


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Sardauna's Middle East: Regionalism and Backstage Politics in Nigeria's Postcolonial Diplomacy

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## Abstract

The Middle East conflict has been identified as one of the most polarizing issues in the history of foreign relations of Nigeria during the First Republic (1960–6). The Christian-majority southern regions supported close relations with Israel, while the Muslim-majority Northern Region aligned with Arab states. The Sardauna Ahmadu Bello, Premier of the Northern Region, is remembered as particularly hostile to Israeli incursions in Nigeria. Reviewing new evidence from the Israel State Archives, this article introduces more complexity into portrayals of the Sardauna's positions. Contending with the enormous challenges of decolonization, the Sardauna continually vacillated in his approach to Middle East relations, weighing opportunities against drawbacks in establishing ties. Examining the more accommodating approach that the Sardauna adopted beyond the public eye, we gain new insights into his attempts to achieve political and economic objectives with regard to the Northern Region, while navigating the contentious political landscape of Nigeria's First Republic.

**Keywords:** Nigeria; West Africa; Israel; decolonization; diplomatic relations; postcolonial; political culture; politics

Nigeria entered independence in 1960 with a political system that was fraught with tensions and centrifugal challenges. The federal structure inherited from the era of British colonial rule fostered a debilitating regionalism, compromising the unity and stability of Nigeria from the very start of the First Republic (1960–6). Within the broader history of decolonization, nation-building, and post-colonial statecraft, the evolution of Nigeria's foreign relations in the years following independence was acutely imprinted with the competition and conflicts that perpetually threatened the viability of the newly established state. Rather than broadcasting singular positions on various foreign policy issues, the foreign relations and strategies embraced by the ruling elite in the First Republic reflected the disparities and disagreements that continually enflamed tensions between Nigeria's three regions and the political parties that dominated them. There were stark divergences between the foreign policy positions of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) from the Northern Region, the Action Group situated in the Western Region, and the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) from the Eastern Region, and these resulted in marked incongruencies in the relations established between each of the regions and foreign interests. The constitution of Nigeria paved the way for this chaotic situation by granting the federal government exclusive responsibility for the external affairs of Nigeria on the one hand, while on the other, also enabling regions to establish direct economic and cultural ties with foreign states. Regional premiers and representatives were known to make pronouncements that directly contradicted the federal government's foreign policy positions, leading David Williams, editor of *West Africa* magazine, to claim

that Nigeria ‘speaks with too many voices’.<sup>1</sup> According to the political scientist Ibrahim Gambari, the political system fostered the inconsistencies between the foreign relations conducted by the regions and the center, and ultimately weakened the authority of the federal government.<sup>2</sup>

In the broader history of postcolonial diplomacy across Africa, the cacophony of Nigeria’s foreign relations offers a highly unique case study. Postcolonial civil wars and secessionist movements clearly created opportunities for divergent foreign policies between central governments and secessionists, as seen in both the Congo crisis and the Nigeria-Biafra War.<sup>3</sup> But among African postcolonial states, the emergence of subnational foreign relations in Nigeria was a unique development, reflecting the particular history of regional tensions and competition that shaped the First Republic. The stark divergences in the diplomacy conducted by each of Nigeria’s regions sheds light on the distinct ways in which each aimed to meet the challenges and opportunities of decolonization. No other issue exposed these dynamics more than relations with the Middle East, which emerged as one of the most polarizing foreign policies issues for the First Republic. Relations split along the fault lines dividing the domestic political scene, with the Christian-majority south — divided into the Eastern and Western Regions — establishing close relations with Israel that included extensive economic and technical assistance, while the Muslim-majority Northern Region aligned with the Arab states, which provided aid in education and development, as well as religious and cultural solidarity. The Northern Region Premier, the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello,<sup>4</sup> in particular, is remembered for his ‘rigid hostility to the Israelis’.<sup>5</sup> There are no official records surviving from the Northern Region administration that documented Ahmadu Bello’s deliberations and behind-the-scenes decision-making processes in the area of Middle East policy, but scholars of Nigeria’s foreign relations in the First Republic have relied on well-documented policies officially enacted on the ground, as well as highly publicized statements of the Sardauna, to reach the conclusion that he was implacably hostile in his relations with Israel.<sup>6</sup> The Sardauna frequently spouted incendiary remarks, denouncing Israeli interventions in Nigeria, and taking pride in the fact that no Israeli had ever stepped foot in the Northern region. Particularly during travels abroad, the Sardauna used his public statements to confirm beyond doubt that his ties were with the Arab States.<sup>7</sup> As the historian Moses Ochonou argues, the Sardauna ‘aggressively cultivated ties across the Islamic world’.<sup>8</sup> He promoted a vision of an Islamized north in united opposition to Christian civilization, and he exploited publicized appearances to affirm this positioning by vocally condemning Israel.<sup>9</sup>

Against this religious, cultural, and ideological backdrop, historians have had little need to question the sincerity of the Sardauna’s anti-Israel stance.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the neat categorization of each of the parties according to precise ideological positions has provided scholars with an easily

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in C. Phillips, *The Development of Nigerian Foreign Policy* (Evanston, IL, 1964), 81.

<sup>2</sup>I. Gambari, ‘Nigeria and the world: a growing internal stability, wealth, and external influence’, *Journal of International Affairs*, (1975), 155–69.

<sup>3</sup>S. Saideman, ‘Explaining the international relations of secessionist conflicts: vulnerability versus ethnic ties’, *International Organization*, 51:4 (1997), 721–53.

<sup>4</sup>Hereinafter ‘the Sardauna’ and ‘Ahmadu Bello’.

<sup>5</sup>O. Aluko, ‘Israel and Nigeria: continuity and change in their relationship’, *African Review*, 4:1 (1974), 48.

<sup>6</sup>Phillips, *The Development*, 7.

<sup>7</sup>M. Wallace, ‘Nigeria and African unity, 1958–1963’ (unpublished PhD thesis, McGill University, 1965), 32.

<sup>8</sup>M. Ochonou, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa imperial agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington, IN, 2014), 194.

<sup>9</sup>C. Ekpo and E. Offiong, ‘Nigeria: The Paradox of a Secular State’, *Politics and Religion Journal*, 14:1 (2020), 149–72; J. Hunwick, ‘An African case study of political Islam: Nigeria’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 524:1 (1992), 147–8.

<sup>10</sup>Phillips, *The Development*, 82–3; T. Ambe-Uva and K. Adegboyega, ‘The impact of domestic factors on foreign policy: Nigerian/Israeli relations’, *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 6:3&4 (2007), 49.

navigated map of the political landscape. In Nigeria and throughout Africa in the era of decolonization, leaders and parties have been catalogued according to distinct camps and blocs that often glossed over far more ambiguity. The Cold War was largely responsible for this binary thinking and, as the historian Priya Lal argues, its projection ‘lingers in much historical scholarship today’, shadowing the wide range of ideologies and creative efforts that drove leaders in formulating national development programs.<sup>11</sup> Behind labels, principles, and rhetoric, there was much ‘fluidity and elasticity’ in the actual practices of postcolonial rulers and states.<sup>12</sup> The great challenges of independence were often met with creativity and flexibility. Diehard socialists regularly promoted capitalist development, and dedicated pan-Africanists spared no efforts to protect staunchly nationalist interests, but this complexity has not found enough expression in the historical literature.<sup>13</sup> The routine depictions of ideological purity were also undoubtedly a reflection of the political culture of the era, as leaders themselves tended to articulate hardline, uncompromising positions in a show of determination and confidence. Particularly in a political context like Nigeria, where competition was fierce and the stakes were high, leaders like the Sardauna promoted their image as stalwarts with unfaltering ideological resolve as part of efforts to rally the support of the masses. The historiography of decolonization reproduces these distinctions, and yet, it is vital to make room for more fluid depictions of leaders and their ideological positions. Looking beyond public proclamations and posturing, there is considerable evidence that postcolonial leaders often compromised their positions, adopted and modified their views, and borrowed from a wide range of ideological possibilities in order to contend with the immense challenges of nation-building and development. Moreover, the need to juggle between domestic demands and foreign influences and alliances also gave birth to ideological zigzagging.

