Islam as an Underestimated Challenge: NATO States and the Afghan Crisis of 1979

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Introduction

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 not only signified that East-West relations were relapsing into a “Second Cold War,”¹ but also helped propel Islamism as an emerging factor within international relations in the immediate “history of the present.”² At this point, the heyday of détente between East and West, which had been initiated in the 1960s and reached its culmination in the signing of the Helsinki Accords, had come to an end. In its place, the arms race not only dominated international political debates, but also policy discussions between the NATO allies.³ As early as 1977, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt drew public attention to Soviet armament with nuclear SS-20 missiles in a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, provoking concerns within the alliance that the strategic balance of power might be shifting in favor of Moscow. A second controversy among the NATO partners over the production and deployment of the so-called neutron bomb followed on its heels, ending in a fiasco that deeply damaged German-American relations.⁴ Then, on December 12, 1979, NATO’s adoption of the Dual Track Decision in which the Western allies threaten-
ned to install medium-range nuclear missiles if no arms control agreement could be reached with the Soviet Union within the next four years sparked even more dissent.

In this already heated international situation around Christmas 1979, the news of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan came as a complete surprise to the German public. For the first time since the end of World War II, Moscow had openly intervened in a country outside the Warsaw Pact – the era of détente seemed to be over once and for all. Although the NATO partners had accomplished a major feat with the Dual Track Decision just two weeks prior, an even more intensive crisis within the alliance seemed to be looming on the horizon. How could NATO respond to this act of aggression without sacrificing the chances for an agreement with the Soviets on the control of medium-range missiles? What role was the West supposed to play in the war between the Soviet army and Afghan government troops on the one hand and armed Afghan resistance groups on the other? And, finally, which long-term objectives did the individual NATO partners pursue on their own accord in Afghanistan?

**Historiography and Concept**

In recent years, historians have taken a much closer look at what is often referred to as the Second Cold War. In particular, they have paid a great deal of attention to the aspects of this bipolar conflict reflected in the debates over arms control policy prior to the NATO Dual Track Decision in 1979. Moreover, several studies have explored the role of the peace movements and the question of whether, and to what extent, they were ideologically influenced and financially supported by the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc countries.

Scholarship on the conflict in Afghanistan itself has predominantly examined the Soviet invasion within the context of the history of the USSR and its

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collapse while focusing on the global level of the Cold War. Other publications compare the failure of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan to the American experience in Vietnam or interpret it as a precursor to the “humanitarian intervention” efforts undertaken by NATO since 2001 and the American “war on terror.” In addition, initial case studies based on archival material address the question of whether the Soviet invasion was rather offensive or defensive in nature. For the most part, a broad consensus has emerged among scholars that Moscow considered this attack necessary in order to secure its power, although it was fully aware of the military and economic risks involved. Alongside this focus on the superpowers, a few recent studies have also begun to situate the communist era in Afghanistan within the context of the general history of the country. That said,


11 See Thomas Barfield, Afghanistan. A Cultural and Political History, Princeton (NJ)/Oxford 2010; Konrad Schetter, Kleine Geschichte Afghanistans, Munich 2010; Antonio Giustozzi, War,
however, studies on the Western – and in particular the West German and Western European – perceptions of the war in Afghanistan that analyze the discussions among the allies over the motives, tactics, and strategies of the Soviet leadership and the resulting decision-making processes are still few and far between.\textsuperscript{12}

Moreover, the debates among the NATO partners on how to deal with the Afghan resistance movement that opposed the communist regime and the Soviet troops have received scant attention within historical scholarship. Although most scholars agree that the United States provided these groups with weapons prior to the Soviet invasion,\textsuperscript{13} it is still unclear whether – and if so, under which normative and strategic aspects – this question was discussed by the allies, particularly during the early stage of the war. What significance did the NATO partners attach to the fact that the competing resistance groups, which were often divided along the lines of ethnic tribal affiliations, had one thing in common: Islamism as the ideological foundation for the “Holy War” against the communist suppressors and a source of legitimacy for their armed fight to free Afghanistan from socialism?\textsuperscript{14}

Building on this scholarship, this article will first situate the conflict in Afghanistan within the larger framework of the emerging crisis in the Greater Middle East region\textsuperscript{15} during the 1970s. After broadening the general perspective, it will then examine how the NATO states perceived the invasion. As this


\textsuperscript{13} See Gibbs, Hintergründe, in: Greiner/Müller/Walter (eds.), Heiße Kriege, p. 310.


\textsuperscript{15} In order to avoid confusion over geographic terminology, this article uses the term “Greater Middle East” to refer to a contiguous set of countries stretching from Morocco in the west to the western border of China in the east.
article will show, these states did not act as a cohesive group, but rather used
the bodies of the alliance at both the working and ministerial levels as outlets
for formal and informal exchange. Alongside the United States, France and Great
Britain, West Germany played a key role within the NATO alliance, which is why
this article concentrates on these four states. Although it addresses the question
of how the allies assessed the Kremlin’s course of action from the perspective
of the bipolar-system conflict, it also investigates the varying significance that
they attached to the religious motivations of the Afghan resistance movements.
Was Islamic fundamentalism seen as a mere instrument to mobilize the Afghans
against the Soviets or was it also perceived to be a potential threat to the capitalist
West? In a third step, this article then assesses the diplomatic crisis management
strategies of the West. Which political concepts and strategies were drawn up by
the allies to resolve the conflict and what role did the Islamic Arab states in the
region play in these plans? Did the NATO states connect the events in Afghanis-
tan with the Shiite revolution in Iran, and if so, in what ways?16 Fourthly, this
article examines the political and material support for the Afghan mujahideen
provided by the NATO states. How did the allies discursively legitimize their
cooperation with radical and obviously anti-democratic militias on the basis of
their foreign policy claims that they were acting in the name of freedom, self-
determination, and human rights? Is it possible to identify different intellectual
traditions and thought systems particular to each of the European transatlantic
partners?17 What role did domestic politics play in this respect? And, finally, did
these Western actors take Islamism in Afghanistan seriously as a long-term factor
within international politics or did they only regard it as a useful geopolitical and
ideological instrument in the global Cold War?

The Greater Middle East as a Crisis Region

In the late 1970s, the Greater Middle East burst as a trouble spot onto the interna-
tional stage, attracting political attention around the globe. Various global and
regional tensions, some of which had been around for a while, contributed to
this heated situation. These factors included the bipolar structuring of interna-
tional relations along Cold War lines as well as the exploitation of the oil fields

16 On the “Islamic revolution” in Iran, see Frank Bösch’s article in this Yearbook: Between the Shah
17 See Tim B. Müller, Krieger und Gelehrte. Herbert Marcuse und die Denksysteme im Kalten
Krieg, Hamburg 2010.
in the Gulf region just as Western industrialized countries were becoming more dependent on energy imports. Likewise, the aftermath of the decolonization processes in the countries of the region that had gained independence after the Second World War and the powerful so-called Arab nationalism that emerged as a result also had a hand in the matter, not to mention the increasing social and political Islamization of vast areas of the Greater Middle East. These strands of conflict combined in varying degrees of intensity within four major flashpoints that began to overlap with each other, effectively turning the entire area into one of the most dangerous crisis regions ever since the late 1970s.

The first flashpoint was the conflict between Israel and Palestine, which had developed incrementally into a long-term structural conflict after the end of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{18} After being defeated by Israel in its “war of independence” in 1948, the Arab states formed a united “Arab front” under the leadership of the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser\textsuperscript{19} that avidly promoted a pan-Arab agenda. These states not only demanded liberation from British and French colonial rule, but also shared the desire to destroy Israel. By the time the Yom Kippur War broke out in 1973 between Egypt and Syria on the one side and Israel on the other, the increasing importance of the Arab states for international politics was becoming obvious, especially because the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) had clearly demonstrated just how dependent Western industrialized nations were on oil imports. When Egypt’s president Anwar el-Sadat signed a separate peace agreement following the Camp David Accords in 1978 in which he agreed to formally recognize Israel’s right of existence in exchange for the return of the Sinai peninsula, the country effectively isolated itself from the rest of the Arab world for decades. From this point on, Egypt – bolstered by substantial U.S. arms deliveries and economic aid – became the West’s most important ally in the region alongside Israel, especially given that Iran could no longer be counted on as a pro-Western stabilizing force after 1979.

