



## Islamic Diplomatic Engagement and Development Partnerships: Assessing Nigeria's Prospects as a Bridge between Africa and the Muslim World

### ABSTRACT

*Islamic diplomacy has gained renewed prominence as faith-based engagement increasingly shapes international cooperation and development governance within the Muslim world. Nigeria, home to one of Africa's largest Muslim populations and strategically positioned between sub-Saharan Africa and the broader Islamic sphere, possesses significant yet underutilized potential to function as a diplomatic and developmental bridge between Africa and Muslim-majority states. This study examines Nigeria's prospects for advancing Islamic diplomatic engagement and strengthening development partnerships with institutions and countries of the Muslim world. Adopting a qualitative analytical approach based on policy documents, institutional reports, and contemporary diplomatic engagements, the paper evaluates Nigeria's existing participation in Islamic multilateral frameworks, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Islamic Development Bank. The analysis reveals that while Nigeria's demographic advantage, religious networks, and historical linkages provide a strong foundation for enhanced engagement, limited institutional coordination, inconsistent foreign policy prioritization, and domestic political sensitivities constrain effective leadership in Islamic development diplomacy. The study further identifies emerging opportunities in Islamic finance, educational exchange, humanitarian collaboration, and South-South cooperation that could position Nigeria as a central hub for Africa-Muslim world development partnerships. By integrating Islamic diplomatic instruments into its foreign policy architecture, Nigeria could strengthen its international influence and contribute meaningfully to inclusive development across both regions. The paper contributes to growing scholarship on faith-based diplomacy and offers strategic policy recommendations for advancing Nigeria's role in global Islamic development cooperation.*

**Keywords:** Islamic diplomacy, Development Partnerships, Nigeria, Africa-Muslim World Relations, Faith-based Diplomacy, South-South Cooperation, Islamic Development Institutions.

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### I. Introduction

In the contemporary international system, diplomacy has evolved beyond traditional state-centric negotiation to incorporate normative, cultural, and religious dimensions that increasingly shape global governance and development cooperation. Scholars of international relations have observed a renewed visibility of religion in global affairs, challenging earlier secular assumptions of diplomatic engagement (Haynes, 2013; Fox & Sandler, 2004). Within this broader resurgence of religious diplomacy, Islamic diplomacy has emerged as a distinctive framework through which Muslim-majority states and Islamic institutions pursue collective political, economic, and developmental objectives grounded in shared ethical and civilizational values (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).

Historically, Islamic civilization developed sophisticated traditions of diplomatic engagement, treaty-making, inter-polity cooperation, and humanitarian responsibility, rooted in Qur'anic principles of cooperation (ta'āwun), peaceful coexistence (ṣulḥ), and communal solidarity (ukhuwwah) (Esposito, 2002; Kamali, 2016). In the modern era, these principles have been institutionalized through multilateral Islamic organizations, most notably the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), which coordinate political dialogue, development financing, humanitarian intervention, and educational cooperation across Muslim-majority states (OIC, 2022; IsDB, 2023). These institutions now represent a significant architecture of South–South cooperation and faith-based development governance linking the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

Despite Africa hosting nearly one-third of the global Muslim population, scholarly attention to African participation in Islamic diplomatic and development frameworks remains limited (Soares, 2016). This gap is particularly evident in analyses of Nigeria, a country that possesses Africa's largest Muslim population, substantial geopolitical influence in West Africa, and long-standing historical ties with Muslim-majority regions through pilgrimage, scholarship, and trade networks (Loimeier, 2012). Nigeria's formal membership in the OIC and IsDB, alongside active Islamic civil society and educational networks, provides institutional legitimacy for deeper diplomatic engagement with the Muslim world (Adetula, 2015). Yet, existing studies suggest that Nigeria's foreign policy has inconsistently integrated Islamic diplomatic instruments, often due to domestic political sensitivities, bureaucratic fragmentation, and fluctuating foreign policy priorities (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

Simultaneously, contemporary global development discourse has emphasized the growing importance of South–South cooperation, alternative development financing, and culturally embedded governance models as complements to Western-dominated aid architectures (Gray & Gills, 2016). Islamic development institutions have increasingly positioned themselves as major actors in infrastructure financing, humanitarian response, poverty reduction, and post-conflict reconstruction across Africa (IsDB, 2023). These trends present strategic opportunities for Nigeria to reposition itself as a diplomatic and developmental bridge between African development agendas and the institutional capacities of the wider Muslim world.

