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Ethno: Religious sentiment and the dynamics of Nigeria Israel relations

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper was to ascertain the level and extent of ethno-religious sentiments in the Nigeria-Israel relations over the years using the linkage approach as its theoretical framework. Basically, the paper relied on secondary source of data collection. As an ex-post facto design, analysing the data was based on content analysis. The findings reveal that conflicting religious undercurrent has impacted on the Nigeria-Israel relations, resulting to a tight-rope-work policy by the Nigerian government in order to avoid a clash between the Christians and Muslims. The study therefore concludes that the ideological disposition between

the two religious sects have impinged on the dynamics of Nigeria-Israel relations, thereby creating socio-economic inertia. In the light of the above, the study recommends that Nigerians should emulate Saudi-Arabia and Israel where both Christians and Muslims live without conflicts. On this note, CAN and NSCIA representing Christians and Muslims respectively, should make deliberate effort in sensitizing their members on the need for ethno-religious tolerance, which will no doubt help to free the wheel of Nigerian foreign policy towards the Middle East for better achievements.

Keywords: dynamics, Christians, relations, Religious, NSCIA

Introduction

Bilateral relations are meant to enhance the dynamics of mutual cooperation and interests among the nations concerned. On its own part, religion is man's relationship with God, which ought to be quite different from politics. Again, the hallmark of any religion is "peace" which is a necessary ingredient for development both at the national and international levels. Meanwhile, considering the religious and demographic structures of Nigeria's population, the Nigeria-Israel relations have become very complicated since independence. In other words, religion has impinged on Nigerian Politics especially in regard to her relations with Israel.

It must be stressed here that, during the struggle for independence, this religious undercurrent as regards to the Middle East Crises was not well noticeable in Nigeria. But thereafter as the years of independence receded, conflicting religious interest representing the fears and aspirations of Muslims and Christians, began to creep deeper into the Nigerian Politics, which no doubt has become a real political problem. Infact, it is a problem that has over the years raised fundamental issues over the quest for national unity. In this regard, Birai (1996) opines that the Nigeria-Israel relations has become the single most important foreign policy matter over which conflicting narrow regional interests underlined by opposing religious sentiment have been easily expressed.

The Nigeria-Israel relations have had course to be on the cross roads which have made the Federal Government of Nigeria to engage on a tight-rope-walk policy so as to avoid a class of interest between the Christians and Muslims. Therefore, a review of Nigeria-Israel relations over the years, tend to reveal latent factors of conflicting religious undercurrent that has generated political schism over substantive policy position of the Federal government in relation to regional and religious tendencies.

Ordinarily, it may seem out of place to talk about religion and politics in Nigeria, let alone religion and foreign policy, because constitutionally religion and politics are supposed to be separate. But in reality, the Nigerian religious and cultural diversity, sometimes taking a geographical dimension of North-South divide, appear to have sustained the inevitability of religious considerations creeping into Nigeria-Israel relations. This become obvious when we take a deeper and critical examination of the manner Muslims and Christians have come to perceive and react to government's posture in the Arab-Israel conflict. This no doubt has helped to reveal the extent to which Nigeria-Israel relations had become a victim of antagonistic religious interests. Also, the confrontational controversy that reared its ugly head concerning Nigeria's membership of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986 buttresses the extent to which religion affects foreign policy decisions.

In fact, the OIC issue according to Birai (1996), was a matter that fuelled the controversy over the restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel, even though it (religion) was not the cause for the break in diplomatic relations. Indeed, the history of Nigeria-Israel relations simply reflects the inevitability of religion in Nigerian foreign policy, which has been of great concern to succeeding governments in Nigeria. This implies that the partisan religious interests of the groups concerned with the passage of time, may no longer be ignored without the risk of raking religious backlash. In other words, the Nigeria-Israel relations appear to be one in which Muslims and Christians can hardly conceal their interest, sympathy, emotion and sometime fears.

It can also be inferred from the foregoing, that the projection of Nigeria's crisis in the direction of North-South dichotomy, reinforced by opposing religious interest, explain in part, why most Arab countries supported the Federal Government during the civil war while Israel lent its weight to the Biafran Secessionists.

Nevertheless, the 1970s saw greater religious undercurrent penetrating deeper into the Nigerian political life. For instance, the Sharia debate of 1977 and the rise of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), marked a definite tense penetration of opposing religious interest into the Nigerian political process. To this end, CAN succeeded in having Christian Pilgrim Boards created alongside Muslims Pilgrim Boards across the federation as a way of ensuring "Balance of power".

These identified struggles between Christians and Muslims due to the misperception of the reality of Arab-Israel conflict has direct impact on the dynamics of Nigeria-Israel relations especially as it pertains to mutual benefits, hence the need for a redress. In this regard, Saleh (2015) adduce that a nation with serious ethnic and religious division must have to check these cleavages before embarking on offensive foreign policy. This paper is meant to x-ray the ethno-religious sentiment impinging on the dynamics of Nigeria-Israel relations with a view to proffer solutions that could help to ameliorate identified constraints.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the impact of ethnicity on the Nigeria-Israel relations
2. Examine the constraints of religious sentiment on the Nigeria-Israel relations.
3. Advance workable solutions that could help to sustain and improve on the Nigeria-Israel relations.

