
NIGERIA-IRAN STRATEGIC COOPERATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria and Iran has a long history of bilateral relations. Both countries are members of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the D-8 Organization for economic cooperation ((Developing 8) and most recently the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF). Iran is a good role model for other developing countries and given its experience in the 1979 Islamic revolution it has a lot to offer to other countries in the world. This paper argues that Nigeria and Iran have opportunities and prospects for good and beneficial strategic cooperation though not devoid of challenges. It observed that the bilateral relations between both countries suffers more from perception than the reality of their bilateral engagements and that if that perception is overcome, both countries have a lot to gain from each other. The paper recommends the pursuit of Nigeria's interest, engagements based on reciprocity, focused and pro-active foreign policy choices as well as citizens centered diplomacy as options before both countries and concludes that adherence to these recommendations would aid the strategic cooperation between Nigeria and Iran.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Cooperation, Opportunities, Challenges, Nigeria, Iran.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a veteran of many battles. From the Islamic revolution of 1979 which changed the political trajectory of that country, its war with neighboring Iraq which lasted twice the length of the second world war to the long years of economic sanctions imposed by the United States, its allies and the United Nations community in response to Iran's support for international terrorism, its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and more recently its practice of supplying arms to insurgents operating in Iraq, the country has weathered the storm and has much to show in terms of socio-economic development. Although its economy is in tatters and in need of urgent reforms that can reinvigorate and bring it out of recession, Iran has demonstrated a high degree of astute political and economic will to take its destiny in its hands. Nigeria on the other hand, has actually not experienced any revolution of Iran's magnitude except for the thirty months old civil war which erupted in the country. It has not also not suffered any economic or other sanctions except from the Commonwealth of Nations during the regime of the late maximum ruler,

Sani Abacha and mostly arising from the execution of the late playwright and environmentalist, Ken Saro Wiwa against international plea for pardon. That sanction regime did not also last long as the one imposed on Iran by the international community as a result of its involvement in nuclear programme development.

But Nigeria seems to be worse off than Iran in terms of development as a result of a lengthy period of military rule, corruption and most recently, the spate of insecurity resulting from the activities of the insurgent group, Boko Haram and agitations from different other ethnic nationalities for self government. It is also embroiled in the clamor for restructuring by these ethnic groupings and an intensification of the conflict between farmers and herdsman in some parts of the country. Perhaps, the only one thing that Nigeria shares with Iran is the rate of economic recession although Nigeria has of recent claimed to have come out of recession, a claim which is yet to have mass acceptability as hunger and frustration arising from poverty stares Nigerians in the face.

Iran has given an avowed commitment to share its experience with Nigeria particularly in the fight against terrorism. This much was said by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif on Monday 25th July, 2016 when he visited Abuja, adding that his country attaches importance to the expansion of economic relations between the two countries and that Iran is ready to expand cooperation with Nigeria in fighting terrorism. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari responded that Iran is a very good role model for developing countries and praised Tehran's role at the global stage, Buhari added that Iran has achieved many advances in economic, social and technological areas. Iran's dexterity and skills in negotiating her way out of sanctions with the coming into effect of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in January 2016 was also applauded by the Nigerian government.

Iran's international capabilities are anchored on her nuclear power and an advanced level of scientific and technical development, skills that are still at the lowest ebb in Nigeria. In fact, it is still ahead in agricultural development even when its land component is not originally favourable to rich agricultural endowment whereas, Nigeria with a rich natural land and other resources is only now preaching the gospel of agricultural revolution having neglected the sector in preference for oil. Both countries are equally well endowed in oil and gas deposits although the management of it stands the two countries apart. While Iran has been able to take advantage of its oil for infrastructural development, as its well paved roads, constant power supply, metro rail and bus systems and affordable prices for petrol and gas portrays, Nigeria wallows under the poverty of thought and ideas on what to do with a sector as lucrative as oil with the resultant effects of high prices for petrol, cooking gas, kerosene and other oily products for its citizens alongside epileptic power supply, decaying and nonexistent infrastructure.

