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Introduction

Especially from today's perspective, the Iranian revolution represents one of the most influential upheavals of the modern age. Within a few months – as in other major revolutions – a mass movement toppled the country's political, social and cultural order by pursuing a universalistic claim.¹ Contemporaries were quite aware of this fact and recognized the potential threat. At the same time, they were also intrigued by the dynamic of the events. In the fall of 1978, the French social philosopher Michel Foucault, who traveled to Tehran twice as a special correspondent of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, commented even before the downfall of the shah: "This might be the first major insurrection against the global systems; the most modern and the most insane form of rebellion."² Helmut Kohl considered the events in Iran a threat to world peace that represented a "clash between developed and developing states."³ Yet many Western observers never thought that an Islamic Republic under Khomeini's leadership would emerge in the end. Iran was regarded as a modern and economically flourishing country with a strong army and secret police. Moreover, it was massively supported by the United States and had close cultural ties with many Western countries. Indeed, the contrast to the Islamic Republic could not have seemed to be any greater. Although some referred to the events in Iran as the "unthinkable revolution," the advent of mass protests demonstrated that a regime change was indeed possible.⁴

1 On this categorization, see Henner Fürtig, *Totgesagte leben länger – 30 Jahre iranische Revolution*, in: Anke Bentzin et al. (eds.), *Zwischen Orient und Okzident. Studien zu Mobilität von Wissen, Konzeption und Praktiken*, Freiburg 2010, pp. 316–33.

2 Michel Foucault, *Il mitico capo della rivolta dell'Iran*, in: *Corriere della Sera*, November 26, 1978. See Thomas Lemke, "Die verrückteste Form der Revolte." Michel Foucault und die Iranische Revolution, in: *Sozial.Geschichte* 17 (2002), pp. 73–89.

3 Minutes of CDU/CSU parliamentary party meetings, November 13, 1979, p. 2, in: *Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik*, sign. VIII-0011059/1.

4 See Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Cambridge/MA 2005. Kurzman's study based on interviews is directed against classic sociological ex-post explanations.

The Iranian revolution was an event that did not fit within the logic of the Cold War. Islam seemed to be developing into a new kind of challenge for the West, as well as for the Soviet Union and the Middle East, that was emerging alongside the bipolar world order shaped by the opposition between communism and capitalism. American scholars have interpreted the Iranian revolution as a symbol of “America’s Failing Empire” that pointed to the future challenges that might come from radical Islamic movements.⁵ The hostage crisis in the U.S. embassy has therefore been referred to in scholarship as “America’s first encounter with radical Islam,” which proved to be so disastrous in the end because U.S. experts had only seen Iran through the lens of the Cold War and thus underestimated the explosive power of radical Islam.⁶ The occupation of the American embassy, following on the heels of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, was yet another major humiliation for the United States. It forced the Western allies as well as communist and Islamic states (such as Saudi Arabia) to take a much clearer stance towards Iran and Islamism. Furthermore, it indicated that the rules of the game had changed; the diplomatic conventions that had still applied even during the Cold War were now being ignored. And finally, the loss of Iranian oil exports – which amounted to roughly a tenth of the international oil trade – caused a second oil crisis in 1979 that had serious consequences for many Western countries as well as Eastern Europe.

Whereas the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis play a key role in American collective memory and are an integral part of the narrative of the 1970s as a decade of crisis,⁷ their significance in the German context has received little scholarly attention. The fact that contemporary historical research has predominantly focused on classical topics of the Cold War, but also the impression that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) seemed to have played a rather marginal role in terms of the Iranian revolution may account for this difference. Only a few studies on German-American relations in the late 1970s deal with the events in

⁵ See Warren Cohen, *America’s Failing Empire: U.S. Foreign Relations Since the Cold War*, Oxford 2005; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 288–89.

⁶ This is the key thesis put forth by David R. Faber, *Taken Hostage. The Iran Hostage Crisis and America’s first Encounter with Radical Islam*, Princeton/NJ 2005.

⁷ See Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s. A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, Princeton/NJ 2012, pp. 263–70. On different research perspectives in Germany and the United States, see Frank Bösch, *Zweierlei Krisendeutungen: Amerikanische und bundesdeutsche Perspektivierungen der 1970er Jahre*, in: *Neue Politische Literatur* 58 (2014), pp. 217–30.

Tehran and examine the new tensions erupting between the United States and the FRG over the course of the hostage crisis.⁸

However, apart from the United States, West Germany was in fact Iran's most important Western partner in an economic, cultural and political sense in the 1970s. Thus, analyzing how West Germany responded to the transition from the regime of the shah to the equally violent rule of the Islamic clergyman Khomeini promises to be a worthwhile scholarly endeavor.⁹ Especially as it took place in the decade of emerging global human rights policies, the Iranian revolution proved to be a key challenge, prompting West German contemporaries to increasingly associate unrestrained violence with Islam.¹⁰ To what extent did the FRG maintain contact with Iran, despite its radical Islam? How could the West German government act as a smart mediator, especially during the hostage crisis?¹¹

Close Partners: The Federal Republic of Germany and Iran during the Oil Crises

The close ties between West Germany and Iran were mainly of an economic nature. Before the revolution, the FRG had been Iran's most important trade partner, and this did not change during the revolution or after Khomeini had established his regime. Also, Iran was one of West Germany's major non-European export countries. Even during the time of the hostage crisis in early 1980, almost half of all European Community (EC) exports into Iran bore the label "Made in Germany."¹²

8 For the most detailed study on this diplomatic maneuvering (with a focus on the United States) to date, see Klaus Wiegrefe, *Das Zerwürfnis. Helmut Schmidt, Jimmy Carter und die Krise der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen*, Berlin 2005, pp. 303–28.

9 For a critical historical overview, see Matthias Küntzel, *Die Deutschen und der Iran. Geschichte und Gegenwart einer verhängnisvollen Freundschaft*, Berlin 2009.

10 Iran and the Islamic states are hardly mentioned by the numerous accounts of the history of human rights. For a recent account, see Jan Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten. Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern*, Göttingen 2014; Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ed.), *Moralpolitik. Geschichte der Menschenrechte im 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2010.

11 Particularly rich source material on Iran was found in the records of the Federal Chancellery in Bundesarchiv Koblenz (henceforth: BArch), in the materials already provided to the archives by Helmut Schmidt and in the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (henceforth: PA/AA); the records of the embassy in Iran, which are held separately in the Bundesarchiv, were also highly informative.

12 Statement by Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, henceforth: BMWi), March 26, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16652.

These close trade relations had evolved over time. Initially, Great Britain had benefited from Iranian oil production. British and Soviet occupation during both world wars, however, fostered increasing discontent directed against both countries. By the beginning of the 1950s, this culminated in the nationalization of the Iranian oil production facilities of the “Anglo-Persian Oil Company” to keep more of the profits within the country. The United States subsequently supported the toppling of the popular Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 to secure Western oil production and backed the shah and his faithful General Fazlollah Zahedi from then on. Whereas Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union were met with much skepticism among the Iranian people, (West) Germany had a rather positive image and was seen as a neutral partner because it had not gotten involved in these conflicts.¹³

Accordingly, during the Adenauer era, the young FRG had been able to revive former contacts, making it possible for Germany to become Iran’s most important trade partner as early as 1952. West German and American imports were officially given preferential treatment and the West German government supported trade with Iran by offering guarantees and substantial financial aid. Beginning in the 1960s, arms exports to Iran had also increased.¹⁴ German nationals managed companies in Iran and got actively involved in training and education. At the same time, thousands of Iranians came to West Germany to study and to learn. In 1974, this cultural cooperation culminated in the foundation of the German-Iranian University of Gilan. As a result, not only many secular elites, but also many future protagonists of the Islamic revolution had been educated in Western Europe. As the shah had married Soraya Esfandiary Bakhtiari, a German-Iranian, in the 1950s, the German tabloids were fascinated by the “Peacock Throne.” For many, Iran appeared to be an oriental fairy tale and a cosmopolitan monarchy at the same time; Soraya became the substitute empress of the Germans.¹⁵ The fact that the shah squandered his wealth on a glamorous jet set lifestyle between Davos and the Côte d’Azur strengthened his

13 On the establishment of relations during the 1920s and 1930s, see Yair P. Hirschfeld, *Deutschland und Iran im Spielfeld der Mächte. Internationale Beziehungen unter Reza Schah, 1921–1941*, Düsseldorf 1980, pp. 303–08. Küntzel emphasizes the closeness of these ties, see *Die Deutschen*, p. 43.

14 See Sven Olaf Berggötz, *Nahostpolitik in der Ära Adenauer: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen, 1949–1963*, Düsseldorf 1998; Küntzel, *Die Deutschen*, p. 82; Harald Möller, *Waffen für Iran und Irak. Deutsche Rüstungsexporte und ihre Querverbindungen zu den ABC Waffenprogrammen beider Länder. Ursachen, Hintergründe, Folgen*, Berlin 2006, pp. 54–62.

15 See Simone Derix, Soraya. Die “geliehene Kaiserin” der Deutschen, in: Gerhard Paul (ed.), *Das Jahrhundert der Bilder*, vol. 2, Göttingen 2008, pp. 186–193.

contacts to Western elites, but also increased contempt towards the monarch *and* the West among the Iranian population.

By the time the shah visited West Berlin in 1967, when the student Benno Ohnesorg was shot dead by a policeman, the authoritarian, violent, and extravagant rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had become public knowledge in the FRG. And yet, economic relations between West Germany and Iran flourished during the 1970s, even under the social-liberal coalition government. The oil crisis of 1973 further improved these good relations, because Iran and Saudi Arabia made an effort to lower oil prices in the following years. Over a year before the revolution, Iran had developed into the largest oil supplier of the Federal Republic, accounting for a fifth of all its oil imports.¹⁶ Vice versa, Iran was also Germany's most important sales market in the "Third World" with annual exports climbing to 6.35 billion DM (*Deutsche Mark*) in 1978. In particular, German machinery and cars as well as electrical and chemical engineering products were shipped to Iran.¹⁷

The West German government increasingly supported the authoritarian regime militarily even during the decade in which the discussion on human rights was in full swing. Despite the fact that the catchphrase "training assistance" replaced "technical assistance," i.e. the supply of weapons, as of 1974 and deals for tank deliveries were less forthcoming in light of NATO guidelines (although the West German government considered circumventing the restriction by supplying separate tank components), little changed on the whole.¹⁸ Thus, weapons worth about one billion DM were supplied to Iran between 1974 and 1979. Even during the uprising, the shah ordered six submarines and four frigates in 1978 from West German companies, which was welcomed by the federal government.¹⁹ According to a German-Iranian agreement made in 1974, 94 Iranian officers and cadets

16 On the international development of oil exports, see the lists from November 7, 1978, Dept. 421, Röskau, as well as the memo by Meyer-Landrut for the Federal Minister of Auswärtiges Amt (Federal Foreign Office; henceforth: AA), August 12, 1978, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

17 Report by Dept. 213, January 2, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

18 Note by AA, March 21, 1974, in: BArch, B 136/17572. On the export of Leopard tanks to Iran, see the critical reports by Hermes und Lahn, March 1, 1974, in: Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (henceforth: AAPD) 1974, vol. 1, ed. by Hans-Peter Schwarz et al., Munich 2005, doc. 66, pp. 274–75, and the report by Hermes, May 27, 1974, in: *ibid.*, doc. 153, pp. 648–49.