Methodology

This paper mainly relies on secondary source of data collection. This shows that the use of library and other educational resource centres were utilised. In other words, the study made use of textbooks, magazines, newspapers, reports (seminars, symposia) and internet services.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used in this study is the Linkage Approach, as espounded by Rosenau (1967). The linkage approach to foreign policy holds that there is a link between domestic

processes (politics, religion, economy, cultural values etc) and the external environment towards which foreign policy is directed. Consequently, Rosenau (1967) defines "linkage concept" as any recurrent sequence of behaviour that originates in one system and reacted to in another.

In the light of the above, Birai (1996) identifies two important features of the linkage approach, which are of immense value to international relations theoreticians. Firstly, the idea of a linkage between the internal (domestic) situation and external (foreign) environment allows for an analysis that adequately examines the extent to which interaction between the two environments can constitute a hindrance to the formulation of an effective policy. Secondly, the linkage approach also provides a specific context for identifying the extent to which specific forces can positively or negatively impinge on the achievement of a given policy.

Further, in corroboration with the views of Rosenau, Saleh (2015) inferred that the political system in a given nation-state has an impact on foreign policy decisions and their implementations. In the same vein, Spanier (1971) in trying to show the relationship between domestic forces and foreign policy implementation observed that foreign policy is actually domestic policy pursued by other means. The above postulations have helped in no small measure, to show the congruency that exist between domestic and external factors in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, which no doubt determine the level of foreign relations.

In applying the theory to this work, it can be inferred that the theory is related to the study. Specifically, the theory helps to explain the constraints of the dynamics of Nigeria-Israel relations occasioned by the Christians – Muslims dichotomy, sometimes aligning with the geographical divide between the North and South. Put in another form, the theory helps to reveal the clog on the wheels of the dynamics of Nigeria-Israel relations, which is ethno-religious sentiment within the Nigerian context. These ethno-religious sentiment, as unveiled by the study is strictly based on the misperception of the reality of the Arab-Israel crises, which has forced the Federal government of Nigeria to be very conscious and cautious in taking decisions that affect the Nigeria-Israel relations, in order to avoid a clash between the Christians and Muslims respectively. Therefore, there is a link between the cautious level at which Nigeria relates with Israel and the domestic forces at the home front.

Ethno-religious sentiments during the debates for the restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel (1973-1992).

The Yomkippur war of October 1973, between Israel and its Arab neighbours, notably Egypt and Syria, ended with Israel occupying more Egyptian and Syrian territories in addition to those captured in 1967. Since Egypt is an African country, an OAU resolution in that same year was passed demanding collective Africa's response in form of severance of diplomatic relations by all African countries with Israel. On 25th October, 1973, Nigerian broke diplomatic relations with Israel in compliance with the OAU resolution, as the 17th African country to so comply. Below is the list of Africa countries that severed relations with Israel.

Table I: Africa's Break in Diplomatic Relations with Israel

S/N	Country	Date of Break
1.	Guinea	June 12, 1967
2.	Uganda	March 30, 1972
3.	Chad	November 28, 1972
4.	Congo	December 31, 1972
5.	Niger	January 4, 1973
6.	Mali	January 5, 1973
7.	Burundi	May 16, 1973
8.	Togo	September 21, 1973
9.	Zaire	October 4, 1973
10.	Benin (Dahomey)	October 6, 1973
11.	Rwanda	October 9, 1973
12.	Cameroon	October 15, 1973
13.	Equatorial Guinea	October 15, 1973
14.	Burkina Faso (Upper Volta)	October 18, 1973
15.	Tanzania	October 18, 1973
16.	Mauritania	October 9, 1973
17.	Malagasy Republic	October 20, 1973
18.	Central African Republic	October 21, 1973
19.	Sierra Leone	October 22, 1973
20.	Ethiopia	October 23, 1973
21.	Nigeria	October 25, 1973
22.	Zambia	October 25, 1973
23.	Gambia	October 25, 1973
24.	Ghana	October 27, 1973
25.	Senegal	October 27, 1973
26.	Gabon	October 29, 1973
27.	Kenya	November 1, 1973
28.	Liberia	November 2, 1973
29.	Ivory Coast	November 8, 1973
30.	Botswana	November 13, 1973
31.	Mauritius	July 6, 1976

Source: Birai, 1996: Domestic Constraints on Foreign Policy: The Role of Religion in Nigeria-Israel Relations 1960-1996.

It must be noted that Guinea, Uganda, Chad and Congo broke relations with Israel much earlier, while Mauritius did so much later for other reasons outside OAU's declaration of 1973. It is true that Israel has an ambition in Africa, but there is nothing unusual about that too. According to Birai (1996), Israel had engaged in a careful diplomacy of building wide African support base at the United Nations against resolutions that may hurt it and in support of those in her favour. Therefore, the severance of all official ties with Israel by 29 African countries was a major blow on Israeli ambition in the region.

Since October 1973, the major issue in Nigeria's Middle East Policy has been the debate on whether or not Nigeria should resume diplomatic relations with Israel. Even though Nigeria-Israel relations were not broken because of religious consideration, the public debate on the merits or demerits of restoration of relations quickly became underlined in a significant way, by conflicting religious interests. For instance, Faronbi, a Reverend, cited in Kani (1987) in his call for restoration opines that God has special interest in the land of Israel as derived from the Biblical injunction:

I will bless them that bless thee and curse him that curses thee; and in thee shall all the families in the earth be blessed. In a like manner, the former Secretary – General of CAN, Northern States, Salifu, as captured from an editorial by the "West Africa" also referred to the biblical context of the state of Israel and further state inter-alia that the nation of Israel should be spiritual barometer to the Christian.

