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In search of Islamic legitimacy: the USSR, the Afghan communists and the Muslim world

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ABSTRACT

During the Afghan War, the Mujahideen claimed that the Afghan communists were atheists who were subservient to Moscow and did not have the legitimacy to rule Afghanistan. The war became a contest for legitimacy in Afghanistan and internationally. The Soviets and the Afghan communists portrayed communist Afghanistan as Islamic and therefore legitimate in the international arena. The Soviets elaborated an information campaign emphasising Islam and strengthened Afghanistan's contacts with Muslim countries to show that the Afghan communists were Muslims too. They hoped international recognition would reduce Muslim countries' support to the Mujahideen and improve the Afghan communists' acceptance at home.

KEYWORDS

Cold War; Soviet Union; Afghanistan; Muslim world; Islam; foreign policy

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the Afghan communists, came to power during the April Revolution in 1978 and quickly became embroiled in a war with the Mujahideen, the anti-communist insurgents.¹ The latter claimed that the PDPA was atheist and subservient to Moscow, and consequently did not have the legitimacy to rule Afghanistan. In December 1979, the Soviet Union intervened to prop up the faltering communist regime. The ensuing Afghan War led to over 15,000 Soviets and between 600,000 and 1.5 million Afghans killed.² It also saw some 5 million Afghans flee to Pakistan and Iran.

In February 1989, the USSR completed the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, leaving behind a friendly regime headed by Mohammad Najibullah. That regime, though, did not resemble a Soviet-style socialist state, including in its treatment of religion. While it had initially tried to 'build its way separately from mullahs and mosques' according to one communist leader, the PDPA had, during the 1980s, ended up creating an organisation of Islamic scholars on government stipends, Islamised the state's institutions, and adjusted its reforms to show respect for Islam.³ The communists had had to admit that

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¹The PDPA publicly avoided the label 'communist' so as not to appear subordinate to Moscow. The Afghans and the Soviets, however, widely used the term in private.

²Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979–89* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 331.

³'LaiK', *Afghanistan.ru*, 11 May 2016, <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/97630.html> accessed 14 July 2022.

such transformations were necessary to build domestic legitimacy and answer the Mujahideen's accusations of atheism.⁴

Meanwhile, the Afghan War had become a proxy conflict in which the United States and a series of Muslim countries backed the Mujahideen. Among these Muslim countries, not a unified Muslim world, accusations of atheism likewise underpinned the opposition to the Afghan communists.⁵ The Soviets in response had mobilised their allies in support of Kabul. The war then became a contest for legitimacy in Afghanistan and internationally, as each side accused the other of usurping power. Both placed emphasis on Islam as a marker of legitimacy.⁶ In this context, this article shows how the Soviets and the PDPA portrayed communist Afghanistan as Islamic and hence legitimate in the international arena. The Soviets elaborated an information campaign emphasising Islam and tried to strengthen Afghanistan's contacts with Muslim countries and organisations to show that the PDPA too was Muslim. They hoped higher international legitimacy would reduce the Muslim countries' support to the Mujahideen and improve the PDPA's acceptance at home. Ultimately, because they relied entirely on the Soviet influence and because the Soviet allies took time to back the Afghan communists, these initiatives proved underwhelming. They, however, did illuminate the divisions running through the Muslim world.

This article draws on over 17,000 pages of media reports from Afghanistan and other Muslim countries as well as on statements by PDPA leaders between 1978 and 1988 that are available in the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union's (Telegrafnoe Agentstvo Sovetskogo Soyuza, TASS) files of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii). The large number of documents and the fact that experts prepared them for Soviet officials mitigate the biases associated with using translated material. This article also relies on memoirs of and interviews with Soviet and Afghan communist officials, Mujahideen journals, and hundreds of additional documents from Soviet and US archives. These sources help triangulate the evidence from the media and official statements.

