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# Israeli-Nigeria Bilateral Relations in a Changing World, 1999-2018

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss Israeli-Nigeria bilateral relations from 1999 to 2018. While it aims at identifying and analysing various changes that have taken place in the last two decades of their relations, the research intends to look at the direction the relations between the two countries have focused within the period under study. The research relies on primary and secondary sources for data collection, namely newspapers, journal articles and books. Since the return of democratic rule in 1999, Israel and Nigeria have continued to interact on global and regional issues. Both countries have constitutively maintained diplomatic, economic, technological and cultural cooperation. The vast economic differences between Israel and Nigeria present a greater opportunity for both countries within the context of comparative advantage. Domestic realities such as insecurity tended to complicate their relationships, thereby hindering Israelis' attempt to wield political and diplomatic influence with Nigerian government like Western nations. The bilateral relations between the nations have focused on advancement of digital technology, information security and knowledge-based economy.

Keywords: Bilateral, Change, Israel, Nigeria, Relations, World

## **Introduction**

No country exists in isolation. An interconnected world needs strong bilateral ties. It is not sufficient for the challenges facing a nation to be addressed without effective collaboration with other sovereign states. Relations between states are driven by mutual benefits embedded in national interests. The more they interact the greater the benefit. This is the case for Israel and Nigeria. Since 1948, the State of Israel had sought for a strong relationship with African countries. Israel's determination for strategic partnership and diplomatic cooperation with African States commenced in the wake of the wind of change and decolonization process that began in the 1950s and 1960s with the strong conviction that Africa possessed a great future that would be of immense benefit to it. Akinterinwa (1998) argues that, "Israel could be said to have come of age and its relationships with Black Africa are just beginning to grow".

When Nigeria was still under colonial rule, foreign relations were conducted and remained under the British control. There was nothing like Nigeria's foreign policy. However, some prominent Nigerian leaders and notable individuals alike had developed great interests in Israel. Nigeria was divided into three regions, namely North, East and West. Each of the three regions was administered differently by the British colonial government. Instead of being an ethnic or linguistics unit, each consisted of a regional nucleus occupied mostly by various dominant ethnic groups in the country such as the Yoruba in the West, Igbo in the East, and Hausa-Fulani in the North (Isijola, 1979, pp. 129-130).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Israel played a significant role in the development of Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria. Israeli experts and volunteers were sent to Nigeria to collaborate with the Nigerian Government in the development

and modernization of agriculture, education, medicine and technological training, and hundreds of Nigerian farmers, experts, educators, academicians, students, doctors, community workers and engineers were trained in Israel (Vanguard, 2018, p.1).

This paper discusses Israeli-Nigeria's bilateral relations from 1999 to 2018. While it aims at analysing changes in their bilateral relations for the past two decades, the research looks at the direction of the two countries' relations within the period under study. In order to achieve this objective, the study has adopted the narrative historical research methodology. It utilizes primary sources, such as archival materials obtained from the British National Archives Kew, London, while the secondary sources are government publications, books, journal articles, dissertations, and newspapers for data analysis. Even in the midst of ups and downs, the bilateral relations between Nigeria and Israel facilitated the consolidation of diplomatic, economic, technical and military relations, especially in the years leading to Nigeria's independence and advent of democratic rule in the country.

The Israeli-Nigeria's bilateral relations have undergone changes and continuities in the areas of economic, political, diplomatic and technological development. Nigeria's aspirations to play a leading role in the West African region were complemented by its relationship with Israel; this is because it was considered to be a powerhouse in the regional context. Achieving full rapprochement and building long-term relations required increased receptivity on the part of both countries. As the global political system has rapidly expanded and become more complex, greater regional co-operation has become imperative. Despite the diplomatic, economic and political relations enjoyed by Israel and Nigeria, there still exist imbalances in the relations between the two nations. Israel had

tended to rely on the world powers in the arena of global politics and diplomacy. This had hugely affected its relations with the African countries, including Nigeria. Nigeria did not fall into the categories of Israel's choice of "can't do without nations" but was always important when the need arose. In other words, she relates with Nigeria based on where her interests lie and the need to be on top of the game of comparative advantage that had been the main bases of international relations.

### **Nigeria-Israeli Bilateral Relations: 1999-2000s**

Following the historic transition from military regime to democratic dispensation there was apprehension on what could be the focus of Nigeria's foreign policy. Having realised how important it was to have a well-structured foreign policy, President Olusegun Obasanjo during his inauguration as the democratically elected President of Nigeria on May 29, 1999, said:

The overriding and permanent aim of our foreign policy is to project and safeguard the national interest. Historically, the main thrust in our foreign policy has been the struggle for peace, unity, security, economic development and cooperation. Africa will continue to be the primary theatre of our foreign policy. Nevertheless, its administration endorses the universal values of the contemporary globalization process, which are development, human security, equity ethnics, inclusion and sustainability (Ajao, 2017, p.12).

