

OBAFEMI AWOLOWO UNIVERSITY, ILE-IFE, NIGERIA.

Inaugural Lecture Series 176 116

**AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE
EAST: THE POLITICS OF
ASYMMETRY**

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NO. 116



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An Inaugural Lecture delivered at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife
on Tuesday, 10 June 1997.

Inaugural Lecture Series 176

**OBAFEMI AWOLOWO UNIVERSITY PRESS LIMITED
ILE-IFE, NIGERIA.**

Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd., 1997

ISSN 0189-7845

Printed by

Obafemi Awolowo University Press Limited

Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Asymmetry in International Politics

The operation of the contemporary international system involves a very complex web of relationships among states and the other actors in the system. The scope, intensity, regularity and the nature of each state's relationships with and within the system are a function of many variables. Geography, the quantity and quality of resources — both human and natural — technological development, shared history and shared values go a long way in determining each state's stake in the system, as well as the degree to which these stakes are pursued and the strategies for pursuing them. And because resources and capabilities are not evenly shared by the members of the international system, there are disparities in the amount of influence members wield in the system. These disparities create a relationship of dependency between the 'have' and the 'have-nots' which oftentimes develop into an asymmetrical relationship. They form the basis of the categorization of states into super, big, middle-ranked and small powers.

However, irrespective of their status, states are dependent on other members of the system in one way or the other as no state has enough resources to satisfy its needs. In other words, in order to achieve their objectives — whether defined in terms of political, economic, cultural, social or technological — states have to interact with one another. The need to satisfy these interests has led members of the system to devise strategies for collaboration and for the management of conflict. In all of the relationships, a basic tenet of interaction is the equality of members. In reality, however, this is more legal than political; relations are often lopsided, hierarchical, unequal or asymmetrical.

In a relationship of asymmetry, the extent to which the component members of the system share in the conditions and concerns of the system vary widely, even to the point that one can question whether a system actually exists. In this situation, it is often difficult to discern interests that could be clearly considered mutual. Each component unit would have about it a unique feature or set of features which separate in important ways, its interests from those of any other state or the system considered as a whole. Clear lines of division would be necessary and jealously guarded insofar as these unique interests are concerned. Consequently, the dominant states pursue their goals with little or no difference to the interests and concerns of the other members of the system. (Tarlton, 1965).

Where is the Middle East?

There has been no unanimity as regards the exact geographic boundaries of the area called the 'Middle East'. The geographic limits of the area called the Middle East has always been determined by the specific interests of writers, strategists and policy makers. In a sense, therefore, it is amorphous and a term of convenience.

The term 'Middle East' was first used by an American naval historian, Admiral Alfred T. Mahan in 1902 to describe 'a vague area between Suez and Singapore where the then strategic and political contest between Britain and Russian was centered.' (Lenczowski, 1968:5) George Lenczowski uses the term to denote "the area on the southern periphery of Asia where there is a strategic clash between the Great Powers" (Lenczowski, 1968:5). Haggai Erlich says "Middle East means a region of modern states and a political culture struggling with the legacies of Islam, of modern Islam, of modern Arabism, of Egyptianism, Zionism and other national affiliations" (Erlich, 1994: viii). Harold Saunders uses the term to include 'the area beginning in the west with Egypt, Israel and the eastern waters of the Mediterranean, extending through the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf and Iran to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Indian Ocean' (Saunders, 1981: 83).

In this lecture (as in my previous works) I have used the term Middle East to include Israel, Iran, Turkey and all the members of the League of Arab States (Arab League). This definition is not a geographical one as it includes countries that are geographically on the African continent. It is a political as well as a strategic one. The inclusion of the North African states of the Arab League in the Middle East is not only justified by their membership of the League — an exclusive culturally-based political regional organization — but also because they see themselves as belonging to the Arab World. There is, perhaps, nowhere this identification is more pronounced than in their relationship with sub-Saharan African states. This was why the Sierra-Leone Foreign Minister, at the Preparatory Meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, warned:

"African unity . . . demands . . . total commitment to Africa and a complete orientation toward Africa and Africa alone."

