in\\_MIDDLE\\_EAST\\_POLICY\\_Vol\\_17\\_No\\_3\\_Fall\\_2010\\_pp\\_153\\_174](https://www.academia.edu/3712368/South_Africa_and_the_Middle_East_in_MIDDLE_EAST_POLICY_Vol_17_No_3_Fall_2010_pp_153_174)

South Africa also engaged in a mutually beneficial, sanctions-busting arms-for-oil relationship. As South Africa faced an oil embargo, and Iran faced an arms embargo, each country was happy to undermine the sanctions against the other.<sup>17</sup>

The partnership between Iran and apartheid South Africa extended into the nuclear domain.

**In the 1970s, Iran signed a \$700 million contract to purchase 14,000 tonnes of uranium oxide (yellowcake) from South Africa, a deal that played a foundational role in Iran's nuclear program.**

Additionally, Iran bought a 15% share in the Rio Tinto-owned Rössing uranium mine in South-West Africa (later Namibia), which was then under South African administration.<sup>18</sup>

A triangular arrangement was established wherein Iran exported oil to South Africa, purchased uranium in return, and had the uranium enriched in France (which also bought uranium from South Africa) for use in its nuclear reactors.<sup>19</sup>

Military cooperation between the two countries included sharing naval intelligence, and Iran refitting at least two naval destroyers in Cape Town during the mid-1970s. The Shah recognised South Africa's strategic position as a regional naval power and encouraged ties between their naval services.<sup>20</sup>

Interactions between white South Africans and Iranians were occasionally awkward, thanks to the darker complexion of the latter, but Iran had arranged at the outset that its people considered themselves Aryans (hence the name "Iran"), and South African authorities officially classified Iranians as white.<sup>21</sup>

When Iran faced criticism over its co-operation with the apartheid regime while international sanctions against it were mounting, the Shah insisted that Iran's long-term national interest took precedence over all other considerations, and "we never mix commercial and political concerns".<sup>22</sup>

As the Iranian Revolution gathered steam, there was talk of South Africa once again extending an invitation to host the Shah in exile, but this arrangement never materialised.<sup>23</sup>



Yellow Cake Uranium  
Wiki commons

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17. *Patriots and Profiteers: Economic Warfare, Embargo Busting, and State-Sponsored Crime*. R.T. Naylor. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. p.144.
  18. *South Africa and the Middle East*. Michael B. Bishku. *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17 No. 3. 22 September 2010. [https://www.academia.edu/3712368/South\\_Africa\\_and\\_the\\_Middle\\_East\\_in\\_MIDDLE\\_EAST\\_POLICY\\_Vol\\_17\\_No\\_3\\_Fall\\_2010\\_pp\\_153\\_174](https://www.academia.edu/3712368/South_Africa_and_the_Middle_East_in_MIDDLE_EAST_POLICY_Vol_17_No_3_Fall_2010_pp_153_174)
  19. *Editorial*. Colin Bundy. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4. 2016. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03057070.2016.1200945>
  20. *Analysis: Iran and South Africa cement ties*. Luciano Arvin. *DefenceWeb*. 14 March 2017. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/joint/diplomacy-a-peace/analysis-iran-and-south-africa-cement-ties/>
  21. *South Africa and Iran in the Apartheid Era*. H.E. Chehabi. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4. 30 June 2016. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03057070.2016.1201330>
  22. *South Africa and Iran in the Apartheid Era*. H.E. Chehabi. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4. 30 June 2016. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03057070.2016.1201330>
  23. *U.S.-South African Discussion on Shah Is Hinted; South Africa Expected to Agree*. John F. Burns. *New York Times*. 2 December 1979. <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/02/archives/ussouth-african-discussion-on-shah-is-hinted-south-africa-expected.html>

### 3.2. Impact of the Islamic Revolution of 1979

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked a turning point. Even before the revolution, the leaders of the various revolutionary factions that rose to power, whether leftist, nationalist or religious, had expressed their antipathy towards apartheid South Africa.

While Pahlavi Iran was on good terms with both Israel and South Africa, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from his exile in Neauphle-le-Château (transliterated as Nofel Loshato in Iran) said of both: "We will not sell oil to the racists and enemies to humanity."<sup>24</sup>

He added: "We cannot establish relations with South Africa unless it changes its behaviour."

The new Iranian regime, under Ayatollah Khomeini, prioritised ideological principles such as anti-imperialism, Islamic solidarity, and opposition to racial injustice. As part of this realignment, Iran severed diplomatic ties with apartheid South Africa, publicly ending the previously close relationship maintained under the Shah.

Iran ceased oil exports, imposed a trade boycott, and sold its shares in South African entities such as Natref.<sup>25</sup> Switzerland was selected as the protector of each country's diplomatic and trade interests.

As South Africa's consulate in Tehran was closed, Iran allowed the South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) – which was party to a protracted conflict with South Africa over the independence of the protectorate of South-West Africa – to open a representative office instead.

Under new import-export laws, "all forms of trade interactions, direct and indirect, with South Africa and the occupier regime of Qods [i.e. Israel] were banned".<sup>26</sup>

The Islamic Republic of Iran aligned itself with liberation movements in the Global South and offered explicit support to the ANC and other anti-apartheid organisations. Iranian

officials referred to the ANC's cause as just and aligned with the Islamic Republic's anti-colonial, anti-racist values.<sup>27</sup>

**Iran's revolutionary ideology and the ANC's liberation rhetoric both emphasised themes of anti-colonialism, resistance to Western imperialism, and solidarity with the oppressed people of the world. Iran's discourse resonated with the ANC's political ethos during its years in exile, facilitating a strong post-apartheid relationship.<sup>28</sup>**

**Iran's principled disengagement with apartheid South Africa didn't last long, however. Mutual interests and the international isolation of both countries persuaded them to continue the arms-for-oil arrangement and other trade on the quiet.**

This trade was considerable, including for one example a deal in 1985 totaling some \$750 million. As late as 1986, a shipment of TOW missiles found its way to Iran, via a British arms dealer, a shell company on the Isle of Man, and South Africa, which received Iranian oil for its part in this sanctions-busting run.<sup>29</sup>



Abdullah Manaz, Flickr, Creative Commons (Iran during the revolution)

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24. U.S.-South African Discussion on Shah Is Hinted; South Africa Expected to Agree. John F. Burns. *New York Times*. 2 December 1979. <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/02/archives/ussouth-african-discussion-on-shah-is-hinted-south-africa-expected.html>
25. Iran - South Africa Relations: Past Trends, Future Prospects. Ahmad Bakhshi. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 2. 2014. [https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article\\_123446.html](https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article_123446.html)
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
- Iran's ties to Africa. J. Peter Pham. *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*. February 2022. <https://jstribune.com/pham-irans-ties-to-africa/>
28. Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective Of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression Farid Esack. *Oneworld Publications*. 5 December 1996.
29. A battle of principles: South Africa's relations with Iran. Michal Onderco. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 252-267. 2017. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315460338-11/battle-principles-south-africa-relations-iran-michal-onderco>
- Patriots and Profiteers: Economic Warfare, Embargo Busting, and State-Sponsored Crime*. R.T. Naylor. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. p.235.

Though undeclared “for political reasons”, South Africa by the mid-1980s remained Iran’s most important trade partner in Africa. Iran continued to import plastics, steel, vehicles, plate glass and grain from South Africa, through middlemen in what was then Swaziland (now Eswatini).<sup>30</sup>

Despite the expedient relationship with the apartheid regime, the 1980s saw revolutionary Iran offer extensive support for struggle organisations in South Africa, including financial, political and cultural support for the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress. It condemned the apartheid regime in international venues, supported front-line states that were engaged in the liberation struggle against the South African government, and fostered links with the Muslim business community in South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

In the early 1990s, it also welcomed Clarence Makwetu and Nelson Mandela, presidents of the Pan Africanist Congress and African National Congress respectively, to Tehran.

The seminal moment for relations between Iran and South Africa’s anti-apartheid forces came in 1986, when the Ayatollah attended the 8th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Zimbabwe, where he insisted on prioritising the struggle against the South African regime.<sup>32</sup>

It was at this meeting that Oliver Tambo, then ANC president, declared: “That we meet here must surely underline the fact that here, in this capital city of the anti-colonial struggle, Harare, the apartheid system will meet its day of reckoning.”<sup>33</sup>

It was also at this meeting that Tambo explicitly expressed the solidarity of the anti-apartheid movement with liberation movements around the world, including the “Palestine Liberation Organisation, with whom we are united in a common struggle against the Pretoria-Tel Aviv-Washington axis.”<sup>34</sup>

The ideological faultline between the colonial powers of the Global North, and the liberation movements of the Global South, was now clearly defined, no longer in terms of Cold War relations between East and West, but independently, on the basis of anti-colonialism rather than political-economic ideology.

The Global North, the ideological enemy, included the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Israel. All were viewed as implicit supporters of the apartheid regime as a consequence of Cold War realpolitik.

As Thomas Friedman put it in the New York Times in 1987: “For years, Israel’s policy toward South Africa was one of deliberate ambiguity - publicly condemning apartheid, while privately maintaining a pragmatic and mutually beneficial array of commercial and military ties. This approach, Israeli officials note, is no different from that of most Western nations and perfectly reflects the contradictory impulses in Israel: On the one hand there is an abhorrence of the racism of the South African Government, but on the other hand there is a concern for South African Jews, an often subliminal identification by Israelis with the beleaguered and surrounded Pretoria Government and a “realpolitik” attitude that Israel has too few friends in the world to be choosy about its partners in trade and arms sales.”<sup>35</sup>

The Global South, comprised largely of the world’s anti-colonial movements, including the anti-apartheid organisations, and, notably, Iran, rejected such ambiguity.

