

**‘BETWEEN THE DEEP BLUE SEA AND THE DEVIL’: THE DILEMMA OF PURSUING NATIONAL INTEREST AND PLAYING THE CARD OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA-MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Rather than being influenced by its national interest for sustainable development, Nigeria’s relations with the Middle East have been defined by religion. Although a secular state with no professed state-religion, Nigeria’s multi-religious arrangement especially the one with Muslim-dominated north and corresponding Christian south, makes the conduct of the country’s foreign policy tortuous since independence. While the country’s Muslim north shows solidarity with the Arabs/Palestinians, Christians in the South often show their biases towards Israelis. This behaviour is reinforced with the belief that Arabs and Jews symbolize Muslim and Christian civilizations respectively. On the contrary however, particularly in Israel, Christians are minority group compared to Judaists, a fact relatively known to many in Nigeria. Thus, the study examines the dilemma of Nigerian leaders in foreign policy projections in the region of religious contrast and concludes that Nigeria’s often subtle diplomacy and inactiveness on Middle East are exemplified with this domestic reality.

**KEYWORDS:** Middle East, National Interest/Foreign Policy, Sustainable Development, Religion, Christianity, Islam

## INTRODUCTION

Interestingly, Nigeria's relationship with the Middle East since independence in 1960 has been characterized with extreme caution on the parts of the country's leaders and suspicious on the parts of citizens who are mainly divided into two religious 'opposing' camps: Christianity and Islam. Even though the country's founding fathers realized the impacts religion will have on the country's domestic and external dispositions, and as such made it a secular state with no recognition of state-religion, Nigeria has not been free from the undue influence Christianity and Islam especially, have had on it. Indeed, Haruna (2011: 95) captured more vividly Nigeria's frustrating and dilemmatic mood when he pointed out that,

Nigeria's relationship with the Middle East during the 1960s was characterized by extreme caution due to two main reasons. First is the perceived repercussion an outright alignment with either the Arabs or the Israelis would have had on the domestic political landscape. Second, as a member of the UN Security Council for part of the period, Nigeria was obliged to show neutrality to ensure fairness to parties involved in conflicts. But, at the sub-national levels owing to religious sentiments more sympathy was drawn to the Palestinian cause in the northern region, while the Israeli support came mainly from the southern regions. Christians in southern Nigeria support Israel notwithstanding the fact that Christians in Israel constitute a minority group while the Jewish majority practiced Judaism. The belief that Israel is the epitome of Christianity is a mistaken notion held by both Muslims and Christians alike in Nigeria.

In fact, since 1960 when Nigeria became an independent state, its relation with Israel in particular has generated what Nereus (1993:16) called "heated controversy". While the truth on the misconception about seeing Israel as a 'Christian State' is not lost on those who clearly have understanding of the intricate religious configuration of the Jewish society, the fact that it serves as embodiment and an attraction of Christian civilization and perhaps Islam, poses a huge challenge to the outburst of sensitive emotions it often evoke in Nigeria's policy towards the Middle East. Undoubtedly, accounts on what led to the Arab-Israeli impasse and Middle East vulnerability to crisis (especially between the Israelis and the Arabs - mostly the Palestinians) have been well documented and pre-date recent history.

The on-going hatred, accusation and counter-accusation on land-grabbing by both sides which led to series of military confrontations between Israeli and various Arab forces, most notably in 1948 - 1949, 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982 including several intermittent yet devastating wars like the recent confrontation in July 2014, has a deep religious, social and historical origins. However, according to McWilliams and Piotrowski (1997: 428) more critical to this is the fact that both the Jews and Arabs lay claim to Abraham as their ancestor and as such, his tomb at Hebron in West Bank continue to represent a sacred place to be controlled. Writing on this dilemma, McWilliams and Piotrowski went down memory lane and wrote

Arabs and Jews both claim Abraham as their ancestor. The Jews descended from Abraham's second son, Isaac, born of his wife Sarah; the Arabs from the first son, Ishmael, born of Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maid. The Bible prophesied that great nations would descend from the two sons of Abraham. The biblical account, however, also stresses that

God renewed with Isaac the covenant he had made with Abraham, while the Muslim account makes no distinction between the sons of Abraham. Islamic scholars have argued that it is inconceivable that God would favour one son over the other. In Islamic teachings, the conflict between Jews and Muslims, therefore, becomes a family divided against itself. Since both Muslims and Jews trace their religious ancestry to Abraham, it was not surprising that both sought to control the West Bank city of Hebron, which contains the tombs of Abraham and his family (notably his wife, Sarah, and his son, Isaac)... (Ibid).