He consequently demanded that these North African states should first publicly announce their commitment to Africa rather than the Middle East

before they could be admitted into the proposed organisation (OAU, 1963: 48-49). It is also noted that these states are the only states on the African continent that prefix their names with their racial affiliations — Arab Republic of Egypt, Libyan Arab Socialist Jamahiriya, Arab Kingdom of Morocco etc. They all emphasize their 'Arabness' rather than their 'Africaness'. On the other hand, in sub-Saharan Africa, only Central African Republic and South Africa make reference to 'Africa' in their names. But unlike the Arab states, the reference to 'Africa' in such names is only geographical and not racial.

Besides, although, the North African Arab states are also prominent members of the OAU — the political institutional expression of pan-Africanism — these states have for most of the time pursued Arab, rather than African, agenda within the Organization. They are the only members that act as a bloc within the OAU even when their bilateral relations were in a troubled state (Ojo, 1982: 133; Agyeman, 1984). That partly explains why a number of Africans, including former President Mobutu of Zaire (now, the Democratic Republic of Congo) called for an exclusive 'African organization' where black African leaders could meet and discuss African issues and harmonize policies — a call that was privately endorsed by some officials of the OAU (Ojo, 1988: 63).

The basis for the discussion of Africa and Middle East as subsystems of the international system has been settled. (Zartman, 1967; Tareq, 1974; Binder, 1958). The countries of each subsystem hold a shared history, culture, a similar place in the world economy and are tied together in an interconnected whole. Nevertheless, the concept of a subsystem does not imply a homogeneous unity. Indeed the Middle East is a heterogeneous combination of different societies, centres of civilization and cultures. It is made up of states with varying political philosophies — from democracies, neo-feudal monarchies to various shades of military and one-party dictatorships. For example, while Israel and Turkey practice multi-party democracies, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are monarchical. Iran is a theocratic dictatorship, while Libya, Iraq, Sudan and Syria are various forms of dictatorships. Its economic landscape is also as varied as the regime types. Nonetheless, this does not deny the true ties between the countries of the Middle East in an interconnected whole 'based on common wounds and indelible scars handed down from an imperial past' (Krooth and Morllem, 1995: 1).

The Importance of the Middle East to Africa

The Middle East has been important to Africa since time immemorial. This importance has become increasingly more significant in the more contemporary times. The importance of the Middle East to Africa is a function of geography, strategy, culture and oil.

The region is geographically propinquous to Africa. Unlike individuals who can decide to move away from bad neighbours, states cannot. They, of necessity, have to maintain a relationship with their neighbours. Such relationships may, of course, be one of friendship or enmity. Geography has consequently impacted on the demography, politics, culture and economies of Africa.

In the second half of the 20th century, this geographical factor assumed a strategic importance. Although the Middle East had been important for its control of strategic waterways, the Cold War accentuated that significance. The region's control of vital lines of communication to Africa, Asia and the Indian Ocean makes it of special interest to Africa. Since the early 1960s, the region has been used as air staging posts and stockpiles for great power intervention in Africa and the Indian Ocean areas. Military facilities in Egypt were used during Soviet airlifts to Yemen in 1968 (Mangold, 1978: 7). During the 1960s and early 1970s Soviet weapons supplied to Egypt were transferred to the Congo (Zaire), Nigeria (1968), Sudan (1971) and to India during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. Britain and the United States had also used their facilities in the Middle East to intervene in Africa. The US operated a number of important electronic intelligence facilities in the Middle East. These included a key link in the American early-warning system as well as a number of listening posts which provided the primary source of American intelligence data on former Soviet missile developments and activities in the adjoining areas (Hottinger, 1975: 138). The Israeli rescue at Entebbe, Uganda, of the predominantly Jewish passengers of the hijacked French airliner in 1976 clearly demonstrated that Entebbe was within reach of Middle Eastern air power.

The closure in 1967 of the Suez Canal its reopening in 1975 further demonstrated the strategic importance of the Middle East in global politics in general and to Africa in particular. The closure drastically affected the prosperity of East African states as these states were dependent on the short route through the Canal for their trade. It also heightened the importance of South Africa at a time Africa wanted the world to disengage from the then racist regime in the country. The reopening of Suez in 1975 cut 24

days off the sailing time between the Black Sea and the Arabian Sea and reduced the sailing time between Odessa and Bombay from 41 days via the Cape to 16 (Mangold, 1978: 17).