This brings us to the second flashpoint. In the 1960s, the Iranian government in Tehran under shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi fostered the economic and socio-political modernization of the country along Western lines, receiving substantial arms supplies from the United States in return.\textsuperscript{20} When the shah was


\textsuperscript{19} For easier readability, Arab, Iranian and Pashtun personal names and terms have been rendered in English.

\textsuperscript{20} See Westad, Global Cold War, pp. 288–330. For a brief overview of the history of Iran, see Monika Gronke, Geschichte Irans von der Islamisierung bis zur Gegenwart, Munich 2009, here pp. 95–116.
overthrown in the spring of 1979 and Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed an Islamic Republic, the West abruptly lost an important partner and oil supplier. The situation then came to a head in November when Iranian students occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran with Khomeini’s approval. They took American members of the embassy staff hostage and demanded the extradition of the shah who was in New York at the time. The American-Iranian crisis – which was finally resolved with the release of the hostages on January 20, 1981 after a series of dramatic turns – became a focal point in the U.S. elections that ultimately ended in a victory for Ronald Reagan. For over a year, the developments in Iran captured the attention of both the American administration and the public, setting the tone for Washington’s policy throughout the region.

The “Islamic revolution” in Iran also had profound repercussions on the country’s chronically strained relations with its neighbor Iraq, the third flashpoint in the region. A former British mandate area, Iraq was an artificial creation whose territorial lines failed to take the ethnic and religious identities of the population into consideration. As a result, the country has been continually plagued by domestic conflicts and border disputes with its neighbors ever since. The division of the Muslim population into Shiites and Sunnis also created a fault line within Iraqi society. Although the former clearly formed the majority of the population, they were largely excluded from governmental posts traditionally held by members of the Sunnite upper class. Following the Shiite revolt in neighboring Iran and Khomeini’s calls to spread his revolutionary ideology, the mostly Sunnite Ba’ath party in control of the government in Baghdad feared that the revolution might sweep into Iraqi territory.

After the Ba’ath party staged a coup in 1968 that brought it to power under the leadership of Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, it enacted a constitution that established Islam as the state religion and introduced a socialist economic system, resulting in rapprochement with Moscow. In 1979, only a few months after the “Iranian revolution,” al-Bakr stepped down from power, turning the reins over to the second man in charge, Saddam Hussein. The new leader gradually established a dictatorship, leaving a lasting mark on world politics that still reverberates today. Hussein was an avid proponent of Abdel Nasser’s ideas of Arab nationalism, and

he strove to become the leader of the Arab world in its fight against the “Jewish threat” in the West and the “Persian threat” in the East.\textsuperscript{22}

When Tehran was hit by a period of domestic political weakness during the months after Khomeini’s seizure of power, Hussein jumped at the chance to forcibly redraw the contested geostrategic border that had been defined by the thalweg of the Shatt al-Arab river. By starting a “blitz” war against Iran, he hoped to claim this waterway with its access to the Persian Gulf for Iraq, bolstering the country’s oil industry.\textsuperscript{23} However, these plans did not work out. The conflict turned into an eight-year war in which both of the major superpowers and their respective allies sometimes supplied both sides with weapons. After a ceasefire agreement was finally signed in 1988 following years of intense efforts on the part of the UN, the world found itself confronted with a devastating situation: Iran and Iraq were economically ruined and the rifts between Arabs, Kurds, and Persians as well as between Shiites and Sunnites had deepened. Not only had millions of people died, but also countless refugees had fled the war zone. In the 1980s, Iran in particular not only had to deal with its own internally displaced persons but also with refugees coming from outside, especially since its eastern neighbor, Afghanistan, was involved in a year-long war of attrition at the time.

This fourth flashpoint – the Afghanistan conflict – had been brewing since the late 1970s, but it turned into a true international crisis in December 1979 when Soviet troops invaded the country. Afghanistan had built up close relations with the Kremlin since the 1950s, and the Soviet Union had gradually become the country’s most significant supplier of economic and military aid.\textsuperscript{24} As the conflict between East and West worsened, Washington’s interest in the country increased, and the United States tried to strengthen its influence vis-à-vis this officially neutral state by providing development aid. Afghanistan thus enjoyed a period of prosperity in the 1960s, which has often been idealized as a “golden era” in retrospect.\textsuperscript{25}

This phase of relative stability ended abruptly in July 1973 when Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan staged a coup against his cousin, King Mohammed

\textsuperscript{22} See Henner Fürtig, Kleine Geschichte des Irak. Von der Gründung bis zur Gegenwart, Munich 2003, pp. 81–96.
\textsuperscript{25} See Schetter, Geschichte, pp. 84–95.
Zahir shah. Supported by the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), Daoud declared himself president of the newly-proclaimed republic of Afghanistan.26 His cooperation with the communists remained a fragile partnership of convenience: as a member of the aristocracy, Daoud was willing to modernize the poor and backward country, but he was not prepared to carry out a socialist revolution. The PDPA itself was deeply divided over the question of how quickly the country should be restructured along communist lines. The moderate Parcham wing under Babrak Karmal took the view that the agrarian country with its profoundly devout population was not yet ready for socialism, which meant that a long transitional period would probably be necessary. The Khalq faction under the leadership of Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, on the other hand, advocated a swift and radical social transformation.

At first, a general aversion to the president's policies seemed to keep the party united. Then, on April 27, 1978, it staged a coup supported by the military and took over power, overthrowing Daoud and proclaiming the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Taraki himself took up the posts of Secretary General of the party, director of the Revolutionary Council, and prime minister of the new “revolutionary government.” Whereas Karmal was designated as his deputy in all of these offices, Amin was made Foreign Minister. However, it was not long before the arduously concealed conflict within the PDPA erupted once again. In the end, Taraki and Amin, who still leaned towards Moscow, held the upper hand. They not only modeled the party doctrine after the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but also ultimately signed a treaty of friendship with the Kremlin in December 1978. With the help of Soviet advisors, they created a tight party organization and began restructuring the economy and Afghan society along socialist lines. But, the radical measures implemented by the government met with growing resistance among the Afghan population, which regarded the party’s communist and anti-religious reforms as an attack on Islam and evidence of a Soviet occupation of the country. Unrest and protests led by oppositional Muslim brotherhoods increased, provoking a brutal response from the government. With the Herat uprising in mid-March 1979, the conflicts escalated to a new height as more and more members of the Afghan army defected to the opposition.

Despite the PDPA’s repeated appeals, Moscow refused to send troops to put down the rebellion in Afghanistan at this point. Thus, when Amin overthrew his

rival Taraki on September 14, 1979 and took over as head of state and Secretary General of the PDPA before initiating a series of bloody purges, the fight for power within the party entered a new phase. The violence between government supporters and resistance groups also escalated over the next three months as the insurgents took control of more of the country. Finally, on December 24, 1979, Soviet troops marched across the Afghan border, and they conquered Kabul two days later. Amin also died under unexplained circumstances in the process.27 On the evening of the same day, Moscow’s protégé Babrak Karmal took over as director of the Revolutionary Council, Secretary General of the PDPA, and Prime Minister of the country. Thus, in the late 1970s, Afghanistan, just like the entire region of the Greater Middle East, found itself in a precarious state of political, religious, and ethnic instability.

NATO and the Path to the Soviet Invasion

Following the communist “April revolution,” the NATO partners regularly discussed the developments in Afghanistan during their deliberations. At first, the debates focused on the question of what role Moscow had played in the coup of the PDPA. Andreas Meyer-Landrut, Head of Department in the West German Foreign Office, concluded in a letter to Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher dated July 1978 that the Kremlin’s active participation in the April revolution was “unverifiable and rather unlikely.”28 The CIA shared this opinion.29 Nevertheless, diplomats and the intelligence services in Bonn and Washington were convinced that Moscow sought to establish permanent control over the regime in Kabul in order to gradually expand its sphere of influence to include Iran and Pakistan and to gain access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in the long run. Accordingly, they believed that this cautious and reserved maneuvering was proof

27 The CIA assumed that Hafizullah Amin had been murdered by the Soviets, but evidence is lacking to prove this assumption, see Douglas MacEachin, Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. The Intelligence Community’s Record, Washington D.C. 2002, pp. 33–35.
29 See MacEachin, Predicting, p. 8. David N. Gibbs also assumes that Moscow was not actively involved in the April coup, see Hintergründe, in: Greiner/Müller/Walter (eds.), Heiße Kriege, p. 301.
that the Soviets were fully aware of the foreign policy disaster that might await Moscow if it chose to actively intervene in Afghanistan.