19 See Hermes to German embassy in Tehran, March 7, 1978, in: AAPD 1978, vol. 1, ed. by Horst Möller/Klaus Hildebrand/Gregor Schöllgen, Munich 2009, doc. 71, pp. 354–56. Hermes refers here to a note by Lautenschlager, February 17, 1978, in: *ibid.*, p. 355, footnote 7. This was apparently already common knowledge, see *Der Spiegel*, March 6, 1978, p. 31; see also Möller, *Waffen*, p. 62.

were to be trained at the Bundeswehr academy in Munich.²⁰ Rising oil prices also strengthened the economic ties between the two nations. Moreover, oil-exporting countries such as Iran invested their “petro-dollars” in Western companies. Iran, for instance, bought 25 percent of the Fried. Krupp Hüttenwerke AG (*Aktiengesellschaft*), a German heavy industrial giant with a long history.

The cooperation between Iran and Germany in the still controversial nuclear industry proved to be quite close at that time. Whereas the United States voiced reservations as early as the mid-1970s, the West German government signed the German-Iranian “Agreement for Nuclear Cooperation” on July 4, 1976, which paved the way for supplying Iran with two nuclear plants set up by the Kraftwerk Union AG (KWU). They were supposed to be about the size of the then largest German nuclear power plant in Biblis. With a sum of roughly eight billion DM (other estimates are around eleven billion), this was one of the country’s largest export orders with a potential to create about 6,000 new jobs in the FRG alone in the years to come.²¹ Also, in Iran, German nationals took part in setting up an Iranian nuclear research center, and the Federal Ministry for Research and Technology financed the consultation provided by the German Society for Nuclear Research (*Gesellschaft für Kernforschung*).²² Numerous Iranians studied nuclear physics at several European universities, although Iran sought to use this knowledge for civilian as well as military purposes in the long run. In return for this more intensive cooperation, the shah offered to supply more oil to Germany after the first oil crisis.²³

Accordingly, reports of the Federal Foreign Office on state visits to Iran during the 1970s entailed lengthy remarks on economic and cultural relations, but hardly ever touched human rights issues. The notes on the talks when the minister of economic affairs, Hans Friedrichs (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP) visited the country, for example, only mentioned that the federal government should take action against anti-shah groups operating in Germany.²⁴ And yet, although West Germany in particular supported the shah’s regime economically in a variety of ways, the Iranian population, and even the Islamists, saw Germany as less of an

20 See note by Pagenstert, Vortragender Legationsrat, July 4, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol 2, ed. by Horst Möller/Klaus Hildebrand/Gregor Schöllgen, Munich 2011, doc. 201, pp. 1086–87.

21 Memo by AA, Dept. 413, VS, July 7, 1976, in: BArch, B 136/17572. This is only very briefly mentioned in: Stephan Geier, *Schwellenmacht. Bonns heimliche Atomdiplomatie von Adenauer bis Schmidt*, Paderborn 2013, p. 326.

22 BMWi to German embassy Tehran, October 28, 1978, in: BArch, B 136/17572.

23 German embassy Tehran, Ritzel, to AA, August 2, 1977, in: *ibid.*

24 German embassy Tehran, Wieck, to AA, October 21, 1976, in: *ibid.*

enemy than the United States. It is fair to assume that this was due not least to American involvement in the Israel conflict.

Immediately before the revolution, Iran's oil exports peaked. Its share in the global market amounted to about ten percent, while its share of production within OPEC hit 20 percent. At the time, Iran was the most important oil supplier for many Western countries. As with the FRG, oil from Iran accounted for a fifth of all oil imports in Japan and the Netherlands; Israel and South Africa relied to an even greater extent on Iranian oil. In fact, even in countries that had their own oil reserves such as the United States and Great Britain, Iranian oil accounted for ten and 17 percent of their imports, respectively.²⁵ After OPEC had already announced a price increase in 1978, the price of oil skyrocketed as of the end of 1978 when Iranian exports ground to a halt in the wake of the protests and strikes in the country – in terms of absolute prices, the cost of oil rose even more dramatically than in the oil crisis of 1973. Even more worrying was the assumption that Saudi Arabia might not be able to increase its oil production and only had enough reserves to last for twenty years.²⁶ Against this backdrop, the planning staff of the federal government responded very pragmatically to the looming revolution: “our partner is neither the shah nor Khomeini, but the potentially rich country,” it stated in a memo to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.²⁷

The West and the Rise of the Revolution

Whereas the industrial nations in the West and in the East had come to terms with the regime of the shah, growing waves of protest began to engulf Iran. They were prompted by various economic, cultural, and political factors. A genuine Islamist mobilization directed against Western imperialism and Western culture developed comparably late in the 1960s/1970s. The conflict with Israel also served to further unify Islamists across borders.²⁸ The “white revolution” of the shah, confirmed in a referendum in 1963, had introduced active and passive female suff-

²⁵ Memo by AA, Dept. 421, Röskauf, November 7, 1978, in: BArch, B 136/16650; note for the Chancellor, January 15, 1979, in: *ibid.*; see Fiona Venn, *The Oil Crisis*, London 2002, p. 91.

²⁶ Ursula Braun, conversation of experts on Iran, June 22, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

²⁷ Notes to Chancellor Schmidt, Dept. 213, February 6, 1979, and Dept. 311, February 5, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

²⁸ See Fakhreddin Azimi, *The Quest for Democracy in Iran: A Century of Struggle against Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge/MA 2008, pp. 339–40; Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power*, London 1991, pp. 156–93.

rage, improved secular education, and brought about a land reform, all of which fostered the discontent of the Islamic clergy. But, even during the 1970s, it was mainly the socio-economic situation and political repression that motivated the protests rather than the desire for an Islamic republic. The Iranian people were mainly outraged by the fact that mostly only the rich upper class, and especially the relatives of the shah, seemed to benefit from the growing oil profits while the general cost of living in the country continued to rise. The anger and disgust of the Islamic clergy and religious followers was further fed by the shah's commitment to nationalism and his tendency to break with religious traditions such as in his calendar reform. In addition, the international campaigns for human rights that had begun in the mid-1970s most likely stirred Iranian discontent even more. Organizations such as Amnesty International were not the only ones to criticize the situation in Iran. For example, U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who had been promoting human rights since 1977, openly condemned Iranian torture chambers at an international level, although the Iranian people themselves did not consider human rights issues to be a particularly pressing issue.²⁹ That said, protests against the shah, such as those in the FRG or the United States in 1977, nonetheless impressed the Iranian public.³⁰

The shah responded to the protests in 1978 with a mixture of concessions and violence. He tolerated more political groups and granted more freedom of expression. He also retracted some particularly controversial reforms such as the new calendar, the establishment of casinos, and a ministry for women's affairs that was run by women.³¹ Cynically, Western observers regarded these measures as the source of the unrest. A ministerial memo of the government in Bonn noted: "Let us hope that the tempo of the changes will slow down."³² Similarly, the German embassy in Tehran argued that the "lack of restraint" seen in the streets of Iran reflected the "level of political maturity of the Iranian masses."³³

At the same time, the regime in Tehran called in the police several times to crack down on the protests in 1978 with brutal violence, resulting in the deaths

29 However, Carter focused primarily on other countries such as South Korea. See Jan Eckel, *Schwierige Erneuerung. Die Menschenrechtspolitik Jimmy Carters und der Wandel der Außenpolitik in den 1970ern*, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 66 (2015), pp. 5–24.

30 Even the later Vice Prime Minister Tabatabai regarded Carter's human rights policy the main reason for the revolution; conversation Genscher and Tabatabai, March 21, 1980, in: *AAPD 1980*, vol. 1, doc. 88, pp. 496–501, here p. 496.

31 Memo by Montfort to State Secretary, September 7, 1978, in: *BArch*, B 136/16650.

32 Memo by Peterson to State Secretary, August 16, 1978 and memo by Montfort to State Secretary, September 7, 1978, in: *ibid.*

33 Report by German embassy Tehran to AA, October 17, 1978, in: *ibid.*

of numerous demonstrators.³⁴ These concessions and this governmental violence only intensified the protests. In particular, the strikes that hit the oil industry, whose workers demanded higher wages, put the regime in a predicament because they brought the entire economy to a standstill. As more than one million people gathered in the streets on December 11, 1978, the representatives of the movement called on Khomeini to take over the leadership of the country.³⁵ Due to the strikes, production had sunk down to only a fifth, banks had been destroyed and were no longer solvent, and even German businesses in the country such as BMW and VW dealers reported heavy losses.³⁶

In many countries all over the world exiled Iranians also took to the streets in protest. Some 7,000 Islamist opponents of the shah gathered in Frankfurt and hundreds of people were injured in the ensuing fights.³⁷ When the shah finally fled in the face of these mass protests on January 16, 1979, he left Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar in charge of the government. Bakhtiar tried to save what was already beyond repair by implementing last-minute reforms. The millions of protestors who finally pushed the shah into exile came from very different directions: communists and socialists as well as liberals and moderate Islamic groups had mobilized in opposition. Initially, it was quite unclear which camp would prevail in the end.³⁸ During this phase of the revolution, it was not the desire for an Islamic state that held things together, but rather objections to the shah, demands for more social justice and a strain of nationalism that was opposed to Western influence and Western profits stemming from Iranian oil.³⁹

34 The body count is not clear: official figures cite 64 fatalities, but Stuti Bhatnagar refers to 600; idem, *Revolution in Iran, 1979 – the Establishment of an Islamic State*, in: P. K. Kumaraswamy (ed.), *Caught in the Crossfire: Civilians in Conflicts in the Middle East*, Reading 2008, pp. 95–118, here p. 98.

35 See Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran. Roots and Results of Revolution*, New Haven/CT 2003, p. 234.

36 Report by AA, November 11, 1978, task force Iran, November 6, 1978, and Ambassador Ritzel, Tehran, January 31, 1979, all in: BArch, B 136/16650.

37 Report by AA, January 13, 1979, in: *ibid.*

38 All existing accounts emphasize the diversity of the protests, see Peyman Jafari, *Der andere Iran. Geschichte und Kultur von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart*, Bonn 2010, p. 72; Amir Sheikhzadegan, *Die iranische Revolution von 1979. Eine makrosoziologische Analyse*, in: *Asiatische Studien* 59 (2005), pp. 857–78, here p. 871.

