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Collateral Geopolitics: Africa and the Fallout of the US/Israeli War on Iran

by Hubert Kinkoh

When Operation Epic Fury began before dawn on 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel presented the attack as a decisive effort to “dismantle Iran’s security apparatus” by striking targets deemed to pose an imminent threat. The strikes succeeded in crippling elements of Iran’s command network but also unleashed geopolitical shockwaves that travelled far beyond the Gulf. Within hours, Iran’s retaliation – over 400 ballistic missiles and nearly 1,000 drones – had convulsed global energy markets and forced maritime operators to divert vessels en masse. The first theater to be destabilized was the Gulf. The second, almost immediately, was the Red Sea–Horn of Africa corridor, which also has direct implications for the security, economy, and political stability on the African continent.

Why does it matter?

For Africa, the fallout is neither abstract nor distant on a security-related, economic and political level:

Regarding regional *security*, the continent is structurally connected to Middle Eastern dynamics through trade routes, energy dependencies and political alliances. The Bab al-Mandab Strait – a narrow chokepoint between Yemen and Djibouti – is one of the world’s most critical maritime arteries. It links Europe to Asia and carries a significant share of global trade. It also sits adjacent to Yemen’s conflict zone, where the Houthis (Tehran’s most capable proxy) have repeatedly targeted commercial shipping. Although the Houthis have so far limited their post-February- rhetoric to threats and symbolic protest, their track record shows intervention remains a possibility. Djibouti, home to Camp Lemonnier – the nerve center of US military operations in Africa – moved to a heightened security posture within days. The convergence of Somaliland’s strategic partnership with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel’s unprecedented recognition of the territory in December 2025 has effectively elevated the region’s exposure to the broader Middle East conflict. This development risks turning Somaliland into a frontline vulnerability, as pro-Iranian proxy actors such as the Houthis in Yemen could potentially target the territory as part of a wider escalation dynamic.

Sudan’s war is also particularly exposed. Iran has supplied weapons to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), while Israel has maintained channels to both the SAF and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). With the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – all members of the Quad Initiative (the most influential forum for ceasefire and humanitarian talks on Sudan) – now absorbed by the crisis, Sudan’s fragile diplomatic track has slipped further into neglect. The risk is not only that international pressure on the warring factions loosens, but that Sudan itself recedes into the realm of forgotten crises as its humanitarian catastrophe is overshadowed by the urgency of escalation in the Gulf

region. As external bandwidth collapses, Sudan's warring factions face stronger incentives to pursue battlefield advantage, not compromise. Operation Epic Fury has inadvertently removed with the Quad Initiative one of the few stabilizing forces remaining in Sudan's political landscape.

The *economic* fallout is equally stark. The near collapse of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly a quarter of the world's seaborne oil normally transits, has forced global carriers to avoid both the Strait and, at times, the Red Sea. Vessels are now travelling around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks to delivery times and driving up freight and insurance costs. For African economies already struggling under debt burdens, weak currencies and the lingering effects of the pandemic, this logistical shock is severe.

The oil price spike has compounded this instability. Brent crude surged to USD 100 per barrel in the aftermath of the strikes, instantly raising import bills for net energy importers. South Africa's currency tumbled, driving up the cost of imported fuel – and transport – from early March. Egypt, which is dependent on imported fuel and on the Suez Canal for critical hard currency inflows, now faces the worst possible combination: rising energy costs and falling revenue from diverted maritime traffic.

Agriculture, historically one of Africa's stabilizing sectors, has not been spared. Disruptions to the Strait of Hormuz have choked fertilizer exports from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Bahrain – suppliers that together deliver a third of global trade in urea, nearly a quarter of ammonia and one fifth of phosphate fertilizers. Following Iranian drone and missile strikes, one major source of urea, QatarEnergy, halted production, further tightening supply. For Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, all major importers of compound fertilizers and urea from the Middle East, this threatens planting seasons and deepens long-term food insecurity.