Also, the New Nigerian (1987) x-ray the letter sent to the African Heads of State delegation to the 27th OAU summit in

Abuja, by Nigeria Israel Association (NIA). In the letter signed by the then president of the association, Dabo, members urged the federal government to restore relations with the state of Israel. It further stated that:

On behalf of the 2.8 million members of NIA, we hereby plead with Africa that those who oppose Israel have an appointment with the wrath of God. The fact is... God is angry with Africa for isolating his children for almost two decades without any justification

In a related development, the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo quoted from National Concord (1979) advocated an automatic normalization of relations between Nigeria and Israel. According to him, Nigeria needs Israel expertise badly, and also because of the Egypt – Israel peace accord. During the Kuru conference of March 1986, an intervention by Rev. Gamaka, on behalf of CAN, argued in favour of resumption in diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Israel. It further re-echoed:

We wish to associate ourselves with the call for the restoration of diplomatic ties with Israel. The OAU solidarity on this matter no longer holds ... Israel has transformed its desert into agric land. We can learn from her.

Indeed, Archbishop Okojie, the then CAN president, and a strong advocate of the restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria-Israel made a valid point in 1988, while commenting

on the increasing presence of Jews in Nigeria. According to Okojie, it is not understandable why the federal government refuse to restore diplomatic ties with Israel, but only to turn around to allow many Jews into the country undertaking many jobs – the Reporter (1988). This view corresponds with the recent publications of Jerusalem Post (2019), which states that many Jews live in Nigeria. It added that thousands of Nigerian Jews constitute the fastest growing Jewish community on the continent of Africa. As a follow-up, the then ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations Major General Garba (Rtd), openly declared his supports for the normalization of diplomatic relation between Nigeria and Israel. According to him, Israel supported African at the UN, which to him was enough to make the argument about South African linkage to “begin to wear” – Olusanya (1989)

On the contrary, opponent of the diplomatic restoration between Nigeria and Israel also followed religious line. For example, the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) in a press released (1989), cited in Birai (1996), contend that the Arab – Israel conflict was assuming it full Islamic dimension:

At least the intifadah in the West Bank and Gaza is decisively influenced by Islamic forces ... Israel ought not to wish for diplomatic relations with countries that respect the views of their Muslim population.

The MSSN thereafter, called on the then Sultan Ibrahim Dasuki, who was also the President-General of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) to take up the matter with federal government and ensure the Non-restoration of diplomatic ties continued indefinitely. In a similar vein, Olusanya (1989) stresses that the Arab-Israel conflict is a matter of justice and fair play and we (Nigerians) cannot be crying out and demanding justice in South Africa while refusing to recognize it somewhere else. Justice is indivisible. Again, the Kuru conference of 1986, in supporting the non-restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel was unmistakable in the language it is used against Israel for its romance with racist South Africa. The conference communiqué reads:

We believe that Nigeria's relations with Israel should be clearly placed on a principled basisour opposition to racism and colonialism. Therefore, given the racist nature of Zionism..., the time has not come for restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel.

On his part, Akinyemi (1982), then Director – General of Nigeria Institution of International Affairs (NIIA) in an open-letter to National Assembly, stated emphatically:

... of all the other groups, region, continents, peoples, or what have you in the world, it is only the Arab countries who have joined in the diplomatic isolation of South Africa. This is not an issue that should be brushed aside lightly.

To that extent, Akinyemi further emphasized that Nigerians should show solidarity with the Arab countries by reinforcing the diplomatic isolation of Israel. Also worthy of note is the stern action taken against two powerful traditional rulers – the Emir of Kano and the Ooni of Ife that visited Israel ostensibly on a religious pilgrimage only to receive red-

carpet treatment. The then General Buhari regime, according to Gambari (1984) took a bold step in punishing the two traditional rulers in order to re-affirm the position of Nigeria's readiness to maintain the diplomatic rupture. It can be recalled that the two rulers concerned were restricted to their domain in addition to six months suspension from their state council of Chiefs of which they were chairmen. In addition, the Emir of Kano has to forfeit the position of Chancellor of University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

However, despite the fact that diplomatic break between Nigeria and Israel was not based on religious factors, yet it was widely belief that the delay in restoring diplomatic ties has some religious connotations as shown in the above analysis. In this direction, Birai (1996) asserts that though it is not easy to see the link between religion and politics, religion has however normally had significant consequence on the domestic politics of Nigeria.

Views and comments of Christians and Muslims after the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1992

On May 4, 1992, General Babangida formally restored diplomatic ties with Israel. Diplomatic ties were broken between Nigeria and Israel for two decades based on an OAU decision in October 1973. The restoration of ties with Israel came after a long and cautious process of covert and overt contacts between the two countries at various fora and levels. The resumption of political ties between Nigeria and Israel has become a very important foreign policy event in the diplomatic history of Nigeria. While the diplomatic break between the two countries was a watershed in Nigeria-Israel relations, the restoration of ties after two decades has become an even more significant event.

By and large, the process that culminated to the restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel took full cognizance of the importance of domestic situation, occasioned by the various debates at different fora, even though the decision to break diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973 had nothing to do with domestic political considerations. However, ethno-religious reactions had trailed the restoration by both opponents and proponents of the diplomatic ties. Consequently, headlines and editorials from various newspapers and magazines painted the picture of the restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel as follows. “The Jews and the IBB”; The story of discreet Romance”; The Israel muscles in Nigeria; The Israeli card. The Israeli Agenda in Nigeria; CAN wins. – New Nigerian (1992).