This article is organised into six sections. The first examines cross-cutting issues related to the PDPA's political legitimacy. The next four deal with the reaction of Muslim countries to the Soviet intervention; the communist information campaign to highlight the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's (DRA) Islamic credentials; the DRA's contacts with Muslim countries; and its diplomacy towards Iran and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).⁷ The last part analyses how the treatment of the DRA by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) illustrated the ambiguities of the nascent Muslim world towards the Afghan communists.

⁴Vassily Klimentov, "Communist Muslims": The USSR and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's Conversion to Islam, 1978–1988', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 24, no. 1 (2022): 4–38; and Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 165–6.

⁵Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 173–226.

⁶On religion in the Cold War: Philip E. Muehlenbeck, ed., *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012).

⁷The PDPA renamed Afghanistan the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in 1978. The country was renamed the Republic of Afghanistan in 1987. I am keeping the acronym DRA throughout the article.

Foreign policy and political legitimacy in Afghanistan

While the historiography has taken avid interest in Afghanistan's place in the world in the twentieth century and its relations with the United States, Islam in Afghanistan, and Moscow's own relations with Muslim countries, it has avoided discussing the DRA's relations with the Muslim world and the Soviet and Afghan international information campaign on Islam.⁸ Unlike domestic policy, on which the PDPA often influenced the Soviets, those foreign policy issues were under tighter Soviet control.⁹ They were important to legitimise communist Afghanistan, and, by extension, the Soviets' ill-fated intervention at home and abroad.

In 1978, the coming to power of Khalq, one of the PDPA's two main factions, had marked a momentous break in Afghan history. The Ghilzai Pashtuns had replaced the Durrani Pashtuns who had governed Afghanistan since the eighteenth century. Beyond this, Nur Mohammad Taraki, Khalq's leader, was a childless man originating from an economically and socially modest background. Nothing predestined him to rule in a society that valued lineage and wealth. Under him, the PDPA rejected the traditional titles of Amir and Shah and forewent the religiously sanctioned ceremony associated with taking power.¹⁰ Together with Khalq's attacks on Islam and reliance on the USSR, this led many Afghans to question the PDPA's right to rule. In fact, the PDPA could lay claim to neither of Max Weber's types of legitimate rule: 'rational' based on institutions and laws; 'traditional' based on longstanding patrimonial networks and alliances; and 'charismatic' based on leaders' personal appeal.¹¹

Throughout the 1980s and under Soviet guidance, the PDPA, now led by Khalq's rival Parcham faction, tried to address this legitimacy deficit to limit support to the Mujahideen at home and abroad. Through international recognition and sham elections, it attempted to generate rational legitimacy. By co-opting Islam and Pashtun nationalism and linking with Pashtun tribes, it embedded itself into traditional Afghan power networks. By building personality cults and associating with famous Muslim figures, Afghan communist leaders promoted their charismatic legitimacy. The international information campaign on Islam and outreach to Muslim countries, the OIC and Muslim figures such as Yasser Arafat and Ruhollah Khomeini, helped in advancing all three types of legitimacy.

⁸Brandan P. Buck, 'Brokering a Buffer State: Afghan Neutrality and American Diplomacy, 1973–1979', *The International History Review* 41, no. 3 (2019): 493–512; Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Nile Green, *Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *The USSR and the Muslim World* (London: Routledge, 2016 [1984]); Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Rubin, *Fragmentation*, 165–6; and Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 242–97.

⁹Karen Brutents, *Tridtsat' let na staroi ploshchadi* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1998), Part IV, Ch I; David Gai and Vladimir Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie* (Moscow: SP IKPA, 1991); Fred Halliday and Zahir Tanin, 'The Communist Regime in Afghanistan 1978–1992: Institutions and Conflicts', *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 8 (1998): 1357–80; Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 81–98, 200–4; Alexander Lyakhovskiy, *Tragediya i Doblest' Afgana* (Moscow: GPI Iskona, 1995); and Vladimir Plastun, *Iznanka Afganskoj Voiny* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2016), 307, 317.