The relationship between the ANC and Iran is best summed up in the words of then Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Maite Nkoane-Mashabane, speaking in Tehran in 2015: “The Islamic Republic stood by us during our darkest days, cutting ties with the apartheid regime. Your revolution was our revolution. You showed us that emancipation was possible, whatever the odds.”<sup>36</sup>



30. *Sub-Saharan Africa: Growing Iranian Activity. Declassified CIA Research Paper, author redacted. December 1984.*  
<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85S00317R000300110005-1.pdf>

31. *Iran - South Africa Relations: Past Trends, Future Prospects. Ahmad Bakhshi. Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 5, No. 2. 2014.*  
[https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article\\_123446.html](https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article_123446.html)

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Statement at the Eighth Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries. O.R. Tambo, Harare. September 1986.*  
<https://sahistory.org.za/archive/statement-eighth-conference-heads-state-or-government-non-aligned-countries-o-r-tambo>

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Israelis reassess supplying arms to South Africa. Thomas L. Friedman. New York Times. 29 January 1987.*

36. *SA condemns sanctions against Iran. SANews, the South African Government News Agency. 12 May 2015.*  
<https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/sa-condemns-sanctions-against-iran>

# 4. Character of Revolutionary Iran

## 4.1. Pahlavi Iran

To understand why a relationship between two countries who share an opposition to racism and colonialism should be controversial, it is necessary to consider the nature and character of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran's revolution in 1979 did not occur in a vacuum. It was also not initially an exclusively Islamic revolution.

The Iranian people have periodically made bids for democracy since early in the 20th century.<sup>37</sup> The most notable of these revolutions occurred in 1951, when Mohammad Mossadegh was selected prime minister and established a secular, democratic government.

Mossadegh's National Front was a fractious coalition of political movements that included nationalists, liberal democrats, socialists, traders ("bazaari") and both secular and Islamic elements. Its dominant leaning, however, was left-wing nationalism, and antipathy towards the control that Western powers wielded over Iran.<sup>38</sup>

As part of populist left-leaning reforms, Mossadegh nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and expropriated its assets. This was a popular move, as Iran received only 17.5% of the profits of the joint venture. The British government did not take kindly to its business being dispossessed, however, and intelligence agencies in the U.K. and U.S. collaborated to engineer a protracted and violent coup that ousted Mossadegh, installed a puppet prime minister, and substantially increased the power of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

The new government reversed the nationalisation and renegotiated an Anglo-Iranian oil agreement. Pahlavi went on to rule as a modernising, but authoritarian and occasionally brutal, shah.

By the late 1970s, Iran outwardly appeared to be thriving, with a rapidly growing economy and modernising infrastructure.

**Beneath the surface, however, the country was undergoing a profound social transformation. Within just a generation, Iran had shifted from a largely traditional, conservative, and rural society to one that was increasingly industrialised and urban. The dramatic pace of change, coupled with widespread perceptions of government corruption and inefficiency, created deep public dissatisfaction.**

In 1978, this discontent erupted into mass demonstrations.

The unrest was initially sparked in January 1978, when thousands of young religious students protested what they saw as defamatory remarks about the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, published in a Tehran newspaper. Their protests quickly gained momentum, joined by large numbers of unemployed youth – many of them recent rural migrants disillusioned with the regime's excesses and unfulfilled promises.

Caught off guard by the scale of opposition and weakened by his battle with cancer, the Shah hesitated, interpreting the protests as part of a foreign conspiracy. The government's harsh crackdown – resulting in numerous civilian deaths – only intensified the unrest.

37. *Iran's Unfinished Democratic Revolution*. Rohini Hensman. *The Wire*. 12 January 2018. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/irans-unfinished-evolving-democratic-revolution>

38. *Social movements in twentieth-century Iran : culture, ideology, and mobilizing frameworks*. Stephen C. Poulson. Lexington Books, 2005.

## 4.2. The Revolution

The early revolutionary movement involved a wide spectrum of political groups and ideologies. They included secular liberals and nationalists, who wanted constitutional government and civil liberties. There were leftists and Marxists, who opposed imperialism and economic inequality. Some were Islamists who objected to Westernisation, moral decline and the decadence of the Shah's regime. They were joined by students, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens, who were all frustrated with corruption, political repression, and the lack of freedom.

These groups were united by a desire to end autocracy and replace it with a more participatory, accountable, and democratic system. By early 1979, the military declared itself neutral, and without its support, the weakened Shah went into exile.

It was into this maelstrom of popular revolt that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile and became the central figure around whom the revolutionary movement coalesced.

**He skillfully framed the struggle in moral and religious terms, appealing to Iran's majority-Shi'a population. While he publicly emphasised unity and spoke of "Islamic democracy," his long-term vision was different.**

Many of Khomeini's statements before the revolution were deliberately vague or moderate, leading many to believe he would support a pluralist, democratic post-Shah government. He criticised dictatorship and supported the idea of a representative assembly, but he did not disclose his intention to establish velayat-e faqih (rule of the Islamic jurist) as the basis for governance.

While the incumbent prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, called for a national unity government, Khomeini sidelined him and appointed his own interim government, with Mehdi Bazargan as prime minister. He took control, declaring, "I will appoint a state. I will act against this government. With the nation's support, I will appoint a state."

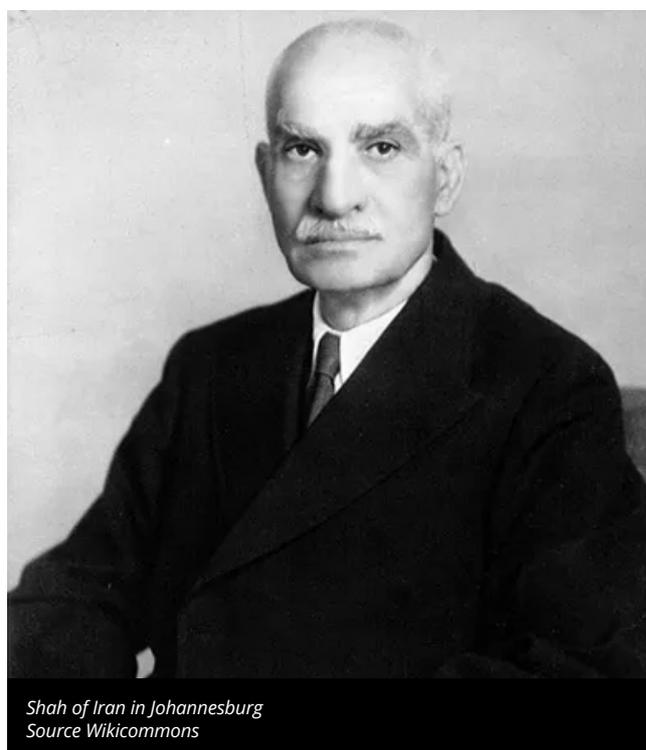
Very quickly, Khomeini and his clerical supporters began consolidating power. They established revolutionary courts to try, and execute, former regime officials.

A new constitution was drafted, which would establish Iran as an Islamic Republic governed by velayat-e faqih, giving Khomeini ultimate authority and veto power as the Supreme Leader.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the komitehs (Islamic revolutionary committees) began to suppress dissent, and former allies of the revolution became political opponents. Liberals, socialists, and secular nationalists were gradually purged, imprisoned, exiled, or executed.

In December 1979, a referendum approved the new Islamic Constitution. While it retained some superficially democratic form, in the shape of an elected president, prime minister and parliament, these institutions were subordinated to the authority of the Supreme Leader and the unelected Guardian Council.

By 1982, Khomeini and the Shi'a clerics had crushed the rival factions, defeated local rebellions and consolidated power. Iran had become a clerical autocracy. The revolution's early democratic ideals were replaced with a strict theocratic framework.



Shah of Iran in Johannesburg  
Source Wikicommons

39. *Return to Tehran. Biography of Imam Khomeini. International Affairs Department of the Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works. 16 August 2011.*  
[http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n2271/Biography/Return\\_to\\_Tehran](http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n2271/Biography/Return_to_Tehran)

### 4.3. Post-revolutionary Iran

Under the supreme authority of the Ayatollah, the Guardian Council can veto parliamentary decisions and disqualify electoral candidates, effectively subordinating democratic processes to religious doctrine.

Khomeini also established an office to conduct a Cultural Revolution, enforced by unaccountable armed thugs that attended him known as “Hezbollahi” (meaning members of the party of Allah).<sup>40</sup>

The Cultural Revolution Headquarters purged university campuses of liberal, leftist, secular, pro-Western or other influences inconsistent with revolutionary, political Islam.

**During 1981 and 1982, thousands of members of secular political groups, religious minorities, students, professors, scientists, intellectuals and artists, including children, were systematically and unlawfully imprisoned without trial, raped in detention and tortured. Many were summarily executed.**

According to a 2024 report by the the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, these purges, decreed by the Ayatollah Khomeini and senior state officials answerable to him, rose to the level of “atrocities crimes”, “crimes against humanity” and “genocide”.

The Cultural Revolution Headquarters was made permanent by the establishment of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR), founded and led by Khomeini in 1984, with most of its present members appointed by his successor, the present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

This unelected organisation coopted many government ministers, including the prime minister, into a body that was dominated by the Ayatollah’s clerics. It has wide powers to ensure that Iran’s culture and education remains fully consistent with political Shi’a Islam, as decreed by the Supreme Leader.

Another major purge followed in 1988, and instead of facing accountability, many alleged perpetrators of the detentions, tortures and massacres were promoted or elevated to high office.

While 1981/2 and 1988 represented periods of extreme violence, forced disappearances, torture, rape and extra-judicial executions remains a common occurrence in Iran to this day.

Theocratic Iran employs the Revolutionary Guards and police to enforce strict Islamic norms in public life, too.

Harsh punishments, including flogging, stoning, and executions became part of daily life under a literal interpretation of Sharia law. In 2005, the Islamic Revolutionary Committees were succeeded by a religious morality police force known as the Guidance Patrol. It continues to police and violently enforce public behaviour and dress codes, especially against women.

