

## Saudi Arabia-Led Islamic Military Alliance Against Terrorism and Nigeria's Policy Somersault

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### Abstract

Saudi Arabia initiative to lead an Islamic Military Alliance of 34 countries against terrorism is characterized by ambivalence and skewed membership to exclude rival Shi'a ideological nations. The timing of the initiative bears indices of panicky foreign policy to maintain the balance of regional power with Iran now free from economic sanctions. Nigeria, tormented by Boko Haram, a Sunni Wahhabi al-Qaeda terrorist organization, has always received cold shoulders from Saudi Arabia, despite appeals for assistance, which informed Nigeria's initial rejection of membership of the Islamic Alliance. This has led to desperate arm twisting and foreign policy somersault. This paper has put in perspective the rhetorics of the Islamic military alliance and Nigeria's twisted foreign policy dictated by desperate national economic interests.

**Key words:** Terrorism; Foreign policy; Boko Haram; Alliance; Islam; Wahhabi; Shi'a

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### INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, a motley crowd of 59 different groups across the world has been officially designated as international terrorist organizations by the United States

Government (State Department, 2016), out of which about 80% of them have strong religious ideological background driving their activities. The spread and pervasiveness of such organizations capable of deploying violence have ruled out any perception in the international community that any country is excluded from terrorist attacks. The spate of terrorist attacks has been enduring over the years, and the perception of insecurity embedded in the psyche of many governments in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, North and Latin America, and Europe.

Reuters (2001) puts in perspective the value—laden challenges in defining a terrorist organization by noting that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. The quest for a value—free understanding of the concept of terrorism has been inconclusive. The various perspectives have oscillated between focus on the political violence, and the motives and justification for the international activities of the terrorist organizations (Nacos, 2006). The United Nations General Assembly (1994) viewed terrorism as criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, groups of persons, or particular persons for political purposes which are, in any circumstances, unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, racial, ethnic, religious and other nature that may be invoked to justify them. While the liberal nations accept the perspective of the United Nations General Assembly's view of terrorism, countries in the Organization of Islamic Conference (2002) insist that the concept of terrorism and the legitimate struggle of a group against oppressive foreign occupation destroying their cultural values cannot go together. The US Defense Department sees international terrorism as the unlawful or threatened use of force or violence against individuals or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, ideological, or religious objectives (Hoffman, 1998). It is imperative to notice that terrorist organizations have the preponderance to religious, racial

or ethnic beliefs in explaining their actions or threats; the usual targets of violence which are unarmed civilians who are non-combatants or unsuspecting nationals of certain countries or members of a particular religious or social groups; and the perpetrators who are largely nonstate actors whether they are subgroups or individuals (Nacos, 2006). However, this explanation of international terrorism seems blind to the critical issue of state—sponsored or supported terrorism in furtherance of foreign policy motives in which states, through their proxies, provide financial and technical support to subgroups to unleash violence on unfriendly governments or racial groups within and outside their various countries. During the Cold War period, and in the widening religious divide in the Middle East region, it was cynical for opposing governments to portray the picture of being major victims of international terrorist activities, as the ideological divide between the US—led liberal democracies and Russia—led socialist authoritarian regimes supported right—wing and left—wing subgroups respectively to upstage political and economic structures in different countries (Crenshaw, 1983; Herman & O’Sullivan, 1989). Governments in the Middle East with dominant Sunni and Shi’a ideologies and population are offering support to extremist subgroups in opposing states to be effective opposition outlets in their home states.

While O’Brien (1983) insist that it would be difficult to develop a value—free explanation of the concept of terrorism, critically because terrorism was not a scientific classification devoid of emotive understanding, Stohl (1990) presented a sociological perspective with a three—step approach, that terrorism generally involves the act or threat of violence, the emotional reaction to such an act or threat, and the social effects resultant from the acts and reactions, as the terrorists were more interested in the audience effect and not the victims. In general terms, therefore, the key features of activities or structure of an organization that could qualify it as perpetuating acts of terrorism include the following: intrinsically politically—driven in aims and objectives in the long term; usually discreet in operational activities with conspiratorial cells, made up of individuals motivated by ideology and bravery of its leaders, as well as authoritarian in structure and chain of command; deploys or threatens violence targeting agents of state, unarmed civilians, or citizens of unfriendly countries, race or ethnicity; the acts of violence or threats of violence is designed to have serious psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victims; and the violence or threats of violence perpetuated by a nonstate entity or subnational group that could be independent or whose ideological aims are clandestinely supported by a state or group of states, even through proxies (Hoffman, 2006).