With regard to the Sardauna’s Middle East policy specifically, there is in fact significant evidence to indicate that his approach to Israel was far more ambiguous and complex than his public statements would indicate. A review of materials found in the Israel State Archives, including detailed minutes from meetings and a range of correspondence between representatives of Israel and various members of the NPC elite throughout the early years of independence, offer valuable new information on the ebbs and flows of relations, and make it possible to introduce more complexity into portrayals of the Sardauna’s positions. From the late 1950s, Israel pursued strong relations with newly-independent African and Asian states to offset diplomatic isolation resulting from the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>14</sup> Africa emerged as a main target of Israeli diplomacy when it became increasingly evident that Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, too, had set his eyes on the continent.<sup>15</sup> Ties with representatives of the Western and Eastern regions of Nigeria were forged even before independence, and quickly became unusually strong.<sup>16</sup> The southern regions actively pursued close cooperation with Israel and welcomed Israeli technical assistance in agriculture schemes and

<sup>11</sup>P. Lal, ‘African socialism and the limits of global familyhood: Tanzania and the new international economic order in sub-Saharan Africa’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 6:1 (2015), 21.

<sup>12</sup>A. Pitcher and K. Askw. ‘African socialisms and postsocialisms’, *Africa*, 76:1 (2006), 5.

<sup>13</sup>R. Sklar, ‘Beyond capitalism and socialism in Africa’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26:1 (1988), 1–21. For a discussion on the complicated relationship between state socialism and private capital in Tanzania, see L. Fair, ‘Drive-in socialism: debating modernities and development in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania’, *The American Historical Review*, 118:4 (2013), 1077–104. On the tensions between pan-African and nationalist interests, see J. Nyerere, ‘The dilemma of the Pan-Africanist’ in J. Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism* (Oxford, 1968), 207–17.

<sup>14</sup>S. Decalo, ‘Israel and Africa: the politics of cooperation. A study of foreign policy and technical assistance’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1970); M. Kreinin, *Israel and Africa* (New York, 1964); L. Laufer, *Israel and the Developing Countries* (New York, 1967).

<sup>15</sup>J. Brennan, ‘Radio Cairo and the decolonization of East Africa, 1953–1964’, in C. Lee (ed.), *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010), 173–95.

<sup>16</sup>L. Schler, *Decolonizing Independence: Statecraft in Nigeria’s First Republic and Israeli Interventions* (East Lansing, MI, forthcoming 2022).

other areas.<sup>17</sup> The Northern Region, on the other hand, repelled early Israeli efforts to establish ties. The Israelis would not be deterred, and throughout the First Republic, they relentlessly pursued relations with the Sardauna, believing that strong ties with the Muslim-majority Northern Region would help offset the impact of the Middle East conflict on Israel's international standing.

The records left behind by Israeli diplomats and commercial interests reveal that behind the scenes, the Sardauna continually left the door open to closer ties with Israel. The vast discrepancies between the public face of the Sardauna's Middle East policies, and the more nuanced approach he adopted beyond the public eye, help us to see Ahmadu Bello's diplomatic strategies with new complexity and flexibility. Striving to meet the economic, political, and social challenges of independence, the Sardauna wavered between agendas and strategies far more than his public pronouncements would indicate. While his hardline statements shaped both history and the historical record, a new consideration on the vacillations behind the scenes helps us to better appreciate the dilemmas and compromises that characterized postcolonial political history. The Sardauna continually weighed the opportunities and dangers that relations with the Middle East posed for his agenda regarding the Northern Region, and his broader objectives in the Nigerian political landscape. The evolution of his positions on Middle East relations, and particularly with Israel, provide a window into his broader efforts to advance regional development in the north, confront his political rivals from the southern regions, and maintain his authority over NPC representatives in Lagos.

This article will offer a review of documentary evidence found in the Israel State Archives (ISA) regarding relations between the Sardauna and Israel in the First Republic, in conjunction with secondary sources, to raise new questions about the Sardauna's ideological positions and diplomatic strategies during the First Republic. The documents reviewed here have not previously been used by scholars analyzing this period of Nigerian history. While there are clearly biases and prejudices underlying the viewpoints and perspectives of the Israeli archival sources, when read with a critical eye and alongside the existing literature on the history of the era, they provide an opportunity to reconsider the deliberations preoccupying the Sardauna and the broader NPC leadership as they attempted to navigate the challenges of nation-building, regionalism, and foreign relations in the era of decolonization. These ISA records reveal new threads in the complicated web of interests and domestic political struggles that drove the Sardauna's Middle East policies as part of his efforts to promote the economic and political interests of the Northern Region. The documentary evidence also sheds light on ideological and political divides between the Sardauna and NPC ministers in Lagos, some of whom established exceptionally close ties to Israeli diplomats and commercial interests. These relationships took on personal, political, and economic dimensions, and demonstrated that the hardline of the NPC in Kaduna was not embraced by all members of the party. In relations with the Israelis, NPC ministers in Lagos distanced themselves from the Sardauna's positions, and also challenged his authority. The following history of relations between Israel, the Sardauna and the Lagos-based NPC offers new views into the complex negotiations between regional and federal agendas, between domestic needs and foreign relations, and between the public policies of the Sardauna and the back channels of NPC diplomacy. This investigation leads us a more nuanced view of the Sardauna Ahmadu Bello's leadership, influence, and diplomatic strategies in the First Republic.

### Israel's pursuit of the Sardauna in the era of decolonization

From the very start of Israel's introduction into Nigeria in 1957, Meir Meir at the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem voiced Israeli aspirations regarding the Northern region:

<sup>17</sup>O. Ojo, *Africa and Israel: Relations in Perspective* (London, 1988), 140.

With regard to the impression that the Muslim north is not within the realm of possibilities for us: In fact, it is precisely because most of the Northern region are Muslims that this region is so important to us. We must double and triple our efforts to reach out to them. We fully reject the claim that every Muslim is automatically our enemy.<sup>18</sup>

For the Israelis, the establishment of ties with the Northern Region would signify that the disputes between Israel and neighboring Arab states was a geopolitical conflict, and not a conflict with the entire Muslim world. As Israel's incursion into Africa was driven by this desire to offset the Arab-Israeli conflict, relations with Northern Nigeria became a top priority. But unlike relations with the southern regions, which quickly accelerated to an extraordinary level of collaboration, Israel struggled to make inroads in the North.

While all members of the diplomatic corps left behind important details about Israeli incursions in Nigeria at this era, a particularly detailed and rich chronicle of Israeli efforts to make inroads in the Northern Region in the early years of independence was left behind by Israel's first ambassador to Nigeria, Hanan Yavor. Yavor had a unique passion for Nigerian history, politics, and society, and his reports reflected a learned understanding of the complexities of local political and social dynamics, notwithstanding his occasional orientalist biases. From Yavor's very first meetings in Nigeria in 1957 through his tenure as ambassador (1960–3), he fostered close ties with many of the leading figures of this era, including Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Aminu Kano, Michael Okpara, and Festus Okotie-Eboh. He also reported on private meetings and overtures towards representatives of the Lagos-based NPC and also the Sardauna himself. Yavor's comprehensive accounts of private meetings, official events, social gatherings, and local political developments included transcribed conversations and noteworthy incidents, as well as his perceptions and impressions regarding the Nigerian political scene. Read with alertness to potential distortions and biases, these reports provide a unique vantage point for viewing the aspirations, strategies, and tensions that shaped Nigerian political culture in this era.

