

Israel's Double Game in the Nigerian Civil War Revealed in Newly Declassified Documents

Foreign Ministry documents reveal how Israel helped both sides during the brutal Nigerian–Biafran War in the late 1960s in order to promote Israeli political and business interests

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Between July 1967 and January 1970, one of the 20th century's most horrific wars was fought between the federal government of Nigeria and the breakaway state of Biafra. After it was over, the Israeli Embassy in Lagos estimated that between 500,000 and 750,000 had died on the Biafran side as a result of bombings, executions, massacres and forced starvation of the civilian population.

Anyone who was alive at the time will recall the images of starving Biafran children, their bellies swollen due to an extreme lack of protein, who became a symbol of the war. In an August 8, 1969, telegram sent by Emmanuel Ron, an adviser at the Israeli Embassy, to the Foreign Ministry's Africa Department, he reported that the majority of the senior officials of the federal government held the position that "starvation is an acceptable weapon in wars and was used as a legal means in the wars of the advanced nations and there is no reason for Nigeria to behave differently."

Horrific descriptions of the war and the catastrophic humanitarian situation caused by the Nigerian government's siege of the region, most of whose residents were Igbo people, reached Israel, where it caused great concern in the media and among the public, condemnations and queries in the Knesset, the mobilization of public committees for humanitarian aid and also comparisons to the Holocaust of the Jewish people in Europe.

“Israel has not given military aid to Biafra, neither in training nor in weapons. We have reason to believe that the federal government of Nigeria also knows this.” This is what Haaretz reported on February 22, 1968, quoting the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry. This denial was one of countless such announcements, which were usually accompanied by a claim that the Arab countries were spreading false rumors about Israeli assistance to Biafra with the aim of harming Israel’s relations with the federal government.

Recently, the Israel State Archives opened to the public approximately 40,000 pages of cables related to Israel’s relations with Nigeria that were contained in the Foreign Ministry’s files. Though heavily censored, they reveal that, in addition to the fact that the denials regarding Israeli aid to Biafra were lies, Israel played a double game and provided military and political assistance to the federal government as well. The cables reveal that Israeli support for Biafra was not based on moral considerations, but was intended to promote Israeli political and business interests in Nigeria and in other African countries.

According to a summary prepared by the ministry in October 1972, soon after Nigeria received its independence from Britain, on October 1, 1960, it established relations with the State of Israel and became a major destination on the African continent for the activities of both Israeli government-owned and private companies. Relations began to deteriorate in January 1966, when army Chief of Staff Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, a member of the Igbo people, seized power in a military coup, murdering dozens of army officers and members of the civilian leadership. The junta justified the coup by citing a need to deal with the corruption of the deposed civilian government, and immediately launched investigations and show trials in which Israeli companies were implicated.

Hundreds of cables from the Foreign Ministry indeed confirm the extent to which Israeli companies were involved in corruption and bribery in Nigeria. For example, in a March 14, 1967, letter to the Finance Ministry in Jerusalem, a manager in one of the largest Israeli government companies operating in Nigeria wrote that, “until the January 1966 coup in Nigeria, the authorities at the time, both federal and regional, demanded payments for the needs of

their political parties and the heads of government in the amount of approximately 10 percent of the value of the contractual works they handed over to the contractors.” The company added that “these actions were carried out with the full knowledge of the Israeli Embassy in Lagos, and after consultation with it, and your office was also given a regular report on them at the time.”

In order to allay the concerns of the Israeli companies, it was decided that Israel would also consider “in a sympathetic spirit, proposals in the military realm.” Accordingly, the telegrams show that the ambassador in Lagos, Ram Nirgad, held talks with the junta about offering paratrooper training in Israel and even the establishment of an Israeli parachuting school in Nigeria.

Despite the problems it caused for the Israeli companies active in Nigeria, Israel saw the seizure of power by Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi as an opportunity to strengthen relations between the two countries, which had been limited until then due to the hostile position of the Muslim leadership from the Northern State, which dominated the foreign policy of the federal government. The special relations with the leadership of the Igbo people, who made up the majority in the Eastern State, were solidified during the years of the former civilian regime. The Israeli Embassy reported that the Eastern State leadership claim that “the Igbo are the Jews of Nigeria” and that Israel was the country that “contributed and contributes to the development of eastern Nigeria more than any other country in the world, relative to the size of its population.”

