

AHMADINEJAD IN WEST AFRICA

WHAT IRANIAN OUTREACH TO THE REGION
REVEALS ABOUT TEHRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

CHARLIE SZROM

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Sign denoting Iranian agricultural aid project in Ghana, December 2007
(photo by hiyori13, available on Flickr).

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Introduction

The passage of United Nations (UN) sanctions against Iran and unilateral measures by the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, and European Union countries could be taken as evidence of an increasingly isolated Iran. Tehran does not see itself as alone on the world stage, however, as it has been enjoying and investing in bilateral relationships with countries across the globe. These relationships have provided rewards beyond the lack of unanimity on Iran sanctions at the UN Security Council. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recognizes this: on June 21, 2010, he said, “Today you [Iranian ambassadors] are sent on your missions by a government about which all the world is speaking because Iran is being turned into the biggest world power. . . . Today, nothing can be done in global relations without the presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”¹ Ahmadinejad expanded upon these thoughts in an interview with a Nigerian newspaper:

If you think that Ahmadinejad is becoming popular today, it is because of the fact that people are seeking for justice and peace. It is also because the urge for peace and justice is becoming more prominent and stronger. It is because resistance has become more popular. It is because resistance of the western [sic] powers has become a value for many nations across the world.²

Ahmadinejad’s views help explain Iran’s enthusiastic participation in organizations such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), whose annual summit Iran plans to host in 2012, and the Developing Eight (D-8), whose annual meeting Ahmadinejad attended on July 8 in Nigeria.³ Both of these groups serve Iran’s vision of leading developing countries against developed countries. The D-8, a grouping of majority-Muslim countries that consists of Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and



Key Points

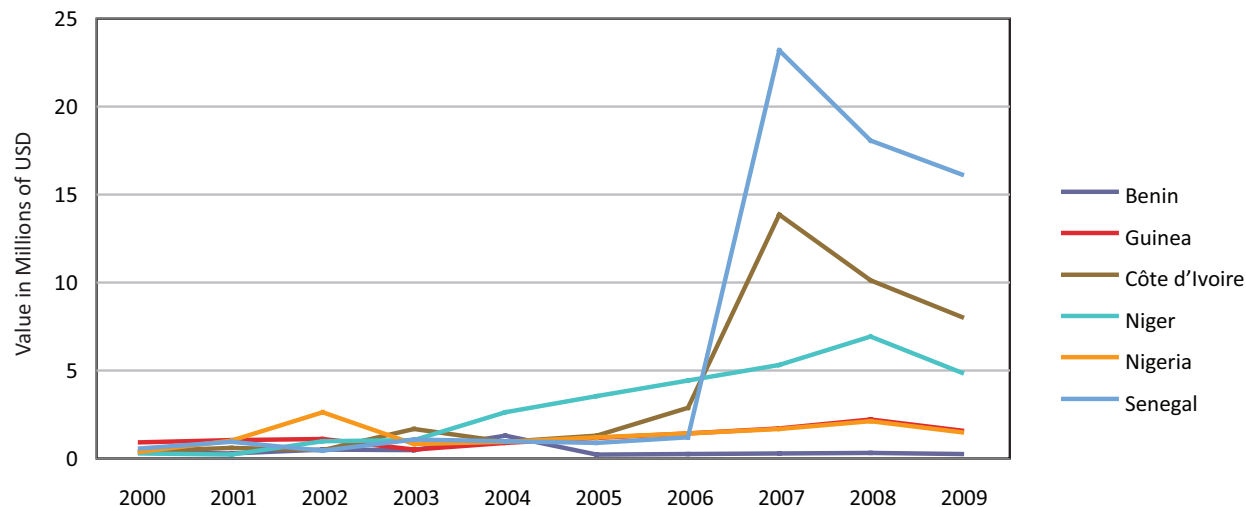
- Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued Iranian efforts to cultivate relationships with West African countries in a trip to the region earlier this July. These countries, while largely friendly to Iran, have not yet fallen under Tehran's sway. Iran rightly views such partners as important to advancing its power and securing its nuclear weapons program.
- The Islamic Republic's soft-power activities in West Africa have yielded successes. In a November 2009 UN vote on the human rights situation in Iran, almost all West African nations maintained their previous positions (which were primarily in support of Iran), while several other African and Middle Eastern nations took stronger stances due to Iran's June 2009 postelection crackdown. Beyond the UN, Tehran has built an alliance with Senegal and encouraged and exploited an anti-Israel trend in Mauritania. Iran also almost signed a nuclear deal with Nigeria in 2008.
- Iran has dramatically increased its economic activity in the region and laid the groundwork for further expansion: the value of 2009 exports to Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal was roughly 2,700, 2,800, and 3,600 percent higher (respectively) than 2000 exports, and the Islamic Republic has planned future deals with a number of other West African nations.
- Tehran has also experienced setbacks in the region: Nigeria voted for sanctions on Iran at the UN in June 2010; Mali, Mauritania, and other West African nations continue to cooperate on counterterrorism with the United States; West African popular opinion is far more pro-American than pro-Iranian; and Nigeria remains the largest U.S. trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa and a critical supplier for America's energy needs.
- A lack of American attention to West Africa allows Iran to continue to expand its influence and undercut Western interests. The people and states of the region view the United States favorably and share interests with it, but the United States will have to provide alternatives to Iranian support should it wish to see a reduction in West African relations with Iran.
- The case of Iran's outreach to West Africa reveals a four-stage approach by which Iran is attempting to build and exploit soft power: through culture, diplomacy, economics, and defense. Iran's history in the region also shows what priorities Iran values in its foreign policy and the characteristics of countries it targets. These findings can assist understanding of Iran's overall foreign policy machinations and its bilateral relations in other regions of the world.

Turkey, provides an attractive forum for Ahmadinejad's vision to lead the charge against the West.

Of the D-8's members, Turkey and Pakistan have both provided recent support to Iran. Turkey increased its economic cooperation with Iran over the last several years, voted against UN sanctions on Iran, and attempted to broker a nuclear fuel swap deal with the Islamic Republic. In Pakistan, a recent Pew Global

Attitudes survey found that the majority of the population supports Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons (although, among other D-8 countries, significant majorities in Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey oppose an Iranian nuclear weapons program).⁴ Ahmadinejad, attempting to expand Iran's appeal in the organization, articulated his vision for the D-8 in the Nigerian newspaper interview:

FIGURE 1
IRANIAN EXPORTS TO WEST AFRICA, 2000–2009



SOURCE: International Monetary Fund, "Direction of Trade Statistics," available at www2.imfstatistics.org/DOT (accessed July 19, 2010).