However, the more the balance of power shifted in favor of the insurgents in the Afghan civil war, the more Bonn and its partners discussed the question of whether, or rather when, the Soviet Union would march into Afghanistan to keep the struggling Amin regime in power. Although the NATO partners were kept informed about the current situation and the increasing military presence of the Soviet Union through the daily reports sent by their embassies in Kabul as well as their intelligence services and the CIA in particular, they were uncertain of how to assess the political significance of these developments. Bonn, Paris, London and Washington continually had to weigh two aspects against one another. On the one hand, it was obvious that military intervention would have had severe political consequences for Moscow at the international level. Not only would the credibility of the Soviets’ “Third-World” policy have suffered, but also the détente process, which had already been severely tested by the increasingly heated debates on rearmament in the West, would have taken a hard hit. On the other hand, the collapse of the communist government in Kabul would have dealt a blow to Moscow’s international image, because it would show the world that the allegedly unstoppable march of socialism towards a global revolution was an illusion. What would Moscow choose? Would it try to save face ideologically or would it opt for its foreign policy rationale?

The way these questions were answered had more to do with the respective political positions of the countries in question than it did with the sometimes conflicting reports coming from ambassadors and intelligence services on the ground. The disputes within the U.S. administration were perhaps the best example of this. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter had taken office with the goal of finally putting the experiences of Vietnam to rest and introducing a new line of foreign policy with a moral foundation that would focus on the protection of human rights. Within the U.S. government, it was Secretary of State Cyrus Vance who primarily represented this idealist and sometimes missionary approach. Carter’s Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, on the other hand, was

31 For easier readability, the term “Third World” will not henceforth be put in quotation marks.
regarded as an advocate of traditional *Realpolitik*, and he had made a name for himself as a right-wing hardliner thanks to his staunch anti-communism. As early as April 1978, he had tried to convince the president that the communist coup in Kabul was part of a long-term Soviet political strategy to gain hegemony over the Middle East and access to the Persian Gulf. Thus, in September 1979, Brzezinski recommended breaking off American-Afghan relations and undermining Moscow’s plans with covert CIA operations. He side-stepped objections that this might in fact provoke Soviet intervention in the first place by pointing out that the invasion had been Moscow’s objective all along. At this point, however, Vance was able to push through his suggestion of maintaining relations with Kabul for the time being while continuing to provide moderate economic aid as part of a wait-and-see approach.

The government in London was also divided on this issue. Margaret Thatcher, who had moved into No. 10 Downing Street in the spring of 1979, championed a strict anti-communist line. In a conscious effort to distance herself from her predecessor James Callaghan and the Labour Party, she also called for a tough policy against Moscow. She believed that the growing influence of the USSR over the last few years could be put down to the lack of strong leadership in the Carter administration, France’s insistence on maintaining an independent foreign policy, and the burgeoning economic ties between West Germany and the Eastern European states. British Foreign Secretary Peter Carrington agreed with the

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35 Scholarship assumes that the CIA started to financially support the Afghan rebels as early as July 1979 on a small scale at first, see details later in this article; Gibbs, Hintergründe, in: Greiner/Müller/Walter (eds.), *Heiße Kriege*, pp. 309–10.


anti-communist consensus of the Conservative government and Thatcher’s firm belief that Britain needed to take on a leading role in the global conflict with the Soviet Union. Yet, he disagreed with a one-dimensional confrontational approach, favoring a pragmatic and constructive policy towards Moscow in close cooperation with Britain’s Western European partners.\textsuperscript{39}

At an operational level, the responsible South Asian Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) discussed the current situation in Afghanistan in November 1979, just a few weeks before the Soviet invasion. The Head of Department, William White, had no doubts that Moscow would march in if a takeover by Islamists loomed.\textsuperscript{40} Graham Archer and Michael Howell, on the other hand, still thought that a Soviet invasion was unlikely, not because Leonid Brezhnev was not capable of such a step, but because the insurgents were too weak to overthrow Amin.\textsuperscript{41}

The West German government as well as the French president, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, took the view that Brezhnev would not risk the hard-won achievements of détente for Afghanistan alone. As late as December 23, 1979, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the West German Foreign Office still strongly believed that Moscow would not interfere in the conflict between Afghan government troops and the insurgents – if only for the simple reason that the onset of winter would make a quick and effective suppression of the rebellion difficult.\textsuperscript{42} German and French diplomats thus interpreted the reinforcement of the Soviet military presence merely as an act of political support for the Amin regime. In the end, this proved to be a blatant misjudgment on their part.

Regardless of the differences in detail, the debates of the NATO partners focused predominantly on Moscow’s role in Afghanistan and the repercussions of an invasion in terms of security politics and détente as well as the geostrategic consequences for the global balance of power between the superpowers. The developments in Afghanistan seemed to become all the more dangerous as the

\textsuperscript{40} Letter by White, Head of the South Asian Dept. of the FCO, to Mallaby, Eastern European and Soviet Dept. of the FCO, November 23, 1979, Subject: Afghanistan, in: The National Archives (henceforth: TNA), FCO 37/2132.
\textsuperscript{41} Letter by Archer, South Asian Dept. of the FCO, to White, Head of the South Asian Dept., November 23, 1979, in: TNA, FCO 37/2132; note by M. E. Howell, FCO, November 28, 1979, Subject: Afghanistan: Mr Mallaby’s and Mr White’s minutes, in: TNA, FCO 37/2132.
West appeared to be losing its influence in the Greater Middle East region. The “Islamic revolution” in Iran in the spring of 1979 was a particularly important factor in these assessments. The main threat was not considered to be the religious fundamentalism of the Khomeini regime, but rather the domestic instability of the country caused by the revolution, which might have tempted Moscow to march into Iran in order to secure access to the Persian Gulf and the oil deposits of the region.43

Consequently, the idea of a Soviet Union so bogged down by its long-term political, economic, and military involvement in Afghanistan that it could not make use of its geostrategic advantages in the region became all the more enticing. Washington thus came around to the idea that Soviet intervention in Afghanistan might have some advantages for the West, especially since it would more than likely severely damage the trust that had developed between Moscow and the countries of the region as well the entire Third World. At a meeting with his fellow ministers, André François-Poncet, David Owen, and Hans-Dietrich Genscher in New York on September 25, 1979, Vance argued: “The West should not overreact if the Soviets feel obliged to intervene. Let them sink into the swamp, while the West responds with more prudence.”44 In early November 1979, Christopher Mallaby from the Eastern European and Soviet Department of the FCO also noted that an invasion should be welcomed because it would significantly damage Moscow’s image and carry enormous military and political costs. As he noted in a letter to White, “The best outcome for the West might be a slow escalation of the present situation, which will ensure that the Russians are slowly and painfully educated in the limits of imperial power without events reaching any definite conclusion.”45

When Soviet troops finally marched into Afghanistan in late December 1979, as West German records show, the NATO partners shared the belief that Moscow

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45 Letter by Mallaby, Eastern European and Soviet Dept. of the FCO, to White, Head of the South Asian Dept. of the FCO, November 8, 1979, Subject: Afghanistan, in: TNA, FCO 37/2132. However, there were other opinions within the FCO. R.D. Lavers from the South Asian Dept. of the FCO argued that Britain had no interest in an invasion; letter by Lavers to Archer and White, South Asian Dept. of the FCO, November 29, 1979, Subject: Afghanistan, in: TNA, FCO 37/2132.
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had not only intervened in order to replace Amin through Taraki, but also that the Soviets were planning a full-scale occupation of the country in order to crush the rebellion once and for all.46 However, they disagreed over the question of Brezhnev’s long-term objectives. Were Moscow’s actions mainly part of an ideologically motivated offensive that aimed at a worldwide communist revolution, which would have directly affected Western security interests? Or was the invasion a defensive act designed to secure power as the Kremlin sought to block the looming Islamist takeover of Kabul and keep such religiously-motivated uprisings from spreading to the Muslim population in the neighboring southern provinces of the Soviet empire?47

The way in which the Europeans and the United States answered these questions determined which kind of response they believed to be most appropriate given the circumstances. Carter summarily declared that Moscow’s actions were an attack on vital American security interests.48 Given the immense pressure coming from the Iranian hostage crisis and the upcoming elections, he saw the situation as a chance to improve his domestic image.49 In order to counter continuing allegations that he was a weak leader, he proclaimed unilateral sanctions against the Soviet Union50 and demanded a boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow without consulting the NATO allies.51

For Thatcher, the Soviet invasion was proof that the West had been too lax when it came to Soviet expansionism in the Third World. Like Carter, she demanded a clear and unambiguous response to Brezhnev.52 She demonstratively

52 See Dimitrakis, Invasion, pp. 514–15.
declared her solidarity with the confrontational strategy adopted by the United States and also recommended that the British Olympic Committee refrain from taking part in the summer games in Moscow. This decision not only caused frictions within the British government, but also led to a public controversy in Great Britain, as the freedom and independence of sports seemed to be called into question by this political act. Yet Thatcher remained skeptical when it came to the economic sanctions imposed by Washington because of the tense economic situation in Great Britain at the time as well as its traditional role as a trading giant.