Evidently, this notion held by many adherents of the two religious groups – Christianity/Judaism and Islam continue to be a source of strife to Middle East and largely shape the way a country of medley of these two religious beliefs like Nigeria relate with the Jews and Arabs and react to their politics. To this extent, while Christian dominated Southern part of Nigeria relate and support Israel with their regional government(s) severally entering into technical cooperation agreements with Israelis in the field of agriculture and infrastructure, the Northern Muslim community consciously distanced itself from Jews but reinforced strong solidarity and brotherhood with the Arabs. Corroborating this viewpoint, Dantaro-Dlakwa (op. cit.: 95) reported that late Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and premier of the Northern region of the country openly exhibited his disdain for the Jews when he cautioned them that the region and specifically, the Sokoto Caliphate, was no go area for them. As a matter of fact, in the period of 1960's when the Sardauna call the shot in the region, Israelis were only allowed to visit places in the north where there is considerable Christian population like Plateau, Kaduna and Kano.

The northern rejection of the Israelis equally came with the rejection of their goodwill in terms of financial and technical assistance no matter how well-intended. Thus, when the federal government sought for a loan amounting to about three million pounds in the 60s, the northern region rejected it and vowed not to have anything to do with it (see Aluko, 1981: 85 as quoted in Dantaro-Dlakwa, 2011: 95 for details). This is the same disdain with which Arabs were been treated by Nigerians of southern extraction. As a result, Nigeria's quest to achieve sustainable development through assistance from countries of the Middle East with both technical know-how (as it is the case with Israelis) and financial endowments (particularly from oil-rich Arab countries) through its foreign policy had often been thwarted. This is so because, the country do not want the adverse effects such move would have on the country back at home. Thus, for Nigeria, relationship with Israel and Palestine and its Arab allies in the Middle East often pose a serious dilemma for the simple fact that the leadership of the country do not want to offend religious sensitivity of both its Christian and Muslim populations alike.

For example, Terhembra and Adegboyega (2007: 45), pointed out the dilemma often associated with Nigeria's relations and reactions with Israel and Arab states in the Middle East. According to them, "the ethnic fragmentation and religious heterogeneity of the country has posed a great 'dilemma' on the government's decision to sever diplomatic ties with Israel due to mixed feelings among the country's diametrically opposed religious structure". This view was supported by Aluko (1981: 83 – 95) who argued that whereas the Muslims felt that the move to break ties with Israel by the Nigerian government in the 1970s was not only timely but also desirable, the Christians on the other hand saw the move as a wrong foreign policy option. But, when the Nigerian government opted to renew diplomatic ties with the country in 1992, the Muslim community especially those from the Northern part of the country vociferated over this policy decision, while the Christians saw it as a welcome idea. In soothing the interest and sensibility of Muslims in the country through making 'what is good

for the geese equally good for the gander', General Babangida's regime in defiance to Christians' disapproval of the Nigeria's intention of joining the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), took the country to the league of Muslim countries. While the North that was against restoring diplomatic relations with Israel received this as cheering news, Christians that were hitherto in support of reviving relations with Israel saw government attempt as grand design to Islamise Nigeria. This is the dilemma with which the Nigerian state has conducted its foreign policy among the Middle East states, especially Israel and the Palestine.

In his submission, Dantaro-Dlakwa (op. cit.: 96) reported a scenario that clearly highlighted Nigeria's impasse in freely relating or taking a position on issues that border the Jews and Arabs in the Middle East in the course avoiding the backlash that such actions and sometimes inactions, may have on its security and stability back at home. According to Dantaro-Dlakwa, "in 1967, Nigeria was caught in a dilemma following the Israeli attack on Egypt, Syria and Jordan and its subsequent seizure of the Sinai Desert, the Golan Heights and the West Bank from these countries respectively". He went further to say that while "Nigeria believed that such Israeli attack was deplorable, it avoided the temptation of openly condemning Israel. Instead, it used its membership of the United Nations Security Council at that time and played an active role in drafting the Resolution 242 of 1967, which enjoined Israel to withdraw from the Arab territories it occupied in 1967". In similar vein, the Nigerian government enjoined the Arabs to recognize the sovereign territorial integrity and political independence of the Jewish state and their right to live in peace within secured and recognized boundaries (ibid).

According to Ojo (1986: 438) and Dantaro-Dlakwa (2011: 96), the Nigerian government often preferred to maintain neutral ground on issues related to the Arab-Israeli confrontation in the UN system. Ojo particularly remarked that "at the United Nations, Nigeria maintain strict neutrality and rarely contributed to the debates on the Middle East Question at the General Assembly. On the few occasions she intervened, it was to urge moderation and accommodation".