NOTE: Exports likely declined in 2008–2009 due to the global recession.

The economies of the developing nations are suffering under the brunt of policies designed by the developed world. Are the D-8 countries doing anything to create a strong economic block that will compete with the developed economies? The western [sic] powers are plundering the huge resources of the developing world. They spread lies about the culture of the Africans because they want to continue the philandering [sic] of the African resources. They are only plundering the resources of the developing nations. We have to develop a proper cooperation among the developing nations in order to wriggle ourselves from the domination of the western [sic] powers.⁵

Ahmadinejad's recent trip to Africa, which consisted of participation in the Nigeria-hosted D-8 summit

followed by a visit to Mali, reveals Ahmadinejad's populist vision and the Iranian soft-power strategy. In West Africa, this strategy has resulted in extensive outreach to Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Senegal, as well as development of relations with geographically smaller states such as Côte d'Ivoire (see figure 1). Nigeria, Mali, and Niger remain battlegrounds for influence, while Iran has seen perhaps the most success in Mauritania and Senegal. Iranian outreach to the region began long before Ahmadinejad: former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani both visited the region.⁶ According to Senegal's ambassador to Iran, Rafsanjani launched Iran's outreach to African states such as Senegal.⁷

The case of relations between West African states and Iran provides insight into how Iran perceives its world, what priorities it values in its partners, and the methods it uses to garner international support.

Nigeria

Iran became interested in bolstering its relations with Nigeria several years before Ahmadinejad's presidency. In past years, the Islamic Republic used the D-8, established in 1997, and bilateral talks to advance trade ties and mutual investment.⁸ In January 2005, Khatami visited Nigeria and signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo. Iran's Export Development Bank also signed a €50 million (\$38.2 million) deal with Nigeria's Ministry of Power and Steel during the visit.⁹ Nigeria's then-defense minister Rabi'u Kwankwaso returned the diplomatic niceties by visiting Iran in June 2005 to familiarize himself with Iran's defense industry.¹⁰ Iran's state media reported that, during a visit to Iran the following February, Nigeria's foreign minister expressed interest in Iranian assistance to develop the power industry in Nigeria, hinting at a potential reward for Nigerian support for Iran.¹¹ Ahmadinejad himself spoke of the shortage of electricity in Nigeria during his visit this July, stating that nuclear power would be a cheap way to close the energy gap.¹²

Nigeria considered exploring such a solution with Iranian help two years ago.¹³ U.S. assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor, David Kramer, and his deputy, Jeffrey Krilla, visited Nigeria in September 2008 to discuss reports that Nigeria had signed such a deal during an August 28, 2008, meeting in Abuja.¹⁴ Nigerian foreign minister Ojo Maduekwe denied the rumors, stating that Nigeria agreed with the international community on non-proliferation issues.¹⁵ However, in October 2008 Nigeria's then-science minister Grace Ekpiwhre acknowledged the existence of such an agreement, which, she said, would involve Iran providing civilian nuclear technology to Nigeria.¹⁶ A month later, in November 2008, the director general of the Nigerian Atomic Energy Agency announced that Nigeria

would not use "expatriates"—presumably Iranians—in the development of its nuclear program.¹⁷ Under U.S. pressure, Nigeria quickly clarified that it would restrict cooperation with Iran to civilian purposes and then appeared to rule out Iranian participation. Yet the fact that Nigeria even came close to a deal shows the success of Iranian outreach.

Ahmadinejad, with his D-8 trip, may be trying to exploit the divide between Nigerian Muslims and Christians by appealing to Nigerian Muslims during a tense time, while also maintaining a relationship with the federal government. Public opinion in Nigeria, which is hosting the D-8 summit, divides along religious lines on the question of Iran's nuclear weapons program: 74 percent of Nigerian Christians—mostly located in the southern part of the country—oppose the weapons, compared to only 41 percent of Nigerian Muslims (48 percent of Nigerian Muslims support such a program).¹⁸ Sectarian violence also continues at a high rate in northern Nigeria: conflict in Jos, the site of hundreds of deaths in early March, continues to smolder, with eight individuals murdered as recently as July 17.¹⁹ Northerners also resent the fact that the southerner Goodluck Jonathan replaced the northerner Umaru Yar'Adua as president this year, after Yar'Adua could not execute the duties of his office due to illness, and that Jonathan may seek election to a full term in the 2011 presidential elections—despite a reported unwritten power-sharing agreement that the presidency should rotate between the north and the south every eight years (two four-year terms).²⁰ When Ahmadinejad visited Nigeria this July, he chose to meet with Nigerian Muslim clerical leaders or *ulema*.²¹ He also left his car to personally engage with Nigerians watching his motorcade pass in Abuja and chanted the first part of the Islamic *shahada* (which begins, "There is no God but God") with a Nigerian crowd.²²

Existing cultural ties provide a foundation for such outreach: some Nigerian clerics have studied in Tehran and Qom, including the Iranian-trained radical Ibrahim Zakzaky.²³ Zakzaky helped spread an extremist form of Shi'ism in northern Nigeria after being inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution.²⁴ What is called Shi'ism in northern Nigeria, however, may not mirror the theology and practice of Shi'a in Iraq and Iran; using the name "Shi'a" may be a way for individuals to distinguish themselves from mainstream Sunni authorities in northern Nigeria. Zakzaky and Nigerian conversion to "Shi'ism" provide an identity that is explicitly opposed to the more pro-Western attitudes expressed by the Nigerian elite.²⁵ This trend may also be playing out among northern Nigerian Sunnis in general, who may express support for Iran as a way to assert their Muslim identities and further distinguish themselves from Nigerian Christians.²⁶ Ahmadinejad's outreach may be an attempt to exploit such an indigenous trend and build upon cultural ties to increase Iran's appeal among both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria.