In contrast to the Thatcher and Carter administrations, the West German government primarily sought to preserve the détente between East and West and prevent a Second Cold War in Europe. Its credo was thus de-escalation through communication, and Genscher in particular incessantly argued for keeping up the dialogue with Moscow. Especially in times of international crisis, Genscher insisted, it was important to keep the lines of communication open in order to be able to understand the other side’s motives, interests and perceptions of threat so that a way forward could be found that was acceptable to all. Regardless of ideological differences – which Genscher saw as the necessary basis for negotiations rather than an obstacle to them – he tried to find possible compromises that would sufficiently satisfy the security concerns of the West while giving Brezhnev the opportunity to withdraw from Afghanistan without losing face.

Schmidt generally supported the West German Foreign Office’s political strategy of détente. This is reflected, for instance, in the Franco-German declaration signed in early February 1980 in which Schmidt and Giscard agreed that the policy of détente “would not withstand another blow of this kind,” thereby leaving the door open for further talks with Moscow. In order to avoid adding further fuel to the flames of the highly charged atmosphere immediately after the invasion, the chancellor decided to try to downplay the dramatic events by purposely continuing with his vacation on Mallorca in late December 1979. For

54 See Lahey, Thatcher, pp. 27–33. On British-Soviet relations, see Sharp, Thatcher’s Diplomacy, pp. 183–201.
57 After his vacation on Mallorca, Schmidt was on an official state visit to Madrid from January 7 to 9, 1980. He did not return to Bonn until January 10, 1980.
Genscher, who took the lead when it came to détente in his role as Foreign Minister, the chancellor’s decision also had a positive side-effect in that he was able to take over the immediate management of the crisis in Schmidt’s absence.  

In Paris, however, Washington’s unilateral action almost instinctively triggered resistance, prompting Giscard to refuse to take part in a joint course of action supported by the European Political Cooperation (EPC) and NATO as he insisted upon the sovereignty and independence of French foreign policy. Yet Carter, driven by the expectations of the American public and internal party pressure, stuck to his policy of sanctions and insisted on unconditional solidarity from his European partners. As a result, the anti-American undertones that had emerged within German and French public debates as a result of the NATO Dual Track Decision and widespread concerns over a new arms race became all the more pronounced.

In the end, although NATO managed to draw up a joint statement demanding the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops and the assurance of the right of self-determination for the Afghan people, the Western Europeans refused to express their unconditional solidarity with the United States. At the NATO conference on January 15, 1980, they merely agreed not to undermine Carter’s sanctions. Rather than strengthening the cohesion of the West in light of the Soviet threat and the dissent over the NATO Dual Track Decision, the Afghanistan conflict further fueled the centrifugal forces within the alliance. Thus, instead of representing a united front, NATO and its different bodies seemed to offer a forum for (sometimes lacking) exchange and coordination between the partner states. That

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58 See Bresselau von Bressensdorf, Frieden, pp. 182–95.
60 See Dumbrell, Policy, pp. 32–52.
said, however, the NATO allies did have one thing in common: their interests, strategies, and notions were driven by détente and security policy considerations that stemmed from modes of thought associated with the bloc politics of the Cold War rather than assessments of the current and future significance of Islamism for the Greater Middle East region in particular and international relations as a whole.

**Islam as a Vehicle of Anti-Communism**

Despite these differences of opinion among the NATO partners on how to adequately respond to Moscow, the allies still faced the question of how to deal with the new situation in Afghanistan and the Greater Middle East region in general. They saw possible ways to resolve the conflict in their best interests via different channels. On one level, they could aim for diplomatic cooperation with the Islamic-Arab countries in the region. On another level, they could provide political and material support to Afghan resistance groups.

**Using the Means of Diplomacy: Islamic States as Partners**

As the situation in Afghanistan escalated, one organization that had been previously overlooked by the international community suddenly gained importance: the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Founded in 1969 as a union of Islamic countries in Asia and Africa, it pursued two main objectives. First of all, it strove – as did other international movements and organizations of Third World countries – for equal participation in the shaping of world politics and the global economy. Its most important organs therefore included the mostly Saudi-financed Islamic Solidarity Fund and Islamic Development Bank that were to subsidize and provide development aid for structurally weak member states lacking in raw materials. Secondly, it is still the only international organization bound to a religious commitment to date. By recognizing the principle of the territorial nation state, it aimed to unite all the Islamic countries to work together towards a long-term restructuring of global politics. This goal was closely linked to the efforts

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of the Arab-Islamic states to strengthen their position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which repeatedly resulted in internal disputes with the Asian and sub-Saharan African member states. With the decision to suspend Egypt’s membership after the country signed a separate peace agreement with Israel in 1979, the OIC survived its most severe test up to that point. But, just a few months later, the focus of international crisis diplomacy turned towards another OIC member state when the Soviets marched into Afghanistan.

The OIC’s very first extraordinary Conference of Foreign Ministers in Islamabad in late January 1980 adopted a declaration in response to the invasion that many Western observers perceived as surprisingly severe in tone. The Foreign Ministers of the OIC explicitly denounced the Soviet military aggression as a violation of international law and demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops; they also suspended Afghanistan’s membership of the OIC and called on member states to break off diplomatic relations with Kabul. At the same time, the Islamic countries did not want their hostile attitude towards the USSR to be seen as an indication that they were taking sides with the United States. Thus, the conference justified its declaration by citing the firmly non-aligned status of the Islamic countries and expressing its concern that the United States might try to use the crisis to expand its own military presence in the region. In addition to the Afghanistan resolution, the OIC therefore adopted a declaration that underscored its unconditional support for the Islamic Republic of Iran in the hostage crisis and denounced any form of pressure put on Tehran, including economic sanctions. Thus, the OIC prioritized upholding its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states over the fact that foreign diplomats were being unlawfully held in Tehran. By adopting both declarations at the same time, moreover, the OIC states ostentatiously demonstrated that they by no means intended to let themselves be drawn into the East-West conflict.

This made it clear to Bonn that any political initiative led by Washington or NATO to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan would be seen as wrongful interference not only by Kabul and Moscow, but also by the neighboring Islamic states. Nevertheless, in order to reinforce NATO’s demand for a withdrawal of the Soviet troops and work towards a political solution to the conflict, Genscher called upon his Foreign Minister colleagues in the European Political Cooperation (EPC), the foreign policy arm of the European Community (EC). Thus, as archival documents

reveal, it was the Foreign Office and not the Chancellor’s Office that set the tone in West Germany when it came to identifying possible political solutions to defuse the crisis.\textsuperscript{66}

Genscher’s objective was not only to get the countries of the region involved, but also to draw the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a bloc onto the international stage on the side of the EC. To this end, he introduced a multi-dimensional strategy based on the premise that it would have been more difficult for Brezhnev to reject a proposal submitted by the NAM states.\textsuperscript{67} Denouncing such an initiative as Western interference would have alienated the countries of the Third World, but the Kremlin actually needed to court these countries more than ever before, because the Soviet invasion of the officially independent Afghanistan had raised fears that Moscow might do the same in other non-aligned countries. Secondly, Genscher hoped that this approach would make it possible to prevent the Afghanistan crisis from becoming part of a new East-West confrontation by emphasizing that it was an issue between the Eastern bloc and the “global South.”\textsuperscript{68} And thirdly, he believed that this kind of crisis management strategy would help pave the way for the improvement of relations between the Federal Republic and the Arab-Islamic countries, which had been neglected for a long time due to West Germany’s “special relationship” with Israel.