Nevertheless, prominent individuals and associations also reacted in various forms. On the question of why it took so long for Nigeria to restore ties with Israel, the view of Obiozor the then Director General of NIIA and Akinyele, former minister under Babangida's regime are worth nothing here. First Obiozor noted that, the foreign policy of a major nation and a major actor in Africa continent like Nigeria is like turning a super tanker on a highway, it takes time. Nigeria is a nation that acts with caution.... Every government that is wise should act in such a way that its policy will be supported by majority of its citizens.

On his part, Akinyele pointed out that the issue was a matter of leadership style. Some of the past leaders according to him were not as dynamic as General Babangida, some of them were not courageous, but were rather afraid of what people would say if they made the attempt.

As expected CAN was happy that relations had at last been

restore with Israel. In a press release, CAN noted thus; we in CAN are particularly pleased. This is what we have been clamouring for. It is good news to every Christian and indeed well-meaning Nigerians – The citizens (1992). As a follow up, Archbishop Okogie, then CAN president also described the decision as long overdue. In the same manner, the Nigeria-Israel Association (NIA), in a congratulatory letter written to General Babangida stated that we are convinced that Israel has the capacity to make every possible contribution towards the realization of our Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) which are intended to enhance the quality of your subjects – Africa Concord (1992). Further, on the opposing side, Sheikh Tureta stated that “as Muslims the government has humiliated and violated our rights” by restoring diplomatic ties with Israel. “Israel is quite aware of the religious divide on the issue in Nigeria and will seek to exploit it as it does in Lebanon” he added. Late Sheikh Gumi, the renowned Islamic scholar was also emphatic in his opposition to the restoration of diplomatic ties with Israel but gave government the benefit of doubt:

We certainly don't support the restoration of relations with Israel, but we don't know what the government means. Allah Shi saukake.

The Secretary-General of NSCIA said that, “we are surprised at the move because the situation that informed the cessation of diplomatic relations with Israel eighteen years ago has not been altered.... we believe that they still occupy some Arab land... The MSSN on its part saw the restoration of ties in religious terms as well as in terms of the pressure brought on government by Israeli lobby, taking advantage of Nigeria's economics crisis. In a statement, the National President of the organisation, Mallam Aliyu Tanko, says that Muslims do not find any logic or sensible reasons for restoring ties with the Zionist state. The society further contended that government was being stampeded into restoring diplomatic ties with Israel because “we are aware that a country trapped in the net

of foreign debt cannot have anything for free” - (Birai, 1996). A former secretary to the Federal government, Ciroma expressed that the decision was right in the circumstance of a changing world environment to avoid the danger of last minutes move – The New Nigerian (1992). Given the extent to which the issue could sensitize conflicting religious perspective, Tahir, an ex-minister under Shagari's regime, agreed that the restoration of ties with Israel by Nigeria was in the right direction, adding that almost all countries and regional alliances were dinning at Israeli table and therefore, warned that there are prices in diplomacy for last minutes movers. He advised that Nigeria should however obtain absolute guarantee for Nigeria Muslims to have uninhibited access to the Masjid Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem and for Christians to their holy places – The New Nigeria (1992).

The reaction of Nigeria-Israel Association (NIA) was as expected, full of praise for General Babangida. In fact, according to the citizen (1992), the then president of the association, Dabo, showered encomiums on Babangida for a courageous decision. Dabo described Babangida as the Abraham Lincoln of Nigeria. In the same manner, the then deputy president of NIIA, Ray Ekpo, describe the decision as a good one but lamented why religion was made a big issue in the matter. He opined that it is just out of fear and undue suspicion that Nigerians are divided on the issue along opposing religious interests. Generally, diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Israel has been conducive and commendable especially in the area of pilgrimage for both Christians and Moslems. As stated earlier, the Masjid Al Aqsa in Jerusalem is the third Moslem celebration worldwide. For the Christians, Israel as a “Holy Land” has attracted so many Nigerian pilgrims in the recent time. In terms of personality, apart from Goodluck Jonathan who visited both as a vice president and as a president, the former Speaker of House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara had also gone for pilgrimage in Israel in 2015. Below is a table showing the number of Christians who performed pilgrimage by States 2011-2015.

Table 2: Number of Christians who Performed Pilgrimage By States, 2011-2015

S/N	State	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
1.	Abia	387	0	819	0	0
2.	Adamawa	379	476	626	958	672
3.	Akwa ibom	1475	1002	1495	1118	756
4.	Anambra	267	49	475	1070	389
5.	Bauchi	397	419	421	295	389
6.	Bayelsa	0	1314	474	310	0
7.	Benue	774	0	980	261	261
8.	Borno	292	246	73	322	638
9.	Cross rivers	143	153	105	79	18
10.	Delta	1101	1176	1315	0	1438
11.	Ebonyi	0	347	358	311	0
12.	Edo	103	66	68	83	117
13.	Ekiti	221	189	184	0	0
14.	Enugu	303	360	359	316	114
15.	Gombe	290	0	565	284	237
16.	Imo	272	144	54	103	6
17.	Jigawa	0	0	0	0	0
18.	Kaouna	1536	643	1066	1182	125
19.	Kano	0	0	0	0	0
20.	Katsina	0	0	0	0	19
21.	Kebbi	112	135	2	69	86
22.	Kogi	216	179	210	203	88
23.	Kwara	514	435	390	486	92
24.	Lagos	1316	1655	1434	1329	1206

