



The Shiite Uprising in Nigeria and Implications for Nigeria's Relations with Iran: Role of the Media

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Abstract

The recent clashes between the Nigerian government and the Shiites, represented by the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), have raised concerns about the potential implications for Nigeria's security and smooth diplomatic ties with the Republic of Iran. The State of Iran is well known to be a solid backer and support for the IMN movement in Nigeria and on the other hand, enjoys a cordial trade relationship with Nigeria. However, Nigeria's cordial relationship with the likes of the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel with whom Iran has rough diplomatic patches, is a serious source of concern for security experts who interpret the trade relations between Iran and Nigeria as merely a marriage of convenience with many potential dangers. The violent Shiite uprisings against the Nigerian State in recent times, instigated by the continuous illegal detention of Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, which is often met with severe use of force by security personnel, have been interpreted by some as providing a lee-way for Iran to use them as instruments of initiating terror and destabilizing Nigeria's security system. The media reportage of the uprising may have been politically motivated and not from the point of view of religion as a fundamental right. This paper thus suggested that the Nigerian State be advised to be more diplomatic and shrewd in the handling of the Shiite crisis.

Keywords: Shiites, Iran, Media, Nigeria, Terrorism

Introduction

Since the establishment of the Shiite Islamic Sect in Nigeria under the auspices of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) in the 80s, the sect has been embroiled in series of conflict with the Nigerian State ranging from peaceful protests to violent conflict. This chaotic confrontation attained a crescendo between July, 2014 and December, 2015 where many adherents of the sect were massacred by the Nigerian Army in an attempt to resist their assault (Anjide & Okoli, 2017). In the July 2014 episode, the Shiites were attacked by the Nigerian Army while having their Alquds procession, which is one of their annual celebrations and their leader, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky

was alleged to have lost three of his sons and 34 other adherents of the sect in that occurrence while several others sustained injuries (Sahara Reporters, 2014). As a follow up to the 2014 episode, another violent confrontation erupted on the 12th of December, 2015 between the Shiites and the convoy of the Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Burutai who was passing through Gyallesu, a town in Zaria. It was alleged that the Army pleaded with the adherents to pave way for the convoy of the Chief of Army Staff as they held their procession, but they refused to bulge which infuriated the Army, inciting them to shoot into the crowd forcefully. The army further proceeded to raid and destroy El-Zakzaky's home and the

Husainiyyah, their spiritual center. It was alleged that about 300 adherents of the sect, including one of El-Zakzaky's wives and leader of the Kano branch, Sheikh Mahmud Turiwere killed in that ambush (Anjide & Okoli, 2017). The act was immediately condemned by non-governmental bodies such as: Islamic Human Right Commission (IHRC), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Human Rights Watch (HRC) and Amnesty International among others who immediately called for government's investigation of the conflict. Since then, the sect has continued to accuse the government of complicity and persecution in the handling of their affairs, especially since the arrest of El-Zakzaky and their agitations have sometimes culminated in violent confrontations with authorities.

The Shiites in Nigeria are known to be closely linked to the Shiite majority country of Iran and in fact, are mentored and sponsored by the Iranian government who stand in direct opposite to the Sunni-Wahhabi brand of Islam led by Saudi Arabia and the interest of Western powers who in turn are close allies of the Nigerian State. The structure of diplomatic relations between these regions in relation to the activities of the Shiites in Nigeria should itself be a source of concern for the Nigerian State even if they enjoy a neutral relationship with Iran. In addition, the media dimension of religious violence cannot be ignored. Media role is crucial in the escalation or de-escalation of the Shiites uprising. The media played a role in their publications in easing the confrontation between the group and the Government (Musa, 2011).

This paper attempts to examine how Iranian involvement in the activities of the Shiite sect in Nigeria can eventually snowball into full-blown terrorism if not properly handled by the Nigerian government and how the media can help in de-escalating the tension between the government and the Shiites.

Conceptual Clarifications

The following concepts are examined under this sub-heading to provide a better understanding of the subject matter and other issues associated with it. They are as follows:

The Shiites: The Shiites who make up the minority of the entire Muslim world (approximately 10% to 15% which accounts for about 250 million of 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide) are the opposite of the two major Islamic ideologies (both political and spiritual) that govern the Muslim world to this present day. Their origin can be traced to the aftermath of the demise of Prophet Muhammed in 632 AD in which their belief that a direct descendant of the prophet should take on the mantle of leadership of the Caliphate was opposed to the idea that the elite Muslim Community (as held by the Sunnis) was to appoint the new Caliph to replace Muhammed as endorsed by the majority Muslim Community (Shuster, 2007). For a long time, these divergent views between the Shiites and the Sunnis created an era of constant conflict and tension in the Persian region as Caliphs were made and killed either by assassination or warfare.

Another distinctive characteristic of the Shiites is their belief in the political and spiritual authority the Imam wields. Hence, in opposition to the Sunni system of administration where the Caliphs wield supreme political authority, the Shiites believe that the Imams wield greater authority by virtue of their spiritual significance (Shuster, 2007). This explains why the Ayatollah of Iran is more powerful and respected than the President himself. The Shiites are concentrated in Iran, Southern Iraq and Southern Lebanon. But there are significant Shiite communities in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India as well (Nasr, 2006).