Already in Hanan Yavor's first visit to Nigeria in 1957, he reported on a cordial meeting with Tafawa Balewa.<sup>19</sup> Outwardly, the prime minister gave no indication that he harbored any hostility towards Israel. He was well-informed about Israel's first steps in Africa in general, and Nigeria specifically. He acknowledged Israel's request to open a consulate in Lagos, and said he hoped that the British would soon grant permission. Yavor told the prime minister that he was interested in visiting the North, and Balewa replied, 'let me know whenever you are nearly [ready] to come and I will take care of it that the Government of the North will invite you officially'. Yavor left the meeting with Balewa with a highly positive impression, describing the prime minister as very friendly, and 'wise and moderate'.<sup>20</sup>

This positive first encounter was not translated into direct contact with Kaduna. On the contrary, Israeli efforts to follow up on the invitation to visit the Northern Region ran into continual evasions and outright refusals. The most publicized of these took place in March 1958, when Golda Meir, Israel's Foreign Minister, visited Nigeria for five days. Over the course of the visit, she met with officials in the West and East, who honored her with official receptions. In stark contrast, the federal government initially tried to block her arrival.<sup>21</sup> The NPC eventually bowed to pressure from the NCNC and when Meir arrived, Balewa extended her a warm welcome. During the meeting between the two, the prime minister even made a point of condemning the growing influence of Nasser in Africa and told Meir that he was equally worried as the Israelis of Nasser's intentions. Meir left with an extremely positive impression of the prime minister, describing him an extraordinary person and

<sup>18</sup>Israel State Archive, Jerusalem (ISA), HZ 3114/9, Meir to Israel's Foreign Ministry (FM), 13 Dec. 1957.

<sup>19</sup>ISA, HZ 3114/9, Yavor to FM, 26 Nov. 1957.

<sup>20</sup>ISA, HZ 3114/9, Yavor to FM, 26 Nov. 1957.

<sup>21</sup>ISA, HZ 6016/13, *Daily Service*, Mar. 1958.

a rare diplomat. However, the Israelis knew that Balewa did not have the political influence of the Sardauna, and that he had successfully blocked Meir's visit to Kaduna.<sup>22</sup> Following the visit, Nnamdi Azikiwe assured the Israelis that he had come to an agreement with the Sardauna, and the NPC would not stand in the way of formal relations between the two countries.<sup>23</sup> This did not put to rest Israel's desire for direct ties with the North.

In November 1958, First Secretaries Yeruham Cohen and Alex Tzur were sent to Nigeria to advance this agenda. Eliashiv Ben-Horin, Head of the Africa-Asia desk at the Foreign Ministry, encouraged them to make every effort: 'I truly hope that this attempt will succeed, and disprove claims that the Northerners don't want to have a relationship with us'. Tzur and Cohen quickly began attempting to establish relations with the NPC leadership. Cohen reported already at this time that there was a stark divide between the policies touted by the Sardauna from Kaduna, and the more accommodating approach towards Israel embraced by the NPC leadership in Lagos. In his first meeting with Malam Zanna Bukar Dipcharima, Minister of Commerce and Industry, who was to become one of Israel's strongest supporters within the NPC, Cohen opened by saying that he regretted the federal government's rejection of Israeli assistance. Dipcharima immediately diverged from the Sardauna's hard line, and assured Cohen that the leadership of the NPC did not hold any negative views of Israel: 'Many of us look with admiration at your huge accomplishments'. He scorned any assumption that there was prejudice against Israelis, claiming that Muslims in Nigeria were not fanatics, and only nominally identified with the greater Muslim world: 'The only aspect of Islam that ties us to the Arab world is the pilgrimage to Mecca and that is all. The days of nationalism are over and there is no connection between us and the Arab world'. He then told Cohen: 'We will not hesitate to ask for help from any friend that will be willing to do this for us. We know that you are active in many different places in Asia and Africa and this has won you many friends in these countries'. Dipcharima noted in particular the success Israel had with cooperatives. He assured Cohen, 'as an NPC member, I want to let you know that there is no one in our party that has prejudice against Jews. The Jews were always an important economic force in many countries'. And he promised to help establish ties with his party.<sup>24</sup>

### Early Israeli missteps: the 1960 loan agreement crisis

The failure of Israeli efforts to establish ties to the Sardauna in this era can partially be attributed to serious miscalculations that Israel made in preindependence incursions in the Nigerian political scene. Israel allied early on with some of the Sardauna's staunchest rivals, most conspicuously Obafemi Awolowo, and the Action Group of the Western Region. Israeli ties to key figures in the NCNC — and particularly with Finance Minister Festus Okotie-Eboh, one of the most influential members of the party — also created tensions with the Sardauna. By all accounts, Okotie-Eboh was a shrewd politician, and one who navigated the minefield of Nigerian politics with exceptional talent. Okotie-Eboh had a great propensity for forging relationships of collaboration and mutual benefit.<sup>25</sup> When he was elected to the federal parliament in 1954, he immediately established very close ties with key figures in the NPC, and became part of the 'Ikoyi clique' of NCNC and NPC politicians that continually collaborated to promote their mutual interests.<sup>26</sup> According to the historian Stephen Ellis, the finance minister was also a 'bagman for the Sardauna', even sending a monthly cut from his unscrupulous financial dealings to Ahmadu Bello.<sup>27</sup> In his relations with

<sup>22</sup>ISA, HZ 3114/10, Ben-Horin to London Embassy, 7 Sep. 1959.

<sup>23</sup>ISA, HZ 3114/9, London Embassy to Ben-Horin, 3 Nov. 1958.

<sup>24</sup>ISA, HZ 3114/10, Cohen to Avrieli, 2 June 1959.

<sup>25</sup>W. Stolper, *Inside Independent Nigeria: Diaries of Wolfgang Stolper, 1960–1962* (Farnham, UK, 2003), 7.

<sup>26</sup>K. Post and M. Vickers, *Structure and Conflict in Nigeria, 1960–1966* (London, 1973), 51.

<sup>27</sup>S. Ellis, *This present darkness: A history of Nigerian organized crime* (Oxford, 2016), 66.



Israelis, Okotie-Eboh positioned himself as a liaison to the NPC, and Israeli reports from this time referred to him as 'a man of the North', evidencing Israel's faulty understanding of Nigerian politics.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, Okotie-Eboh was a skilled and self-serving politician, and he positioned himself as an indispensable intermediary between Israel and the NPC in order to advance his own political agenda. While Okotie-Eboh was known for his closeness to NPC allies in Lagos, his relationship with Ahmadu Bello was often strained by his tendency to stake out his own agenda, and flex his power and influence. This could lead to direct confrontations with the Sardauna, and a 1960 loan agreement with Israel emerged as one of these flashpoints. This crisis emerged when Okotie-Eboh travelled to Israel in June 1960 to secure a £3 million loan from Israel without the knowledge or consent of the NPC. Israel's readiness to extend this credit was remarkable testimony to the importance that it invested in relations with Nigeria in general, as Israel was struggling with its own shortages of financial resources at the time.<sup>29</sup> According to the Israelis, Okotie-Eboh enticed Israel into entering the agreement by claiming it would enable Israel to gain favor with the NPC. He thus successfully exploited what he identified as Israel's strong desire for relations with the Northern Region, as Israeli Finance Minister, Pinhas Sapir, wrote: 'It is highly likely that this loan agreement will strengthen our relationship with the ruling party in the Federal Government — the Muslim party, and also with the Eastern Region, which will also help us to make inroads in the Muslim North'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, once the loan agreement was publicly announced on June 14, it was followed by an unequivocal condemnation by the NPC, which denounced the 'unfortunate' deal made without the consent of the Nigerian people, and against the will of a large portion of the population. The NPC rejected any assistance from the Israeli government, claiming: 'When we want help, we know where to go for it'.<sup>31</sup> NPC headquarters in the North demanded an immediate cancellation of the agreement, threatening a vote of 'no confidence' in the federal government.<sup>32</sup>