Ahmadinejad's trip to Nigeria reveals the continuation of a strong relationship between the Islamic Republic and Africa's most populous nation. Nigeria gives Iran political support and could provide Iran with a valuable export market: Nigeria only imported \$1.5 million in goods from Iran in 2007, but that number could grow as Iran seeks alternative markets.²⁷ Nigeria voted against a November 2009 UN General Assembly resolution condemning Iran's crack-down on human rights, although the country did support sanctions targeting the Islamic Republic at the UN Security Council in June 2010.²⁸ In voting for sanctions, Nigeria's representative to the UN issued a statement saying that "Nigeria could not understand why Iran was not cooperating with the Agency if its goals were peaceful."²⁹ Public opinion in southern Nigeria also shows that many Nigerians do not feel comfortable with a nuclear-armed Iran. By continuing the type of outreach displayed by Ahmadinejad's trip this July, Iran will try to lessen this discomfort, reduce Nigerian votes against Iran at the UN, increase Nigerian support for Iran on the world stage, and ensure Nigeria remains an open export market for Iranian companies.

Mali

Ahmadinejad stopped in Mali following his visit to Nigeria. Mali has many fewer people than Nigeria—13.7 million to Nigeria's 152.2 million—and a much smaller economy—\$15.5 billion compared to \$357.2 billion.³⁰ Yet Mali, like Nigeria, has been a target for Iranian outreach in West Africa, which predates Ahmadinejad's time in office. Khatami also stopped in Mali after visiting Nigeria in January 2005 and expressed a desire to increase cooperation. In particular, Khatami stressed cooperation with Mali in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the NAM.³¹ Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré reciprocated and visited Iran in June 2005, where he met with Ahmadinejad

and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, echoing their desire for further cooperation.³²

The relationship began to bear small fruit for Iran in May 2006, when Malian foreign affairs minister Mokhtar Ouan stated, according to Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency, that he would not let the UN Human Rights Council "become a plaything in the hands of the big powers" after a meeting with the Iranian ambassador to Mali.³³ Presumably, this meant that Mali would oppose efforts to highlight Iran's atrocious human rights record during its term on the Human Rights Council, which expired in 2008 (Mali has consistently abstained from UN General Assembly votes critical of Iran's human

rights record).³⁴ Iranian state media reported that, when visiting Iran in August 2006, Ouan cited Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear energy under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and praised Iran's role in Lebanon (the trip occurred a month after the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel).³⁵

Malian officials likely determined that voicing support for Iran would be a way to encourage Iran's economic investment in Mali, which ranks fifth to last on the UN Human Development Index,³⁶ even though Mali did not explicitly connect Iranian economic assistance with its political activities relating to Iran. Touré, when he invited Ahmadinejad to visit in June 2007, mentioned that he hoped Iranian engineers would begin construction of a dam and power plant as a symbol of positive Iran-Mali relations.³⁷ Iranian first vice president Parviz Davoudi followed up on this aspiration and met with the Malian minister of minerals, energy, and water resources, Ahmed Sow, in February 2008.³⁸ In March 2009, Iranian foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki expressed his government's desire to build the dam.³⁹ Ahmadinejad specifically mentioned economic cooperation with Mali during his visit this July, saying:

In various arenas, we held talks and a number of MoUs were signed. These were for widening cooperation, and Mali provides good grounds for cooperation. They have a vast land span full of mines with fertile land and rivers that are full. And, it has hardworking people.⁴⁰

Iran may wish to drive a wedge between the United States and Mali, an American ally, in addition to receiving political support from its pursuit of closer ties. In a 2007 Pew poll, 79 percent of Malians viewed the United States favorably, consistent with the sentiments of other West African nations.⁴¹ Mali participates alongside the United States as one of the seventeen members of the Convening Group of the Community of Democracies, a global inter-governmental institution focused on the promotion of democracy. (Mali experiences the democratic

challenge firsthand, having seen in the last two years coups on both its western and eastern borders in Mauritania and Niger, respectively.)⁴²

Most critically, the Malian security services form a bulwark against al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQIM, one of al Qaeda's three official franchises, has in recent years expanded its terrorist activity from its base in northeastern Algeria to include regular attacks and kidnappings in Africa's Sahel region, which includes Mali. While Mali has avoided the brunt of this effort, AQIM assassinated one of its senior army colonels, Lamana Ould Bou, in June 2009.⁴³ In response to this killing (and also likely in response to accusations from Algeria that AQIM enjoyed safe haven in northern Mali), Mali launched an offensive against AQIM in July 2009, losing at least sixteen soldiers in the fight but preventing further attacks in Mali throughout the remainder of 2009.⁴⁴ Touré declared a "total struggle against al Qaeda" as part of this campaign.⁴⁵

Algeria, Spain, and the United States have all extended some form of assistance to Mali in its counterterrorism efforts.⁴⁶ U.S. Special Forces reportedly trained Malian soldiers prior to the June 2009 operation, and, in October 2009, the United States pledged to provide Mali with \$4.5 million in equipment, including Land Cruiser trucks, communications equipment, and clothing.⁴⁷ Most recently, Mali participated alongside Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Senegal in a May 2010 United States-led counterterrorism exercise called "Operation Flintlock."⁴⁸ Mali has come under fire from its neighbors for releasing Islamist militants from prison in recent years, but it has likely done so at the behest of Western nations interested in securing prisoner exchange deals for Europeans kidnapped by AQIM.⁴⁹

Mali continues to provide political backing to Iran on the world stage, yet its people, outlook, and actions against AQIM remain largely pro-Western. Ahmadinejad wants to ensure Iran continues to receive political support from the West African nation and may also want to reduce the pro-Western activities of Mali's government.⁵⁰

Niger

Ahmadinejad did not visit Niger on his trip this July, but sustained Iranian outreach shows that the Islamic Republic recognizes the value of Niger's uranium reserves, which are the sixth largest in the world.⁵¹ Reports suggest that as early as 1998, Iran was interested in purchasing four hundred tons of yellowcake from Niger.⁵² In August 2004, then-foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi visited Niger to discuss development cooperation in the water, health, engineering, and roads sectors. Such cooperation, Kharrazi stated, would lay the groundwork to facilitate the entry of Iranian companies into Niger.⁵³ In the same meeting, both sides emphasized the right of countries to seek peaceful nuclear development under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, providing Iran with early international support for its nuclear development.⁵⁴

