



## **Nigeria-Israeli Relations: “So Fragile So Emotional”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Israel is technologically advanced and as a result of it, Nigeria after independence in 1960 had developed ties with the State of Israel particularly in areas of agricultural and technical know-how. Unfortunately, the Middle East crisis has made the relationship to be rocky at times due to Nigerians' religious differences. The predominantly Northern Muslims often reacted adversely towards the Jews due to the Palestinian question while the Southern dominated Christians do not see anything wrong with the Jewish seizure of Palestinian lands in West Bank and Gaza. The break-up of diplomatic ties after the Yom Kippur War of 1973 by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was perceived by the Christians in Nigeria as an undue Muslim overreach. This theoretically based research paper used both secondary sources, newspapers and internet materials, to interrogate Nigeria-Israeli relations. The paper concludes that no human relations is sustained on emotions and religious sentiments. Nigerian-Israeli relations has come of age and it should be based on mutual beneficial opportunities for the good of both countries. On the other hand, Nigeria stands to gain from Israeli's military, technical and agricultural advancement if she becomes more adroit and less emotional in her relations with Israel.

### **KEYWORDS**

Nigeria, Israel, Middle east, Palestinian Question, Muslims, Christians, Arabs

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust the world powers especially Britain campaigned for the resettlement of the Jewish population in the Middle East. The Jews from the eschatological history saw Jerusalem and the territories surrounding it as their inheritance. The Jews had left their homeland in Palestine in droves over the millennia and dispersed around the world. The Arabs had reoccupied the area (Obi-Ani, 2002, p. 103). In the course of their sojourn around the globe, the Jews between 1939-1945 were subjected to the most intolerable genocide perpetrated by the Nazi Germany where men, women and children of the Jewish stock were gassed and decimated by agents of Hitler (Obi-Ani, 2002). As a scattered group in Europe, North and South America, East Africa, the Jews rose up from their World War 11 traumatic experiences with the promise to themselves of 'Never Again'. Therefore, with the help of the Allied powers, a Jewish State was created in 1948. This according to Obi-Ani (2002) was deemed desirable that a state be re-established for the Jews in their traditional homeland where they could call their own and thus avoid a repeat of the massacre of the Jews in the diaspora. The Arabs vehemently opposed the idea of a Jewish state. When Britain could not handle the Arab opposition, she referred the matter to the United Nations. In 1947 the UN resolved to partition Palestine lands into independent Jewish and Arab states by October 1948 (Obi-Ani, 2002). This actualisation forced many Palestinians to seek for refuge in the neighbouring Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. Few days later, a combination of all the Arab nations invaded Israel to annihilate her. This aggression was successfully repulsed within six days and Israel occupied Gaza Strips and the Golan Height while shifting beyond the 1948 boundary.

Israel knew she was surrounded by hostile neighbours who would stop at nothing to ensure that she lacks all the trappings of statehood to accord her legitimacy to exist as a nation. Thus, she courted diplomatic ties or recognition among African and Asian nations. Unfortunately, at this point, African countries were still under the hegemony of colonial masters while some Asian countries (Levey 2008:206) especially India which gained independence the same year refused to accord Israel recognition as a State owing to her grievances on Pakistan-Indian balkanisation. In lieu of this, by the time of these events, Nigeria was neither a sovereign nation nor do the nationalist leaders have a say in such international politics. But, in 1957, when Israel applied to open a consular office in Lagos, Britain rejected the Israeli application claiming that it would

result in an Egyptian demand for similar status to which it was averse. This was because, the Egyptian government used Islam to exert political influence on the predominantly Muslim Northern Region (Levey, 2014: 264). It was twelve years after the birth of the state of Israel that Nigeria gained freedom from her colonial overlord.

However, ever since the creation of state of Israel, the Arabs had made several attempts to isolate her in the international scene. United States of America on the other hand has seen it as their priority to protect the Jewish nation against threats of annihilation by her Arab neighbours. Thus, they have consistently supplied Israel with sophisticated military hardware and even cooperated with the Jewish state on military intelligence gathering (Obi-Ani, p. 103, Adeyemo, 2012, p. 11). US which emerged as a formidable power at the end of Second World War in 1945 was expected by the Arab nations to be an unbiased umpire in Jewish –Arab conflict, but rather the Arab nations have suffered several military reverses owing to US support of Israel. To this, Obi-Ani opined that:

The Arabs had rightly equated their military reverses to the US's overwhelming military assistance to Israel. Not surprisingly, they took umbrage against the US for what they deemed its biased disposition in the Middle East turmoil. Thus, the US has been perceived as the enemy of the Arab people and the protector of the Jewish state. The Arabs, having realised that they can hardly defeat Israel in a conventional warfare resorted to terrorism against both Israel and US interests around the world. (Obi-Ani, p. 105).