Freedom of speech, assembly, and press are heavily curtailed in Iran. Pro-democracy protests, such as the “Green Movement” in 2009, the “Bloody Aban” protests of 2019, and the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests of 2022, have been met with brutal suppression, mass arrests, and hundreds of deaths at the hands of authorities.

Over the years, reformist leaders have periodically been elected, but none could prevail against the ultimate authority of the Guardian Council, the SCCR, the IRGC, and the Supreme Leader.

40. Iran: Group known as Ansar-e Hezbollah (Ansar/Anzar e Hezbollah). Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada. UNHCR. 18 September 2000.

<https://web.archive.archive.unhcr.org/20230517174912/https://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4be430.html>

41. “Atrocity Crimes” and grave violations of human rights committed by the Islamic Republic of Iran (1981–1982 and 1988): Detailed findings of Mr. Javaid Rehman, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UN OHCHR). 17 July 2024.

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/iran/20240717-SR-Iran-Findings.pdf>

## 4.4. Iran's foreign policy and the Axis of Resistance

Revolutionary Iran's foreign policy in the wake of the Revolution was anti-Soviet and anti-Western, taking a distinctly anti-imperialist identity grounded in Islamic nationalism and solidarity with oppressed and formerly oppressed nations.

**Iran aligned itself with anti-Western militant groups and liberation movements around the world. It also established itself as a strategic funder, supporter and trainer of a network of mostly Shi'ite militia forces throughout the Middle East**

Beginning with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980s, which like the Iranian Hezbollahi answered to Khomeini, several similar groups were organised in Sunni Arab countries across the Middle East, from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan.

**Iranian support has lately extended to Hamas, a Sunni group which until 2023 governed the Gaza Strip, Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Yemen's Houthi militias**

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party which was allied to former Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's ruling Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, various member groups of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, a faction of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces known as Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and Shi'a militias based in Bahrain.

These organisations, along with the Assad-era state of Syria, formed the backbone of the so-called "Axis of Resistance"<sup>42</sup>.

**All members of this proxy network have been designated, by numerous countries including most Sunni Arab states in the Middle East, as terrorist groups<sup>43</sup>**

This network of Iranian proxies served at once as a "ring of fire" to menace Israel – whose destruction Iran has frequently vowed<sup>44</sup> – and as a crescent of deterrence to shield Iran from attack.

All the Axis of Resistance groups have conducted terrorist operations against a wide variety of targets both within their own countries and across borders.

Targets have included civilians, including children, often in crowded public places; government officials, infrastructure and security forces; foreign nationals, contractors, aid workers, tourists, diplomats, journalists and non-governmental organisations; energy and other civilian infrastructure; Sunni Islamic opposition including but not limited to groups affiliated with the Islamic State (IS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, or the Arabic acronym Daesh); and other minority religious groups such as Christians, Yazidis, Jews and Druze.

According to a research paper published by Chatham House, a venerable British think tank, Iran's network of proxies is "entrenched within state structures and wield significant power in their own right". It is resilient to conventional military and policy responses because it relies on "cross-border financial flows and energy trading to transcend the traditional institutional and geographic boundaries of the states its members operate in".<sup>45</sup>



42. Soleimani birthed Iran's Axis of Resistance, Ghaani coordinated it. Jason M. Brodsky, Yossi Mansharof. Middle East Institute. 15 December 2023. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/soleimani-birthed-irans-axis-resistance-ghaani-coordinated-it>

43. What is Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'? Reuters. 13 April 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-irans-axis-resistance-which-groups-are-involved-2024-01-29/>

44. Eg. Israel should be wiped off map, says Iran's president. Ewen MacAskill and Chris McGreal. The Guardian. 27 October 2005 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/27/israel.iran>) and Khamenei explains 'final solution' poster: I want Israel destroyed, not all Jews. TOI Staff. Times of Israel. 20 May 2020. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-explains-final-solution-poster-i-favor-destroying-israel-not-jews/>)

45. The shape-shifting 'axis of resistance'. Renad Mansour, Hayder Al-Shakeri & Haid Haid. Chatham House. 6 March 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/shape-shifting-axis-resistance/05-policy-conclusions>

## 5. South Africa's foreign policy drivers and contradictions

South Africa's foreign policy towards Iran in the post-apartheid era is shaped by a complex interplay of ideological, strategic, and economic factors.

The ANC has been the "custodian and steward of South Africa's foreign policy" in the post-apartheid era, and the country's foreign policy has almost entirely been shaped by the views of the ruling party's senior members.<sup>46</sup>

South Africa's first democratic president, and then ANC president, Nelson Mandela, explained the pillars upon which the country's future foreign policy in a 1993 article in Foreign Affairs magazine:

"The pillars upon which our foreign policy will rest are the following beliefs:

- that issues of human rights are central to international relations and an understanding that they extend beyond the political, embracing the economic, social and environmental;
- that just and lasting solutions to the problems of humankind can only come through the promotion of democracy worldwide;
- that considerations of justice and respect for international law should guide the relations between nations;
- that peace is the goal for which all nations should strive, and where this breaks down, internationally agreed and nonviolent mechanisms, including effective arms-control regimes, must be employed;
- that the concerns and interests of the continent of Africa should be reflected in our foreign-policy choices;
- that economic development depends on growing regional and international economic cooperation in an interdependent world."<sup>47</sup>

**These pillars, born of the idealistic principles upon which the new South Africa was founded and upon which its new Constitution would be based, were leavened by an acute awareness of inequality between the Global South and the Global North, and between Africa and the rest of the world; solidarity with the ANC's allies during the anti-apartheid years; the Marxist anti-imperialism with which its leaders were inculcated at Eastern Bloc universities.**

The belief that global establishment fixtures such as the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations Security

Council should better represent the interests of a post-Cold War multipolar world.

**It is this anti-imperialist ideology that serves as a fundamental basis for comprehending South Africa's reactions to Iran's nuclear programme and the broader relationship between the two countries.<sup>48</sup>**

Too often, solidarity with a fellow developing country has trumped concerns about the violation of the stated pillars of South Africa's foreign policy, the violation of international norms, or the violation of non-proliferation agreements.

For Iran, building relations with South Africa, an emerging regional and international power, advanced its own national interests, strengthening relations with countries in the Global South, and thereby reducing reliance on Western powers that shunned or sanctioned it.<sup>49</sup>

South Africa and Iran therefore had common interests in promoting economic and political regionalism within frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Afro-Asian solidarity movement.<sup>50</sup> South Africa likewise viewed its membership of the BRICS trade group, to which South Africa acceded in 2010, as a means to further the interests of the Global South on the international stage.<sup>51</sup>

The ideological hostility of South Africa towards Western hegemony, and solidarity with Iran, is reflected in its consistent and vocal condemnation of sanctions imposed against Iran.<sup>52</sup>

In the "rainbow nation" years under South African president Nelson Mandela, South Africa sought to position itself as a responsible power that emphasised human rights and being a "good global citizen". In particular, it styled itself as a poster child for non-proliferation, having voluntarily dismantled the apartheid regime's nuclear weapons programme.<sup>53</sup>

Its close and developing relationship with Iran, however, highlights the conflicts between South Africa's stated foreign policy principles, its trade ties with Western powers, and its solidarity with old allies in the non-aligned world.

These contradictions often complicated South Africa's efforts to maintain favourable relations with the U.S. and Europe,<sup>54</sup> which unlike Iran are among its largest trading partners.<sup>55</sup>



Iranian army receives drones

46. *A battle of principles: South Africa's relations with Iran.* Michal Onderco. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 252-267. 2017. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315460338-11/battle-principles-south-africa-relations-iran-michal-onderco>
47. *South Africa's Future Foreign Policy.* Nelson Mandela. *Foreign Affairs*. 1 December 1993. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-africa/1993-12-01/south-africas-future-foreign-policy>
48. *A battle of principles: South Africa's relations with Iran.* Michal Onderco. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 252-267. 2017. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315460338-11/battle-principles-south-africa-relations-iran-michal-onderco>
49. *Iran - South Africa Relations: Past Trends, Future Prospects.* Ahmad Bakhshi. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 2. 2014. [https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article\\_123446.html](https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article_123446.html)
50. *Ibid.*
51. *ATC170503: Report of the Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation on a mission of conducting oversight on the implementation of the Joint Commission of Cooperation between South Africa and the Islamic Republic of Iran and the execution of South Africa's international relations policy, in Teheran, Iran and Doha, Qatar from 9-12 May 2015.* 3 May 2017. <https://pmg.org.za/taled-committee-report/3071/>
52. *Analysis: Iran and South Africa cement ties.* Luciano Arvin. *DefenceWeb*. 14 March 2017. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/joint/diplomacy-a-peace/analysis-iran-and-south-africa-cement-ties/>
53. *A battle of principles: South Africa's relations with Iran.* Michal Onderco. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 252-267. 2017. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315460338-11/battle-principles-south-africa-relations-iran-michal-onderco>
54. *Ibid.*
55. *South Africa trade balance, exports and imports by country 2022.* *World Integrated Trade Solution*, 2024. <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ZAF/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>

# 6. Commercial, Military & Nuclear dimensions

## 6.1 Commercial relationship

Iran was among the first countries in the world to re-establish trade and diplomatic ties with South Africa after the General Assembly of the United Nations suspended sanctions against the country in 1993.<sup>56</sup>

**Almost immediately, the oil trade between the two countries, which had been suspended in favour of Iraq for some years, was resumed. Between 1994 and 1996, Iran supplied South Africa with 70% of its oil.<sup>57</sup>**

A South Africa-Iran Joint Commission of Cooperation was established in 1995 to explore economic ties, and it has met frequently since then to discuss matters of mutual interest, including trade, investment, energy, health, mining, transport, agriculture, science, and technology.<sup>58</sup>

Due to diversification, Iran's share of South Africa's oil imports gradually declined to about a quarter of total imports by 2012, but Iran remained a significant supplier.<sup>59</sup>

Sanctions imposed against Iran in 2012, over its suspected nuclear weapons programme, as well as money laundering and terrorist financing concerns, forced South Africa to discontinue its oil imports from Iran and seek alternative suppliers such as Saudi Arabia and Nigeria.<sup>60</sup>

When the UN moved to lift sanctions against Iran in 2015, however, South Africa immediately announced its plans to resume and expand trade with Iran, including to facilitate Iranian oil trade into Africa.<sup>61 62</sup>

**South Africa has been described as a "cornerstone" Iran's strategy to strengthen ties with countries in the Global South.**

Strongly promoted by former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, this strategy aimed to boost Iran's international standing and promote trade.