However, existing literature on faith-based diplomacy and Islamic development cooperation has largely concentrated on Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018; Ayoob, 2011). Empirical analysis of Nigeria's potential leadership role in Africa–Muslim world development partnerships remains sparse. This constitutes a significant scholarly and policy gap given Nigeria's demographic scale, regional influence, and historical religious connectivity.

This study addresses this gap by examining Nigeria's prospects for advancing Islamic diplomatic engagement and development cooperation. It assesses Nigeria's participation in Islamic multilateral institutions, identifies opportunities for enhanced development partnerships, and analyzes structural and political constraints limiting effective leadership. The study is guided by four key research questions:

*What conceptual and institutional foundations underpin Islamic diplomacy in contemporary international relations?*

*How has Nigeria historically engaged with Islamic multilateral and bilateral diplomatic frameworks?*

*What opportunities exist for Nigeria to strengthen development partnerships with Muslim-majority countries and Islamic institutions?*

*What challenges constrain Nigeria's effective participation and leadership in Islamic development diplomacy?*

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to emerging scholarship on faith-based diplomacy, expands empirical understanding of Africa–Muslim world relations, and offers policy-relevant insights into integrating Islamic diplomatic instruments into national foreign policy architecture. It ultimately argues that strategic deployment of Islamic diplomacy could position Nigeria as a pivotal hub connecting African development priorities with the financial, institutional, and normative resources of the Muslim world.

## II. Literature Review

### Conceptual Foundations of Islamic Diplomacy

### Evolution of Diplomacy in Islamic Civilization

Diplomatic practice in Islamic civilization predates modern international relations theory and was deeply embedded in the political, legal, and ethical frameworks of early Muslim governance. Classical Islamic jurists developed sophisticated doctrines regulating inter-polity relations, treaty-making, protection of envoys, and peaceful coexistence. These doctrines were derived from Qur'anic injunctions, Prophetic precedents, and subsequent juristic elaborations within the discipline of *siyar* (Islamic international law) (Khadduri, 1955; Hamidullah, 1996). Early Muslim polities institutionalized diplomatic missions (*rusul*) and treaty arrangements (*mu'ahadāt*), establishing norms of reciprocity and negotiation comparable to later Westphalian diplomatic traditions (Kamali, 2016).

Historical studies further demonstrate that Islamic empires maintained sustained diplomatic engagements with Byzantine, Persian, African, and Asian states, combining political negotiation with religious and commercial diplomacy (Esposito, 2002). This historical evolution indicates that diplomacy in Islamic civilization was never merely pragmatic statecraft but was guided by moral obligations, justice, and communal responsibility. Contemporary scholars therefore argue that Islamic diplomacy constitutes a distinct normative tradition within global diplomatic history rather than a recent reinvention (Shahi, 2019).

### Qur'anic and Prophetic Foundations of International Engagement

The conceptual foundations of Islamic diplomacy derive primarily from Qur'anic principles that regulate relations among communities and nations. The Qur'an promotes cooperation in righteousness (*ta'āwun 'ala al-birr wa al-taqwā*), peaceful conflict resolution (*ṣulḥ*), and fraternity among believers (*ukhuwwah*) while recognizing pluralism among nations (*ta'āruf*) (Qur'an 5:2; 49:13). These principles have been interpreted by jurists as ethical imperatives guiding inter-state and inter-communal relations (Kamali, 2016).

Prophetic practice (*Sunnah*) further institutionalized diplomatic norms through treaties such as the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, diplomatic letters to foreign rulers, and protections granted to non-Muslim communities. Hamidullah (1996) documents that the Prophet Muhammad established binding diplomatic conventions including immunity of envoys, peaceful arbitration, and contractual fidelity. These precedents formed the basis of Islamic international jurisprudence and remain central to contemporary Islamic diplomatic theory.

Modern Islamic political theorists argue that these normative principles offer an ethical alternative to realist diplomacy by prioritizing justice, cooperation, and mutual development (Ayoob, 2011; Shahi, 2019). Consequently, Islamic diplomacy today is increasingly conceptualized not merely as religious symbolism in foreign policy, but as an ethical governance framework for international engagement.