The relationship has continued to grow in the last two years. In June 2008, Iranian first vice president Parviz Davoudi even said that "Iran regards the security and progress of Niger as its own."⁵⁵ That same month, Iran's agriculture minister, when meeting with his Nigerien counterpart, offered Iranian assistance on food security issues such as livestock breeding and the construction of a tractor factory in Niger.⁵⁶ In January 2010, Iran began to receive the return on its investment in Niger with an MoU between Niger's minister of agriculture, who controls the ministry of mines, and Iran's minister of mines, Ali Akbar Mehrabian. Mehrabian noted that Iran would help explore Niger's vast mineral resources.⁵⁷ Other types of Iranian exports have increased alongside the relationship: in 2009, Niger imported \$4.7 million worth of goods from Iran, ranking third among West African countries in value of Iranian imports despite the small size of Niger's economy and population.⁵⁸

It is unclear what effect Niger's February 2010 coup will have on Iran-Niger relations. One unconfirmed

report stated that Iranian diplomats left the Nigerien capital of Niamey after the junta seized power.⁵⁹ Currently, Iran's state press provides favorable coverage to Niger and the new Nigerien regime. A day after the February 18 coup, the Iranian state news agency Press TV reported that Niger planned to double its uranium production by 2012 and overstated Niger's rank among uranium-producing countries in the world.⁶⁰ Five days later, Press TV also said that deposed Nigerien leader Mamadou Tandja had become "unpopular" as he had "changed the constitution in order to remain in power."⁶¹ The Nigerien junta has set January 3, 2011, as the date for democratic elections to form a new government, which introduces further uncertainty in Iran-Niger relations.⁶²

Iran's desire to augment its uranium supply means it will likely continue to attempt to cultivate Niger as a potential resource bank, despite the attention Western intelligence agencies pay to Nigerien uranium reserves.⁶³ A February 2009 Institute for Science and International Security report speculated that Iran may have exhausted as much as 75 percent of a 531-ton supply of yellowcake it purchased from South Africa in the 1970s and stated that Iran has been unable to augment the supply significantly through domestic mines.⁶⁴ A May 2008 International Atomic Energy Agency report suggested that Iran had used up 70 percent of its original stock of yellowcake uranium.⁶⁵ Yet, in January 2010, Iran possessed enough uranium hexafluoride (UF₆), which is produced from yellowcake, to make thirty-five bombs, according to nonproliferation expert David Albright.⁶⁶ Should Iran wish to increase its supply or guard against a decrease in its stockpile due to military action or enrichment-process failure, it may need a third-party source of uranium. Indeed, Iran was reportedly engaged in a search for such a source. While many other countries could provide uranium, such as Uzbekistan and

Kazakhstan, Niger's relationship with Iran makes it a likely candidate.⁶⁷ Beyond such a potential long-term benefit, Iran has already received a short-term boost

from Niger: the country voted against a November 2009 resolution condemning Iran's crackdown after the June 2009 elections.⁶⁸

Mauritania

Iranian outreach to Mauritania represents perhaps the best success story of Iranian foreign relations in Africa in the last several years. Among Iran's targets in West Africa, Nigeria is an established investment with modest returns, and Niger and Mali could provide high returns in the future. Iran has continued to develop strong ties with Eritrea and Zimbabwe and build upon an extensive historical alliance with the Omar al Bashir regime in Sudan; all three of these countries have offered support for Iran's nuclear program.⁶⁹ But unlike these countries, Mauritania is the only one that has significantly shifted its foreign policy.

Mauritania established relations with Israel in 1999, making it one of only three Arab League countries to recognize the Jewish state.⁷⁰ In 2005, the country voted to criticize Iran over its human rights record.⁷¹ Yet anti-Israel sentiment slowly began to permeate the country, and Mauritania voted against UN resolutions critical of Iran's human rights record in the years to follow.⁷² Iran took notice and sent its deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs to the April 2007 inauguration of Mauritania's then-president Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi. The Iranian envoy called for an expansion of ties at the time, a call echoed by Mauritania's then-foreign minister.⁷³

In March 2008, Abdellahi stated his desire to expand relations with Iran, praised Ayatollah Khomeini, and said that he would visit Iran at the earliest opportunity, according to Iranian state media.⁷⁴ This statement may have been an attempt to burnish Abdellahi's anti-Israel credentials after the government received domestic criticism of its relationship

with Israel in early 2008.⁷⁵ An August 2008 coup, however, deposed Abdellahi before he could visit Iran. Tehran initially disapproved of the change in power, called for a restoration of power to the representatives of the Mauritanian people, and denounced military coups, perhaps due to some of the positive rhetoric from Abdellahi and Mauritanian foreign minister Ahmed Ould Sid Ahmed, who had expressed appreciation for Iran's efforts in Iraq and Lebanon in April 2007, according to Iran's semi official Fars News Agency.⁷⁶ The junta, however, quickly capitalized on the anti-Israel momentum that had been building in the country and assured Tehran that Iranian investment had not gone to waste.⁷⁷

The Mauritanian government froze ties with the Jewish state in January 2009, allegedly as a response to Israel's invasion of Gaza.⁷⁸ Two months later, the government expelled the Israeli ambassador, a move rumored to have been encouraged by an alleged \$10 million Iranian payment to Mauritania.⁷⁹ Iran filled the gap left by Israel by taking over a hospital in the Mauritanian capital of Nouakchott previously financed by the Israeli government and the American Jewish Committee.⁸⁰ Additionally, Mauritania said that it would send students to Iran to study medical techniques.⁸¹

In January 2010, when coup leader Ould Abdel Aziz visited Iran to celebrate the opening of a Mauritanian embassy in Tehran, Ahmadinejad and Khamenei praised him for cutting ties with Israel.⁸² Ahmadinejad also praised Mauritania's support for Iran on the world stage. During the visit, Khamenei urged Mauritians to avoid hosting an American military presence, presumably in reference to U.S.

