

The Conflict Studies And Analysis Project (CSAAP) at The Global Initiative For Civil Stabilisation

Assessment Paper

Assessing The Impacts Of A Potential US-Iran War On Nigeria

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Authors Point Of View:

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Summary

With US-Iranian confrontation seemingly spinning closer to all-out war, Nigeria's current administration and the national security establishment, are worried about the potential fallout of a US-Iran war on national and regional stability and security.

Text

Relations between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which were established during the regime of the Shah, while nominally cordial, are underlined by Nigerian efforts to counter Iranian moves to initiate a proxy war with Israel and the United States on Nigerian soil.

This silent confrontation began when Iranian-backed converts to Shi'ism led by Ibrahim Az-Zakzaky[1] established a group called the Islamic Movement of Nigeria- which organised and propagated the Khomeinist doctrine of Wilaayatul-Faqih, starting from the 1980's, and was soon recognised as a nascent Iranian proxy[2].

While the Az-Zakzaky-led Islamic Movement of Nigeria(IMN), initially tried to develop an extensive armed capability, an intense coordinated security campaign to ensure the group was kept disarmed - which ran through the 90's and 2000's during both military and civilian governments - ensured that by 2012 the group was largely demilitarised.

In 2010 a weapons shipment containing 107mm rockets, assault rifles, rocket launchers and associated ammunition, from Iran was intercepted at the Port of Lagos, in Southwestern Nigeria[3]. This shipment, although destined ultimately for the Gambia, was routed through Lagos by a Nigerian Shia with links to Az-Zakzaky, acting as an agent for Iran's Revolutionary Guards-Quds Force (IRG-QF)[4].

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At the time the head of the Quds Force's Unit 6000 (the section responsible for African operations of the IRG-QF) Ali Akbar Tabatabaie was in Nigeria on a non-diplomatic passport, and together with the head of IRG-QF operations in Nigeria, Azim Adhajani who was directly fingered in the investigation, fled to hide in the Iranian Embassy in Abuja, escaping arrest by mere minutes[5]. Mr Tabatabaie remained inside the Embassy, until with tacit approval of Nigeria's government[6], he was exfiltrated out of Nigeria on the plane of the Iranian Foreign Minister when he came for a visit four months later. Mr Adhajani would later be surrendered by the Iranian government, held by the Nigerians for two years before being tried and sentenced to five years in prison[7].

Three years later, the State Security Service (SSS), Nigeria's internal security agency, arrested three Iranian assets, part of a locally recruited terror network, for plotting to attack American and Israeli interests in Nigeria. This cell was also accused of plotting to kill the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Nigeria[8].

In the past ten years, Nigeria has expelled or asked to be withdrawn, two Iranian Ambassadors, for their involvement in covert Iranian operations deemed detrimental to Nigeria's national security[9].

Iran's efforts in the late 2000's and in the last decade, to coopt the government of the Gambia, (a small West Africa country long considered a Nigerian satellite state[10]), prompted Nigeria to prevail on the then Gambian President Yahya Jammeh, to sever diplomatic ties with Iran in 2010 after the Iranian arms shipment was intercepted in Lagos. From 2015, with Iran's intelligence and covert operations networks in Nigeria largely considered degraded, Nigerian-Iranian relations mostly shifted from being governed by the security agenda to a new foundation on economic ties.

On assuming office in 2015 Nigeria's president, Muhammadu Buhari, had to simultaneously deal with the falling oil prices and decreased revenues for the Nigerian government which is largely dependent on oil, along with the return of Iranian oil to the international market as sanction reliefs under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action(-JCPOA)[11]between Iran and world powers worried about its nuclear programme, kicked in. In addition, Nigeria's dream of becoming a supplier of cheap Liquefied Natural Gas(LNG) to European markets was also threatened by the lifting of sanctions on Iran.

To smooth over the various points of potential conflict, Nigeria's president visited Tehran ostensibly in November 2015 to attend a summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum(GECF)[12].

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While billed for a bilateral working meeting with President Hassan Rouhani, President Buhari would however be received in a special audience by Supreme Leader Khomeini[13], including a closed door meeting between the two leaders with only their translators present.

US-Iran Confrontation

Reduced Iranian oil exports on the international oil scene, since the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and the reimposition of US sanctions on Iran, is benefiting Nigeria through increased revenue from oil sales. However a potential war between Iran and the United States, comes with a mixed bag of expectations for Abuja.

Nigeria is for religious and historical reasons[14] closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates and for cultural and historical reasons it is also firmly tied to the Western powers. In addition, Nigeria has long running and strong security relationships with Israel and Jordan, two countries that have not been shy about their anti-Iran credentials in recent times. However while Nigeria ultimately believes that although Iran is an unconventional anti-Westphalian state, it also see Iran as very much containable and open conflict should be the last option to be used in confronting it[15].

Recent American moves that seem to signal an escalation toward open conflict, unnerve Nigerian national security officials, as there is a strong belief that pro-Iran elements - IRG-QF assets and linked cells that are still existing across the country,

and Hezbollah's extensive West African infrastructure particularly in Southwest Nigeria and the neighbouring Republic of Benin - might be activated to carry out terror attacks against US and Israeli interests in Nigeria and its immediate environs. Thus straining even more, already stressed counterterrorism resources of the Nigerian government.