But before Israel had time to consolidate its good relations with the Eastern State, to carry out the security contacts with the junta ruled by an Igbo general and also to bring to an end the investigation of the Israeli companies in the corruption scandals, in July 1966 officers from the Muslim Northern State staged a second coup. Aguiyi-Ironsi and several hundred other officers were murdered, and power passed into the hands of a new junta, which was headed by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, a northerner who was considered a compromise candidate.

Among other things, since the toppled junta was identified with the Igbo, in the months following the second coup, pogroms were carried out against Igbo people all over the Nigeria, and especially in the Muslim Northern State. In dozens of telegrams, the Israeli Embassy in Lagos reported back to Jerusalem about a series of attacks, in which tens of thousands of Igbos were murdered and about 2 million were displaced from their homes and had to flee to the Eastern State.

With the increasing tension between the leadership of the Eastern State and the federal government, now led by the junta of Gowon, and against the backdrop of the continuing pogroms, which in turn exacerbated the Igbo refugee crisis, there was also Gowon's decision, on May 24, 1966, to reorganize Nigeria from four states into 12. In response, representatives of the Eastern State in Nigeria and in London, Paris and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, prepared for war. They turned to Israeli diplomats and asked for assistance with arms procurement for self-defense. Ambassador Nirgad opposed giving a positive answer to these requests, telling Jerusalem, "if we take any step of this kind, it will be revealed and without a doubt, we will be finished in both the north and the west [of Nigeria]."

Despite Israel's repeated denials that it gave Biafra any military assistance – denials that according to the telegrams were reported in the press after the Israeli Embassy bribed newspapers and journalists to get the story out – once war broke out, the president of the Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, one of Israel's closest allies on the continent, began pressuring it to assist the Biafrans. He called on Israel to transfer weapons either directly to Biafra or by way of his country. According to a memo dated July 18, 1968, from Hanan Bar-On, who directed the Foreign Ministry's Africa Department, to Foreign Minister Abba Eban, the former prime minister of the Eastern State, Dr. Michael Okpara, had paid a secret visit to Israel and it was agreed to transfer weapons captured by Israel during its own wars to Biafra via Tanzania, since the range of Israeli planes did not extend to Nigeria and a stop was needed. Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere refused to approve the stop, even though his country recognized independent Biafra. Israel then decided to give

\$200,000 in two payments to Biafra's representatives in Paris, to allow them to purchase weapons independently.

While the advisor at the Israeli Embassy in Paris, Yehoshua Almog, handed the Biafran representative \$100,000 in cash, the former told him that Israel was overseeing a campaign to explain to the world that what was happening in Biafra was tantamount to genocide. Numerous cables in the archive reveal that this public-relations effort included discreet "outreach" by Israeli diplomats and pro-Israel organizations around the world, and also the "placement" of op-ed pieces in the Western press.

The campaign was not undertaken out of humanitarian motives alone. In a March 23, 1969, telegram, Yael Vered, director of the Middle East Department at the Foreign Ministry, wrote to the embassy in London of Israel's intention to "initiate and assist a large-scale propaganda campaign for Biafra, in order to divert some of the sympathy for the Palestinians to this oppressed people and to simultaneously denounce the murderous role of the Arabs in the case of Biafra," a reference to the use of Egyptian pilots to fly the Nigerian planes that bombed Biafra.

Even while they were preparing for the war, the Biafrans appealed to local representatives of Israeli private and government companies operating in its territory to ask for their help in weapons acquisition. In a June 5, 1966, telegram to the head of the Africa Department, Moshe Leshem, Nirgad reported that he had denied to Gowon the involvement of "private" Israelis and explained to him that "buying weapons requires the approval of the Israeli government, and sales are only government to government; a private person cannot usually obtain weapons because there is strict supervision. Therefore, the Nigerian government should not be afraid of the rumor that weapons are being sold by anyone from Israel."

Despite the Israeli government's repeated denials to the Nigerian government, to the Israeli and international media, and also to its friends around the world, including the neutral U.S. government, dozens of cables testify that the Foreign Ministry knew full well about this "private" campaign of weapons sales, and was coordinating it with some of the Israelis who were

acting “privately.” In a telegram dated February 27, 1967, Leshem wrote the ambassador regarding the allegations of arms shipments from Israel to Biafra, that “only the allegation about the activity of private Israeli dealers is true. However, this cannot be repeated nor admitted.” In the telegram Nirgad sent to Leshem the next day, he wrote, “It is possible that at a later date we will be decorated with feathers that are not ours” – that is, if Biafra wins the war, Israel would be able to “come out of the closet” and take credit.