The climax of this terrorism is the gruesome September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Centre in US orchestrated by the Saudi born Osama bin Laden led Al- Qaeda. Though this is not within the scope of this paper, but it will give a background understanding on the linkage why the Nigeria-Israeli relations has been most unstable.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A plethora of works have emerged on Afro-Arab-Israeli relations, some of these works are examined herein. A country's foreign policy is solely dependent on her national interest (Nzewunwa 1984, Obi-Ani 2008, Adeyemo 2012). The question is: is strengthening Nigeria relations with Israel in her national interest? According to Joseph Frankel, "Foreign policy is generally conceived as being based upon the concept of national interest" (Nzewunwa, 1984, p. 4). In the case of Nigeria, sentiments beclouded her relationship with Israel to the utter neglect of

beneficial gains through military and technical assistance. Adeyemo (2012) concluded that two factors militated against Nigeria-Israeli relations as ethnic and religious (Omotere, 2011) and membership of international organisations. Although, how these two factors ranked higher than national interest is not discussed. In the same vein, Gambari (as cited in Nzewunwa, 1984, p. 43, Adeyemo 2012) saw the fragile relationship based on conflict of allegiance: Northern Region's ties with the Arab world and South's sympathy towards Israel, the North's political rejection of Israel and the South's acceptance of Israel's loans and economic aid. And lastly the North's partisanship in the Middle East conflict as opposed to Federal Government's even-handedness. This made analysts to view Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's stance on foreign policy inept and shallow due to his "claim of neutrality" in the Middle East crisis even though the West and Eastern Nigeria were already receiving technical assistance in establishment of farm settlements modelled after Israeli MOSHAV in the regions. These farm settlements especially in the Eastern region have been abandoned since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967-1970). Thus, aggravating the problem of food insecurity in Nigeria which has been exacerbated by the current armed Fulani herdsmen terrorising farmers all over the country in recent times. In view of this, Isiani (2020) lamented that this vision by Dr M.I Okpara, the then Eastern Regional Premier was jettisoned after the civil war partly due to Nigerian government hostility towards Israel. Israel is self-sufficient in food production and Nigeria would have benefited from Israel's technical and agricultural know-how but for her emotional entanglement in the Middle East conflict. Today, Nigeria is a mono-product economy importing staple food that could be produced through revamping of these neglected farm settlements. To this, Obi-Ani (2012) advocated that Nigeria should have her national interest at the back of her mind to pursue a purposive foreign policy not based on primordial sentiments.

However, Levey (2008:208) has observed that the 1973 boycott of Israel by Black African countries was an act of indirect violence on the state of Israel. African countries that severed ties did so not on the basis of national interest but on threat and pressure from the Arab states. He mentioned that ambivalence marked Israeli relationship with Nigeria because of pro-Arab sentiment in northern Nigeria (212-213). Unfortunately, the anticipated Arab assistance by various African governments never materialised that by early 1980s, most of them had restored diplomatic ties with Israel and yet Nigeria remained uncooperative for two decades. Bubawa (1990, pp.179-180) is of the view that, the severance of Black African relations was hinged on

Israel's victories in wars against the Arab states. Also, the occupation of Sinai Peninsula made Black Africans to see Israel as an aggressor with imperialist ambition. This argument could be punctured on three grounds: first, war is no dinner party and the possibility of the victor annexing parts of the territory of the vanquished has been there since time immemorial. Defeat in war entails some retributions in form of war indemnity. The Franco-Prussian war of 1871 led to France losing Alsace-Lorraine to united Germany. Second, available records have shown that African countries were pressurized or rather blackmailed to boycott Israel with promise of reduction of oil prices and development aid (Chhabra, 1975, p. 367, Levey 2008). But what rankles the mind is Nigeria, an oil producing nation succumbing to religious sentiments. This paper purports that Nigeria-Israeli relations borders on emotion rather than clear cut national interests. Besides, Nigeria Muslims ought to outgrow religious bigotry in international relations and pursue what is most beneficial to the country. No amount of profession of Islamic tenets will make a black man an Arab.