39 See Keddie, *Modern Iran*, p. 212.

Khomeini as the “Lesser Evil”? Islam as a Challenge during the Cold War

On February, 1 1979, Khomeini landed in Tehran. In just a few weeks, he and his Islamic followers were able to take over all major positions of power. This development proved that the governments and elites in the West had profoundly underestimated Khomeini as they were too engrossed in Cold War ideology and too naïve in their prejudices against Islam. Compared to the dynamic politicians of the 1970s, Khomeini seemed to have fallen out of time. As a fragile, grim clergyman without political experience who continued to live in a sparse room at his sister's even after coming to power and who wanted to implement Sharia law, Khomeini was far from what the West imagined as a modern statesman.⁴⁰ Accordingly, Western as well as Arabic politicians assumed that he would not be able to hold on to power in the long run, even if he was successful initially, and that his charisma would fade.⁴¹ Even the Saudi Arabian foreign minister described him as a “primitive personality.”⁴² And Chancellor Helmut Schmidt told the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat in confidence: “The ayatollahs will not be able to rule the country for long.”⁴³

However, as early as February, Western governments recognized the provisional government under Mehdi Bazargan spawned by the revolution, despite continuous reports about escalating violence in the streets of Tehran. West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher announced at the cabinet meeting on February 14, 1979 “the continuance of friendly relations” and Schmidt sent a congratulatory telegram to Bazargan, whom he judged to be part of the democratic camp.⁴⁴ With an underlying anti-American tone, the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) leadership called for the official recognition of the revolution, claiming that the “shah had been an undemocratic ally of the West.”⁴⁵ The Federal Foreign Office and the embassy in Tehran, on the other hand, empha-

⁴⁰ See the biography by Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, New York 2000.

⁴¹ German Ambassador, Washington, to AA, January 25, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

⁴² Record of conversation between Schmidt and Prince Saud, January 19, 1979, in: Archiv der sozialen Demokratie Bonn (henceforth: AdsD), 1/HSAA008825.

⁴³ German-Egyptian governmental talks (between Schmidt and Sadat), March 29, 1979 in: AAPD 1979, vol. 1, ed. by Horst Möller/Klaus Hildebrand/Gregor Schöllgen, Munich 2010, doc. 94, pp. 421–27, quote p. 427.

⁴⁴ Brief minutes of the cabinet meeting on February 14, 1979, and speaking note of the Chancellor, February 15, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

⁴⁵ Karsten Voigt according to SPD press service, February 12, 1979.

sized with relief that there were not any “left-wing extremists” in the new Iranian cabinet and that Bazargan had gained effective control over the country.⁴⁶

Germany’s Western neighbors responded in a similar way. France and Great Britain also recognized the new government, citing anti-communist arguments as justification. The French minister of foreign affairs Jean-François-Poncet commented in a slightly optimistic tone that Khomeini “might not be the best solution for Iran, but he is also not the worst,” noting that “the present leaders in Iran are about to get things under control administratively.”⁴⁷ In a conversation with Chancellor Schmidt, President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing was even more forthright; as a victory for the leftists would have rendered economic relations with Iran impossible, he hoped “for Khomeini’s victory – even though he is rigorous and bloodthirsty – and for a defeat of his opponents as well as the communists.”⁴⁸ On February 23 the NATO foreign ministers concluded: “only Khomeini has a broad enough base of support among the population. Any other solution would be worse for the West given the current circumstances.”⁴⁹ The Carter administration also sought to establish relations with the new rulers in good faith. Its trust in the new Prime Minister, Bazargan, helped alleviate some of the reservations against a regime change.⁵⁰

Another factor behind the West’s rather benevolent attitude towards the new regime was the general assumption that the Soviet Union hoped for a socialist revolution in Iran and therefore stood to profit from an unstable situation.⁵¹ And indeed, the USSR and its socialist allies such as the German Democratic Republic (GDR) quickly sought to establish good relations with the new Islamist government.⁵² A day before Khomeini’s return from French exile, *Pravda* sided with the ayatollah and recognized the new government in a move to secure Soviet

46 Report by German embassy Tehran, February 14, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

47 Cited by François-Poncet on February 23, 1979 at Franco-German consultation, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA006730; conversation Genscher with François-Poncet on February 22, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 1, doc. 50, pp. 214–25, quote p. 223.

48 Conversation protocol Giscard d’Estaing–Schmidt, February 23, 1979, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA006730.

49 Ambassador Pauls, Brussels, to AA, February 21, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 1, doc. 49, pp. 207–13, quote p. 208.

50 See Christian Emery, *US Foreign Policy and the Iranian Revolution: The Cold War Dynamics of Engagement and Strategic Alliance 1978–81*, New York 2013, pp. 105–07.

51 See Ambassador Pauls, Brussels, to AA, February 21, 1979, and Ambassador Wieck, Moscow, to AA, March 1, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 1, doc. 49, pp. 208–11, here p. 208–09, footnote 11; note by Ruhfus, June 29, 1979, in: *ibid.*, doc. 193, pp. 936–39, here p. 938.

52 The good relationship with the Islamic Republic was praised, for instance, see *Neues Deutschland*, April 3, 1979, p. 1, and April 9, 1979, p. 1.

influence.⁵³ Anti-Americanism proved to be a link between the two regimes and *Pravda*, as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), blamed the United States for the deaths at the last mass demonstrations. In the Western bloc, fears arose that the Soviets would encircle the Persian Gulf from Ethiopia across South Yemen to Afghanistan – and therefore half of the world’s oil reserves – ultimately gaining access to the Strait of Hormuz.⁵⁴ The Soviet Union in fact demanded the right to have a say in the Gulf region and urged the Americans to show restraint.⁵⁵ Although the Soviet Union delighted in the fact that Iran had broken with the United States, it was also plagued by concerns over the spread of Islamism quite close to its southern Muslim regions.⁵⁶ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan later on was also a response to this destabilizing process and, at the same time, it confirmed Western fears of Soviet expansion in this oil-producing region.

In addition to anti-communism, economic interests played a key role in the swift international recognition of the revolution. The internal assessments of the Federal Foreign Office immediately after Khomeini’s return to Tehran clearly indicated this: whoever governs, one report noted, “Iran is and will remain an oil exporter. [...] It is of pivotal importance for the West that Iran will not drift off into the Soviet sphere of influence.”⁵⁷ The German ambassador in Tehran was equally clear when he told Ezzatollah Sahabi, a member of the Council of the Islamic Revolution and head of the economic planning office that “we need foreign trade partners, as well as Iran, for that matter, and foreign politics should not be weighed against moral principles.”⁵⁸ The West wanted to paint the revolution in Iran in a positive light to secure economic relations, especially since oil prices had already been skyrocketing and the debate on the NATO Dual Track Decision had aggravated Cold War tensions. Accordingly, Deputy Prime Minister Sadegh Tabatabai travelled to Bonn several times in early 1979, where he met with officials such as the Federal Minister of Economic Affairs and the State Secretary

53 Analysis of Soviet press coverage, AA, January 31, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16650. See the summary of *Pravda* articles by the correspondent of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ): *Moskau blickt mit gemischten Gefühlen nach Iran*, in: FAZ, January 13, 1979, p. 12.

54 Memo by AA, Dept. 405, January 29, 1980, in: PA/AA, ZA, vol. 126878; AA, Dept. 405, May 29, 1980, in: *ibid.*

55 German embassy Moscow to AA, March 1, 1980, Breshnev’s speech, in: PA/AA, ZA, vol. 126878.

56 See Ambassador von Staden, Washington, to AA, February 8, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 1, doc. 33, pp. 149–53, here p. 152.

57 AA, Dept. 311, situation in Iran, February 6, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

58 German embassy Tehran, March 20, 1979, in: *ibid.*

of the Ministry of the Interior to talk about establishing a new intelligence service and joint efforts to combat terrorism.⁵⁹

Khomeini's skillful media policy that simultaneously threatened the global public while signaling a willingness to compromise facilitated his acceptance in the West. Khomeini had stepped onto the global political stage just a few months before he came into power in the fall of 1978. While still in exile in Paris, he gave about 130 interviews in a very short period of time. At times, hundreds of journalists were waiting in front of his house to catch him on his walks.⁶⁰ When his plane landed in Tehran on February 1, 1979, some 150 journalists from all over the world were on board, among them ZDF (*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*; German public TV broadcaster) reporter Peter Scholl-Latour and *Der Spiegel* (weekly political magazine) correspondent Volkhard Windfuhr.⁶¹ His advisors had established a relation of trust with some of these reporters, including Scholl-Latour, who came to act as mediators.⁶² Consequently, the world's press elevated Khomeini to a leading figure within Iran as well as within international politics.

Before he had come into power, Khomeini had already announced to the media that he would renegotiate economic agreements initiated under the shah – for instance Iranian investments in Krupp companies and orders for German submarine and nuclear power plants – this information was immediately passed on to the West German Foreign Office by the correspondent of the German tabloid *Bild*.⁶³ Khomeini kept emphasizing that he would use Iranian oil as a political weapon: Israel and Egypt would no longer receive oil supplies, and all other countries would have to pay a “fair price,” indicating a substantial spike in prices.⁶⁴ In most interviews, Khomeini promised to steer away from both the United States

⁵⁹ Ritzel to AA, May 20, 1979 and June 29, 1979, in: PA/AA, B 150.

⁶⁰ See Moin, Khomeini, p. 192. His daughter also remembers that Khomeini continuously listened to the news on the radio: Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran*, New York 2000, p. 49.

⁶¹ See Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, New York 1984, p. 49. As Amir Taheri recalls, Khomeini did not talk with Iranian journalists, see idem, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution*, London 1985, p. 205. The figures of journalists on the plane differ, some mention up to 200, see Carole Jerome, *Back to the Veil*, in: *New Internationalist*, September 1, 1980.

⁶² He expanded on this later in detail, see Peter Scholl-Latour, *Allah ist mit den Standhaften. Begegnungen mit der islamischen Revolution*, Stuttgart 1983, pp. 95–96.

⁶³ AA, Dept. 421, Röskauf, November 7, 1978, in: BArch, B 136/16650. Khomeini's statements were also collected in the United States, see Congress of the United States/Joint Economic Committee (eds.), *Economic consequences of the revolution in Iran: A Compendium of Papers*, Washington, D.C. 1980, here p. 226.

⁶⁴ Memo by AA, January 7, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

and the Soviet Union. He indicated that he would respect the United States – as long as the Americans left the country and refrained from interfering in its affairs – as well as the Soviet Union, but not form a government with Marxists.

At the same time, Khomeini also appeared in interviews as a surprisingly moderate politician willing to compromise. He frequently used the language of democracy, human rights, and social justice, distancing himself from the undemocratic regime of the shah. Shortly before his return to Tehran, he and his advisors promised free elections, freedom of the press, and a constitution, but insisted that Islamic criteria would apply to the selection of candidates.⁶⁵ Women, they claimed, would not be excluded from public life. These signs of compromise enabled him to unify very different political protest groups under his leadership after his return to Iran.