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION OF CONCEPTS**

### **THE MIDDLE EAST**

The term 'Middle East' is one of the nebulous and controversial concepts attracting diverse interpretations from scholars on the basis of its geographical location, predominant religious belief, creed, tribe, history and civilization. As a result, Middle East region is associated with Islam (and to a reasonable extent, Christianity and Judaism), Arabs/Arabic, and history of innovation and extremism. Indeed, Middle East is a region of contrast. In his famous Middle East/Cairo Speech on June 4, 2009, President Barack Obama of the United States paid glowing tributes of Islam and the Middle East when he told his mostly Muslim audience in Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt that,

...You represent the harmony between tradition and progress... As a student of history, I also know civilization's debt to Islam. It was Islam, at places like Al-Azhar that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment. It was innovation in Muslim communities that developed the order of algebra; our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how diseases spreads and how it can be healed. Islamic culture has given us majestic arches and soaring spires; timeless poetry and cherished music; elegant calligraphy and places of peaceful contemplation. And throughout history, Islam has

demonstrated through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality. I also know that Islam has always been a part of America's history. The first nation to recognize my country was morocco...

He went further and said:

And since our founding, American Muslims have enriched the United States. They have fought in our wars, they have served in our government, they stood for civil rights, they have started businesses, they have taught at our universities, they've excelled in our sports arenas, and they've won Nobel prizes, built our tallest building, and lit the Olympic Torch. And when the first Muslim American was recently elected to Congress, he took the oath to defend our Constitution using the same Holy Koran that one of our Founding Fathers – Thomas Jefferson – kept in his personal library. So I have known Islam on three continents before coming to the region where it was first revealed. That experience guides my conviction that partnership between America and Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't. And I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam whenever they appear... (Obama, 2009: 2 – 4).

But much earlier, in his State of the Union address in 2002, President George Bush of the United States, Obama's immediate predecessor, referred to the region as "axis of evil" with grand design of threatening the world peace and security through its ambition to acquire nuclear weapon and support for Islamic extremism and terrorism (Hagee, 2006: 8 – 9; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012 Deluxe Edition). In his work, John Hagee (Hagee, 2006), associated the Middle East with terrorism and militant Islamism with the Jews and State of Israel as targets.

Geographically, the Middle East is a region of the world and the lands around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, extending from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula and Iran and sometimes beyond. Some geographers and historians earlier referred to the central part of this area as the *Near East*. The name, Near East, applied to the region proximate to Europe, extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, from the Gulf to Southeast Asia and Far East, those regions facing the Pacific Ocean. Thus, Middle East is defined as region of the world which consist of states or territories of Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel (formerly Palestine with controversial statehood status), Jordan, Egypt, The Sudan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. It also consists of the three North African countries of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. To many, Afghanistan and Pakistan are countries of Middle East on the basis of their geographical connection with the affairs of other Middle Eastern states (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012 Deluxe Edition and Dantaro-Dlakwa, op. cit.: 92).

According to Dantaro-Dlakwa (ibid: 92), the geo-political zone of Middle East is unique in two respects. One, "it is the epicentre of human civilization as it has been claimed by the world's three most prominent religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) to be a home to the Garden of Eden where God created Adam and Eve. Strictly speaking therefore, all mankind could trace their origin to the Middle East". Two, it serves as a bridge-head linking three continents of Europe, Africa and Asia, bringing into contact and most times clash, western, oriental, Arab and African cultures and civilizations.

## **NATIONAL INTEREST/FOREIGN POLICY**

The concept of 'national interest' is intricately associated with foreign policy. To this end, it becomes problematic offering a universally acceptable definition. Writing on the difficulty of defining the concept with precision, Ojo and Sesay (2002: 87) opined that "the national interest is perhaps one of the most controversial concepts in contemporary international relations". They identified factors like different interpretation/misinterpretation by scholars, abuse of the concepts by politicians and decision-makers globally, non-susceptibility and elasticity of the concept to rigorous academic analysis, and absence of universal consensus of what it means, to be responsible. However, Ade-Ibijola (2013: 566), explained national interest in terms of what is used to explain the motives behind a country's relations with other countries of the world. To him, the country's foreign policy is driven by a set of principles and objectives that the state intend to actualize in the course of her relation with other countries. Hence, he defined national interest "as the totality or aggregate interest of groups in a given state". In his own submission, Joseph Frankel (Frankel, 1973: 78) defined national interest 'as the vision of the good life to some ideal set of goals which the state would like to realize if this were possible, including sum total of interests and policies actually pursued to prove one's self-right and one's opponents wrong'. To this extent, his definition stemmed from aspirational, the operational and the polemic analytical perspectives. According to Arnold Wolfers (cited in Ojo and Sesay, 2002: 88), when people sometimes say or ask that a state's policy should reflect the national interest, "what they have in mind essentially is that they desired to see the makers of national policy to rise above the narrow and special economic interests of parts of the nations to focus their attention on more inclusive interests of the whole (nation)".