Economic sanctions particularly from the US notwithstanding, Iran's revolutionary government had remained bluntly determined to pursue a nuclear weapons program, and its corresponding designs for projecting military power in the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf region. With Iran out of economic sanctions, the country seems to have returned to regional reckoning and although it is not an Arab country, Iran's large geographic and economic size makes it a very influential player both economically and politically in the Middle East (DeRosa and Hufbauer, 2008). It has progressively made its way into the regional security equations and has become a force to be

reckoned with in the region. According to its foreign minister, Muhammad Javad Zarif, Iran has successfully managed to bring itself to the core of regional security equations. In his words, “When I took office in the eleventh administration (August 2013 to August 2017), we were not given a place in any regional security negotiations. Today, however, Iran is a leg of any security talks in the region” (Tehran Times, 2017). This tends to put Nigeria and Iran at par. In the West African sub-region, Nigeria is a hegemon of some sort, globally it is referred to as the giant of Africa and except South Africa in terms of its economy Nigeria has no rival as a regional bloc leader. Thus, the two countries can tangle and make the best out their relationship that has seen decades of close and friendly ties.

The above shared qualities notwithstanding, Nigeria-Iran relations seem to be anchored more on the issue of Muslim religion. Iran has an avowed commitment to spread its Islamic revolution’s ideology of Khomeinism all over the world and to protect the Shiites wherever they are found. Hence, Iran is perceived in Nigeria as having an agenda only for the Muslim particularly the Shi’a population and its romance with the fundamentalist Zaria cleric, Sheik Ibrahim Al-Zakzaky tends to support this view. Nigeria’s pro-Iranian Shi’a Muslim community was virtually non-existent 30 years ago but now comprises about five percent of Nigeria’s 80 million Muslims (Zenn, 2013). Equally, in recent years, Iran’s Quds Force, a special unit of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that is tasked with “extraterritorial operations.” and Lebanese HizbAllah have coordinated intelligence gathering on U.S. and Israeli targets in Nigeria and engaged in weapons and drug trafficking in West Africa with operatives drawn from Nigeria’s Shi’a community.

Aside from the fact that Nigeria and Iran are members of the OIC and the Developing 8, organizations which takes its roots from Islam, Iran is also seen as a terrorist enclave and has severally been accused of sponsoring terrorism, which falls in league with generally held perception that terrorism is more an Islamic fundamentalist movement as depicted in the ideology of Boko Haram which believes western education is an aberration or the veiled (hijab) picture of a typical female suicide bomber. These stereotypes surround Iran as a country and make it difficult for the average Nigerian to appreciate its relations with Tehran. It reigns supreme in the psyche of a typical Nigerian, a development which has energized us to examine the opportunities and challenges that are embedded in Nigeria-Iran relations beyond these perceptions and stereotypes.

Statement of the Problem

In the sphere of international relations, states are usually guided by their national interest which in turn influences their foreign policy decisions and choices. Nigeria and Iran has remained in formal bilateral diplomatic, economic and other relations since 1976 when Nigeria opened its embassy in Tehran. Nigeria just as Iran has remained committed to a cordial and friendly ties between both countries and except for some skirmishes like the issue of the arms shipment to Nigeria from Tehran claimed to have been meant for the Gambia and Iran’s support for Ibrahim AlZakzaky during the group’s clash with the military in Kaduna, there has never been any case of open confrontation between Abuja and Tehran unlike other African countries which have severed their relations with Iran at one point or the other. However, with this scenario, Nigeria seems to have nothing to show as the gains of its engagements with Iran outside some official diplomatic exchanges and visits between officials of government of both countries. This seems to be the case not because both countries have nothing to offer each other but because they have been engulfed in some negative perceptions,

stereotypes and apprehension in their bilateral relations. Here lies the problem of this paper which has also encourage us to look beyond this veil in order to examine the opportunities that both countries could explore and the challenges they have to surmount in that process. This paper therefore attempts to answer these basic questions: Is there nothing that Nigeria can benefit from Iran outside the issue of religion? How can both countries erase these negative perceptions and relate on the basis of a win-win strategy?