Such compromises can also help explain why the West misjudged the change of power in Iran. With Bazargan, Khomeini appointed a Prime Minister who was rooted in both the Islamic and secular resistance movements against the shah but belonged to the more liberal-leaning Islamist camp. This Tehrani professor, who had studied engineering in France and fought in the French army, was considered to be respectable even among Western diplomats. The West German ambassador in Iran saw him as “guarantor of the hope that a non-violent and largely consensual solution can be worked out.” According to him, it was still unclear whether Khomeini sought to institute a theocratic state or a democracy.⁶⁶ The cabinet in Tehran included representatives of various protest movements, who also expressed moderate opinions in early diplomatic talks. For instance, Hassan Nahsi, a member of the Council of the Islamic Revolution and Bazargan’s confidant, promised Bonn diplomats that the future republic would be Islamic in name only and “would look to align itself with the liberal ideas of the Western world.”⁶⁷

However, as early as March 1979, it became very clear that Western politicians had been just as mistaken as their Soviet counterparts, whose hopes soon burst. The Iranian Marxists were not able to reach and mobilize peasants. It did not help that they were also widely seen as Soviet henchmen.⁶⁸ Khomeini established the Islamic Republic with feigned democratic concessions, populist promises, and sheer force. He initiated the regime change by calling a referendum in

⁶⁵ See Khomeini’s interview with *Der Spiegel* correspondent Windfuhr: “Ich bin der Sprecher dieses Volkes,” in: *Der Spiegel*, January 22, 1979, pp. 110–11.

⁶⁶ Ambassador Tehran to AA, February 5, and February 6, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

⁶⁷ Ambassador Tehran to AA, February 14, 1979, in: *ibid.*

⁶⁸ See Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels With A Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*, London 2000, pp. 138–51.

which 98 percent voted in favor of an Islamic Republic as opposed to a monarchy. The referendum did not offer other options such as a Western-style democracy or a socialist republic. Khomeini adopted a similar approach when it came to the new constitution, which he also put to a referendum. While it contained several democratic elements designed to integrate different political groups, the constitution also cemented the hegemony of the clergy. It established Islamic law as the foundation of the legal system and placed the political and religious leadership of the country firmly in the hands of the deputy of the Twelfth Imam, which de facto ensured Khomeini's position.⁶⁹ The constitution created a dual structure of religious power and secular government in which the clergy only permitted select candidates to run for office.⁷⁰

In addition, Khomeini also made populist promises to garner support. He announced a "Foundation for the Oppressed" funded with the assets of the shah and his followers that was to support the poor lower class. A land reform was also introduced with the intention of turning destitute agricultural workers into independent farmers who were supposed to form cooperatives.⁷¹ With an eye to the important bazaar merchants, Khomeini also emphasized the protection of private property. At the same time, the restructuring of state and society was carried out with violence. Revolutionary courts and Islamic guards publicly executed political opponents. People's militias took over police stations and barracks. As a result, numerous weapons were circulating throughout the streets, fueling the violence and choking off resistance.⁷² In addition to all the people killed in the streets, hundreds were executed after speedy trials that were closed to the public, which targeted former politicians, followers of the shah, military officers, and police commissioners in particular.⁷³ Whereas the general population tolerated the execution of police chiefs responsible for torturing opponents under the shah regime, the execution of ex-Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda was not met with unequivocal approval in Iran.⁷⁴

69 For an overview of the constitution, see Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 163–65. The return of the Twelfth Imam is a key element of Shiite religion. Until his return, the Iranian constitution of 1979 stipulates a representative government by the clergy.

70 See Keddie, *Modern Iran*, pp. 242–43; Azimi, *Quest*, p. 414.

71 See Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, pp. 179–80.

72 See Philipp W. Fabry, *Zwischen Schah und Ayatollah. Ein Deutscher im Spannungsfeld der Iranischen Revolution*, Gießen 1983, pp. 30, 36–37.

73 See Abrahamian, *Modern Iran*, p. 181.

74 See Botschaftsrat Strenziok, Tehran, to AA, April 9, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 1, doc. 103, pp. 463–64.

The Western states still tried to maintain (or establish) close ties with Iran, but by March 1979 they were also at least protesting against the executions of former political leaders whom they had courted shortly before. The West German government also responded with indignation, in particular regarding the death sentence on the longstanding head of government Hoveyda. Regardless of such protests, he was executed on April 8 on the grounds that he had, among other things, supplied Israel and the United States with oil for their wars.⁷⁵ Diplomatic attempts to intervene at this point were rather toothless. The ambassadors of France, Ireland and West Germany met with Bazargan and presented a confidential demarche of the EC states demanding at least proper trials.⁷⁶ However, significant protests or sanctions were not yet imposed.

The Islamic Republic curtailed many human rights, which politicians and social movements had fought for worldwide during the 1970s. This was especially true for women's rights. As early as March, women were no longer allowed to serve on courts, and moral committees began to monitor dress code and behavior, which de facto forced women to wear the chador. Husbands were granted authority over their wives and the right to divorce them, and the legal age for marriage was lowered gradually to nine years. Finally, women were even denied the right to testify as equals before a court of law. In May 1979, co-educational schools were abolished and married women were prohibited from attending schools.⁷⁷ Numerous secular schools and universities had to close, because non-Islamic studies were seen as a gateway for Western values.⁷⁸ Teaching materials were "cleansed" and history rewritten, while freedom of the press, which had been fought for and hard-won during the revolution, began to disappear, thanks in part to self-censorship.

Thus, the Iranian revolution was a difficult challenge for the political Left in the West. Not surprisingly, the Left was generally skeptical of such a religious regime that far exceeded the pope in terms of conservatism. And yet, some leftists were sympathetic to the anti-American, anti-consumption, and revolutionary character of the new Iranian regime. In February 1979, for example, Joschka Fischer praised the Islamic Revolution in the journal *Pflasterstrand*, because "it is also opposed to the infiltration of consumerist atheism coming from Western industrialized societies."⁷⁹ In a way, the political Left saw the revolution in Iran

75 See *ibid.*, p. 463; memo, March 16, 1979 and April 9, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651. On the American perspective, see Con Coughlin, *Khomeini's Ghost. Iran since 1979*, London 2009, p. 155.

76 German embassy Tehran, April 30, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

77 See Bhatnagar, *Revolution*, in: Kumaraswamy (ed.), *Caught in the Crossfire*, pp. 106–07.

78 These difficult to verify figures come from: *ibid.*, p. 109.

79 Joschka [Fischer], *Durchs wilde Kurdistan*, in: *Pflasterstrand* no. 47 (1979), pp. 28–31, here p. 31.

as a romanticized version of what they had not been able to achieve at home. Some West German journalists initially sang the same tune. The TV reporter Gordian Troller (Radio Bremen) compiled a favorable documentary for the ARD (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*; German public TV broadcaster) that spoke of a cultural revolution “against a foreign lifestyle that would bring impoverishment,” given that only multi-national companies had made money. According to his film, the Islamists wanted “to abolish the fever of consumerism that is reflected in this traffic chaos,” noting that panic only reigned in “upscale neighborhoods.” Troller underpinned these statements with lengthy moral speeches by Khomeini.⁸⁰ Drawing on an analysis of the minutes of the “Bergedorf discussion group” and the contributions to a conference of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Matthias Küntzel has shown that even West German intellectuals and scholars shared this romanticized view of Iran.⁸¹

However, not all leftist intellectuals were deceived. The liberal-left journal *Der Spiegel* reported very critically right from the beginning on violence and deprivation of rights in Iran and condemned the excesses in detailed cover stories to a greater extent than most politicians. Writers such as Munir D. Ahmed predicted that “the Islamic state” would be a “mixture of Fascist state ideology and practices of a late medieval absolutist state” that discriminated against women and non-Muslims.⁸² The hostage crisis in the American embassy shortly thereafter only served to reinforce this impression. Amnesty International in particular published critical reports on the revolutionary courts describing the bloody punishments in great detail.⁸³

As Edward Said pointed out immediately after the Iranian revolution in reference to British media coverage, “Islam” became a generalized phrase that disregarded the diversity within the Arab world. The Middle East appeared to merely consist of mosques, the praying masses, and a violent threat against the West – an anachronistic counterpart to democratic modernity.⁸⁴ In the West German public, observers

80 See *Eine Verteufelte Revolution – Iran 1979 – Persien kurz nach der Revolution*, ARD 1979, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecYdqarp15g [accessed March 12, 2012].

81 See Küntzel, *Die Deutschen und der Iran*, pp. 159–62.

82 Islam. Hoffnung in den Übermenschen, in: *Der Spiegel*, April 9, 1979, pp. 160–68, here p. 162; see also *Der Spiegel*, February 12, 1979.

83 See Amnesty International, *A Report Covering Events Within the Seven Month Period Following the Revolution of February 1979*, London 1979.

84 See Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, rev. ed., London 1997, p. 6; see the foreword to the new edition, in: *ibid.*, p. xvi, xxvi.

and commentators also dramatized the spread of Islam. *Der Spiegel*, for instance, wrote: “In all the countries between Morocco and Indonesia, the teachings of the Prophet are gaining ground.”⁸⁵ Prior to this point, the Turkish “guest workers” had hardly been seen as part of the Islamic world.⁸⁶ Over the course of the Iranian revolution, left-leaning journalists noted that mosques, Koran schools, and “radical sects” such as the Suleymanicilar movement were even infiltrating West Germany, which connected Islam with the rising fear of sects and gurus. Such reports spoke of some 1.4 million Muslims in the FRG and quoted senior German trade union officials as fearing an “Islamic state within the state.” *Die Zeit* (the German weekly newspaper) even headlined: “Khomeini’s arm stretches as far as Hamburg.”⁸⁷

Women’s rights advocates within the circles of the so-called “new social movements” also sought to intervene. Prominent feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir protested with manifestos; numerous Western women’s rights activists traveled to Iran to demonstrate against increasing discrimination and to make the violence against women public. The German feminist Alice Schwarzer also flew to Tehran in mid-March 1979 to support Iranian women. Again, the regime signaled its willingness to enter talks. The hastily established “International Committee for the Protection of Women’s Rights” was personally received by Khomeini and Bazargan.⁸⁸ And yet, the “spring of freedom” ended in March 1979. The American feminist Kate Millett was expelled from Iran; others left with the feeling that there was not much that could be done to stop the repression of women. Thus, the hope that it would be possible to ensure human rights everywhere in a globalized world with the help of an international public disintegrated.

The Hostage Crisis and Delayed Sanctions

With the hostage crisis in the American embassy in Tehran, radical Islam presented a new kind of challenge to the Western world. Roughly 400 Iranian students stormed the building on November 4, 1979 and took 66 American embassy staff

⁸⁵ On the portrayal of Islam in *Der Spiegel*, see the issues cited, December 11, 1978, pp. 152–53; February 12, 1979, pp. 103–06; April 9, 1979, p. 164.

⁸⁶ Ulrich Herbert has also pointed out this connection, see *idem*, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland. Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge*, Munich 2001, p. 260.