For local journalists, foreign observers, and politicians across the spectrum, this crisis emerged as a test of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's authority. Balewa was leader of the federal government from the NPC ruling party, but the Sardauna, premier of the Northern Region, remained the actual leader of the NPC. The balance of power between federal PM Balewa and the Sardauna has been a topic of debate in the history of Nigeria. According to the political scientist Billy Dudley, the transition to independence increased the centralization of authority in Nigeria, and the federal government gained significant power through control over the armed forces and foreign policy. The federal government also had emergency powers with regards to the regions.<sup>33</sup> The prime minister controlled the appointment of ministers, and had the power to call new elections. Yet, despite these constitutional provisions, most scholars agree that it was the Sardauna, and not PM Tafawa Balewa, who held 'the real levers of power' in Nigeria.<sup>34</sup> The Sardauna's will has been described as 'uncontested', as his power was linked to traditional systems of authority with deep historical and cultural roots.<sup>35</sup> As political scientist Ufot Inamete writes, the Sardauna 'had more real power and influence (though not necessarily formal power and formal authority) than Tafawa Balewa the prime minister of the federal government (who, constitutionally, was supposed to have the more formal and real political authority and power in the country)'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>28</sup>ISA, HZ 3114/10, Ben-Horin to London Embassy, 7 Sep. 1959.

<sup>29</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Lorch to Argov, 24 June 1960.

<sup>30</sup>ISA, G 6388-12, Policy recommendation from Pinhas Sapir to government, Aug. 1960.

<sup>31</sup>*Daily Times*, 16 June 1960.

<sup>32</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Argov to FM, 10 July 1960.

<sup>33</sup>B. Dudley, 'Federalism and the balance of political power in Nigeria', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 4:1 (1966), 16–29.

<sup>34</sup>Dudley, 'Federalism', 21.

<sup>35</sup>C. Whitaker, 'Three perspectives on hierarchy: political thought and leadership in northern Nigeria', in R. Sklar and C. Whitaker (eds.), *African politics and problems in development* (Boulder, CO, 1975), 98.

<sup>36</sup>U. Inamete, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Nigeria* (Selinsgrove, PA, 2001), 23–4.

While the Sardauna is consistently recognized as the de facto center of power in the NPC during the First Republic, PM Balewa did exert his own influence over foreign relations, at times serving as a check on the Sardauna's primacy and a form of resistance to his authority. The loan agreement crisis of 1960 provides a vantage point from which to assess these dynamics. Indeed, Balewa did not waste any time in asserting his positions, and called a press conference the following day after the announcement from Kaduna. He began by condemning the introduction of religion into politics, claiming, 'that will mean the end of happiness in Nigeria.' He then asserted that the federal government had the right to borrow money from external sources, and the regions were not obliged to accept this money. Thus, the NPC could not impose its will on the NCNC or the federal government. Finally, Balewa stated that Nigeria would maintain relations with Israel and not get involved in Middle East politics.<sup>37</sup> The loan agreement thus laid bare the disconnect between the NPC in Lagos and party headquarters in Kaduna. PM Balewa and the Sardauna were clearly not coordinated in their responses to the incident, and Balewa seized the opportunity to demonstrate his willingness to publicly oppose the Sardauna.

### The turnaround? The Sardauna and Moshe Dayan

Two months after the loan crisis erupted, a breakthrough in relations came when a historic meeting was scheduled between the Sardauna and Israeli officials. The meeting took place on 28 September 1960, at the Lagos home of the Muhammadu Ribadu, Federal Minister of Land and Mines, in honor of the visit of Moshe Dayan, Israel's Agricultural Minister. Attending the meeting were the Sardauna, Ribadu, NPC Treasurer Mallam Bida, incoming ambassador Hanan Yavor, and acting Israeli consul, Shlomo Argov. The gathering provided the Israelis with their first view of the Sardauna as a leader and politician. Moshe Dayan opened by thanking the Sardauna for granting him the meeting, and for the chance to talk openly. He claimed that there were misunderstandings between Israel and the Northern Region, and he aimed to clear the air so that friendly relations could be established. He assured the Northerners that Israelis had no intention of imposing themselves, and they hoped that there was mutual desire for friendship. The Sardauna replied that there were several reasons for the lack of relations. First, he referred to the close relations that Israel had established with the Action Group, whose only interest, he charged, was to annihilate the North: 'They wish to destroy our homes and our way of life'. If the Action Group had succeeded, the Muslims of the north would have had to migrate out of Nigeria. Thus, Bello said, 'a friend of your enemy is your enemy'. The Sardauna also explained that he wanted to minimize the suffering of Nigerian pilgrims in Saudi Arabia, who had been treated as slaves by the Saudis in the past. With his intervention, they were now being treated well, and he did not want endanger those relations. Dayan responded by assuring the Sardauna that Israel had no intention of hurting the interests of the North, and he hoped nonetheless that they could enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship: 'Israel is not a large country, but we have had the luck and opportunity to gain skills in many areas that can be of help to the North, particularly since we share many of the same geographical characteristics'. Dayan offered to personally oversee the transfer of Israeli agricultural knowledge to the North. To this the Sardauna replied, 'I do not rule it out. We need to proceed gradually and patiently'.<sup>38</sup>

The Sardauna then took the opportunity to assert his authority with regard to the other NPC members in the room, perhaps to dispel any illusions among the Israelis that his leadership was being defied by members of the federal government. He told the Israelis that they should maintain contact with Ribadu, who was 'the closest and most trustworthy' to him. He then disparaged Balewa, in a move that shocked the Israelis: 'Clearly amused, he said that he made a habit of staying at

<sup>37</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Argov to FM, 10 July 1960.

<sup>38</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Argov to FM, 12 Oct. 1960.



Ribadu's house whenever he came to Lagos, and not at Prime Minister Balewa's house. He explained that he welcomed Balewa to visit him there, but only a day or two after he arrives in Lagos'. The Sardauna then pointed to Ribadu and Bida and promised the Israelis that he would continue to consult with 'these two little men', but assured them that the final decision rested with him: 'I am the leader of these men and all the others, and everyone accepts my authority. I only need to say the word and they all fall in line'. Hanan Yavor raised the possibility of his coming on an official visit to the North, and the Sardauna replied, 'gradually, gradually'. Before departing, Dayan joked with him and said, 'don't have any hard feelings towards us!', to which the Sardauna responded with boisterous laughter.

Argov reported that the meeting was a historic breakthrough after three years of efforts on the part of Israel to hold an official meeting with the NPC leader. The Israelis were particularly encouraged that the Sardauna was willing to meet with Dayan, the former commander of the Israel Defense Forces during the 1956 war, 'a fact he was well aware of'. The Israelis left the meeting convinced that the North harbored no hostility toward Israel, and it would be possible to eventually formalize their relations. The Sardauna left a deep impression upon Argov, who wrote, 'his entire essence projects majestic royalty. He speaks English eloquently and with hardly any accent. He is a man of immense power who commands respect and honor, as should be expected of the descendent of powerful rulers and conquerors'.<sup>39</sup> The Israelis believed that this was the breakthrough they had been hoping for, and hoped it would soon be possible to invite ministers from the North for a visit to Israel.<sup>40</sup> Argov later heard that the Sardauna returned to Kaduna and gathered his closest associates to report that many misunderstandings had been cleared, and proclaimed, 'the clouds have been dispersed!'<sup>41</sup> Yet, it was soon clear that both the Israelis and the Sardauna had been overly optimistic about the budding relationship.