The Middle East is the cradle of three of the world's most important monolithic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Most Africans are adherents of either of the latter two. To these Africans the 'holy land' is either Israel or Saudi Arabia. Hundreds of thousands of African Muslims and Christians go on the annual pilgrimage to either Saudi Arabia or Israel. And, it has been impossible to insulate Africa from the politics of the region. Both Israel and the Arab states have worked very hard to marry the politics of the Middle East with the religions of the Africans. Many African states, including Nigeria, have internalized the political divisions and conflicts in the Middle East on religious grounds. Political events in the Middle East are often viewed with the religious lenses of the African observer.

Islam has in particular exercised a great influence on both the politics and the international relations of African states. The presence of a very large Muslim population in Africa has provided Arab states with a constituency in Africa. It has thus far provided them with the major axis around which their political moves revolve. Africa is also inevitably affected by waves of Islamic revolutions that often grip the Middle East. The Islamic Revolution in Iran, for example continues to cause unsettling ripples in many African societies.

The importance of the countries of the Middle East became heightened in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis. The region is not only the world's largest producer of crude oil, it also contains the world's largest proven oil reserves — accounting for some 68.8% of the world's total (BP, 1995: 2). Although Africa is a relatively low consumer of oil, accounting for only 2.6% of the world's total in 1994, it is heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil. In 1994, for example, 33.3 million tonnes of the total 42.5 million tonnes Africa's oil imports came from the Middle East (BP, 1995: 16) Africa, therefore, has an abiding interest in the steady and uninterrupted supply of oil and at a reasonable cost.

Linked to its increased share of world's supply of oil, is the huge accumulation of wealth by the Middle Eastern oil producing states, especially after the price of oil quadrupled in the wake of the Yom Kippur War of 1973. As a consequence, the Middle Eastern oil states amassed considerable balance of payment surplus of some \$45 billion in 1974. In 1975, the surplus was established at between \$35 and \$40 billion (Ojo,

1983: 325-6). These huge surpluses gave Middle East oil states the means to influence political and economic developments both in and outside of the Middle East — and particularly in African and other Third World countries.

Historical Contacts: Background to Contemporary Relations

Contacts between Africa and the Middle East predated modern times. As far back as the ancient Greek period, there were records of political, military and economic contacts between the two regions. This was despite the obstacles posed by the Sahara Desert. The rock paintings and engravings found in the Saharan Desert, known as the Saharan rock arts remains a living testimony of the contacts of the past. As Bovill rightly observes:

But though much remains obscure, one fact stands out beyond the reach of controversy: for centuries before the introduction of the camel to the Sahara (an event that took place about the beginning of the Christian era) men were accustomed to move about the desert with oxen, in horse drawn chariots, or on horse back (Bovill, 1968: 15).

Indeed, until the appearance of Europeans on the African shores, the Arabs held a virtual monopoly of Black Africa's cultural and economic contacts with the outside world.

In East Africa, Arabs from Yemen provided India with African goods and were the main connecting link between East Africa and Ethiopia on the one hand and Persian, Greek and Roman civilizations on the other. From the 8th to the 10th century AD the Arabs penetrated the shoreline of East Africa in increasing numbers, establishing trading posts at Malindi, Mombasa and along the Mozambique coast. Until the arrival of the Portuguese, Arab hegemony on the East African coast was complete.

For centuries black African slaves were carried across the Desert and the Indian ocean to end their days as domestic servants, as concubines, as labourers, or as soldiers among the Middle East communities. In the mid-19th century, between 40,000 and 50,000 African slaves a year passed through Zanzibar alone. With them other products such as gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, hides and kolanuts were carried to the Middle East in exchange for clothes, paper, swords, beads and salt (Bovill, 1968; Oliver and Matthew, 1968; Coupland, 1939; Davidson, 1961).

The birth of Islam added a new dimension to Afro-Middle East contacts.

Islam spread to Africa soon after its establishment. By the middle of the 11th century, the religion had become firmly established in the Sahel region of West Africa. In East Africa, although the Arab settlers were more interested in commerce than in proselytizing among the Africans, commercial contacts nevertheless led to a number of converts.