¹⁰Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 80–1. On Afghan legitimacy: David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2002); and William Malley, 'Political Legitimation in Contemporary Afghanistan', *Asian Survey* 27, no. 6 (1987): 705–25.

¹¹Keith Tribe, ed., *Max Weber: Economy and Society, A New Translation* (London: Harvard University Press, 2019), 338–43.

In addition to the socialist countries and India, the DRA's diplomacy directed by the Soviets thus concentrated on Muslim countries. As Mikhail Slinkin, the chief Soviet adviser in the PDPA's International Department, explained, Afghanistan had to 'get out of international isolation, predominantly in the Islamic world'.¹² Reaching out to Muslim countries, leaving aside Pakistan who led the support to the Mujahideen and which Moscow and Kabul saw as a lost cause, would go together with the transformation of the PDPA's policies at home after Parcham's Babrak Karmal became ruler of Afghanistan in 1980. Among other measures, the PDPA would then tactically declare its 'respect' for Islam and organise conferences of loyal Islamic scholars. The first such conference, presented as the first ever in Afghan history, explicitly called on Muslim countries to accept the DRA.¹³

Examining the DRA's place among Muslim countries, it is important to underscore the PDPA's weak domestic and international political legitimacy compared to other Soviet Muslim allies. Unlike rulers in Iraq, Algeria and Syria, the PDPA presented itself as a Marxist party and long refused to dilute its ideology to boost its popular support. Its ability to portray itself as Islamic was significantly weaker than Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party in Iraq.¹⁴ Until Najibullah replaced Karmal in 1986, its leaders refused to call themselves 'Muslim', only saying that they 'respected' Islam. They had no interest in an Islamic nationalist platform with socialist undertones.¹⁵ Ideologically, they were closest to the communists of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY or South Yemen) whom Moscow also saw as too radical.¹⁶ Unlike the Afghans, the Yemenis did not, however, have Soviet troops fighting in their country and their rulers had not been installed by the Soviets. No one challenged their place among Muslim countries and in the OIC. The Yemenis could rely on this international recognition to boost their standing at home. By contrast, even some pro-Soviet Muslim countries were reluctant to accept the DRA.

Muslim countries and the Soviet intervention

While non-alignment, incarnated by the concept of *bitarafi* ('without sides'), had defined Afghan foreign policy since 1929, Khalq's arrival marked a stark departure from that course.¹⁷ At the Non-Aligned Movement's (NAM) Conference in Belgrade in 1978, Hafizullah Amin, the PDPA's then foreign minister, used language indistinguishable from the Soviet and Cuban positions on international issues.¹⁸ It was, however, not until the Soviet intervention that most countries began treating the DRA as a Soviet puppet state. The rejection of the PDPA went far beyond Moscow's enemies in the Cold War. It spread to the NAM, communist parties in Western Europe and even Romania.¹⁹ Aside

¹²Mikhail Slinkin, *Afganskije stranitsy istorii* (Simferopol: TGU, 2003), 12, 26–7.

¹³*Ibid.*, 19; Klimentov, 'Communist', 20–6.

¹⁴Samuel Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam, and the Roots of Insurgencies in Iraq* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁵Fred Halliday, "'Islam" and Soviet Foreign Policy', *Journal of Communist Studies* 3, no. 1 (1987): 217–33.

¹⁶Brutents, *Tridtsat'*, Part IV, Ch. 3; and Yevgeny Primakov, *Konfidentsial'no* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2016), 51.

¹⁷Elisabeth Leake, 'Afghan Internationalism and the Question of Afghanistan's Political Legitimacy', *Afghanistan* 1, no. 1 (2018): 68–94; and Crews, *Modern*, 173–228.

¹⁸US DoS Telegram, Kabul, 3 August 1978, (College Park, MD: National Archives (NA)), <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=216841&dt=2694&dl=2009> accessed 14 July 2022.