However, it was Tunde Adeniran (Ibid: 87) who provided explicit explanation of what national interest is when he noted inter alia:

When statesmen are expected or are required to act in national interest ... what is meant is that they are being called upon to take action on issues that would improve the political situation, the economic and social well-being, the health and culture of the people as well as their political survival. They are being urged to take action that will improve the lot of the people rather than pursue policies that will subject the people to domination by other countries ... policies which are likely to make them unable to stand among other nations.

## **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

The origin of the concept of sustainable development is a recent one. The term was first used by the World Conservation Strategy presented by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1980. However, it was commonly used and defined for the first time by the Brundtland Report with the caption: *Our Common Future*, of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (cited in Jhingan, 2005: 22iie).

However, according to Aniekan (2013: 29), sustainable development is a neoliberal development paradigm witnessed in post-cold war era precisely during the 1992 Rio Conference. Thus, to him, sustainable development is defined as

“development that meets the needs of the present generation without jeopardizing the resources available to the future generations”.

Be that as it may, there exist as many definitions as there are scholars defining it. Nonetheless, the most helpful definition is that which was offered by the Brundtland Report in 1987. According to the said report, the term sustainable development implies “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generations” (Jhingan, 2005). This definition is instructive in one respect that development must be enduring, persistent, viable and everlasting such that it is not time-bound. This means that development must not be approached with selfish motive. It emphasizes a situation whereby the exploration of natural and ecological resources in catering for today’s needs must not be compromised or allowed to deteriorate to the extent that it hampers the comfort of tomorrow’s people.

To Jeffery Sachs, at the centre of sustainable development is the idea that harnessing the environmental resources for today’s benefits “without destroying [tomorrow’s] prosperity” (Sachs, 2005).

Similarly, sustainability as a concept lay emphasis on a simple principle that everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment and as such, it behoves on us to protect and preserve the environment from being deteriorated. In a nutshell, sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which human beings and their natural environment including the dwelling resources can exist in mutually and interdependently in productive harmony which permit fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations. In this regards, it is worthwhile to note that sustainability is very key in making sure that humans have and continue to have environment-supported resources tangible or intangible like water, air, trees, wildlife, minerals, and other resources that make human life worth a living. In this respect, the idea of sustainability is akin to the vision of sustainable development.

## **RELIGION**

The centrality of religion to every known society can never be over-emphasized. That is why Abe (2004) avers that religion is the provenance and consummation of all things by which he meant to say that “in the beginning, it was religion; and in the end it shall be religion”. Supporting this view, Akiti Glory Alamu (Alamu, 2013: 114) argues that “religion has explained the world and human understanding of it”. She went further to say that religion does not only command respect and loyalty of its adherents but also give them something they are glad to live for and if need be, die for. Nevertheless, as pointed out by David Smock (David, 2005), religion constitute a major factor in many of the world’s most intermittent, intractable and violent conflicts known. This is as a result of destructions and catastrophic occurrences that often accompany religious crises in the country. This is particularly true in the case of Nigeria considering the fact that conflicts that often arises from their relations has remained a source of sorrow, worry and agony to all and sundry with their usually unprecedented humanitarian tragedies. Always being mindful of not seen to be taking side, the Nigerian state unfortunately yet severally, exhibited apparent glib capacity to mediate these conflicts. However, like many concepts, religion has not lend itself to acceptable and consensus definition. Bolaji Idowu (Idowu, 1973: 69) put it more poignantly when he said “by now, everybody who is seriously engaged in the study of religion has been convinced that to attempt a definition of religion is an almost impossible, if not altogether impossible task; and every serious scholar is on the verge of giving up the task”.

However, he went on to define religion when he said: “religion results from man’s spontaneous awareness of, and spontaneous reaction to, his immediate awareness of a Living Power, ‘Wholly Other’ and infinitely greater than himself; Power mysterious because unseen, yet a present and urgent Reality, seeking to bring man into communion with Himself” (ibid: 75). Religion can also be seen as human relations to that which they regard and consider as holy, sacred, spiritual, and divine, be it God, gods, spirits, ancestors or whatever name called.