⁸⁷ See *Der Spiegel*, January 7, 1980, pp. 38–43; *Die Zeit*, August 27, 1979, p. 5.

⁸⁸ See Janet Afary/Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, Chicago/IL 2005, pp. 112–17; for reports of the feminists’ experiences, see *Um ihre Hoffnungen betrogen*, in: *Die Zeit*, March 20, 1979; *Emma*, May 1979.

hostage.⁸⁹ Originally, they had only intended to occupy the embassy for a few days,⁹⁰ but the hostage situation turned into one of the longest lasting and most dramatic events of its kind in history. It took 444 days and several international sanctions, negotiations, and concessions, until the hostages, numbering then only 52, were finally released.

From early on, it was clear that the revolutionary protests and the new regime presented a potential danger to Western nationals. According to estimates, roughly 55,000 Americans and 13,000 people with West German passports were in Iran in late 1978.⁹¹ Most of the Germans worked for major export projects, in particular for “Hochtief” and KWU Siemens, and to a lesser extent for Babcock and Zimmer AG. As early as December 1978, 1,400 Germans left the country, some because German schools had been closed.⁹² From late 1978, a few Western nationals were murdered in isolated incidents.⁹³ After Khomeini’s return, numerous roadblocks and roadside checks, in particular close to the airport, created an atmosphere of permanent intimidation. Since it was first and foremost the Americans who were the object of hatred, many Germans profited from being able to point out their German nationality, even though this sometimes led to comments such as “Germany, Hitler, very good.”⁹⁴

Internal documents confirm that the West German government, just like other Western countries, began to prepare for the evacuation of its nationals in November 1978. Lufthansa was instructed to keep some of its larger aircraft on standby. The government also looked into increasing the frequency of flights leaving the country and potential connections via neighboring countries. Additionally, it considered an evacuation across the Caspian Sea with Soviet support as well as a military airlift coordinated with Western allies.⁹⁵ The West German Foreign

89 Six hostages were able to escape to the Canadian embassy and were brought out of the country by the CIA. Thirteen hostages, mostly women and African Americans, were released after two weeks.

90 According to one of the leading hostage-takers in an interview, see Ulrich Encke, *Vom Kaiserreich zum Gottesstaat*. Reportagen aus 30 Jahren iranischer Revolution, Norderstedt 2010, p. 103.

91 Memo, Multinational Evacuation, in: BArch, B 136/16650. Figures vary widely depending on the source.

92 Report by Oldenkott for the Chancellor, December 7, 1978, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

93 On December 23, 1978, the American oil manager Paul Grimm was killed. German embassy Tehran, January 7, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

94 See the report by the journalist Volkhard Windfuhr, *Wann kommt der Schah eigentlich zurück?*, in: *Der Spiegel*, February 19, 1979, p. 112.

95 Report by German embassy Tehran to AA, November 2, 1978, task force Iran, November 6 and 28, 1978, report by Oldenkott for the Chancellor, December 7, 1978, all in: BArch, B 136/16650. See also the note by Meyer-Landrut, January 10, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 1, doc. 8, pp. 43–46.

Office opted for the strategy of encouraging Germans to leave the country without making an official announcement. It recommended that its nationals refrain from making public statements, even on the shah, so as not to worsen the situation of German nationals in Iran or jeopardize the relatively good relations between the two countries.⁹⁶ In early January, an additional 3,000 Germans left, some of them with extra Lufthansa planes and military aircraft from Canada. Even before Khomeini's return, half of the Germans living in Iran had left. Nevertheless, the regular daily flights still had empty seats, because many Germans were convinced that things would get back to normal again soon.⁹⁷ After Khomeini's return, the West German government prepared for the worst: two Boeing 707s were kept on stand-by, blood reserves were stored, and two Transall planes carrying specialists from the *Bundesgrenzschutz* (national border control) flew to Cyprus.⁹⁸ Following Khomeini's triumph in February, a British-German-American-French task force specified the plans to evacuate 20,000 people: 4,800 West Germans, 8,411 Americans and Japanese citizens if there were any empty seats left.⁹⁹ Although, officially-speaking, Western politicians seemed to be unruffled by the regime change and some even greeted it as the lesser of two evils, they were nonetheless highly aware of the severity of the situation behind closed doors.

In mid-February 1979, a radical group had already occupied the U.S. American embassy in Tehran. Yet Khomeini, who wanted to be seen as the guardian of the new order by the international public, persuaded them to leave. Several threats had been made against foreign nationals prior to the fall of 1979, but their situation seemed to stabilize on the whole. Businessmen began to travel to Iran again, especially because Iranian oil had slowly started to flow again and the country's relations with European trade partners were stabilized. In summer 1979, KWU/Siemens actually withdrew from the largest German project, the nearly completed nuclear power plant in Bushehr that is still controversial even today, citing the economically and politically unstable situation as well as Khomeini's lack of support for nuclear power.¹⁰⁰ Other major projects awarded to German companies, however, were confirmed, such as a refinery in Isfahan (Thyssen), a thermal

96 Report by AA, November 10, 1978, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

97 Memo, January 3 and 4, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16650.

98 Evacuation plan Iran, February 11, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

99 Memo, February 14, 1979, in: *ibid.*

100 The nuclear plant was bombed in the Iraq War and rebuilt in the 1990s with Soviet help. It remained controversial due to Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program, see Mehdi Askarieh, A case for Sustainable Development of Nuclear Energy and a Brief Account of Iran's Nuclear Program, in: Homa Katouzian/Hossein Shahidi (eds.), *Iran in the 21st Century: Politics, Economics & Conflict*, New York 2007, pp. 181–93.

power plant in Neka (BBC/German Babcock), and treatment facilities for Tehran's water supply (Lar-Tunnel-Konsortium Huta Hegerfeld), amounting to a total of three billion DM.¹⁰¹

But the situation changed in October 1979, when the United States allowed Reza Pahlavi, who was suffering from severe cancer, to enter the country for treatment; Henry Kissinger facilitated his visit, alongside David and Nelson Rockefeller, who had close business ties to Iran.¹⁰² The Islamists in Iran wanted to put him on trial and demanded his extradition. When the Americans did not comply, hatred against the United States flared up again. Rumors circulated that the Americans were preparing a coup such as the one in 1953 to reinstate the shah. American flags went up in flames and the U.S. embassy in Tehran was the target of anti-American protests; ultimately, students stormed and occupied the building.

The occupation of the embassy radicalized the restructuring of the Islamic Republic and signified a clear rupture between Islamism and the Western world. Although it had not been initiated by Khomeini, he clearly tolerated the situation and – unlike the occupation in February 1979 – made no effort to put an end to it. At the same time, he took advantage of the occupation of the embassy to strengthen his position in the power struggle over the shape of the Islamic Republic and the referendum on the constitution.¹⁰³ In the months prior to this, moderate government representatives such as Prime Minister Bazargan had advocated limiting the power of the clergy to a certain extent. However, the new revolt against the United States had strengthened the influence of the Islamists and their power on the streets. When Khomeini did nothing to end the crisis, Bazargan resigned immediately and a new government was formed, weakening the moderate camp.

Officially, the Iranian Foreign Office justified the occupation by stating that it was, in fact, not an embassy that had been taken hostage, but a CIA-spy nest and the “true power center of Iran.”¹⁰⁴ When the occupiers were actually able to identify some Iranian informants of the Americans, the hatred directed against the United States was further fueled and conspiracy theories gained ground. Similar to what happened in Vietnam and later Mogadishu, the United States was

101 Dept. 311, situation in Iran, October 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

102 See James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion. The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*, New York 1988, p. 322.

103 See Christian Emery, *The Transatlantic and Cold War Dynamics of Iran Sanctions, 1979–80*, in: *Cold War History* 10 (2010), pp. 371–96.

104 Press release of the Foreign Office of the Islamic Republic of Iran, November 10, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

humiliated in the global visual media: blindfolded members of the embassy staff dragged before running cameras revealed to the whole world the superpower's vulnerability and the strength of the Islamic revolution.¹⁰⁵

American embassies in many Islamic countries became the target of violent protests. Especially when Khomeini declared on the radio that the United States was to blame for the seizure of the Great Mosque of Mecca on November 20, 1979 (for which radical Islamists were actually responsible), violence erupted across borders. The U.S. embassies in Islamabad and Tripoli were burnt to the ground. This radicalized conflict spread to other Western countries, including West Germany. On the day after the occupation, Iranian demonstrators gathered in front of the U.S. embassy in Bonn, which had to be placed under constant police protection. American police had to intervene at demonstrations in Washington to separate protesters against and in favor of Iran. In London, arrested Iranian demonstrators went on hunger strikes, which increased fears about the fates of fellow Britons in Iran.¹⁰⁶

In fact, the British embassy was occupied for a short while as well.¹⁰⁷ The West German embassy in Tehran also received a threat on November 10, 1979. It promised that the embassy would be spared if a letter was made public on TV that, among other things, condemned the applications for asylum submitted by followers of the shah.¹⁰⁸ For the time being, the German embassy staff stayed at home, as instructed by Federal Foreign Minister Genscher, and the embassy operated with minimum staff. The West German Foreign Office also ordered the destruction of files, and especially anything related to personal data. On the same day, the embassy advised German nationals in Iran – about 1,900 had remained – to leave the country, quietly and without raising suspicion. In a somewhat convoluted way, it spoke of a “cautious thinning out” and recommended that its citizens should definitely reveal themselves as German nationals in light of the rampant anti-Americanism in the country.¹⁰⁹ The ambassador urged officials at home in the FRG to abstain from making critical statements, because this might have fatal consequences for the Germans in Iran.¹¹⁰ The German Chamber of Industry and Commerce, on the other hand, assessed the situation as less dan-

105 See the ABC news broadcast, November 11, 1979, www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8bC1DEYbI4 [accessed February 6, 2017].

106 Report by German embassy London, August 6, 1980, in: PA/AA, ZA, vol. 137623.

107 Report by British embassy Bonn, November 9, 1980, in: *ibid.*

108 Dept. 114, November 6, 1979, and Dept. 213, November 8, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

109 See daily reports by Ambassador Ritzel, Tehran, November 11, 12, 15 and 16, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

110 Ritzel, November 18, 1979, in: *ibid.*

gerous, and several representatives of German companies wanted to stay. At the same time, Iranian politicians tried to placate the embassies of other countries, claiming that they were not in danger as they were not hotbeds of espionage. Ayatollah Nouri and some of his followers even visited Western embassies in Tehran and presented flowers of friendship in front of running TV cameras, which was accepted as a gesture of goodwill.¹¹¹ With such acts, the new regime tried to divide the Western world.

Mediation attempts were also made at different levels. Condemnations issued by the International Court of Justice and the UN's attempts at negotiation under Secretary General Kurt Waldheim were unsuccessful. The stricter economic sanctions that the United States introduced against Iran, however, proved to be more successful over the long run. Especially effective was the freezing of Iranian assets in the United States on November 14, which amounted to a total of twelve billion dollars. Officially, this course of action was described as capital protection; in reality the American government needed to gain some leverage.¹¹² This measure was met with resentment in the entire Arab world, because the United States had been considered to be a safe place to invest "petro-dollars" up to this point, but now it seemed that political conflicts could jeopardize these investments. In addition, the U.S. government banned Iranian oil imports.