### Islamic Ethics in Global Cooperation and Development

In contemporary scholarship, Islamic diplomacy is closely linked with Islamic ethical conceptions of development, solidarity, and humanitarian responsibility. Islamic economic and social ethics emphasize collective welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), poverty alleviation, social justice, and mutual assistance, forming the moral foundation of Islamic development cooperation (Chapra, 2008; Kamali, 2016). These ethical commitments are institutionalized through multilateral Islamic organizations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), which operationalize Islamic solidarity in financing infrastructure, humanitarian relief, education, and health projects across Muslim-majority and Muslim-populated countries (OIC, 2022; IsDB, 2023).

Development scholars increasingly recognize Islamic development institutions as emerging actors in South–South cooperation and alternative development governance beyond Western aid paradigms (Gray & Gills, 2016). This literature situates Islamic diplomacy within global development studies, highlighting its potential to mobilize culturally grounded development frameworks that enhance legitimacy and sustainability in recipient societies.

### Contemporary Interpretations of Faith-Based Diplomacy

The broader literature on faith-based diplomacy provides essential theoretical grounding for understanding Islamic diplomatic engagement. Haynes (2013) and Fox and Sandler (2004) argue that

religion has re-entered global politics as a source of soft power, normative legitimacy, and transnational mobilization. Mandaville and Hamid (2018) further demonstrate that states increasingly deploy religious identity as an instrument of foreign policy to build alliances, promote development initiatives, and enhance international influence.

Within this framework, Islamic diplomacy is conceptualized as a form of faith-based diplomacy that integrates religious ethics, institutional cooperation, and strategic statecraft (Shahi, 2019). Comparative studies illustrate how countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Indonesia have institutionalized Islamic diplomatic instruments to advance humanitarian outreach, development financing, and cultural diplomacy (Ayoob, 2011; Mandaville & Hamid, 2018). However, African Muslim-populated states remain underrepresented in this literature, revealing a clear empirical and theoretical gap.

Religion functions as a potent source of soft power, enabling states and non-state actors to cultivate legitimacy, moral authority, and cultural affinity in international engagement (Nye, 2004). Islamic humanitarian agencies, interfaith peace councils, and faith-inspired development banks illustrate how religious legitimacy facilitates trust and access where conventional diplomacy may struggle. In the Islamic context, Prophetic models of diplomatic conduct continue to inform contemporary approaches to international engagement, emphasizing justice, mutual cooperation, and peaceful coexistence (Musaddad, 2021). Such religiously grounded diplomacy strengthens moral credibility and enhances partnership-building across regions.

### **Theoretical Linkages with Constructivism and Normative Power Theory**

The growing role of faith in diplomacy aligns closely with constructivist IR theory, which emphasizes the power of norms, identities, and shared values in shaping state behavior (Wendt, 1999). Religious beliefs contribute to identity formation and influence diplomatic preferences, alliance patterns, and development priorities. Likewise, normative power theory explains how actors project influence through ethical and value-based persuasion rather than coercion (Manners, 2002). Islamic diplomacy, grounded in Qur'anic principles of cooperation (ta'āwun) and justice ('adl), represents a form of normative power projection in international engagement (Musaddad, 2021).

The reviewed literature establishes that Islamic diplomacy possesses deep historical roots, normative Qur'anic and Prophetic foundations, institutional expression in modern Islamic development organizations, and growing relevance within faith-based diplomacy scholarship. Nevertheless, existing studies have largely focused on Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian actors, with limited systematic analysis of Nigeria's participation in Islamic diplomatic and development architectures (Loimeier, 2012; Soares, 2016).

This omission is significant given Nigeria's large Muslim population, geopolitical weight in West Africa, and formal membership in Islamic multilateral institutions. The present study therefore addresses this gap by examining how Nigeria can operationalize Islamic diplomatic principles and institutional partnerships to serve as a bridge between Africa and the wider Muslim world.

### **III. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research design, combining document analysis and literature review to examine Nigeria's potential as a bridge between Africa and the Muslim world through Islamic diplomacy. Data were drawn from official policy documents (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, OIC, IsDB), peer-reviewed literature on Islamic diplomacy and development cooperation, and expert opinions where accessible.

