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THE 2006 ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS AND THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

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1.0 Introduction

The Middle East is one region of the world that refuses to go away from the 'Headline News' and 'Breaking News' of major world's news networks. For a variety of reasons, the world's political, economic and financial leaders and statesmen always have more than casual interests in what happens in the region. One of the major intractable political post-World War II problems that continue to task leaders of both small and major states is the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Since the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1979, the Israeli-Palestinian dimension of the conflict has assumed greater regional and international prominence. Governments have risen and fallen; elections have been won and lost; expansionist wars have been rationalised and justified; Arab masses have been mobilised for ends that have nothing to do with the conflict; terrorism and extreme acts of violence in far-flung areas of the world have been carried out in the name of the conflict! Even Osama bin Laden, who initially ignored the Palestinian issue, elevated it to the top as he rallied support for his cause after the horror of 9/11. And when the American troops surrounded Baghdad, Saddam Hussein declared “Long live Iraq, long live Palestine.”

For many state leaders, the conflict has become a foreign policy irritant that they wished they do not have to deal with. It remains the prism through which most Arabs see the US and her allies and continues to provide the distorting vision that makes it harder for many states, big and small, to address other issues. There is, therefore, an interest in any process that can lead either to the escalation or the resolution of the conflict.

In the last five months, three unexpected developments that would impact on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process occurred. The 28 March 2006 Israeli election was unimaginable a few months ago. The founding of a new centrist political party, *Kadima*, in Israel in November 2005 by the former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon drew mass defections and ended a generation of politics in Israel that pitted left-wing *Labour* against right-wing *Likud*. The nation had not recovered from the blow Sharon dealt to the political system when he suffered a more devastating one, a stroke that has left him in a coma since 4 January 2006. Yet a third bolt from the blues – the victory of *Hamas* -- an organisation regarded as terrorist not only by Israel but also by the European Union, United States and their other Western allies – in the 25 January 2006 Palestinian elections.

This Lecture seeks to examine these developments with the aim of assessing their impact on the Palestinian peace process. In doing this, we shall first have a brief overview of the state of the peace process. We shall then discuss the major actors and issues in the Israeli and Palestinian elections. We shall thereafter analyze the results of the elections and examine their possible impact on the peace process.

But first, why should Nigerians bother about a far-away problem at a time when the country has more than a fair share of her own political, security and economic problems? Why not devote time and energy to finding solutions to these myriads of problems, some of which threaten the corporate existence of the county – sectarian violence, violence in the Niger Delta, good governance, personal security, corruption that seems to have become malignant, alleged 'Third Term Agenda', poverty etc?

1.1 Nigeria: Why Interest in the Middle East?

The Middle East has always been important for political, strategic and cultural reasons. Technological advancements and the dictates of modern economy have accentuated its significance. Even with the increasing multiplicity of our complex political, economic and social problems, and in spite of the geographical distance, Nigeria has to monitor developments in the region with keen interests.

The region straddles three continents and is integrally connected to some of the world's most strategic waterways. It is washed by the Mediterranean Sea, Caspian and Red Seas, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This has enhanced its geo-strategic uniqueness and has placed it in the forefront of Great Power politics.

The region is the world's largest producer of crude oil. Besides, it has the world's largest proven reserves of crude oil. Nigeria is a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the oil cartel dominated by its Middle East members. Events in the region and in Nigeria's Niger Delta now instantly affect the world's crude oil markets.

It is also the cradle of three of the world's most impactful religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For millions of Nigerians, the 'Holy Land' is in the Middle East. Tens of thousand of Nigerians strive every year to undertake pilgrimage to either Saudi Arabia or Israel. This has impacted on the lives of Nigerians in areas other than religion. It has been impossible to insulate Nigeria from the politics of the region. Both Israel and the Arabs have worked hard to marry the politics of the Middle East with the religions of Nigerians. Religion has, therefore, created a constituency in Nigeria for the peoples and

countries of the region. Events in the region often create political and economic ripples in Nigeria. Indeed, the country has internalized the politics and problems of the region on a scale sometimes difficult to rationally explain, and oftentimes to the detriment of the people and of the country as a polity. Earlier this year, many Nigerians slaughtered their country men, women and children, wantonly destroyed property with relish, ostensibly because of some cartoons, drawn by one man in far away Denmark, which they never saw, but which were alleged to have run foul of the teachings of Islam.

The Middle East also affects Nigeria in another way. The internationalization of Middle Eastern terrorism should be a major concern to any Nigerian government. Many times some Western embassies in Nigeria have to close down because of Middle Eastern terrorist alert. Many Nigerians took to the streets in some parts of northern Nigeria rejoicing at the terrorist attacks on targets in New York and Washington in September 2001. The Nigerian Police Force was recently reported to be seeking the support of the Israeli government to train Nigeria in counter terrorism methods.

Many times, both the people and governments of Nigeria had been prepared to sacrifice the country's interests on the alter of loyalty to a 'greater force' in the Middle East. For almost two decades, Nigeria took the extreme action of severing mutually beneficial diplomatic ties with Israel, a country with which it had no bilateral conflict. In the process, we put unnecessary stains on our goals of national unity, political stability and economic development. We complicated our major foreign policy objectives of decolonization of the African continent and ending Apartheid in South Africa.

The Peace Process: A Synopsis

The Middle East peace process started by the dramatic moves of the late President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, notably his surprise visit to Jerusalem in 1977, has been a story of progress followed by setbacks, high hopes by letdowns, euphoria by disappointments. It has, however, been in a state of comatose since the failure of the Camp David talks in 2000. Soon after, the second *intifada* (or Palestinian uprising) began.

The second Gulf War, the end of the Cold War and important internal ideological, political and cultural self assessment in Israel, particularly between 1977 and 1991, created opportunities for peace that nobody wanted to miss. Thus, the peace process formally began with the convening of the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991 by President George H.W. Bush of the United States. Talks continued later in Washington. The Madrid process, in addition to bilateral Israeli-Palestinian track, also provided for multilateral negotiations to address regional wide contentious issues like water, refugees, arms control, economic development and the environment.