Iran: Iran is a predominantly Muslim country with a population of about 81 million people located in the Middle East, South of the Caspian Sea and North of the Persian Gulf. It shares borders with countries such as Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and occupies a total land space of about 631,659 square miles which is equivalent of 1,635,999 square kilometres (Infoplease, 2015). Iran is a multi-ethnic country made up of ethnic groups such as the Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Arabs among others. Their major sources of income include petrochemical products, gas, textile, cement, food processing,

construction materials among others. Apart from the Shiite inspired brand of Islam which make up for over 95% of the population, other religions such as Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism can also be found in the country (Infoplease, 2015).

Terrorism: Terrorism as a term, defies a single-universal description or definition. In 2005 at the 60th United Nations summit, the attempt to formulate a universal-legal definition to describe terrorism was infeasible because delegates could not reach an amicable agreement. The same held for the United Kingdom in 2007 when a report by the commission set up by the government concluded that there is no full definition of the term 'terrorism' that commands international support (Carlile 2007:47). According to Hough (2008:66), this complexity can partly be traced to the fact that terrorism is an appropriated word that can be used to elicit a security threat by a group or individual at any time. It is indeed a value-laden word used to justify a group's legitimate killing (the State for example) against another's illegitimate killing (non-state violent groups for example). For clarity in vision, a definition by the United States State Department can be adopted because it captures the view of many of what terrorism appears to be like in contemporary times. The U.S. State Department describes terrorism as a "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents usually intended to influence an object" (USA 1983). This definition captures the character of modern terrorism to some large extent, especially if we are looking at it from the perspective of non-state actors. It is in this light that Jessica Stern (2003) describes Terrorism, especially as it occurs in contemporary times, as "an act or threat of violence against non-combatants with the objective of exerting revenge, intimidating, or otherwise influencing an audience". Therefore, these definitions can be adopted for this work.

Media: A medium is a channel of communication through which people send and receive information. Singularly, a newspaper is medium, radio is a medium but in the plural media is the plural of medium. in this context, media refers to

the several channels of communication that involve transmitting information in some way, shape or form to large numbers of people. Such mass media communicate to an audience that involves many people at the same time and in a way that is largely impersonal (Livesey, 2011).

There are several types of Mass Media grouped into three major categories:

- (1) Print Media: These are newspapers, Magazines, Booklets, Brochures and Billboards.
- (2) Electronic Media: These include Television and Radio.
- (3) New Age Media: These are Mobile Phones, Computers, Internet and Electronic Books.

Theoretical Framework

To create a veritable explanatory framework for the subject matter, the 'Social Aggression Theory' of violent conflict has been chosen. The origins of this theory though is psychological and sociological in character has, however, been utilized in the explanation of some phenomena in international politics and the reason for some forms of domestic uprising or violence. The immediate origin of this theory can be located in the works of John Dollard and his colleagues at Yale University shortly before the commencement of the Second World War with some later modifications. However, this theory dates as far back as the classical works of the likes of McDougall and Freud (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1990). The basic premise of Dollard and his colleagues is that the manifestation of aggression which often results in conflict is as a result of some inherent frustration triggered by some extreme circumstances. Dollard opined that frustration occurs in individuals and groups when a desired goal is interfered with, leading to the mobilization of an extra amount of energy which if not properly checked could culminate in general destructive behaviour. According to Dollard, the strength of the instigation towards aggression depends on three major factors: 1) the strength of the instigation towards aggressive behaviour. 2) The degree of interference with the frustrated response and 3) the number of frustrated response sequence (Dollard *et al*, 1939:31). Going further, Dollard argued that aggression can be inhibited if its committal could

lead to some form of punishment or some undesirable consequence especially if the object is physically, socially or psychologically immune to attack and is vested with some kind of invulnerability, air of authority or sacredness. The invulnerability of the immediate object and the expectation of punishment for the Dollard group could in itself broaden the scope of frustration. In this case, aggression could be displaced and diverted towards an object not originally the source of the frustration thereby altering the form of the aggression but not really the object (Dollard *et al* 1939).

In an attempt to modify the original Dollard and group hypothesis, the likes of K. Menninger and J. Seward criticized the frustration-aggression theory as too simplistic in explaining sources of aggression. For them, there are other factors to be considered in explaining the reasons for aggression. Some of those given include the struggle for dominance, disputes over possession of objects and interference with comfort. The followers of the Dollard School will insist that these are still varying forms of issues or incidents that could elicit frustration. Hence, in the long run for them, all still boils down to frustration. Going further, the likes of Malinoski, a sociologist opined that environmental factors are also very active pointers to circumstances that could necessitate aggression. Hence, for him, most cases of violent action by groups are basically as a result of conventional, traditional and ideological imperatives. Taking a look at the hypothesis from the social perspective must therefore necessarily incorporate these considerations of which environment and group philosophy play a very crucial role (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1990). As a way of explaining the phenomena of the Shiite violent conflicts with this theoretical model, one can see some truism in the frustration-aggression theory, although not all its assertions can hold firm. Most of the incidences that led to the Shiite uprising can be traced to some circumstances that elicit frustration such as the killing of their members and arrest of their leader, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky. Also, the tendency to vent aggression on innocent victims who are often the scape-goats in terrorist attacks can partially be seen as a result of further frustration by the aggrieved terrorist groups with

the realization that their actions are often met with threats of punishment by formidable states who have the structures and capacity to withstand their clandestine activities; though this may not always be the case, as it is also possible to use innocent people as scape-goats borne out of the realization of the perceived weaknesses of the intended objects and knowing that these could make them yield quickly to their demands.