Yaron (2021) argued that across Africa the trends of renewing ties with Israel, which began since the 1990s following the Oslo Accords with accelerated diplomatic initiatives and trade relations with African countries, include

Nigeria. Nigeria appeared to have leveraged on the epoch-making accord to strengthen its relationship with Israel.

While delivering his New Year message to the nation on January 1, 2000, President Obasanjo laid strong emphasis on the Nigeria's foreign relations when he declared: "the goodwill that greeted transition has translated into a positive attitude, with Nigeria admitted into international organisations and foreign investors once more expressing genuine interests in our country. Indeed, Nigeria has taken its rightful place in the comity of nations" (Obasanjo, 2000, p.12). Ever since the emergence of democracy in the country, the relations between Nigeria and Israel have tilted to global development in the area of trade liberalization, globalization, information technology, human rights, security and military, intelligence, energy and agricultural co-operations. From one transition to another, Nigeria-Israeli relations have not only focused on the aforementioned areas, but also the characteristics of those specific areas of interaction have been needed in order to strengthen the two nations democracy and create a good level playing ground for comparative advantage.

Since 1999, Israel and Nigeria had had series of diplomatic engagements geared towards boosting different aspects of the national life of both countries. This was reflected in various diplomatic shuttles embarked upon by many top Israeli and Nigerian government officials to both countries, which crystallized in exchange of ideas and even signing of joint bilateral agreements.

On May 10, 2000, the Israeli Deputy Speaker of the *Knesset*, Naomi Chazan, paid a diplomatic visit to Nigeria. Her visit to Nigeria was aimed at building effective mechanisms for parliamentary diplomacy and to brief the Nigerian government on the Middle East situation. She commended the democratic reforms and human rights records under Olusegun Obasanjo

government as “encouraging, pleasing and uplifting”. The major highlights of her visit were the endorsement of the establishment of Nigerian-Israeli Friendship Parliamentary Association with the objective to enable the legislators of both countries to exchange ideas on principles of democracy, rule of law, poverty alleviation, corruption, social security and other areas (Nwosu and Ndujihe, 2000, p.11).

In June 2001, Israeli Prime Minister’s Special Envoy to Nigeria, Ambassador Yoel Barnea, visited Nigeria to brief former President Olusegun Obasanjo on the renewed upsurge of violence in the Middle East region and efforts of the Israeli government to stop the violence with a view to return to the negotiating table. He sought the assistance of the Nigerian government to work towards moderate resolution over the Middle East conflict in the Summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) which took place in Lusaka, Zambia. The Israeli Ambassador met with the Minister of State Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dubem Onyia, and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry, Daniel Hart, and commended them on Nigeria’s peaceful role in the Middle East conflict (Appolonia, 2001, p.52).

Following the consistent and convincing clamour by diplomatic analysts, military strategists and captains of industry for vibrant bilateral diplomatic relations with Israel, the Nigerian government officials numbering about six serving Ministers visited Israel in 2001. These were Bola Ige, Segun Agagu, Hassan Adamu, Mohammed Arzika, Haruna Elewi, and Dan Chuke. The visit became necessary in view of the fact that Israel had become a centre of attraction in terms of hi-tech economy and because of its status as the highest engineer per capita worldwide. The Nigerian government officials’ visit to Israel was seen as highly commendable by the Nigerian Ambassador to Israel, George Obiozor. The cloudy areas in the

relationship between the two countries were cleared as soon as the Obasanjo regime came to power two and half years" (The Guardian, 2001, p.1).

As a mark of the deepening diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Israel, Ambassador Moshe Ram presented his Letters of Credence to the then President of Nigeria, Umaru Musa Yar'adua, on November 30, 2007. During the celebration of Israeli Sixty years of independence in Abuja, Ambassador Ram reaffirmed the Israeli government's willingness to cooperate with the Nigerian government in various aspects of the economy of the country. He declared that "there is more cooperation and more awareness to the potential and benefits existing in the collaboration in fields of development priorities such as agriculture, public health, medicine, education and combating desertification" (Israeli Embassy, 2007, p.1).