While commenting on religion, Hassan-Kukah (2006: 11) simply wrote that “religion is based on the relationship between human being and his creator”. Or as cited in Ayantayo (2002), Kenny, explains that religion is “any system which relates men to ultimate values, whether God or something else and which embodies a creed, a code and a cult”. To Ejiofor (1974: 63 as quoted in Alamu, op. cit.), he maintains that “religion is the complex of beliefs and behaviour of men in the supernatural sphere and realities and in the dynamic linkage of supernatural with the natural”. He argued further when he said that “religion is one major drive behind human behaviour” and as such, has had very significant effect on the entire gamut of societal structure in any given civilization. According to Abdurashheed (2008: 121) contended that “religion suggests an attempt by man to work out a relationship with a super-ordinate being often epitomise in God”. Quoting sociologists’ view on religion, Ojebode and Ajayi (2012: 2), defined religion as “a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life”.

## **CHRISTIANITY**

Christianity is a religious faith of Christians, the followers of Jesus Christ (of Nazareth), and adherents of His teachings. The word ‘Christian’ which literally means ‘Christ-like’ or ‘people who act like (Jesus) Christ’ was first used among early Christians in the city of Antioch. In the Bible, the book of Acts 11: 26 capture this vividly when it says: “And when he had found him, he brought him back to Antioch. For a whole year they assembled together with and were guest of the church and instructed a large number of people; and in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians”. Antioch is an ancient city in Phrygia, near the Pisidia contiguous to modern Yalvac in west-central Turkey. It was founded by Seleucus I Nicator (c. 358–281 BC) until the Romans made it a free city in 189 BC. Later, it became one of the centres of Apostle Paul’s mission in Asia Minor.

Thus, Christianity is described in the following words:

Christianity is a major religion, stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the Anointed One of God) in the 1st century AD. It has become the largest of the world’s religions. Geographically the most widely diffused of all faiths, it has a constituency of more than 2 billion believers. Its largest groups are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Protestant churches; in addition to these churches there are several independent churches of Eastern Christianity as well as numerous sects throughout the world... At the very least, Christianity is the faith tradition that focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ. In this context, faith refers both to the believers’ act of trust and to the content of their faith. As a tradition, Christianity is more than a system of religious belief. It also has generated a culture, a set of ideas and ways of life, practices, and artefacts that have been handed down from generation to generation since Jesus first became the object of faith. Christianity is thus both a living tradition of faith and the culture



that the faith leaves behind. The agent of Christianity is the church, the community of people who make up the body of believers (see Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012 Deluxe Edition).

Therefore, Christianity is built on the edifice of religious belief that Jesus Christ, the head of the Christian church is the exclusive medium through which God's salvation can be attained. This expression and impression is greatly influenced by the teaching of Christ as documented in the biblical book of John 14: 6 where it is clearly reported, "Jesus said to him (Thomas), I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father (in heaven) except through Me". On this note, to Christians, it is *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* meaning 'outside the church (or Christ), no salvation' (see Alamu, op. cit.: 116 for example).

## **ISLAM**

According to McWilliams and Piotrowski (op. cit.: 427), Islam literally means total "submission" or "surrender to the will of Allah". Today, John Hagee (Hagee, 2006: 31) wrote that "Islam, once an obscure Middle Eastern religion, has rapidly grown into the second largest religion in the world". This is a quantum leap from being the third world's great religion that comes out of the Middle East as reported by McWilliams and Piotrowski (op. cit.). It represents to Muslims the third and last of the "true revelations" by a divinity whom called Allah – Arabic word for God – the sole creator and restorer of the world. The will of Allah, to which man must submit, is made known through the sacred scriptures, the Koran, which Allah revealed to Prophet Mohammed, His messenger. Thus, it is Islamic belief that Mohammed is the last of a series of prophets (including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others), and his message simultaneously consummates and completes the "revelations" attributed to earlier prophets (encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012 Deluxe Edition). Therefore, Islam emphasises strict adherence to uncompromising monotheistic worship of Allah and strict adherence His injunctions. To this extent, Islam disapproves the Christian doctrine of trinity – three-in-one belief of God the father, Son and the Holy Spirit predominant among Christian faithfuls.