The Shiites in Nigeria and their Iranian Link

The El-Zakzaky led Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) got a foothold in the Nigerian State in 1980, shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. According to Ekemenah (2019), the beginning of the Shiite movement in Nigeria can be traced to some recruitment efforts on the part of the Iranian government to spread the Khomeini ideology and strengthen the Shiite brand of Islam across the globe. It was alleged that Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky was approached by the Iranian government as they already saw a potential of the influence he could wield since he was already associated with leading various Islamic-styled groups (Ekemenah, 2019). Based on intelligence investigation as to how El-Zakzaky was convinced by the Iranian government, it was alleged that he was told that there would be lots of benefits attached if he could become the sole promoter of Khomeinism (which is the Shiite based ideology of Islam promoted by Iran) which included monetary rewards and a platform on which he could push an ideology to gain followership and influence (Ekemenah, 2019).

In 2009, during a lecture to mark the 20th Anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in London, the depth of El-Zakzaky's indoctrination into the Shi'a brand of Islam as promoted by Khomeini and his followers was well exposed when he carefully analyzed the significance of the *din* (religion) of Shi'a Islam and proposed it as a philosophical basis for universal governance (Katzman, 2019). He further stated that Khomeinism had already dealt a death blow to the revolutionary false consciousness promoted by Communism and would also see to the end of Western Capitalism (Ekemenah, 2019). These statements in themselves, in one's opinion, should not be

regarded as a mere euphoric outburst of excitement or sentiments of admiration but should be viewed with a more critical lens of what the Iranian backed Shi'a brand of Islam aspires to achieve if granted the opportunity and indices work in their favour.

The beginnings of the IMN movement in Nigeria was marked by the revolutionary styled expression of radical Islamism as displayed during the Iranian revolution of 1979 which was evident in their various violent confrontations with the Nigerian State, borne out of certain ideologies such as rejection of Western-secular educational system, disregard for the symbols of State such as the Nigerian Coat of Arms, National Anthem and State Institutions (Isa, 2010). Between 1981 to 1998, Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky was jailed nine times for the various unrests he had caused and as a way of resolving the issue he had with the State government amicably, the past administration of the then Governor of Kaduna State, Ahmed Makarfi, appointed him as a Special Adviser to the Governor which he retained till the later vacated office (Paden, 2008). In a sudden twist of events, El-Zakzaky later changed his style of radical Islamism and embraced a subtle form of Islamic evangelism, encouraging his followers to embrace Western education and partake in works of charity for the good of society which in turn attracted lots of moral and financial support from their Iranian counterparts (Baba-Ahmed, 2015). This new strategy helped in no small measure in attracting new members and increased followership tremendously. Apart from the aforementioned changes to the group's new approach, El-Zakzaky was also vociferous in the condemnation of Boko Haram insurgency and the activities of the United States in the Middle East, especially as regards her support for Israeli policies towards Palestine, tagging them as oppressive (Baba-Ahmed, 2015).

As a way of critically examining the situation presented above, one can opine that the sudden transformation of the IMN from revolutionary radicalism to subtle Islamic evangelism in recent years, which was in turn backed by their Iranian sponsors could be associated with the decision of the Iranian government to be more diplomatic

and less aggressive in the pursuance of their interests. This was on the heels of international sanctions slammed upon them during the Obama administration as a result of their nuclear programme which in turn had an adverse effect on their economy. Hence, it is possible that the adoption of the subtle evangelism model was an agreement between El-Zakzaky and the Iranian government to lay low pending the lifting of international sanctions placed on them and the full implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which was an agreement between Iran and Western powers as to the drastic reduction of their nuclear capacity in return for certain privileges. The return of the IMN to violent confrontations these past few years (though can be said to be provoked) is an attestation to the fact that the revolutionary spirit of the group or movement has not been totally buried but can be incited at any point in time based on the object of provocation. The erstwhile actions and inactions of the group must always ring in our consciousness of what they are capable of if they are not well handled.