British Foreign Secretary Carrington proved to be Genscher’s most important European partner in developing these kinds of specific political initiatives. Unlike Thatcher, who offhandedly dismissed such a diplomatic strategy as “useless,”\textsuperscript{69} Carrington worked together with the West German Foreign Minister to draw up concepts for an independent, non-aligned Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{70} The objective was to achieve the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the establishment of a representative Afghan government with the participation of the oppositional groups. Accor-

\textsuperscript{66} Usually, plans were developed in the Federal Foreign Office, so only copies were filed in the Chancellor’s Office. There are no archival documents entailing plans and initiatives coming from the Chancellor’s Office itself. See the relevant documents in PA/AA (B 37) and Bundesarchiv (B 136; henceforth: BArch). The West German Ministry of Defense also complained about the suboptimal information policy of AA, which – as it claimed – had monopolized the crisis management of the Afghanistan conflict; letter by Dietrich Genschel, GL 23, to Head of Dept. 2 of AA, Ministerialdirektor Klaus Blech, January 10, 1980, in: BArch, B 136/16585.


\textsuperscript{68} On the notion of the “global South,” see Thomas Greven/Christoph Scherrer, Globalisierung gestalten. Weltökonomie und soziale Standards, Bonn 2005, pp. 50–83.

\textsuperscript{69} Smith, Response, p. 361.

\textsuperscript{70} Letter by Lavers, South Asian Dept. of the FCO, to Private Secretary, Alexander, March 16, 1980, Subject: Afghanistan, German paper, in: TNA, FCO 37/2272.
According to British plans, this government was then supposed to declare its neutrality along the lines of the Austrian example, and the neighboring states of Pakistan, Iran, India, and China as well as the two superpowers were to issue declarations guaranteeing that they would respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, and non-alignment of Afghanistan and refrain from interfering with its internal affairs. The order in which these measures were supposed to take place and a specific schedule for their implementation remained open.71

However, Genscher disagreed with the idea of Afghanistan becoming a neutral country along Austrian lines for two reasons. For one thing, he claimed, Afghanistan’s status could not be compared to that of Austria. For another, he cautioned against the notion of neutrality with its inherent post-imperial British foreign policy impetus that had the potential to destroy the recently hard-won trust of the developing countries.72 Despite these differences in detail, Carrington and Genscher acted in concert and, at the meeting of the EPC in April 1980, they both advocated trying to sell the idea of a non-aligned Afghanistan to the Islamic and NAM states as a first step in order to keep up the pressure on Moscow.73

Interestingly, neither the British nor the Germans even thought about how to reconcile the interests of the socialist and clearly atheistic regime with the aspirations of the Islamist rebel groups within a viable and lasting unity government. Indeed, they failed to consider that this inherent antagonism between communist and Islamist ideology jeopardized not only Afghanistan’s stability in the long run, but also the structure of the entire region given the universal claims of both ideologies. Rather, this diplomatic offensive was very much a product of Cold War bloc politics.

In keeping with these plans, the West German Foreign Office contacted the OIC in order to promote the idea of an independent Afghanistan.74 This idea seemed to be promising at the time because all of the OIC member states – except for Turkey as a NATO member – belonged to the Non-Aligned Movement. If the OIC, whose members included Iran and Pakistan, could have been convinced of

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72 Letter by Palliser, Under-Secretary of State and Head of the Diplomatic Service, to Private Secretary, Alexander, February 22, 1980, Subject: Visit of State Secretary van Well, in: TNA, FCO 37/2263.
the EC’s suggestions, it would certainly have been an important step in the right direction.

However, given that neither the countries of the Third World nor the OIC were homogeneous, they proved to be difficult partners to negotiate with. Moreover, the West seemed to be losing favor within the OIC. At the OIC’s 11th Foreign Ministers’ Conference in May 1980, it adopted a distinctly less critical declaration on the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan compared to the one in January. In this new statement, the OIC sharply condemned the U.S. military’s failed attempt to rescue the hostages in the American embassy in Tehran in late April as an act of aggression against Iran.75 From the perspective of the Islamic states, Washington was less interested in turning Afghanistan into an independent country than it was in taking advantage of the Soviet-Afghan conflict to shift the geostrategic situation in the region in its favor. As Habib Chatty, the Secretary General of the OIC, noted, “[...] the U.S. stand on Afghanistan was meant to defend the American strategic position while the Islamic Conference wanted to defend the liberty of the Afghan people.”76

Nonetheless, the West German Foreign Office judged one aspect of this Foreign Ministers’ Conference to be quite promising, namely that representatives of the Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan – a newly founded umbrella organization of Afghan resistance movements that proved to be a rather unstable partnership of convenience from the outset – had attended the conference as part of the Iranian government delegation.77 At this meeting, a tripartite commission was established consisting of the Foreign Ministers Agha Shahi (Pakistan) and Sadegh Ghotbzadeh (Iran) as well as Habib Chatty. It was tasked with the job of promoting the OIC’s January resolution internationally.78 At a further meeting in June, all the participants stressed their commitment to the creation of an “Afghan-Islamic resistance movement.”79 This movement was sup-

78 Note by the FCO, July 1980, Subject: Afghanistan report no. 1/7, in: TNA, FCO 973/103.
posed to be recognized by the international community as the legitimate representative of the Afghan people and as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, which would hopefully lead to a UN special conference on Afghanistan. Also, the OIC conference called on OPEC and the Islamic states to provide financial assistance for the Afghan resistance and break off all relations with the Soviet Union as a sign of solidarity. The establishment of satellite offices in New York, Geneva, and the capitals of the OIC member states was supposed to secure the long-term influence of the resistance movement on the situation in Afghanistan. According to the OIC commission, the fundamental prerequisite for the desired peaceful resolution of the conflict was – apart from the complete and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops – the political independence and sovereignty of the country, the achievement of true non-aligned status, and protection of “the Islamic identity of Afghanistan.”80 Despite this apparent commitment to a solution, the OIC remained a weak partner for the West, especially as the tripartite OIC commission shrank to an ineffective duo after Tehran ceased to function as an important player in the resolution of the conflict in the wake of the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980 as well as the ongoing hostage crisis.

The West German government together with its allies therefore focused on one of the few remaining options to stabilize the situation and maintain, or rather expand, the influence of the West in the crisis region as much as possible: a program to stabilize Pakistan, Afghanistan’s most important neighboring state apart from Iran, which also played a key role in the region. If the Soviet invasion was in fact Moscow’s first step towards the Persian Gulf, then the non-aligned country of Pakistan had to be stopped from strengthening its relations with Moscow and thereby being drawn into the Soviet sphere of influence.81 Moreover, a great number of Afghan war refugees had fled to Pakistan as their first choice. The refugee camps, which were already home to over a million people by April 1980, put an additional strain on the Pakistani budget and the domestically unstable country as a whole. Since his coup in 1977, Prime Minister Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq had neither consolidated the economy of the country nor had he been able to level the historic disparities between the more affluent western and the disadvantaged eastern parts of the country in economic, administrative, financial, and military terms. Instead, a gradual Islamization of Pakistan’s society had

80 Ibid.
taken place.\textsuperscript{82} In addition, Afghan resistance fighters used the barely controlled Afghan-Pakistani border region as an area of retreat, which posed the risk that the war might easily spread to Pakistan.\textsuperscript{83}

In January 1980, the West German government officially adopted a program to stabilize Pakistan politically and economically. Its three-pronged approach consisted of humanitarian aid for the refugees – augmented by substantial food supplies from the EC – and an increase in development aid\textsuperscript{84} as well as the introduction of debt rescheduling negotiations.\textsuperscript{85} However, this substantial aid package did not remain uncontroversial, not least because Bonn and its partners thus contributed to the consolidation and international legitimization of Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime. Within Genscher’s decisively “realist” foreign policy, moral considerations had to give way to geostrategic interests. In a conversation with U.S. Senator John Tower on February 20, 1980, the West German Foreign Minister reiterated his belief that Pakistan would have to be given a key role in the attempt to prevent the Soviets from advancing to the warm oceans. “Regardless of whether or not one likes Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime,” Genscher claimed, the country had to be stabilized in the long term.\textsuperscript{86}

**Weapons for Freedom? Supporting the Islamist Resistance**

Alongside these diplomatic, economic, and financial policy initiatives designed to integrate the Islamic states, the Western allies (long before the Soviet invasion) had been fully aware of the fact that the Afghan resistance groups played a pivotal

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\textsuperscript{83} Notes by Horst-Dieter Maurer, Kapitän zur See, January 29, 1980, Betr.: Unterstützung der afghanischen Befreiungsbewegungen, in: AAPD 1980, doc. 31, pp. 196–201. See also Dimitrakis, Invasion, p. 527.


role in the question of whether the Kabul regime would be able to hold its ground in the long run, effectively making Afghanistan a permanent part of Moscow’s sphere of influence as a result. In the global competition with communism, the French Ministry of Foreign affairs noted soberly, Afghanistan was merely “a pawn in a very big game of chess.” As had often been said before, he also reiterated that “the Afghan resistance is the key to the situation.” What would have made more sense from this perspective than to support the insurgents? Scholarship in fact assumes that the CIA financially and militarily subsidized the anti-communist resistance even months prior to the Soviet invasion. Furthermore, evidence confirms that the U.S. National Security Council decided on December 17, 1979 to confer with the United Kingdom and Pakistan about a further increase in aid and arms supplies as well as more intensive talks with the Afghan rebels “to make it as expensive as possible for the Soviets to continue their efforts.” Thus, it is hardly surprising that Paris, London, and Washington unanimously spoke out in favor of supplying arms to the resistance groups in January 1980. From the outset, these Western partners agreed that this military support was not intended to achieve a swift victory of the rebels over the Kabul regime and the Soviet troops; rather, the goal was clearly to keep the Soviet troops involved in a long-term war of attrition. At a meeting of the four political directors in London in late January 1980, Jacques Pierre Dupont, deputy Head of Department at the Quai d’Orsay, bluntly pointed out that it was a rather tempting idea to let the Soviet Union sink in the Afghan swamp.