Africa Command's search for a base upon the African continent.⁸³ The trip also resulted in agreements on cooperation in mining, banking, and insurance.⁸⁴ In April 2010, a report emerged that the Iran Khodro Company, an automobile manufacturing company, planned to export 500 passenger cars and 250 buses to Mauritania.⁸⁵

Iran was able to capitalize on anti-Israel sentiment

in what had once been one of the more Israel-friendly Arab countries. By doing so, it increased its foothold in West Africa, reduced global support for its stated enemy, Israel, and developed a new export market in Mauritania. Iran may now seek to expand its success in Mauritania, including turning the country away from Western security initiatives, such as the U.S.-led Operation Flintlock in which Mauritania participated.⁸⁶

Senegal

While Mauritania has become one of Iran's stronger allies in the region in the last few years, Senegal has been Iran's closest friend in West Africa for years. In 2004, Kharrazi said that "Senegal is one of the most significant African countries and it has a particular position in our foreign policy."⁸⁷ Iranian officials view their relationship with Senegal as a gateway to the rest of Africa; through this loyal springboard, they hope to improve relations and trade with other West African nations.⁸⁸ The relationship with Senegal also helps Iran further its goal of portraying itself as a leader among Muslim countries; Iran, for example, helped Senegal prepare for the March 2008 Organization of the Islamic Conference summit in the Senegalese capital of Dakar.⁸⁹

Senegalese officials have returned Iran's compliments. In May 2010, Senegal's minister of state for foreign affairs, Madicke Niang, said, "Given the political resolve of the two countries' presidents, Senegal always sides with Iran. . . . We would never back down on our support for Iran and we would never backtrack on the path that we have opted [for]."⁹⁰ Senegalese parliamentary speaker Pape Diop lauded Iran in May 2008 for playing a leading role in the Muslim world.⁹¹ Senegal has criticized sanctions against Iran, praised the May 2010 Iran-Turkey-Brazil uranium deal, and publicly supported peaceful nuclear enrichment in Iran.⁹² Senegal has also followed Tehran's lead on Israel, issuing a joint

statement in January 2009 that criticized Israel over Operation Cast Lead in Gaza and another in March 2004 that stated that Palestinian refugees should return and that Jerusalem should be the capital of an independent Palestinian state.⁹³ Only Iranian media appear to have reported the aforementioned Senegalese statements, the accuracy of which is difficult to corroborate. However, taken together they form a pattern that fits with close Senegalese ties to the Islamic Republic.

Frequent diplomatic contact has also helped sustain a common worldview. Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade has visited Iran at least six times since December 2003, most recently in October 2009.⁹⁴ Following the lead of Khatami, who visited Senegal in January 2005, Ahmadinejad has visited the West African nation at least three times since taking office, most recently in November 2009.⁹⁵ An equally important visitor has been Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who traveled to Senegal in July 2007.⁹⁶ Khamenei kept Shahroudi as the head of the Iranian judiciary for a decade, from 1999 to 2009, and appointed Shahroudi to the influential Guardian Council.⁹⁷ Khamenei and Shahroudi remain close, and Shahroudi's presence in Senegal shows the importance that key nonpresidential Iranian regime elements, such as the judiciary and the supreme leader, place on Iran's relationship with the West African country.⁹⁸ These delegations have tightened

economic ties, as have the joint Tehran-Dakar Economic Commission Summits, which were first held in 1996 and last held in February 2010.⁹⁹

In Senegal, Iran has been able to accomplish two economic priorities: securing markets for Iranian goods and gaining access to increased petroleum-refining capacity. Senegal is Iran's largest trading partner in West Africa: Iran exported \$16 million to the country in 2009, a roughly 3,600 percent increase compared to Iranian exports to the country in 2000.¹⁰⁰ As sanctions limit the number of customers from whom Iran can buy and directly target Iran's already-limited refining capacity, Senegal's economy provides some relief. In August 2007, the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company promised to expand Senegal's state petroleum refinery from 1.2 million tons refined annually to 3 million.¹⁰¹ The deal also entailed a 34 percent Iranian share in the refinery and the provision of Iranian crude oil to Senegal for a year.¹⁰² Less than a year later, an automobile factory 60 kilometers east of Dakar started a production line of five thousand Samands for the Iran Khodro Company.¹⁰³ The facility reportedly cost \$80 million, of which Iran Khodro, Iran's largest automaker, provided 60 percent (while the Senegalese government and private sector each funded half of the remaining share).¹⁰⁴ Economic cooperation between the two countries has also included activity in the power and mineral industries.¹⁰⁵

Political and economic ties between Senegal and Iran have also built off cultural ties that stretch back decades. Senegalese have traditionally been Sufi, but the influx of Lebanese clerics (Lebanese now number roughly forty thousand in Senegal) slowly spread Shi'a ideas throughout the country.¹⁰⁶ Shi'a cleric Abdel Monem el Zein helped lead this proselytizing by founding the Islamic Institute in Dakar in 1978, after training under Khomeini during Khomeini's exile to Najaf, Iraq.¹⁰⁷ Despite opposition from the Senegalese government to such activities in the

1980s (Senegal's Abdou Diouf regime shut down the Iranian embassy in Dakar in 1984), the current Senegalese regime has not interfered with Iran's cultural outreach in Senegal.¹⁰⁸ Wade has allowed the construction of a Persian-language school at Senegal University in 2003 and a Shi'a *hawza*, or seminary, near the University of Dakar known as the *Hawza ul Rasul al Akram*.¹⁰⁹ Senegalese foreign minister Sheikh Tidiane Gadio said in 2004 that he wanted "Iranian expertise" in establishing "Islamic schools and Qur'anic training."¹¹⁰

The two countries have engaged in nearly every area of potential cooperation. Iranian defense minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar has met with his Senegalese counterpart at least twice, once in Tehran in 2008 and once in Senegal in 2009. Both meetings led to calls for increased cooperation on defense.¹¹¹ Iran also agreed to provide Senegal with medical training, doctors, and nurses in March 2009, and both countries have called for judicial cooperation.¹¹² Iran's agricultural ministry has operated an office in Ghana since 1988.¹¹³

Senegal has provided Iran with a true ally in West Africa. Some countries, such as Mauritania, have become increasingly friendly toward Iran, while others, such as Nigeria, Mali, and Niger, have left the door open to increased cooperation. Yet none of these relationships has risen to the level of the Senegal-Iran alliance. This relationship, strengthened by shared cultural ties, has provided direct political support and significant economic exchange for Iran. It may even grow into increased defense cooperation, should the meetings between defense ministers materialize into further activity. Iran will likely try to replicate the Senegalese success in other countries: first, by encouraging and exploiting cultural ties; second, by conducting high-level diplomatic exchanges; third, by expanding economic ties; and fourth, by considering future joint initiatives in defense and other areas.