¹⁹Anatoly Chernyaev, *The Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev* (Washington, DC: National Security Archive (NSA), 2003), 9 March 1981; and Vasilij Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Afghanistan* (Washington DC: Wilson Center (WC), 2002), 105–6.

from Soviet allies, Indira Gandhi's India was the only country to welcome the PDPA because of its opposition to Pakistan. With the West, the Afghan communists faced opposition throughout the decade.

In November 1980, at the UN General Assembly, 111 countries called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Among Muslim countries, Syria and the PDRY opposed the UN resolution; Algeria, Chad, Guinea-Bissau and Mali abstained; and Iraq, Libya and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) did not participate in the vote.²⁰ Remarkably, even pro-Soviet Algeria and Iraq criticised the intervention in Afghanistan.²¹ A year later another resolution condemning the Soviets gathered the support of 116 countries. Libya had joined the opposing ranks while Iraq, a traditional Soviet ally, backed the resolution.²² Although Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister, had expected possible backlash in the NAM, this wide show of Islamic solidarity took the Soviets by surprise, according to Andrey Grachev, who worked in the Central Committee (CC) of the Department of Foreign Political Propaganda of the Communist Party (CPSU).²³ Suddenly, Moscow's 'traditional and favourite allies among Arab countries had joined the camp of its critics', he noted.²⁴

The Muslim countries' opposition was problematic because it combined diplomatic ostracism of the DRA, support to the Mujahideen, and was an image issue at home for the PDPA. As Gromyko told Shah Mohammad Dost, his Afghan counterpart, 'Saudi Arabia intended to get six countries bordering it to break off diplomatic ties with the DRA' because of its atheist regime.²⁵ While aside from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, most Muslim countries only downscaled diplomatic relations instead of breaking them in the 1980s, this still testified to Afghanistan's isolation.²⁶

Meanwhile, under US patronage, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia started supporting the Mujahideen. Anatoly Adamishin, the future Soviet deputy foreign minister, summed up the Soviet and Afghan view by noting that the '[Americans] had then coalesced with the Muslim world and made it forget about the things Israel was doing in the Near East'.²⁷ In fact, Afghanistan undermined years of Soviet support for causes important to Muslims. As put by the High Sunni Council in Beirut, although 'the Soviet Union's support for the Arabs' struggle against Israel had received high appraisal', 'what was now happening in Afghanistan [could] only be described as an intervention against a Muslim people'.²⁸ By 1980, the inability to secure Muslim political objectives in the Middle East and answer Egypt's rapprochement with Israel had already weakened Soviet

²⁰United Nations (UN), *Resolution (R) 35/37*, 20 November 1980, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/35/37>; <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/629402?ln=en> accessed 14 July 2022.

²¹Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 318–20.

²²UN, *R36/34*, 18 November 1981, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/36/34>; <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/626815?ln=en> accessed 14 July 2022.

²³'Ob obostrenii', 17 March 1979, fond (f.) 89, opis' (op.) 25, delo (d.) 1, list (l.) 1–25, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (Moscow, Russia: RGANI).

²⁴Andrey Grachev, Interview by author, Moscow, September 2019.

²⁵'Meeting', 4 January 1980, WC, f. 89, o. 14, d. 36, RGANI <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117050> accessed 14 July 2022.

²⁶Slinkin, *Stranitsy*, 26–7.

²⁷Anatoly Adamishin, Interview by author, Moscow, August 2019.