25.	Nasarawa	208	199	238	151	136
26.	Niger	350	422	499	23	270
27.	Ogun	119	200	234	327	202
28.	Ondo	289	296	257	209	168
29.	Osun	473	377	509	354	144
30.	Oyo	406	520	475	565	123
31.	Plateau	940	561	1681	1677	1199
32.	Rivers	2289	1957	0	0	566
33.	Sokoto	0	0	0	0	0
34.	Taraba	347	334	387	573	450
35.	Yobe	68	48	39	0	57
36.	Zamfara	0	0	0	0	0
37.	Fc (abuja)	970	661	1219	1363	384
38.	Self sponsored	302	343	635	781	870
39.	Medical	201	192	174	162	174
40.	Consular	330	319	202	83	201
41.	Staff	-	147	147	147	147
	Total	17390	15564	18169	15194	11,742

Source: Department of Planning, Research and Development, Nigeria Christian Pilgrim Commission

A preview of the above table 2, clearly shows that states in the south are more represented than those in the North, while sokoto, zamfara, kano, and jigawa had no representation at all. However, it should be noted that southern states are more populated with Christians, while the North is dominated by muslims. This could also help to explain the disparity in the representation.

Indeed, the restoration of ties with Israel by the Babangida administration can also be located in the context of his government's effort at ensuring a posture of neutrality in the treatment of religious interests. This is coming on the heels of the fact that Nigeria had earlier become a member of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Therefore, some analyst saw it as a sign of even – handedness towards the adherents of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. In fact according to Birai (1996), it is difficult to ignore the possibility of a link between restoration of ties with Israel and Nigeria's full membership of OIC. He added that though not on the same footing, they are both foreign policy issues that generated not only controversy and emotion, but also conflicting religious imageries.

To further exemplify and consolidate the commitment to the restoration of ties, Israel recently conducted the third national old Testament Bible contest in Nigeria to mark the sixty (60) years of diplomatic relations between Israel and Nigeria. At the occasion, the Israel Ambassador to Nigeria, Ben-Shoshn said that Nigeria and Israel will turn their challenges into opportunities. He concluded that holding a country-wide Bible competition in all six geopolitical zones can serve as a cultural bridge between Nigeria and Israel – Daily Sun (2020).

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that several reasons made the renewal of ties between Nigeria and Israel possible, while some of the reasons seem apparent, other may not be known to the public beyond speculations. It must also be quickly mentioned here that despite the wide believe that the interests of the Muslims had stalled the renewal of ties between the two countries until 1992, there are few Muslims as seen in the above literature, that saw the restoration as a welcome development. This further help to reinforced the view of Ray Ekpo, a one-time deputy president of the NIA, that it is sometimes out of fear and undue suspicion that Nigerians are divided on the issue along opposing religious interests.

Notwithstanding, the decision to restore diplomatic ties

between Nigeria and Israel remained a very historic and controversial one in the diplomatic relations Nigeria has ever engaged in. this is due to the long and tortuous years it took (1973-1992) to restore a break in diplomatic relations. In the final analysis, it is an undeniable indication that if properly educated on an issue no matter how controversial it may be, Nigerians are capable of appreciating both domestic and foreign policy decision of government with less emotion and sentiments even where conflict of interest is involved.

The controversy over Nigeria's membership of organization of Islamic conference (OIC) in 1986

The controversy that followed Nigeria's membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in January 1986 was unparalleled in the history of Nigeria's foreign policy and diplomatic activities. It was a controversy that revealed the extent to which conflicting religious interests could threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria. The controversy did also underscore the extent to which religion has become a critical element in the political process in Nigeria. It became obviously clear that the factor of religion had become difficult to ignore in Nigeria political process even if it was unable to legitimize political power and justify political actions.

The OIC was founded in 1969 in Rabat, Morocco. Nigerian Muslims were naturally anxious to be part of that historic event. Guardian (1986) states that Nigerian Muslims were thus represented by a delegation led by late Sheikh Abubakar Gurni who was also a member of the delegation that went for the full membership campaign in January 1986. However, General Gowon, the Head of State at that time the OIC was established, was said to have sent an urgent message to King Hassan of Morocco disassociating the Nigerian government from the delegation-Birai (1996). The government thus formally informed the King that the delegation was not officially representing the government of Nigeria. The delegation was therefore denied official accreditation but was nevertheless allowed to observe the proceedings. Since then and until 1986, Nigeria had been an observer in the OIC.

A new situation however arose when Nigeria became a full member of the OIC fifteen years after the formal inauguration of the organization. The controversy started by a news flash in The Guardian (1986), based on a report from Agence France Presse (AFP), according to which Nigeria had formally joined the OIC as its 46th member. That was the

beginning of what came to be known as 'the OIC controversy'.

The controversy took a more serious dimension since government neither confirmed nor denied the story. Government simply kept mute and allowed rumours concerning the issue to circulate freely. The controversy was further fuelled by a statement from Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, the then Chief of General Staff and member of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC). Commodore Ukiwe was second in the political hierarchy of the administration of General Babangida at that time. He was later to be removed unceremoniously from that position.

Commodore Ukiwe's statement was the first public pronouncement on the issue by any government official. He denied any knowledge of the matter, because according to him, it was not discussed at the AFRC, the highest ruling body in the country. According to Concord (1986), Commodore Ukiwe emphatically told the Press that:

Nigeria has not applied to join any international religious organization.

Tension then rose with the then CAN President, Catholic Bishop of Lagos, Okogie angrily declaring that:

The President alone does not make Nigeria. He has no right to draw Nigeria into any religious organization.