Other West African Countries

Iran, while prioritizing its relations with poor countries home to Muslim populations, has been active in West African nations beyond the five discussed above. As with their northern, geographically larger neighbors, West Africa's coastal states can provide Iran with export markets and political support. Iran may also be interested in the region to ensure positive host environments for friendly minorities, such as the hundred thousand or more Lebanese living in Côte d'Ivoire.

Economic goals have dominated Iran's outreach to West Africa's coastal region. As recently as the first week of July 2010, Iran set up a joint investment committee with Ghana, a key American ally, following a visit by Ghanaian business leaders to the Islamic Republic.¹¹⁴ In January 2009, the Iranian ambassador to Sierra Leone, Nosratollah Maleki, stated that the Iranian Sepahan Afrique Company was active in Sierra Leone; the groundwork for such work may have been laid by a visit from Khatami in 2005.¹¹⁵ In 2007, Gambia, a sliver of a country surrounded on three sides by Senegal, agreed to import commercial vehicles from Iran Khodro for use in the Gambian public transportation sector; the Gambian government also offered support for Iran's right to possess nuclear technology.¹¹⁶

Iran has also sought to use its relations with these smaller countries to secure imports of critical

raw materials. In May, Mottaki announced that Guinea and Iran had agreed to lift visa requirements and had increased bilateral trade by 140 percent.¹¹⁷ Guinea, which experienced a coup in December 2008 followed by a massacre in September 2009, has the largest reserves of bauxite in the world, with at least a quarter of total global reserves.¹¹⁸ This summer's presidential elections in Guinea, however, the country's first free elections in fifty-two years, could shift Guinea's foreign relations with Iran.¹¹⁹

Iran may be hoping to accomplish similar goals in Guinea-Bissau, Guinea's northwestern neighbor, as Mottaki discussed expanding trade with the country in May.¹²⁰ Guinea-Bissau also experienced a recent coup—in April—and may have some bauxite reserves, albeit much smaller than those Guinea enjoys.¹²¹ On Guinea's southeastern border, Côte d'Ivoire has seen domestic crude oil production increase in recent years, and Fars News Agency reported that the country's president said in May that "the Islamic Republic of Iran is a great power in the region and we welcome and support development of ties with Iran."¹²² Among West African countries in 2009, Côte d'Ivoire ranked second in value of Iranian imports at \$7.9 million and first in value of exports to Iran at \$593,000.¹²³

Hezbollah in West Africa

Iranian interests in West Africa's coastal region may go beyond the diplomatic and trade realms. For many years, the Iranian-backed Hezbollah has been active in these countries, building upon a Lebanese

diaspora that began settling in the area in the early 1900s.¹²⁴ Most of these Lebanese, who number in the tens of thousands, are Shi'a, while some are Christian. The largest community, which numbered

between sixty thousand and one hundred twenty thousand in the late 1980s, resides in Côte d'Ivoire, and about another forty thousand live in Senegal.¹²⁵ Many of these Lebanese émigrés have no political agenda beyond what facilitates their business; many run retail shops while others work in the region's active diamond trade.¹²⁶ However, many also harbor sympathy for Hezbollah, and, in May 2008, Israeli diamond traders working in the region expressed fears for their safety for this reason.¹²⁷

In May 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department designated as a terrorist Abd al Menhem Qubaysi, who serves as a fundraiser, recruiter, and liaison for Hezbollah in Côte d'Ivoire.¹²⁸ Qubaysi appears to be active still in Côte d'Ivoire as the head of the Lebanese Muslim Association, despite reports that the Ivorian government expelled him in August 2009.¹²⁹ In the past, Hezbollah has extorted cash from some Lebanese merchants in the region and has reportedly become increasingly more involved in the diamond industry.¹³⁰ Larry Andre, deputy chief of

mission for the U.S. embassy in Sierra Leone in 2004, said then, "One thing that's incontrovertible is the financing of Hezbollah. It's not even an open secret; there is no secret."¹³¹ The amount of revenue available to Hezbollah in West Africa is likely increasing: in 2008, then-head of U.S. Southern Command General James Stavridis asserted in a report that drug traffickers had increased their activity in West Africa to better access the European market.¹³²

Neither Iran nor Hezbollah's West African members likely desire a Hezbollah-linked attack in West Africa. The terror group's continued presence in the region, however, provides the Lebanon-centered network with another source of revenue and a logistics and transportation network that can be used to move and shelter personnel, finances, arms, and goods. Just as Iran's relationship with Mauritania weakens Israel diplomatically, Iran's relationships with smaller West African states provide some buffer for Hezbollah's activities in the region, increasing Hezbollah's ability to weaken Israel militarily.

Conclusion

Iran has received significant benefits from its investment in West Africa. In a November 2009 UN vote on the human rights situation in Iran, all West African nations except Liberia and Togo maintained their previous UN voting positions on human rights in Iran. Nigeria took an even weaker stance, voting against the resolution when it had previously abstained from votes on such measures. Several other African and Middle Eastern nations—Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa—took stronger stances against Iran than they had in previous votes, likely due to the Islamic Republic's June 2009 crackdown on protesters. (See table 1 for a list of UN votes by West African nations on Iran human rights resolutions.)

Beyond the UN, Tehran has exploited and encouraged an anti-Israel trend in Mauritania, undercutting

support from what was once a key Israeli ally among Muslim states; developed an alliance with Senegal; and continued positive relations with Côte d'Ivoire, which is home to a Hezbollah leader designated as a terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department. Iran also almost signed a nuclear deal with Nigeria in late 2009, nearly gaining a key resource ally in its quest for nuclear weapons.