The general characteristics enunciated above could be deployed in identifying six very active international terrorist groups that have gained international attention

and serious concern in recent times (DePetris, 2015). The popular and well—organized terrorist organization with a standing military outfit and ultra—conservative ideological illegitimate leadership governing a geographical territory is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Syria (ISIL or ISIS or the Islamic State). This group which gained international attention in 1999 is rooted in Wahhabism and Salafi Jihadism ideology of Sunni Islam (dominant in Saudi Arabia religious culture and exported to other countries), and headquartered in Al Raqqa, Syria, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A major operational highpoint of ISIS, compared with other Islamist terrorist organizations in the international scene, is the ability to overrun, capture and hold large landlocked portions of two sovereign states—Iraq and Syria in the Middle East—in which it declared an Islamic caliphate where the terrorist group imposed political, religious, and economic authority over the inhabitants. Under the imposed strict Sharia law, ISIS has been notorious for extreme human rights abuses and deployment of the social media in showing audio—visual recordings of beheading or execution of civilians and captured soldiers, as well as destruction of cultural heritage sites. The military and human rights activities of ISIS have also attracted US and Russia—led military bombardments of the group, and its rebel allies, to stop its territorial ambition and plans to overrun the governments of Iraq and Syria respectively. Russian President, Vladimir Putin, in mid March 2016, ordered the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria claiming it had achieved its goal of pushing back and weakening ISIS and other rebel groups from overthrowing the Syrian Arab Republic authorities in Damascus (Al Jazeera, 2016).

The Al-Qaeda is another very active terrorist organization founded in August 1988 by the original leaders comprising Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam and other volunteers initially to fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The al-Qaeda is a global militant group, without territorial control and governance like ISIS, pursuing the ideology of the supremacy of the Sunni Wahhabi jihadist religious ideas of arresting foreign influences in muslim countries, strict enforcement of Sharia laws and creation of a new caliphate ruling over the Middle East. The group took the global community by surprise with September 11, 2001 simultaneous hijack of commercial airlines that slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centres in New York and the Pentagon Building in Washington DC. It is the most widespread terrorist group and has outlets operating in the Maghreb, West Africa, Arabian Peninsula, India, Somalia, Syria, Sinai Peninsula, Yemen, Iraq, Pakistan and Egypt. ISIS initially pledged its allegiance to al-Qaeda, but both groups fell apart in 2014 to pursue their hegemonic struggle for religious authority and political relevance (BBC, 2014; Reuters 2014). Another active international terrorist group is Boko Haram which operates

largely in the northeastern geopolitical zones of Nigeria, northern Cameroun, parts of Chad and Niger Republic. It was founded in 2002, and has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and ISIS. Boko Haram is a Wahhabi fundamentalist sect driven by the ideology of Wahhabism and Salafism, advocating enforcement of Sharia law and contempt for Western education. Like ISIS and al-Qaeda, Boko Haram seeks the establishment of an Islamic State in Nigeria, and has been notorious for kidnappings, suicide bombing and destruction of public infrastructures in the northern parts of the country. Besides, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Quds Force, founded in 1979, is another active terrorist organization based in Tehran, Iran, and pledges its allegiance to the Supreme Religious Leader in Iran. It is a militia rooted in Islamic Shi'a ideological perspective, and opposed to ISIS and operates to support other terrorist groups in the Middle East as a foreign policy instrument to improve on Iran's regional hegemony in the region. The Quds Force has operational cooperation, in terms of financial aid and arms shipment, with violent groups like the Lebanese Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Syria's Bashar al-Assad (DePetris, 2015). The other two active groups are the Haqqani Network and the Kata'ib Hezbollah. The former (Haqqani Network) founded in 1980 on ideology of Deobandi fundamentalism and operational on both sides of the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders, has longstanding violent attacks on US – led NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces and Afghan government institutions. The latter (Kata'ib Hezbollah) operational in 2003, on the ideology of Shi'a ideology of Islam, and based in southern Iraq, is an Iraqi Shi'a paramilitary group active in Iraqi insurgency and Syrian civil war, opposed to ISIS.

## 1. SAUDI ARABIA-LED ISLAMIC INITIATIVE TO COMBAT INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

The idea of a 34-nation Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's knee-jerk military diplomatic contraption in December 2015, in apparent response to the growing Western nations' criticism and concern of other Muslim-populated countries around the world that the Kingdom was not doing enough to tackle the spread of Islamic extremism wrapped in violence. The Islamic Military Alliance, to be operationally headquartered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, has the declared objectives of fighting terrorism and developing the necessary programmes and mechanisms for supporting these efforts, with the core area of military operations listed as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan (curiously Nigeria not listed despite the enduring daily wave of terrorism from Boko Haram). The countries invited into the membership of the Islamic Military Alliance were as follows: Bahrain, Bangladesh,

Benin, Chad, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen (Saudi Arabia Foreign Affairs, 2015).