The West German government also responded immediately to the events in the American embassy, but rather hesitantly. As of November 6, 1979, governmental guarantees for export businesses were no longer granted and the export of military materials was stopped.¹¹³ The government also promised to urge German companies to refrain from supplying Iran with spare parts and to keep buying Iranian oil in U.S. dollars and under OPEC conditions. At the same time, banks were advised to cease setting up new Iranian accounts and to stop making gestures of goodwill in the event of delay or default of payment.¹¹⁴ In sum, the FRG, just like other Western European states, opted for softer recommendations instead of making harsh cuts.

111 Ritzel, November 18, 1979, and cabinet note, in: *ibid.*

112 Russell Moses interprets this step as more of a punishment for Iran and a move to protect the U.S. dollar, see *idem*, *Freeing the Hostages. Reexamining U.S.-Iranian Negotiations and Soviet Policy, 1979–1981*, Pittsburgh/PA 1996, pp. 35–36.

113 Conversation with Secretary of State Vance on December 11, 1979, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA008875. This does not support Emery's interpretation that the Federal Republic initially saw the Iran crisis as a merely regional conflict, see *idem*, *Transatlantic and Cold War*, p. 382.

114 Preparations for talk with Secretary of State Vance on December 11, 1979, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA008875; Dept. 311, January 3, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16652.

The question of how to respond to the hostage crisis increasingly divided the Western world and exacerbated the already tense relations between Western Europe and the United States.¹¹⁵ The Americans called on their NATO partners to impose drastic sanctions and put real pressure on Iran. In a phone conversation as early as November 20, President Carter urged Chancellor Schmidt to close the embassy or at least to reduce the embassy staff. Schmidt declined, citing the need to ensure the security of his fellow Germans in Iran.¹¹⁶ In late March, the Chancellor warned President Carter that “hasty actions would be counterproductive” and complicate negotiations. The German ambassador in Tehran agreed.¹¹⁷ They both hinted at an American military rescue mission, which the Western Europeans feared would further escalate the situation. The minutes of the conversations between Schmidt, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Giscard illustrate that the Western European states and Germany in particular were not at all interested in breaking off economic relations with the new regime or even freezing Iranian assets.¹¹⁸ Ultimately, it was the fear that oil prices would spike even further if sanctions were introduced that remained foremost in their minds.¹¹⁹

Negotiations on sanctions were further hampered by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979. The United States demanded joint sanctions against the Soviet Union in response. But, given that both cases involved important trade partners of the FRG who supplied the country with oil and gas, West Germany stood to suffer itself from such sanctions. In 1979, West Germany was still one of Iran’s most important trade partners, although its exports to Iran had declined by two thirds compared to the previous year.¹²⁰ Despite all reservations against a true embargo, Schmidt emphasized that the FRG was bound to show solidarity should a joint course of action among the Allies prove to be necessary. A hand-

115 See in detail on diplomatic maneuvering, Wiegrefe, *Zerwürfnis*, pp. 303–28.

116 Memo cabinet meeting, November 20, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16652.

117 Schmidt to Carter, March 29, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 1, doc. 95, pp. 528–30, quote p. 529; Ministerialdirektor to Chancellor Schmidt (Bundeskanzler; henceforth: BK) in preparation for talks with Secretary of State Vance, December 11, 1979, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA008875.

118 Conversation Schmidt with Thatcher on May 9, 1980, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA006756; conversation Schmidt with U.S. Secretary of State Christopher on January 16, 1980, recorded by von Staden, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 1, doc. 15, pp. 89–91, here p. 91. Consulted documents do not confirm that Margaret Thatcher was in favor of sanctions, as Emery argues based on media source material, see Emery, *Transatlantic and Cold War*, p. 384.

119 See conversation Schmidt with Secretary of State Christopher on January 16, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 1, doc. 15, p. 92.

120 List BMWi, March 26, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16652.

written annotation by the Chancellor on the letter of the ambassador in Tehran warning against sanctions reads: “Ritzel is right. 1.) That’s how we have argued towards Washington – but the United States will decide – not us. 2.) Ritzel has to be told why we (only that far – not any further) have officially shown solidarity with the United States in terms of Iran.”¹²¹ The first NATO state to show genuine solidarity by breaking off trade relations with Iran was, of all countries, Portugal, one of the poorest American allies, despite the fact that it had imported a sixth of its oil supplies from Iran in 1978.¹²²

The Cold War clearly continued to shape such decision-making processes. The Western European countries argued that in the event of an economic boycott, the Soviet Union and its allies would step in and try to tie another country to the Eastern bloc after having invaded Afghanistan.¹²³ Neither the Soviets nor China officially condemned the hostage situation immediately after the occupation of the embassy. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrej Gromyko even emphasized in a conversation with Helmut Schmidt on November 23, 1979 “that the Soviet Union is very much in favor of everything labeled as ‘Iranian revolution’”; nobody was supposed to interfere.¹²⁴ As expected, the Soviet Union voted against economic sanctions in the UN Security Council and tried to further its relations with Iran by concluding trade agreements. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, however, posed an obstacle to rapprochement. After the first sanctions were introduced in November, the GDR declared that it, along with its allies, could provide Iran with everything that was needed. With Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski in charge, East Germany began supplying Iran with more and more trucks and weapons as of 1980; amounting to a total of 477 million Valuta Marks between 1981 and 1983 alone; it also provided support for training programs. Accordingly, the GDR received even more oil from Tehran after the revolution.¹²⁵

Beginning in January 1980, schemes for a military mission to rescue the hostages were being bandied about. The West German and British governments were

121 Ritzel to AA, January 19, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16654.

122 German embassy Lisbon, February 18, 1980, in: *ibid.*

123 Dept. 311, January 3, 1980 and list BMWi, March 26, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16652.

124 Conversation Schmidt with Gromyko on November 23, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 2, doc. 344, pp. 1770–84, quote p. 1775; German embassy Washington to AA, November 24, 1979, in: BArch, B136/16652.

125 See Harald Möller, *DDR und Dritte Welt. Die Beziehungen der DDR mit Entwicklungsländern. Ein neues theoretisches Konzept, dargestellt anhand der Beispiele China und Äthiopien sowie Irak/Iran*, Berlin 2004, pp. 226–36, 433, 437; *idem*, *Waffen*, pp. 70–78; Klaus Storkmann, *Geheime Solidarität: Militärbeziehungen und Militärhilfen der DDR in die “Dritte Welt,”* Berlin 2012, pp. 93–106; Emery, *Transatlantic and Cold War*, p. 378.

against this plan because they feared that it might lead to lasting resentment within the Islamic world.¹²⁶ However, on April 25, 1980, the United States unilaterally sent in eight helicopters to try to free the hostages. This rescue attempt ended in disaster. Although the Carter administration had not officially informed its Western allies in advance, it had indeed consulted with them.¹²⁷ The president wanted to demonstrate that he was capable of action; but the embarrassing failure of the mission only strengthened his Republican opponent in the next election, Ronald Reagan.¹²⁸ It also symbolized the weakness of the superpowers in the face of such new Islamic challenges. Whereas Iran and the socialist countries responded with derision, the West German public complained that the embarrassing rescue mission had been carried out unilaterally and would aggravate global political tensions.¹²⁹ The failed rescue attempt did in fact hamper access to the hostages, who were transferred to different locations.

In the end, only tougher sanctions and informal negotiations were able to resolve this political standoff. One day before the rescue attempt, the EC countries agreed to impose sanctions if the hostages had not been released by May 17. They reiterated time and time again that they would be more deeply affected by these sanctions than Iran itself.¹³⁰ The plan was also to reduce the number of diplomats and ban arms exports prior to this deadline. However, these economic sanctions only applied to *new* contracts that had been made after the hostage crisis and not to older agreements; sanctions against these older contracts would have been genuinely economically detrimental for Iran and the EC countries.¹³¹

126 Memo and conversation Christopher with Genscher, January 16, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 470; conversation Schmidt with Thatcher on May 9, 1980, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA006756; Ritzel to AA, March 18, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 475.

127 According to accessible documents, this came as a surprise to the Germans; German embassy Washington, April 25, 1980 and April 28, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16653; intelligence source material indicated that the Soviets would have tolerated a military solution, see directive Vestring, December 4, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 2, doc. 360, p. 1838, footnote 3. Kissinger requested that no critical statements should be made, despite the fact or because no information was given in advance. Thatcher, however, was likely informed, see Wiegrefe, Zerwürfnis, p. 322.

128 On the impact in the United States, see Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies*, New York 2006, p. 222.

129 AdsD, HA/HSAA009140.

130 Declaration of the foreign ministers of the nine states on Iran, April 22, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16652; memo for cabinet meeting, May 14, 1980, and May 21, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/30561.

131 Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Lambsdorff actively – albeit unsuccessfully – supported exemption limits to be implemented in the new agreements; room documents for cabinet meeting on April 23, 1980; speaking note government spokesman, April 22, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16653.

Accordingly, the German Chancellor was able to reassure major German companies trading with Iran that business could go on as usual.¹³² As a result, Western European sanctions did little, at least in the short run, to solve the conflict.

West Germany as a Mediator in the Hostage Crisis

Simultaneously, informal negotiations over the release of the hostages were taking place. In the beginning, Iranian demands were mostly related to the shah. At first, they demanded the extradition of the former Iranian ruler. They then stepped down their demands, calling for a hearing for the shah before an international investigative commission in the United States that had been appointed by Iran, which would determine whether the shah was to be put on trial. The Tehran government also demanded the return of the shah's assets and an official statement from the U.S. government acknowledging that the shah had committed crimes.¹³³ When Reza Pahlavi left the United States in mid-December 1979 and died in Cairo in July 1980, the negotiations shifted to focus mainly on financial demands and symbolic concessions. Both sides were particularly interested in saving face. Initially, Switzerland took on a key role in facilitating communication between the United States and Iran, delivering memos or reports and arranging initial meetings.¹³⁴

Yet, the informal and top-secret negotiations were mainly engineered by West Germany.¹³⁵ Whereas Swiss mediators targeted President Abolhassan Banisadr and Parliamentary President Rafsanjani, the Germans focused their efforts on Khomeini's entourage, which proved to be the more successful tactic in the end.¹³⁶ After the release of the hostages in 1981, many West German media outlets

132 Schmidt to Ewaldsen, June 4, 1980 (memo), in: BArch, B 136/30561. Thus, it certainly falls short to primarily blame the British House of Commons for the toothless sanctions as Emery does, since they were perfectly in line with the German opinion on this matter, see Emery, *Transatlantic and Cold War*, p. 386.

133 Corresponding lists in: BArch, B 136/16652. See also Ambassador Ritzel to AA, November 14, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 2, doc. 331, pp. 1692–97, here p. 1694.