### Independence and new developments

Hanan Yavor began his tenure as Israeli ambassador to Nigeria following independence celebrations, and immediately sought to capitalize on the September meeting with Moshe Dayan. He sent a request for an official visit to the North to Ahmadu Bello's secretary, and was invited for January 1961.<sup>42</sup> Prior to departure, Yavor met with Balewa, and the prime minister expressed satisfaction that circumstances had finally made the trip possible. He assured Yavor that if there had been 'anti-Israeli feelings in their hearts', it was only due to the close ties that Israel had established to the Action Group, the staunch political rivals of the NPC, and not because of any prejudice against the Israelis: 'We are devout Muslims, but the only thing we have in common with the Arabs is religion'.<sup>43</sup>

Yavor arrived in the North on 9 January 1961 for a four-day visit. The reports he sent revealed the deep impression this trip had made upon him. He included information about the history and geography of the region (which reminded him of Israel), and projected both exoticism and wonder as he reveled in the beauty of 'the exotic and mysterious region'.<sup>44</sup> His visit took place in a fully public fashion, with the local radio station reporting on his every move and the *Daily Times* publishing his picture in the Northern parliament.

Yavor held meetings with several ministers of the Northern regional government, including finance, education, information, welfare, cooperatives, and interior. Some expressed regret that formal ties had not yet been established, and hoped that Israel could help the North as it was helping

<sup>39</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Argov to FM, 12 Oct. 1960.

<sup>40</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Dover to Lagos Embassy, 8 Nov. 1960.

<sup>41</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Argov to Moshe, 4 Nov. 1960.

<sup>42</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Yavor to Grier, 28 Nov. 1960.

<sup>43</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 5 Jan. 1961.

<sup>44</sup>ISA, 3330/4, Yavor to FM, 23 Jan. 1961.

the southern regions. The cooperatives minister specifically discussed Israeli assistance to cooperatives and regretted that the same progress had not been made in the North. The minister of interior even disclosed that he opposed the decision to refuse the Israeli loan to Nigeria. The grand kadi from Kaduna also surprised Yavor by saying, 'it's a shame you can't fix the [Palestinian] refugee issue because if you did, you would have Arab students coming from Egypt, Jordan and Syria'.<sup>45</sup> While a lively argument erupted around this issue, Yavor reported that all those he met with were welcoming, and he speculated that they had been prepared for his visit by the Sardauna.

Yavor held two meetings with the Sardauna himself. The Sardauna talked openly about the destructive impact of colonial rule and shared his views on pan-African politics. He said that many African leaders made all kinds of proclamations about unity without taking practical steps. He personally favored the need for joint economic ventures but not political unity. There wasn't a leader who could rise above differences and represent all the interests of the people. The Sardauna also gave expression to his disappointment with other foreign relations. When Yavor invited the Sardauna to send a delegation of ministers to Israel, Bello joked that he had received similar invitations from Turkey, Sudan, the United Arab Republic, Lebanon, and Pakistan, but these were just diplomatic pleasantries and no one followed up on their offers. This joking reference to the disappointing show of Muslim countries in delivering aid in fact revealed the Sardauna's very real concern about his region's development.<sup>46</sup> Yavor reported on the conversation to Jerusalem and urged that an official invitation come soon from either David Ben-Gurion or Golda Meir in order to demonstrate Israel's earnestness. A formal invitation was sent from Meir several weeks later.<sup>47</sup>

Yavor returned from the visit echoing the modernist (and patronizing) view that Northerners were slowly opening up to development, and if Israel proceeded with sensitivity and caution, it could play a role in helping them advance: 'The Northern giant is starting to awaken. While the process is still in its infant stages, I believe that if we handle ourselves correctly, we will surely be able to contribute our part to the development of the region, with mutual benefits for both sides'.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, there are archival reports that Yavor transferred £4,000 to Ahmadu Bello via the Israeli company Dizengoff West Africa following his visit.<sup>49</sup>

Yavor's optimism with regards to the visit began to waver when several follow up letters to the Sardauna went unanswered. He became increasingly concerned that perhaps something had gone wrong when he received a surprise 10pm phone call at in the beginning of April: Ahmadu Bello's secretary asked Yavor to come to a meeting immediately. Yavor arrived at a house in Lagos where the Sardauna was staying, and was led directly to a meeting. He reported 'feeling uncomfortable walking past and greeting a line of NPC Ministers who were waiting for their own meeting with the Sardauna'. Entering the room, Yavor was surprised to find both Ahmadu Bello and Balewa greeting him. Yavor reported on a very pleasant and long meeting, where the political situation in Nigeria and the approaching elections were discussed. The Sardauna conveyed thanks for the invitation from Golda Meir and acknowledged that he had not responded to proposals for assistance. As Ramadan had just ended, he recommended that Yavor send the offers again.<sup>50</sup> The meeting ended without any suggestion that something had gone awry, but Yavor's report indicated that he was continually left guessing as to what Ahmadu Bello's intentions were.

<sup>45</sup>The author inserted here the clarification that the Grand Kadi was referring to Palestinian refugees.

<sup>46</sup>A. Thurston, 'Interactions between northern Nigeria and the Arab world in the twentieth century' (unpublished PhD thesis, Georgetown University, 2009), 34–5.

<sup>47</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 5 Jan. 1961; ISA, 3330/4 Yavor to FM, 16 Jan. 1961.

<sup>48</sup>ISA, 3330/4, Yavor to FM, 23 Jan. 1961.

<sup>49</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Hacohen to Dr. Yachil, 16 Nov. 1961.

<sup>50</sup>ISA, 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 10 Apr. 1961.

### The Cameroons vote

Two weeks after this cordial late-night meeting, a new crisis emerged that completely uprooted the seeds that had been planted in relations between Israel and the Northern Region. The issue was around voting on two different resolutions in the United Nations. Over the course of a few days in April 1961, both Nigeria and Israel voted against each other's interests with colossal consequences for relations between Israel and the NPC.<sup>51</sup> On April 4, Nuhu Bamalli, a diplomat from the NPC told the Israeli ambassador to the UN, Michael Comey, that the UAR was pressuring Nigeria to join Resolution 1604 — a resolution affirming the rights of repatriation or compensation for Palestinian refugees. Bamalli reported rejecting this request, telling the Egyptians that Nigeria would remain neutral on the Israel-Arab conflict.<sup>52</sup> But on April 18, despite Bamalli's promise, the Nigerians expressed unequivocal support for Resolution 1604 during committee discussions, and voted in favor. When the Israelis contacted Bamalli to ask what had caused the sudden change in Nigeria's position, he sent a note replying, 'you have the refugees and we have the Cameroons'.<sup>53</sup> The Sardauna fervently believed that the Northern Cameroons was historically and culturally linked to Nigeria, and invested tremendous effort into the successful passage of UN Resolution 1608, proposing that this territory become part of his Northern Region. Israel voted against the Northern Cameroons Resolution in an effort to rally the support of the Brazzaville Group, including Cameroon, against Resolution 1604. Bamalli later told Yavor that Nigeria had indeed planned to abstain on Resolution 1604, but this position changed when rumors reached them that Israel was not going to vote with Nigeria on the issue of the Cameroons. This led Nigeria to cast an 'opportunistic vote' with the Arabs on the issue of the refugees.<sup>54</sup> Attempting to smooth over relations with the NPC, the Israelis purchased a video camera for Bamalli at the cost of \$550.<sup>55</sup>