The membership indicates that almost 60% are members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), and 59% are African countries with muslim population. The geopolitical spread of the countries listed encompasses the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. However, Indonesia, the country with the highest population of muslims, oil-rich Iran and Iraq, as well as war-ravaged Syria in the Middle East were not listed, same for Afghanistan, Azerbarjan and Tajikistan with dominant muslim population. Critically, Iran, a regional power in the Middle East, was deliberately not listed by Saudi Arabia as a muslim nation she could form an alliance with to fight Islamic terrorism. Viewed from the ideological and religious rivalry between the Saudi Arabia-led Islamic Sunni Wahhabism and Iran-led Islamic Shi'a bifurcation of the practices of Islam and influence on muslims worldwide, the Saudi initiative of the Islamic Military Alliance was a foreign policy instrument largely to protect the national power interest of the ultra-conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi rhetorics of an Islamic Military Alliance could be viewed from the political realist theoretical perspective in which its foreign policy was to engage in international politics of sustenance of the status quo and display of power prestige with the assemblage of 34 nations to its Islamic cause. Morgenthau and Thompson (1985) described nations' foreign policy as international politics with three basic patterns aimed at the struggle for power. They posited that the foreign policy of status quo is targeted at the maintenance of the prevailing distribution of power, the policy of imperialism seeks the overthrow of the prevailing power distribution structure and a reversal of the power relations, while the foreign policy of prestige is the pleasant by-product of actions and strategies with the ultimate objectives of increasing the perception of influence and sustenance of power. Thus, foreign policy of nations seeks to keep power, increase power or demonstrate power in the international arena at all times.

As a regional power, with immense military, economic and religious influence in the Middle East, and in the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia seek to maintain the prevailing balance of power in its favour, especially in relation to Iran as a rival power in the regional geopolitics. By taking the initiative to establish and warehouse in Riyadh the 34-nation Islamic Military Alliance, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia developed a foreign policy instrument to sustain her hegemony and primal position in the Middle East especially and in the global Muslim community. As a corollary, the foreign policy thrust of

Saudi Arabia is also to demonstrate prestige as it seeks to “impress other nations with the power one’s own nation actually possesses, or with the power it believes, or wants the other nations to believe, it possesses” (Morgenthau & Thompson, 1985, p.87). By the readiness to host the Islamic Military Alliance and lead in displaying military force, the foreign policy of prestige is deployed both as a deterrent to, and a preparation for, war. The political rhetorics are encapsulated in the propaganda which is aimed at increasing the prestige of ones own side, deflate that of the rivals and impress or influence the weaker nations in the Muslim-dominated Middle East region especially. In international politics, alliances, especially in dealing with economic and military interests, are instruments deployed to achieve definitive gains in power relations in terms of status quo sustenance, imperialistic tendencies to reverse power relations, and reputation display. Goldstein (2008) explained that an alliance, in international power politics, is a coalition of states that coordinate their actions and inactions to accomplish defined ends, and have the primary purpose of augmenting their collective power relative to other states not in the coalition. Therefore, most alliances thrive as a response to a perceived threat, and are marriages of convenience based on national interests that may be dynamic. Alliances recognize the sovereignty of states, and its cohesion as well as aggregate power capabilities could determine its credibility to achieve its purpose, and earn international respect. Thus, Saudi Arabia initiative of the Islamic Military Alliance is an intergovernmental cooperation of 34 countries with Muslim population in the Middle East, Africa and Southern Asia to fight a supposed common cause—Islamic international terrorism already giving the religion a negative image in the international community, destroying the economy and infrastructures in the Middle East, and seeking to overthrow regimes on the opposing divide of the ideological beliefs in Islam

## 2. SAUDI ARABIA MILITARY CAPABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in which the Al Saud dynasty holds the monopoly of political and judicial power and directs religious practices, is the second largest state in the Arab world (after Algeria). The country boasts of two sea coast outlets—the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf—with immense economic power arising from its crude oil production capacity and reserves. Saudi Arabia hosts the two holy Mosques in Islam in Mecca and Medina. In the Middle East and across the world, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has demonstrated very serious interest in its security with high military expenditures. In 2013, Saudi Arabia’s military expenditures hit \$67 billion in weaponry acquisition and training, making it the highest in the Middle East region, and ahead of the United Kingdom,

France and Japan (Al Jazeera, 2014). The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reports that out of the 15 countries with the highest military expenditures in the world in 2014, Saudi Arabia was adjudged the fourth globally, with the United States of America leading with \$610 billion; China (\$216 billion); Russia (\$84.5 billion); Saudi Arabia (\$80.8 billion); France (\$62.3 billion); and the United Kingdom (\$60.5 billion) (SIPRI, 2014). The London—based International Institute for Strategic Studies assessment of military expenditures in the world for 2015 indicated that Saudi Arabia had moved up to the third highest position globally in military related purchases. According to the Institute (2015), the USA still leads the pack of 10 world highest spenders on military on military hardware and training with \$597.5 billion; followed by China (\$145.8 billion); Saudi Arabia (\$81.8 billion); the United Kingdom (\$56.2 billion); and Russia (\$51.6 billion).