The Association of Catholic Students described the membership as "a plan to Islamise the nation". On his part, the Anglican Bishop of Kwara State made an exceptionally sentimental appeal to Christian members of the Armed Forces. The tune of the Bishop's appeal according to Birai (1996), held grave implication to the corporate existence of the Nigerian military and the future of the country. The Bishop stated that:

"No Nigerian soldier will allow himself to be used by men of different faith to crush his own religion for the benefit of another faith."

Muslims hardly find the hardline position taken by CAN on the OIC and other issues like the Sharia, justifiable as indicated by this statement from the Muslim leaders in Lagos:

Anytime a move is made towards legitimate Islamic welfare, the Christians rise in an impious indignation as if the Muslims are not part of this country, They resist anything that might change the status quo in which the Muslims are unjustly made the underdog in the country in which they are majority.

The Muslim Council of Nigeria also re-echoed this feeling when it declared that:

from now on we' ill demand and take effective steps to obtain our rights. Although we will be peace loving, we will rebuff any threat or blackmail with the toughness that is historically characteristic of Muslims.

In a news analysis by National Concord (1986), on the OIC, the paper also re-echoed the same feeling more emphatically, According to the paper, Nigeria's Embassy in the Vatican was being maintained for more than two decades without any visible benefits but for the interest of Christianity. It also compared the visits of Pope John Paul II and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who were accorded official reception on the one hand, and the visit of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the Chief Imam of Mecca, who were abandoned to the Muslims as their private affair on the other hand. The paper then concluded that: all these show that whilst Muslim leaders and entire Muslim community have acted with generosity in matters affecting our Christian compatriots, even when Muslims have final say, the Christian compatriots have chosen to ignore the facts on matters affecting Islam. The OIC controversy was therefore an occasion in which extreme positions were taken by both Muslims and Christians. The arguments on both sides were over-stretched and twisted. Neither side was willing to give the other a hearing. According to The New Nigerian (1987), the picture of the controversy painted by Okadigbo aptly described the situation:

A frightening controversy arose with Muslims and Christians trading threats to life and property and to the unity and stability of Nigeria as one political entity. Since the civil war, nothing as explosive as OIC has bedevilled the father's land. Bishops versus Imams; Churches versus Mosques; elders versus children - the soul of the country, if any, had been rocked.

Before the summation of the substantive argument on both sides however, let us briefly highlight the major aspects of the Organization of Islamic Conference. Though founded in 1969, the Organization of Islamic Conference was formally inaugurated in 1971 in Morocco with thirty founding member countries. The Organization of Islamic Conference has the following objectives and principles.

1. To promote Islamic solidarity among member States;
2. To consolidate cooperation among member States in the economic, social, cultural, scientific and other vital fields of activities and to carry out consultation among member States and International Organizations;
3. To endeavour to eliminate racial segregation, discrimination and to eradicate colonialism in all forms;
4. To take necessary measures to support international peace and security founded on justice;
5. To coordinate effort for the safeguard of the holy places and support the struggle of the people of Palestine and help them to safeguard their right and liberate their land;
6. To strengthen the struggle of all Muslim people with a view to safeguarding their dignity, independence and "national rights";
7. To create a suitable atmosphere for the promotion of cooperation and understanding among member States and other countries.

Below is a table showing the list of member countries of OIC:

Table 3: List of membership of the organisation of Islamic conference (OIC) showing regions and dominant religion

S/No.	Name of Country	Continent/Region of country	Dominant Religion of Country
1.	Afghanistan	Asia	89% Muslim
2.	Algeria	Africa	99 % Muslim
3.	Bahrain	Middle East	100% Muslim
4.	Burkina Faso (Upper Volta)	Africa	65 % Animist
5.	Bangladesh	Asia	84% Muslim
6.	Benin Republic	Africa	70% Animist
7.	Brunei	Asia	63% Muslim
8.	Cameroun	Africa	51 % Animist
9.	Chad	Africa	44% Muslim
10.	The Comoros	Africa	86% Muslim
11.	Djibouti	Africa	94% Muslim
12.	Egypt	Africa	94% Muslim
13.	Garbon	Africa	55-75% Christian
14.	The Gambia	Africa	90% Muslim
15.	Guinea	Africa	85% Muslim
16.	Guinea Bissau	Africa	65% Traditional
17.	Indonesia	Asia	87% Muslim
18.	Iran	Middle East	98% Muslim
19.	Iraq	Middle East	97% Muslim
20.	Jordan	Middle East	95% Muslim
21.	Kuwait	Middle East	75% Muslim
22.	Lebanon	Middle East	75% Muslim
23.	Libya	Africa	97% Muslim
24.	Malaysia	Asia	% NA. Islam Confusionism, Buddhism, Hinduism
25.	Maldives	Indian Ocean	Predominantly Muslim. % Not Available
26.	Mali	Africa	90%
27.	Mauritania	Africa	100%
28.	Morocco	Africa	90%
29.	Niger	Africa	80%
30.	Oman	Middle East	Predominantly Muslim. % Not Available
31.	Pakistan	Asia	97%
32.	Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO)	Middle East	Predominantly Muslim. % Not Available
33.	Qatar	Middle East	95%
34.	Saudi Arabia	Middle East	100%
35.	Senegal	Africa	92%
36.	Sierra Leone	Africa	30%
37.	Somalia	Africa	100% Muslim
38.	Sudan	Africa	70% Muslim
39.	Syria	Middle East	90% Muslim
40.	Tunisia	Africa	98% Muslim
41.	Turkey	Middle East	98% Muslim
42.	Uganda	Africa	66% Christian
43.	UAE	Middle East	89% Muslim
44.	Yemen Arab Republic	Middle East	100% Muslim
45.	Yemen People's Dem. Republic	Middle East	Predominantly Muslim
46.	Nigeria	Africa	**

Source: Birai, 1996: Domestic Constraints on Foreign Policy: The Role of Religion in Nigeria-Israel Relations 1960-1996.