134 See, albeit without consulting archive material, Thomas Fischer, *Die Rolle der Schweiz in der Iran-Geiselkrise 1979–1981. Eine Studie zur Politik der Guten Dienste im Kalten Krieg*, Zurich 2004.

135 The American accounts of the history of these events hardly mention this, see Moses, *Freeing the Hostages*, and David R. Faber, *Taken Hostage. The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's first Encounter with Radical Islam*, Princeton/NJ 2005.

136 Ritzel to AA, June 2, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 480; German embassy Washington to AA, September 22, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 487.

gave Foreign Minister Genscher most of the credit, although they were mostly in the dark about the details of the events.¹³⁷ Archival records, however, indicate that many officials were involved and point to the vital role played by Gerhard Ritzel, the West German ambassador in Iran. The diplomat, born in Hessen in 1922, had already acquired some experience with these kinds of sensitive talks. As the son of Heinrich Ritzel, a Social Democratic member of the Reichstag, who had emigrated to Switzerland in 1933, Gerhard Ritzel was well versed in politics from an early age. Ritzel entered into diplomatic service in 1951 and took up posts in Bombay, Colombo, New York, and Los Angeles in the years that followed. In the late 1960s, he worked close to Willy Brandt and even became one of the newly-elected Chancellor's personal assistants for a short time. In the 1970s, he was ambassador in Oslo and Prague; in 1977 he took up the post in Tehran. During the revolution, he was one of few Western ambassadors with good contacts to the Islamic leadership.¹³⁸ Numerous conversations between Ritzel and close confidants of Khomeini have been archived; Ritzel actively sought to arrange talks with the ayatollahs as well as their intermediaries and confidants in government, and they also sought to meet with him.

In February 1979, only a few days after Khomeini's triumphant return, Ritzel talked to Ayatollah Taleghani. His report clearly indicated the advent of a new framework for diplomatic relations with the Islamic leaders, especially in contrast to the pompous appearances of the shah: "shoes off, windows open at about 3 degrees Celsius [37 degrees Fahrenheit], stove fired with wood from a box, cheapest European brown carpeting."¹³⁹ But the two found a common basis during their conversations, which later contributed to the rescue of the hostages. According to Ritzel, the ayatollah said: "We have a good past in Iran, which we can build on"; Ritzel also noted, "I answered that we also hoped to keep up the good relations that we have built up over the years."¹⁴⁰ The German ambassador attended Ayatollah Taleghani's funeral in 1979, visited the mosque, and joined

137 First on the U.S. TV channel ABC: *The Secret Negotiations*, January 22, 1981, 10 pm, in the Federal Republic in the newspaper "Bild", January 23, 1981, afterwards in many German newspapers on January 24, 1981. Critical especially towards the veracity of the report in "Bild" the AA, Dept. 213, January 27, 1981, in: BArch, B 136/16653.

138 Ministerialdirektor to BK Schmidt in preparation for talks with Secretary of State Vance, December 11, 1979, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA008875; see Gerhard Ritzel, *Soweit ich mich erinnere. Aufzeichnungen eines Dieners der Diplomatie über Länder, Erlebtes, Gehörtes, Empfundenes und Gedachtes*, Michelstadt 1998, pp. 196–200.

139 Ambassador Ritzel, Tehran, to AA, February 7, 1979, in: BArch, B 136/16651.

140 Ibid.

the funeral procession. In his memoirs, he recalls that he was often greeted with smiles from Iranians on the streets.¹⁴¹

Ritzel soon appeared in the guise of mediator. Shortly after the hostages had been taken, the Iranian regime chose the German ambassador as an emissary to pass on a message to the shah.¹⁴² Ritzel himself immediately offered his services to the United States and met, sometimes at the request of the American secretary of state, with ex-Prime Minister Bazargan, Ayatollah Besheti, and other confidants of Khomeini.¹⁴³ He destroyed the top secret and encrypted reports immediately afterward, and often only code names were used. Ritzel's contact to Vice Prime Minister Sadegh Tabatabai in particular proved to be crucial for the rescue mission. Tabatabai had close ties to both Khomeini and West Germany, where he had lived for a long time. After studying chemistry in Aachen, he had earned his doctorate at the university in Bochum. He allegedly supplied Ulrike Meinhof (the left wing journalist and later co-founder of the RAF, Red Army Faction) with material for her famous *konkret* column against the shah's visit.¹⁴⁴ He was also related to Khomeini by marriage (his sister was married to Khomeini's son) and had been at the ayatollah's side when he was in exile in Paris. In May 1979, Tabatabai was the first representative of the new regime to officially visit Germany and meet with Otto Graf Lambsdorff (FDP), the Federal Minister of Economic Affairs. He also had good contacts at the German embassy in Tehran and had built up relations of trust with some important foreign correspondents, including Peter Scholl-Latour.¹⁴⁵ Because Tabatabai spoke German, no interpreters had to become involved in all these conversations.

After Ritzel had made the arrangements, Genscher also met with Tabatabai on March 21, 1980. In these talks, the West German Foreign Minister demonstrated his negotiation skills. He emphasized that he had never visited Iran under the shah regime nor received the shah's Foreign Minister since he had assumed office in 1974. When he mentioned the hostage situation, he indirectly slipped in some positive remarks about the new regime: "Without the hostage issue, the Iranian revolution would be met with much more sympathy and understanding

141 See Ritzel, *Soweit ich mich erinnere*, p. 194.

142 See Ambassador Hermes, Washington, to Montfort, December 1, 1979, in: AAPD 1979, vol. 2, doc. 357, pp. 1827–29, here p. 1828; recorded by von Staden, December 11, 1979, in: *ibid.*, doc. 371, pp. 1884–87, here p. 1885; Ritzel, *Soweit ich mich erinnere*, pp. 201–05.

143 Ritzel to AA, January 2, 20, 21 and March 18, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 471.

144 A dossier on Tabatabai in the documents of Chancellor Schmidt 1979, in: AdSD, 1/HSAA008863, Bestand Schmidt. His contacts with Ulrike Meinhof, which cannot be proven here, were researched by Die Zeit, see Küntzel, *Die Deutschen*, p. 164.

145 See Scholl-Latour, *Allah*, pp. 196–97.

in Germany.” Genscher also suggested a private, seemingly coincidental meeting that American representatives could join in on. Afterwards, he called the U.S. secretary of state to inform him of the plan.¹⁴⁶ Just two weeks later, Genscher once again spoke with Tabatabai, demanding a swift handover of the hostages and threatening sanctions.¹⁴⁷ Even though these meetings did not seem to be a success initially, they strengthened the trust in West German diplomacy all the more, especially because the Americans had not been able to find someone of note to negotiate on their behalf. Afterwards, Ritzel, who met Tabatabai and other Khomeini confidants on a regular basis, conveyed crucial guarantees made by the Americans in return for the release of the hostages: no punitive actions, the release of Iranian assets in the United States, the resumption of normal economic relations, and support for trials to claim the shah’s assets in America for Iran.¹⁴⁸ These contacts were kept alive through one-on-one talks. For instance, Tabatabai met with the SPD member of the Bundestag and Middle East expert Hans-Jürgen Wischnewsk in Bonn on August 19, 1980; the two knew each other from Tabatabai’s time in the FRG and the Socialist International.¹⁴⁹

In early September, Ambassador Ritzel held crucial preliminary talks in Tehran that paved the way for a solution. He first talked to President Banisadr, then to Ayatollah Beheshti and finally, on September 9, 1980, to Tabatabai.¹⁵⁰ As a result, Tabatabai and Khomeini’s son Ahmad and Chairman of Parliament Rafsanjani agreed upon a procedure to ensure the release of the hostages. They largely discussed three demands that had to be negotiated in Bonn: the release of frozen Iranian assets, American guarantees not to intervene in Iran, and the return of assets that the shah had transferred abroad.¹⁵¹ This provided the basis for secret negotiations that were held in Bonn under the pretext of a conference at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on the situation in Iran on September 16 and 18, 1980. Genscher, Tabatabai, and Warren Christopher led the talks. The deputy secretary of state had arrived without any fanfare on a small airplane from London. The United States declared that it was willing to release the frozen assets, to exer-

146 Conversation Genscher with Tabatabai on March 21, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 1, doc. 88, pp. 496–501, quote p. 498; see note by Ambassador Ruth, Washington, April 16, 1980, in: *ibid.*, doc. 113, pp. 618–22, here p. 620.

147 See conversation Genscher with Tabatabai on April 3, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 1, doc. 88, p. 501, footnote 14.

148 Schlaginweit to Ritzel, May 28, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 479.

149 Account of the hostage situation by Dept. 311, p. 14, in: BArch, B 136/16653.

150 On September 3 and 6, 1980; account on the hostage situation by Dept. 311, p. 14 in: BArch, B 136/16653.

151 Ritzel to AA, September 10, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 2, doc. 265, p. 1375.

cise military and political restraint, and to support the return of the shah's fortune (which Tabatabai stressed as the most vital point). Christopher assured the Iranians that the United States would grant guarantees in advance.¹⁵² In Iran, Ritzel confirmed that President Carter agreed with the results of the negotiations.¹⁵³ In addition, he also suggested that the Americans resume supplying spare weapon parts to Iran.¹⁵⁴

From then on, all further negotiations and contacts were supposed to be arranged through the West German ambassador. Ritzel kept in contact with Tabatabai on a regular basis and met with him eight times in October 1980 alone.¹⁵⁵ On these occasions, Tabatabai informed the Germans about talks he had with Khomeini. They agreed that it would be best to release all hostages at the same time.¹⁵⁶ It was of particular importance that Ritzel, and Genscher as well, assured Tehran "that we will be the guarantor for ensuring that the United States will live up to its promises."¹⁵⁷ Genscher even assured Tabatabai that he would make an effort "to positively influence public opinion on Iran."¹⁵⁸ As Tabatabai feared that he might be killed as a traitor in the event of Khomeini's death, Ritzel also promised to destroy all the related documents.¹⁵⁹ Khomeini indeed mentioned the negotiated conditions in a public speech, which Ritzel interpreted as a directive aimed at the parliament. In the end, it was the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War with the invasion of Saddam Hussein's troops on September 22, 1980 that resulted in delays in the release of the hostages.

The Iranian assets were transferred via Algeria, which seemed trustworthy in Iranian eyes because it was an Islamic country. Algeria had already been considered as a potential partner in the negotiations in February 1980.¹⁶⁰ The funeral

152 Conversation notes, September 16, 17, 18, and 19, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 487; see Montfort to Ritzel, September 19, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 2, doc. 275, p. 1416; Warren Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime: A Memoir*, New York 2001, pp. 110–11. He remembered that the release of the shah's assets in particular was a crucial and difficult point. See also Moses, *Freeing the Hostages*, pp. 253–54, 258–62.

153 German embassy Washington, September 22, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 487.

154 Ritzel to AA, September 22, 1980, in: *ibid.*; German embassy Washington to Genscher, October 15, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 488.