A purposive sampling approach was used to select relevant documents and scholarly works, ensuring inclusion of sources rich in information and credibility (Palinkas et al., 2015). Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, identifying key themes on historical foundations, institutional mechanisms, opportunities, and challenges in Nigeria's Islamic diplomatic engagement.

### **IV. Result and Findings**

#### **Nigeria's Islamic Diplomatic Identity and Historical Engagement**

#### **Nigeria's Religious Demography and Diplomatic Identity**

Nigeria occupies a distinctive position in Africa's religious and geopolitical landscape. With



one of the largest Muslim populations on the continent and a long history of Islamic scholarship, pilgrimage networks, and trans-Saharan intellectual exchange, Nigeria possesses deep-rooted religious connectivity with the wider Muslim world (Loimeier, 2012). Islam has been present in the region for over a millennium, shaping political organization, legal traditions, and socio-cultural relations in Northern Nigeria through the historical legacy of Kanem-Borno, Hausa city-states, and the Sokoto Caliphate (Soares, 2016). This historical experience has embedded Islamic identity within Nigeria's socio-political fabric and provides a natural foundation for diplomatic engagement with Muslim-majority countries.

Modern Nigerian statehood inherited this legacy while adopting a formally secular constitutional order. Nevertheless, religion continues to play a visible role in Nigeria's external relations, particularly through pilgrimage diplomacy, educational exchanges, and cultural cooperation with Middle Eastern and North African states (Adetula, 2015). Scholars of Nigerian foreign policy observe that religious identity functions as a subtle but persistent soft-power asset in Nigeria's international engagement, especially within Islamic multilateral institutions (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

### **Nigeria's Membership in Islamic Multilateral Institutions**

Nigeria's formal integration into Islamic diplomatic structures began with its accession to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1986. Membership in the OIC granted Nigeria access to political consultation platforms, development cooperation mechanisms, and humanitarian assistance frameworks linking Muslim-majority states across three continents (OIC, 2022). Despite initial domestic political controversy over perceived threats to secularism, Nigeria has retained its OIC membership and participates in ministerial and summit-level deliberations (Adetula, 2015).

Similarly, Nigeria became a member of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), gaining access to development financing, educational scholarships, infrastructure funding, and technical cooperation programs. The IsDB has supported projects in Nigeria across agriculture, health, education, and poverty alleviation sectors, reflecting institutionalized Islamic development cooperation in practice (IsDB, 2023). These engagements position Nigeria within an existing architecture of Islamic development diplomacy, even though utilization remains below potential.

### **Bilateral and Educational Diplomatic Engagements**

Beyond multilateral institutions, Nigeria has historically maintained bilateral diplomatic and educational relationships with Muslim-majority states including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Iran, Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia. These engagements have included scholarship programs for Nigerian students in Islamic universities, religious teacher training, Arabic language development, and cooperative agreements in cultural affairs (Loimeier, 2012). Pilgrimage diplomacy—through the annual Hajj operations—has further sustained Nigeria's administrative and diplomatic interactions with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, reinforcing institutional familiarity with Islamic diplomatic environments.

### **Nigeria's Foreign Policy Orientation toward the Muslim World**

Nigeria's foreign policy tradition has historically prioritized African regional leadership, non-alignment, and economic diplomacy. Engagement with the Muslim world has often been secondary, episodic, and reactive rather than strategically institutionalized (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018). Analysts argue that domestic political sensitivities surrounding religious pluralism have constrained Nigeria's willingness to openly deploy Islamic diplomacy as a defined foreign policy instrument (Adetula, 2015).

Nevertheless, recent global shifts toward South–South cooperation and alternative development financing have renewed interest in expanding Nigeria's partnerships beyond traditional Western alliances. Islamic development institutions now represent credible alternatives for infrastructure financing, humanitarian assistance, and educational investment across Africa (Gray & Gills, 2016). This evolving global environment presents Nigeria with new diplomatic space to recalibrate its foreign policy architecture toward structured Islamic development engagement.

### **Emerging Potential for Bridge-Building Diplomacy**

Nigeria's position between sub-Saharan Africa and the broader Muslim world, combined with its demographic weight and institutional access to Islamic multilateral frameworks, provides strategic potential for such a role. Yet, no systematic study has comprehensively examined how Nigeria could operationalize this advantage for development cooperation and diplomatic leadership.