A 'second track' of series of clandestine meetings between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators hosted by Norway also began. These meetings produced the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords signed in Washington between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. By 1996, the process had produced Israeli-Palestinian Agreement (Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995), a formal peace treaty between Israeli and Jordanian (26 October 1994). This was followed by the establishment of economic and consular relations with Arab States Morocco, Tunisia,

Qatar and Oman. The PLO had moved its institutions and military forces from outside to the inside. The process of building representative political institutions in both Gaza and the West Bank by the Palestinians with the approval of their main opponent, Israel, had also begun. Israeli troops pulled back from Palestinian towns resulting in the establishment of Palestinian self rule in the Gaza Strip and in some towns in the West Bank. Yasser Arafat returned to Palestine and he was subsequently elected as President of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

This was in sharp contrast to what obtained earlier. As Ian S. Lustick aptly observes:

In 1972, the Israeli government declared the Gaza Strip an “inseparable part of the State of Israel”. Israel's “three noes” were a “national consensus” no talks with the PLO, no Palestinian state, and no change in the status of Jerusalem. Before 1992, not only was the Palestinian flag illegal, no political activity of any kind by Palestinians in the territories was permitted.

Consequently, by late 1995, there was a sense of cautious optimism regarding the Oslo process by both Israel and the Palestinians. The euphoria and the hopes engendered by the progress made were rudely interrupted. The Israeli right-wing struck; Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin was assassinated on 4 November 1995 by a young Israeli right wing Bar Ilan University law student, Yigal Amir, who accused the prime minister of violating the sacredness of *Eretz Yisrael* through concessions embedded in the Oslo agreements. This set up a chain

reaction, including calling a snap election which the pro-peace coalition of the Labour alliance, headed by Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres, was supposed to win handsomely. But the Palestinian antagonists of the Oslo process unleashed a spate of terror attacks. A series of four suicide bombings by *Hamas* and Islamic Jihad in February and March 1996 destroyed Peres solid lead over Binyamin Netanyahu, his right wing Likud opponent. The bombings took the lives of seventy Israelis and wounded over two hundred. The opposition exploited the situation as buttressing their claim that Labour's peace policy was mistaken. And Binyamin Netanyahu won. There was expectedly not much progress in the peace process under the *Likud* government of Netanyahu. Although he resumed the suspended talks on the implementation of the Hebron agreement (suspended by Peres following the suicide bombings), he reversed 'the pattern established after the 1993 DOP in which Israel implemented its commitments while the Palestinians delayed or ignored theirs'. 'Reciprocity' and 'lowered expectations' over possible Israeli concessions on any of the key issues of negotiations were the dominant hallmarks of the Netanyahu's era. There was lack of agreement within the government over even the limited progress in the process like the Wye River Memorandum that was signed in October 1998. Election had to be called in 1999, a year earlier than scheduled. For all practical purposes, it is safe to conclude that the peace process slowed to a grinding halt after the assassination of Rabin. Palestinian violence against Israel, and the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories continued.

Ehud Barak of the Labour alliance won the 1999 Israeli elections on the platform of a peace agenda. He promised to bring Israeli troops out of Lebanon, make peace with Syria and resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He brought the troops home from southern Lebanon, not through an agreement with Lebanon but through a unilateral action. The talks with Syria produced no positive results and Israeli-Palestinian angle did not fare any better.

In July 2000, President Bill Clinton convened a peace summit between Barak and Arafat at Camp David in the US. Barak was reported to have made far-reaching concessions to Arafat but which he turned down. The Israeli Prime Minister reportedly offered the Palestinian leader about 97% of the West Bank and Gaza Strip including sovereignty over some parts of East Jerusalem.

Arafat rejected this offer. President Clinton reportedly asked Arafat to make counter proposals but he offered none. By September 2000, the Palestinians unleashed another round of violent attacks against Israeli civilian populations -- the second *intifada* -- especially the suicide bombings. Under intense American pressure another summit was convened in Taba, Egypt in January 2001. This round of talks like the ones in Camp David in July 2000 ended without an agreement. Barak's readiness to even consider concessions on Jerusalem led to the collapse of parliamentary support for his government. A month after Taba, Ehud Barak was swept out of office in the general elections by the right-wing Likud candidate, Ariel Sharon.

Sharon was more concerned with fighting terror than in any peace process. Indeed he came to the conclusion (and President W. bush of

the US agreed with him) that the Israelis had no one to negotiate with as they vowed not to have anything to do with the Arafat again. After the particularly deadly terror attack in a hotel in the coastal Israeli town of Netanya in late March 2002, Sharon launched a military operation against the Palestinians; reoccupying area of the West Bank Israel had vacated under the Oslo agreements. Yasser Arafat headquarters in Ramallah was attacked and he was confined to what remained of the complex until he died in November 2004.

In the mean time, Sharon decided to unilaterally withdraw both settlers and troops from Gaza and from four West Bank settlements of Ganim, Kadim, Sa Nur and Homesh, and started building a 650-kilometre 'separation wall' to separate Israelis from the Palestinians. Sharon reasoned, and most Israelis agreed with him, that Gaza settlements were built primarily to provide security. However, demographic realities and the human and financial cost of Gaza's occupation had made Gaza a potential security liability. In a televised address on the eve of the unilateral 'disengagement' in August 2005, Sharon once more reiterated the rationale for his policy: "We cannot hold on to Gaza for good ... More than a million Palestinian live there, doubling their numbers every generation."

The only serious attempt to revive the peace process after the 'death' of the Oslo process in 2000 was the outlining the principles of a road map for peace by the quartet of the US, Europe, Russia and the United Nations in July 2002. The 'Road Map' was released in April 2003 after the appointment of Mahmoud Abbas as the first Palestinian Prime

Minister. Titled 'A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', the Quartet envisaged a step-by-step process that would lead to 'a final and comprehensive settlement' of the conflict by 2005. However, implementation was contingent on the Palestinians ending all forms of violence and terror against Israel.

However, the most that happened was the acceptance of the plan by both sides. The failure of the Palestinians to stop terror attacks meant that the 'road map' has not amounted much beyond another piece of diplomatic document.

The death of Arafat in November 2004 and the subsequent election of Abbas as the new Palestinian President raised some hopes of a possible breakthrough in the peace process. These hopes were not realised. Palestinian terror continued as Abbas was either not willing or able to rein in the militants. Sharon continued with his unilateral disengagement plan and effected the complete evacuation of Gaza and four West Bank settlements, while still professing to the Road Map. He said he would effect further unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank if the Palestinians could not meet the conditions for negotiations. The strains and politics of the Gaza disengagement led to Sharon's loss of support within his own Likud Party and the Labour Party's withdrawal in November 2005 from the coalition government that implemented the disengagement. Sharon had no real choice than to call an early election. In the process, he left *Likud* which he had helped to form in the 1970s to form a new party, the *Kadima*. Shortly afterwards, he suffered a debilitating stroke and relapsed into coma on 4 January from which he has not recovered.