Iranian officials estimated the value of Iranian foreign direct investment in South Africa in 2018 at roughly \$135 billion.<sup>63</sup>

**South African companies MTN, a leading cellular network operator, and Sasol, a petrochemicals giant, have made large investments in Iran.**

MTN, which is discussed more fully below, bought a 49% stake in Irancell, securing an operating licence in 2005. The joint venture is among the three largest telecommunications operators in Iran. In 2014, it represented 24.4% of the MTN Group's total income. The company has had significant difficulty repatriating its earnings from its Iranian venture, however, because of the reinstatement of sanctions.

56 *Iran - South Africa Relations: Past Trends, Future Prospects.* Ahmad Bakhshi. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 2. 2014. [https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article\\_123446.html](https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article_123446.html)

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*

59 *South Africa and Iran Aim to Resume Strong Trade Relationship.* John Campbell. *Council on Foreign Relations*. 6 May 2016. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-africa-and-iran-aim-resume-strong-trade-relationship>

60 *A battle of principles: South Africa's relations with Iran.* Michal Onderco. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 252-267. 2017. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315460338-11/battle-principles-south-africa-relations-iran-michal-onderco>

61 *South Africa and Iran Aim to Resume Strong Trade Relationship.* John Campbell. *Council on Foreign Relations*. 6 May 2016. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-africa-and-iran-aim-resume-strong-trade-relationship>

62 *Analysis: Iran and South Africa cement ties.* Luciano Arvin. *DefenceWeb*. 14 March 2017. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/joint/diplomacy-a-peace/analysis-iran-and-south-africa-cement-ties/>

63 *Shedding Light on the Iran-South Africa Relationship.* John Campbell. *Council on Foreign Relations*. 17 December 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/shedding-light-iran-south-africa-relationship>

**The MTN investment in Iran has been controversial since a rival bidder for its operating licence, Turkcell İletişim Hizmetleri A.Ş. (Turkcell Communication Services), instituted court action to allege that MTN promised Iran that MTN could deliver South Africa's vote at the International Atomic Energy Agency,**

Promising Iran defense equipment otherwise prohibited by national and international laws, and the outright bribery of high-level government officials in both Iran and South Africa.<sup>64</sup> MTN denies the allegations, and the case remains a matter of litigation today.

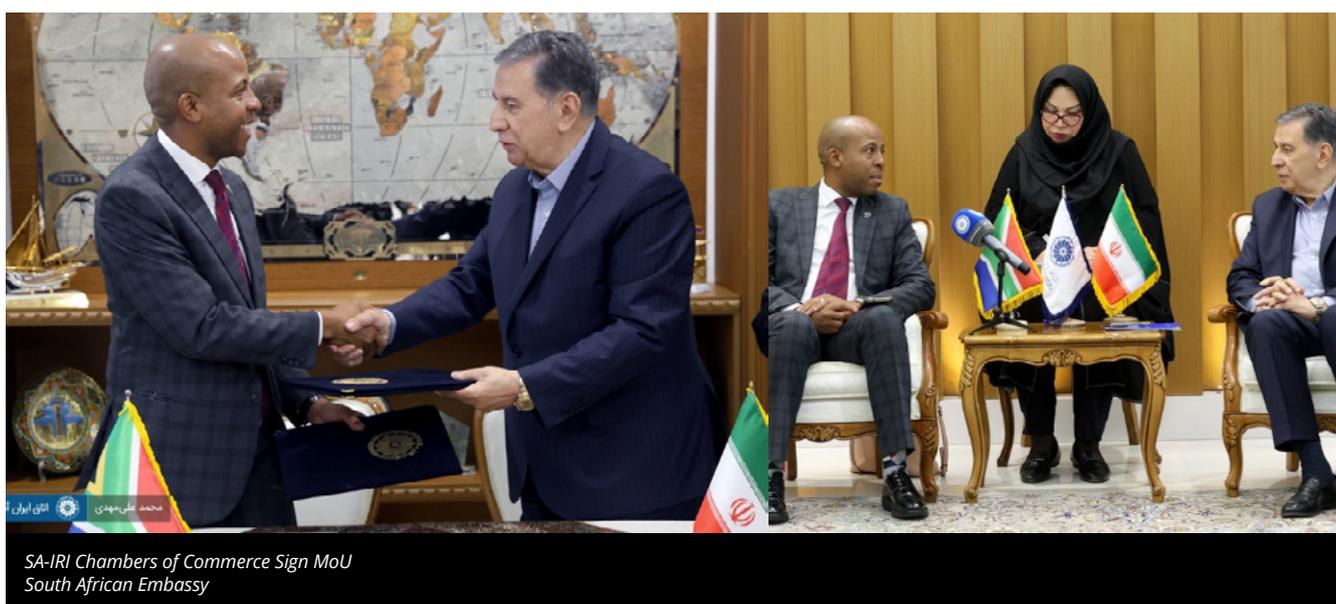
South Africa's energy and chemical company, Sasol, has also made significant investments in Iran. Sasol acquired a 50 percent stake in a joint venture with Iran's National Petrochemical Company that was worth \$900 million in 2012. It disposed of this investment in 2013.

In the 2022-2023 period, Iran's exports to South Africa amounted to about \$304 million, making South Africa Iran's top destination for exports on the continent, although non-oil trade made up less than \$100 million of that amount.<sup>65</sup>

Substantial bilateral trade missions between South Africa and Iran explored cooperation opportunities that included Iran becoming a hub for South African access to central Asian markets, the establishment of Iranian trade centers in South Africa, preferential trade agreements, direct air links, and strengthening banking relations.<sup>66</sup>

Iran also declared itself willing to contribute technical and engineering services towards maintaining and developing oil refineries in South Africa.<sup>67</sup>

The growing commercial relationship faced challenges, however, not only from international sanctions against Iran, but also because of geographical distance, a lack of free trade agreements, competition from rival countries, and the dysfunction of South Africa's internal bureaucracies.<sup>68</sup>



64 Independent Special Committee Charter. MTN Group Limited. 28 March 2012.

[https://mtn-investor.com/html/pdf/circulars/2013/hoffman\\_appendices.pdf](https://mtn-investor.com/html/pdf/circulars/2013/hoffman_appendices.pdf)

65 Iranian Infiltration of Africa. United Against a Nuclear Iran. February 2024.

[https://www.unitedagainstanucleariran.com/sites/default/files/UANI%20Resource\\_Africa\\_Feb%202024.pdf](https://www.unitedagainstanucleariran.com/sites/default/files/UANI%20Resource_Africa_Feb%202024.pdf)

66 ATC170503: Report of the Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation on a mission of conducting oversight on the implementation of the Joint Commission of Cooperation between South Africa and the Islamic Republic of Iran and the execution of South Africa's international relations policy, in Teheran, Iran and Doha, Qatar from 9-12 May 2015. 3 May 2017.

<https://pmg.org.za/taled-committee-report/3071/>

67 Fact Sheet: South Africa, Hamas, and the ICJ "genocide" case against Israel.. Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council. 6 February 2024.

<https://aijac.org.au/featured/factsheet-south-africa-hamas-and-the-icj-genocide-case-against-israel/>

68 Iran - South Africa Relations: Past Trends, Future Prospects. Ahmad Bakhshi. Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 5, No. 2. 2014.

[https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article\\_123446.html](https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article_123446.html)

## 6.2 Military cooperation

In 2017, Iran and South Africa signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to boost defense and military cooperation, nominally aimed at “promoting regional and international stability”.<sup>69</sup>

This follows an earlier mutual defence MoU signed in Tehran in 2004, the particulars of which were never disclosed.<sup>70</sup>

The defence ties were said to focus on improving marine security and exchanging experiences on fighting organised crimes and terrorism.<sup>71</sup>

In 2017, Iran’s Deputy Minister of Defense met with South Africa’s Chief of Defense Force Staff to discuss “long term and strategic engagement”.<sup>72</sup>

**South Africa has welcomed Iranian military vessels in its ports, including the docking of IRIS Alavand and IRIS Boushehr in Durban in 2016 following a counter-piracy mission.<sup>73</sup> Iran reportedly sought to leverage South Africa's maritime infrastructure for naval expansion, and has conducted out-of-area naval operations in South African waters.<sup>74</sup>**

Iran aimed to use South African ports to expand its strategy to project power with a borderless naval force capable of blue water missions, as part of its long-arm strategy of distant defense.<sup>75</sup>

**Allegations in court documents filed by Turkcell claim that MTN promised to help Iran acquire embargoed defense equipment in exchange for its telecommunications license.**

It has, independently of the MTN arrangement, allegedly sought satellite interception, online surveillance, hacking, and missile guidance technologies from South Africa.<sup>76</sup>



69 Analysis: Iran and South Africa cement ties. Luciano Arvin. DefenceWeb. 14 March 2017.

<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/joint/diplomacy-a-peace/analysis-iran-and-south-africa-cement-ties/>

70 Analysis: Why is S. Africa helping Iran? Amir Mizroch. Jerusalem Post. 6 December 2005.

<https://www.jpost.com/international/analysis-why-is-s-africa-helping-iran>

71 South Africa and Iran cement defence ties. Staff writers. DefenceWeb. 10 January 2017.

<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/joint/diplomacy-a-peace/south-africa-and-iran-cement-defence-ties/>

72 Shedding Light on the Iran-South Africa Relationship. John Campbell. Council on Foreign Relations. 17 December 2019.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/shedding-light-iran-south-africa-relationship>

73 Analysis: Iran and South Africa cement ties. Luciano Arvin. DefenceWeb. 14 March 2017.

<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/joint/diplomacy-a-peace/analysis-iran-and-south-africa-cement-ties/>

74 Shedding Light on the Iran-South Africa Relationship. John Campbell. Council on Foreign Relations. 17 December 2019.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/shedding-light-iran-south-africa-relationship>

75 Revolutionary Iran’s Africa Policy. Banafsheh Keynoush. King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. June 2021.