A Survey of Nigeria-Iran Diplomatic Relations

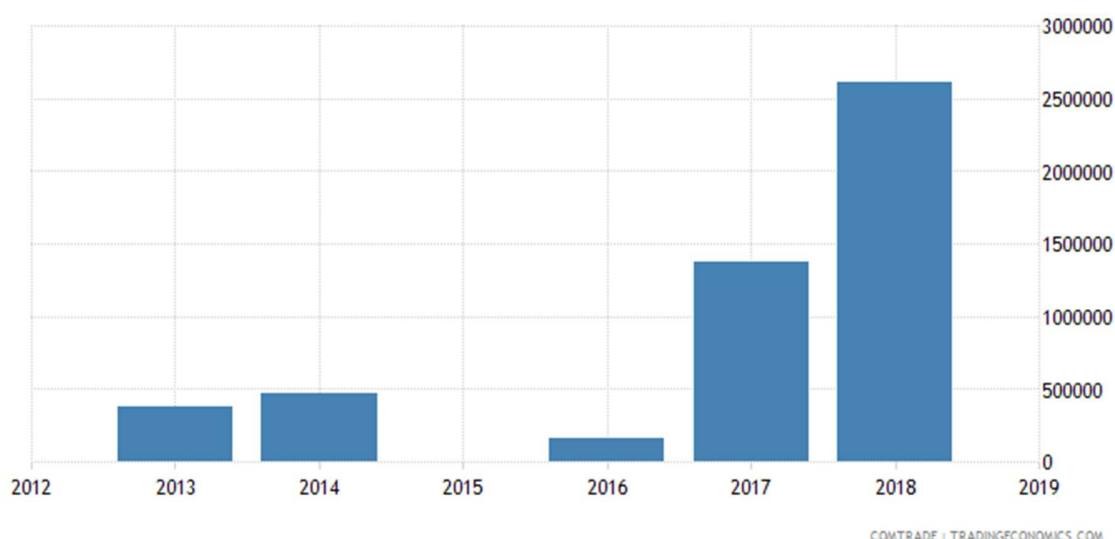
Despite Nigeria's close ties with countries such as the United States and Saudi Arabia who stand at direct opposites on the pole of diplomatic relations with Iran, Nigeria seems to have maintained a neutral and considerably cordial relationship with the State of Iran. Nigeria's cordial diplomatic relations with Iran can basically be identified on three major pointers which include trade, business and cultural agreements signed by both countries over the years (Ekemenah, 2019). In an interview carried out by the Nation Newspaper with Saeed Koozechi, an erstwhile Iranian Ambassador to Nigeria in 2015, it was alleged that trade relations between Iran and Nigeria was at an estimated \$50 million and was expected to rise. The Ambassador noted that the Nigerian economy had a lot to gain from trade relations with Iran which boasted of small scale agriculture, manufacturing and financial services apart from her proven vast natural gas and crude oil reserves (The Nation, 2015). It is pertinent to note that Iran was desperately in search of profitable international markets for juicy bilateral deals to counter the effect of sanctions placed on their oil

trade by Western powers, bolstered by America's interest due to their perceived nuclear programmes. Hence, it was understandable that Nigeria easily came to mind as one of the leading African economies as at then.

Apart from the individual diplomatic trade relations between both countries, Nigeria and Iran also cooperate on an organizational platform called the D-8 (Developing Eight) which is an alliance between developing Muslim countries from the larger body of the Organization of Islamic States (OIC) and it consists of member countries such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey. The D-8 was established in June, 1997 in

Istanbul, Turkey to enable free trade between member countries and encourage inter-state cooperation (Tash et al., 2012). Nigeria's exports to Iran on the other hand basically consist of agricultural products. Below is a bar chart explaining the increase in exports from Nigeria to Iran between 2012 to 2018 which shows a sustained increase over the years. Nigeria's Exports to Iran included agricultural products such as oil seed, oleagic fruits, grain, seed, fruits among others which were at an estimated US\$2.61 million during 2018, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade. This is illustrated below in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Nigeria's Exports to Iran of Oil seed, Oleagic fruits, Grain, Seed, Fruits (2012-2018)



(Source: United Nations Comtrade, 2020)

While relations between Nigeria and Iran weighs higher on the scale of trade, the same cannot be said on security matters, as both countries have had rough patches as regards this, especially in relation to the security of the Nigerian State (Nasrullah, 2019). As earlier mentioned, the lack of cordial ties between the State of Iran, the United States and Saudi Arabia who are also close allies of Nigeria, has placed Nigeria in a dicey situation which could be detrimental in the long run. It is also important to note that Iran aims for certain goals in her national security policy (both foreign and defense) which affects her

diplomatic ties with any country and this Nigeria must take into consideration in her dealings with the Republic of Iran. Some of these should be examined to provide a compass with which we can evaluate Iran's relationship with any country, especially Nigeria.

According to Kenneth Katzman (2019), the national security policy or interest of the State of Iran can be summarized as follows:

- To thwart American or other Western efforts to invade or intimidate Iran or bring about a regime change.
- Take advantage of opportunities of regional conflicts to usurp a power structure in the Middle East that she believes is in favour of the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Muslim Arab regimes.
- Seek to enhance her international prestige and restore a sense of “greatness” reminiscent of the ancient Persian empire.
- Advance her foreign policy goals, in part by providing material support to regional allied governments and armed factions. This, she believes, is to help the region’s “oppressed”. She also asserts that Saudi Arabia, in particular, is instigating sectarian tensions and is trying to exclude Iran from regional affairs.
- Support acts of international terrorism, as the “leading” or “most active” state sponsor of terrorism, according to the Annual State Department Report on International Terrorism, since the early 90s.