In addition, Hezbollah's extensive infrastructure in Côte D'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Senegal, could be used to carry out attacks in those countries against Western interests. In both Sierra Leone and Côte D'Ivoire there is a growing pro-Iran Shia population fueled by Iranian proselyting. An insufficient local counterterror capability means Nigeria will be expected to provide support to stabilise these two countries which are fragile, perhaps together with France (in Côte D'Ivoire) and the United Kingdom(in Sierra Leone), depending on domestic politics in those countries. This is a potential responsibility that will further drain on Nigeria's heavily strained resources.

However, a positive side-effect of a US-Iran war on Nigeria, will be the expected collapse of Iran's oil and gas economic sectors for a period of time, which will inevitably drive up global oil prices to Nigeria's benefit. Currently, Nigeria's government spends about 60% of its income on debt repayments[16]. Increased global oil and gas prices will expand its margin of income and impact on what it has available to spend on big ticket infrastructural projects in the next four years of the current administration.

END NOTE

[1] Loimeier, Roman, "Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria".

[2] In the late seventies and early eighties, a young Az-Zakzaky who had been an activist affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood current, had led protests against Nigeria's secular state dominated by a military and political elite that were mostly split between Capitalists, Socialists and Marxist-Leninists. Arrested multiple times and largely shunned in polite society, Az-Zakzaky had found the 1979 Iranian Revolution to be an inspiration, and by 1982 he had converted to Shi'ism and began leading the clarion call for a revolution emulating Iran's to happen in Nigeria, in addition with working with other converts to Shi'ism, most of whom had studied in Iran, to propagate the Shia faith, and also build the necessary structure to carry out the hoped for revolution. This organisation, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, while portrayed by its members as Islamic and not specifically Shia, was however, by the early 90's, identified by Nigeria's intelligence services, as a proxy for Iran's Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force.

[3] Tattersall Nick. Reuters 2010. "Weapons Seized In Nigeria, Came From Iran: Shipping Company. Retrieved from:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-weapons/weapons-seized-in-nigeria-came-from-iran-shipping-company-idUSTRE69T1YT20101030>

[4] US Treasury Department. "Treasury Targets Iranian Arms Shipments". March 27, 2012. Retrieved from:

<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx>

[5] Author's conversation with officials in the know of details of the operation to shut down IRG-QF network in Nigeria post 2010.

[6] Ibid

[7] Reuters. 2013. Nigeria Gives Iranian, Nigerian, Fives Years For Arms Smuggling. Retrieved from:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-iran/nigeria-gives-iranian-nigerian-five-years-for-arms-smuggling-idUSBRE94C0QS20130513>

[8] Mazen, Maram. Bloomberg News. "Nigeria Arrests Iran Linked Suspects Planning Attacks." Retrieved from:

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-02-20/nigeria-arrests-iran-linked-suspects-planning-attacks>

[9] Hussein Abdullahi, a known Iranian Revolutionary Guard-Intelligence Organisation operative was forced to leave in 2010, officially for permitting Tabatabaie and Adhajani to receive sanctuary in the Embassy and thus posing a direct threat to Nigeria's national security. However some sources the author spoke to, say that he was an operative of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence rather than the IRG-IO. Saeed Koozechi, was expelled/or was withdrawn on Nigerian insistence in 2016 when he made comments deemed inimical to Nigeria's national interests, by interfering through his words on the Nigerian Army's 2016 crackdown on Ibrahim Az-Zakzaky and his followers.

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Koozechi was said to be an IRG-QF operative, and is said to have personally overseen the subsequent rebuilding of the structure to support IRG-QF operations in Nigeria following the near total destruction of that network between 2010 and 2015.

[10] Over the course of the Gambia's history since its independence in 1965, Nigeria has played a large role in its affairs, acting as a balance to Senegalese influence. The 1994 coup which brought Yahya Jammeh to power, was reported backed by Nigeria's military ruler at the time, General Sani Abacha, and his removal in 2017 was negotiated and signed off on by Nigeria's current president, Muhammadu Buhari. From 1965, Nigeria has continuously provided technical state building assistance to the Gambia, sending doctors, teachers, judges and bureaucrats to serve in that country's service, and also training Gambians to be able to take over these roles. This is in addition to providing training and advisory support to the Gambia's military.

[11] The JCPOA was negotiated by Iran, the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union, to address Iran's nuclear enrichment programme, which was viewed as posing a threat to international peace and stability. As part of the terms of the deal under which Iran agreed to restrictions on its enrichment programme, the US and the other parties committed to lift specific sanctions on Iran, including sanctions targeting Iranian oil. In 2018, US President, Donald J. Trump announced that his country was withdrawing from the JCPOA, automatically bringing back US sanctions on Iran.

[12] Vanguard NG. 2015. "President Buhari Arrives Tehran For 3rd GECF Summit". Retrieved from: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/11/president-buhari-arrives-tehran-for-3rd-gecf-summit/>

[13] Leader.ir. 2015. "Leader meets with Nigerian President in Tehran". Retrieved from: <https://www.leader.ir/en/pictures/13882/The-Leader-meeting-with-the-Nigerian-President-in-Tehran?category=1&year=2017>

[14] In addition to being a Muslim majority country, Nigeria is currently being governed by an elite from Muslim parts of Northern Nigeria. Muslims from Northern Nigeria, also form a relative majority within the defence and national security establishment, and a significant minority in the foreign service.

[15] Author's conversations with Nigerian national security and foreign service officials.

[16] Stears.NG. 2018. "Nigeria Is Going Broke". Retrieved from: <https://www.stearsng.com/article/nigeria-is-going-broke>