<https://kfcris.com/en/view/post/343>

76 Iranian Infiltration of Africa. United Against a Nuclear Iran. February 2024.

[https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/sites/default/files/UANI%20Resource\\_Africa\\_Feb%202024.pdf](https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/sites/default/files/UANI%20Resource_Africa_Feb%202024.pdf)

## 6.3 Nuclear relations

According to a secret “Operational Target Analysis” written by South Africa’s National Intelligence Agency, Iran has expressed interest in South Africa’s nuclear expertise and technology.<sup>77</sup>

The report claims that in 2005, an Iranian delegation headed by a “Mr Rowhani” (believed to be Hassan Rouhani, who was then Iran’s Chief Nuclear Negotiator and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, and later succeeded Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran’s president) met multiple times with South African president Thabo Mbeki, to assist Iran with their nuclear program and to provide technical advice and technology.

“The Iranians do want to procure nuclear technology from South Africa,” the report said.

The South African government, in response to U.S. president Donald Trump’s claim in an Executive Order on 7 February 2025 that South Africa is “reinvigorating its relations with Iran to develop ... nuclear arrangements”,<sup>78</sup> has denied that there has been any cooperation with Iran on nuclear technology.

“#SouthAfrica has not had any cooperation with #Iran in the nuclear field in any form or shape,” South Africa’s head of public diplomacy, Clayson Monyela, posted to X. “There are no technical exchanges between the two countries & neither do we export to Iran any controlled items ( nuclear,

chemical, biological). These areas are strictly governed by our country’s Non Proliferation Act & monitored by the relevant UN agencies. Our nuclear programme is under comprehensive safeguards & declarations are submitted to the IAEA.”<sup>79</sup>

On the same day, however, South Africa’s minister of mineral resources and energy, Gwede Mantashe, said that the country would be open to a bid by Iran to supply civilian nuclear power technology.<sup>80</sup>

South Africa’s official position, since 1994, has been that it has not cooperated with Iran on any nuclear technology, and will not do so in relation to nuclear weapons. It prides itself on its unique distinction of having acquired nuclear weapons and then voluntarily dismantling them.

South Africa has expressed the view that the entire Middle East ought to be free of nuclear weapons, and it supports Iran in its efforts to reach a comprehensive agreement in ongoing nuclear talks, in the hope that sanctions could be lifted without delay.<sup>81</sup>

**It has, however, consistently supported Iran’s “inalienable right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, in line with the provisions of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT)”, and future cooperation on nuclear energy technology remains on the table.<sup>82</sup>**

77 Summarised in *Spy Cables: South African spies wary of Iran operations*. Rahul Radhakrishnan, Will Jordan & Al Jazeera Investigative Unit. 23 February 2015.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/2/23/spy-cables-south-african-spies-wary-of-iran-operations>

Original intelligence document available at: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1674131/south-africa-operational-target-analysis-of-iran.txt>

78 *Addressing Egregious Actions of The Republic of South Africa. Executive Order. The White House. 7 February 2025.*

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/addressing-egregious-actions-of-the-republic-of-south-africa/>

79 Post on X.com by Clayson Monyela. 17 February 2025.

<https://x.com/ClaysonMonyela/status/1891569737773023673>

80 *South Africa open to nuclear project bids from Russia or Iran, minister says. Press Release. South African Nuclear Energy Corporation (NECSA). 17 February 2025.*

<https://www.necsa.co.za/2025/02/17/south-africa-open-to-nuclear-project-bids-from-russia-or-iran-minister-says/>

81 *ATC170503: Report of the Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation on a mission of conducting oversight on the implementation of the Joint Commission of Cooperation between South Africa and the Islamic Republic of Iran and the execution of South Africa’s international relations policy, in Teheran, Iran and Doha, Qatar from 9-12 May 2015. 3 May 2017.*

<https://pmg.org.za/taled-committee-report/3071/>

82 *ATC170503: Report of the Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation on a mission of conducting oversight on the implementation of the Joint Commission of Cooperation between South Africa and the Islamic Republic of Iran and the execution of South Africa’s international relations policy, in Teheran, Iran and Doha, Qatar from 9-12 May 2015. 3 May 2017.*

<https://pmg.org.za/taled-committee-report/3071/>

# 7. The MTN Controversy

The MTN controversy is a significant case that illustrates the intricate links between commercial interests and foreign policy decisions in South Africa's relationship with Iran.

## 7.1 Irancell

In 2005, the MTN Group, a major South African telecommunications firm, secured a deal to acquire 49% of Irancell, a joint venture with a consortium controlled by the Iranian government. MTN provided the initial funding for the venture and oversaw the network's launch in 2006. The majority shareholder in MTN Irancell is the Iran Electronic Development Company, which is itself a joint venture between Bonyad Mostazafan (Foundation of the Oppressed) and Iran Electronics Industries (IEI).

The Mostazafan Foundation is nominally a tax-exempt charity. It was founded during the Iranian Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini, and is run by hardline current and former officials of the IRGC. It still answers directly to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, and supplies goods and services to the IRGC, Iran's law enforcement services, and the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL).<sup>83</sup>

Mostazafan took over the assets of the former Shah of Iran, as well as the Pahlavi Foundation. It manages hundreds of companies, and is widely viewed as the largest holding company in the Middle East, and the second-largest commercial entity in Iran after the state-owned National Iranian Oil Company.<sup>84</sup>

**IEI, the other partner MTN chose to work with, is a direct subsidiary Iran's MODAFL, and manufactures electronic components for weapons systems. It has extensive operations in the military-industrial complex of Iran, and is widely suspected of sanctions-busting.<sup>85</sup>**

Both organisations have been subjected to sanctions by various countries.

Whether or not MTN chose its partners for this reason, both organisations are clearly very well connected at the highest levels of Iran's government and defence industries.

Two special reports were published by Reuters in 2012, alleging that MTN "bribed its way into Iran", and "funneled U.S. technology to Iran".

**The first report states: "Turkcell, an Istanbul-based rival, in March filed a federal lawsuit in Washington alleging MTN bribed its way into Iran and stole the license from under it. It is seeking at least \$4.2 billion in damages.**

An elite South African police unit called the Hawks is investigating. MTN has denied the allegations and called Turkcell's demands 'extortionate'. ... The core of the Turkcell case is the sworn testimony of Chris Kilowan, a former MTN executive who guided the company's bid to win the Iranian license and has emerged as the key witness. He has turned over to Turkcell's attorneys some 7,000 pages of internal MTN documents related to Project Snooker - MTN's code name for its effort... "We said we are going to snooker Turkcell,' Kilowan testified."<sup>86</sup>

The second Reuters special report alleges: "Hundreds of pages of internal documents reviewed by Reuters show that MTN employees created presentations for meetings and wrote reports that openly discussed circumventing U.S. sanctions to source American tech equipment for MTN Irancell. The documents also address the potential consequences of getting caught. The sanctions are intended to curb Iran's nuclear program, which Tehran maintains is peaceful."<sup>87</sup>

83 Bonyad Mostazafan. *IranWatch*. 1 June 2021. <https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/bonyad-e-mostazafan-foundation>

84 Millionaire mullahs. Paul Klebnikov. *The Iranian*. 7 July 2003. <https://www.iranian.com/Travelers/2003/July/Rich/>

85 Iran Electronics Industries (IEI). *IranWatch*. 29 January 2025. <https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/iran-electronics-industries-ie>

86 Special Report: How an African telecom allegedly bribed its way into Iran. Steve Stecklow & David Dolan. *Reuters*. 15 June 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/special-report-how-an-african-telecom-allegedly-bribed-its-way-into-iran-idUSBRE85E0CI/>

87 Special Report: Documents detail how MTN funneled U.S. technology to Iran. Steve Stecklow. *Reuters*. 30 August 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mtn-iran-documents/special-report-documents-detail-how-mtn-funneled-u-s-technology-to-iran-idUSBRE87T05R20120830/>

MTN denied any wrongdoing, and has not been convicted of any crime.

It has spent the better part of two decades in court, however, defending itself against claims made by losing bidder Turkcell of having bribed South African and Iranian officials, including by promising that MTN could sway South Africa's

## 7.2 Bribery claims

MTN was in a prime position to secure favours from the South African government, since its senior staff, including chairman Cyril Ramaphosa, and executive director Irene Charnley, were both extremely well-connected members of the ruling ANC. Its CEO, Phuthuma Nhleko, was also very well-connected, though not known to be an ANC member. Ramaphosa went on to become South Africa's president in 2018.

The litigation implicated the South African ambassador to Iran, Yusuf Saloojee, who allegedly gave MTN assurances that South Africa's ambassador to the IAEA, Abdul Minty, would not support referring Iran to the UN Security Council. It was also alleged that MTN's intervention secured the meetings between Hourani and Mbeki in 2004.

In 2012, South Africa's foreign affairs ministry, which by then had been renamed to the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, suspended Saloojee, pending an investigation into malfeasance related to MTN's entry into Iran.<sup>89</sup>

South Africa's elite investigation unit, the Hawks, also launched an investigation. After a raid on MTN's South African offices, and those of its legal counsel, Webber Wentzel, in 2018,<sup>90</sup> Saloojee was arrested in February 2019 on suspicion of being involved in "deceitful, corrupt activities with Iranian officials" which led to the cancellation of the Turkcell licence in favour of MTN Irancell.<sup>91</sup>

vote at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in matters pertaining to Iran's nuclear programme, and by promising Iran equipment that was otherwise prohibited by sanctions.<sup>88</sup>

The case remains a matter of litigation.