Furthermore, export industries are under acute strain. Iran is a major buyer of Kenyan tea, importing roughly USD 33 million worth in 2024, and with the Strait of Hormuz now blocked, exporters are facing severe margin squeezes as freight costs climb and flight disruptions snarl shipments into Persian Gulf ports. Kenya's high-value exports of fresh flowers, meat and vegetables to the UAE and Qatar are similarly exposed. As air cargo corridors over the Gulf become restricted and scheduling grows increasingly irregular, the reliability and competitiveness of these time-sensitive exports are at risk, adding another layer of vulnerability to an already fragile external trade environment.

Even oil-producing states are not insulated. Nigeria, despite being Africa's largest crude exporter, still depends on imported refined fuel. Oil revenues account for more than half of federal income, 92 percent of export earnings and the bulk of foreign exchange, leaving Nigeria dangerously exposed to global price swings triggered by the Gulf conflict. Angola, where imported fuel meets 80 percent of domestic consumption, faces a similar paradox: Higher crude prices deliver little relief when refined fuel imports become costlier.

These economic pressures carry serious *political* implications. Between 2023 and 2026, African cities from Nairobi and Lagos to Accra, Antananarivo, Maputo, Marrakech and Agadir saw recurring protests driven by price spikes, unemployment and governance failures. The current crisis acts as an accelerant. Declining purchasing power, rising food and fuel prices and tightening fiscal conditions heighten the probability of further unrest. The Islamic Movement in Nigeria, led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, staged demonstrations across Lagos, Kaduna, Kano and Sokoto following the killing of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, illustrating how geopolitical shocks in Iran can activate ideological networks inside African states with alarming speed.

What is the big picture?

Geopolitically, the confrontation has forced African governments into a far more precarious balancing act. South Africa faces the most acute dilemma. Pretoria's longstanding political affinity with Tehran, which is reflected in decades of supportive UN voting patterns and periodic security cooperation, now collides with mounting pressure from Washington and growing ties with Gulf states such as Qatar that are under Iranian attack. Iran's formal accession to BRICS on 1 January 2024 further deepened Pretoria's ties to Tehran, heightening the diplomatic stakes as the Middle East crisis escalates. The January 2026 naval exercise episode underscored this tension: After initially agreeing to joint drills with Iran, Pretoria moved to curtail Iranian participation following explicit US warnings, a visible recalibration that revealed how rapidly African states now adjust to avoid being pulled into the slipstream of a widening confrontation. Africa is not merely absorbing the aftershocks of the US-Israel-Iran confrontation; it is being drawn into a reshaped geopolitical and economic order. The continent's dependence on external energy sources, fertilizer supply chains and vulnerable maritime routes ensures that the conflict's effects will endure. Even if hostilities subside, elevated risk premiums for the Red Sea and Hormuz corridors may keep shipping costs – and thus inflation – high for months.

What comes next?

The crisis reinforces an inconvenient truth: Africa's fortunes remain tied to shocks originating far beyond the continent. What follows is a strategic choice point: African leaders must view this conflict not as another external shock to be weathered, but as a prompt to pivot from reactive crisis management toward strategic insulation. This

shift requires diversifying energy systems, accelerating investment in renewables capable of buffering oil-market swings, and deepening regional production networks so that disruptions at Hormuz or Bab al-Mandab no longer cascade through African markets. It also demands accelerating operationalization of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) from diplomatic aspiration to a functioning economic framework that reduces dependency on volatile maritime corridors. Whether this moment of crisis becomes yet another destabilizing blow or a catalyst for a more resilient continental order will depend on the choices African governments make next.

About the Author

Hubert Kinkoh is a Senior Researcher at CARPO, currently focusing on the Robert Bosch Stiftung-funded project on 'West Asian and Sub-Saharan African partnerships in Flux' (WASSAP). Over the last decade, he has developed expertise in the governance of peace, security, and development in Africa, researching, among others, how external influences impinge on African states and societies. Currently, he is also a Mo Ibrahim Foundation Academy Fellow at Chatham House within the Africa Programme. Hubert has held research positions with prestigious organizations such as the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), International Crisis Group (ICG), the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and the African Leadership Centre (ALC). He has also consulted for various stakeholders, including the US Department of State, UNESCO-IICBA, the African Union, and the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy.

Contact: kinkoh@carpo-bonn.org