These key goals serve as a guide to the conduct of diplomatic relations between Iran and any other country, including Nigeria. An examination of some of the key points reveals grey areas which have the potential to initiate conflict within Nigeria’s clime if care is not taken, especially as regards the involvement of the IMN and present realities. Since the inception of the El-Zakzaky led Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) backed by Iraqi security network (especially the Iran Revolutionary Guards-Quds Force IRG-QF) in Nigeria, there has been a lot of apprehension as to the feasibility of Iran using Nigeria as a base to launch attacks on perceived enemies, especially Western powers and even the country herself if she is perceived by Iran as aligning with her foes (Ekemenah, 2019). Two significant events took place on Nigerian soil which portrayed Iran’s capacity of unleashing terror on Nigeria and Nigeria’s allies by proxy. In 2010, a shipment containing rocket launchers, associated ammunition, assault rifles and 107mm rockets from Iran was intercepted at Lagos Apapa Port which was ultimately destined for the State of Gambia. Further security investigations revealed that the shipment was procured by a Nigerian

Shia with links to El-Zakzaky and was acting as an agent of the IRG-QF (Nick, 2010). This incident was part of the reasons that instigated the Nigerian government to prevail on the then President of Gambia, Yahya Jammeh to sever diplomatic ties with the State of Iran in 2010 (Nasrullah, 2019). From another perspective, one can interpret such move on the part of Nigeria as an attempt to avoid any bad blood between herself and her other Western allies and trade partners who obviously had conflicting interests with that of Iran and not basically due to the fact that she was bent on curtailing Iran’s excesses (Nasrullah, 2019).

Another event of great significance relating to the previous incident described above and which was viewed as a perceived security threat to the Nigerian State, necessitated by the State of Iran also occurred. At that time, based on investigations made by Nasrullah (2019), one Ali Akbar Tabatabaie, the then head of the Quds Force Unit 6000 which was responsible for the African operations of the IRG-QG, was domiciled in Nigeria on a non-diplomatic passport and with one Azim Adhajani (Head of the IRG-QF operations in Nigeria), sought to hide from the Nigerian Government by fleeing to the Iranian Embassy to escape arrest. They remained there until with the tacit approval of the Nigerian Government, Mr. Tabatabaie was extradited to Iran on the plane of the Iranian Foreign Minister who came on a visit four months later. Mr. Adhajani, on the other hand, was surrendered to the Iranian government after two years where he was later sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for acts of conspiracy (Nasrullah, 2019). In 2013, the DSS (Department of State Security) in Nigeria arrested three Iranian Nationals as part of a locally recruited terror network alleged to be planning attacks on American and Israeli citizens in Nigeria. They were also accused of plotting to assassinate the Saudi Arabia Ambassador to Nigeria (Maram, 2013). Added to this, the Nigerian Government over the years has had cause to expel two Iranian Ambassadors for their involvement in covert Iranian operations deemed detrimental to Nigeria’s security (Nasrullah, 2019).

These indices should be of great concern to the Nigerian Security network as to the palpable potency of the threat Iranian security activities in Nigeria pose to the Nigerian State and her diplomatic relations with other countries who do not enjoy a cordial relationship with the State of Iran. The recent uprisings of the Iranian backed IMN in recent times should not be taken with levity as to its potential to initiate unrest in the country and beyond. The development of this tumultuous episode between the IMN and the State are examined in the next section.

The Shiites and the Nigerian Government

To understand why the Shiites seem to be marginalized in a Sunni-dominant Nigerian State, it is necessary to examine the origins of the Sunni-Shiite divide in Nigeria to provide us with an understanding of why even fellow Muslims view Shiites as threats and do not seem to provide the enabling environment for a cordial relationship between both sects. Before the formation of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria in the 80's, Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky was the head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Nigeria which comprised basically of students and those considered alienated who were faithful to the tenets of the Sunni brand of Islam (Adesoji, 2010). However, with the formation of the IMN through Iranian interests, the Muslim Brotherhood in Nigeria was split into the Izala (which remained faithful to the Sunni doctrine) and the IMN (which became the flag-bearer of Khomeinist-Shia brand of Islam). This marked the beginning of the Sunni-Shiite divide, especially in Northern Nigeria of which the majority stuck with the Izala brand of Islam, while few followed the newly established IMN (Loimeier, 2012). We have already examined the motivations that led EL-Zakzaky to embrace the Shiite brand of Islam previously. Hence, what needs to be addressed is the major bone of contention between both branches of Islam in Nigeria.

While the Izala movement, backed by the Saudi Wahhabist nation, remains the largest Sunni group in Nigeria, it should be noted that other smaller Sunni groups eventually broke away from the larger Izala movement due to some internal disputes. However, irrespective of their minor

differences, the Sunni Muslims collectively believe that Islam should strictly be guided by the Quran and Sunna and that innovations or religious creativity should not be introduced into Islam as a religion and this remains their bone of contention with the Shi'as who they see as the major engineers of innovation in Islam (Sanusi, 2015). It should be noted that the Shiites (Shi'as) strongly encourage the embrace of Western education and religious dialogue as earlier mentioned, unlike other branches of Islam. This in itself could explain why insurgent groups like Boko Haram strongly detest the sect. Apart from the reason presented above, one can also argue from the angle of national interest. There is also a possibility that the preference of the Nigerian State for the Sunni brand of Islam has to do with the international structure and Nigeria's national interest in the whole scheme of things. It is mostly about creating the conditions for maximum gain and minimal loss in the international system of which the Nigerian State might believe she has more to gain by aligning with Saudi Arabia's Sunni-Wahhabi brand of Islam than the Khomeinist-Shiite brand of Islam practiced by Iran. This is because the former wields more influence in international affairs, especially in the Middle East and enjoys good diplomatic relations with the United States who in turn is an ally of the Nigerian State, unlike Iran. Hence, Nigeria may have more to gain in adopting the Sunni brand of Islam than the Shi'a.