Decision Making Theory: A Framework of Analysis

Decision making theory is a theory of how rational individuals should behave under risk and uncertainty. It is the study of the reasoning underlying an agent's choices.

The decision-making as a process of administration has a wide range of application mainly in public administration and at the beginning of the fifties of last century it came to the limelight. Behind this the work of a celebrity of public administration was active and he was H. A. Simon.

In international relations, decision making implies a conscious choice of one form of behavior alternative. Decisions are implied in policy making and in implementation of policy strategies. Decision making determines a course of action which has important consequences. There are basically three types of decisions in international relations and these are: (i) Programmatic decisions which are decisions taken after careful deliberation of stated goals and consideration of political parties, pressure groups, public opinion are recognized to influence decision making processes much more in democratic than authoritarian states (Kochran, 2010: 13).

The above criticism notwithstanding, decision making theory remains suitable for this study because of the involvement of choice and some element of rationality which usually influences decisions taken by leaders of states saddled with the responsibility for foreign policy decisions. It is the position of this paper that the nature of foreign policy output is a reflection of the strength in the decisions taken by the leader. For instance it has been acknowledged by scholars that the vibrancy and dynamism witnessed during the regime of late Murtala Mohammed in terms of Nigeria's foreign policy choices and thrust was a function of a sound, proactive and pragmatic decisions of the late head of state. It would equally not be out of place to conclude that the personality of the leader also has a greater role to play in foreign policy decisions making.

Review of Related Literature

Studies and researches on the bilateral relations between Nigeria and Iran are very scanty. In fact, aside from few journalistic write-ups on issues involving both countries in newspapers and magazines, there is nothing much by scholars in terms of constructive studies and researches on the relations between both countries particularly in Nigeria. Similarly, even the newspaper reportage on Nigeria-Iran relations rarely depict anything but negative perception of Iran by the Nigerian media except in instances of reports concerning exchange of visits by officials of both countries. This development is quite understandable given the numerous challenges which this study had earlier highlighted. However, few publications exist on Nigeria-Iran bilateral engagements as well as that of Iran and Africa generally.

Writing on the massacre of Shia in Northern Nigeria, John Campbell (2015), a Ralph Bunche Senior

Fellow for Africa Policy Studies in the American Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) captured the clash between the Shia Muslims in Zaria and the convoy of Nigeria's Chief of Army staff Lt. Gen. Tukur Buratai as something akin to developments in Burundi which has been enmeshed in long standing ethnic crisis. According to him, and citing Shia sources, about a thousand people lost their lives although military authorities acknowledged that only seven people were killed and called for investigation into the clash by Amnesty International in order to ascertain the actual number of casualties. The actual import of Campbell's submission remains the fact that the Iranian authorities were very much agitated over the clash and demanded some explanations from the federal government. The Times, citing Iranian media, reported that the Iranian foreign minister called his Nigerian counterpart for an explanation while the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari to say that he expects the Nigerian state to compensate the families of the dead and injured.

In a similar vein, Jacob Zenn (2013) observes that Iran has since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the country has promoted "Khomeinism" as one of its foreign policy tools in the Muslim world. According to Zenn, despite Nigeria's geographic and cultural distance from Iran, there is no region outside of the Middle East where Iran's ideology has a great impact than in Northern Nigeria. Zenn attempts to establish a relationship between the Islamic religion and the activities of Boko Haram as well as the Iranian involvement in the spread of Khomeinism in the country. The US and the West. Kaduna he argues, which is the political centre of Northern Nigeria, has experienced increased Muslim-Christian violence, unemployment, and anti-Western sentiments since the country's return to civil rule in 1999 and the adoption of the Sharia law by 12 Northern states.