## **THE NATIONAL QUESTION: ROLES AND INFLUENCE OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA – MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS**

It is pertinent here to interrogate the concept of 'National Question' in order to understand its adaptability in Nigerian context. Thus, we ask, what is national question? Responding to this question, Ayodele Jimoh (Ayodele, 2006: 3) noted that "the concept of national question is often a common topic for discussion" usually viewed from two dimensions of inter-group relations and class relations. He went further to say that "some equate it to anything that is of crucial importance (to the nation)". Therefore, he defined the concept from the inter-group relation perspective when he said "the national question is concerned with how political union of diverse ethnic groups or nations or peoples, who are conscious of their diversities should be ordered and run". To him, "it is about how a state made up of diverse nations (or ethnic groups or peoples) should order relations among its constituent parts. It is about whether relations among the diverse groups should be geared towards integrating the groups into a single nation or granting self-determination to them". Furthermore, it arises when groups within the political union (the state) seek advantages over others, try to dominate others or seek for some

measure of independence (see Ntalaga, 1987; Ajayi, 1992; Toyo, 1993; Anyanwu, 1993; Adejumobi, 2000; and Adejumobi, 2002 for details on this).

Nigeria's founding fathers, realizing its heterogeneity in virtually everything that make up the country including religion, even though in principle, took the path of secularism by adopting no official religion for the country. As a matter of fact, what informed the foreign policy direction the country took at independence was friendly relationship that would engender sustainable development that will promote economic wellbeing for the people and make the country economically viable. However, as it turned out, religion takes the centre stage in determining the foreign policy direction and projection for the country especially in Nigeria-Middle East relations. Regretfully, in contrast to African Traditional Religion, both Islam and Christianity were imported into country in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively Arab and European colonialists (Alamu, 2013: 115). According to Abdurashheed (op. cit.: 122), since then, the seed of antagonisms between Islam and Christianity was sown especially during the "pre-independence period when the British colonialists embarked on the policy of protecting the Muslim North from the 'destructive influence' of the Christian South" even though they deemed it fit to amalgamate the two into one political entity. The antagonism however, reached a crescendo during the 1977/78 Sharia controversies at the Constituent Assembly (CA) when it came to the fore. Despite all these, the two religions continue to shape and determine events in the country both domestically and externally. In fact, the most powerful weapons of mobilization in Nigeria either for positive or negative end is first, religion, and secondly, ethnicity. For as reported," to most Nigerians, religion and faith are important aspects of everyday life as it controls the laws, how people thinks and act, what you belief, and what you value among others. In fact, religious considerations have created a situation of (unnecessary) state's veneration of religious groups especially, Islam and Christianity". Accordingly, it suddenly becomes a potent political force that cannot be ignored in any national issue whether foreign or domestic while it continued to be manipulated in furtherance of the objectives of politicians.

Commenting on the significance of religion in determining both internal and external political manoeuvrings in the country, Alamu (op. cit.: 115) said "interestingly, therefore, Nigeria is a secular and pluralistic state without any particular religion being a state religion... But of the entire diverse elements, religion has proved to be most sensitive agent of legality in the society". This view was equally expressed by Abdurashheed (op. cit.) when he argued that religion has greatly influenced and affected both domestic politics and external relations the Nigerian state get involved and cautioned that except harmonious interfaith relation be given more than a passive attention by both the government and the entire citizens at large to stem the tide, it poses a great risk to national unity, peace and progress. Therefore, according to Abdurashheed (2008: 121) he said:

... [B]ecause of its tendency to colour relationships, religion has become a major influence in politics, playing significant roles in the entire societal process especially in multi religious societies such as Nigeria... It is realised that the high sentimental attachment to it by people of different culture and background makes it a politically active instrument in both national politics and the country's external relations which at times assume a destructive dimension. This situation obviously poses some threat to social, political and economic stability of the country... although the country may not have experienced a full-blown religious war, nothing seem to suggest that such will not occur given the trend and character of religious conflicts in the country.

The above assertion clearly demonstrate the centrifugal force that the profound twosome religions – Christianity and Islam – have come to exert on the country. Again, the assertion of Abdulraheed Muhammed (Ibid) is quite instructive here. According to him,

More important is that relations between the Christian and Islamic groups have been characterised more by a race for ascendancy – a situation that have raised religion to the forefront of governance issues. Often, the intense antagonism between the two produces conflicts with its attendant consequences for the state. Some recent trends have shown that religious conflicts are at times a domestic response to external pressures as happenings elsewhere in the world could trigger religious violence in the country.