In West Germany, however, the constitution prohibited arms exports into areas of tension, which the Foreign Office in Bonn kept pointing out in response to repeated questions coming from the Bundestag and the media. Notwith-
standing this constitutional issue, there were also some strong voices within the Foreign Office in favor of supplying arms to the Afghan rebels. On January 29, for example, Horst-Dieter Maurer, who worked in the policy planning department, wrote a report together with his colleague Wilhelm Schönfelder expressing a decisively “realist” claim:

The motives of the Soviets for the military occupation of Afghanistan are probably manifold. For the West, however, it is facts that count. [...] Given this background, the occupation of Afghanistan has clearly improved the Soviets’ geostrategic position. Soviet troops are now only a few hundred kilometers away from the oil fields of the Middle East and the vital shipping routes in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. [...] One way to keep the costs high for the SU is to support the Afghan liberation movements. [...] The most suitable weapons would be those the Afghans are familiar with. [...] Yet given the Pashtun warriors’ love for weapons, they are probably very capable of learning how to handle Western weapons quickly. [...] The resistance movement will not be able to achieve a decisive victory over the Soviet forces even with considerable support. [...] Despite the aforementioned problems and risks, the long-term involvement of the SU in a guerrilla war in Afghanistan will surely be in the best interests of the West [...]. The West should prudently assess whether and, if so, how the Afghan resistance groups can be effectively supported. For obvious reasons, it would be best to deliver weapons and equipment via other Islamic states. The West could encourage these countries and offer compensation – for instance to Somalia.94

Thus, the Foreign Office appeared to be less concerned with whether the idea of involving the Soviet Union in a war of attrition by providing military support to the Afghan resistance groups was compatible with a democratic, value-based foreign policy, but rather more concerned with how to actually go about implementing this strategy. Since the rebels used the region around Pakistan’s western border as an area of retreat and received support from Islamabad, it seemed obvious that Western arms supplies should be delivered via Pakistan and other Arab-Islamic states of the region such as Saudi Arabia. As a report of the West German Foreign Office indicates, the allies agreed that their support of the resistance groups had to be handled “with the utmost discretion.”95 Likewise, it was “paramount to avoid giving the impression that the support of the Afghan rebels could be seen as

an act of imperialist interference,” and, according to Dupont, this was “a matter beyond traditional diplomacy.”

As they had done in their dealings with the OIC, the NATO partners focused on Islam as the way to unite the divergent interest groups among the Afghan rebels in the fight against communism. Interestingly, the NATO states repeatedly linked the notion of a decidedly Islamic resistance to the Western concept of freedom. This was particularly evident in Great Britain, where “freedom” – with its anti-socialist connotations – evolved into one of the main tenets of Thatcherism.

At the first cabinet meeting after the Soviet invasion in early January 1980, the British Prime Minister stated: “a strong stand was necessary over Afghanistan to mitigate damage to political interest in the free world.”

Not surprisingly, the documents of the British Foreign Office consistently referred to the Afghan resistance groups as “freedom fighters.” The Prime Minister herself also relentlessly reiterated this point in public, for instance in a speech before the House of Commons in late January 1980:

Who are the Russians fighting against? The newspapers call them ‘the rebels’. [...] It is a strange word to me of people who are fighting to defend their own country against a foreign invader. Surely they are genuine freedom fighters, fighting to free their country from an alien oppressor.

David Atkinson, a fellow Conservative MP, even more plainly linked his calls for weapons exports to the Western concept of freedom when he addressed his fellow party member and representative of the FCO, Douglas Hurd, in the parliamentary debate on June 18, 1980: “Will he [Hurd] give an assurance that all possible help, aid and equipment, short of manpower, is being provided for the freedom fighters, who are fighting not only for their own freedom but for ours?” These

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98 Quoted from Lahey, Thatcher, p. 26.
quotes ideally illustrate the view of the world typical of Thatcherism in which Great Britain was the champion and guarantor of Western values of freedom both at home and abroad.\footnote{See Dominik Geppert, Thatchers konservative Revolution. Der Richtungswandel der britischen Torries 1975–1979, Munich 2002, pp. 61–144; Ben Jackson/Robert Saunders (eds.), Making Thatcher’s Britain, Cambridge 2012; Richard Vinen, Thatcher’s Britain. The Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era, London et al. 2009.} Given their struggle for freedom from socialist paternalism, the Islamist resistance movements thus seemed to be the natural allies of the West in its global fight against communism.

At the same time, however, the Thatcher government exercised restraint when it came to questions about these exports in the media. As Foreign Secretary Carrington wrote to the Prime Minister in mid-August:

\begin{quote}
Public admission or even suspicion that we were considering or were actually supplying arms would not be helpful to the Afghans themselves, would embarrass the Pakistanis and could provoke reactions from the Russians. Our main tactic of bolstering Islamic and non-aligned opposition to the Russians will be spoilt if the conflict in Afghanistan takes on the appearance of an East/West confrontation. Our public line which has been used on several occasions in Parliament should therefore be that it is desirable that the Afghan resistance should have the wherewithal to oppose the Soviet invasion; that arms appear to be getting through; and that it is not helpful to the Afghans themselves to be specific about the sources.\footnote{Note by the Secretary of State, Lord Carrington, August 19, 1980, Subject: FCS/80/141: Help for the Afghan resistance, in: TNA, PREM (Prime Minister’s Office) 19/387, p. 1.}
\end{quote}

The U.S. administration, on the other hand, actually used the term “rebels” – which Thatcher had in fact rejected – in its internal documents and conversations with NATO partners.\footnote{See memorandum by the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs, Brzezinski, to President Carter, January 9, 1980, Subject: A Long-Term Strategy for Coping with the Consequences of the Soviet Action in Afghanistan, in: FRUS 1977–1980, vol. VI, Soviet Union, doc. 256, www.history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977–80v06/d256 [accessed April 12, 2017]; note by Schenk, Vortragender Legationsrat I. Klasse, January 28, 1980, in: AAPD 1980, doc. 29, p. 173.} Nevertheless, a rhetorical shift can be detected in the U.S. government’s public statements, which certainly had to do with the fact that Ronald Reagan had become president in January 1981. Although Carter had indeed sharpened the tone of his foreign policy statements in light of the Soviet invasion and the heated atmosphere in the run-up to the elections, the ideolo-
gically charged anti-Soviet rhetoric of the White House intensified even further under President Reagan. Similarly to Thatcher, Reagan was committed to anti-communism and a “roll back” policy that was supposed to prevent the global spread of socialism and expand the influence of the “Free World.” Accordingly, Reagan dramatically emphasized the struggle of the Afghan resistance groups for freedom in his public speeches, often idealizing and justifying their cause by referring to the heroic biblical fight of David against Goliath. On the occasion of the third Afghanistan Day on March 21, 1983, for example, Reagan said: “To watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighters battle modern arsenals with simple hand-held weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom. Their courage teaches us a great lesson – that there are things in this world worth defending.”