Writing from the perspective of non recognition of the existence of any cordial relations between Nigeria and Iran, Gabriel Onoja (2013) observes that Iran has greatly betrayed her diplomatic relations with Nigeria. Onoja believes this kind of betrayal is worse than the economic recession ravaging the Nigerian system. He criticized Nigeria's posturing with Iran even in their engagements within the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), as mere rhetoric that should not be taken seriously. In his view, one can only hope that our diplomats see to it that such events do not go beyond mere rhetoric since in actual fact Iran may be Onoja went further to cite instances where Iran has actually betrayed Nigeria's confidence in their diplomatic relations beginning with the 2013 discovery by military intelligence of a large cache of arms and ammunitions in a warehouse in the Bompai area of Kano. The uncovering of an Iranian terror network in Lagos by operatives of the Department of State Service (DSS), on February 20, 2013 prior to this arms discovery as well as the seizure of a shipload of arms that originated from Iran with the claim that it was meant for the Gambia among others, All pointing to the adoption of policies and actions by Iran inimical to the interest of Nigeria as a country.

In his contribution to Nigeria-Iran relations, Donna Abu Nasr (2017) traces the Iranian involvement in the Shite movement to Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, a Sunni Muslim University activist who was so impressed with the Iranian revolution that he wanted one at home. Nasr revealed that Iran has been funding Zakzaky for years and the area of Zaria he lives and work has become the "Mecca for the dispossessed in Nigeria," according to Matthew Page, a former U.S. State Department specialist on Nigeria. He concluded by highlighting the effort of the US in containing Iranian expansionist ambition particularly as it concerns Nigeria and other countries in Africa.

However, the submission of Adegbite, (2017:4), on the Iranian venture in Nigeria tends to be different from all of the above. He focuses on the visit of the Iranian Ambassador, Mr Morteza Rahimi Zarchi, to the Ministry of Mines and Steel Development in Abuja where he was received in audience by the Minister of State, Honourable Abubakar Bawa Bwari. He observed that the Minister of State expressed the Federal Government's readiness in strengthening trade relations with Iran, especially in the mining sector and while expressing appreciation for the visit, the minister recalled that President Muhammadu Buhari was in Iran to reinforce the trade relations between the two countries. Adegbite (2017), further observed that Honourable Bwari restated the fact that both countries share a lot in common as members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), in the diversification of their economies due to the global fall in oil prices and in mining. Adding that Iran, in terms of mining, technology could impart Nigeria positively, noting that Iran was advanced in coal, power and mining exploration, which could be of benefit to Nigeria.

Nigeria and Iran: Opportunities and Challenges in Bilateral Relations

That Nigeria is having cordial and friendly relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran is stating the obvious. But what cannot be said with any amount of certainty is that she is reaping enough and commensurate benefits from the relationship. A lot of reasons abound for this anomaly some of which had been enumerated in the previous part of this paper. Truth be told, if relations between and amongst nations are guided by national interest, then Nigeria must strive to explore opportunities for a fruitful and mutually beneficial bilateral relation with this Asian country if she must be in the relationship at all. As a matter of fact, there must be something of benefit for both countries in this bilateral tie, a development which is buttressed by the existing capacities for common and mutual cooperation such as their membership of the UN, D-8 Group, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, OPEC among others.

The Iranian economy may not be a very robust and sound one but it is certainly better than that of Nigeria even under the sanctions regime it found itself. Entrepreneurship in education Nigeria must utilize the opportunity offered by Iran which has made considerable and commendable progress in harnessing her gas deposits for export and recorded giant strides in security, manufacturing, agriculture and technology within a span of 30 years.

Iran has also demonstrated an uncommon advancement in nuclear technology research and development including her ability to negotiate its way out of sanctions with the European Union, the UN and the 5+1 countries. These are issues that should be of interest to Nigeria irrespective of the negative global and domestic image associated with Iran as a country. a leaf from the Islamic Republic of Iran instead of basking in apprehension and the negative perception of Iran. In fact, the time is now as the oil prices has dipped and thus creating the need for the diversification of the Nigerian economy particularly towards agriculture where the country has great untapped potentials. Partnership with Iran presents a good opportunity in this regard.