## **Islamic Development Institutions and Partnership Architecture**

### **Overview of Islamic Development Institutions**

Islamic development institutions provide both the normative framework and the financial infrastructure for faith-based development cooperation across Muslim-majority and Muslim-populated countries. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), established in 1969, is the largest intergovernmental body uniting 57 member states, aiming to safeguard Muslim interests, promote political consultation, and advance economic, social, and cultural development (OIC, 2022). The Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), founded in 1975, operationalizes development financing, capacity building, and technical assistance for member countries, aligning projects with Shariah-compliant principles and ethical governance norms (IsDB, 2023).

These institutions exemplify how Islamic diplomacy transcends traditional statecraft, integrating moral-ethical obligations, inter-state cooperation, and development priorities into structured programs. Scholars argue that such institutional arrangements are a manifestation of Islamic principles of solidarity (ta'āwun), mutual welfare (maṣlaḥah), and human dignity, operationalized at regional and global levels (Chapra, 2008; Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).

### **Organisational Structure and Functional Mechanisms**

#### **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)**

The OIC operates through multiple organs, including the Council of Foreign Ministers, specialized committees on economic cooperation, cultural affairs, and humanitarian assistance. It has developed frameworks for intra-Muslim economic collaboration, conflict mediation, and technical assistance, which provide formal channels for diplomatic engagement and development partnerships (OIC, 2022). The OIC's coordination with African member states is particularly significant for Nigeria, offering institutional legitimacy and access to regional and continental development initiatives.

#### **Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)**

The IsDB serves as the primary financial institution for development projects under the OIC framework. It provides interest-free financing (Qard Hasan), equity investments, technical assistance, and capacity-building programs. IsDB operations span infrastructure, healthcare, education, agriculture, and poverty reduction, all guided by Shariah-compliant principles and ethical accountability (IsDB, 2023). Nigeria has benefited from IsDB funding for agriculture and education projects, yet studies indicate that Nigeria's engagement remains largely project-based rather than strategic or policy-integrated (Adetula, 2015).

### **Channels for Bilateral and Multilateral Engagement**

Islamic development institutions operate on multiple levels:

#### **Multilateral Cooperation**

Member states coordinate on large-scale development projects, humanitarian interventions, and regional planning via OIC councils and IsDB-funded initiatives.

#### **Bilateral Partnerships**

Countries leverage OIC and IsDB mechanisms to negotiate bilateral technical cooperation, scholarships, and trade agreements.

#### **Non-State Actors**

Faith-based NGOs, universities, and transnational Islamic organizations facilitate grassroots-level development projects, humanitarian aid, and educational programs (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).

### **Opportunities for Nigeria**

Existing literature highlights several opportunities for Nigeria to leverage Islamic development institutions:

**Infrastructure Financing**

Access to IsDB project funding for transport, energy, and urban development can complement Nigeria's domestic development agenda (IsDB, 2023).

**Educational Diplomacy**

Scholarships, academic exchanges, and capacity-building programs can enhance human capital and strengthen institutional networks across the Muslim world (Loimeier, 2012).

**Humanitarian Cooperation**

Nigeria can coordinate with OIC humanitarian programs to support internally displaced persons (IDPs) and conflict-affected regions (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

**Cultural and Soft-Power Diplomacy**

Participation in Islamic conferences, religious forums, and interfaith dialogue strengthens Nigeria's visibility and influence in multilateral Islamic governance (Shahi, 2019).

**Constraints and Institutional Challenges**

Despite these opportunities, Nigeria's engagement with Islamic development institutions faces several constraints:

**Policy Fragmentation**

Limited coordination among ministries and agencies reduces effectiveness in leveraging OIC/IsDB programs (Adetula, 2015).

**Domestic Political Sensitivities**

Balancing secular constitutional mandates with faith-based engagement requires careful diplomacy to avoid internal political backlash (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

**Limited Strategic Integration**

Most engagements are ad hoc and project-based, lacking a coherent long-term strategy to maximize Nigeria's regional leadership potential.