In 2013, the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Nigeria was held in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). At the event, Ambassador Ram said that "the reestablishment of relations with Nigeria coincided with the commemoration of the day God gave the Law to Israelites and the grain harvest in Israel. Viola Onwuliri, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, said that "the relations between the two countries would continue to blossom. Nigeria would partner with Israel in the areas of education, agriculture and culture, among others (Premium Times, 2013, p.1).

President Goodluck Jonathan in 2013 became the first Nigerian President to visit the State of Israel. He had gone on a pilgrimage and signed bilateral air service agreements with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He held a meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres during which the two leaders affirmed their commitment to stop the spread of terrorism. Jonathan declared that "the relations between Israel and



Nigeria were not only excellent at the official level, but have also been marked by deep interpersonal affection” (Jewish Virtual Library, 2013, p.1).

On July 25, 2018, at the Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question in New York, Nigeria through its Ambassador and Permanent Representative in the UN, Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, proffered solutions to the Israeli-Palestine conflict, particularly on the need for both Israel and Palestine to cooperate closely with the UN and its agencies in order to achieve the shared objective of a two-state solution in line with relevant UN resolutions and international laws. Bande said that: “Nigeria is gravely concerned at the alarming situation in many parts of the Middle East, particularly in Palestine. It is pertinent for all parties to make genuine and concerted efforts to find peaceful solutions” (Agency Report, Premium Times, 2018, p.1).

Israel has opted for bilateral ties with Nigeria because of the strategic nature of the country. Apart from Nigeria being the powerhouse of West Africa and agent of regional stability, it is also a key player in continental politics and diplomacy. Nigeria’s role in regional and continental organisations, namely the Economic Community of West African States and African Union, is highly attractive to Israel. Thus, associating with Nigeria and other powerful countries in Africa such as Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda and Ethiopia enables Israel to influence decisions on key issues that concern Israeli foreign policy in Africa.

## **Economic Relations**

Nigeria is of major interest to the Israelis because of its size, large market and influence with African states. As the region’s principal oil producer and a prime mover behind the Economic

Community of West African States, Nigeria carries considerable weight among its neighbours. Historically, Nigeria has long been Israel's largest trading partner in black Africa, although Israeli communities have suffered sometimes because of Nigeria's economic instability.

Nigeria and Israel had consistently maintained trade relationships since the return of democracy in the country on May 29, 1999. The wide rift between the economies of the two countries especially with regard to industrial sectors necessitated a substantial degree of cooperation designed to protect the fledgling Nigerian economy. In 1999, Israel exported to Nigeria goods which consisted of mechanical machines, electrical appliances and pharmaceutical products worth about \$21 million, while it imported from Nigeria products which were mainly agricultural produce worth \$1.5 million. According to the figure released by the Commercial Section of the Embassy, there was an increase of 31 percent in the exports to Nigeria (Oni, 2000, p.12).

It was in recognition of the aforementioned that the idea of launching the Nigeria-Israeli Chamber of Commerce was supported by the Israeli government on May 17, 2000. The establishment of the NICC marked a new beginning in the economic ties between the two countries under democratic rule. The initiative was seen as an offshoot of the Israeli desire to assist Nigeria to grow its economy. The Israel Deputy Speaker of the *Knesset*, Naomi Chazan, first broached the idea of establishing the Chamber of Commerce during her visit to the country on May 10, 2000 (Nwosu and Ndujihe, 2000, p.12).

During the pre-launch Press Conference of the NICC held at the Israeli Embassy in Lagos on May 16, 2000, the Israeli *Charge d'Affaires* Ambassador Gerzhon Zohar, asserted that, "the intention was not to seek for outlets to export finished goods to Nigeria; rather the Chamber would be involved in

efforts to help restructure the socio-economic environment of the country.” Nigeria-Israeli Chamber of Commerce had a main objective of promoting cooperation in all forms and through such bodies as the Israel Export Institute being mobilized and ready to help countries like Nigeria to execute planned projects (Abbah, 2000, p.12).

In 2002, the Commercial Department of the Israeli Embassy in Abuja disclosed that Nigeria’s trade with Israel hit \$34.7 million, which represented an increase of 40 percent over the \$25.8 million figure in 2001. The Second Secretary of the Embassy, Amir Lati, asserted that “Nigeria is one of the biggest trading partners of Israel, and that the Israeli community in Nigeria is the biggest in Africa. The trade between the two countries had shown consistent rise in recent years” (Anyikwa, 2003, p.4).

Corroborating the above assertion, former Nigerian Ambassador to Israel, George Obiozor, at the hosting of the 2001 Nigerian pilgrims from Adamawa State to the Holy Land, to a farewell dinner at the Nigerian Embassy in Tel Aviv, opined that “Since Nigeria’s return to democratic rule two and half years ago, economic activities between Israel and Nigeria have increased to over 105 percent. The renewed relationship has led to the signing of an agreement on cultural, scientific and economic cooperation between the two countries in December 2001” (The Punch, 2002, p.12).