Nigeria can also use her relations with Iran in the fight against terrorism and insecurity that has bedeviled the country for almost a decade now. There is no doubt that Iran is better equipped and experienced in this direction and could be willing to assist the country in its fight against insurgency of any kind. It is on record that far back in 2014, Iran had offered to assist Nigeria in the search and

rescue of the abducted 276 Chibok school girls, a situation which the federal government did not explore. This was reiterated on the 20th of May, 2014 by the Director General of the Iranian Foreign Ministry's Department for African Affairs Valiollah Mohammadi Nasrabadi who underlined Tehran's readiness to help the Nigerian government free the school girls who have been abducted by Boko Haram, a Wahhabi Al-Qaeda affiliate in Nigeria. He made the remarks while addressing an International Conference on 'Unity against Terrorism and Extremism' in Tehran on Wednesday 24th May, 2014 to deplore the continuous detention and prolongation of the ordeal of the Nigerian kidnapped girls (The Iran Project, 2014).

Another opportunity for Nigeria to embrace in her engagements with Iran is the development of the solid mineral sector particularly the mining sector. This will not only fall in line with the country's current drive for the diversification of the economy but will certainly generate foreign exchange and shore up Nigeria's revenue profile. This should be taken beyond the usual rhetoric or exchange of diplomatic pleasantries which has been the bane of Nigeria's foreign policy choices. The above position was equally canvassed by the Minister of State for Mines and Steel Development, Honourable Abubakar Bawa Bwari, on Wednesday, 9th August, 2017 when he expressed the Federal Government's readiness in strengthening trade relations with Iran, especially in the mining sector. He made this known when he received in audience the Iranian Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr Morteza Rahimi Zarchi, who paid a courtesy visit to the Ministry. The Honourable Minister concluded that the two countries share a lot in common as members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), in the diversification of their economies due to the global fall in oil prices and in mining (Adegbite, 2017). This offer by Iran should be taken seriously and appropriate mechanisms put in place for the consummation of this technical cooperation by Nigeria. For a country that has opened up its solid mineral sector for illegal mining and exploitation by individuals and groups who have through the process become richer than the Nigerian state, the time is ripe for a serious policy direction in this regard and Iran could be a good technical partner.

There is also need for the utilization of the opportunity for human capital development in areas where Iran has comparative advantage. It is a known fact that the Iranian government offers scholarship to Nigerian students but not all passes through Nigerian government agencies like the Ministry of Education or Foreign Affairs, a development which creates apprehension in the minds of government officials who view such opportunities as avenue for indoctrination of Nigerians in insurgent and terrorist techniques following the country's experience with Sheik Ibrahim Zakzaky and that of Abdul Muttallab and his Saudi connection. This situation can be changed by government through a renegotiation of the conditions for scholarship in a way that allows the total involvement of agencies of government in the selection and placement of students. This much was revealed by the present Nigerian Ambassador to Iran, Hamzat Ibrahim (personal communication) who reiterated the resolve of the Nigerian embassy in Tehran to refocus government attention to this line of action. He equally expressed readiness to engage the Iranian authorities in the training of medical students given the high level of expertise in health and medical services in the country and revealed further that an Iranian hospital is being built in Enugu while discussions were in top gear for the involvement of the Iranians in the proposed medical village by the federal territory administration in Abuja. These strides in the relations between the two countries can be replicated in other parts of Nigeria.