The arrest was likely related to Kilowan's claim under oath in the Turkcell case that he had paid Saloojee a \$200,000 bribe out of his own bank account, on the understanding that Charnley had assured him MTN would reimburse him. MTN never did, and both Charnley and Saloojee denied any knowledge of such a bribe.<sup>92</sup>

Kilowan also claimed to have paid Iran's deputy foreign minister \$400,000, and that he had access to a "slush fund" of another \$200,000 to pay six Iranian state employees to spy for MTN.<sup>93</sup>

Saloojee died a month later, however, and the case never proceeded to trial.<sup>94</sup> His family and attorneys insist that he was innocent.<sup>95</sup>

City Press, however, got sight of a memorandum from Nhleko to Charnley, which Kilowan claims relates to payments including the amount due to Saloojee. The memo reads: "With reference to the process in terms of which MTN ... acquired a 49% equity interest in Irancell, you are authorised to finalise all agreements with the consultants that assisted the company during the run-up to and actual negotiating period, and to effect the necessary payments."<sup>96</sup>

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89 South Africa Acts in MTN Bribery Case. Devon Maylie. *Wall Street Journal*. 12 July 2012.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303740704577522560497930748>

90 Hawks raid MTN offices in Turkcell dispute. Duncan McLeod. 5 June 2018.

<https://techcentral.co.za/hawks-raid-mtn-offices-in-turkcell-dispute/200180/>

91 SA's ex-ambassador seized over MTN Iran license win. Uncredited. *News24*. 15 February 2019.

<https://www.news24.com/business/companies/sas-ex-ambassador-seized-over-mtn-iran-license-win-20190215>

92 MTN exec admits to bribe. Uncredited. *City Press*. 3 June 2012.

<https://www.news24.com/business/mtn-exec-admits-to-bribe-20120603>

93 Cellphone man says he bribed 7 Iranian, including deputy minister, to get contract. *International Iran Times*. Undated.

<https://iran-times.com/cellphone-man-says-he-bribed-7-iranian-including-deputy-minister-to-get-contract/>

94 Yusuf Saloojee, former Iran ambassador arrested over alleged corrupt MTN deal, dies. Uncredited. *News24*. 18 March 2019.

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/just-in-yusuf-saloojee-former-iran-ambassador-arrested-over-alleged-corrupt-mtn-deal-dies-20190318>

95 Yusuf Saloojee, former Iran ambassador linked to alleged corrupt MTN deal, wholly innocent – lawyer. Uncredited. *News24*. 18 March 2019.

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/former-iranian-ambassador-died-before-baseless-corruption-charges-could-be-withdrawn-lawyer-20190318-2>

96 MTN exec admits to bribe. Uncredited. *City Press*. 3 June 2012.

<https://www.news24.com/business/mtn-exec-admits-to-bribe-20120603>

## 7.3 Allegations of sanctions circumvention

Kilowan also claimed that Iranian officials made repeated requests of him to assist with Iran's military hardware requirements, including drone aircraft, radar systems, armored personnel carriers, long-range cannons and the Rooivalk attack helicopter, as well as support for its nuclear development program.<sup>97</sup> Kilowan claimed to have relayed the requests to his superiors, who, he said, would talk to the government.<sup>98</sup>

In the end, there is no evidence amounting to proof that Iran succeeded in securing any military hardware, but MTN Irancell did procure equipment that Iranian companies could not buy directly from the E.U. or U.S. due to sanctions, including, Reuters reports, "products from Sun Microsystems Inc,

## 7.4 Quid pro quo

Other senior government figures implicated in the MTN saga were then minister of foreign affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, and then deputy foreign minister Aziz Pahad.<sup>102</sup>

Around the same time, Pahad also flew to Tehran, to meet with Mostazafan Foundation president Mahmoud Farouzandeh to lay the groundwork for a bilateral trade meeting to be held in December of that year. In a statement, the South African foreign affairs department confirmed that Pahad and Farouzandeh had discussed cooperation in telecommunications, nuclear energy, electricity and oil.<sup>103</sup>

In December 2024, a South African-Iranian Joint Bilateral Commission was held, at which Dlamini-Zuma reported that \$4 billion worth of South African investments in Iran were "nearing finalisation". MTN was not mentioned directly, but it was one of only six companies present at the conference.

The following year, in September 2005, South Africa, represented at the IAEA by Abdul Minty, who at the time chaired the South African Council for the Non-Proliferation

Oracle Corp, International Business Machines Corp, EMC Corp, Hewlett Packard Co and Cisco Systems Inc..."<sup>99</sup>

**An inquiry commissioned by MTN found that the company had broken no laws,<sup>100</sup> but that very same month, an Iranian-born U.S. citizen, Mohammad Hajian, was jailed for four years in the U.S. on charges that he sold high-tech equipment to MTN Irancell in violation of U.S. sanctions against Iran.**

Prosecutors held that the equipment could have military applications, and could easily be used by the Iranian regime once MTN Irancell had brought it into the country.<sup>101</sup>

of Weapons of Mass Destruction, abstained from a vote that found Iran guilty of violating its commitments as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and resolved to refer it to the United Nations Security Council.

Until this time, Turkcell was under the impression that it was the leading contender in the bid for a share in Irancell. Ten days after the IAEA vote, however, MTN expressed its interest, saying the company had decided "to contribute" to the consortium.

The claim of Turkcell, in its protracted legal effort to secure \$4.2 billion in damages from MTN, was that all this was not mere coincidence, but amounted to a corrupt quid pro quo.<sup>105</sup>

At the time, the opposition Democratic Alliance noted that while there was no firm evidence that Minty's vote was influenced by either MTN or Saloojee, Minty and Saloojee did allegedly meet with MTN representatives over dinner prior to the IAEA's vote. The party requested that Minty be suspended, pending an official investigation.<sup>106</sup>

98 *Special Report: Documents detail how MTN funneled U.S. technology to Iran.* Steve Stecklow. Reuters. 30 August 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mtn-iran-documents/special-report-documents-detail-how-mtn-funneled-u-s-technology-to-iran-idUSBRE87T05R20120830/>

99 *Ibid.*

100 *Hoffmann clears MTN of Iran wrongdoing.* Duncan McLeod. TechCentral. 1 February 2013. <https://techcentral.co.za/hoffman-clears-mtn-of-iran-wrongdoing/187311/>

101 *US trial turns heat on MTN.* Editor. TechCentral. 18 February 2013. <https://techcentral.co.za/us-trial-turns-heat-on-mtn/187398/>

102 *South Africa's Bilateral Relations with Iran and the Development of Military and Nuclear Capacities.* Irina Tsukerman. Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs. 15 October 2024. <https://jcpa.org/south-africas-bilateral-relations-with-iran-and-the-development-of-military-and-nuclear-capacities/#elementor-toc-heading-anchor-3>

103 *Ibid.*

104 *MTN in bed with Iran's military.* AmaBhungane. 10 February 2012. <https://amabhungane.org/mtn-in-bed-with-irans-military/>

105 *Turkcell v MTN Group.* United States District Court for the District of Columbia. 28 March 2012. <https://www.mtn.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/usa-district-court.pdf>

106 *Suspend Abdul Minty as well - David Maynier.* David Maynier. PoliticsWeb. 12 July 2012. <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/suspend-abdul-minty-as-well-david-maynier>

## 7.5 Ongoing litigation

The initial case, filed by Turkcell in the District Court for the District of Columbia in 2012, was withdrawn a year later in favour of refiling the case in South Africa.

After a ten-year battle, including a failed attempt at international arbitration, the High Court of South Africa dismissed Turkcell's application with costs in 2022.<sup>107</sup> It did not rule on the merits, but held that the matter properly fell under Iranian jurisdiction.

MTN agreed, but Turkcell objected, saying that the Iranian courts were not independent of the state, and since the case involves serious allegations against the Iranian state, it could not expect a fair hearing in Iran.

It approached the Supreme Court of Appeals in Bloemfontein, arguing that because MTN was based in South Africa, and the

scheme to secure the Irancell operating licence was largely hatched in South Africa, its courts do have jurisdiction.<sup>108</sup>

**The Supreme Court of Appeals agreed, and set aside the High Court judgment, directing the case back to the High Court to be heard. In response, MTN took the matter to the Constitutional Court, South Africa's apex court.<sup>109</sup>**

The case now awaits a ruling on whether or not it ought to be heard in the High Court. Throughout, MTN has maintained that the case has no merit, and Turkcell has pointed out that no court has ever ruled on the merits of the case.

## 7.6 Millstone

MTN's investment in Iran has been a millstone around the company's neck. Sanctions have frequently made it hard or impossible to repatriate earnings. MTN's share price has fluctuated in concert with the tightening or easing of sanctions against Iran.<sup>111</sup>

Difficulties over repatriating funds via third-party countries reportedly led to the resignation of MTN's chief finance officer in 2013.<sup>112</sup>

When sanctions were eased in 2015, under an Obama administration nuclear deal with Iran, MTN was able to transfer \$1 billion which had been stuck behind a wall of sanctions.<sup>113</sup>

After the first administration of Donald Trump withdrew from the Obama-era nuclear accord with Iran in 2018, MTN was once again stymied, and was unable to receive loan repayments and dividends from its Irancell operation.<sup>114</sup> The prospect of sanctions being lifted in 2021 under U.S. president Joe Biden once again raised the prospect of being able to repatriate funds.<sup>115</sup>

This illustrates the great difficulty of operating in Iran, and the value to MTN of South Africa's diplomatic support for lifting sanctions on the country.