During the fortieth anniversary to mark Nigeria’s independence, held in October 2000, the Israeli *Charge d’Affaires*, Sharon Polishuk, declared that “relationship between Nigeria and Israel is destined for greater heights in the light of the fact that Nigeria could learn from the Israelis how they achieved the feat of turning a desert into one of the most productive agricultural regions of the world”. The Israeli Embassy used the occasion as an opportunity to express strong willingness to help

improve bilateral relations between Israel and Nigeria as a mark of support for the effort of the Olusegun Obasanjo administration to set the nation on a path to economic greatness (Oni, 2000, p.4).

In 2006, a Nigerian-Israeli Business Forum was inaugurated in Abuja. That year, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in which Israel and Nigeria agreed to consult on issues of bilateral relations and other regional and international issues of mutual interest. The first round of consultations took place in Jerusalem in November 2006 (Oladele, 2018, p.1).

In an effort to boost investment opportunities and economic cooperation between Nigeria and Israel the first Nigeria-Israeli International Economic Summit was held on September 8, 2009 (The Punch, 2009). At the Summit, the Nigerian Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, Humphrey Abah, described the forum as “a veritable platform through which investors in both countries could explore further business avenues” (The Punch, 200, p.1).

On June 21, 2013, the Israeli Embassy in Nigeria supported the idea of establishing an economic platform as part of efforts to deepen bilateral relations with the two countries. This was revealed by Israeli Ambassador, Uriel Palti, during a visit to the headquarters of the Sun Publishing Limited. Uriel said that there was still much to do between Nigeria and Israel, in order to have a balanced trade exchange. Israeli government wanted to convince Israeli businessmen and show them the potentials that abound in Nigeria’s economy. This plan of action would concentrate on areas described as crucial to the overall development of Nigeria. They include agriculture, irrigation, education, and fight against international terrorism (Israeli Embassy in Nigeria, 2013, p.1).

On March 1, 2014, Nigerian Agriculture Minister Akinwumi Adesina and Israeli counterpart Yair Shamir at a brief ceremony in Abuja signed a cooperation agreement aimed at allowing both countries to share expertise and step up cooperation in the field of agriculture with the ultimate goal of boosting food security (World Bulletin, 2014).

Nigeria planned to use the new partnership to leverage on the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) achievements by ensuring that Nigerian farmers and agribusinesses benefit from the extensive knowledge, experience and technology practices of Israeli agribusiness. Adesina disclosed that “today, Nigeria has become a more than \$1 million market for Israeli private sector companies. The Nigeria-Israel Agricultural project sited in *Bompai* village, near Minna in Niger State, involved in modern drip irrigation farming sponsored by the State of Israel for the benefit of the host community to commemorate Israel’s 60<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary” (Semiu, 2014, p.1).

A move towards promoting Nigeria’s non-oil sector and diversify its mono product economy was made when the Nigerian Association of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (NACCIMA) in 2015 entered into partnership with Israel in the area of hi-tech production in medicine, security wares and agriculture. At a business meeting organized by NACCIMA Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria, Uriel Palti said that, “Israel and Nigeria could collaborate in agriculture, security, water technology and other areas of the real sector”. Also, the National President of NACCIMA, Bassey Edem, represented by his Vice, Dele Oye (2015), said that “the relationship between both Nigeria and Israel have come of age and need to be improved upon:

..In this period that the Nigerian Government is working earnestly to diversify the economy, we wish to state that the

State of Israel should take advantage of the several incentives that the Federal government is providing for all prospective investors that have decided to make our country their next destination. There are vast opportunities in the agricultural sector where Israel could use its comparative advantage to invest into.”

Bolaji (2021) argued that Nigeria-Israeli diplomatic relations remained lopsided, with only the religious angle flourishing; a more robust diplomatic relations could have yielded more positive results in both the political and economic fronts, such as grants, low interest loans and knowledge exchange to support Nigeria. We have not been taking good advantage of many opportunities taking place in Israel.

The Bank of Industry (BOI) and the Israeli government entered on April 8, 2017 into a partnership agreement to deepen and strengthen the bilateral trade and business relationships. The acting Managing Director, of BOI, Waheed Olagunju, during a courtesy visit by Israel’s ambassador to BOI, said the partnership is apt, coming at a time when Nigeria is trying to improve and increase its agro-processing capacity. The partnership was meant to also cover areas of possible collaboration in the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) initiated by the Federal government aimed at promoting inclusive growth and building a globally competitive economy (Ship and Ports, 2017, p.1).