Additionally, with Iran out of sanctions as a result of the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which though signed on July 14, 2015 came into effect on January 16, 2016 there is the likelihood that cooperation between Nigeria and Iran could play a leading role in the stability of the international oil market. Such stability would as a matter of fact assist Nigeria in her drive to combat economic recession. This much was said by Nigeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Geoffrey Onyeama when he received his Iranian counterpart, Javid Zarif and his entourage in Abuja on Monday, July 25 2016. Zarif who was on a four nation tour of Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea and Mali expressed satisfaction with the level of cooperation between the two countries in the field of culture and noted that many Nigerian students are studying in Iranian universities (Walker, 2015).

However, the first challenge plaguing Nigeria-Iran relations is what can be termed as Western propaganda which is spearheaded by the United States of America. America has not spared any opportunity at demonizing Iran and as far as its concerned Tehran remains an axis of evil and a terrorist cell at all times. There is generally no love lost between both countries and there is no pretension about that. It is worth noting that the US has been able to push this agenda through to most countries of the world who view doing business with Iran as a last resort. In fact, this position has not been assuaged by the coming into force of the JCPOA and the subsequent lifting of sanctions by the 5+ 1 countries against Iran as the current President of America, Donald J. Trump has kicked against the agreement and has not hidden his interest in making sure that it is terminated. President Trump holds this opinion in spite of assurances from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the world's nuclear regulatory body that Iran has not violated any part of the agreement.

For Nigeria, the issue of perception remains a serious challenge in her bilateral relations with Iran. Nigerians are fast to condemn the Asian country and as well banish it to the dust bin of terrorism and religious fundamentalism. This is done in a way that does not give room to efforts at seeing the possible gains that would have arisen from any bilateral engagements with Tehran. This perception is held unmindful of the fact that nothing is so bad and valueless, in fact not even a clock that has stopped working which remains correct at least twice a day.

Another challenge is the issue of lack of publicity of activities involving Nigeria and Iran at the diplomatic and governmental levels. Except for few cases of exchange of visits either by the leaders or envoys of both countries little is known of other fields of engagements between both countries not even the commonest ceremony of the presentation of letter of credence by the Ambassadors of both countries is captured on national media networks unlike that of other countries which has bilateral relations with Nigeria. There are instances where issues like end of year parties and meetings between embassy officials and the Nigerian communities in most of these countries are beamed on Nigerian Television and other media outfits in the country. This much has been acknowledged by Ambassador Hamzat Ibrahim with a promise to refocus the attention of the Nigerian populace to issues of bilateral engagements between Nigeria and Iran through adequate publicity.

Finally, Nigeria-Iran relations suffer more from the level of insecurity engulfing the country as a result of the activities of the Boko Haram insurgent sect particularly in the North Eastern Nigeria. Boko Haram has been involved in several cases of bombings and killings of innocent Nigerians, hostage takings and general insurgent activities which climaxed in the abduction of 276 Chibok school girls on the night of 14-15 April 2014. They are seen by Nigerians as a terrorist organization with its roots in the Islamic religion in which Iran as a country is a key global player and as such any

effort in courting Iranian friendship is seen as a direct romance with terrorism irrespective of whatever benefits the country stands to achieve.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to highlight the opportunities and the challenges facing Nigeria and Iran in their bilateral relations. It observed that Iran stands the chance of winning the support of other African countries once it can successfully court Nigeria's friendship and is making frantic efforts to do so. But that Iran's association with and promotion of Khomeinism has likely influenced public attitudes and perception about its activities in the country, a development which has caused many Nigerians to see Iran more in the prism of religious fundamentalism unworthy of any meaningful bilateral and technical cooperation with Nigeria. However, it is our avowed believe that the Nigerian foreign policy experts have a lot of work to do in harnessing possible options opened to Nigeria for fruitful and beneficial bilateral relations with Tehran. In doing this, it is pertinent that the issue of perception and stereotype should be put behind Nigerians by pursuing policies that can assist the development of the country particularly with the present level of insecurity in Nigeria. Nigeria should discard to an extent Western propoganda on Iran and go for the positive aspects of what the Asian country could offer in her bilateral engagements, after all, it is all about Nigeria's interest and nothing more.

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