Even prior to the war, Israel connected the government of the Eastern State with arms dealers in Europe. For example, in an August 15, 1966, cable, Moshe Bitan, deputy director general of the ministry, told Nirgad that a Biafran delegation had arrived in Israel on a secret mission. With 1.5 million pounds sterling (around \$4.2 million at the time) to spend, it requested assistance in obtaining 2,000 rifles, 500 machine guns, 100 pistols, 1,000 hand grenades and a certain amount of ammunition. Bitan explained that he and his superior, Aryeh Levavi, had decided to help by providing contact details for an arms agent in Europe who would be able to sell them both Israeli and non-Israeli weapons.

As noted, Israel was simultaneously assisting in the war efforts of the federal government against Biafra, although the war crimes of the former were well known. In an October 24, 1967, telegram, Nirgad told Leshem that the representative of UNICEF to Nigeria said that since the start of the war in July, over 250,000 Igbo people had been slaughtered, and that as the federal army advanced, its soldiers were systematically slaughtering the women and children who remained in the “liberated territories.”

Despite this, several weeks after learning from the UNICEF representative about the extent of the massacres, the telegrams reveal that Israel gave its approval for the Nigerian government to use an Israeli merchant vessel for delivery of weapons and soldiers to the war zone in Biafra. The head of the Federal Navy initially requested the vessel, but later sent a message that he would consider confiscating it if Israel refused. Replying on November 10, Africa Department head Leshem told Nirgad that “it is more convenient for us to have them confiscate the ship than to volunteer it. You can tell the commander of the navy that we will accept the confiscation and won’t resist.”

Since Israel had agreed to a fictitious confiscation, a problem arose with the company's insurance, which only covered it in the event of coercion. In a return telegram dated November 12, Nirgad reported that two more problems had arisen: Part of the Israeli crew refused to sail to the war zone in Biafra, and the Nigerian foreign minister had asked him to personally speak with them; the second problem was for the ship to be flying an Israeli flag, which could shock "our friends in Biafra."

Nirgad boarded the ship in Lagos to speak with the Israeli crew, and in a telegram to Leshem dated November 20, he described "a difficult conversation that lasted about two and a half hours. I faced a barrage of questions on conscientious, humanitarian and national grounds and simply about their fears of danger. ...I did not to force the crew, but still out of safeguarding the company that owns the ship's interests and in order not to be accused by the Nigerian authorities of a failure bordering on sabotage I led the crew in the conversation so that almost all of them were convinced to remain on the ship." Nirgad reported that the ship reached its destination successfully, carrying 750 armed soldiers, fuel in barrels, bombs, explosives, weapons, light ammunition, trucks and 150 cows.

Three days later, on November 23, in a telegram that the chief assistant in the ministry's Africa Department, Yohanan Bein, sent to all of Israel's embassies in Africa, he cited Nirgad's reports in announcing that, "there are many reports of massacres of the Igbo people by the federal forces, whose behavior is characterized by robbery, looting and murder," and that even in other regions of Nigeria, the Igbo people who were found in hiding were "immediately slaughtered or exterminated by the federal army."

On July 9, 1968, Nirgad reported to Bein that a shipment of Israeli 81-mm mortars had arrived at the port of Lagos from Israel on an Israeli ship. The following day, the Israeli Foreign Ministry published a statement denouncing "the unimaginable human suffering that afflicts parts of the population in eastern Nigeria, and that arouses deep feelings of shock among all human beings, and in particular among our people who have experienced inhuman suffering over the years." Four days later, on July 15, Israel officially decided to send 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds) of biscuits to Biafra. It was part of a

series of food shipments that Israel transferred to Biafra, which, according to extensive internal communications, did not stem from moral concerns but in response to the heavy political pressure within Israel, especially from public committees for humanitarian aid. A committee led by the peace activist Abie Nathan was one the most outspoken among them.