It is to this extent that it has been argued that “it has become an axiomatic truth that the foreign policy of a country is to a large extent determined by its domestic structure” which many scholars and diplomats have accepted to have said “demonstrate that the various constituent elements in the political system – the government, the political parties, pressure groups, the civil service, the political and bureaucratic elites, public opinion, and the press – operating within the democratic process provided by the constitution, exert direct or indirect influence in shaping a country’s foreign policy (see Terhemba and Adegboyega, 2007: 45; Nweke, 1986: 34 ).

## **NIGERIA – MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS**

No doubt, Nigeria’s relations with the Middle East can be viewed from perspectives prism of Arabism and ‘Jewism’. With all intents and purposes, this is a reflection of the country’s population configuration with Muslim predominant North and Christian dominant South. If anything, the most arduous and frustrating external relations in Nigeria’s foreign policy is that with Israel on one hand and the Arabs on the other.

On relations with the State of Israel, much earlier, the Nigeria-Israel relations brought arrays of hope, goodwill and mutuality to citizens of both countries. Without any doubt, their relationships were friendly, cosy, and mutual. This, ostensibly at the early years excited many Nigerians especially Christians (and later majority of Moslems and their leaders) who even advocated that in view of the mutual accruable benefits of such a relationship between both countries, the country should deepen her bilateral understanding and cooperation with the Jewish state. In fact, in the first decade and some few years (precisely, 1960 – 73), many Israeli experts and technicians were sent to all parts of Nigeria, at the request of the Nigerians, helping to modernize agriculture, building new housing projects, highways, universities and assisting in laying foundations for a modern communication system. Nigerian scholars, agriculturists, educators and students were sent to study in Israel and major Israeli companies and private entrepreneurs became involved in Nigeria’s development (Terhemba and Adegboyega, 2007: 55).

However, the outbreak and conduct of the war left considerable impact on Nigeria’s foreign policy and external relations with Israel. The effectiveness of Biafran propaganda succeeded in painting Nigeria in the worst colours especially on the accusation of genocide. The Federal Government was portrayed as conducting a genocidal campaign against the Ibos and Eastern Minorities (Fawole, 2003:57). This clever manipulation of global sentiment and public opinion caused Nigeria a

few friends and allies in the early stages of the war including Israel which strongly nurture the belief that Igbos of Nigeria are one of the twelve lost tribes of Judah. This deadly propaganda by the Biafrans noted Fawole, successfully diverted the Israeli public opinion, support and sentiment in their favour (Fawola, 2003:57). And Israel actually did assisted the Igbo throughout the war (Olusola; 1980: 438). Hence, even though diplomatic relationship was not disengaged, Nigerian-Israel relations suffered challenges.

Apart from the Biafran civil war, Nigeria's solidarity to Egypt and Africa mainly necessitated sour in its fruitful and meaningful relationship with Israel which came to a halt in 1973, when Nigeria led by Gowon, a Christian, adhered to the decision of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU) which under hard pressure of its Arab members, called upon its members to break off diplomatic relations with Israel following the Yom Kippur War. It took 19 years until the Moslem Nigerian Head of State, General Ibrahim Bagangida decided to restore and normalize the relations between the two countries. During the period when the diplomatic relations between both countries was at its lowest ebb, Nigeria's foreign policy became very critical of Israel. The country often lend its voice to Arab solidarity as it always maintained that Israeli occupation of Egyptian land was totally unacceptable to it with General Gowon declaring Israel's action as brazen act "breaking faith with Nigeria" and opted for breaking of diplomatic relations with the country (Terhempa and Adegboyega, op. cit.: 55; Olusola, op. cit.: 438; and Ojo, 1986: 440). But as observed by Aluko (1981), Nigeria's criticism of Israeli's was a mere showmanship to curry the favour of Arab dominated Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) which Nigeria is a late-comer member of. He accused the country of playing double standard of criticising Israel during the day and sing its praises at night. Thus, the Nigerian government always resort to what Aluko called the 'subterranean diplomacy' by which he implies Nigeria openly disparaging Israeli over Palestinian question but sending delegates to secretly meet with Israeli officials to encourage understanding and cooperation between them. This made the country's foreign policy towards Middle East states deceptive and likened to Jacob's voice but Esua's skin.

Nonetheless, after the bitter civil war experience, Nigeria quickly had a change of negative orientation and attitude towards Israel whose expertise in construction projects was 'badly' and urgently needed to reconstruct the devastation caused by unprecedented 30 months civil war in the country's history. Even more recently, the Federal Government of Nigeria confronted with the security challenges posed by the activities of Islamic sect terrorist group called the Boko Haram particularly in the North-eastern part of northern Nigeria, continue to seek for greater cooperation in intelligence gathering between its security forces and Israeli secret service.