**Table 1**  
**World Highest Military Expenditures—2014**  
**(Attached)**

Rank	Country	Amount (\$ billion)	Percentage of GDP
1	USA	610	3.5
2	China	216	2.1
3	Russia	84.5	4.5
4	Saudi Arabia	80.8	10.4
5	France	62.3	2.2
6	United Kingdom	60.5	2.2
7	India	50.0	2.4
8	Germany	46.5	1.2
9	Japan	48.5	1.0
10	South Korea	36.7	2.6
11	Brazil	31.7	1.4
12	Italy	30.9	1.5
13	Australia	25.4	1.9
14	UAE	22.8	5.1
15	Turkey	22.6	2.2

Source: *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Report* (www.sipri.org, 2014).

**Table 2**  
**Top 10 World Military Spending Countries – 2015**  
**(Attached)**

Rank	Country	Spending(\$Bn)	% of GDP	Per capita \$
1	USA	597.5	3.3	1,859
2	China	145.8	1.2	106
3	Saudi Arabia	81.8	12.9	2,949
4	UK	56.2	2.0	878
5	Russia	51.6	4.1	362
6	India	47.9	2.2	35
7	France	46.7	1.9	702
8	Japan	41.0	1.0	323
9	Germany	36.6	1.1	454
10	South Korea	33.4	2.4	681

Source: *International Institute for Strategic Studies* (London: Routledge, 2015).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has eight countries as neighbours namely Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the Sultanate of Oman, Yemen and Bahrain. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has acquired sophisticated military weapons from Western allies especially the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France to protect her national interests and territorial integrity. Between 1951 and 2006, the USA sold high technology military arsenal worth over \$80 billion to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and over a four-year period (2010- 2014), military hardware imported by the Kingdom were 38 combat helicopters from the USA, 45 combat aircraft from the United Kingdom, 600 armoured vehicles from Canada, as well as outstanding orders involving 154 combat aircraft from the USA and 27 other fighter aircraft from the United Kingdom (SIPRI, 2014). In 2010, the US State Department had announced to the US Congress that the biggest arms sales deal in American history to a single country worth a whopping \$60.5 billion had been sealed with the Saudi Arabia (Teitelbaun, 2010). The probability is high that, in terms of high-tech military weaponry, and immense support from the Western allies, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the capability to propagate the foreign policies of status quo and prestige in the region in the Middle East and the Muslim world. The critical issue is whether the conservative authorities in Saudi Arabia would turn same military arsenal against hard line religious adherents propagating the approved Sunni Wahhabism brand of Islam abroad and seeking to extend the influence of the Kingdom in the Muslim world, against countries driven by rival Shi'a ideological perspectives in the teaching and practices of Islam. Already, the initial objective of the Saudi—led Islamic Military Alliance is to tackle terrorists in Iraq, Syria and Libya. These are countries that have Shi'a—biased political leadership in place, and have been seriously contending with the Sunni Wahhabi—friendly ISIS and other rebel groups in the battlefields. The neutrality of Saudi Arabia in the military alliance, and its interest to secure and stabilize rival Islamic religious adherents in political authority in other countries seem far-fetched.

### **3. NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY SOMERSAULT**

Nigeria has been grappling with the dreaded terrorist group, Boko Haram, a Wahhabi al-Qaeda violent organization, very vicious in its operations against the Nigerian state and innocent civilians. Described as the Nigerian Talibans, the ultra—conservative group took on a violent approach to its activities after the extra—judicial killing of its original founder, Muhammad Yusuf, by Nigerian security forces in Borno State, and was succeeded by radicalized Abubakar Shekau. The group launched its first attack on the medium security

prison in Bauchi in September 2010, and freed over 700 inmates, including 150 Boko Haram members (Sani, 2010). By adopting the tactics of the Talibans and al-Qaeda, the Nigerian—based terrorist group launched series of shootings and suicide attacks on churches and later mosques as well as public places with civilian population like markets, and bus stops; bombings of public infrastructures; and kidnapping of civilians especially young females; deployment of the social media for propaganda to create fear in the minds of the public, and declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda and later ISIS. The international connections of Boko Haram opened the floodgate of heavy weaponry, communication gadgets and guerrilla warfare training from insurgents abroad with the support of Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), MUJAO in Sub-Saharan Africa, Al-Shabbab in Somalia, and rebel groups in Libya (Alli & Ogunwale, 2011; Ogunseye 2012). The terrorist organization in Nigeria, which has killed over 20,000 persons, had operational cooperation with ANSARU until 2012 when the latter disagreed with Boko Haram over the killing of fellow Muslims following the attacks in Kano in January 2012 leading to the death of 150 innocent civilians, mostly muslims (Zenn, 2013).