1.3 The 2006 Elections: The Parties, the Actors, the Issues and the Politics

The Palestinians

The Palestinian Legislative Council was one of the structures provided for in the Oslo Accords that created the PA. The first Palestinian election took place in 1996. Only the main factions of the PLO participated. *Hamas* boycotted the election as well as the presidential election held in January 2005 to elect a successor to Arafat. The breakdown of the Oslo process and the violence that ensued led to the postponement of legislative elections until January 2006.

Under the Palestinian electoral system, half of the 132 seats were elected on the basis of the percentage each of the contesting parties obtained from the national vote. The other half was elected from constituencies. On election day, each voter cast two ballots: one, a national ballot in which voters selected one party from among the contesting parties, and a second in which voters were divided into sixteen multi-member districts or constituencies. Voters could select as many names as there were seats in their district.

The January 2006 elections were contested by the PLO factions, *Hamas* and a number of independent candidates.

Fatah

Fatah was created by Yasser Arafat and his associates, including Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) and Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Muzen) under heavy secrecy while living in Kuwait in the late 1950s. In 1964, the Arab League brought all the Palestinian nationalist movements

under the umbrella of a new organisation, the PLO. In 1974, both the League of Arab States and the United Nations Organisation (UN) recognised the PLO as the only and sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

Since its establishment, *Fatah* has been committed to the full independence and self-determination of the Palestinian people and to building a secular state within historical Palestine. It subsequently became the dominant group in the PLO and has monopolized nearly all aspects of factional power since 1969.

It started armed attacks against Israel and Israeli targets in January 1965 when it launched an armed attack into Israeli territory from southern Lebanon. The PLO was later to move its headquarters to Lebanon after it was violently expelled from Jordan in 1971. Again it had to relocate from Lebanon to Tunisia in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon. The fighters were thereafter stayed in military camps in various Arab countries until the Oslo agreement in 1993. Israel and the PLO formally recognised each other as part of the Oslo Accords, the bulk of PLO members and structures came back to the occupied territories accompanying Arafat who was elected President of the PA in 1996.

Fatah blossomed, in part due to its lack of ideology, as it claimed it represents all Palestinian people with all its classes and sectors. Three militia-type organizations have developed from *Fatah*: the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades; Force 17, a personal security force for PLO leaders; and the *Tanzim* (or organization) militia, which is considered to be an offshoot of *Fatah*. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades emerged

during the second *intifada* and grew out of *Fatah's* need to be seen to be putting up resistance to Israeli occupation.

Internal factions and conflicts became a prominent feature of the organisation. The most damaging of these was the split between the younger generation of activists who had come to prominence during the first *intifada* of the late 1980s and the 'old guard' who had spent years in exile with Arafat. Arafat personal rule encouraged corruption and nepotism. As Rifat Odeh Kassis observes: "One could say that *Fatah's* approach encouraged people with [selfish motives] to join the movement because the way it ran the Authority did not convey the message that it was trying to run any governmental structure based on professionalism and dignity. ... *Fatah* became too old and never managed to turn itself into a modern political party with some discipline." However, the charisma and personal power of Arafat kept the tensions and the schisms under manageable proportions. His death removed the lid of discontent within *Fatah*. Discontent and indiscipline were to have disastrous electoral consequences for the party in the January 2006 election.

Hamas:

Hamas (an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement) is the most influential Palestinian fundamentalist movement. It grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna with branches throughout the Arab world. Founded in December 1987 at the early stages of the first Palestinian *intifada* by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, *Hamas* couches the Palestinian nationalism in Islamic fundamentalism. Israel allegedly tacitly encouraged it in the

late 1980s as a counterforce to the growing authority of the secular and nationalist PLO. It has a political and military wing (the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade), although distinctions between the two are often blurred. It is committed to the destruction of Israel, the replacement of the PA with an Islamist state on all the lands of historic Palestine. It views violence against Israeli targets (including civilian) as legitimate resistance. Its leaders have called suicide attacks the “F-16” of the Palestinian people and have launched more than 60 suicide attacks against Israel. After each bombing, *Hamas* gives the family of the suicide bomber between \$3000 and \$5000 and assures them that their son died a martyr in holy jihad. It is believed that it has killed more than 500 Israelis in more than 300 separate terrorist attacks since 1993. It asserts the rights of the 1948 Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Israel and that since those rights are individual rights they cannot be subject to negotiation or be traded away. Its founder, Ahmed Yassin and his successor, Abdel Aziz Rantisi were killed by Israeli targeted air strikes within a month of each other in the spring of 2004.

Hamas is antagonistic towards the PLO because of its secular character and willingness to use political means and it has refused to join it. It opposes the PLO's acceptance of 'a mini state' in the West Bank and Gaza as it believes such concession will weaken its claim to the whole land in the eyes of the international community and prevent them from taking over the whole of Palestine. It, therefore, opposed the Oslo peace process and all agreements entered into by the PLO.

After the death of Arafat, *Hamas* appears to have adopted a two-

pronged strategy. It continues the armed resistance. However, it seems it has envisaged that it might be pressured to suspend the armed resistance and into participating in the political process. It seems determined to use the political process not to advance any peace process but to scuttle it. Thus while refusing to participate in the Palestinian presidential elections in January 2005, it was actively involved in the municipal elections in December 2004. Its primary objective in participating in the 2006 parliamentary elections was to win sufficient number of seats in parliament to be able to block the peace process.

Hamas is involved in more than nationalist struggles especially in Gaza where it is based. Over the years, it has developed an efficient and extensive social service network. It funds schools, orphanages, mosques, healthcare clinics, soup kitchens, childcare, pensions and sports leagues.

It has a reputation of being disciplined. It is regarded by Israel and the West as a terrorist organisation.

Israel

Election of the 120-member Knesset, Israel's unicameral parliament, is done through a proportional representation system. General elections in Israel are closed list; that is voters vote only for party lists and cannot affect the order of candidates on the lists and since 1992 *Party Law*, only registered parties can contest an election. There are no separate electoral districts. For a party to have representation in the Knesset, it must cross the 2% threshold of total ballot cast.

The electoral system makes it very difficult for a party to have a working majority in the Knesset. Since the establishment of the State, all Israeli governments have, therefore, been made up of coalitions of parties. The leader of the party with most elected candidates is selected by the President as the Prime Minister. He then has 42 days to form a government. The members of the cabinet must be approved collectively by the Knesset.