### **NIGERIA- ISRAEL RELATIONS, 1960-1979**

Islam has penetrated the greater part of what presently constitutes Nigeria. It was the religion of the ruling elite in Borno empire since the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD. It was adopted by the Habe rulers of the Hausa States as the official religion. Islam became a way of life after the successful Uthman Dan Fodio jihad of 1804 and the emergence of the Sokoto caliphate. It further penetrated into Yoruba land of Ilorin and Auchi in the outskirts of Benin kingdom. Sharia law pervaded over the political, economic and social life of its adherents long before the British conquest of Nigeria. Thus, there had been a strong bond between adherents of Islam and the Arabs of the Middle East. This partly explains the emotional attachment of its adherents to Middle East crisis and the undue influence on Nigerian Foreign Policy towards Israel. The same sentiments apply to adherents of Christianity to Jewish cause. This is understandable but should no longer apply in a modern state foreign relation.

The year 1960 was generally known as the year of Africa. This wind of change swept all through Africa because of the large number of countries that won their freedom. Nigeria became independent on October 1, 1960. It was only after then that the new independent leaders tinkered with what could be called the Nigerian foreign policy. Since, independence, Nigerian foreign policy has been African centred. She has also maintained neutrality or non-aligned stand in

international politics. Also, this thrust has not been consistent in the pursuit of her national interest. This according to Obi-Ani (2008:187), might be as a result of the unresolved domestic issues like constitution which can easily be overthrown by ambitious military officers and a fragile economy still dependent on external influences or factors.

However, colonialism entrenched ethnic politics in Nigeria. The colonisers fanned ethnic sentiment and sectionalism to manipulate the political and economic system of the country. Indirect rule and divide and rule tactics were firmly entrenched to achieve the purposes of the British raj. On the wake of independence, most Nigerian leaders had come to believe that ethnicity is the most critical factor in Nigerian politics. Ethnic politics according to Nnoli (2008:171) had become entrenched in the country. Ethnic differences according to Nzewunwa (1984) blossomed into North-South dichotomy which became the basis for economic and political development with the inevitable competition for wealth, power and influence (See also Nnoli, 2008:101-136). He further reiterated that Nigeria's foreign policy at this time became an object of struggle and competition among the regions that polarised into North and South (Nzewunwa:41). From the period of granting the regions self-government in the late 1950s to 1970s, the Nigerian foreign policy experienced conflicting views from the regional premiers and the federal government. One example will suffice here: in 1960, the Balewa government sent the then Finance Minister, Mr Festus Okotie-Eboh to Israel to negotiate for Israeli support in certain developmental programmes and succeeded in obtaining a loan facility for Nigeria. The loan generated a heavy furore among the regional governments of Nigeria. The Northern regional government led by Sir Ahmadu Bello rejected the loan denouncing the deal by insisting that it disassociate itself to ally from the entire transaction and would not accept any pact of such loan (Adeyemo:14). The northern premier stated categorically that: "the North would never ask for help. When we want help, we know where to go for it" (Adeyemo:14). On the other hand, the Western and Eastern Regional Governments of Action Group (AG) and National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) condemned the Northern People's Congress's (NPC) position on the loan, insisting that Nigeria could not afford to do without the foreign aid (Adeyemo:14, Omotere, 2011:7). In this way, the positions of the various parties at the regional levels influence the citizenry on their view to certain foreign policies. This is so because, they are the link between the people and government, their role is essential in the evolving nascent democracy (Alfa

*etal,2020:2*). Again, the Nigeria relation with Israel was reinforced by North -South religious dichotomy. The federal government had to intervene and declared that:

The federal government would accept assistance from any country, would not involve itself in the Arab- Israeli conflict, would not force any region to accept particular loan; but would not permit the objection of a region to interfere with the federal government's constitutional authority to borrow money from abroad (Adeyemo:14-15).

Indeed, the Federal government's position on foreign loan was most appropriate. Newly independent countries like Nigeria should not concern itself with geopolitical conflict such as Arab-Israeli dispute in Palestine. Nigeria should be open to investment opportunities from every willing nation regardless of religious differences. Although this sentiment was voiced in the first decade of independence, the federal government has been accessing loan facilities from Islamic bank (Sukuku Islamic bank loan) for road construction across the country.

However, prior to the above incident, in 1960, Britain finally allowed Israel to open a legation in Lagos. Levey (2014, p. 264) and Nzewunwa (1984) mentioned that:

Before then Israeli specialists have been already aiding Nigeria: a joint enterprise for rural water prospecting operated in the eastern Region and Nigersol, the Israeli-Nigerian construction company had been established. In July 1960, Levi Eshkol, Israeli Minister of Finance toured West Africa and announced a \$10 million loan to the Federal Government. An Arab reaction quickly followed. Egypt's envoy met with Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduna of Sokoto and premier of the Northern Region, and the two men delivered speeches on Muslim unity (p. 42).