155 List in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 489.

156 See Montfort to Ritzel, September 19, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, vol. 2, doc. 275, pp. 1414–16, and note by Montfort, October 14, 1980, in: *ibid.*, doc. 291, pp. 1516–18.

157 Ritzel to AA and Genscher to AA, October 17, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 489.

158 Phone call Genscher–Tabatabai, October 27, 1980, in: *ibid.*

159 Ritzel to AA, November 9, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 490. The Foreign Office, on the other hand, kept them.

160 German embassy Tehran, February 14, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16654.

of the Yugoslav President Tito on May 8, 1980, attended by leading politicians from all over the world and of all stripes, proved to be an excellent opportunity for negotiations. Helmut Schmidt asked Algerian President Chadli Bendjedid to act as advocate for the release of the hostages. When the Chancellor declared that “we will certainly find a solution without outside interference,” the Algerian politician answered: “Algeria would do everything in its power.”¹⁶¹ It was again Ritzel who kept in touch with the Algerian ambassador in Tehran. Despite a severe illness, he had remained at his post until 1981 so that he could help bring an end to the hostage crisis.¹⁶²

The final negotiations, mainly on financial issues and details of the hostage handover, were led by the United States, represented by deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher in particular, and Algeria; the Algerian politicians talked to Iran.¹⁶³ Both sides finally agreed that the United States would transfer about eight billion dollars of frozen Iranian assets and gold with the value of one billion dollars to the Algerian Central Bank and lift the blockade of Iranian assets after the release of the hostages. Parts of the Iranian money were retained to cover Iranian debts owed in the U.S., which reduced the sum that was transferred considerably. The so-called Algiers Accords of January 19, 1981 also guaranteed that the Americans would lift their economic sanctions against Iran, block the assets of the shah, and issue a statement of non-intervention towards Iran, which Iran is still insisting upon even today.¹⁶⁴ These arrangements were acceptable for both sides: the United States argued that it was only giving back what belonged to Iran anyway; Iran profited not only from symbolic concessions, but also – more importantly – from access to foreign currencies that it could use to buy weapons for the war against Iraq.

The fact that the hostages were flown out of Iran via Algiers to a U.S. military base in Wiesbaden, where they were greeted by Helmut Schmidt and U.S. President Carter, who had just lost the elections, added to the public impression that West Germany had played an important role in rescuing the hostages. In front of

161 Conversation Schmidt with Bendjedid on May 8, 1980, in: AdsD, 1/HSAA006756; Dept. 213, January 27, 1981, in: BArch, B 136/16653.

162 Ritzel to AA, November 3, 1980, in: PA/AA, B 150, vol. 490. Afterwards Ritzel worked in the Federal Chancellery as director of Dept. 6 (Federal Intelligence Service, coordination of the intelligence services of the Federal Republic, also responsible for the internal security of the Federal chancellery), 1983–1988 as ambassador in Stockholm.

163 The memoirs of Christopher are quite telling, see *idem*, *Chances of a Lifetime*, pp. 116–23.

164 Memo, meeting of the Federal Cabinet, January 21, 1981, in: BArch, B 136/16653; see Moses, *Freeing the Hostages*, pp. 252–326. The Algiers Accords, January 19, 1981 are accessible online: www.parstimes.com/history/algiers_accords.pdf [accessed February 6, 2017].

TV cameras and in a personal letter, Carter thanked the Germans, which was balm on the wounded German-American friendship: “They helped us in ways which I can never reveal publicly to the world,” Carter wrote.¹⁶⁵ Behind closed doors, he thanked the German ambassador in particular: “Working patiently, Ritzel brought Tabatabai to accept being a middle man for the American government, passing on messages to the ayatollah through Ahmed Khomeini.”¹⁶⁶ The internal assessment of the West German Foreign Office humbly concluded that Genscher’s and Ritzel’s contributions were not really the main factor behind the release of the hostages.¹⁶⁷ On further reflection, however, it was very much Ritzel’s brave and skillfully tactful engagement in Tehran that facilitated the crucial talks. Thus, in the end, it had paid off that he had maintained contact with the Islamic clergymen and the country’s new leaders after Khomeini’s return, lending an open ear to a country in upheaval.

The Islamic Revolution and the Discourse on Human Rights

The Iranian revolution took place at a time when the discourse on human rights was blossoming. And yet the international response to the events in Iran illustrates that political elites in the FRG – as well as large portions of the political Left – hardly paid more than lip service to this topic. Even when violence escalated after the Islamic Republic had been established, a policy of tolerance reigned supreme. Immediately after the end of the hostage crisis, the West German government sought to normalize its relations with Iran, primarily driven by economic and anti-communist motives. In late summer 1981, for instance, the West German Foreign Office soberly stated in an internal memo that approximately thirty executions had been carried out every day since the dismissal of Iranian President Benisadr in June. But, according to internal minutes, Foreign Minister Genscher had only informed his Iranian counterpart Mir Hossein Mousavi that the FRG would “deplore any act of violence” while continuing to court the oil-rich country at the same time: “We have met your revolution unconditionally. If you want good relations, you will get good relations.”¹⁶⁸ Similarly, the new German

165 German embassy Washington, January 22, 1981, in: BArch, B 136/16653.

166 Transcript appendix, in: *ibid.*

167 Dept. 213, January 27, 1981, in: BArch, B 136/16653.

168 Conversation Genscher with Mussawi on October 8, 1981, in: AAPD 1981, vol. 3, ed. by Horst Möller/Gregor Schöllgen/Andreas Wirsching, Munich 2012, doc. 292, pp. 1568–70, quotes p. 1569.

ambassador in Tehran, Jens Petersen, declared in front of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in October 1981 that critical media coverage on the executions in Iran was neglecting to point out “to what extent these brutalities are the result of terror acts by the militant Left opposition.”¹⁶⁹

Yet, the human rights discourse did not shift its focus more heavily to Iran until October 1981. From the revolution in early 1979 until Banisadr’s dismissal on June 21, 1981, “only” 2,000 people were executed, which was about the same number that was killed during the first three months after Banisadr was removed, not to mention the even greater number of deaths in the fights against the Kurds.¹⁷⁰ Media coverage on executed young people and children in particular, for instance on the *Tagesschau* (TV news program) on October 11 and on *Panorama* (TV investigative current affairs program) on October 27, 1981, ensured outrage in the FRG. Students in schools as well as adult citizens bombarded German politicians with letters and signed petitions. In turn, several politicians, including the Federal Justice Minister Jürgen Schmude (SPD), staged a protest at the reception of the UN human rights committee.¹⁷¹ Other problems also arose when Iran put pressure on German companies, such as Bayer, to transfer shares to the Iranian state for free.¹⁷² In the months to come, Genscher addressed “the high number of executions” in talks with Iranian politicians more directly, even when he met with Chairman of Parliament Rafsanjani in 1984.¹⁷³

Yet, no Western country maintained closer ties to Khomeini’s Iran than the FRG. The well-established economic and cultural relations tended to trump critical media rhetoric. In 1983, German exports to Iran amounted to 7.7 billion DM.¹⁷⁴ German exports to Iran increased significantly in the years that followed, accounting for almost 50 percent of all EC exports to Iran in the 1990s.¹⁷⁵ Armament sup-

169 Ambassador Teheran, Jens Petersen, to AA, October 25, 1981, in: PA/AA, ZA, vol. 137673.

170 Amnesty referred to 1,800 executions in the three months; report by Dept. 311, November 23, 1981, and report by German embassy Tehran, November 2, 1981, in: PA/AA, ZA, vol. 137673. 171 various documents in: PA/AA, ZA 137673.

171 Various documents in: PA/AA, ZA, vol. 137673.

172 AAPD 1983, vol. 1, ed. by Horst Möller/Gregor Schöllgen/Andreas Wirsching, Munich 2014, doc. 156, p. 817, footnote 7.

173 Conversation Genscher with Ambassador Velayati on February 5, 1982, in: AAPD 1982, vol. 1, ed. by Horst Möller/Gregor Schöllgen/Andreas Wirsching, Munich 2013, doc. 43, pp. 212–16, here p. 215; see also conversation Genscher with Rafsanjani on July 21, 1984, in: AAPD 1984, vol. 2, ed. by Horst Möller/Gregor Schöllgen/Andreas Wirsching, Munich 2015, doc. 201, pp. 934–37, here p. 935. Genscher nonetheless gave a positive summary of the conversation: Genscher to Secretary of State Shultz, July 23, 1984, in: *ibid.*, doc 203, pp. 941–42.

174 Report by German embassy Tehran, September 15, 1984, in: PA/AA, ZA, vol. 137754.

175 In international comparison, see Roger Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to*

plies were still limited due to the war against Iraq that lasted until 1988, but even during the wave of executions in 1983, there were talks about potential weapon exports after the end of the war, such as submarines, alpha-jets, and tanks.¹⁷⁶ Accordingly, the FRG courted a political exchange with Iran more than other countries. It was the first Western country to receive Iranian statesmen in 1981, and Federal Foreign Minister Genscher was the first leading Western politician to officially visit Iran in 1984. During the 1990s, his successor Klaus Kinkel was also more eager to establish a dialogue with Iran than his fellow Western ministers. Likewise, most of the long-standing business relations remained in place. Iran kept its large block of Krupp shares, which meant that a representative of the Khomeini regime served on the Krupp supervisory board. In particular, Iranian elites, trained and educated in the West, facilitated this ongoing cooperation. As a result, however, the FRG had to deal with considerable tensions in its relations with the United States. It was not until the Americans put pressure on German companies with shares held by Iranians that Thyssen-Krupp, for example, bought back these shares in 2003, ending its partnership with Tehran to avoid jeopardizing its American market.

For a long time, human rights policy and rhetoric focused on other regions and countries such as South Africa and Chile. Efforts within political circles and even within social movements that were directed against oil-rich Arab countries that fostered violence and terrorism while torturing their people faded in comparison. In 1979, for instance, Genscher visited Libya – a country that supplied Germany with a fifth of its enormous oil exports – with a large entourage. He pled for such economic contacts, arguing that otherwise the Soviets, who already provided Libya with weapons and had built a nuclear test facility, would step in and exploit the situation. The fact that the Gaddafi regime supported terrorism and sent troops to Chad did not change the policy of the West German federal government towards Libya.¹⁷⁷ Although the Iranian revolution raised fears over the radicalization of Islam in the media and among the public, most German politicians still seemed to be stuck in the Cold War and to be entirely pragmatic when it came to economic policy.

America, London/New York 2003, p. 67. For a very critical perspective on the later developments, see Küntzel, *Die Deutschen und der Iran*, pp. 151–76.

¹⁷⁶ Notes by Schlagintweit, Vortragender Legationsrat, September 26, 1983, in: AAPD 1983, vol. 2, doc. 278, pp. 1402–03.

¹⁷⁷ See Tim Szatkowski, *Gaddafis Libyen und die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1969 bis 1982*, Munich 2013.