There are too many parties in Israel.

Table 1

	Left	Left of Center	Centrist	Right of Center	Right
Major Parties		Labor	Kadima	Likud	
Small Parties (Running for Re-election)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meretz-Yachad • Natr'li Demo. Assembly-Balad • Hadash • United Arab List 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shinui 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shas • Torah & Shabat Judaism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Union-NRP • Yisrael Beitenu
New Parties	Left Wing		Center	Right Wing	
(Not in the former Knesset).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brit Olam • Da'am • Gili • Green Leaf • Greens • Halev- Fight the Banks • Lechem • Leeder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lev • Natr'li Arab Party • New Zionism • One Future • Strength to the Poor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tafnit • Hetz • Tzedek Lakol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Herut • Jewish National Front • Tzomet 	

Source: <http://www.vote4israel.com/interpreting.php>

28 parties contested the 2003 election and 13 won seats. 30 parties contested the 28 March elections, 12 won seats. They sprawled from the ideological left to right, through the secular to the religious, to the “ethnic” divide of the state -- (Shas) orthodox religious Sephardi;

(Yahadut ha-Torah) orthodox religious Ashkenazi; (Yisra'el Beytenu) right-wing mostly Russian immigrants; (Avraham Negusah's Atid Ekhad) Ethiopian immigrants. About two dozens of the parties have narrow agenda; some of them are 'one-issue' parties. These include *Halev* (Hebrew acronym for “Party for the Struggle with the Banks”; *Green Leaf* (wants legalization of marijuana); the Pensioners' Party, that focuses on pensioners' rights; Tsedeq l-Kol, translated 'Justice for All Men's Rights in the Family' (advocates men's rights); and Tafnit (anti-corruption). The major parties include the following:

Kadima (Forward)

The party was formed by the former Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, in November 2005 when he left the ruling Likud Party which he had helped to form in 1973. He had been forced into coalition with the Labour party because of lack of support for his disengagement from Gaza by his Likud ruling coalition. Likud was not going to have anything to do with further disengagement plans from the West Bank which Sharon was determined to pursue. The Kadima idea was basically a belief that models on the right and left have both failed. The model on the left promised there could be a negotiated peace settlement with the Palestinians. The one on the right believed that the status quo could be maintained indefinitely. Kadima's platform is that even if there are no Palestinian partners to negotiate with, Israel does not want to continue occupying Palestinians. It was, therefore, formed as a centrist party with a programme of pragmatic disengagement from West Bank, free-market economic policy with adequate welfare support, reform of party-based parliamentary

system and reducing the influence of Jewish Orthodox religious interest groups.

Ehud Olmert took over the leadership of the party after Sharon became comatose on 4 January 2006. During the election campaign, Olmert did the unthinkable in Israeli politics. Politicians had hitherto been vague on policies during campaigns. But Olmert took the risk of putting forward a controversial policy initiative of unilateral West Bank withdrawal and made it clear that he would not enter into a coalition with any party that did not agree with details of his plan. He promised to set Israel's final borders by 2010 either through negotiations or unilaterally. This he promised to effect by evacuating most Jewish settlements on the West Bank but incorporating into Israel the two major settlement blocs around Jerusalem-- Ma'ale Adumim and Gush Etzion; and Ariel deep inside the West Bank. All three settlements would be on the Israeli side of the 'separation barrier' which he plans to complete. This is not an entirely new proposal, although it was the first time that it will be put forward as a major election platform. In March 2002, Labour's Efraim Sneh, a former Deputy Defence Minister but then the Minister of Transportation, proposed that future Palestinian state annex Arab localities close to the Green Line (1967 borders), in return for the annexation of West Bank settlement blocs by Israel.

The over 90000 settlers in areas to be evacuated, by force if necessary, would be relocated to, or “converge”, within the new borders of the state. Jerusalem and its environ would also fall within the permanent borders as would West Bank's Jordan Valley on the frontier with

Jordan for security and strategic considerations. But because of the divisions generated in the country by Sharon's 'disengagement' from Gaza and to bridge such divisions, Olmert coined a softer term '*hitkansut*' that translates as “ingathering” or “consolidation” or “convergence”. And unlike Gaza's “disengagement”, West Bank evacuation will only affect settlers and not soldiers.

Labour

The centre-left Labour Party has been one of Israel's two dominant parties since the founding of the state in 1948. Frustration on the left of the party with the leadership of Shimon Peres, who largely backed Sharon's economic austerity programme and unilateral approach to security issues, led to the election of the left-wing trade unionist Amir Peretz to the party leadership in November 2005 becoming the first Mizrahi Jew to lead a major party.

The party supports disengagement from the West Bank, but only through negotiations. It is opposed to the unilateralism of Kadima. Social and economic issues, however, were at the head of Peretz's agenda who advocates social democratic policy of increases in the minimum wage and welfare payments.

Likud (Consolidation)

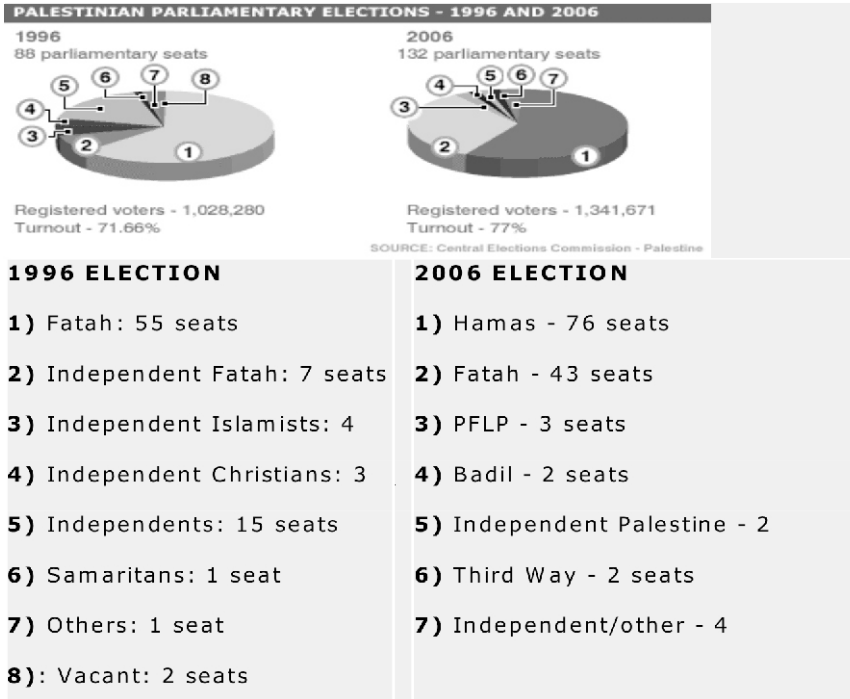
Founded in 1973, the Likud Party is a conservative Zionist that drew its political power from an ideology that saw Israel holding on to the territories she captured in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. For the next three decades the Party set the tone for an Israeli unwilling to discuss ceding an inch of land. The increasing human and economic tolls of