The linkages of Boko Haram to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have been quite established. Apart from its ideological slant of Sunni Wahhabism, the predominant Islamic culture approved by the Saudi politico—religious leadership and allowed amongst the population in the Kingdom, Boko Haram once felt comfortable to demand that Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia, should be the location for a botched ceasefire negotiation between it and the Federal Government of Nigeria (Mark, 2012). Boko Haram leaders have utilized same Saudi Arabian location for discussion with al-Qaeda leaders during the lesser hajj (umra) in August 2011, and the funding of the terrorist organization has been traced to certain organizations in Saudi Arabia with the assistance of AQIM (Adisa, 2012). In 2004, Boko Haram's founder, Muhammad Yusuf, took refuge in Saudi Arabia in a tactical move to evade the initial crackdown on the violent inclinations of the group by Nigerian security forces (Zenn, 2013).

Thus, when Nigeria was listed amongst the 34 countries proposed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to be part of the Islamic Military Alliance to fight terrorism, Nigeria outrightly rejected the offer of membership. Although the details of the Saudi initiative were sketchy, Nigeria was neither excited nor convinced about the sincerity of the Saudis, principally based on the established historical, religious, financial and intelligence linkages of Boko Haram to Saudi Arabia's brand of religious extremism, and the lukewarm attitude of the Saudi authorities to Nigeria's initial plea for assistance to stem the wave of violent activities of the terrorist group in Nigeria. Following the bilateral meeting between

President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria and the King of Saudi Arabia, Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz, in Riyadh, in February 2016, the Nigerian President told the world, in an official statement, that Nigeria would not honour the Saudis' invitation to join the Islamic States Military Coalition, noting that "even if we are not part of it, we support you, especially your efforts in keeping the peace and stopping the spread of terror in your region." (Shehu, 2016, p.1). Nigeria had specifically directed Saudi Arabia's efforts to the Middle East, as the Kingdom has shown disinterest in the terrorist activities in Nigeria for several years on. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has not offered Nigeria any financial or technical assistance despite Nigeria's desperate appeals for international assistance. Three critical reasons could account for this. First, Saudi's national interest is the promotion of the Sunni variant of Islamic culture across the world through the vehicle of Wahhabi ideology, and that was part of the religious mission of Boko Haram, in addition to its political objective of setting up an Islamic state, probably to be mentored by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Second, Saudi Arabia treated Boko Haram issues as an African affair that should be handled as peripheral to its core security interests, and not capable of reversing the balance of power in the Middle East. Thirdly, Saudi Arabia would not want to upset her major Western allies, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, which held back any form of financial and technical assistance from Nigeria despite their rhetorics of fighting terrorism anywhere in the world. In 2014, the US government placed an arms embargo on Nigeria on the allegations of human rights abuses by the Nigerian Army fighting guerrilla warfare, and ensured that its allies, including the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, frustrated arms sales to Nigeria. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia even refused to grant permission to overfly its airspace in transporting arms to Nigeria (Lakemfa, 2016). The hard line policy of the Saudis is reflective of the peripheral position of Nigeria's stability and internal security to Saudi Arabia's national interests.

However, the international community, and Nigerians indeed, were taken aback by the policy somersault of the Nigerian government a fortnight later, when same President Buhari announced in an interview in Al Jazeera news network that:

We (Nigeria) are part of it (the Islamic Military Alliance) because we have terrorists in Nigeria that everyone knows. So, if there's an Islamic Coalition to fight terrorism, Nigeria will be part of it because we are the casualties of Islam terrorism. (Al Jazeera, 2016)

The Nigerian leader rationalized that Boko Haram has pledged allegiance to ISIS which was terrorizing certain Islamic countries, and that troops to the Alliance will be contributed from the Lake Chad Basin Commission, a sub-regional grouping fighting the spread of Boko Haram, comprising Benin, Cameroun, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

The policy reversal was the product of serious diplomatic horse trading while the Nigerian President performed the lesser hajj in Saudi Arabia and visited the Qatar Prime Minister, Sheikh Abdullah ibn Khalifah Al Thani. The Saudis desperately needed the membership of Nigeria, as the most populous and influential black nation, to assist garner the support of other listed sub-Saharan African countries and raise the credibility of the Military Alliance.