The major arguments concerning Nigeria's full membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference are two. First is the argument that Nigeria is a secular country and membership of OIC is a breach of that principle as contained in the country's constitution. The second argument is related to a constitutional question regarding the competence of the President in matters of foreign policy and diplomacy. The first argument however, has two dimensions, namely: the principle of secularity as contained in the constitution of Nigeria, secondly the religious and non-religious aspects of the OIC and the extent to which membership would breach that principle.

However, it appears that Nigeria is neither represented as an observer nor as a member of the OIC. According to Nigerian

Ambassador and Permanent Representative at the United Nations, the uncertainty about the status of Nigeria in the OIC has made it difficult for the Nigerian Permanent Mission to the United Nations to participate in OIC activities. He cited the OIC Committee on Bosnia of which Nigeria was neither a member nor an observer. The resolution of the confused status of Nigeria in the Organization seems to be very difficult – Birai (1996). The government of General Babangida that created the ambiguity in the first instance could not resolve it in terms of a categorical statement on the true position of Nigeria in OIC. Nigeria has neither withdrawn its full membership nor reverted to its observer position. The short-lived Interim National Government under Chief Earnest Shonekan did not revisit the issue. Also, the

government of General Sani Abacha could not clarify the ambiguity. The confused position of Nigeria in the OIC since January 1986, arising from divisive domestic controversy anchored on conflicting religious interests, is not credible. The projection of this uneasy silence over an issue of foreign relations, gives credence to the fact that the domestic sources of a country's foreign policy and diplomatic activities may override external pressures especially in a new nation. This is even more glaring in a new nation struggling with formidable forces that are pulling her apart, forces on which a durable national and a consensual policy can hardly be anchored without rancour. Secondly, the OIC controversy indicates the extent to which conflicting religious perspectives can be potent in affecting the direction of foreign policy and diplomatic activities by any government in Nigeria. The controversy has provided for deeper penetration of religious interest in the Nigerian political process to the extent that, foreign policy and diplomatic issues that easily take on religious coloration would be difficult to tackle by Nigeria despite obvious advantages they may hold for the nation. Finally, the OIC controversy and the stalemate may therefore remain for a long time to come, a feature of Nigeria's foreign policy. However, the restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel may well restrain opponents of Nigeria's membership of the OIC in their demand for a withdrawal. The scenario that has emerged is a situation in which the sleeping dog may well be left alone, of course to the satisfaction of neither side. The confusion at home has made Nigeria neither a member nor an observer of the organization. The net effect of this is an ineffective policy that is neither credible abroad nor inspiring to the citizenry at home.

Discussion of findings

In the light of the data gathered for this study, it is obvious that religion has a role to play in Nigeria-Israel relations. On the one hand, Christians not only see Israel as a holy land and home of pilgrimage, but also as a nation blessed by God capable of serving as a spiritual barometer to all Christians worldwide. Infact, prominent Christian leaders as represented by Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) believe that having a good diplomatic relations with Israel has the capacity to bring blessing and development to Nigeria, while diplomatic isolation could bring retrogression in line with the biblical injunction which states: I will bless them that bless thee and curse them that curse thee.... On the other hand, Muslims have their reservation for the Nigeria-Israel relations. For the fact that Israel has always be at logger heads with Arabs especially the neighbouring Palestinians, the Muslims believe that having a good diplomatic relations with Israel is not desirable. For instance, during the break in diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Israel and the debate for the restoration that follows, the Muslim students society of Nigeria (MSSN) contended that the Arab-Israel conflict was assuming a full Islamic dimension in its press release (1989), the association contended that the crises at West Bank and Gaza strip was assuming a religious dimension... Israel ought not to wish for diplomatic relations with countries that respect the views of their Muslim population. The MSSN thereafter, called on Dasuki, the then Sultan of Sokoto, to ensure that the non-restoration of diplomatic ties continue indefinitely. The views of these two bodies mentioned above aptly represent the views of Christians and Muslims along religious line concerning the Nigeria-Israel relations. Indeed, the Christians saw the

maintenance and sustenance of the diplomatic rupture between Nigeria and Israel, especially after the 1979 camp David accord which saw Egypt normalizing relations with Israel, as deliberate attempt to perpetually and unnecessarily keep them out of the "Holy Land" while the Muslims saw it as a means of restricting and streamlining Israeli activities in the West Bank and other Arab territories.

To further support the view that religion has a role to play in diplomatic relations, the case of Nigeria's membership of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) is a food for thought. Though not on the same footing with Nigeria-Israel relations, the controversy and reactions that trailed the membership is a clear testimony of conflicting religious imageries that dominate domestic policy decisions which directly or indirectly affects foreign relations.