²⁸'Telegrafnoe Agentstvo Sovetskogo Soyuz. Afganistan (TASSA)', 24 January 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22314, l. 2, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Moscow, Russia: GARF).

influence among Muslim countries.²⁹ According to Moscow's Institute of the Economy of the World Socialist System, Afghanistan had dealt it another blow.³⁰

In 1980, Egypt stood as one of the leaders of the anti-Soviet front. Just months prior, the PLO, Iraq, Libya and Syria had been able to convince the Arab world to adopt sanctions against it following the Camp David Accords.³¹ Leading the support to the Mujahideen was a way for Cairo to leave diplomatic isolation. Egypt's People's Assembly condemned the Soviet intervention and declared it 'anti-Islamic'. Islamic scholars from Al-Azhar called on Muslim countries to confront the Soviet aggression by *jihad*.³²

In parallel, Pakistan, as explained by a senior Pakistani intelligence operative, also 'stood to gain enormous prestige with the Arab world as a champion of Islam and with the West as a champion against communist aggression' by supporting the Mujahideen.³³ The Oriental Studies Institute (OSI) in Moscow pointed out that Islamabad had aptly taken advantage of Khalq's anti-Islamic policies to promote its own Islamic image. Pakistan's 'Islamisation of the domestic life of the country and of its foreign policy', including the strengthening of its relations with Saudi Arabia, had helped consolidate Pakistani influence in Pashtun tribal areas. Islamabad, the OSI argued, had been wise to emphasise 'Muslim solidarity' instead of 'Pashtun solidarity' to boost its influence across the border.³⁴ Pakistan, with Saudi and US support, would continue to stress this religious angle during the war as it recruited and trained Afghan refugees and, after 1984, foreign Islamist fighters to fight among the Mujahideen.

In response, the Soviets and the PDPA tried to change the anti-Islamic image of Afghanistan that had resulted from Khalq's anti-Islamic policies and, ironically, the Soviet occupation of the country. Appearing as an internationally recognised Islamic government was essential to broaden the regime's popular base and undermine international support for the Mujahideen. The Soviets, meanwhile, believed it was urgent to improve their own image in the Muslim world.

The communist information campaign in the Muslim world

The Kremlin led the information campaign in support of the DRA. Aside from the West, it focused on the NAM, where it relied on Cuba and Vietnam. The declared goal was to counter 'the hostile activity of the USA and its allies regarding the Islamic countries of the Middle and Near East, particularly Pakistan and Iran' and India.³⁵ Although the Soviets formally adopted this new information strategy a couple of weeks later, Gromyko probably conveyed its main points to Dost in advance of the UN General Assembly. Using Soviet-prepared evidence, Dost was then to parry uneasy questions about the

²⁹Aydin, *Muslim*, 214.

³⁰Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya*, 171–3.

³¹US DoS Telegram, Washington DC, 3 April 1979, (College Park, MD: National Archives (NA)), <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=21655&dt=2776&dl=2169> accessed 14 July 2022.

³²US DoS Telegram, Cairo, 31 December 1979, NA, <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=71064&dt=2776&dl=2169> accessed 14 July 2022.

³³Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan – The Bear Trap* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001), 26.

³⁴E. Primakov, ed., *Polozhenie* (Oriental Studies Institute, May 1981), 11–12, NSA, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/BrezhnevEpoch/1981.05.00%20Analysis%20of%20Pushtu%20Tribes%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf accessed 14 July 2022.

³⁵Politburo', 28 January 1980, WC, f. 89, o. 34, d. 3, RGANI <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111585> accessed 14 July 2022.

‘Soviet military contingent in Afghanistan’.³⁶ Afterwards, the Soviets remained similarly concerned with Yugoslavia’s attempts to play up the Afghan question in the NAM and reached out to Algeria and Kuwait to counter them.³⁷ Meanwhile, the Sekretariat CC CPSU discussed additional measures to develop propaganda on Afghanistan in July, October and December 1980. It notably ordered TASS to support the DRA’s news agency, Bakhtar, in the ‘deployment of ideological work’.³⁸ For the rest of the war, the Afghan communist media similarly relied on Soviet news agencies for articles on regional and international issues that presented their joint position.³⁹