107 MTN says its long-running and ugly battle with Turkcell is over. Duncan McLeod. TechCentral. 1 December 2022.

<https://techcentral.co.za/mtn-says-its-long-running-and-ugly-battle-with-turkcell-is-over/218076/>

108 R75-billion Turkcell, MTN bribery case back in court. Duncan McLeod. TechCentral. 23 August 2024.

<https://techcentral.co.za/r75-billion-turkcell-mtn-bribery-court/250192/>

109 MTN vs Turkcell: \$4.2bn bribery lawsuit heads to SA's top court. Duncan McLeod. TechCentral. 30 April 2025.

<https://techcentral.co.za/mtn-vs-turkcell-bribery-sas-top-court/262929/>

110 S.Africa's MTN to access \$1 bln after easing of Iran sanctions. Reuters. 7 April 2015.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/mtn-group-iran/s-africas-mtn-to-access-1-bln-after-easing-of-iran-sanctions-idUSL6N0X43E720150407/>

111 South Africa's MTN rises after world powers clinch deal with Iran. Reuters. 25 November 2013.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-mtn-idUKBRE9A009D20131125/>

112 Iran deals forced Patel to quit. Jana Marais & Rob Rose. BizCommunity. 30 July 2013.

<https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/543/97518.html>

113 S.Africa's MTN to access \$1 bln after easing of Iran sanctions. Reuters. 7 April 2015.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/mtn-group-iran/s-africas-mtn-to-access-1-bln-after-easing-of-iran-sanctions-idUSL6N0X43E720150407/>

114 Sanctions make it harder for South Africa's MTN to repatriate Iran cash. Tiisetso Motsoeneng. Reuters. 8 August 2018.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mtn-group-results/sanctions-make-it-harder-for-south-africas-mtn-to-repatriate-iran-cash-idUSKBN1KT1WB/>

115 Push to lift Iran sanctions boosts MTN's plan to withdraw cash. Agency Staff. 1 June 2021.

<https://techcentral.co.za/push-to-lift-iran-sanctions-boosts-mtns-plan-to-withdraw-cash/170219/>

## 7.7 Anti-Terrorism Act

**In 2021, 67 family members of American service members killed or injured in terrorist attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan sued the MTN Group, among others, to claim damages under the U.S. Anti-Terrorism Act.**<sup>116</sup>

The suit alleges that the plaintiffs or their family members were injured in a series of terrorist attacks that took place in Iraq and Afghanistan. They allege that the MTN Group did business with Iranian entities that served as fronts for the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), its Hezbollah division, and its external Quds Force. The alleged fronts were named as Bonyad Mostazafan and Iran Electronics Industries. The plaintiffs claim that MTN knew, or recklessly disregarded, that the entities with which it did

business were supporting a terrorist campaign that lasted over a decade, and even went so far as to make an official agreement to support the IRGC's "security" needs, which they claim to be a euphemism for terrorist activities. MTN allegedly provided these Iranian entities with funding, embargoed American technology and equipment, and logistical support. The plaintiffs claim that the technology MTN provided to the IRGC was unique in that it helped terrorists monitor American movements, avoid detection, clandestinely communicate, build and detonate more effective bombs, and develop more lethal rockets.<sup>117</sup>

In 2023, the court ruled on motions filed by all the defendants to dismiss the case, on the grounds that it had no jurisdiction, and that the plaintiffs had not made a case against them. The court ordered dismissals for all plaintiffs, except MTN Group, allowing the case to proceed to discovery.<sup>118</sup>



116 *Zobay et al. v MTN Group et al.: Amended Complaint for Violation of the Anti-Terrorism Act. Case number 21-cv-3503, U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York. 2021.*

<http://terrorismcase.com/zobay-amended-complaint>

117 *U.S. Federal Court Issues Historic Ruling Permitting Anti-Terrorism Claims Against MTN Group to Move to Discovery. Sparacino PLLC. PR NewsWire. 29 September 2023.*

<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/us-federal-court-issues-historic-ruling-permitting-anti-terrorism-claims-against-mtn-group-to-move-to-discovery-301943424.html>

118 *Memorandum & Order in Zobay et al. v MTN Group et al. U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York. 2023.*

<http://terrorismcase.com/zobay-opinion>

## 8. Greylisting

On 24 February 2023, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) took the decision to include South Africa on its “grey list”, thereby classifying it as a jurisdiction under increased monitoring for money laundering and terrorism financing.<sup>119</sup>

This decision followed a comprehensive report published in 2021, in which the FATF concluded that although South Africa has a solid legal framework to fight money laundering and terrorist financing, it has significant shortcomings implementing an effective system, including a failure to pursue serious cases.

While not flagging MTN Group in particular, or the telecommunications sector in general.

**The report did highlight concerns about financial flows between South Africa and two sanctioned countries: Iran and North Korea.<sup>120</sup>**

Although South Africa’s National Treasury claims to have addressed 20 of the 22 action items agreed between it and the FATF to effect removal from the grey list, the remaining two items are not trivial: demonstrating a sustained increase in investigations and prosecutions of serious and complex money laundering, and do the same for the full range of terrorism financing activities.<sup>121</sup>

## 9. Votes at the UN and IAEA

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increase in investigations and prosecutions of serious and complex money laundering, and do the same for the full range of terrorism financing activities.<sup>121</sup>

South Africa’s position vis-à-vis Iran’s nuclear programme, and international sanctions aimed at suppressing it, presents a clear moral conflict.

On one hand, South Africa is the poster child for voluntary nuclear disarmament, while Iran has repeatedly been found in violation of its international obligations on nuclear non-proliferation, starting in 2003.<sup>122</sup>

On the other, its foreign policy is oriented away from the West, and towards solidarity with anti-colonial, anti-imperialist developing countries in the Global South.

**In the end, the latter consideration won, leading *The Economist* in 2010 to describe leading South Africa as “one of Iran’s doughtiest supporters at the UN”.<sup>123</sup>**

119 *Understanding South Africa’s FATF greylisting.* Cliffe, Decker, Hofmeyr. 29 March 2023. <https://www.cliffedekkerhofmeyr.com/en/news/publications/2023/Practice/Corporate/corporate-and-commercial-alert-29-march-Understanding-South-Africas-FATF-greylisting-.html>

120 *South Africa’s measures to combat money laundering and terrorist financing.* Financial Action Task Force. 7 October 2021. <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/content/fatf-gafi/en/publications/Mutualevaluations/Mer-south-africa-2021.html>

121 *FATF Greylisting Progress Update for South Africa: Two Action Items Remain to be Addressed.* Media Statement. National Treasury. 21 February 2025. [https://www.treasury.gov.za/comm\\_media/press/2025/2025022101 Media Statement – FATF Greylisting Progress Update for South Africa.pdf](https://www.treasury.gov.za/comm_media/press/2025/2025022101%20Media%20Statement%20-%20FATF%20Greylisting%20Progress%20Update%20for%20South%20Africa.pdf)

122 *IAEA and Iran - IAEA Resolutions.* International Atomic Energy Agency. Last updated 12 June 2025. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iran/iaea-and-iran-iaea-resolutions>

123 *A battle of principles: South Africa’s relations with Iran.* Michal Onderco. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 252-267. 2017. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315460338-11/battle-principles-south-africa-relations-iran-michal-onderco>

At the IAEA, over multiple decades, South Africa has strongly resisted coercive pressure and sanctions against Iran,<sup>124</sup> advocating “talk, talk, talk, not isolation”.<sup>125</sup>

**While the IAEA found Iran in non-compliance with its obligations, South Africa commended Iran on its compliance, pleaded for more time for Iran, argued that it ought to be permitted to continue uranium enrichment and maintain other facilities needed for both civilian and military nuclear programmes.**

It has abstained from several votes to censure Iran or refer it to the United Nations Security Council for further action.<sup>126</sup>

South Africa’s representative at the IAEA, Abdul Minty, said that the South African government “was opposed to moves by the UNSC to stop Iran’s civilian nuclear programme”.<sup>127</sup>

**Referring to Iran’s nuclear programme as “peaceful” and “civilian” became a pattern for South Africa, despite the fact that it has long been known that Iran was enriching large amounts of uranium to levels of at least 60% for implausible reasons,<sup>128</sup>**

While civilian nuclear energy reactors use low-enriched uranium, usually far below 20%. The process to refine uranium from 60% to weapons-grade is reportedly very short. As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, South Africa’s votes have not uniformly favoured Iran, perhaps illustrating the internal contradictions in South Africa’s foreign policy principles.

In 2007 and 2008, South Africa called for an end to all key sanctions on Iran, including the arms embargo and financial restrictions on the IRGC. It separately argued for a reduction in the number of entities targeted by sanctions.<sup>129</sup>

Despite this, South Africa on three occasions voted in favour of sanctions resolutions against Iran, although the votes were met with dissatisfaction among domestic foreign policy officials.<sup>130</sup> On other occasions, it abstained.

South Africa also argued that the Security Council ignored the findings of the IAEA, despite the fact that it was South Africa that voted against the IAEA referring Iran’s nuclear file to the Security Council in the first place.<sup>131</sup>

South Africa has also demurred on resolutions targeting other members of Iran’s Axis of Resistance, such as a 2012 resolution on Syria. Its foreign policy at the time was described as “fickle”.<sup>132</sup>



- 125 SAG ON HAMAS, PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS, AND IRAQI DEBT. U.S. Embassy in Pretoria, via Wikileaks. 30 March 2006. [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PRETORIA1290\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PRETORIA1290_a.html)
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# 10. Relationship with Hamas

In the wake of the brutal 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas on civilians in Israel, South Africa once again courted controversy, and put its relationship with Western trading partners at risk.

**A telephone call took place between then International Relations minister Naledi Pandor and then Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, about which the two sides gave conflicting reports.**

Hamas, in a statement, said: “The head of the Hamas political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, received a phone call from the South African Foreign Minister, where he [sic] affirmed South African solidarity with the Palestinian people and with Gaza in the Al-Aqsa flood battle, and expressed his sadness and regret for what the Palestinian people are experiencing in Gaza.”<sup>133</sup>

Pandor, and a spokesperson for the presidency, denied that there was a “bilateral relationship with Hamas”, and that Pandor had offered support for the Battle of Al-Aqsa Flood – as the attack was named by Hamas.