Lastly, Iran has attempted to dull the effect of sanctions and lessen its isolation by successfully laying the groundwork for an expansion of Iranian business into new markets in West Africa. In three West African nations, Iranian exports have increased dramatically in recent years: the value of 2009 exports to Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal was roughly 2,700, 2,800, and 3,600 percent higher (respectively) than 2000 exports.¹³³

Despite these advances, Iran has experienced setbacks in the region. Nigeria voted for sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council in June 2010. Mali, Mauritania, and others in the region continue to work with the United States and other Western nations to combat al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Nigeria is the largest U.S. trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa and remains a key supplier of oil to the United States. Iran has also faced difficulty in fulfilling its economic commitments to the region. For instance, its dam project in Mali has not yet materialized.¹³⁴ Despite years of courting export markets, trade levels with West African nations remain in the low millions or mere hundreds of thousands except with Senegal and a select few other countries. (See appendix for trade data.) Additionally, West African publics surveyed by Pew dramatically favor the

United States over Iran, as shown by table 2. Regional public support for U.S. antiterror efforts—such as counterterrorism cooperation with Mali—generally remains high. Support for the war in Afghanistan is low in some West African countries—Senegal's opposition may reveal some of the world outlook encouraged by Iran—but Ghanaians and Nigerians supported the war at roughly the same level as American respondents to the same poll did in 2007.

U.S. Policy. The United States can bolster these and other barriers to Iranian outreach by constructing a comprehensive policy counteroffensive that would limit further Iranian successes in West Africa. As the episode of the near-nuclear deal between Iran and Nigeria shows, U.S. influence, when applied, can reduce Iranian influence in the region. Washington could protect its influence by bringing its significantly

TABLE 1
UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY VOTES ON IRAN HUMAN RIGHTS RESOLUTIONS

Country	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009*
Benin	A	A	A	A	A
Burkina Faso	A	A	?	A	A
Côte d'Ivoire	A	A	A	A	A
Gambia	N	?	N	N	?
Ghana	A	A	A	A	A
Guinea	N	N	N	N	N
Guinea-Bissau	A	A	?	A	A
Liberia	?	A	Y	Y	Y
Mali	A	A	A	A	A
Mauritania	Y	N	?	N	N
Morocco	N	N	N	N	A
Niger	N	N	N	N	N
Nigeria	A	A	A	A	N
Saudi Arabia	N	N	N	N	Y
Senegal	N	N	N	N	N
Sierra Leone	?	A	A	A	A
South Africa	N	N	N	N	A
Togo	N	N	N	N	A

SOURCE: United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBISNET), available at <http://unbisnet.un.org> (accessed July 19, 2010).

NOTES: *In November 2009, five months after the June 2009 crackdown in Iran. Gray background = Non-West African Country. Votes: A = Abstain, N = No, Y = Yes, ? = No Data. Color Scale: Green = stronger stance on Iranian human rights, Yellow = maintained stance, Red = weaker stance.

larger economic weight to bear in the economies of the region; a small amount of economic aid or incentivized private-sector investment could make a dramatic difference in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal, most of which suffer from a lack of investment in critical industries such as power and transportation infrastructure. Additionally, a food crisis of epic proportions currently threatens the region: an unprecedented drought has forced roughly 7 million Nigeriens and hundreds of thousands of Mauritians and Malians to face hunger this summer. U.S. food aid could help alleviate suffering and cultivate goodwill for America, much as U.S. emergency humanitarian assistance did following the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia.¹³⁵

A second area in which the United States could increase its investments to counter Iranian soft power

TABLE 2
WEST AFRICAN PUBLIC OPINION, 2007*

Country	Iran	United States	U.S. Anti-Terror Efforts	U.S. War in Afghanistan
Ghana	26	80	59	50
Côte d'Ivoire	46	88	87	43
Mali	50	79	62	37
Nigeria	44	70	63	48
Senegal	42	69	41	19

SOURCE: Pew Research Center, "Key Indicators Database," available at <http://pewglobal.org/database> (accessed July 21, 2010).

NOTES: Data last available for all four countries in 2007. * = Percent of respondents in country expressing favorability.

is its military assistance to West African countries. Despite existing training and military aid provided by the United States to regional partners, official American security aid to the region, at least that related to equipment sales and training, remains strikingly low. Mali presents a stark case: the State Department requested a mere \$200,000 in Foreign Military Financing for Mali for fiscal year 2010 while millions of dollars went to European partners much further removed from the direct kinetic threat faced by Mali; International Military Education and Training funding stood at just \$350,000 for the same year.¹³⁶ The Department of Defense 1206 security aid account, which is primarily designated for counterterrorism initiatives, provides significantly more funding for Mali: \$5.1 million as of October 2009 (compared to Pakistan's \$203.4 million and Yemen's \$97.3 million).¹³⁷ The Department of Defense cannot bear the burden alone, however, and the Iranian strategy in the region shows that security assistance to these countries must go beyond counterterrorism initiatives.

Implications beyond West Africa. Iran has pursued an aggressive approach in West Africa to lessen its isolation and expand its influence. This approach reveals an Iranian soft-power model, highlights Iran's foreign

policy goals, and shows the characteristics of countries that Iran targets. In attempting to expand influence, Iran 1) encourages and exploits cultural ties, 2) conducts frequent high-level diplomatic exchange, 3) attempts to expand economic relations, and 4) lays the groundwork for future cooperation in defense or other areas. The case of West Africa also shows Iran's international priorities: increasing support for its nuclear program, increasing market access for Iranian