These various contacts between Africa and the Arab World had important socio-cultural, and political, consequences that impacted on contemporary relations. Indeed, they form the psychological basis of asymmetry in the relations between the two regions. The Middle Easterners came into contact with the Africans primarily within the context of the slave trade. For most Arabs a 'slave' and 'Black' (Abd) were synonymous. As Philip Hitti observes, 'Abd' in the sense of (slave) was restricted to Blacks while non-Black slaves were called 'mamluk' (owned) (Hitti, 1963: 236). Baulin also remarked that Egyptians referred to the Negro only as a **barber** (barbarian). They felt a deep sense of superiority toward any black man, and did not hide it (Baulin, 1962: 40). The legacy of the slave trade developed among the Arabs a mental attitude of scorn and disdain for Africans from which many Arabs, including members of the Arab political elite, still find it difficult to extricate themselves.

Besides, the Arabs not only brought (and imposed) their religion, they also brought with it new concepts of law and government, and a new language that supplanted traditional African systems. The two most widely spoken indigenous African languages — Hausa and Swahili — are heavily influenced by Arabic. Virtually all the political vocabulary of Swahili is borrowed from Arabic.

The Arabs, Israel and Africa

The conquest of the Songhai Empire by the Moroccans in 1603 which removed the stabilizing influence of the empire coincided with the presence of Europeans on the African shores. This consequently led to the diversion of Africa's outlook from the north. The direction of trade shifted southwards and soon the trans-Saharan trade paled into insignificance. The establishment of European colonialism in Africa in the 19th century dealt a further crippling blow to Afro-Middle East contacts. Until the 1960s, although contacts continued to be maintained at the cultural-religious level, they remained spasmodic as they were tightly controlled by the colonialists.

The termination of colonialism in both regions created opportunities for

renewed political contacts. However, the interests and concerns of both regions were in the first decade of Africa's independence not complementary. The newly independent African states were preoccupied with the twin problems of national integration and economic development, while most of the Middle East was absorbed with the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Indeed, for the Arab states, their opposition to Israel became the benchmark against which all other foreign policy questions tended to be tested.

The conflict between the Arabs and Israel is fundamentally a clash of two nationalisms — Arabism and Zionism. It became concretized in the struggle for possession of Palestine. The Arabs had hoped that the newly independent African states would naturally support them in their antagonism to the state of Israel. They assumed that shared anti-colonialism and cultural, religious and historical ties would turn the Africans their natural foreign policy allies. They wanted the Africans to shun all political and diplomatic overtures from Israel and to refuse to have any economic contacts with the Jewish state. At every international forum that brought the two groups of states together, the Arabs wanted Africans to support resolutions that would have delegitimized Israel.

However, Arab expectations in Africa were largely unfulfilled. First, the Africans did not see the problems in the Middle East as their problems. Second, they did not want to inherit other people's enemies. In the spirit of the nonaligned policy which they embraced at independence, they were not prepared to adopt other people's enemies. Rather, they were going to take positions on burning international issues on the basis of their own assessment of each case. Third, the Africans had no traditional hostility toward the Jewish people. Unlike with the Arabs, there were no lingering bitter memories of the past. On a philosophical level, they tended to compare emphatically the plight of the dispersed Jews with that of the enslaved Africans. Former President Leopold Senghor of Senegal often referred to the Africans, the Arabs and the Jews as 'a triad of suffering peoples' (Senghor, 1972: 11). Fourth, they were having fruitful economic and technical relations with Israel. Israel had from the late 1950s quickly moved to either establish, or lay the basis for future economic and technical cooperation with African states. By the mid-1960s, she had signed cooperation agreements with most African states. Her technical assistance programmes were widespread all over Africa. Between 1958 and 1970, a total of 3958 Israeli experts were sent abroad; 2483 or 63% of them served in Africa. And between 1958 and 1972, 9182 Africans were trained in Israeli

institutions under cooperation agreements. Fifth, Israel was involved in a fairly extensive military assistance programme to African states. Many African leaders, impressed by the record of Israeli army both as an instrument for national integration and as a professional fighting force, had turned to Israel for assistance. By the mid-1960s the Israeli military presence in some African countries was quite substantial. In Ethiopia, the staff of Israel's military mission was second only to that of the United States. In Uganda, the Israeli military mission was the most important foreign mission in the country in 1965. And in Sierra Leone, by 1964, Israel had taken over the training of the entire officer corps of the Sierra Leonean Army (Ojo; 1988, 20-22). Finally, African leaders believed they stood to gain from Israel's own experiences in national integration, in rural and social development, in agriculture and medicine. They were therefore not impressed by the Arab call to isolate Israel.