occupation and the fear of Jews becoming a minority in Israel that incorporates all Palestinian lands forced a change of policy. Nonetheless, the core of Likud saw Sharon's disengagement from Gaza as a betrayal of God's covenant with the Jews. The internal disagreements over Sharon's policy led to the defection of the pragmatic elements within the Party to Kadima. Netanyahu took over the leadership after Sharon's defection. And during the election campaign, he moved the party back to its roots in pushing hard line on security and a free-market economy. He focused on the rise of *Hamas* in the January Palestinian election. It is nonetheless, significant that the Party no longer opposes territorial withdrawal in principle only unilateral withdrawal.

1.4 The Elections and the Consequences for the Peace Process

The outcome of the Palestinian election that took place on 24 January 2006 was a shock for all those who were hoping to see some progress in the peace process. Contrary to predictions of opinion polls and surveys, even on the eve of the election, Hamas won an overwhelming victory, taking 74 of the 132 seats contested for, deposing the ruling Fatah party, which won only 45. The remaining 13 seats were taken up by representatives of small parties and independent candidates.

Table 2



14 of the new legislators were elected from inside Israeli jails and were not allowed to attend the subsequent swearing-in ceremony. *Fatah's*, rout by *Hamas* has been likened to an earthquake or a tsunami.

The party, in spite of its overwhelming majority in Parliament, tried to form a government with *Fatah* and other factions, but they all rebuffed it. It had hoped that such a government would reduce the negative image of the party in the eyes of the international community. Consequently, it ended up forming a 24-member cabinet of 19 *Hamas* activists and 5 technocrats and independents. Ismail

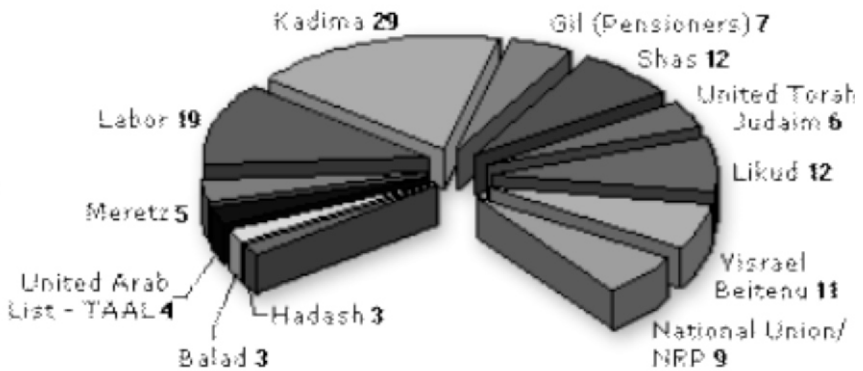
Haniyeh, who was expelled from the territories in 1992 and who had survived at least one Israeli assassination attempt, became the Prime Minister, with Nasser al-Sha'er, an unelected hardliner, as his deputy. Another hardliner, Mahmoud al-Zahar, a short-tempered surgeon, who lost a son in a 2003 Israeli air strike which also broke his back and badly injured his wife, became the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Said Siam, another hardliner, became the Minister of Interior and Civil Affairs with authority over the security forces.

The Israeli election equally produced surprises. First, the turn out was the worst since the creation of the state; only 63.2% turned out to vote. This helped the small parties and hurt the big ones as it reduces the number of votes, which the small parties needed to cross the 2% threshold required to get seats. Second, although polls had predicted a win for Kadima, the size of its victory was less than predicted. It won 29 of the 120 seats at stake. Third, it was a repudiation of Likud, which won 38 seats in 2003. The party won only 12 seats just like the religious Shas Party. Labour won 19 seats, thus becoming the second largest party in the Knesset. There were other surprises: the Pensioners Party, which had not been represented in the Knesset before, won 7 seats. On the whole, it was a victory for the Centrist and Leftist parties. They won 70 as against 50 by the parties on the Right.

Table 3

Results of the 2006 Israeli Elections

Kadima	29 seats
Labor	19 seats
Shas	12 seats
Likud	12 seats
Yisrael Beitenu	11 seats
National Union / NRP	9 seats
Gil (Pensioners)	7 seats
United Torah Judaism	6 seats
Meretz	5 seats
United Arab List	4 seats
Balad	3 seats
Hadash	3 seats



Source: "ELECTIONS 2006 ISRAEL DECIDES",
Jerusalem Post Online Edition, <http://www.JPost.com>

What do these portend for the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations and for the region in general? The outlook for peace in the short run appears bleak. *Hamas* victory would no doubt increase political instability and possible economic collapse of the Palestinian area. Any of these outcomes would make peace very unlikely. Under the Palestinian system, the President controls foreign affairs and negotiations with Israel under the auspices of the PLO which Abbas heads. Already, Mahmoud Abbas, has rejected the new *Hamas* government platform. His official position is not affected by the outcome of the January election as he was elected in 2005 for a five-year term. He insisted that that he remained committed to negotiations with Israel, and he made it clear that future negotiations would be conducted through the PLO. As mentioned earlier, *Hamas* is not a member of the PLO and it is opposed to the Organisation's methodology of achieving Palestinian nationhood.

Although the President may have constitutional rights to conduct negotiations with Israel as the Chairman of the PLO, the prospects of that happening, without the support or tacit approval of the government, does not appear bright. What will be the status of agreements reached through such negotiations? Such a situation will amount to a form of anarchy which neither of the parties would cherish. It could lead to a civil war which neither of the parties nor other regional powers would welcome. It is true Abbas has the

authority to negotiate but he has no power to deliver. This has been the bane of the PA since Abbas succeeded Arafat. In any case such a scenario assumes that the Israelis would be a willing partner for such negotiations an assumption that runs counter to every observable pointer on the Israeli political scene.