During the Israeli National Day celebration held at the Transcorp Hilton Hotel in Abuja on Thursday, May 9 2018, Israeli Ambassador, Guy Feldman, not only spoke on the existing relations between Nigeria and Israel, but also called for more collaboration with Nigeria, particularly in the areas of agriculture with better irrigation techniques. Some parts of Nigeria have similar arid land features as Israel; therefore, Israel and Nigeria have a lot to share in terms of water

management. Israel is 60 percent desert, but with high technology, it is pumping over 80 percent of its waste water back to the sea while losing only two percent of water. These practices are being taught to Nigerians to help those in areas with arid land to improve their agriculture with better irrigation practices. Israel is determined and willing to help Nigeria attain economic development and achieve that by training Nigeria professionals and sharing Israeli's vast knowledge in important segments that would help Nigeria develop further (Oladele, 2018, p.1).

Still on agriculture, on February 1, 2018, Nigeria and Israel reviewed the existing Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on agricultural cooperation between both countries. The understanding was sealed at a bilateral meeting in Abuja between Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria, Guy Feldman, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Audu Ogbeh. The scope of the agreement was agro-research, attraction of aids from development partners, strengthening the twenty-two research institutes on agriculture and offering youth practical training in agriculture (Olawale, 2018, p.2). Within the context of economic relations, the vast economic differences between Israel and Nigeria presented significant opportunity in widening the principle of comparative advantage in the production of technology, agriculture, labour-intensive products, supply of goods and services aimed at developing a relatively large market of lower income Nigerian households.

Israel partnered with Nigeria due to its strong economic interests in the country. The two countries have unique commodities and products made for exportation. While Nigeria has agricultural products that are usually exported to Israel, there are numerous technologies which Israel exports to Nigeria. This exchange of goods and services creates the

opportunity for the two countries to grow their economies and derive maximum comparative advantages.

The Israel-Nigeria relations strengthen religious interactions between the Christians in Nigeria and Israeli citizens. Every year Nigerians travel to Israel for pilgrimage. Such programmes enhance the relations between the countries as their citizens share ideas and have the opportunity to visit holy sites in Israel. These pilgrim exercises have helped to boost the tourism of Israel and Nigeria and cultural exchanges.

## **Military and Security Cooperation**

Security and military cooperation are a core component of Nigeria-Israeli relations under democratic dispensation and at a time when the two countries are facing major internal security threats like terrorism, cybercrime, kidnapping and insurgency. The need to solve these problems<sup>66</sup> and improve the nation's security apparatus has underscored the importance of military and security relations between Nigeria and Israel through intelligence sharing, cross border control, immigration and policing.

In April 2013, the Israeli telecom company, Elbit Systems, was awarded a \$40 million contract by the Nigerian government to put in place a Wise Intelligence telecommunications surveillance system that would allow the Nigerian government to monitor all internet traffic and activity within Nigeria as part of an effort to combat cybercrime and terrorism, a development that met a significant backlash when many Nigerians, particularly human rights activists, considered the technology and its use as undemocratic (Israeli Homeland Security, 2013,p.1). In May 2014, Israel sent two anti-terror experts to Nigeria to join in the search for two hundred and fifty *Chibok* schoolgirls kidnapped by extremist Islamist group,



Boko Haram. On May 11, 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called former Nigerian President Good Luck Jonathan with an offer to help search for the schoolgirls. He said: "We are prepared to help in locating the girls and to fight the cruel terror which has struck you." The former Nigerian President welcomed the offer by Netanyahu (Times of Israel, 2014, p.2).

Also, in 2014 President Good Luck Jonathan led a large Nigerian delegation in an official visit to Israel to discuss cooperation in fighting terrorism. Jonathan was accompanied by a Nigerian delegation of eight Governors, several Cabinet Ministers, three members of the Nigerian National Assembly, and several religious leaders. Both Jonathan and Israeli President Peres discussed the common threats both countries faced, such as terrorism and extremism. Israeli President Peres said: "The State of Israel also has engaged in fighting terrorism since its establishment. With Nigeria at our side in the fight against terror, we remain determined as ever to combat the spread of darkness." Also, President Jonathan said: "Combating the menace of terrorism is a challenge that we must address in partnership with all peace-loving countries and peoples of the world" (Israeli Homeland and Security, 2014, p.4).