“The reports that minister Pandor also offered support for the ‘Battle of Al-Aqsa Flood’ are untrue and meant to impugn the minister and the government of South Africa,” a statement from the minister’s office said, although it did not clarify why Hamas would wish to impugn Pandor.<sup>134</sup>

“During the call, and in line with the Government’s position, Minister Pandor reiterated South Africa’s solidarity and support for the people of Palestine and expressed sadness and regret for the loss of innocent lives both Palestinians and Israelis,” the statement read. “Minister Pandor and the Hamas Leader discussed how to get the necessary Humanitarian Aid to Gaza and other parts of the Palestinian Territories.”

The claim not to have a bilateral relationship appears to fly in the face of earlier reports. In 2015, it was reported that then president Jacob Zuma met with Hamas leader Khalid Mesh’al “to cement formal relations”.<sup>135</sup>

At an event celebrating the relationship, attended by several senior ANC figures, the secretary general of the ANC, Gwede Mantashe, reportedly said: “[W]e are starting a relationship with Hamas... [W]e are happy today we are together, we are formally formalising our relationship. We’ll exchange delegations, we’ll share experiences and we’ll talk to each other regularly.”

**Another report held that the ANC signed a “letter of intent” with Hamas to build a long-lasting relationship with Hamas.**<sup>136</sup>

In 2018, South Africa again “rolled out the red carpet” for a Hamas delegation, along with a formal signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the group and the ANC, signed by Mahmoud al-Zahar and Jackson Mtembu, respectively.<sup>137</sup>

The delegation was taken on a tour of Nelson Mandela’s cell on Robben Island, associating the Palestinian struggle with that of black South Africans against apartheid. There is a profound discordance between the image of Nelson Mandela as a symbol of peaceful negotiation and the formation of a “rainbow nation”, and that of Hamas, almost universally considered a terrorist organisation, which has not subjected itself to popular elections since it first came to power in Gaza in 2006, and which frequently launches deadly attacks against civilian targets in its democratic neighbour, Israel.

Hamas clarified recently that its relationship is with the ANC, which has always had close ties to the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and not with the government of South Africa.<sup>138</sup> However, South Africa is one of few countries in the entire world to host an open physical supportive presence of Hamas.<sup>139</sup>

The relationship between Hamas and the ANC dates back to the mid-1990s, according to Moussa Abu Marzouq, a former head of the organisation’s political bureau. The group specifically sought and nurtured a relationship with South Africa, and worked to present the Palestinian struggle against Israel as a parallel of South Africa’s liberation struggle against apartheid.

**Hamas also reportedly established organisations affiliated with it in South Africa, such as the Islamic Al-Aqsa organization, the Middle East Studies Center and the Afro-Palestine Forum, in order to develop relations with Muslims in South Africa. It also worked closely with the Boycott, Disinvest, Sanction organisation in South Africa, in its campaign to delegitimise Israel.**

The South African government, in its official response to the 7 October 2023 attack, declined to even acknowledge the attack or the responsible party. It merely referred to, “the recent devastating escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict”, and added: “The new conflagration has arisen from the continued illegal occupation of Palestine land, continued settlement expansion, desecration of the Al Aqsa Mosque and Christian holy sites, and ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people.”<sup>140</sup>

**It did not name Hamas, did not condemn the attack that killed over 1,000 civilians in Israel, and laid all the blame at the door of alleged Israeli wrongdoing. It did, however, offer to “share its experience in mediation and conflict resolution”.**

Five days later, it again called for a cessation of violence. President Cyril Ramaphosa extended condolences to “all the victims” of “an escalation of hostilities...that has left more than 1,000 people dead”.<sup>141</sup>

This statement, too, used the passive voice to avoid naming the perpetrator of the original attack.

A day later, the South African government issued its first broadside against Israel, over the nature of its response to the Hamas attack, using inflammatory phrases like “grave breaches” and “war crimes”. Only at the very end of that statement, almost as an afterthought, did it deign to mention the cause of the conflict: “South Africa also calls for the release of the Israeli hostages taken into Gaza.”<sup>142</sup>

This one-sidedness and refusal to acknowledge the atrocities committed by the ANC’s very good friend, Hamas, while pouncing on every perceived misdeed of Israel in its retaliation, has become a hallmark of South African diplomacy since.



ANC members Jackson Mthembu with Hamas leadership  
Twitter

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# 11. International Court of Justice case

## 11.1 Shared viewpoints

South Africa and Iran have long shared viewpoints on Middle Eastern issues. In particular, South Africa, and influential people in the ANC and broader liberation movement, have been highly critical of Israel, accusing it of apartheid policies and genocide against the Palestinian people.

South Africa's official position – unlike that of Iran, which seeks the destruction of Israel – is to support peaceful negotiation towards a two-state solution. Nominally, it bases this position on “equality, justice and human rights”.<sup>143</sup>

In 2021, Cyril Ramaphosa wrote: “We call on all parties involved to show restraint, to respect human life, and to cease the current hostilities.”

## 11.2 Genocide allegation

If it wasn't already clear that South Africa's offer to mediate in the conflict was cynical rhetoric, entirely undermined by its close identification with the Palestinian cause in general and Hamas in particular, and by its open hostility towards Israel, it formally filed proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), to seek an order under the Genocide Convention, on 29 December 2023.

Like in its public statements, its submission to the ICJ glosses over the inconvenient fact that Hamas perpetrated what could be considered a genocidal act against Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023, and focuses entirely on allegations about Israel's military response.

**A detailed analysis of the case is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to note that the ICJ has not ruled on the merits of the case, has not accused Israel of genocide.**

It has merely imposed provisions designed to prevent genocide. The description by David Scheffer, the first United States Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues during President Bill Clinton's second term in office, of Israel's response merits reproduction: “They had a very strong response today because they focused on, well, frankly, almost the complete

This is a stock diplomatic formulation, but it hides the fact that South Africa's analysis of the conflict is very much one that blames Israel for illegal occupation and various atrocities, while glossing over attacks against Israelis and the historical refusal or inability of Palestinian leadership groups to negotiate in good faith, or peacefully govern their territories.

Formal relations between South Africa and Israel have deteriorated over the past decade, to the point where South Africa's parliament, then controlled by ANC members, voted to cut diplomatic ties entirely, close the Israeli embassy in Pretoria and recall the ambassador to Tel Aviv.<sup>144</sup>

lack of recognition in the South Africa application that Israel is at war. It's engaged in combat with an enemy. The enemy is Hamas. That means military force is being used. And Hamas is responding in ways that also violate international law, such as using human shields and embedding themselves in civilian structures, et cetera. By overlooking the war context, you completely miss the point of why there is so much death and destruction.”<sup>145</sup>

In a televised address, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, thanked South Africa: “I applaud all the positions of support and especially the state of South Africa, which filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice against the occupying state for its crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, and we appreciate the political and legal importance of this lawsuit.”<sup>146</sup>

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded: “No, it's not us who came to commit genocide, it's Hamas”.

This is consistent with a reading of Hamas's founding documents, which clearly spell out its genocidal intentions towards Jews, its refusal to negotiate any settlement, its refusal to renounce violence against civilians, and its determination to destroy Israel.<sup>147</sup>

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### 11.3 The Iran connection

**A mere two weeks after the Hamas attack on Israel, South Africa's minister of international relations, Naledi Pandor, visited Iran. There, she met with Iranian prime minister Ebrahim Raisi and Iran's minister of foreign affairs, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, to discuss "issues of mutual bilateral interest".**

In a statement on 24 October 2023, DIRCO explained: "... South Africa also emphasised its position on the Middle East Peace Process, including non-interference and the adherence to International Humanitarian Law, and Human Rights Law, while supporting the fulfilment of the Palestinian peoples' inalienable right to self-determination and independence.

"Minister Pandor stated that: '...countries like South Africa have been consistent in their support to Palestine and have never deviated from the belief President Mandela held, that until the people of Palestine are free, South Africa will not be fully free.'"<sup>148</sup>

South African president Cyril Ramaphosa first announced the country's intention of bringing charges against Israel in an international forum such as the ICC or ICJ in November 2023, while he was on a state visit to Qatar.<sup>149</sup>

Qatar is, like its neighbour across the Persian Gulf, Iran, a sponsor of Hamas and host of an office for Hamas leaders.<sup>150 151</sup>

It has been widely speculated, notably by respected analysts such as Frans Cronjé<sup>152</sup> and Paul Hoffman<sup>153</sup>, that South Africa acted against Israel at the request of, and perhaps with funding by, its good friend, Iran.

It ignored several court orders to pay the outstanding debt, and eventually took the matter to the Constitutional Court, the highest court in the land.

**The evidence for such a claim is entirely circumstantial, but bears relating. In early December 2023, the ANC, South Africa's ruling party, faced imminent liquidation.<sup>154</sup> It allegedly owed R102 million to a service provider, which it could not pay.**

In the preceding years, the ANC has on several occasions been so cash-strapped that it was unable to pay staff salaries.<sup>155 156</sup>

Mere days after the South African government filed its case against Israel at the ICJ, an undertaking involving a phalanx of lawyers of international stature that could cost as much as R1.5 billion in taxpayer money,<sup>157</sup> the ANC announced that it had reached an out-of-court settlement of an undisclosed nature with its creditor and turned its finances around.<sup>158</sup>

Suspicious though the coincidence is, a fact check by a leading South African newspaper could find no evidence to prove that the ANC had received funding from any particular source, be it Iran or otherwise, but noted that the party's finances were not a matter of public record.<sup>159</sup>

Although the ANC claimed it complies with the Political Party Funding Act, which requires disclosure of donor funding exceeding R100,000, the Act is weakly enforced, if at all, and its violation might never become known.



President Cyril Ramaphosa address ANC meeting on Israel/Hamas war  
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