Furthermore, there is already a power tussle over the control of the security forces. These forces consisted of twelve divisions of some 58000 people, which Abbas had lately reorganised into three broad branches National Security; Interior; and Intelligence. They were all headed by *Fatah's* loyalists. In the period between the election campaign in January 2006 and the swearing in of the new *Hamas* government in March, Abbas' PA took certain measures that would strengthen the Presidency at the expense of the Prime Minister. The Palestinian Basic Law makes the President the commander-in chief of the security forces, while the Prime Minister is responsible for national security and appoints the Interior Minister. Abbas appointed his loyalists to a special court set up by the departing parliament to resolve disputes between the prime minister and the president. Abbas took over the control of Palestinian media by decree after the election, closed down “al-Aqsa”, the *Hamas* television station in Gaza. He also appointed his allies to key government posts, including the head of the three branches of the security branches, and recruited 18000 additional security service personnel. Generally, he increased the number of government employees from 136000 allowed by the budget in 2005 to 164700 at the end of March 2006 by employing *Fatah's* jobless loyalists. And on 5 April, he also issued a presidential

decree taking over security control over the Gaza Strips border crossings.

Hamas condemned all these measures and vowed to nullify all them. Ismail Haniyeh, the new Prime Minister said his government would assume control of the Palestinian security forces despite Abbas appointment of his ally to head the three security branches. Already, there are violent clashes between *Hamas* militia groups and Palestinian forces and among the various militia groups. The new Interior Minister Saeed Seyam, said he would coordinate militants' operations against Israel and would not order the arrest of militants carrying out attacks against her. It would, therefore, be interesting to see whose orders the security forces would obey.

Another thorny issue is: What happens to *Hamas* militia now that it is in control of government? The *Hamas* government attempted to formally convert them into a parallel security force, but this was blocked by the president. Will the militia forces eventually be integrated into the PA security forces loyal to the President? Will they exist as a *de facto* parallel army funded by the Authority? In the circumstance, given the asymmetry between Abbas and *Hamas* platforms, the peace process may not be high on the agenda of the new government in the short run. Attention would have to concentrate on resolving the internal political contradictions brought about by the election.

If the situation deteriorates, Abbas could, under the Palestinian constitution, sack the *Hamas* government and call for a new election.

If that happens and given the possible deterioration in the living conditions of ordinary Palestinians as a result of international sanctions on *Hamas* on account of the latter's policy towards Israel, *Fatah* may regain power. After all, the vast majority of Palestinians supported a two-state solution to the crisis. Although *Fatah* won only 45 of the 132 seats in the election, it captured 42% of the popular vote. *Hamas* landslide victory was made possible not by a corresponding overwhelming Palestinian support at the polls but by the electoral system. *Hamas* won less than 44% of the national vote with 29 of 66 seats; 36.5% of the district votes, winning 45 out of 66 district seats. For example, in the Gaza district of Khan Yunis, voters were asked to select up to 5 names out of 43 on the ballot; the top five candidates receiving the most votes in the district were selected. While the movement's supporters voted largely for *Hamas* candidates, supporters of *Fatah* and other parties scattered their votes among a large number of candidates.

It would, therefore, appear that they have elected *Hamas* on account of its past philanthropic record, its community service, its organisational efficiency and the honesty, and transparency of its leaders vis-à-vis the inefficiency, indiscipline and corruption of *Fatah*. In any case, *Hamas* played down on its views on Israel and concentrated on social and economic issues during the election campaign. Unlike Kadima in Israel that made his “convergence” policy and unilateralism election issues, *Hamas* made “no reference to the liberation of all of Palestine in its election manifesto.”Al-

Jazeera website conducted an on-line poll in March 2006 asking: “Should the issue of recognising Israel be put to Palestinians in referendum?” 78% of the 16,926 respondents said yes. Another poll had earlier shown that 66.3% of Palestinians approved of negotiations with Israel with only 29.6% opposing it.

Even if a constitutional crisis or the need to avert economic collapse leads to Abbas sacking Haniyeh, will this positively advance the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peace? In the short run, the answer is negative. *Hamas* would certainly feel embittered and could step up attack on both Israel and *Fatah*. It is pertinent to recall that it was the inability of Abbas' PA to rein in on militants and stop violence against Israel that largely account for stalling the peace process, especially the implementation of the quartet's Road Map to Peace.

The Un Security Council and the quartet of Middle East mediators -- US, EU, Russia and the UN have warned *Hamas* to change its policy or risk losing international aid for its people. Because the US, Canada, Japan and the European Union regard *Hamas* as a terrorist organisation, they have cut off financial assistance to the *Hamas*-controlled government, except for humanitarian needs. In addition, the US government has barred Americans from most business dealings with the Palestinian government. They insist that *Hamas* must disavow terrorism, recognise Israel and accept the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem. The European Union that sends about 500 million euros (\$600 million) said that European taxpayers need to know that their money is not going to terrorists.

Israel responded to *Hamas* victory by taking a series of punitive

measures against the PA. She stopped the transfer of a \$50 million monthly payment of custom duties and taxes that she collects for the PA. The government also cancelled V.I.P. permits for Palestinian legislators, who have been able to use them to move easily from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. The swearing in by Abbas in Ramallah of the new Legislature had to be conducted by videoconference link in Gaza. She also hinted at other measures including:

- Separation of the West Bank from the Gaza Strip, with the banning of workers from Gaza entering Israel and movement of Palestinians between the West Bank and Gaza except in emergencies;
- Restriction of the Karni crossing between Gaza and Israel to basic goods, fuel, water and relief aid; and
- Cancellation to build a Gaza seaport.

These measures could have two possible consequences. If it is sustained, it could lead to the collapse of the Palestinian economy and the disintegration of the society in general with concomitant tensions and violence. Already the government is having problems paying the salaries of about 164700 workers, including the security forces and the armed militias. The Palestinian Minister of Finance Omar Abdelrazeq told parliament on 18 April 2006 that the PA had outstanding debts of \$1.3 billion and could not pay salaries. Armed police men have consequently become restive.

Any attack against Israel will, expectedly, be met with reprisals. She has threatened that any member of the *Hamas*-led government

becomes a candidate for 'target killing' in the event of any terrorist attack against Israel. The resumption of Israeli pounding of Palestinian militants in Gaza since the Palestinian election in response to attacks on Israeli targets, and the daring raid on the Jericho prison in March to remove prisoners convicted of killing the Israeli Tourism Minister in 2002, including a newly elected parliamentarian, are clear indications of Israel's resolve to pursue a hard line against the *Hamas*-led government. Attacks and counter attacks would only dim the prospects of peace.