The Premier of Northern Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello went as far as prohibiting Israeli nationals from entry into Maiduguri and Sokoto areas considered to be holy to Islam. It is this kind of stand by the northern regional Premier with federal acquiesces that were part of the issues that led to the fall of the First Republic. The central government should not condone restriction of movement of any legitimate foreign national from visiting any part of the country to engage in business. Freedom of religion presupposes every individual's legitimate right to choose the kind of religion to adhere to and the free will to alter that decision without coercion or intimidation from any quarters. It is unfortunate that the leadership in Northern Nigeria in the 1960s desperately tried to preserve the north for Muslim adherents. This attitude is against the tenets of the Nigerian constitution that guaranteed freedom of religion.



Between 1966-1970, Nigeria witnessed political convulsions that could have dismembered the nascent country. The Biafran leadership tried to portray themselves as victims of genocide to woo Israel. Israel was torn between helping the Biafrans (called themselves 'Jews of Africa') who deployed sentiment and emotions of Jewish holocaust to gain the sympathy of Israel. Israel could not openly help Biafrans despite call for such from her citizens. She deftly rendered help to Biafrans by directing her where she could procure arms which unfortunately happened to be outdated weapons that arrived the shore of Port Harcourt with several parts missing. The Nigerian government though, was suspicious of Israeli assistance to Biafra but lacked evidence to nail them because Israel also supplied arms to the Federal government. However, the Israeli Prime Minister preferred to 'sit on the fence' to avoid incurring the ire of Lagos. By 1972, Nigeria was one of the countries which forced a unanimous anti-Israel resolution at the June 1972 OAU Summit in Rabat, Morocco (Levey, p. 276). Israel was smart in not taking sides in the Nigeria-Biafran war because of religious sentiments. Foreign policy behoves every nation to weigh its national interest vis-à-vis other mundane considerations such as being co-religionist. Nigeria appears not to put its heart where its mouth is.

Shortly after the end of the Nigerian-Biafra war, the Yom Kippur war broke out on October 6, 1973, when Arab States attacked Israel. Israel won a decisive victory against the Arabs. This war served as a catalyst for actions taken by African leaders including Nigeria. On October 9, 1973, General Gowon blamed both sides for not scrupulously observing the UN Security Resolution 242, of November 22, 1967 (Adeyemo, 2012). On October 12, 1973, the Federal Military Government issued a statement condemning Israel and supporting the Arabs. On October 25, following an OAU decision, Nigeria broke diplomatic relations with Israel as it claimed that Egypt was an African sister state whose land had been occupied and also due to Arab pressure. To this, Obi-Ani (2008) opined that,

the OAU member countries took the collective decision to break diplomatic ties with Israel because a part of a member country's territory was being occupied by Israel after inflicting a crushing defeat on her. In the heat of the general outcry against Israel, the OAU's decision must have been beclouded by emotion, and anger at the total military defeat of Egypt and her Arab collaborators. Otherwise clear logic would have shown to the OAU leaders that the organization was never meant to be a military alliance in which member states undertake to aid member in military conflict with a



non-member state or even boycott trade relations with such belligerent country (p. 222).

He further reiterated that “OAU failed to take into consideration that Egypt never consulted it before confronting Israel militarily. Yet, Egypt ran back to the continent crying like a beaten child, recruiting young African States in her meddlesomeness in Middle East conflict. Again, Egypt and other African countries (Libya, Algeria and Tunisia) have dual loyalty. Their loyalty to the Arab League appears stronger than that to the OAU’ (Obi-Ani, 2008:223, Adeyamo:13). These countries with Arab affinity hounded other African countries especially Ethiopia in their deleterious quest for Israeli isolation in the continent (Chhabra 1975, Levey 2008). This Arab loyalty marred every benefit Nigeria vis-a-vis other African countries should have gained from Israel. For instance, Israel embarked on agricultural revolution immediately after her settlement, she began to industrialise her society through creation of agricultural labour productivity to settle the settlers and migrants who were Jews of the diasporas returning from various parts of the world after the creation of the State of Israel (Isiani, 2020:15). Through multiple labour productivity, she hopes to lead the world in agriculture, science and technology and even development (Isiani, 2020, p. 15). Therefore, Israel first of all embarked on agricultural revolution to be self-sufficient before engaging in industrial revolution. Today Israel is not to be toyed with in all facets of human endeavours. The cutting off of diplomatic ties with Israel defy any logic, common sense or explanation, for such a move, owing to the fact that relations with Israel at that point had not impinged on Nigeria’s national interest. The only reason could be to identify with her co-religionist, the Arab.