In June 2014, when Israel was looking for three abducted teens, Eyal Yifrach, 19, Naftali Fraenkel, 16, and Gil-ad Shaar, 16, who were killed by Hamas terrorists, Nigerian President Good Luck Jonathan wrote a letter to Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister: "I assure you that we are in solidarity with you, as we believe that any act of terrorism against any nation or group is an act against our common humanity. We unequivocally condemn this dastardly act, and demand that the children are released unconditionally by their abductors" (Marissa, 2014, p.2).

Consequently, Israel pledged to assist Nigeria to tackle cyber-crime and internal security through the use of the latest technology. Israel's Ambassador to Nigeria, Guy Feldman, made the promise at a Conference on Homeland and Cyber Security organized by the Israeli Embassy in collaboration with the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Interior in Abuja on November 4, 2016. The Nigerian Minister of Interior Lieutenant-General Abdulrahman Dambazau, represented by retired Brigadier-General Saleh Bala Dambazzau, stressed "the need for cyber security to safeguard the nation. Nigeria will continue to collaborate with Israel and other foreign countries to develop its cyber security architecture" (the Nation online, 2016, p.1).

In 2017, in a conversation with the Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria and Permanent Representative of Israel to ECOWAS, Guy Feldman, who visited his office in Abuja, the former Nigerian Minister of Interior, Lieutenant-General Abdulrahman Dambazau (Rtd) stressed the need to strengthen existing security bilateral ties between Nigeria and the State of Israel. He described it as vital considering the enormous security challenges the country was facing at the time. Meanwhile, the Israeli Ambassador said "my visit is to boost Israel's existing relations with Nigeria, and convey Israeli's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's intention to visit Nigeria". The Ambassador was assured that the Ministry of Interior would be ready to receive the Israeli Prime Minister whenever he would visit the country (Nigerian Ministry of Interior, 2017, p.1).

In April 2017, the dramatic arrest in Nigeria of three Hezbollah operatives by Nigerian Secret Service in collaboration with the Israeli's Mossad and Aman intelligence services, showed a clear evidence of security cooperation between Israel and Nigeria. The Nigeria's secret service revealed the discovery of a cache of weapons which belonged to a Hezbollah cell in a house in Kano, where

Lebanese nationals had concealed weapons to be used for attacks against “Israeli and Western targets.” Kano, located in the Northern Nigeria, had a large Lebanese community. The Mossad and Aman were charged with, among other things, monitoring Iran and Hezbollah’s global activities (Yossi, 2017, p.1).

As part of the fight against Boko-Haram insurgency in the North-Eastern Nigeria, the Israeli security experts were brought to Nigeria to train 450 selected regiment of the Nigerian Air Force as Special Forces in August 2017. To underscore the importance of the training, the NAF Director of Public Relations and Information Officer, Air Commodore Olatokunbo Adesanaya, (2017) said that:

Of course, the training given to our personnel by the Israelis will ultimately have an impact on the war against Boko Haram insurgents in the North Eastern Nigeria. The training is meant to make our troops fight an unconventional warfare instead of conventional warfare, and enable the air force to protect its bases adequately. The NAF before now was trained to fight a conventional warfare. But the war against the insurgents is an unconventional warfare, also known as an asymmetric warfare. The training being given to the personnel, therefore, is to make our troops fight an unconventional warfare. It will also enable the air force to protect its bases adequately. It is just that the expertise needed is domiciled in Israel. It could have been domiciled in any other country. The hired Israelis are private organisations. The areas of training are the defence of our critical assets (p.1)

The training organized in three batches at the NAF Regiment Training Centre in Kaduna State was handled by Four-Troop described as an Israeli Military Training Organisation (IMTO).

At a one-day seminar on Israel’s Homeland Security and cyber-crime 2018 organized by the Embassy of Israel in Nigeria,

the Head of Mission of the Embassy reiterated Israeli government's pledge to assist Nigeria in tackling cyber-crime and Homeland Security threats (HLS) using modern technology. The Adamawa State Commissioner for Justice and former Chief of Staff of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Bala Sanga, who was at the event, gave an account of the Nigerian perspective on financial and cyber technology, and noted that "the call for collaboration is apt". Marco Aviad, Senior Director, Business Development and Marketing of Israel's Airspace Industry said that "cyber technology could pose security threats if not well managed" (Agency Report Premium Times, 2018, p.1).

Apart from the Boko Haram insurgency, another important security challenge facing Nigeria is the resurgence of secessionist agitations in Southern Nigeria especially the Southeast. After many years of fighting a civil war, 1967-1970, and amid democratic dispensation, the country was agog with the rising secessionist movement agitating for the restoration of the defunct Republic of Biafra.