Hamas has rebuffed the actions of the US and the EU as 'blackmail' and vowed to make for any shortfall arising from such sanctions with financial assistance from Arab and other Muslim states. Ali Larijani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Council, pledged during a meeting with the exiled *Hamas* leader, Khaled Mashaal in Tehran in February 2006 said that Iran would fund a *Hamas*-led government if the West cuts off aid. The Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has also said *Hamas* should not fear the West's threat to cut off funds: "Since divine treasures are infinite, you should not be concerned about economic issues." At the end of a three-day international conference on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which he convened in Tehran on 16 April 2006, the Iranian President promised a \$50 million gift to *Hamas* to make up for the loss of revenue arising from the US and EU sanctions.

The entry of Iran into the Israeli-Palestinian fray will not bode well for the peace process. Indeed, it portends a more grave danger to the

unsettled politics of the Middle East. Iran, as part of its dispute with the USA, has in recent times stepped up its verbal attack on Israel. The Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denied the World War II Holocaust against the Jews and threatened to “wipe Israel off the map”Iran has also opened its first official liaison in the PA since the *Hamas* victory. Although there are virtually no Shi'ite residents in the PA, and although the PA contains a huge Sunni minority that has hitherto rejected Shi'ite teachings as heretical, political expediency seems to have brought *Hamas* and Iran closer together. Given the current heightened political crisis over Iranian nuclear ambitions, crossing the rhetorical line to active involvement with *Hamas* could precipitate an Israeli attack against Iranian facilities before Iran is able to develop nuclear weapons. Israel has threatened to use military action against Iran if the UN Security Council proved incapable of stopping her from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran is known to have developed long range missiles that can be fitted with nuclear weapons to hit Israeli targets. Given the almost anarchical situation in Iraq and the unsettled situation in Syria and Lebanon, a war between Israel and Iran would have dire consequences not only for the region but also for global peace and security.

Abbas, Israel, Egypt and Jordan have all raised alarm over the presence of al-Qaida, linked to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon. The anti-Syrian regime in Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan are not comfortable with the rise of *Hamas* on account of their own internal and security considerations. Although *Hamas* is not likely to embrace al-Qaida as this would further

complicate its international relations, expediency, a situation of total chaos in the PA, could bring the two organisations into a working relationship with dire regional consequences.

It is, however, possible that Israeli and international pressures, participation in government and the responsibility that accompanies elected office may force *Hamas* to moderate its militancy. Without the uninterrupted flow of financial assistance and investment, *Hamas* electoral promises of education, social and health facilities, employment and housing for the people would become empty. A UN report predicts unemployment rate would rise steeply, and getting to as high as 60% from the current 35% and the GDP for 2006 could fall to negative 25% from plus 5% in 2005. To consolidate its hold on the Gaza and the West Bank, therefore, it may find a diplomatic way to recognise Israel, freeze attacks against her and allow Abbas to take charge of negotiations with Israel. This is plausible if *Hamas* anticipated receipt of funds from Arab and Muslim states do not materialise. No Arab regime has any interests in consolidating *Hamas* in its current form.

Theoretically, such a transformation is not inherently impossible. After all, the PLO itself experienced such a fundamental change. It moved from a policy of total annihilation of Israel in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to accommodation with and recognition of the state in the 1990s. Some “terrorist” organisations in other lands have in recent times also experienced such transformation. The IRA in Northern Ireland and ETA in Spain are such examples. The recent confusing

signals and statements by leading *Hamas* figures are suggestive of some debate along that line within *Hamas*. It is also instructive to recall that two of Israel's most distinguished prime ministers, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir were once labelled terrorists by their opponents. Begin was a leader of *Irgun*, and Shamir of the *Stern Gang*, both regarded as terrorists by the British mandate powers. Their groups launched terrorist attacks against British and Arab targets. They changed and later became statesmen.

If the exigencies of governing can force a change of policy on *Hamas*, the region may have a new window of opportunity for peace. A changed *Hamas* in government, with the confidence of their people, given their antecedents, may be the ones who would be confident enough to make the painful concessions that are needed for Israeli-Palestinian peace. It will be recalled that right-wing Menachem Begin was the one who negotiated the first breakthrough in Israeli-Arab conflict the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1979.

However, such transformation is not very likely, given the rooting of *Hamas* ideology in religion. Matthew Levitt has also observed that *Hamas* has taken concrete steps to follow the model of the Iranian backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and has suggested that this would make a possible transformation impossible. Hezbollah has been part of the government in Lebanon for many years and it has a cabinet minister. But it simultaneously participates in government and politics and social welfare while still continuing with militancy, whether in guerrilla attacks or terrorist attacks. *Hamas*, months before the election announced it was setting up a standing militia, the Qassam

Brigade. This would not take the place of, but would sit parallel to, existing terrorist wings just like the Hezbollah's standing militia in southern Lebanon. And just like Hezbollah, which set up an international satellite television station, al-Manar, *Hamas* said its efforts to set up a *Hamas* television station in Gaza, al-Aqsa, were based on lessons it learned from Hezbollah.

Nonetheless, if *Hamas* moderates its views and tactics, the most that could happen in the short run, is to brighten the prospects of negotiations with Israel and not that of a peace deal. It is instructive to note that negotiations collapsed in 2000 and 2001 on account of the incompatibilities of the two sides' objectives and goals. In addition to the challenges at the psychological level, there are key issues that have continued to obstruct attempts at finding solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These issues have been the heart of the conflict. The recognition of the seemingly intractable nature of these issues had made all the parties involved in previous Israeli-Palestinian peace process to defer discussions of these issues to the last stage of the process the 'final status negotiations'. It was on these issues that the Camp David talks of 2000 collapsed. The issues are:

- the settlement policies of Israel, and the ultimate fate of these settlements;
- the fate of Palestinian refugees;
- the nature of a future Palestinian state;
- Defensive borders; and
- Jerusalem.

With *Hamas* takeover, Israel says the PA is now a terrorist body and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Israel will not negotiate if even part of the PA is an armed terrorist organisation. On these, there is also unanimity across the various shades of Israeli political opinion. The deadly suicide attack on a Tel Aviv café which killed 10 and left dozens of others injured on the very day the new Israeli Knesset was being inaugurated, could only reinforce Israel's 'no talk with *Hamas*' posture. The attack whose responsibility was claimed by both Islamic Jihad and the al-Aqsa Brigades was welcome by *Hamas* whose spokesman described it as an 'act of self defence'.