This video camera was not enough to mend the rift that emerged between Israel and the Sardauna following the UN votes. The Sardauna's discontent could be seen in a front-page editorial in the Northern *Daily Mail*:

The fact that Northern Nigeria will not receive aid from the Israeli Government in any shape or form is known to be a big headache for the Government of Israel. After all, the Northern Regional Government is entitled to choose its friends. The Israeli Government should know that it is an open secret that its government is being run from the USA by wealthy Jews there.<sup>56</sup>

The depth of the Sardauna's ire was further revealed when he embarked on a visit to Pakistan, Sudan, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt in July 1961, condemning Israel in each location.<sup>57</sup> In Khartoum, he said, 'Northern Nigeria has no relations with Israel. The plight of the Palestinian refugees and Israeli belligerence make it difficult for us to have relations with that country'. In Beirut, he said that relations between Nigeria and Israel were insignificant, and as long as he was in power, Israel would not take part in the development of the northern region. In Jordan, he visited Palestinian refugee camps and heard speeches about Israeli aggression from Jordanian officials. There, the Sardauna said, 'Israel has succeeded in gaining a foothold in the western and eastern regions of Nigeria, which is another expression of its imperialist regime. But in the North, there is no Israeli activity'.<sup>58</sup> Finally, at a press conference in Cairo, the Sardauna proclaimed, 'Israelis are out for domination wherever they may be'.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Z. Levey, *Israel in Africa: 1956–1976* (Leiden, 2012), 94.

<sup>52</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Ilan to Avriel and Lorch, 4 Apr. 1961.

<sup>53</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Ilan to FM, 1 May 1961.

<sup>54</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 23 May 1961.

<sup>55</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Ilan to Yavor, 1 May 1961.

<sup>56</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, *Daily Mail*, 10 June 1961.

<sup>57</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Oded to FM, 23 July 1961.

<sup>58</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Oded to FM, 23 July 1961.

<sup>59</sup>Radio Cairo, 16 July 1961, quoted in *Middle East Record* 2 (1961), 688.

Following the Sardauna's declarations, Yavor had dinner with Nuhu Bamalli in Lagos to discuss the crisis between the NPC and Israel. Bamalli brushed off the Sardauna's public comments condemning Israel, saying that politicians made opportunistic statements in particular circumstances and Israeli should not relate to this too seriously.<sup>60</sup> A few days later, Yavor met with Ribadu, who explained why the issue of the Cameroons was so critical: 'The Sardauna led this fight for deep emotional reasons and can only be understood by those who know our history'. The Northern Cameroons was historically and culturally tied to the former Sokoto Caliphate, and the Sardauna was the modern representative of that empire. According to Ribadu, the Sardauna got news of the Israeli vote while he was at a meeting for the leadership of the NPC, and everyone was overcome with shock and anger. Balewa turned to Ahmadu Bello and said, 'you see how your friends are acting, your new friends? The minute this friendship was tested, it was forgotten'.<sup>61</sup> Hearing this, Yavor told Ribadu that in fact the Israelis were the first ones to suffer a blow from the Nigerians with the vote on the Palestinian issue. According to Yavor's report, this was the first time Ribadu had heard of the resolution regarding the Palestinian refugees, and he immediately changed his tone. He asked Yavor to put the whole incident in writing, outlining the events linking the two votes. Yavor concluded that Bamalli had never informed the Sardauna about the two conflicting resolutions.<sup>62</sup> Tensions seemed to have lifted after this, and in September, Balewa met with Yavor and said, 'the Cameroons incident is completely over'.<sup>63</sup>

### **New beginnings, new breakdowns**

Again, at the start of 1962, there were indications that the Sardauna was becoming once again favorable to developing formal relations with Israel. Bamalli told Yavor in January that the Sardauna was having a change of heart. He had forgotten the regretful incident of the Israeli vote with regard to Northern Cameroons, and he was becoming fed up with the empty promises of the Arab states, particularly Egypt and Lebanon. He could no longer ignore the impressive results of Israeli development cooperation with the Western and Eastern Regions. A few weeks later, the Sardauna publicly signaled his growing discontent with the Arab presence in the North when he unleashed an attack on the Lebanese and Syrian traders in the region. The Sardauna's government had investigated their trading practices, and adopted new measures to curb their activities. The Northern government was seeking a policy of indigenization to enable more Nigerians to enter the retail business, access loans, and gain licenses as buying agents.<sup>64</sup>

Then in July 1962, some of the Sardauna's close allies in the NPC began negotiations with the Israeli firm, Dizengoff West Africa (DWA), for the establishment of a joint corporation to be based in the North. The Director of DWA, Nachman Levin, negotiated with Dipcharima and Ribadu to establish a commercial partnership in which they would all be part owners. Yavor had previously promised the Sardauna that Israel would take no concrete steps in the Northern Region without his knowledge and would not attempt to enter the North via a back door. However, with Ribadu as Ahmadu Bello's close ally, Yavor was satisfied that the Sardauna was aware of the initiative.<sup>65</sup> In August, Yavor was invited for another official trip to the North and a meeting with the Sardauna. When he entered the premier's office, Bello approached him with an extended hand and warm greeting, apologizing for his very hectic schedule that caused delays in organizing Yavor's visit. Yavor raised the tensions around the Northern Cameroons vote, but the Sardauna brushed it off, and they both agreed that 'politics was usually a game of quid pro quo'. Yavor

<sup>60</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 18 July 1961.

<sup>61</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 23 July 1961.

<sup>62</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 23 July 1961.

<sup>63</sup>ISA, HZ 3330/14, Yavor to FM, 19 Sep. 1961.

<sup>64</sup>ISA, HZ 3423/10, 'North Wages Trade War on Syrians', 29 Jan. 1962.

<sup>65</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, Yavor to Alon, 30 July 1962.

did not mention the Sardauna's visit to the Middle East and the bitter condemnations that appeared in the press. Instead, he turned the conversation to the possibility of technical assistance from Israel to the North, saying: 'the whole world is talking about the close relations between Israel and Nigeria, and yet the Northern Giant is not taking part in this'. To this, the Sardauna replied, 'you must understand that the Northern Region is facing a very delicate situation with regards to our relations with the Arab states. But now I can say that there has been a change of heart in this regard'.<sup>66</sup> The Sardauna was deeply disappointed with Nasser's failure to deliver on promises of assistance. A loan for £2.5 million never materialized, and instead the Egyptians offered to sell Nigeria cement at prices significantly higher than what was offered by Dizengoff West Africa. Bello claimed that he rejected this 'generous' offer.<sup>67</sup> Yavor offered Israel's help in the area of public health and agriculture. The Sardauna suggested that to avoid bureaucratic delays, Yavor submit to him personally the proposals. The two decided to meet again in September, when the Sardauna would be passing through Lagos on his way to Germany.<sup>68</sup>

Yavor's visit also included meetings with the Sardauna's closest allies in Northern regional government, including Minister of Lands Ibrahim Gashash, the minister of economic planning, and minister of commerce and industry. He also met again with the grand kadi of Kaduna, who made the deepest impression upon Yavor 'not only because he, a Muslim religious leader, was a fan of the movie, *Exodus*'. Yavor found him to be extremely learned, progressive, and broad-minded. During this visit, the Dizengoff West Africa representative in the North organized a large conference in honor of Yavor, and all of Kano's *crème de le crème* attended. Yavor returned to Lagos 'filled with impressions, especially for the mutual respect and brotherhood that the Northerners extended to me and Israel'. He concluded that the visit constituted another chip in the wall that existed between the North and Israel, and cause for guarded optimism.<sup>69</sup>

Negotiations for the joint corporation between Ribadu, Dipcharima, and Dizengoff West Africa also continued in September. Levin travelled to the North for an additional meeting, and he was surprised to find the Sardauna in attendance. Discussions advanced for the creation of a joint corporation to deal in imports and exports, with ownership divided between DWA with 25 per cent, and the other 75 per cent owned by Ribadu and Dipcharima.<sup>70</sup> Plans were made for a delegation of Northern ministers to visit Israel.<sup>71</sup> Formal agreements were also reached with regard to Israeli assistance in water development, poultry rearing, medical assistance, and academic scholarships for students from the North in Israel.<sup>72</sup> All of these developments reflected a dramatic turnaround in relations between the Northern Region and Israel that took place in the first half of 1962, but the new understandings were quickly obliterated when the next crisis came.