However, despite Israeli’s estrangement by OAU member countries, many African States continued to maintain trade and economic relations with Israel. In fact, commercial activities with Nigeria ballooned (Nueberger:20). It is deplorable that the breaking of ties with Israel has nothing to do with the national interest of any of the OAU member countries, Nigeria inclusive but rather it was based on sentiments and emotions. Sonni Tyoden observed that: “the focus of Nigeria’s foreign policy on Africa is both sentimental which is based on racial and cultural affinity. He reiterated further that element of realism in foreign policy makes it imperative for states to promote their interests and extend their influence in the most conducive environment available” (Obi-Ani 2008, p. 188). The cowardice among many African states is palpable. Many of them did not break ties with Israel not because such relationship wreak havoc to their

economy but rather because of religious affiliations with the Arabs. The remaining states have to do so to assuage the sentiments of their Muslim African brothers. Today this politico-economy distancing has its own repercussion. As Wezeman (2011) observed that:

in the 1950s and 1960s, Israeli interest in Africa was very much driven by political, diplomatic and military issues, as Israel struggles to come to terms with neighbouring Arab states. Israeli arms exports in this period consisted of military aid in the form of equipment and training. By 1970s most African states ended diplomatic isolation and Israel accepted diplomatic isolation and until recently made few efforts to improve relations with African states. Since 1970s Israeli, arms export has been strongly motivated by Israel's strategic military and economic aims.

He went further to reveal that, "in 2009 Avigdor Lieberman visited Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda in the first visit of an Israeli Foreign minister to Africa in 20years. Representatives of Israeli arms companies made up the majority of the 20-person business delegation with him suggesting a strong interest in developing military relations and selling arms" (Wezeman, 2011, p. 10). It is true the collapse in Afro-Israeli ties did not lead to a complete estrangement either economically or militarily, yet despite the restoration of ties, Israeli's interest in the continent has waned and its energies turned elsewhere to China, India, and economic tigers of Asia to the emerging economies in Europe and Latin Americas (Neuberger, 2009).

The policy of neutrality adopted by Balewa administration and Gowon's regime were to contain the varying sentiments in the country. This is because the Northern Nigeria easily identifies with their Muslim brothers of North Africa than southern Christians who are derogatorily regarded as infidels. Balewa saw the tension generated by the loan saga immediately after independence and probably knew that the newly independent country needed to be nurtured and opted for neutrality. Ironsi after the coup that led to his accession to power, sent Northern leaders to Middle East. This, it has been muted was part of his assuaging mechanisms of placating the Northern elements who were still aggrieved over the loss of their political and military leaders during the January military putsch of 1966. So also, General Gowon maintained neutrality over Israel-Middle-East crisis until the Yom Kippur war on October 25, 1973(Neuberger 2009:109) when Nigeria cut diplomatic ties with Israel. Thus, Neuberger (2009) argued that the consideration on the part of Nigeria, for cutting off diplomatic ties was her quest to identify with

Egypt. Thus, this move by Gowon led regime has no national interest at the back of their minds. This is a period when Nigeria could have gained much from Israel in technological and technical assistance. Even when other African states realised that they needed Israeli assistance more and restored diplomatic ties, Gowon never budged because he has enough resources at his disposal which he squandered mostly on white elephant projects. A country with national interest at heart should not have jettison the relationship with Israel and even learn how they advanced exponentially within a short period of time in technology, military intelligence and economy especially the MOSHAV farm settlement. Thus, when General Gowon was boasting that Nigeria has too much money, such resources could have been used to revitalise the agricultural economy or even channelled to farm settlements in Eastern Nigeria that was bombarded by the Egyptian pilots during the Nigeria-Biafra war. Unfortunately, after Gowon's regime, subsequent administrations in Nigeria remained pro-Arab and maintained pro-Arab foreign policy in Arab-Israeli-conflict. When Major General Shehu Musa Yar' Adua became second in command to Obasanjo after the demise of General Murtala Muhammed, he visited Saudi Arabia in 1979 and preposterously declared that, "our friends are the Arabs, we shall always support them (Omotere, 2011:8)". This declaration lacks pragmatism as many African countries had already restored relations with Israel and Egypt in the same year signed the Camp David Accord with Israel. Thus, the non-normalisation of relations with Israel even after Egypt restored diplomatic ties with her appears like crying more than the bereaved. Religious sentiments would appear to have beclouded Nigeria's better sense of judgment.

### **NIGERIA- ISRAEL RELATIONS SINCE 1980**

The break of diplomatic ties with Israel after the Yom Kippur War of 1973 was not hinged on her national interest but rather on her geopolitical, alliances and linkages. The North's proximity to Arabs and contact with Western European missionaries (Nzewunwa:10) had adversely played out in this. Africa was one of the theatres of cold war intrigues, Israel and the Arab nations sought ties with the North and South respectively while the various Nigerian regimes and administrations favoured non-alignment and neutral stance which has affected the overall policy in Nigeria-Israel relations.