**Nigeria as a Bridge between Africa and the Muslim World****Strategic Geopolitical Positioning**

Nigeria's geopolitical location at the heart of West Africa, combined with its substantial Muslim population and regional influence, positions the country uniquely as a potential bridge between Africa and the Muslim world. With over 50% of its population identifying as Muslim (Loimeier, 2012; Soares, 2016), Nigeria possesses demographic legitimacy and cultural connectivity to facilitate both diplomatic and developmental cooperation. Scholars note that states occupying such transregional and culturally interconnected spaces are well-positioned to function as "bridge states," leveraging religious, linguistic, and historical networks to foster transnational engagement (Shahi, 2019; Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).

Nigeria's leadership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and active participation in African Union initiatives further enhance its capacity to link African developmental priorities with multilateral Islamic institutions (Adetula, 2015). Through such dual positioning, Nigeria can simultaneously advance continental development objectives while deepening ties with OIC member states and IsDB projects, fostering Africa-Muslim world collaboration.

**Historical and Cultural Linkages**

Nigeria's Islamic heritage, rooted in the Sokoto Caliphate and trans-Saharan trade networks, has historically connected the region to North African, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian Muslim societies (Loimeier, 2012). Educational and scholarly exchanges, particularly through Qur'anic schools, Islamic universities, and pilgrimage diplomacy, have established longstanding networks of trust and reciprocity with the Muslim world. These cultural linkages provide an intangible yet influential form of soft power that can be strategically leveraged in diplomatic and development

engagements (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).

Nigeria's potential to act as a bridge is strengthened by several emerging opportunities:

### **Islamic Finance and Infrastructure Development**

Nigeria can expand Shariah-compliant financial instruments to fund infrastructure projects across West Africa, utilizing IsDB and other Islamic financial institutions (IsDB, 2023).

### **Educational Exchange and Human Capital Development**

Scholarships, academic partnerships, and technical training programs can foster capacity-building and institutional linkages between Nigerian universities and institutions in the broader Muslim world (Loimeier, 2012).

### **Humanitarian and Post-Conflict Cooperation**

Nigeria can coordinate with OIC-led initiatives and Islamic NGOs to provide aid to internally displaced persons (IDPs), conflict-affected communities, and disaster-impacted regions, both domestically and regionally (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

### **Cultural Diplomacy and Interfaith Engagement**

Participation in Islamic conferences, interfaith dialogues, and cultural diplomacy initiatives can enhance Nigeria's visibility, influence, and credibility as a neutral and legitimate bridge state (Shahi, 2019).

These opportunities underscore the multidimensional nature of bridge-building, where diplomatic, economic, educational, and humanitarian strategies converge to enhance regional and international collaboration.

### **Challenges and Constraints**

Despite its potential, Nigeria faces several constraints in operationalizing its bridge-building role:

#### **Domestic Political Sensitivities**

Balancing religious diversity within a secular federal system requires careful diplomacy to avoid internal friction (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

#### **Institutional Fragmentation**

Limited coordination among ministries, diplomatic missions, and Islamic organizations reduces policy coherence and strategic impact (Adetula, 2015).

#### **Limited Strategic Planning**

Engagement with Islamic development institutions is often project-based rather than strategically integrated into Nigeria's broader foreign policy and regional leadership objectives.

#### **External Competition**

Other Muslim-majority countries, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia, are increasingly active in African development diplomacy, posing competition for influence and leadership (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).

### **Strategic Policy Pathways**

To harness its bridge-building potential, Nigeria can adopt the following strategic pathways:

#### **Institutionalizing Islamic Diplomacy**

Establish a dedicated unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate Islamic development engagement with OIC, IsDB, and bilateral partners.

#### **Integrating Faith-Based Development into National Planning**

Align IsDB and OIC-funded projects with national development priorities to maximize economic, social, and infrastructural impact.

#### **Strengthening Civil Society and Academic Networks**

Leverage Nigerian Islamic NGOs, universities, and cultural institutions to support



transnational partnerships and knowledge exchange.

### **Promoting South–South Cooperation**

Position Nigeria as a leader in Africa–Muslim world partnerships by facilitating joint initiatives in education, finance, infrastructure, and humanitarian assistance.

### **Opportunities, Challenges, and Policy Recommendations**

#### **Opportunities for Nigeria in Islamic Development Diplomacy**

Nigeria's demographic weight, historical Islamic connections, and institutional access to OIC and IsDB frameworks present a range of opportunities for enhancing its diplomatic and developmental influence:

#### **Strategic South–South Cooperation**

Nigeria can serve as a conduit for knowledge, technology, and financial exchanges between African countries and the broader Muslim world; leveraging IsDB financing and OIC technical support (Gray & Gills, 2016).