### Okotie-Eboh and the 1962 economic delegation

In October 1962, Israel once again became embroiled in the battle between the Sardauna and the Finance Minister Okotie-Eboh, and relations with the Northern Region suffered yet another setback. The trigger to this new conflict was Okotie-Eboh's behavior toward Dipcharima during an economic delegation to Europe, the USA, and the Middle East from August to October 1962. According to Ribadu and Dipcharima, Okotie-Eboh treated Dipcharima poorly from the start, but the conflict erupted in New York, when Okotie-Eboh did not include Dipcharima in a private meeting with Israel's Finance Minister, Levi Eshkol, who was also in New York at the time.

<sup>66</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/18, Yavor to FM, 28 Aug. 1962.

<sup>67</sup>ISA, HZ 3423/10, Yavor to FM, Sep. 1962.

<sup>68</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/18, Yavor to FM, 28 Aug. 1962.

<sup>69</sup>ISA, HZ 3423/6, Yavor to FM, 28 Aug. 1962.

<sup>70</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, Yavor to Avriel, 15 Sep. 1962.

<sup>71</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/18, FM to Lagos, 11 Sep. 1962.

<sup>72</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/19, Remez to Eshkol, 5 Oct. 1962.

According to Dipcharima, the two behaved as if they had something to hide from him. The tensions escalated when the Nigerian delegation arrived in Cairo, and as Dipcharima described it: 'the Egyptians abused us', and purposely dragged out negotiations in order to sabotage their planned trip to Israel. When they were scheduled to depart for Tel Aviv, the Egyptians requested they extend their trip in order to finalize an agreement, but Okotie-Eboh was infuriated by the maneuver and refused. Dipcharima told Yavor that he could not leave Cairo before signing because 'his entire career would be in danger if they left without an agreement. The Sardauna would never forgive him'. Dipcharima pleaded with Okotie-Eboh to simply inform Israel of a two-day delay, but the finance minister left for Israel, leaving Dipcharima behind. The Egyptians told Dipcharima that he and Ribadu had fallen under the influence of 'the evil spirit' of Okotie-Eboh who was an 'Israeli agent'.<sup>73</sup>

Okotie-Eboh arrived in Israel on October 11, and warned his hosts that the Sardauna had signed new trade agreements with both Egypt and Lebanon. He told the Israelis it was urgent to prepare similar agreements that he could bring back to the federal government, and asked for cooperation on trade, technical assistance, and cultural exchange.<sup>74</sup> A press release announced a new agreement between Israel and Nigeria, and both countries expressed 'their determination to take all necessary measures for maximum further progress in the future'.<sup>75</sup>

Once again, Israel had been roped into the power struggle between the Sardauna and the finance minister.<sup>76</sup> The infuriated response of the Sardauna to Okotie-Eboh's maneuver was not late in coming. The Kano newspaper the *Daily Mail* published a full statement from Sardauna saying that the Northern regional government 'disassociates itself' from any aid in any form from the government of Israel. It cited a similar statement made following the 1960 loan agreement and quoted the Sardauna saying: 'My government still maintains this attitude. We do not want in any way the Israeli government to participate in any aspect of our development program'.<sup>77</sup>

A shocked Hanan Yavor reported to Jerusalem, 'this statement hit us like lightning on a clear day'. The Sardauna's statements set off a round of condemnations by the southern press and NCNC politicians. Okpara put out a statement in stark contradiction to the Sardauna:

Israel is a great country. It is not a big country, but I have seen what they can do and I think it is praiseworthy. On my part, I shall always go to Israel and any aid to us would be accepted. Israel is helping my government right now and I like it. Let us get this clear, I myself am almost an Israeli, I love and admire Israel.<sup>78</sup>

An enraged Bamalli called Yavor, accusing him of being behind a harsh attack in the *West African Pilot*, as well as the other pro-Israel statements that appeared in the press, an accusation that Yavor strongly denied.<sup>79</sup>

Once Dipcharima was back in Lagos, he and Ribadu met with Yavor, and Dipcharima apologized that his visit to Israel never materialized, blaming Okotie-Eboh's stubborn behavior. Both Ribadu and Dipcharima justified the Sardauna's outrage. Okotie-Eboh disregarded Dipcharima's request to stay on in Cairo, and then brazenly publicized an agreement with Israel that far exceeded the agreements reached in Beirut and Cairo. The Sardauna would never accept Okotie-Eboh's attempt to determine Nigeria's foreign economic policy single-handedly. Dipcharima expressed regret over the sequence of events, particularly since he and Okotie-Eboh had made great efforts over the last year to advance the relationship between the North and Israel. Dipcharima and Ribadu reasoned,

<sup>73</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, Yavor to Lorch, Oct. 1962.

<sup>74</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, FM to Lagos, 14 Oct 1962.

<sup>75</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, Press release, Oct. 1962.

<sup>76</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/19, Remez to Yavor, 18 Oct. 1962.

<sup>77</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/19, Yavor to FM, 19 Oct. 1962.

<sup>78</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/19, Yavor to FM, 20 Oct. 1962.

<sup>79</sup>ISA, HZ 1908/19, Yavor to FM, 19 Oct. 1962.



however, that the situation need not jeopardize the negotiations for the joint corporation. The meetings between Levin and the Sardauna would continue as planned. Ribadu then added, 'it is sometimes advantageous to separate between friendly commercial ties and official relations'.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, negotiations continued regarding the joint corporation with Dipcharima, Ribadu, and Dizengoff West Africa. As they moved ahead, DWA opened stores and company offices in the major cities of the region.<sup>81</sup> Thus, by the end of 1962, another cycle of negotiations towards relations followed by crisis and breakdown had been completed. Officially, the NPC maintained a hard-line anti-Israel policy. Behind the scenes, relations expanded between Israel and the Sardauna's closest associates, reflecting the ongoing struggle of both the Nigerians and the Israelis to navigate the complex relationships between the regions and the federal government, and between Nigerian domestic politics and international relations.

### Towards the end of the First Republic

Hanan Yavor departed Nigeria in February 1963. His tenure as Israel's first ambassador in Nigeria had been marked by failed efforts to create inroads to the North, but his exceptional efforts were reflected in the ties he established with NPC representatives in Lagos. On the eve of Yavor's departure, Prime Minister Balewa invited the diplomat to his home for a farewell meeting and told him how much he appreciated the contribution that Israel had made to Nigeria. He also expressed regret that Yavor did not succeed in his efforts to finalize formal ties with the North and wished that the 'vicious cycle' would be broken between the Sardauna and Israel. He repeated the same sentiments he had conveyed over and over during Yavor's three-year tenure: 'We are Muslims, and very devout Muslims, but we are not Arabs. The conflict in your region does not interest us beyond its international implications and we are ready to assist in bringing peace to the region'.<sup>82</sup>

After Yavor's departure, relations between Israel and the Northern Region in the remaining years of the First Republic were a continuation of the cycle set in motion since 1960. Israeli diplomats made efforts for official ties, key players in the northern political elite tried to facilitate the normalization of relations with the Sardauna, private commercial ties expanded and included the participation of the political elite, and the Sardauna continued holding periodic meetings with Israeli representatives. Then, without warning, all of these developments would be quickly laid to waste by Ahmadu Bello's hostile and uncompromising public outbursts against Israel. In each instance, the contentious landscape of the Nigerian political scene would erupt into a conflict that could either be escalated or resolved by denouncing ties between Israel and Nigeria.