The political realism of economic survival of Nigeria, buffeted by the serious crisis of low income from crude oil, the main stay of the economy, was the key driving force behind the Nigerian President's state visit to the Saudi King and Qatar authority in February, 2016. The price of crude oil in the international market had fallen to the low ebb of \$27 per barrel in January 2016 (the lowest in 12 years), and Nigeria, which depends on its crude for survival, and prepared the 2016 national budget with an oil sale benchmark of \$38 per barrel, was in economic doldrums. Nigeria require higher oil prices to finance her 2016 national budget of N6.07 trillion, with a deficit of N2.22 trillion (equivalent of 2.16 per cent of her Gross Domestic Product – GDP) and level of borrowing put at N900 billion (foreign) and N946 billion (domestic) (Nigeria Budget Office, 2016). Saudi Arabia's policy since 2014 when the US Shale oil production gathered momentum was to increase production and protect her market share. Purvis (2016) argued that in the global oil market, it is the strategic behavior of the producing titans, not the slow motion supply—demand balance, that has the real power to move the markets. The behavior of Saudi Arabia has shown its intent to increase both production capacity and supply, a pattern still unabated. In response to the growing influence of the US Shale oil in the global market, Saudi Arabia began an ambitious and rapid rig count expansion in its history to increase supply into the market. If this situation persists, Nigeria, with less diversified economy, under the umbrella of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), will remain in serious economic quagmire. As an economic power and the most influential member of OPEC, Saudi Arabia pressured other OPEC members to increase output in an oversupplied market, with the expectation that such move would force higher—cost producers to scale down their operations. Critically, the zero—sum game between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia was the interests between economic survival and the military alliance. Nigeria's policy somersault was to gain the assurance of the Saudi King to intervene in the oil production scenario, and secure his commitment to raise the international price of crude oil (Shehu, 2016), in order to save Nigeria's economy from collapse, and for Saudi Arabia, she recovered from the initial international embarrassment of Nigeria's rejection of membership of the Islamic military alliance. Nigeria desperately needed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to bolster its economic fortunes with new production behavior and cut back

strategies to raise prices and earn foreign exchange. Nigeria's Minister of Petroleum, Ibe Kachikwu, gleefully announced in Doha, Qatar, the strong assurances of the Saudi King to rein in OPEC and non-OPEC members like Russia to agree to freeze production by April 2016, and by implication raise crude oil prices (The Punch, 2016). With the political pressure from Saudi Arabia on other oil producers, Qatar, which holds the Presidency of the OPEC for 2016, also announced that 15 OPEC and non-OPEC producers, accounting for about 73% of the world oil output, were supporting the oil freeze in production in order to raise international prices (The Punch, 2016).

The political economy perspective, not national security concerns, to the Nigerian policy somersault is further indicated by Saudi Arabia's offer to Nigeria liberal financial assistance through the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) to the 19 Northern States where the population of Muslims is significant in Nigeria, and whose economy and public infrastructure are devastated by the violence of Boko Haram insurgents over the past five years (Vanguard, 2016). The offer from the Saudis, through the Islamic Development Bank, was blown open by the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria through the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign and Domestic Debts, Senator Shehu Sani. The major concern of the Senate was the need for the Federal Government of Nigeria to ensure that the foreign aid deal follows due process as prescribed in the Nigerian laws, especially the Debt Management Office Act 2003, External Borrowing Guidelines and approval of the National Assembly (Nation, 2016). It is important to highlight the narrow Islamic interests of the Saudi financial overtures to Nigeria, which limited its financial assistance to the northern states with significant Muslim population. The Islamic Development Bank is a multilateral development financing institution founded in 1973 as a financial arm of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), with the leading investment from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (IDB, 2016).

It is yet to be seen how the membership of the alliance would add military value to the on-going campaign by the Nigerian government and other Lake Chad Basin Commission member countries against the menace of Boko Haram insurgency in the region. The Saudi Arabia authority is yet to offer technical assistance, in terms of weaponry, to the Nigerian government which had sought arms and ammunition in the international market since 2013 to be able to tackle the insecurity in the northeastern parts of the country, and parts of Cameroun, Chad and Niger Republic. While Saudi Arabia has not shown any visible interest in Nigeria's internal security woes with the devastating and perennial attacks of Boko Haram, a Wahhabi Al-Qaeda affiliate, the Islamic Republic of Iran in May 2014 announced that she was ready to extend any

kind of assistance to the Nigeria government to find and free the 276 school girls in Chibok town, in Borno State, Nigeria, kidnapped by the terrorist group (Iranian Foreign Ministry, 2014).