The former precedent described above provided the seedbed for continuous clashes between the Shiites, the Nigerian government (which is obviously dominated by Sunni Muslims) and other Islamic bodies in Nigeria. The beginning of the confrontations between the government and the Shiites have previously been explained. Since the 2015 episode which eventually led to the arrest of Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, the IMN has embarked on series of peaceful protests (which have sometimes turned violent) to lament the continuous detention of their Supreme Leader despite the rulings of various courts that he should be granted bail (Anjide & Okoli, 2017). Between October 2018 and July 2019, the IMN embarked on series of protests in Abuja and Lagos to demand the release of El-Zakzaky and were often met with lethal force by security

operatives which eventually led to casualties on both sides (Zenn, 2019). The coercive response of the Nigerian Government in handling the series of IMN protests has been met with condemnation and its potential to snowball into another form of insurgency has also been identified by various bodies in Nigeria and beyond (Zenn, 2019). However, the final outcome will depend on the

Nigerian government's ability to diplomatically resolve the issue.

Table 1 below shows the record of some of the violent confrontations that have erupted between the IMN and Security Forces from 2014 to 2019. It should be noted that not all records of their confrontations are captured here, but those of palpable significance.

Table 1: Some Violent Confrontations Between IMN and Security Forces in Nigeria (2014-2019)

Date	Place	Cause(s)	Security Personnel Involved	Approximate Number of Casualties
July 2014	Zaria, Kaduna State	Annual Al-quds Procession of the Shiites	Nigerian Army	About 36 Casualties
December, 2015	Zaria, Kaduna State	Annual Al-quds Procession of the Shiites	Nigerian Army	Over 300 Casualties
October, 2018	FCT, Abuja	Protest for Release of Shiite detained leader, Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky	Presidential Guard Brigade (Nigerian Army)	About 42 Casualties
July 9, 2019	National Assembly, FCT, Abuja	Protest for Release of Shiite detained leader, Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky	Nigeria Police	About 12 Casualties
July 11, 2019	Ikeja, Lagos State	Protest for Release of Shiite detained leader, Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky	Nigeria Police	No recorded casualties
July 22, 2019	FCT, Abuja	Protest for Release of Shiite detained leader, Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky	Nigeria Police	Over 10 casualties

(Sources: Author's Compilation from various News Sources: Reuters (2019), Vanguard Newspaper (2019) and Human Rights Watch (2019))

After the July 22, 2019 episode, it appeared that the agitations of the IMN eventually began to yield some fruit as a Nigerian High Court in August, 2019 ruled that the IMN leader, El-Zakzaky should be granted bail on health grounds in order to proceed for treatment in India. However, this was granted on the condition that he be accompanied by government officials for security reasons (Adnan, 2019). This was an aftermath of the government's decision to ban the activities of the sect. There was also hope that El-Zakzaky would be made to sign an agreement with the Nigerian Government to avoid future confrontations with security forces in exchange for his freedom, but the IMN leader has since

been retained in detention since his return from India (Adnan, 2019).

Media, Religion and Violence

The media play an important role in the society including in its religious life. While the constitution of Nigeria guarantees freedom of religion to its citizens, the mass media have the obligation to uphold and reflect this principle in their coverage and reportage of society (Oloyede, Oni & Oluwole, 2015). The guarantee of freedom of religion became institutionalized with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nation's General Assembly in 1948. Since then, these rights have been domesticated in several national constitutions.

Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) states as follows (Ezeanokwasa, Ewulum & Mbanugo, 2016):

(1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

(2) No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or a religion not approved by his parent or guardian.

(3) No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

Also, principle IX of The International Principle of Professional Ethics in Journalism enjoins all journalists to "...ensure respect for the rights and dignity of all nations, all peoples and all individuals without distinction of race, sex, language, nationality, religion or philosophical conviction." This implies that journalists and media organizations have the obligation to report religious issues with fairness and objectivity (Oloyede, Oni & Oluwole, 2015). The media serve as instrument communicating religion. In this case, while religions can legitimately communicate religion to citizens, religion can other hand use the media as a medium for religious propagation and proselytization and in extreme cases as propaganda (Oloyede, Oni & Oluwole, 2015). In using the media as propaganda, the media role can be seen as political in a sense. As put it "any presentation of religion in the media is a political act with a political agenda." The media, thus, has reported that Shiite uprising is a political act of Iran trying to build a stronghold in the country and using its oil mother to pursue these interests (Oloyede, Oni & Oluwole, 2015).

Daily Post of July 25, 2019, reported a possible Iranian involvement in the crisis, thus "I, as the prosecutor general of the Islamic Republic of Iran, urge the Nigerian judicial authorities (to take steps) in line with their judicial independence and support for a captive citizen, and provide the ground for his release and transfer him to the Islamic Republic of Iran for treatment," the letter read in part" (Inyang, 2019). Also, an online medium, Premium times reported about Nigeria's suspicion of Iran's involvement thus "The Nigerian government, on Wednesday, accused the leader of Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, of being sponsored by Iran to replicate the 1979 violent revolution that led to the forceful takeover of power in the country in Nigeria" (Yahaya, 2019). In both cases, it appears the media portrayed the political dimensions of the conflicts rather than the freedom of religion of the Shiites and saw them as proxies for Iran.