There were two phases to Soviet (counter)propaganda on Afghanistan. From 1979 to 1985, it, according to Grachev, ‘stressed American interventionism, that it funded and armed insurgents in Pakistan’. The Soviets needed to ‘rebuild relations with the Muslim world, but basically weather the storm’. Presenting the DRA as an Islamic country and drawing attention to the fact that the Soviets were not the only foreign powers meddling in Afghanistan helped achieve that goal. The situation changed after Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary in 1985 and started preparing the withdrawal. The job, Grachev explained, became at that point to ‘sell that change in [the Soviet] position, the readiness to leave without obtaining advantages from that’. The Soviets also actively supported Najibullah’s national reconciliation campaign. The latter aimed to expand the regime’s base by offering material incentives and autonomy to insurgent leaders, emphasising Islam and nationalism in official discourses, and discarding earlier radical reforms.⁴⁰

During the first phase, the Soviets published an English-language pamphlet entitled *The Truth about Afghanistan*, with speeches by Soviet and Afghan officials, articles from the Afghan and foreign press, and testimonies from Afghans and foreigners. To counter the propaganda about the godless PDPA, the brochure featured an Afghan Islamic scholar’s interview with *El Pais*.⁴¹ It moreover published Karmal’s ‘Appeal of the Presidium of the Revolutionary Council to Muslims in Afghanistan and All Over World’.⁴² The latter was a watershed that redefined the April Revolution as national-democratic – not proletarian – and part of an alleged global Muslim anti-colonial struggle. *The Truth about Afghanistan* also republished pro-DRA articles from newspapers in the West and in Muslim countries, including *Al-Shaab* and *Al-Kifah al-Arabi* in Lebanon, *Millat* in Pakistan and *Indonesia Merdeka* in Indonesia. They all presented similar pro-PDPA arguments. The newspaper *Al-Muvazzaf* in Tripoli typically noted how ‘American Imperialism and international Reaction were trying to divert the attention of Arabs and Muslims’ by using Afghanistan.⁴³

There were evidently limits to the extent publications in the leftist media and Soviet-made pamphlets with limited circulation could sway Muslim public opinion. This was

³⁶‘Meeting’, 4 January 1980.

³⁷‘Briefing’, 1980, WC, M-KS 288f. 11, (Budapest, Hungary: National Archives of Hungary), <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112499> accessed 14 July 2022.

³⁸‘Sekretariat’, f. 4, o. 44, d. 26, ll. 24–30, 119–20, 157–9, RGANI.

³⁹See note and for 1984–87: ‘Otchety Agentstva pechati “Novosti” (APN) v Afganistane’, January–December 1984, f. R9587, o. 4, d. 90, GARF; *ibid.*, January–June 1985, *ibid.*, d. 242; *ibid.*, July–December 1985, *ibid.*, d. 243; *ibid.*, January–December 1986, *ibid.*, d. 417; *ibid.*, January–June 1987, *ibid.*, d. 603; *ibid.*, July–December 1987, *ibid.*, d. 604.

⁴⁰Grachev, Interview. On national reconciliation: Kalinovsky, *Goodbyes*, 93–121; Klimentov, ‘Communist’, 27–37; and Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya*, 325–42.

⁴¹Y. Volkov et al., *The Truth about Afghanistan* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1980), 57–8.

⁴²*ibid.*, 59–62.

⁴³TASS SSSR-Iran. Afghanistan (TASSSIA), 16 March 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22933, l. 56. GARF.

even more so as literacy levels in Muslim countries were low. The information campaign nonetheless showed that the communists took the criticism of the DRA in Muslim countries seriously. The Soviets hence mobilised the KGB to conduct it as part of its so-called ‘active measures’, notably in Southwest Asia.⁴⁴ The information campaign was also important in Afghanistan because the communist media and PDPA leaders could reference positive articles from the foreign press. As the next part shows, diplomatic contacts with Muslim countries were for the same reason dutifully reported in the Afghan media. Using Bakhtar, the radio, the television and newspapers such as *Haqiqat-e Inqilab-e Saur* (‘Truth of the April Revolution’, *HIS*), *Kabul New Times*, *Hewad* (‘Motherland’) and *Anis*, PDPA leaders tried to increase their rational and traditional legitimacy in Afghanistan by showing that other Muslim rulers accepted them.