Different pro-Biafran groups have emerged to give strength to the campaign for Biafra's reestablishment. One of such groups is the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra led by Nnamdi Kanu. The groups have massively expanded in followership up to the point of having multiple branches across the world, including in the State of Israel. The IPOB group had conjured up the sentimental feelings of the Israeli sympathy to the Biafra's struggle. They created the awareness that the South-eastern people are the lost tribe of Israel who settled in West Africa many years ago (BBC, 2018, p.3).

The deepening pro-Biafran campaign in different Israeli cities, mainly in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, sent a negative signal to the existing relationship between Israel and Nigeria. That the pro-Biafra groups are using the Israeli contacts in their

campaign for Biafra makes that relationship a near fractured one for the groups seeks the dismemberment of Nigeria as an Israeli ally. The Nigerian government sees such action as against their vital interests.

The perceived gloomy feelings about the Israeli-Biafra connection became clear when the leader of IPOB, Kanu, announced on October 22, 2018 his arrival to Israel following his escape from his hometown Isiama Afara Ukwu, Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria, shortly after it was raided by the Nigerian military (BBC, 2018, p.1). Kanu once said that “it is the Israeli topnotch responsibility to ensure that Biafra stands as an independent entity in Africa” (Abimbola, 2018, p.1). His arrival to Israel, where he was granted asylum, was a moment of jubilation for his followers and many Israelis who were friends of Biafra, but at the same time did not augur well with the Nigerian government. The incident wanted to cause a diplomatic row between Israel and Nigeria.

Nigerians have equally at some point expressed misgivings about the unending Israeli-Palestinian issue. But since it is an internal matter, it has only adopted the principle of admonition of both parties to resolve their differences through dialogue. According to Nigeria’s Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Samson Iteboje, “in this regard, it is paramount for all parties to make genuine and concerted efforts to find peaceful solutions, and to cooperate closely with the relevant UN resolutions and international laws. The international community has continued to seek ways to advance the peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question. International efforts must remain focused on paving the way for Israel and Palestine to return to meaningful negotiations” (Agency Report Premium Times, 2018, pp.1-2).

Despite Biafra’s agitation and Palestinian question, Nigeria and Israel have been able to sustain their relationship

knowing fully well that the most important thing is to work together in tackling global challenges rather than focusing on one another's internal affair. The Israeli government was convinced that the Biafran question is Nigeria's internal affair which in any way could jeopardize the existing mutual interests between the two countries on Africa and global issues.

Given Nigeria's contributions to continental peace and security, Israel saw the West African country as a trusted ally to work with in bringing stability in the Middle East. This is because of the strategic closeness of both part of the world. The security threat of terrorism and insecurity facing the two countries is enough reason towards strengthening security ties between Israel and Nigeria. The proliferation of terrorist groups in Nigeria and Israel such as Hezbollah and Boko Haram and Ansaru operating within the Sahel region up to the Middle East is a serious concern to both Israeli and Nigerian governments.

As a result, both governments have sought to deepen their relationship on security in order to gain upper hand in the counterinsurgency campaign being undertaken by the Israeli and Nigerian military. The desire to share intelligence on the movement of terrorist groups across the West African coast prompted the Israeli government to engage Nigeria in different security capacities to jointly develop initiatives and accelerate the frontier of arms delivery and technological surveillance systems needed to enhance border controls.

## **Technical Assistance**

Technical assistance and aid programmes have been part and parcel of the Nigeria-Israeli bilateral relations. While Nigeria benefited immensely from the Israeli technical aid programme in the 1970s through the Israeli Centre for International

Cooperation (MASHAV), it has continued to do so even under the democratic regime.

The Israeli technical assistance to Nigeria featured prominently in the area of training farmers in the country on modern agricultural and farming techniques. On November 24, 2004, a two-week international workshop on mango and citrus orchards growing and management, jointly sponsored by the Israeli Embassy in Nigeria and the Maizube Farms, owned and managed by the former Nigerian Head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, was held in Minna, Niger State. At the event, the Israeli Ambassador in Nigeria, Noam Katz expressed Israel's determination to sustain the technical assistance aimed at helping Nigeria regain her lost glory in agriculture. The workshop was the second in the series of training and collaboration with the Israeli Embassy, the first one focusing on Dairy Cattle Production, held in February 2004 according to the General Manager of Maizube Farms, Mallam Abdi Abdullahi (Okwe, 2004, p.64).