Shiite Uprising and the Media Role

Scholars agree that the media can mitigate or exacerbate conflict (Galtung, 2000). In the lead up to the Shi'ite uprising, the media played roles which, although rightly belongs to the traditional responsibility of balanced reporting of all sides to a conflicts, they also tried to mediate, a theory that properly anchored in Johann Galtung's Peace Journalism (Galtung, 2000). In an Editorial of Premium Times of October 21 2016 (Premium Time, 2016), entitled "Nigeria Must Not Transform the Shiites into Enemies", the media outlet made effort to mediate in the uprising by persuading the Nigerian Government to take action and prevent the crisis from escalating. It writes.

PREMIUM TIMES wishes to call attention to the dangers associated with the widespread attacks on Shiites, a Muslim religious movement, in various parts of Northern Nigeria. The attacks are directed at members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), Nigeria's foremost Shi'a group... Rather than punishing the Nigerian Army for its crimes, what we have witnessed so far is the proscription of the movement. Many of the members have also been attacked and killed since the

proscription order... steps should immediately be taken to identify members of the Nigerian Army who acted contrary to their Rules of Engagement and professional ethics and participated in the killings of the IMN members and other citizens between December 12 and 14, 2015, with a view to bringing them to justice by prosecuting them.

Also, in a Feature story published in the Guardian of 25 July 2019 entitled "March of the Shiites", Dare (2019) argued that the conflict would end only if the Government employed tact and diplomacy. Dare (2019) writes

The Nigerian state has to navigate its way out of this catacomb. We should not allow the Shiites to morph into a terrorist organisation. As of now, the international situation does not favour a total crackdown on the group. We have seen how international terrorism has taken advantage of our inability to contain the Boko Haram gang. Tact and diplomacy may be needed to halt the march of the Shiites.

The implication of the published texts from the above media showed that the Nigerian media actively sought to mediate and bring the conflict to an amicable end that satisfies all parties. This is the crux of peace journalism in which it argues that journalism must take a step further to make proposals for peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Implications of the Shiite Crisis on Nigeria's Relations with Iran

Scholars such as Ekemenah (2019), Nasrullah (2019) and Maram (2013) have warned that Nigeria should be careful of getting too cozy and comfortable with Iran merely because both countries enjoy cordial trade relations. In this light, Nigeria should remember that the principle of "national interest" comes first before any other consideration in the conduct of a country's foreign policy. Nigeria should take it to heart that Iran will not hesitate to seize any opportunity that will place her at a better advantage than Nigeria since they are both oil-exporting countries. As a result, Nigeria's loss is Iran's gain. In the light of the above, we should remember according to Katzman (2019) that one of the primary goals of

Iranian foreign policy is to take advantage of regional conflicts which seek to undermine US, Saudi Arabia and Israeli interests in any part of the world. Nigeria is not left out of this situation in the sense that Iran is very much aware that Nigeria enjoys friendly relations with the United States and Saudi Arabia most especially. Iran could take advantage of the Shiite agitations in Nigeria to unleash terror on the government in the guise that Nigeria is a friend to their sworn enemies, irrespective of the relationship that exists between both countries. Iran could accuse the Nigerian government of indulging in oppressive acts against the Shiites and seize that as an alibi for the IMN to evolve into a militia. Their (the IMN) sentiments could be evoked to make them see the Nigerian government as an ally of their foes and against their interest. If this happens, Iran has more to gain on both economic and diplomatic levels. If the Nigerian economy crumbles in the light of vicious terrorism, it means more market for Iran in the global oil economy and it will also increase her strategic influence in the Nigerian State.

The recent assassination of Gen. Qassim Souleimani, a high ranking Iranian officer of the IRG, in Baghdad, Iraq by the US-based on allegations of a planned attack on US citizens in Iraq, should also be a lesson to Nigeria. Nasrullah (2019) has pointed out the feasibility of Iran initiating a proxy war against the United States or Saudi Arabia on Nigerian soil. In this sense, the Nigerian government may not be the direct target, but Iran may utilize their already established stronghold in Nigeria through the IMN to unleash terror on American, Israeli or Saudi citizens which will place Nigeria in a very bad light. For example, the earlier mentioned 2013 arrest of some Iranian citizens believed to be members of a terrorist cell plotting to eliminate the Saudi Ambassador to Nigeria and attack American/Israeli interests in Nigeria was a very good example of what Iranian links could cause. If such occurs, this could mar the amicable and cordial relationship Nigeria enjoys with the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia and could have unpalatable consequences for Nigeria's Foreign relations with other countries because Nigeria could be accused of "tolerating" Iran's

excesses by refusing to nip in the bud, the aggressive tendencies of the IMN from the start.