The concept of freedom also figured in the discussions in West Germany. The inquiry of the CDU/CSU (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union) parliamentary group of 16 June 1981 as to whether the federal government shared the U.S. president’s preference for using “freedom fighters” or “resistance fighters” rather than “rebels” and “insurgents,” for instance, demonstrates the paramount role that this issue played in West German public debates. Genscher in fact tried to avoid these terms altogether and consistently used the notion of “liberation movements” in order to emphasize the legitimacy of the actions of these groups and to avoid indirectly recognizing the Karmal regime. Ministerial documents, however, commonly used the terms “resistance” and “resistance groups,” thereby alluding to the heterogeneity and

105 See James Cooper, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. A very political special relationship, London 2012.
106 See also Moser, Politik, p. 109.
fragmentation of the movement. The West German Foreign Office and Genscher himself constantly emphasized the Afghans’ right of self-determination – a right to which the Afghans as well as the divided German nation were entitled. On the one hand, this reference to the German question lent a great deal of credibility to Genscher’s position, especially in the eyes of his own voters. On the other hand, it bore new risks for a common EC foreign policy regarding another trouble spot, namely the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Most Western Europeans agreed that the West could hardly grant the Afghan people the right of self-determination while denying the Palestinians the same.\footnote{110} This highlighted the difficulties Bonn and its allies faced in trying to develop a consistent strategy to resolve the complex conflicts in the Greater Middle East region.

The French government also alluded to the right of self-determination, but it added revolutionary undertones in keeping with its own historical traditions, thereby lending the notion of rebellles a heroic touch. This also reflected the traditionally positive connotations associated with rebellion and the right of resistance against oppression (la résistance à l’oppression), which had shaped French history since the early modern period and found expression in the Declaration of Human and Civil Rights of 1789 as well as in the constitutions of 1791 and 1793.\footnote{111} Likewise, the résistance movement during World War II also played a pivotal role in France’s collective memory and its national identity. Given the collaboration of the Vichy regime with Nazi Germany, the narrative of the resistance of the French people had taken on mythical proportions within the French culture of remembrance.\footnote{112} Thus, it is no coincidence that French ministerial documents as well as public statements on the Afghanistan conflict often used the term “résistance afghan.”\footnote{113}

Consequently, the French government not only declared the armed fight of the Afghan people against the Kabul regime and the Soviet occupiers to be legitimate, but also to be worthy of support. Paris once again considered Islam to

\footnote{111} The constitution of 1791 states: “The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.” (art. 2): Günther Franz (Hrsg.), Staatsverfassungen. Eine Sammlung wichtiger Verfassungen der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in Urtext und Übersetzung, Darmstadt 1975, p. 305.
\footnote{113} Bordereau collectif no. 700, August 8, 1980, Objet: Résistance afghane, in: AMAE, Direction d’Asie et d’Océanie, sous-série Afghanistan, 2882TOPO/2798.
be the vital link that could unify the population that was fragmented into tribal groups in order to resist the aggressors together. Not surprisingly, it was the French minister of foreign affairs who championed an armed revolutionary fight against communism at a meeting with his fellow ministers from Washington, London, and Bonn in January 1980. According to the notes of the West German Foreign Office, Secretary Dupont from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs also pointed out: “In general, the cause of the Afghan rebels needs to become a matter for Islam.”

Thus, in addition to arms supplies, he also advocated the political recognition of the resistance movements as well as their international inclusion by supporting their participation in the OIC and the Arab League. In June 1980, the French minister of foreign affairs, François-Poncet, once again emphasized this view by firmly pointing out the importance of supporting the resistance and mobilizing “Islamic opinion” against the Soviets.

Despite these divergent approaches to underscoring the legitimacy of the Afghan resistance within the Western public that were clearly embedded in different intellectual and national traditions, the Western partners had correctly surmised that Islam was the only link that unified the hopelessly divided and competing Afghan resistance groups. The seven most important Afghan parties had set up camp in the Pakistani border city of Peshawar: firstly, the fundamentalist Islamic Party of Afghanistan (Hizb-i-Islami-yi Afghanistan) under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Kharoti tribe of the Ghilzai Pashtun from North Afghanistan; secondly, the Islamic Party of Afghanistan II (Hizb-i-Islami-yi Afghanistan II) under Yunus Khalis, who had split with Hekmatyar’s party after a leadership struggle; thirdly, the Islamic Society of Afghanistan (Jam’iat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan) of the Tajik Burhanuddin Rabbani, which is often referred to as the Tajik party; fourthly, the Islamic Revolutionary Movement (Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami) led by the prominent Sunni clergyman from the Ghilzai tribe of the Ahmadzai, Mawlawi Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi; fifthly the National Liberation Front of Afghanistan (Jabha-yi Najat-i Milli-yi Afghanistan) under the leadership of Sibghatullah Mojaddedi; sixthly the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (Mahaz-i Milli-yi Islami-i-yi Afghanistan) under Sayyid Ahmed Gailani – the Afghan National Liberation Front and the National Islamic Front were organized along family

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lines with roots in the “old” Afghan establishment and pursued a traditionalist-
moderate political course that aimed to reinstall Mohammed Zahir shah on the
throne; lastly, the Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan (Ittihad-i
Islami Bara- yi Azadi-yi Afghanistan), founded by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf in March
1980, which recruited its members predominantly from the tribe of the Kharoti,
in a similar way to its rival, the Islamic Party of Afghanistan. Other organizations
were different Shia groups based in Iran; the most influential of these groups
were An-Naar (Victory) led by Mir Hoseyn Sadeqi and the Afghanistan Islamic
Movement Association of Asif Mohseni.117

The mujahideen used the refugee camps that had been set up in the Afghan-
Pakistani border region as a place to retreat with their families before they made
the difficult trip back over the Hindu Kush to Afghanistan for the next battle,
armed with new weapons and replenished food supplies.118 The Peshawar parties
in particular began to control the camps according to their own rules more effec-
tively as time went on, thereby importing Afghan ethnic and religious conflicts
into Pakistan. For instance, aid relief supplies were not centrally distributed by the
Pakistani authorities, who had barely any means to control the Tribal Areas, but
rather by the competing factions themselves. As a result, an increasing amount of
money kept flowing into what were referred to as “bachelor camps” because they
had been set up specifically for resistance fighters.119 This posed considerable
problems for international institutions committed to political neutrality such as
the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).120 Likewise, the West German government also
repeatedly discussed how to address the fact that it more or less directly suppor-
ted the Islamist militia by providing humanitarian aid. In the end, though, Bonn
concluded that a sudden reduction or even cessation of relief aid would not only
antagonize the Afghans and Pakistanis, but also incite the German media to pose
rather uncomfortable questions. The West German government would then have
been forced to publicly admit that it had been actively supporting the Afghan
resistance, which would have raised serious doubts about its official policy of

117 Over the course of the 1980s, more parties were formed, most of which were supported by
Iran, see Schetter, Geschichte, pp. 108–11.
118 Letter by German Consulate General Karachi to German embassy Islamabad, February 4,
1980, Betr.: Belutschistan, in: PA/AA, B 37, UA 34 (ZA), vol. 113184. See also Fiona Terry, Con-
Rüdiger Schöch, UNHCR and the Afghan refugees in the early 1980s. Between humanitarian ac-
119 Letter by German embassy Islamabad to AA, March 18, 1982, Betr.: Dienstreise von RL 301
120 See Schöch, UNHCR, pp. 50–57.
non-interference and political neutrality. Moreover, it would have dealt a death blow to the diplomatic initiatives that had been undertaken thus far, and have further damaged West Germany’s relations with the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{121} Especially in order to avoid the latter, given the primacy of détente, the West German Foreign Office decided to continue with its existing policy. By sending humanitarian aid, Bonn thus contributed to the consolidation of the structures in the refugee camps, which increasingly developed into a breeding ground for Islamist terrorism in the future.