On January 28, 2008, the Nigerian and Israeli governments initiated talks on a technical agreement that would see Israeli experts helping Nigerian Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMSEs) on relevant skills. This was revealed by Professor Longmas Wapmuk, the Director-General of the Industrial Training Fund (ITF). Moshe Ram, Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria, visited him in Jos, Plateau State. The Director observed that, "agriculture is the second most important revenue earner for the country after oil, what is needed, however, is developing the human capacity to fully harness the resources. Also, Ram stressed that, "my home country has over the years extended immense support to countries that are willing to share its experience in vocational expertise" (Onwuemenyi, 2008, p.17).

Under democratic rule, about six thousand Nigerians of various disciplines had received training by MASHAV, either through direct participation in courses in Israel or On-the-Spot-Training Programmes such as the 26<sup>th</sup> International Course on “Marketing and Management in Developing of Agribusiness and Rural Projects” known as MAITC conducted in January 2008. Two leading Israeli experts, namely Yoram Mitkli and Ram Herstein, participated in the programme to share unique opportunities to Nigerians (Embassy of Israel, 2008, p.1).

On February 27, 2008 during his visit to the Headquarters of the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission in Abuja, the Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria, Ram said that “my government is willing to offer help to find a solution to the acute power shortage facing Nigeria”. The Israeli Electricity Corporation which had some expertise in tackling some of the problems that were relevant to the transformation of the energy industry in Nigeria had a sophisticated visitor’s centre to train Nigerian engineers. The Chairman of NERC Ransom Owan said that “Nigeria requires assistance in every aspect of the electricity industry, including generation, transmission and distribution.” In March 2008, a capacity building and training workshop on fish disease and control for veterinarians was held in collaboration with the Israeli government where over six thousand Nigerian professionals and researchers received training on the key sectors of the Nigerian economy, such as information technology (Nwachukwu, and Ezeobi, 2008, p.7).

On April 26, 2008, the Israeli-Nigerian Cooperative Company proposed a plan to construct a \$10 million solar energy plant to boost electricity in Nigeria. Doron Shimoni, the company’s representative revealed that: “for Nigeria to attain economic growth, the issue of inconsistent electricity must be solved. In the age of global warming and climate change, Nigeria ought not to depend only on fossil fuel. Rather Nigeria



should upgrade towards building modern instruments of energy generation and distribution". Similarly, the facilitator of the project, Anthony Ohia-Ezukpo, said that "the company plans to invest more than \$100 million in Nigeria's economy in the next year and the investment spans the key sectors of agriculture, energy, health and construction, thereby creating about 10,000 new jobs" (Nwachukwu and Ezeobi, 2008, p.7).

On September 3, 2009, the Israeli Ambassador, Moshe Ram, paid a diplomatic visit to Osun State in the South-Western Nigeria where he inaugurated the State Education Resource Centre in Osogbo, a planned joint project of the Osun State Government and the Israeli government with a value worth of ₦2.5 billion designed to boost the teaching of science and mathematics in the state. Located on the Government Technical College premises in Osogbo, the Centre was envisaged to serve as a place for training teachers in the use of "Skill Glabless kits" in imparting knowledge on the two subjects in public secondary and primary schools. The new teaching and learning methodology was invented by an Israeli don, Professor Zvi Ludmer, who was present at the inauguration of the Centre. The success of Israeli technical programme in Nigeria and indeed other African countries was frequently mentioned by the professionals familiar with the Israeli's global aid programme. Israel's unique development trajectory helped it to become a major supplier of development expertise around the world, Nigeria inclusive (Onwuemenyi, 2008, p.17).

## Conclusion

The Nigeria-Israeli relations took off on a very sound footing. It is no longer a relationship attached to ethnic and religious sentiments but one based on mutual interests in the issues that affect the world and Africa. While the issue of religion and

ethnicity would always remain visible in one way or another in the relations between the two countries, the fundamental goal of both countries under the democratic rule is to take advantage of the economic and political opportunities in the ever changing globalized world in attaining the visions of sustainable growth and development. The two nations also appeared ready to take advantage of the “knowledge-based economy” that is fast spreading through robust diplomatic interactions.

Therefore, strengthening economic relations and signing of bilateral trade agreements; job creation through information and communication technology; improving the construction industry; building a strong military, intelligence and security architecture in the fight against cybercrime, kidnapping, terrorism, human right violations, building effective power and energy generation, and creating equal opportunities in the global liberalized economy took the centre stage in the Nigeria-Israeli relations in the last decades. While the above ingredients were being incorporated in different development agendas of both countries, the need to prioritise these agendas based on national needs had become necessary in view of the series of challenges confronting them. Both nations can harness the opportunity in digital technology in attracting foreign direct investments for rapid and robust economic growth.

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