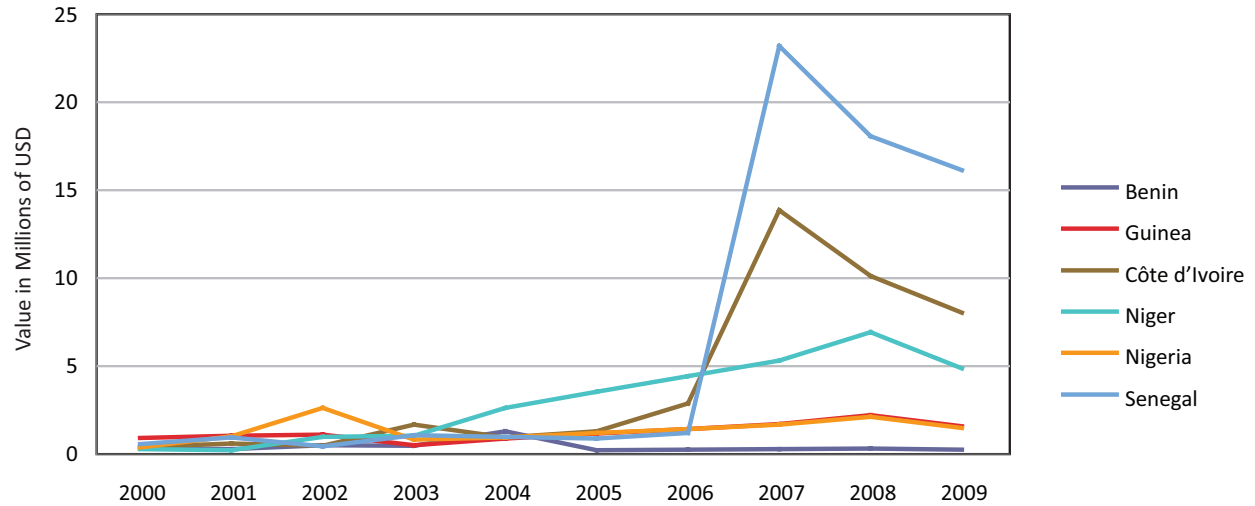
companies, securing access to critical raw materials (such as uranium in Niger and bauxite in Guinea), delegitimizing Israel, creating hospitable environments for friendly substate groups (such as Hezbollah in Côte d'Ivoire), and decreasing support for the United States and its policies. Iran chooses its foreign policy targets based on which countries it believes might help it achieve those goals (whether the targeted country is initially receptive to Iran's outreach or not), including those that might be open to Iranian aid or private-sector involvement and that share cultural ties with Iran. West African countries with large Muslim populations, largely undeveloped economies, and ties with both the United States and Iran therefore make attractive targets.

Perhaps the greatest threat to U.S. interests lies in the rise of the Iranian nuclear weapons program. Defeating that program requires separating Iran from potential partners and denying it friends wherever it seeks them. West Africa is a region full of countries yet to fall under Iranian sway. In this region, the United States must challenge Iranian soft power as part of an overall strategy to combat Iran and its nuclear weapons program.

Charlie Szrom (charlie.szrom@aei.org) is a senior analyst and program manager for the Critical Threats Project at AEI.

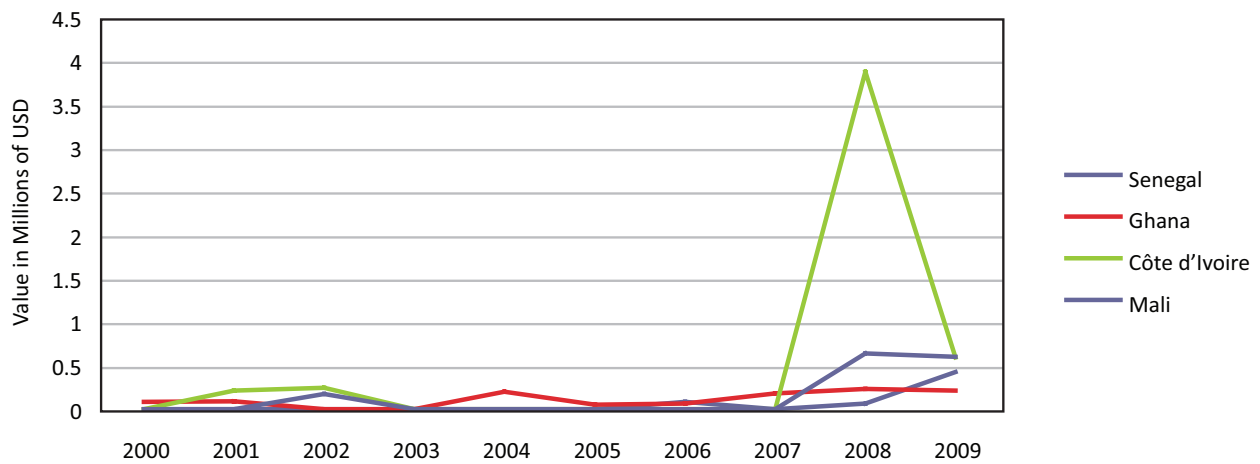
Appendix: Iran’s Trade with West African Countries

FIGURE 1
IRANIAN EXPORTS TO WEST AFRICA, 2000–2009



SOURCE: International Monetary Fund, “Direction of Trade Statistics,” available at www2.imfstatistics.org/DOT (accessed July 19, 2010).
NOTE: Exports likely declined in 2008–2009 due to the global recession.

FIGURE 2
IRANIAN IMPORTS FROM WEST AFRICA, 2000–2009



SOURCE: International Monetary Fund, “Direction of Trade Statistics,” available at www2.imfstatistics.org/DOT (accessed July 19, 2010).

TABLE 3
IRANIAN EXPORTS TO WEST AFRICA, 2000–2009 (MILLIONS OF USD)

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Burkina Faso	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Benin	0.237	0.147	0.391	0.34	1.171	0.095	0.12	0.145	0.19	0.133
Gambia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ghana	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Guinea	0.791	0.92	0.978	0.365	0.766	1.042	1.31	1.58	2.077	1.446
Côte d'Ivoire	0.287	0.472	0.359	1.549	0.824	1.179	2.763	13.748	9.988	7.91
Liberia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Togo	0.091	0.925	0.388	0.061	0.019	0.01	0.012	0.015	0.02	0.014
Cape Verde	0.007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mali	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mauritania	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Niger	0.161	0.102	0.849	0.926	2.509	3.413	4.291	5.176	6.804	4.739
Nigeria	0.239	0.893	2.514	0.711	0.819	1.087	1.301	1.535	2.009	1.366
Senegal	0.429	0.814	0.321	0.965	0.843	0.757	1.083	23.08	17.945	16.022
Sierra Leone	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

SOURCE: International Monetary Fund, "Direction of Trade Statistics," available at www2.imfstatistics.org/DOT (accessed July 19, 2010).

TABLE 4
IRANIAN IMPORTS FROM WEST AFRICA, 2000–2009 (MILLIONS OF USD)

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Sierra Leone	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Benin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Senegal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.087	0	0.066	0.427
Niger	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nigeria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gambia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ghana	0.083	0.089	0	0	0.202	0.051	0.066	0.182	0.23	0.215
Guinea	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Côte d'Ivoire	0	0.213	0.248	0	0	0	0	0	3.874	0.593
Liberia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mali	0	0	0.172	0	0	0	0	0	0.64	0.6
Mauritania	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Togo	0	2.138	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

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