Murtala / Obasanjo regime did not want to stir the hornet nest due to Muslim influence in Nigerian government. Nigeria continued to maintain its pragmatic posture under the Shagari

administration 1979-1983 (Adeyemo 313). Even when on April 12, 1982 that Nigeria hosted the Inter-Parliamentary conference, the Nigerian government insisted on non-attendance by Israeli delegates to the Inter-Parliamentary conference. This was months after Egypt on whose behalf the African countries severed ties with Israel normalised her relations with her following the Camp David Accord. As Obi-Ani (2008:223) opined that OAU refused to lift the ban on diplomatic contact with Israel even after the accord between Egypt and Israel due to alleged strong Arab lobby. It seems that OAU was crying more than the bereaved. Nigeria, projecting itself as the big brother, under Shagari never deemed it necessary to restore relations with Israel. But for the insistence of the Nigerian parliamentarians, Shagari led administration was vehement against Israeli attendance. However, at the end of the conference, the leader of Israeli delegation Mr Moshe Shalal encouraged Nigeria to restore diplomatic ties with Israel. He maintained that normalization of relations with Nigeria would be beneficial as Israel was prepared to share her knowledge of boosting agricultural production with Nigeria (Obi-Ani, 2008:225). Yet, Nigeria was intent on pursuing an egocentric foreign policy than looking beyond Arab persuasions to revitalise her agricultural sector. The various farm settlements dotted all over the country have been neglected. Nigeria is an importer of staple food. Nevertheless, Shagari refused to reopen diplomatic ties with Israel. It is alleged that:

President Shagari was influenced by Islamic religion which he subscribes to, the influence of the strong pro-Arab and pro-Islamic lobby in Nigeria championed by members of the ruling party to which he belonged; the desire of Shagari's government to maintain the radical foreign policy which the military bequeathed to the civilians. Other reasons include the desire to maintain the pro-Palestinian position of Nigeria and to retain Nigeria's claim to leadership and initiative in Africa, the Israeli issue was just one aspect of the moves to remain relevant in Africa. (Obi-Ani, 2008, p. 226)

This loyalty to Arab nations stemmed from the aids doled out to the Northern part of Nigeria not to establish industries or schools but in most cases in building mosques to sponsor Muslim fundamentalism. For President Shagari to allow religious sentiments to override better judgment of resuming diplomatic ties with Israel unwittingly antagonised a large proportion of Nigerians who are Christians and even those who believed that Nigeria should not champion Arab nationalism simply because a large proportion of her population are adherents of Islamic religion (Obi-Ani, 2008 p. 226). Nigeria's foreign policy has been marred by sentiments and religious bigotry and the desire not to offend one party.

Shagari's government was toppled in a military coup in 1984 led by Muhammadu Buhari. He maintained that there is no need to restore diplomatic ties with Israel. In 1984-85, Buhari's regime queried some prominent traditional rulers for unauthorised visit to Israel in 1984. They were the Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuade 11, Emir of Kano, Alhaji Ado Bayero and the Obi of Onitsha, *Igwe Ofala Okagbue* (Adeyemo, 2012, p. 313). In summary, Adeyemo (2012) concluded that tit for tat or vengeful considerations became the basis of conducting Nigeria's diplomacy under the Buhari/Idiagbon regime. Unfortunately, this vengeful disposition of Buhari has not changed over the years even with age in his second political journey in Nigeria. In 1986, Babangida enlisted Nigeria as a member of Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Nigeria was made a full member of this Arab dominated organisation. This was to enable her benefit from the interest free loans and grants from the Islamic Development Bank, and other rich Arab States. In 1990, Nigeria's foreign minister, General Ike Nwachukwu, visited Israel earlier in the same year (Adeyemo, 314). The enlistment of Nigeria into OIC generated a heavy furore from the Southern Nigeria. This is because Nigeria's claim to be a secular state should not dispose to any religious group. Thus, it could be adduced that the restoration of diplomatic ties in 1992 by the Babangida regime may have been an administrative move to allay the fears of the majority Christian Southerners, despite that, the move was vociferously opposed by the Muslim North. Likewise, it should be recalled that earlier in 1966, shortly after the January 15, coup, many Arab nations and Northerners were afraid of Ironsi- an Easterner's stance on Middle East conflict. But like most of his domestic policies, Ironsi was bent on placating and assuaging the Northern fears. Thus, Adeyamo asserted that; "to assure the north and Arabs of his intention to maintain what many saw as Nigeria's neutral policy in the Middle-East in motion by Balewa administration, General Ironsi sent a large federal delegation of prominent Northerners to the capitals of Middle-East countries. This particularly was to allay the fears of the Northerners." (Adeyamo:14). From the foregoing therefore one could deduce, that Nigeria's foreign policy is not clear-headed. It is a jumble of emotions, sentiments and banality.