The economic desperation of the Nigerian government made it to downplay the potential threat that the Iran—friendly vibrant and rival Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria could pose to the country's stability, as the proposed membership of the Islamic Military Alliance is glaringly an initiative to protect and defend the Sunni Muslims, with the deliberate exclusion of Iran and Iraq from the membership. In the Middle East geopolitics, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia view Iran as a rival regional power supporting revolt against the traditional Sunni Islamic religious practices dominant in Saudi Arabia and exported to the Muslim world, as well as seeking political re-engineering of the Middle East through the instrumentality of protests for reforms in different countries. The Nigerian authorities also view the Shi'a Muslim population in the northern parts of the country as engineering unwanted rivalry with the Sunni majority population in the country. Nigeria stoked a diplomatic row with Iran over the Nigerian Army killing of members of the Iranian – sponsored and popular Shi'a Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), and arrest of its leader, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky in the northern town of Zaria, Kaduna State, on December 13, 2015. The claim of the Nigerian Army was that members of the Movement who gathered for a ceremony blocked the road and denied access to the convoy of the Chief of Army Staff and his entourage, and in the altercation, gunshots rang out from both the members and soldiers (The Punch, 2015). The hard line approach in dealing with the Movement could be an indicator to crackdown on Islamic fundamentalists, but could also open the window of appeasement to the Saudi—supported Sunni Muslims. There have been worries about the potentiality of Nigeria becoming the staging outposts of terrorist groups arising from the meddlesomeness of Sunni and Shi'a fundamentalist states of Saudi Arabia and Iran. These two Middle East countries have the proclivity of externalizing their differences in national interest pursuits to other Muslim countries utilizing religious ideologies as the vehicle.

Diplomatically, the Saudi pressure on, and economic carrots offered to, Nigeria for urgent policy reversal on membership of the Islamic Military Alliance, was to use Nigeria as the key player in rallying other West and East African countries to project the Saudi initiative. It was expected that the ability to win Nigeria over to the Saudi project could be leveraged on other black African countries listed such as Benin, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Sudan and Togo. Following Nigeria's policy summersault, Saudi Arabia was assured of some troops from the Lake Chad Basin Commission—a coalition of Benin, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroun (not listed for membership of the

Islamic Alliance) contributing soldiers to fight the spread of Boko Haram insurgency.

## CONCLUSION

The timing of the Saudi Arabia initiative of an Islamic Military Alliance is instructive in the geopolitics of the Middle East, as it was announced soon after the USA and other Western allies lifted the international economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The successful implementation of the nuclear and sanction—free deal between Iran and P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and USA, —plus Germany) in collaboration with the European Union, has re-positioned the Islamic Republic of Iran as a rival regional and middle power in the Middle East and in the Muslim world. The deliberate exclusion of Iran from the membership of the Islamic Military Alliance is a testament to the deepened rivalry and extreme divergence in the foreign policies of both states. The discomfort of Saudi Arabia during the Iranian nuclear programme impasse with the Western allies was so strong that Saudi King urged the US to attack Iran and “cut off the head of the snake” (Black & Tisdall, 2010, p.1). Besides, US former ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Robert Jordan, described the eventual success of the Iranian and P5+1 deal and lifting of the economic sanctions as “Saudis worst nightmare” (McDowall, 2013, p.1).

In the theocratic Sunni and Shi’a—dominated States in the Middle East, the distinction between the state and religion is blurred. Ademoyo (2016) posits that the social roots of terrorism traced to Islam could be derived from the exclusivist theological practices of the Salafi Islamic ideology in Saudi Arabia, exported as Wahhabism outside the Kingdom, which insist on Salafi as the authentic Islam and gives no room for dissent. Saudi Arabia is home to the Salafi / Wahhabism ideology as its official sect. The country’s theocracy is a marriage between the Salafi institution and the political structures. Saudi Arabia’s brand of Islamic belief and practices encourages extremism and intolerance, and promotes violent tendencies to enforce obedience and imposition of religious and political ways of life. The extremism and violent tendencies could be seen from the fact that active and vicious Islamic terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and its various global off-shoots, ISIS, MUJAO, al-Shabbab, Boko Haram, ANSARU bear strong imprint of Salafi / Wahhabism ideology. Besides Osama bin Laden who was the leader, 15 out of 19 hijackers of September 11, 2001 bombing of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, as well as the Pentagon, were from Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2010), while in ISIS – occupied Raqqa, the seat of its operations, in mid-2014, all 12 judges of Sharia law and enforcement were Saudis (Economist, 2015). Even the US hold the official

view that its key ally in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, supports terrorist groups, and former Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, said thus: “Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other terrorist groups...donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni (Salafi / Wahhabi—driven) terrorist groups worldwide” (Walsh, 2010, p.1).