In line with the findings of the study, ethnicity has no strong influence on the Nigeria-Israel relation. In other words, it has no dominant role in Nigeria-Israel relations. However, if we take a look at the number of Christians who performed pilgrimage by states between 2011-2015 (see table) it can be self-revealing that ethnic groups in the Middle-belt and the entire South are more represented than those in the North. Though states like Borno, Bauchi, Kaduna, Gombe etc. have an appreciable representation, others like Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Sokoto and Zamfara have no representation at all. Obviously, the Southern Nigeria is predominately Christians, while the North is also Muslims dominated, but even at that, there are Christians in those core states of the North that has no representation at all, thereby pointing to ethnic affiliated interest in the Nigeria-Israel relations, notwithstanding the percentage it may be.

Again, this ethnic affiliation in the Nigeria-Israel relations can further be down played by the fact that Muslims in the core-north, including those that have no representation in the Christians pilgrimage to Israel, also have course to go for pilgrimage in Israel (Masjid AL Aqsa). In fact, as at 1984, the Ooni of Ife (South) and the Emir of Kano (North) performed this pilgrimage in Israel, but for receiving red-carpet reception while the diplomatic rupture between Nigeria and Israel was still on, the then Buhari military regime dealt with them up to the level of stripping them of their traditional positions irrespective of their ethnic background.

To further buttress how religion has really impinged on Nigeria-Israel relations, it was only in 2014, almost fifty-four (54) years after independence, that Goodluck Jonathan broke the jinx of no-Nigerian-President has ever visited Israel, when he paid a visit to Israel officially. This was later reinforced in 2015, when the former speaker of House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara also visited Israel. The long boycott of Israel by Nigerian leaders was meant to avoid religious backlash owing to the ideological dispositions between the Christians and the Muslims towards Nigeria-Israel relations. To this end, Nuamah (2003), opines that ethno-religious factor affects Nigerian foreign relations, which makes consensus or rational issues difficult to be achieved. Therefore, this age long rivalry of opposing religious conflicts has not allowed Nigeria to benefit from Israel maximally. Regrettably, Israel has always benefited from Nigerian economy the way they want, not minding the ethno-religious sentiment in the Nigerian system. In fact, Premium Times (2018) testifies of the various activities of Israel in Nigeria. If Nigeria must develop and leap-frog into the 21st century style of development, these ethno-religious sentiments must be discarded.

Conclusion

In view of the findings that emerged, the study has arrived at the followings as conclusion:

That religion has impact on bilateral relations especially that of Nigeria-Israel. To support this assertion, the opposing view that followed debates on the restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel, though religions was not the cause of severance, is a clear testimony as revealed by the study. It must be stated here that the scepticism of Muslims toward Nigeria-Israel relations does not mean that there are no Muslims, no matter how few they are, that are still well disposed to the relations. As stated earlier, this is not unconnected to the fact that even Muslims go for pilgrimage in Israel. Again, the criticisms and crisis that trailed Nigeria membership of OIC is also a pointer to the influence of religion in foreign relations.

However, the issue of ethnicity could not be found to have strong and relevant impact on Nigeria-Israel relations. Though it was discovered that states in the Middle East and Southern Nigeria were found to have sponsored and encouraged Christians to go for pilgrimage in Israel than their Muslims counterparts, this was somehow expected in view of the fact that south is Christian predominance and north is Muslims predominance respectively.

Conclusively, it can also be inferred from the finding of the study that the future relations between Nigeria and Israel is still certain and guarantee despite the seemingly religious antagonism that is inherent in it. This can be attributed to the following reasons: (1) Both Christians and Muslims see and regard Israel as a "Holy Land" for pilgrimage, which helps to guarantee future patronage (2) Various bilateral deals according to Vanguard (2019) have in the recent past been signed by both countries. This coupled with the visit of former President Jonathan and former speaker of House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara, have further help to cement the diplomatic ties between the two countries, which also give an array of hope to future relations.

Recommendations

In line with the findings and conclusion, the following have been advanced as recommendations for this study:

1. Since religion has been found to have impact on foreign relations, especially as it affects Nigeria-Israel relations, government should endeavour to enlighten the public (masses) on issues that borders on sensitive aspects of such relations. Bearing in mind the crisis that was associated with Nigeria's membership of OIC and also the religious undercurrent that gripped the debate on restoration of diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel, the study strongly advised that government should do well in educating the people, in order to avoid religious backlash on certain foreign policy actions.
2. All the states in the Federal should endeavour to sponsor both Christians and Muslims in their respective domains to pilgrimage in Jerusalem and Mecca to douse any suspicion of religious intolerance within the Nigerian system, no matter how few or many the number (pilgrims) may be.
3. There is also the need for leaders in both religions, especially as represented by Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), to make deliberate efforts in sensitizing their members on the need for ethno-religious tolerance. As expected, it is quiet easier for Christians to

adhere to the rules and advice of CAN and Muslims to that of NSCIA, than the other way round.

4. Government at all levels in Nigeria should make a conscious effort at providing enabling conditions through seminars, conferences, workshops etc that embraces synergy of ideas and moral values between Christianity and Islam. Here, leaders of both sects are to give talks on the need for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. This will go a long way in providing healthy environment for Muslims and Christians to operate.
5. Finally, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria should note that the hallmark of any religion is "peace". They should emulate Saudi Arabia (a holy land) where both Christians and Muslims live without fight or antagonistic views, and even Israel (also a holy land) where churches and mosques are erected side by side without violence within the system, outside that of Israel-Palestine, which is not even based on religious disposition but strictly on territorial disagreement or conflict. Therefore, all hands must be on deck to make Nigeria great, a land of peace, devoid of ideological religious dispositions in order to achieve a unification of all and sundry that could pose a common front against domestic and external aggressions.

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