### **NIGERIA-ISRAELI RELATIONS: SO FRAGILE, SO EMOTIONAL**

It is a truism that in most cases, Nigeria's foreign policy towards Israel has been perceived through the prism of religious affinity. Nigeria from 1973-1991 broke diplomatic ties with Israel. Despite this development, she still maintained some diplomatic channels with Israel. This is in tandem with international best practices involving nations experiencing difficulties in their

relationship. Usually a third party could look after the interest of the other in the interim pending the resolution of the dispute. In Nigeria's case, it was only in solidarity with a member of the OAU, Egypt that had issues with Israel. Nigeria was not directly involved and the *impasse* in relationship does not and should not deprive Nigerian citizens the opportunity to engage in beneficial business ventures with their Israeli counterparts. Thus, depicting in the main the poor knowledge of foreign policy by the Nigerian leaders. As Obi-Ani (2008:187) defined that a robust and dynamic foreign policy is often a consequence of a strong economic foundation and military might. Nigeria lacks both features and has been playing the ostrich in her relations with Israel. Nigeria has also publicly and constantly condemned and voted against Israel at United Nations. However, it has continued to allow its citizens to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem while the Muslim visits Medina and Mecca. Nigeria's foreign Policy posturing is sentimental, illusory and egocentric (Obi-Ani ,2008: 189). Adeyemo (317) recorded that in 2007, Oyo State alone sent 800 Christians on a pilgrimage. Aside that, Nigeria companies continued to trade with Israel and Arab nations and allowed companies from both sides to operate in Nigeria. Despite Nigeria's vote against Israel at UN, by 1983, forty Israeli firms were operating in Nigeria and by 1991 it has increased to 100 (Adeyemo 317). Likewise, Eastern Nigeria has benefitted also from the Israel type of farm settlement which has been neglected since the oil boom making the country a mono- economy to the utter neglect of food crop production. Today, Israel is self-sufficient in food production while Nigeria is a net importer of food items. In 1992, the Nigeria Export Promotion Council advertised zones in the Middle East with favourable export environments such as: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Cyprus and Yemen (Adeyemo, p. 317). These countries were given special focus. This is evidence that the Middle East crisis never affected the economic contacts between her and Israel on the one hand and on the other hand with the Arabs nations. One can safely argue that Nigeria's foreign policy towards Israel and Arab nations is meant to accommodate divergent conflicting interests in the region. To support this assertion, Adeyemo (318) noted that:

The North was left to support and sympathise with the Arabs and the Palestine and had nothing to do with Israel. But in the South, the Israelis, their business companies and industrial manufacturers were received and welcomed with open arms (p. 318).

It is necessary here to recall as US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger diagnosed that the roots of Middle-East conflicts are not economic or strategic but ideological and religious. It is no wonder that these have played crucial roles in Nigeria-Israeli relations. Quoting Falwole, Adeyemo (318) mentioned that, “the government of Nigeria accommodated the conflicting basic interests of the Arabs and the Israelis and this afforded the government the requisite flexibility to relate with both adversaries”. Thus, since independence the religious divide between North and South has made it very difficult for the Federal government to establish strong ties with Israel. Between 1960-1990 the core Northern elite deny the existence of Israel while the South wished to do business with Israel. There is still nostalgia over the Israeli modelled farm settlements in Eastern and Western Nigeria. Many people in Southern Nigeria believe that if the farm settlements modelled after Israel had been sustained, Nigeria’s food insecurity would have been overcome. Youth unemployment would also have been drastically reduced as agriculture is a big employer of labour. The denial of the existence of Israel in tandem with the aspiration or dream of Arab nations in Middle East and North Africa stems from the fact that the northern Nigeria has produced more of the Nigerian presidents in her over five decades of existence. The result was that there has been undue pressure on the Federal government by the Northern religious leaders pandering to religious sentiments to maintain hostile attitude towards Israel. Israel on the other hand evoke sympathy and solidarity among the Christian South. Whereas in Northern Nigeria, Arab solidarity is shown through pro-Arab demonstrations and riots. Thus, Muslim adherents in Nigeria see Arabs in Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon among others as their kith and kin. The result is that these divergent positions of Nigerian ethnic groups have made it impossible for the Federal Government of Nigeria to muster internal solidarity to take a clear-cut side against both parties over the Middle-East crisis nor establish strong ties with Israel. In this way, Nigeria does not benefit from Israel’s military, technical and agricultural assistance which strong diplomatic ties offers.