The Arabs reacted to Africa's close ties with Israel angrily. They embarked on a destabilization policy in many African countries aimed at forcing them to toe the Arab line on Israel. Key Arab actors supported all forms of dissident and secessionist groups in many countries. The Arab League also decided to boycott African business and commercial concerns that had any connection with Israeli companies. Some countries even went to the extent of applying total economic boycott of states that had close links with Israel. Egypt and Syria for example boycotted Ghana's independence celebrations and Egypt prohibited Ghana's national shipping line — the 'Black Star Line' — from the Suez Canal. (Ojo, 1988). Although the style of Arab policy became modified and more sophisticated with time, the contents of the policy remained largely unchanged. In 1972 for instance, a combination of intensified support for Chadian rebellion and an offer of generous financial assistance forced the Chadian government to sever its diplomatic ties with Israel. Similarly, in 1973 intensified Arab support for Eritrean secession, increased Arab pressure within the OAU including a call to move its headquarters from Addis Ababa to a capital more supportive of Arab cause eventually 'persuaded' the Ethiopian government to abandon its historic ties with Israel (Ojo, 1988).

The Arabs continued to maintain pressure on African states even after the latter had severed their diplomatic ties with Israel in October 1973. They made assistance to African states dependent on the latter's continued support for the Arab cause. They were not even prepared to concede to Africa a right to make its own assessment of the changing situation in the

Middle East. The Africans were expected to adopt the Arab interpretation of political developments in the region. Hence the refusal of the OAU to sanction Egypt, as the Arab League had done over the latter's peace treaty with Israel, led to Arab unilateral suspension *sine die* of multilateral cooperation with Africa. Interestingly, Egypt which had itself established diplomatic, political and economic relationships with Israel, lobbied Africa not to follow on its footsteps. It argued that Africa needed to continue to boycott Israel so as to force her to be faithful to deal with Egypt. And for over a decade after the Egyptian/Israeli Peace Treaty, the threat of economic sanction and possible political destabilization dissuaded most of Africa from renewing diplomatic ties with Israel.

The Oil Crisis, Arab Aid and the Entrenchment of Asymmetry

There was no other single issue that exposed the asymmetrical nature of Afro-Middle East relations more vividly than the oil crisis of 1973. In the wake of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, decided to use 'oil weapon' as part of the Arab war effort. Its ministerial council decided on an immediate overall production cut. An oil export ban was also instituted against the Western friends of Israel until such a time that the Arabs were convinced that an appreciable change had taken place in the pro-Israeli policies of these states. Concurrently, the then on-going oil states' negotiations with oil companies broke down under the strains of war. The six Gulf members of OPEC — Abu Dhabi, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia unilaterally increased the prices of oil. This was the beginning of such price increases. By the end of 1974, the price of oil had quadrupled.

These measures produced different effects on Africa and the Arab world. For the Arabs, it radically transformed their economic fortunes and enhanced their international political standing. On the other hand, the oil measures had crippling effects on the economies of the non-oil producing African states. Many African states rushed to break relations with Israel in a bid to shield their economies from the impact of the measures and for an anticipated hope of benefiting from Arab aid.

The OAU quickly moved to work out a coordinated response to the crisis. In the spirit of the newly found amity with the Arabs, following the massive break of ties with Israel, its foreign ministers asked the Arab League for a number of concessions. Ghana's foreign minister, Major Baah, expressed the feelings of his colleagues at the OAU ministerial conference

that met in Addis Ababa in the November 1973. While conceding that the crises confronting the Africans was

only an incidental and not a deliberate effect of the Arab decision to use oil as a political weapon in the fight against Israel, it is necessary to emphasize that our solidarity in this conflict is also a challenge to our national interest which must be duly acknowledged and reciprocated. There can be no sustained unity and solidarity without the recognition of the need for reciprocity of interests (ARB, 1973: 3041).

Specifically, the Africans wanted an uninterrupted supply of oil, and at concessionary prices. They also demanded financial assistance to cushion their economies from the effects of the increased oil prices and from the loss of assistance from Israel consequent upon their support for the Arab cause.