It is expected that Olmert will form a coalition that will include the Centrist and Left parties. It is also possible that Shas could be brought on board. This would see Olmert's West Bank policies through in the Knesset. However, given his winning less than the expected number of seats, the dictates of coalition politics may force a moderation of some pre-election promises. The impact of this on Israeli-Palestinian relations is not likely to be significant. Most Israelis are agreed on ending the occupation. Olmert had turned the election into a referendum on a final separation from the Palestinians. And in his victory speech after the election, Olmert said he was ready to negotiate this: "In the coming period we will move to set the final borders of the state of Israel, a Jewish state with a Jewish majority. We will try to achieve this in agreement with the Palestinians." He warned that Israel would not wait for ever. He vowed to implement his plan: "I want to make this clear, so that no one is in any doubt: I intend to implement this plan. Anyone who does not wish this plan to be

implemented will not be in coalition. I do not intend to compromise on the details of the plan. This is the plan, and there is no other.”

Israelis seem resigned to unilateralism. The general consensus among them is that while unilateralism is risky, it was the only option currently available for the country. According to Dennis Ross: The consensus is based on a premise that there isn't a partner, but we Israelis want to shape our own future and not have it held hostage to either Palestinian dysfunction or outright opposition. So the impulse towards separation, disengagement, is driven from within, driven by a demographic issue, which, by the way, would have led to the disengagement from Gaza even without the gun, because of Israel's need to deal with the demographic reality and because Israelis want to basically shape their own future and not hold it hostage to the unknowns of what Palestinians will do.

It is, however, doubtful if a unilateral fixing of borders will bring peace. But according to Miri Eisin, a former intelligence officer in the Israel Defence Forces, the mood in Israel had changed. “Israelis don't talk about peace. We talk about non-violence. We talk about separation. The last five years and half have pretty dramatically changed the Israeli society's psyche and the political *realpolitik*.” Barrier walls, unilateral rather than negotiated separation, may at best, in an age of Katyusha and al-Qassam rockets and determined suicide bombers, reduce rather than eliminate violence.

Hamas current stance and the continued violence will weaken any international community's pressure against unilateralism. The need

for the emergence of Palestinian statesmen from among the politicians has, therefore, never been more urgent. Statesmanship entails taking controversial decisions and assuming responsibility for such decisions. The leadership needs to level up with its public as this is a pre-requisite for an enduring Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The region is, therefore, many steps away from stability and peace. It is at the moment reasonable to expect a period of intense cycle of violence and not an era of peace. This is ominous for international peace and security. Nonetheless, both the Israelis and Palestinians, because of geographical proximity, are inexorably locked together into a perpetual state of neighbourliness. Proximity, it is said, breeds contempt, (and some will add) and children too! The parties will be impelled by geographical propinquity, even in a state of low level warfare, to interact on a range of issues, including crossing points, water usage, electricity, work permits etc. This will continue unless and until either community is able to extinguish or supplant the other. Neither of these options appears feasible.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this lecture by returning to Nigeria. What do the various scenarios painted above mean for Nigeria, and indeed Africa? The impact of an escalating conflict in the Middle East goes beyond the issue of annual or bi-annual pilgrimages to the Holy Lands or shopping sprees in Bahrain and Dubai. These, of course, would be adversely affected in the event the region is engulfed in a war.

Instability in the Middle East will, however, lead to increase in oil prices. Nigeria may 'benefit' from such a windfall. This assumption is

contingent on the ability of the country to continue to exploit and export oil in reasonable quantities. The recent escalation of the protracted crisis in the Niger Delta will need to be more creatively addressed by the government if the country will continue to bank on oil exports. In any case such 'benefits' may be pyrrhic. With the experiences of past oil windfalls, I am not sure, given the monstrosity of corruption and recklessness in public life that many people will long for another "oil boom". Another oil boom may aggravate the "oil doom". Besides as the oil crisis of the 1973-74 shows, the economies of African and other Third World countries could be worse off for it. It would slow down economic growth, and even possibly lead to recession in developed industrial economies-- with all the negative impact on world prices, trade and investment, social and political conditions in developing states, including Nigeria.

Escalation of crisis in the Middle East could also bring international terrorism nearer to Nigerian cities and possibly facilitate home-grown versions. Some aggrieved youths in the Niger Delta have started to change religions and grow beards like Osama bin Laden and the Afghan Talibans. The world has indeed become a global village; the revolution in science and technology ensures that the images of terrorist attacks and the modus operandi of terrorists are brought to the homes of the average Nigerian middle class. The picture of the bomb shattered scene in Port Harcourt last week reminds one of similar ones in the streets of Baghdad or that of a suicide attack on a Jerusalem commuter bus. Given the porosity of our borders and the corruption, inefficiency, the ineffectiveness of our security services, including

Intelligence, and the general lack of patriotism and commitment to the country, particularly by the ruling elites, Nigeria has remained a potential soft target for international terrorism. This is why a number of foreign missions always immediately shut down their missions each time their own intelligence suggested a terrorist alert. We need to recognise that the international terrorist groups that blew up American embassies in Nairobi and Dares Salaam in 1998, in which hundreds of Kenyans and Tanzanians were killed and maimed, had their quarrels with the Americans and not the Africans.

The pervasive insecurity in Nigeria as evidenced by the notorious spate of high profile assassinations, armed robberies, kidnapping and ritual killings, religious and sectarian violence that could not be detected, averted, thwarted, or the perpetrators identified, apprehended and prosecuted, should be a serious concern. Already the Ijaw militants have resorted to kidnapping and hostage taking and using of car bombs to pursue their political goals. Apart from taking a cue from international terrorism, desperation may unwittingly drive some of these groups into the hands of Middle Eastern terrorist gangs. The action of Nigerian politicians is equally showing an unacceptable level of desperation. These desperate politicians with little or no sense of national interest and history and who continue to show no demonstrable iota of patriotism and humanism in the inordinate pursuit of their primordial and selfish ambitions could sell their 'birthrights' to terrorists. These politicians started with political thuggery; they have now graduated to political assassinations and bombing of political opponents. *Hamas* started with throwing stones

during the intifada of the late 1980s. They later transformed into kidnappers and murderers of settlers. They have now perfected the use of suicide bombers and also now fire al-Qassam rockets to Israel! A quick crafting of the ground rules for Nigerian politics that will be acceptable to the various stakeholders, and with national interest as the primary focus, therefore, appears very urgent to avert a doomsday scenario. Whether the current crop of Nigerian politicians is capable of rising up to this challenge is anybody's guess.

Thank you for your patience and God bless you all.

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