Also, Nigeria's relations with the Arabs and Muslim community in the Middle East is very interesting yet intriguing one. This relations is particularly encouraged due to the fact that Islam, as Obiyan and Usman (2013: 4) have arguably noted, has remained with the core north as a dominant religion for a very long time", and considering the strategic place of the region in the country, the leadership at the federal government level in Nigeria cannot afford to be indifferent to the religious sensitivity of the region. Nigeria has at one time and the other enjoys goodwill from Muslim countries in the Middle East. For instance, during the Nigerian civil war, whereas Israel supported the secessionist forces of Biafra, it was reported (see Dantaro-Dlakwa, 2011: 96) that "the Arab world supported the federal authority (of Nigeria)". He went to argue that 'the Arab members of the (then) OAU constituted a good basis for Nigeria to win the sympathy of the Arab world even though Nigeria, in reality, did not contribute much to the Middle East between 1967 and 1970 other than its support to the United Nations General Assembly in enforcing Resolution 242 of the Security Council".

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, effort is been made to highlight the role and impact of religion in Nigeria's foreign policy towards the Middle East. It is our contention that while state behaviour in the international politics and relations is mainly influenced by perceived national interest, in the case of Nigeria's relation to Arab and Israeli states in the Middle East, the Nigerian government is often 'timid' and reticent to vigorously pursue proactive foreign policy due to religious sensitivity of its population. As a heterogeneous state with diversity in virtually everything among the citizenry, Nigeria foreign policy projection in the Middle East is often considered to be on a slippery slope. Even though Nigeria is a country of medley of faiths, the influence exerted by two most dominant religions – Christianity and Islam, both on domestic and external politics and policies cannot be ignored.

While the Christian southern population supports Jews notwithstanding the fact that Christians themselves constitute minority in the State of Israel, a fact not known to many Nigerian Christians (and Muslims alike) but disdain Arab Muslims, the Muslims in the country whose largest concentration is in the North equally identified with the Arab and entire Muslim community and often encourage and support the federal government to cultivate good relations with them. Nigerian Muslims like their counterparts elsewhere perceived the Jews as people who forcefully took over the Palestinian land in 1948 and rendered Palestinian Muslim brothers and sisters homeless. For this reason, Israelis are seen as common enemies that must be crushed and their state (of Israel) wiped off the world map, with the land they are 'occupying' returned to Palestine, 'the rightful owners'. Whereas this held notion creates the spirit of brotherhood and solidarity among Muslims in the country, it stoked suspicion, mistrust and many a times, hostility between them and their Christian counterparts who see the land in question as inheritance of the Jews promised and given to them by God to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The aforementioned has often lead to many religious-induced crisis in the country. Alamu (op. cit.: 117) did not mince words when she said "religious particularity is one of the causes of religious crises in contemporary Nigerian society". She went further to say that "instead of Islam and Christianity that had a Semitic origin to see themselves as 'brothers' in Nigeria, they usually attack each other on doctrinal issues as if the belief of one neutralizes the other". Merchants of religious crisis in the country have fail to realize and take to heed the admonition of Dopamu (2010: 99) as documented and supported in the Holy Koran (Surah 10: 99) that "if God has wished the whole world to worship him in the same way, He should have done so in His infinite wisdom. But as we have always opined, He has not done so because He hates monotony and loves variety".

With the above apparent division of the Nigerian populace along the two religions of Middle East origin – Christianity and Islam, coupled with display of weakness and/or failure that habitually characterized Nigerian government in addressing or tackling issues that are religious sensitive, its foreign policy with the Middle East continue to be elusive, evasive and subterranean. Also, Nigeria, for obvious reason, continue to ignore or shy away from active involvement socio-cultural, political, military and economic relations with Middle Eastern states thus, missing opportunities such active relationship and cooperation would have brought.

Conclusively, the paper argues that the prevalence of religious diversity and associated acrimony between and among adherents constitute a clog to formulation and implementation of constructive and active foreign policy with countries of Middle East. Ostensibly, this is in recognition of the fact that domestic realities define external relations of nation-states,

Nigeria inclusive. Also, it is our contention that rather than taking advantage of the two Middle Eastern religions – Christianity and Islam in view of large adherents the two command in the country for huge economic assistance that will bring about sustainable growth and development, the acrimonies the two often generating have caused the country some harm. If properly harnessed, the two religions have tendencies to make Nigeria a bride to be courted by both the Arab-Muslim and Jewish communities in the Middle East.

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