The governments in Bonn, Paris, London and Washington were fully aware that the resistance groups were neither structured like Western political parties, nor had any ideas or plans for a democratic reorganization of Afghanistan. The West German Foreign Office correctly discerned that Hekmatyar was a particularly radical leader. After the collapse of the communist regime in the wake of the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, he took over power in Kabul with the support of other rebel leaders, becoming head of the government in 1993 for one year. When the coalition of warlords broke apart, Hekmatyar earned his nickname as the “butcher of Kabul” through the unparalleled brutality of his actions in the skirmishes between the rival groups that went on for years, in which tens of thousands died.\textsuperscript{122}

Rupert Dirnecker, the member of the CDU/CSU parliamentary party responsible for foreign affairs, tried to play down the Foreign Office’s critical assessment of Hekmatyar when the Afghan leader visited Bonn at the invitation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (associated with the CDU) and the Hanns-Seidel-Foundation (associated with the CSU) in February 1981. In a report to Alois Mertes, head of the working group “Foreign Policy,” Dirnecker wrote:

Hekmatyar, who has sometimes been referred to as the “Afghan Komeini” because he represents the strict Muslim-fundamentalist resistance group in Afghanistan, proved to be a prudent, theoretically-thinking, calm, and clever advocate of the Afghan resistance. The about 40-year old does not fit the image of a radical Muslim leader like Khomeini, but rather that of a deeply devout, humble, and religiously tolerant Muslim.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{121} Letter by German embassy Islamabad to AA, March 18, 1982, Betr.: Dienstreise von RL 301 nach Pakistan v. 11.–15.3.1982, in: PA/AA, B 45 (ZA), vol. 146089.
\textsuperscript{123} Alois Mertes handed this note to the party whip of the CDU/CSU parliamentary party, Helmut Kohl, and recommended that he should also invite Hekmatyar for talks; letter by Mertes to Kohl, February 4, 1981, appendix: Gespräch mit Herrn Hekmatyar, Repräsentant der moslemisch-fundamentalistischen Widerstandsgruppe Afghanistans am 4.2.1981 in Bonn, in: ACDP, Mertes papers, 01–403-164/3.
Apart from highlighting that Dirnecker made a gross error of judgment in his assessment, this report also alludes to an important aspect of NATO’s crisis management strategies: the interdependencies between the conflicts in Iran and Afghanistan.

The Western allies came to very different conclusions on how to assess and address these interdependencies. According to the records of the West German Foreign Office at a meeting of the four political directors in late January 1980, the U.S. representative George Southall Vest stated that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan may have “complicated American policy on Iran, but altogether alleviated it,” because “it brought Iran’s leaders to think twice about the intentions of the Soviet Union.”124 Thus, Washington hoped that Tehran would become more concerned that Moscow might march into Iran in order to gain access to the Persian Gulf and the rich oil fields in the south of the country. By drawing attention to Soviet expansionism, Washington hoped that it could soften Khomeini’s anti-American course, especially since the main objective of U.S. policy was undoubtedly to secure the release of the hostages in the Tehran embassy. As reported by the West German Foreign Office, Vest urged the allies to declare solidarity with the United State and to support its sanctions policy:

America does not understand the tendency of certain European capitals to refrain from issuing sanctions against Iran with reference to the strategic implications for the developments in Afghanistan. No democratically elected leader can explain this to the American people.125

Great Britain also saw the Afghanistan crisis as an opportune moment to make Iran realize the gravity of the Soviet threat.126 Precisely for this reason, London maintained that sanctions were counter-productive at the time. The British government argued that such measures would alienate many Islamic countries from the West, completely ruin the Iranian economy, and lead to the disintegration of the country, giving Moscow even more reason to intervene. Furthermore, the FCO claimed, Brezhnev faced a form of Islamist extremism in Tehran represented by Khomeini that was clearly anti-socialist, which meant that Iran was not a natural ally for Moscow.127

125 Ibid., p. 175.
126 Ibid., p. 177. See also Dimitrakis, Invasion, p. 515.
127 This was the assessment of the FCO from as early as September 1979; letter by D. S. Broucher, Eastern European and Soviet Dept. of the FCO, September 7, 1979, Subject: Soviet Policy in Iran and Afghanistan, in: TNA, FCO 37/2132.
Although Bonn and Paris also considered the entire Greater Middle East region to be one big trouble spot as a whole, they still tried to focus on the differences between Afghanistan and Iran in order to minimize the potentially negative consequences for Europe and to avoid having to comply fully with Washington’s demands for solidarity. Accordingly, they maintained that the hostage crisis in Tehran violated the fundamental principles of human coexistence and that the lives of the U.S. citizens had to be saved. From their perspective, the situation in Afghanistan, on the other hand, affected the entire West because it had long-term repercussions for détente and East-West relations in general.

Despite these varying interpretations, the allies had one thing in common: their policies were primarily driven by geopolitical considerations that followed the bipolar logic of the Cold War. In the global rivalry between the two political systems, the goal was to keep Iran and Afghanistan from falling into the Soviet sphere of influence or at least to keep the costs for Moscow as high as possible. Islam and Islamism were not considered to be a powerful long-term force within international relations. The West neither expected that Khomeini would be able to keep himself in power in the long run, nor that the Karmal regime in Afghanistan would be toppled by rival mujahideen. As a memo of the Quai d’Orsay dated July 29, 1980 noted, it seemed unlikely that the various resistance groups would play a decisive role in the future given how fragmented they were.

Conclusion

At the end of the 1970s, the East-West conflict once again escalated to a dangerous level with the Soviet march into Afghanistan. But the invasion did not come as a surprise to the NATO partners, who had been carefully observing and discussing the developments in Kabul since the communist “April revolution” in 1978. However, their respective assessments of Moscow’s motives differed. The U.S. administration considered it to be clear proof of Soviet aims to expand into

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130 See Bösch, Shah, p. 146.
the Third World in order to secure access to the Persian Gulf and the oil fields of the Middle East. It pressed its allies to declare solidarity with the American sanctions directed at Moscow. The Western Europeans, and particularly West Germany, detected elements of a defensive strategy in Brezhnev’s actions that sought to prevent the insurgents from overthrowing the Karmal regime for ideological reasons. Accordingly, Bonn cautioned against a punitive policy, suggesting instead that the formal condemnation of the invasion should be accompanied by incentives that would allow the Kremlin to withdraw its troops quickly without losing face.

In addition to this diplomatic strategy, which was supposed to prevent tensions from spreading to Europe and putting an end to détente, the European partners, and the West German Foreign Office and the FCO in particular, made efforts to defuse the crisis by cooperating with the Islamic states of the region. Alongside supplying Pakistan with bilateral relief aid, Genscher and Carrington tried to convince the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement of their plans for a neutral Afghanistan and to bring them onto the international political stage. This attempt to take the Afghanistan crisis out of the firing line of the Cold War and to declare it to be a conflict between Moscow and the countries of the Third World failed, not least due to the heterogeneity of these countries and their reluctance to be instrumentalized by the West as well as a lack of diplomatic vigor.

These diplomatic and economic attempts to stabilize the situation were also counteracted by the political and especially military support that the NATO partners provided to the Afghan resistance fighters, most of whom were living in the Pakistani border region. The goal of these Western arms supplies was not to bring about the swift demise of the communist regime; but rather the plan that was openly discussed in NATO bodies and between the respective Foreign Ministers was to involve the Soviet Union in a long-term guerrilla war in order to keep its economic and military resources bound up in Afghanistan.

Both the diplomatic and military aspects of this crisis management strategy were based on the premise that an effective tool against this Afghan/Soviet atheist communism could be created by appealing to the Islamic solidarity of the heterogeneous OIC states, including Iran, and the fragmented resistance groups. It seemed to be less important at the time that neither the OIC member states nor the radical Islamic “liberation movements” were democratic forces.

Publicly, at least, the NATO partners denied being party to any arms transfers in order to avoid being accused of interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. At the same time, they underscored the legitimacy of the interests of the Islamist insurgents, thereby justifying their own political strategy of providing these groups with support. The British and U.S. governments in particular firmly emphasized that the extremist Islamists were defending Western values in the
fight against communism, including the right of self-determination and resistance as well as the pursuit of freedom from oppression and thus the freedom of the West itself. Serious concerns that such an alliance of these radical forces might strike out on its own and turn against the West, however, do not crop up in official documents. Their absence seems to be all the more paradoxical given that in Iran, Afghanistan’s next-door neighbor, such a scenario seemed to be entirely plausible in light of Khomeini’s openly anti-American policy and the ongoing hostage crisis. But, the lack of such considerations can in part be attributed to a substantial error in judgment made by the NATO partners, who believed that Islam could be useful as a short-term or intermediate instrument for political and military mobilization, but that it would not be able to serve as the foundation for the long-term exercise of political power. Accordingly, they believed that neither Khomeini nor the Afghan insurgents would be able to establish themselves as lasting political forces capable of holding on to power in the long run. Rather, their thinking continued to be dominated by the categories of the East-West conflict in which all Islamic forces – be it extremist or moderate – were seen as strategic allies in the fight against communism. The crisis management strategies adopted in the Afghanistan conflict thus aptly reflect just how much Western politicians underestimated religion as an independent factor within international relations because they were trapped in the tight confines of bipolar Cold War thought. And the lasting consequences of this fundamental misperception reverberate to this day.