Nasrullah (2019) believes that in this era of global terrorism, when terrorist groups are no longer merely cloistered within a particular sovereign entity, it is quite possible that Iran can take advantage of their growing influence and established small terrorist cells across other African countries such as Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Senegal among others to create a solid terrorist structure for the IMN. This can possibly be anticipated since the suppressive tendencies of the government towards IMN has done nothing but increase the frustration of the group towards the Nigerian State. In one's opinion, Iran may seize this feeling of frustration to provide a stronger basis for transforming the IMN into a restive militia by providing resources, intelligence, personnel and other necessary assistance for them by making use of their extensive influence in the other African States formerly mentioned. Based on our evaluation, if the Shiite uprising in Nigeria assumes a regional dimension, it would place Nigeria in a very complicated position in her war against domestic insurgent groups which has already overstretched Nigeria's resources. Nigeria cannot afford another new entrant in addition to the plethora of insurgency issues which she is already handling.

Nigeria has a lot to be careful about in her dealings with Iran because due to certain decisions she has taken in the past which were obviously detrimental to Iranian interest. She has every cause to sleep with one eye opened because Nigeria cannot perfectly vouch for Iran's good intentions towards her. According to Ekemenah (2019), two significant events which have placed Nigeria in a position of a potential foe in Iran's evaluation are participation in the United Nations 2010 voting exercise which condemned Iran's nuclear programme and the signing up to join forces in January 2016 with Saudi's 34 country anti-terrorism coalition with other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Palestinians, Qatar,

Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. However, what was most noticeable in one's evaluation is that this move was obviously against the interest of Shiite majority countries with the palpable absence of Iran, Iraq and Syria. This calls for the Nigerian government to tread carefully in her diplomatic romance with Iran and counter all measures of using the IMN as an instrument to compromise her security.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to examine some salient issues about the Shiite Uprising in Nigeria. Some of these include the origin of the movement, the grouse they have with the government, the role played by the media in resolving the conflict, the significance or effect of Iranian links with the group on their ideology and ways of acting, diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Iran and the possible implications of Iranian involvement with the Shiites on Nigeria's domestic security and Africa at large. At this point, one can submit that it is indeed too early to predict the evolution of the IMN into a full-blown terrorist group, but the careless handling of their affairs by the Nigerian government can have unpalatable consequences for Nigeria's security and diplomatic affairs in general.

Recommendations

Based on the above predictions and possible outcomes of Iranian involvement with the IMN, it is pertinent for the Nigerian government to consider these following suggestions which could serve as a guide to the amicable resolution of the Shiite uprising and de-escalation of an already gathering hurricane on the national landscape.

- First and foremost, what is obvious in the IMN and government clashes is the excessive use of force and the suppressive tendencies of Nigerian Security Personnel in the handling of the whole issue. Various Non-governmental bodies have called the attention of the government to be more diplomatic in dealing with the Shiite unrest and create room for dialogue. In this sense, a round-table discussion between representatives of government and the IMN is not out of place to identify and address the root causes of the IMN agitations. The

continual ostracizing body language of the government will only provide a lee-way for political opportunists to use the group to their advantage.

- The Nigerian government should exemplify the democratic ideals she proclaims by obedience to the rule of law. What is evident in the present dispensation is that Nigeria continues to pay lip service to democratic ideals while in actual sense, she tends to manifest some authoritarian tendencies. If the government had obeyed the court ruling about granting bail to Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzaky from when it was pronounced, she would have not experienced an escalating violent pre-disposition on the part of the IMN. From the start. The government seemed to portray a body language of “might is right” which will only keep aggravating the situation.
- The fight against terrorism is no longer a purely domestic affair due to the international dimension of contemporary terrorism. Based on the intelligence report previously mentioned about the presence of the IRG-QF, the Hezbollah and other associating terrorist cells in other African countries like Ivory Coast, Senegal and Sierra Leone among others, it is pertinent for Nigeria to initiate collaborative action with other African countries to tackle Iranian menace. Intelligence networks should be established across the various African States to monitor Iran's activities and to curtail an outright situation of the violation of the territorial integrity of African States. In diplomatic affairs and any sphere of human endeavour, the best way to tackle a problem is to truncate its growth even before it begins to manifest. It is believed that this strategy is most appropriate in this kind of situation.
- The Nigerian government should desist from showing signs of diplomatic weakness. In this sense, any misconduct on the part of Iranian citizens in Nigeria which can be traced to the government of Iran should be met with severe consequences. For example, the 2010 incident where shipments of missile heads to the Gambia

were intercepted by the Nigerian government, led to the severing of diplomatic ties between Gambia and Iran. Also, other African states such as Djibouti, Sudan, Comoros and Somalia have not hesitated to sever diplomatic ties with Iran in the past in the face of the latter's misconduct. One can then wonder what stopped Nigeria from taking drastic actions in the face of the 2013 discovery of a planned attack on American and Saudi interests in Nigeria. Could it be fear or timidity in the light of Nigeria's self-awareness of her structural deficiency?

- The Nigerian State should desist from any behaviour or body language which seems to endorse a mindset that the IMN are outcasts or unacceptable within the Muslim community. They should not be punished for holding alternative views quite different from the larger Muslim body. Their diversity and uniqueness should be acknowledged, respected and employed in the overall surge towards the growth and development of the Muslim world and Nigeria at large.
- Lastly, the media should endeavour to report on media crisis from the point of view of religious rights and freedoms and not from political dimensions.
- The media can play a role in furthering peaceful resolution of the Shiites' conflict with the Government and should report in a manner that promotes peace.

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