

Removing the Lid on Mugabe's Foreign Policy

Iranian-Zimbabwe Relations

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After 37 years in power, Robert Mugabe (93) resigned as President of Zimbabwe following the recent military coup. Commentators will have their hands full, for some time, trying to grasp the implications of Mugabe's fall, but for now one thing is clear: Zimbabwe's foreign policy is on the cusp of real, fundamental change.

For us at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre, understanding the implications for the Arab Gulf states is prioritised. After assessing the Zimbabwe-Gulf relationship it is clear that none of the Arab Gulf countries retain significant relations to Zimbabwe. This is because of the deep alignment between Tehran and Harare. So, while the Iran-Zimbabwe relationship is now under pressure, the Arab states will only experience residual change. Iran may be losing a strategic partner in Africa and, perhaps, the Arab Gulf states will be gaining one, but for now the status quo is prevailing.

The development of Zimbabwe-Iran relations goes back to 1996, when the international isolation of Iran made the Islamic Republic seek-out relations to developing African states. Mugabe was a useful interlocutor for the Islamic Republic since he was staunchly anti-Western (re: anti-UK), his rhetoric championed an us-vs-them approach in which the wide assortment of developing countries — no matter their internal politics — was, ostensibly, locked in an international struggle against Europe and the US. Mugabe was looking for trade ties while an international pariah — like Iran — and found them in Tehran.

Since then Iran has enjoyed a favoured relationship with Zimbabwe. This has led to numerous allegation that the African nation was also directly involved in Iran's bid for nuclear weapons and Mugabe often advocated Iran's 'right' to nuclear technology—arguing that the current distribution of such technology favoured the West and disempowered the rest. This rhetoric led to action and in 2013 claims emerged that Zimbabwe and Iran had signed a secret deal according to which Zimbabwe would have sold uranium to Iran in support of the latter's nuclear programme. Predictably, Iran denies the claims. Still, diplomatic ties and cooperation



between the two countries have flourished under Mugabe and the specifics of their relationship remains shrouded in mystery.

Now that the situation in Zimbabwe is uncertain it is difficult to anticipate what will happen to this alliance. It is possible that the domestic events in Zimbabwe will preclude a deepening of ties to Iran as the emergent government decides on its strategic priorities which may run counter to those articulated under Mugabe since the trend is to reverse previous policy orientations in the aftermath of a coup or revolution. But this should not be taken for granted. Zimbabwe's military government may hold onto the heritage of dictatorship and hence need additional international support—and Tehran seems ready and willing to provide it.

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre will continue to monitor the situation and to provide appropriate analyses as information becomes clearer.