The various African demands were received unsympathetically by the Arabs who accused the Africans of trying to politicize an essentially commercial issue. First, they refused to meet an OAU committee set up to discuss the oil crisis at the level of foreign ministers. They insisted that the committee should meet their oil or trade ministers as the issue was one of trade and not politics (Ojo, 1985a). Second, they could not guarantee uninterrupted oil supply as they alleged that they had no control over the movement of their oil once the oil left their territorial waters. Third, they claimed they could not sell oil at a cheaper rate to African states as this would violate OPEC's pricing rules. They equally pressured Nigeria into abandoning her plan to sell oil at concessionary rate to non-oil producing African states. However, the OAU discovered to its chagrin in April 1975 that the Arab oil states were supplying oil at preferential prices to non-oil producing Arab states including Arab OAU states (OAU, 1975).

The crisis generated a lot of furor between the two groups. The Arab League finally agreed to give some financial aid to cushion the adverse impact of the crisis on the economies of African states. It set up an oil fund (which later came to be known as the Special Arab Aid Fund for Africa (SAAFA) of \$200m. It also later decided to set up an Arab Bank for African Development (BADEA). These measures generated more heat than help. The Africans derided them as half-hearted measures designed to perpetuate the asymmetrical nature of their relationships. They criticized the paltry sums allocated BADEA and SAAFA. Kenya's Assistant Minister for

Foreign Affairs described the \$200m the Arabs were offering as SAAFA as "the equivalent of a two-year outlay by the Ministry of Education" of his country (I.H. Tribune: 1974). They were also piqued by the insistence of the Arabs to make these institutions exclusively Arab rather than joint Afro-Arab. Furthermore, the refusal to channel the funds through the African Development Bank and the demand that African ministers should travel to the Arab League Headquarters in Cairo to collect the first installment of their share of the oil fund created a lot of ill-feelings in the OAU. The Africans also resented the imposition of political conditionalities for benefiting from these funds. The then Nigerian foreign minister, General Joe Garba, publicly criticized the Arabs for what he called their 'patronizing attitude'. Senegal's foreign minister, Assane Seck, was even more blunt. He stated that the "idea of being a beggar of the Arabs is not acceptable to Africans" (Ojo, 1985b).

This was, however, mere posturing. Although they were most unhappy with their treatment by the Arabs, the parlous state of their economies left nearly all of Africa with no choice but to succumb to the Arab 'dictate'. African states came to realize that instead of being beneficiaries of their alliance with the Arabs, they were net losers. They had to bear the full impact of the oil crisis. Consequently, many had to use over 35% of their budgets for imported oil even after drastic cutbacks in the quantity imported. They suffered serious balance of payment problems attributable to oil price increases and many went into serious debt as a result. Consequently, there was a "precipitous decline in official foreign reserves and assets, heavy borrowing from domestic and foreign sources, and increasing inability to capitalize any but the most modest development projects. Most important, the crisis not only placed additional financial burdens on most African economies, but in a number of instances, undermined economies already heavily impacted by other unrelated factors such as drought, political instability, earlier debt, government mismanagement and the like" (Le Vine and Luke, 1979:20).

The problem was not just the volume of Arab aid, its distribution did not reflect a tendency that could promote genuine cooperation. It showed a remarkable bias towards Arab and Muslim countries. During the period 1973-79, Africa received only 5.8% of total Arab aid. The bulk of Arab aid went to non-oil producing Arab states — accounting for 69% of total Arab aid. In the period 1973-1975, when the need for compensatory aid to weak

African economies was greatest, the African members of the Arab League received nearly 90% of all OPEC aid going to developing African countries. Asia received over 10.5% of total Arab aid in the same period (Ojo, 1985b).

Moreover, African countries with predominantly Muslim population were favoured in the disbursement of the little that was given to Africa. Besides a substantial proportion of bilateral assistance was directed towards the promotion of Islam rather than for economic development. The bulk of the \$4.5m assistance expended under the Technical Assistance Fund before it ceased operation in 1978, also went to Islam. The trend prompted Dr. Lansine Kaba of Guinea as early as 1976 to lament: "Most Muslims wish that Arabs were involved in African projects for development rather than merely in the construction of mosques and Islamic centers" (Kaba, 1976: 41). In addition, the terms of the Arab-OPEC aid generally hardened from 1974 to 1975. Even then, actual disbursement rarely exceeded between 35 and 45% of commitments and much of it took excessively long to materialize.