The interim Israeli ambassador to Nigeria who followed Yavor, Uzi Nedivi, continued pursuing options for cooperation with the Northern Region, and Dipcharima and Ribadu continued to offer their assistance in this effort.<sup>83</sup> In a report from April 1963, Nedivi described growing cleavages within the NPC itself, with ministers in Lagos giving voice to more emboldened critiques of the Sardauna, as seen in the following comments he reported by Dipcharima:

The only ones who have suffered from the Sardauna's outburst are the people themselves. Our people that make a living off raising cattle deserve to have Israeli veterinary expertise. If someone thinks that the Sardauna's outrage hurts Israel, well, they are wrong. Because Israel does not need the aid of Northern Nigeria. Look at Hamani Diori, the President of Niger, no less a pure Hausa than the Sardauna, and he has relations with Israel!<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, Yavor to Lorch, Oct. 1962.

<sup>81</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, Yavor to FM, Dec. 1962.

<sup>82</sup>ISA, HZ 3423/6, Yavor to FM, Feb. 1963.

<sup>83</sup>ISA, HZ 3142/13, Nedivi to FM, 20 Mar. 1963.

<sup>84</sup>It should be noted that this reported conversation was relayed by Nedivi, but it credits Dipcharima with referring to the Sardauna as Hausa. See: ISA, HZ 3142/13, Nedivi to FM, 19 Apr. 1963.

A new ambassador, Aviezer Chelouche, arrived towards the end of 1963. Chelouche hoped to avoid the internal power struggles of Nigerian politics that Israel had succumbed to in the past, and to gain influence in the North through 'quiet economic activity'.<sup>85</sup> He focused his efforts on an Israeli government investment in a tomato factory, believing that commercial ties would pave the way for political ties: 'If we establish this kind of industry in the North, we will be able to break the blockade that the Northern Government put on us'.<sup>86</sup>

Until the end of the First Republic, the Sardauna continued to make periodic anti-Israel pronouncements publicly, while enabling negotiations behind-the-scenes for agreements of cooperation. Despite several visits of Chelouche to the north, and increasing economic cooperation, the Sardauna travelled to Jordan in 1965 and vowed, 'there is no Israeli infiltration in Northern Nigeria. . . To my mind, [Israel] does not exist. And it will never exist. . . I don't know where it is'.<sup>87</sup> Another vehemently anti-Israel statement came in April 1965, when the Sardauna visited the World Islamic Conference in Mecca and told applauding delegates, 'Nigerian Muslims have formed a committee to deal with Islamic matters including the problem of the Israeli penetration into Nigeria'. He condemned the 'Jewish criminal seizure of Palestine from Muslim inhabitants' and also Israel's treatment of Palestinians, 'I visited Jerusalem in 1956 and saw how Muslim brothers suffered and declared: since then, I have been Israel's number one enemy and will continue to be forever'. Again, the Sardauna vowed, 'there is Israeli infiltration in Nigeria. Nigeria is a large country of diverse peoples and different religions. But in the North, where the population is predominantly Muslim, their Israeli footsteps cannot be found'.<sup>88</sup>

On 3 January 1966, Chelouche submitted a report that reflected his disillusionment with the deadlock:

There is little hope of penetrating the Northern Region. If we manage to preserve the current situation, which is maintaining relations with Ministers from the North in the Federal Government who are blocking efforts of the Sardauna from realizing his ambitions, that will be an achievement from our perspective.<sup>89</sup>

Twelve days later, the Sardauna was assassinated in the coup that would catapult Nigeria into the devastating era of the Nigeria-Biafra war. The violent removal of the Sardauna from the Nigerian political scene was part of the broader calamitous breakdown of Nigeria's First Republic. Nigerian political culture succumbed to the debilitating regionalism, zero-sum game politics, and brinkmanship that had plagued the state from the start.

## Conclusion

Historians have attributed the demise of the First Republic to the political class that was known for its 'vituperative and inflammatory rhetoric of political competition and conflict, the lack of response and tolerance for opposition, and the unwillingness to compromise with it'.<sup>90</sup> These dynamics were continually rehearsed and performed for the Nigerian public, leaving much of the citizenship disgusted with the political leadership by the end of the First Republic. Yet, as the political scientist Eghosa Osaghae writes, 'there was more to the First Republic than its collapse'.<sup>91</sup> As this study

<sup>85</sup>ISA, HZ 3423/9, Chelouche to Avriel, 31 Dec. 1963.

<sup>86</sup>ISA, HZ 1932/15, Chelouche to FM, 6 July 1964.

<sup>87</sup>*Daily Times*, 1 Sep. 1965, quoted in A. Akinyemi, *Foreign Policy and Federalism: The Nigerian Experience* (Ibadan, 1974), 104.

<sup>88</sup>ISA, HZ 3569/21, Lagos Embassy to FM, 21 Apr. 1965.

<sup>89</sup>ISA, HZ 307/8, Alon to FM, 3 Jan. 1966.

<sup>90</sup>L. Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity, and Democracy in Nigeria: The Failure of the First Republic* (Syracuse, NY, 1988), 291.

<sup>91</sup>E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (Bloomington, IN, 1998), 31.

has shown, there was certainly more to the political culture of the First Republic than met the public eye. Undoubtedly, the public performances of conflicts that enflamed the political landscape were often extremist and uncompromising, but behind the scenes there was more flexibility and nuance. Faced with the immense political, economic, and social challenges of decolonization, the Sardauna broadcasted a polarizing political strategy of competitive escalation.<sup>92</sup> Yet, behind the scenes, his uncompromising stances gave way to ongoing deliberation and vacillation between various interests.

Previously regarded as one of the most hardline figures in this era of Nigeria's history, the foregoing analysis reveals the Sardauna to be a more pragmatic leader than scholarly and popular portrayals of him allow. This focus on the Sardauna's fluid positions with regard to Middle East relations helps us to better appreciate the complexities that have been shrouded by binary and unwavering categorizations of postcolonial leaders. Throughout Africa in the era of decolonization, there was a constellation of factors pushing states, leaders, and parties into clearly demarcated camps, blocs, and ideological alliances. The Cold War, regional and ethnic tensions, and the challenges of nation-building all merged to discourage inconsistency and ambiguity. Against this backdrop, Ahmadu Bello's fluctuations demonstrated that leaders were indeed willing to think outside of established dichotomies that defined the era in order to achieve their objectives for their societies.

The Sardauna attempted to juggle between the immense challenges of development facing his region, and the pressures to align both domestically and internationally with allies who actually delivered support and assistance. Religious, historical, and cultural considerations made alliances with Arab states a natural inclination, but frustration with the lack of material benefits from these ties led the Sardauna to reconsider Israeli assistance. Ultimately, this wavering did not have any significant impact on historical outcomes. Instead, it is his hardline posture that has been etched into the historical record. Indeed, it was the failure of Nigerian leaders to bring more nuance and moderation from the backstage to the front stage of politics that led to the demise of the First Republic.

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<sup>92</sup>Diamond, *Class*, 158.