#### **Infrastructure and Economic Development**

Shariah-compliant financing mechanisms, including sukuk and qard hasan, offer Nigeria an alternative funding source for national infrastructure and regional development projects, particularly in energy, transportation, and urban development (IsDB, 2023).

#### **Human Capital and Education Diplomacy**

Academic partnerships, scholarships, and capacity-building programs with Muslim-majority states can strengthen Nigerian institutions while fostering transnational networks of expertise (Loimeier, 2012).

#### **Humanitarian and Social Development Initiatives**

Nigeria can coordinate with Islamic humanitarian actors to enhance disaster response, post-conflict reconstruction, and social welfare programs for vulnerable populations, including internally displaced persons (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

#### **Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Expansion**

Participation in interfaith dialogue, Islamic conferences, and cultural exchange programs can enhance Nigeria's legitimacy as a neutral and credible bridge state (Shahi, 2019).

#### **Challenges to Nigeria's Engagement**

Despite these opportunities, several structural and operational constraints limit Nigeria's effectiveness in Islamic development diplomacy:

#### **Domestic Religious Sensitivities**

Nigeria's religiously plural society necessitates careful balancing of secular governance principles with faith-based foreign policy initiatives (Adetula, 2015).

#### **Fragmented Institutional Coordination**

Ministries, diplomatic missions, and Islamic organizations often operate independently, reducing strategic coherence and diminishing impact (Adebajo & Mustapha, 2018).

#### **Reactive Policy Orientation**

Engagements with OIC and IsDB tend to be ad hoc or project-based, lacking integration into a long-term strategic foreign policy framework.

#### **Competition from Other States**

Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Muslim-majority countries, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia, are actively engaging Africa in parallel diplomatic and development initiatives, creating competitive pressures (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018).

### **V. Policy Recommendations**

To address these challenges and maximize its potential as a bridge between Africa and the Muslim world, Nigeria should consider the following policy measures:

**Institutionalizing Islamic Diplomacy**

Establish a dedicated Islamic Development and Diplomacy Unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate Nigeria's engagements with OIC, IsDB, and bilateral Islamic partners, ensuring strategic alignment with national development objectives.

**Integrating Islamic Development Cooperation into National Planning**

Align IsDB and OIC-funded projects with Nigeria's National Development Plans, ensuring projects contribute to infrastructure, education, health, and social welfare priorities.

**Strengthening Civil Society and Academic Networks**

Leverage Nigerian Islamic NGOs, religious institutions, and universities as complementary channels for grassroots-level cooperation, knowledge exchange, and humanitarian outreach.

**Promoting Knowledge and Capacity Building**

Expand scholarship programs, technical training, and professional exchange initiatives to build expertise in Islamic finance, governance, and development cooperation within Nigerian institutions.

**Enhancing Regional Leadership and South–South Coordination**

Nigeria should actively convene regional forums, participate in multilateral initiatives, and promote collaborative projects between West African countries and Muslim-majority states, reinforcing its credibility as a bridge state.

**Strategic Implications**

Implementing these recommendations would position Nigeria as a central actor in Africa–Muslim world partnerships, enhancing its soft power, economic cooperation, and regional influence. By integrating Islamic diplomatic instruments into formal foreign policy and development planning, Nigeria can:

*Mobilize financial and technical resources for domestic and regional development.*

*Strengthen institutional and human capital linkages with the Muslim world.*

*Serve as a model for faith-based diplomacy that complements secular governance while respecting domestic pluralism.*

**VI. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Nigeria possesses significant potential to serve as a bridge between Africa and the Muslim world through Islamic diplomatic engagement. Its historical Islamic heritage, strategic geopolitical position, and access to multilateral institutions such as the OIC and IsDB provide both normative legitimacy and operational capacity for development cooperation.

Despite challenges, including domestic religious sensitivities, institutional fragmentation, and reactive policy engagement, Nigeria can leverage opportunities in education, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, and cultural diplomacy. Strategic integration of Islamic development cooperation into national planning, strengthened institutional coordination, and active engagement with civil society and academic networks can enhance Nigeria's regional leadership and soft-power influence.

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