The politics of asymmetry that characterize relations between the two groups was also evident in the preference of bilateralism over multilateralism by the Arabs in their assistance programmes. A glossary comparison of the capital of Arab national financial institutions and Arab sponsored aid agencies brings this into sharp focus. The Saudi Fund for Development had an initial capital of \$2.9 billion, and was later increased to \$8 billion. The national funds of Abu Dhabi, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have a combined capital of over \$16.589 billion. On the other hand the capital of BADEA (plus SAAFA and the Fund for Technical Assistance) remains only at a little over \$988m. And between 1974 and 1981, only 6.18% of total bilateral and multilateral Arab assistance were channeled through BADEA.

The preference of bilateral channels is, of course, typical and rational in international politics, in spite of African objections. Such channels afford donors to better maximize their political and administrative control over the allocation of their financial assistance. They also allow maximum exposure and public relations impact of aid when desired, and yet provide complete discretion if preferred. Assistance can easily be made to respond quickly to changes in bilateral political relations as was the case when Idi Amin was overthrown in Uganda or when the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire) and Liberia reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel.

Conclusion

Africans and the peoples of the Middle East have been in contact for centuries. But their relationships have been asymmetrical. The Arabs penetrated Africa, and participated both in the slave trade and proselytization of Islam. Africa, on the other hand has remained recipient of Middle Eastern, particularly Arab, influences and has imparted little besides its slave labour. In historical times, Africans were the slaves, the Arabs the slave catchers, traders and slave owners. The Arabs were the purveyors of Islam, of Arabic culture and language. It is commonplace to see in humid, blistering tropical African climate, Africans dress up as if they are battle ready for the sand dunes of the Arabian Desert. In the more contemporary times, it is the Africans looking up to the Arabs for oil and aid. All these have fed and continue to reinforce in the Arab, a psychology of superiority, of arrogance, even of disdain towards the Africans.

Another striking feature of Afro-Middle Eastern relations is that relations have essentially been organized at the superstructural level. Apart from annual pilgrimages, which have themselves not been totally insulated from high politics, relations have been essentially political, confined almost exclusively to conferences, bilateral exchange of visits and the issuance of platitudinous joint statements and communiques by government officials. Transnational relations have been largely absent. For Africa, the returns have been largely disappointing, both psychologically and materially.

Because contacts have been mainly intergovernmental, the interests of regimes rather than those of the peoples have been predominant. Unfortunately most of the leaders lack vision. Africa has oftentimes condescended to humiliating terms because her leaders pursue interests that promote the survival of regimes rather than those of the people.

The fact of geography has, nonetheless, destined Africa to continue to have contact with the Middle East. Relations between the two regions are important and could be mutually beneficial. The basis of relations would however, need to change. Besides, sub-structural ties would have to assume prominence for fruitful mutually beneficial relations to develop.

However, such trans-national ties can only develop and be meaningful when and where the people have the freedom to organize their lives without the 'intimidating eyes' and the 'oppressive hands' of dictatorial regimes. Africa can only recover its dignity and assume its rightful place in the international system if her governments respect the human and democratic rights of their citizens. The people should be allowed to organize their

politics and economies through genuine democratic processes. It is hypocritical for African governments to demand further democratization of the international system without a corresponding democratization of both their domestic politics and foreign policies. Human rights and democratic principles and ideals are universal. Africans should be weary of so-called 'home-grown' democracies and 'the cult of indispensable leaders'. Such ideas are no more than devious traps of dictators often chorused by charlatans, bootlickers, and self-seeking praise singers.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge with heartfelt gratitude, the enduring support and guidance of God Almighty. He is always around and His presence gives joy, peace, strength, victory and hope.

I want to thank all those individuals and institutions that have in one way or the other contributed to my education and understanding of international relations. I wish, in particular to pay tribute to my late father and brother, to my mother and sister and my teachers. I thank them for their vision, their labour and sacrifices which, by the grace of God, have not been in vain. I also acknowledge with thanks the opportunities given me to sharpen and broaden my intellectual horizon by such institutions as the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Human Rights Centre of the United Nations, the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board and the United States Information Agency. Our great University, the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, has provided me the base, support and resources for my career development. I pay tribute to its founding fathers for their vision and to various administrations that have tried to preserve Ife for learning and culture.

I also wish to thank colleagues and friends in the University for their support and encouragement. It is comforting to have people who appreciate truth and the essence of probity in public life. My sincere gratitude goes to my students who have been an important component of my professional development.

Finally, I wish to thank my Dewumi (she has been more than a wife) and to our children for their unparalleled patience, understanding, support and sincere love.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience.

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