In addition to the Israeli ship that transported soldiers and weapons to the war zone and the sale of mortars, during the war Israel also sold jeeps and communication equipment to both sides. On January 10, 1968, Nirgad reported to Leshem that Gowon complained to him that despite Nirgad's guarantee that Israel was not helping Biafra, "certain things were still discovered, such as Israeli communications equipment that the federal forces found in the territories they had 'liberated' from Biafra." In response, Nirgad pointed to Israel's "unconditional" support for the federal government, and reminded him of Israel's ongoing assistance. Nonetheless, Leshem confirmed to Nirgad in a January 18 telegram that indeed, communications equipment was sent from Israel to Biafra.

In December 1968, as negotiations were taking place over another sale of communications equipment to the federal government, the Foreign Ministry received a report, prepared by Dr. Yoram London, who headed a team of Israeli medics who had come to help the civilian population of Biafra. London wrote that "the Nigerian army destroyed the entire Igbo population including women and children... we know of acts of abuse against pregnant women." As an example, he described a case in which "federal soldiers cut open the abdomen of a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy, without killing her, and took out the living fetus, shot it and then played football with it." London added that there were places "where federal soldiers cut off the legs of little children and babies and left them alive."

London also wrote that on October 19, 1968, at 9:45 A.M., the hospital where the Israeli medical team was staying was targeted from the air with three bombs, which resulted in 32 casualties. No Israelis were wounded but some suffered from trauma. The International Red Cross estimated that the hospital was bombed because the federal government pilots were from Egypt and they knew about the presence of the Israeli medical team there.

Despite the ongoing reports of massacres and serious crimes committed by the federal government, including horrific reports prepared by Nirgad himself, and contrary to the position of others in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, throughout the course of the war the ambassador opposed making any moves in support of Biafra that would harm Israel's relations with the federal government. This was despite the fact that he recognized the importance that the president of the Ivory Coast attached to Israel's supporting the Biafrans. In a telegram sent to Jerusalem on July 30, 1968, Nirgad expressed indignation at the comparisons made by Biafran leaders between the fate of the Jews and that of the Igbo people. According to Nirgad, the Nigerian government was not interested in exterminating the Igbo. Rather, he said that Gowon claimed that his goal was to "suppress a rebellion and give the Igbo people their full rights in their Nigerian homeland." Nirgad added, regarding Gowon, "I tend to believe in his personal honesty."

The ambassador was not alone in his reluctance to support Biafra. Dozens of telegrams reveal that there were senior officials in the Foreign Ministry who wanted to stop Israeli food deliveries, arguing that the Biafran leadership would not prefer food to weapons anyway. They warned against damage to Israel's relations with the federal government, and noted that the physical transfer of the food to the war zone in Biafra was a complicated operation in itself.

The internal dispute in the ministry reached a boiling point after Nirgad cabled the ministry, on July 5, 1967, demanding that Israeli firms be prevented from undertaking "uncoordinated initiatives" in Biafra. Bein, from the Africa Department, wrote by hand on top of Nirgad's cable a message to Deputy Director General Moshe Bitan about the plan of an Israeli company to help Biafra purchase jeeps. Bein added that it was decided within the ministry not to inform Nirgad about the plan in order to prevent him from "sabotaging it."

The war in Biafra ended in January 1970, with the victory of the federal government and reintegration of Biafra into the federation. For nearly the next three decades, until 1999, Nigeria was ruled almost continuously by military regimes. In a telegram sent on March 16, 1972, by the new

ambassador in Lagos, Issachar ben Ya'akov, to Nirgad, his predecessor, who at the time served as CEO of an Israeli company operating in Nigeria, he asked to convey his regards to Nirgad's wife and daughters and added, matter-of-factly, how "At the station established by your company, damage was caused last week, probably intentionally by striking workers, which is estimated in 1 million Nigerian pounds. Have you heard about that?"

In 1974, Nirgad was appointed Israel's ambassador to Argentina, where he served during the years of the military junta, which arrested, tortured and "disappeared" tens of thousands of citizens, including about 2,000 Jews, while at the same time purchasing Israeli weapons and training. In a telegram dated June 28, 1972, sent by Israel's deputy ambassador in Washington D.C., Avner Idan, to the ministry's Africa Department, he wrote that he had met someone who had been among Biafra's leaders, and had represented it abroad in matters of arms procurement and finances during the war. The Biafran told him that he "always received help and assistance from Israelis, officials and private citizens." Ephraim Dubeck, deputy director of the Africa Department, responded to him on July 24 in a telegram, "We have no interest, for obvious reasons, in demonstrating close relations with personalities associated with the late state of Biafra."

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