Thus, the Saudi initiative is a foreign policy instrument to maintain its hegemonic position and influence in the Middle East, and in the Muslim—populated states in Africa and Southern Asia. Aside from its aversion to republicanism and democratic tendencies that arose from the Arab Spring in 2010, Saudi Arabia is very uncomfortable with the rival regional power, Iran, with the economic sanctions lifted and has the potential to fund irredentist Islamic movements within and outside Saudi Arabia. In packaging the Military Alliance as an “Islamic” coalition but excluding the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq was a foreign policy miscalculation that has diminished the credibility and wider acceptability of the initiative to other critical Muslim nations and the Western world. The ambivalence of the Islamic Military Alliance is further indicated in the lack of extensive diplomatic consultations and planning. The initial responses of the countries listed as members of the military alliance were either silence, surprise or measured optimism but no commitments. Even the US, the leading Western ally of Saudi Arabia, issued an official statement expressing cautious optimism, looking “forward to learning more about what Saudi Arabia has in mind in terms of this coalition” (DeYoung, 2015, p.1).

It is imperative therefore for Nigeria to properly define and protect her national interests in the short and long terms in view of her promised involvement in the Islamic Military Alliance. No doubt, there is no public record of the Nigerian President’s sudden policy reversal being deliberated upon by the Federal Executive Council to x-ray the policy options for Nigeria in view of Nigeria’s peculiar economic, security and secular interests. Besides, the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was not consulted in accepting membership of a foreign military alliance, and puts the Government in bad light of the provisions of Section 12 of 1999 Constitution of the Federation of Nigeria (Alechenu et al., 2016). The economic carrot offered to Nigeria by Saudi Arabia is not an absolute deal, as its success will depend on the initial and continued cooperation of other major oil producers in the international market. Already Iran and Iraq, two major producers who are members of OPEC, have backed out of the new arrangement for production freeze because of the long negative effects of the economic sanctions and long-drawn war respectively on their economy, and have insisted, rather, on seriously raising their daily crude oil production level to pre-sanctions and war times (Sims, 2016). Besides, Kuwait has also insisted that all



stakeholders must be brought to the negotiating table (veiled reference to Iran and Iraq refusal to cooperate) before she could agree to an oil production freeze (Stratfor, 2016).

In Nigeria, the religious peace between Christians and Muslims, especially in the northern parts of the country, is very fragile. Despite the fact that Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federation (1999) declared Nigeria a secular state, the apprehension amongst the Christian folks in the country over the policy somersault of the Nigerian government on membership of an Islamic Military Alliance is predicated on the diminishing reputation of the Federal Government following the inability of its security forces to protect non-Muslims and their residences, places of worship and businesses from unprovoked attacks from Boko Haram insurgents and armed Muslim herdsmen. The Nigerian Christians are not happy over this policy decision on membership of the Islamic—branded military alliance by the Nigerian President, a conservative Muslim with open Islamic convictions, reminiscent of the surreptitious approval of Nigeria's membership of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in 1985 under a military junta headed by General Ibrahim Babangida, another Muslim, who also did not table the matter before the then legislative/executive decision making organ—the Armed Forces Ruling Council. The military elite religious power tussle and public embarrassment for the military regime led to the sack to the second- in-command, Navy Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, in that junta.

The critical issues in countering the violent and guerrilla warfare operations of the terrorist groups are the access to, and purchase of, firearms and sophisticated weaponry with which organized military outfits like ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram raid and resist national armed forces. The ease with which terrorist groups access arms and ammunition is an international issue beyond the capacity of Saudi Arabia and few Muslim—populated countries in an alliance, as arms could be purchased from anywhere in the world. It calls for concerted action to be driven under the UN Security Council.

It is suggested that the double edged anti—terrorism measures that Saudi Arabia could seriously deploy, and within its capability for now, are to deliberately tone down the extremism and intolerance of the Salafi / Wahhabi ideological perspective of Islam being propagated by terrorist groups in other parts of the world, leading to violence and insurgencies; and to seriously cut off financial lifeline from donors and private sources to these terrorist groups that enables them to seek and purchase arm and ammunition, as well pay their fighters and volunteers. The probability that Saudi Arabia would bomb her Sunni brothers propagating the Salafi / Wahhabi Islamic practices, the accepted official culture of the Saudis, and in line with the national interests of the Kingdom, is still far-fetched. The alliance could therefore serve much more as the instrument of containing

opposition terrorist groups spreading imperialistic Islamic ideologies from rival countries, in order to maintain the regional balance of power and influence in Islamic leadership for Saudi Arabia. The alliance has the potential of boosting the prestige of the Kingdom as a hegemon in Islamic power politics in the Middle East, and in the Muslim—populated countries of the world, instead of actually diminishing the violence quotient of terrorist organizations already trailing the blaze in making the world more insecure and unstable. This still leaves Nigeria with its internal insecurity challenge spearheaded by Boko Haram insurgency, and probably more money to spend in acquiring new military hardware, and on welfare of battle-weary soldiers, if the Saudi Arabia keeps her commitment on production freeze and international oil market picks up in pricing.

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