In the long run, Nigeria’s foreign policy towards Israel has been marred by the sentimental dominant inclination of the Muslim lobby (Omotere 2011, Adeyemo 2012). Some of these leaders were neutral, some docile while others like Murtala/Obasanjo regime were more radical in their approach. Adeyemo (2012) was of the view that of all these leaders, Shagari was the worst of them all. He expelled illegal migrants and was not decisive on Arab-Israeli situation. He therefore concluded that religious dichotomy between the North and South reflected in this relationship. Nzewunwa (1984), is of the view that the “circumstances which led to Nigeria to



sever diplomatic relations with Israel have not remained static. He went further to state that, "there have been major changes to favour a reconsideration of the issue of resumption of diplomatic relations with Israel. But on the other level, there have emerged disturbing developments that have apparently conspired to stay Nigeria's action" (Nzewunwa 1984:3). This was as different Nigerian government prevaricated in restoring diplomatic ties long after 1973, notwithstanding that Nigeria's stance towards Israel and the Arabs in the Middle east has featured in her internal politics right from independence. This issue had tended to exacerbate the North-South dichotomy in Nigeria (Nzewunwa 1984:4). The complexities of Nigeria's internal structure mar her attitudes towards Israel. Adeyemo (2012) opined that "pro-Arab and anti-Israeli posture of Northern Nigeria under Ahmadu Bello's Northern People's Congress (NPC) to the cultural and religious affinities of the North with the Arabs which is in contradistinction to the Southern political leaders' attitude towards Israel". He, however mentioned that the South pro-Israeli inclination is explained on the need for Israeli technical assistance and not on religious grounds (104). He asserts that as the South being secular, their relations with Israel did not affect their relations with the Arabs. This explains the thrust of this paper that Nigeria relationship with Israel has always remained tenuous due to the North-South divide of Nigeria. This has reduced a supposedly robust foreign policy into mere emotions and religious sentiments.

## CONCLUSION

The Nigerian-Israeli relation has been ambivalent. It has been unstable and tainted with emotions and sentiments. It was obvious that Israeli romance with newly independent African states was for recognition and political advantage while Africans wanted aid from Israel. It would have been a case of *quid pro quo*, by African countries- give them what they want and gain what you need. It became shameful knowledge that most Black African countries apologised in private to Israel ambassadors before severing ties and confessed that they were under serious pressure by Arab Africans (Levey 2008). International politics is *quid pro quo*. The thrust of this paper is that Nigeria-Israeli relationship despite all economic benefits has been tottering based on ethnic and religious configuration of the country. Nigerian leaders though in most cases could be said to be under pressure from Muslim north and Arab nations, national interest should have been at the front burner in her relations with Israel. The severance of relations with Israel for two decades was an unmitigated disaster and deleterious move that in no way was in her national interest.

Today, neglect of the farm settlements established in the western and eastern regions are a testament of having some unenlightened regimes in a country. What pricks the mind of many is the gain such loyalty to Arab States has brought to the country. Is it the sponsorship of Muslim Fundamentalism? It is high time Nigeria knew where her interest lies in the international scene. The good old norm should be pervasive in Nigeria-Israeli relationship: 'Permanent interest but no permanent enemy.' Israel is a reality and like Nkrumah cautioned the Arabs in the 1960 UN General Assembly session, to recognise realities-implying that since Israel is a reality, the Arabs might as well come to terms with it (Chhabra, 1975:362). Israel may have overreached itself in her diplomacy in Middle East but that should not becloud our judgment that permanent interest supersedes every other affinity in international diplomacy.

Between, 1960-1966 bilateral agreement with Israel cuts across trade, agriculture, educational network, medical institution and technological training (Omotere 2011), today it is more of arms business not only in Nigeria but Africa. This change of motives after 1970s severing of diplomatic ties, confirms what Naomi Chazan, a professor of political science and African Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem says that:

The Israeli presence in Africa is all too frequently determined by opportunistic business people and security consultants carrying Israeli passports rather than by legitimate emissaries of the public and private sectors. And, even though there are still Israelis devoted to tackling the multiple humanitarian challenges facing Africans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they now operate in non-governmental frameworks with little substantive backing and next to no formal support. (Neuberger 2009:8)

Indeed, no human relations is sustained on emotions and religious sentiments. Nigerian-Israeli relations has come of age and it should be based on mutual beneficial opportunities for the good of both countries.

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