More pro-DRA articles appeared in the leftist Muslim press during the 1980s. They had similar goals and limitations. The Egyptian newspaper *As-Siyasi* explained in 1986 that the PDPA was respectful of Islam.⁴⁵ That same year, the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Watan* published an interview with Karmal. Catering to local audiences, he explained that ‘Israel played the central role in the undeclared war against Afghanistan’ and that Kabul particularly wanted ‘to strengthen relations with brotherly Muslim and first of all Arab countries’.⁴⁶ As the Afghan War progressed, communist media and PDPA and Soviet leaders increasingly shifted to promoting Najibullah’s national reconciliation at home and abroad – Grachev’s second phase of the propaganda campaign. They talked about the Mujahideen who had accepted Najibullah’s amnesty, the regime’s pro-Islamic policies, and the upcoming Soviet withdrawal.⁴⁷

Finally, the information campaign was noteworthy for one specific limitation: Afghan and foreign leftist media rarely blamed Riyadh for supporting the Mujahideen.⁴⁸ One possible explanation was that it was important for Kabul not to seem at odds with Saudi Arabia, the home to the Muslim holy sites, in a context where it wished to uphold its Islamic credentials. Similarly, pro-PDPA outlets never talked of the Islamist foreign fighters who had flocked to Afghanistan, perhaps so as not to emphasise that fighting godless communists had become attractive to Muslims worldwide.

Diplomacy in the Muslim world

The Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Department tried to build diplomatic support for the DRA immediately after the intervention. As Gromyko told Dost in January 1980, they had to arrange meetings with ambassadors from Iraq, India and other non-aligned countries.⁴⁹ Moscow put special emphasis on the Muslim world, a group that, aside from a few Soviet allies, included predominantly

⁴⁴Vasily Mitrokhin, ‘KGB Active Measures’, April 2004, WC, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110013> accessed 14 July 2022; Mitrokhin, *KGB*, 140, 150.

⁴⁵TASSA’, 21 January 1986, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 7565, l. 239, GARF.

⁴⁶TASSA’, 31 January 1986, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 7566, l. 45, GARF.

⁴⁷‘SMI DRA’, January–June 1987, f. R9587, o. 4, d. 603, l. 89–94; l. 116, GARF; and ‘Spravka’, August 1987, f. 9587, o. 4, d. 604, l. 16, GARF.

⁴⁸*Khadamat-e Aetela’at-e Dawlati* (KhAD) Head of Department, Interview by author, Moscow, February 2019; Slinkin, *Stranitsy*, 95–6.

⁴⁹‘Meeting’, 4 January 1980.

Western-leaning countries. It instructed Soviet diplomats to explain to their Muslim counterparts that ‘the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan was the direct result of the events in Iran’ and blame Khalq for losing ‘the support of influential Muslim circles in Afghanistan’.⁵⁰ The Soviet ambassador in Iran went, meanwhile, to see Khomeini to mollify the Iranians on Afghanistan.⁵¹ Given the widespread condemnation that their intervention faced, the Soviet damage control strategy struggled. Still, it was remarkable that Moscow made such efforts to defuse the Muslim countries’ criticism. At the same time it is interesting that the Soviets, as did the PDPA afterwards, seemed to believe that they could use the Iranian Islamic Revolution to explain the situation in Afghanistan.

With Moscow’s support, the DRA reached out to various Muslim countries, especially Soviet allies. Afghan leaders hence sent notes for Islamic holidays and at times of tensions with the West to their counterparts. However, they only received answers from Syria’s Hafez el-Assad and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.⁵² Moscow subsequently praised Assad for his ‘resolute support’ on Afghanistan.⁵³ Syria and Iraq were also among the countries with which Afghans had sustained diplomatic contacts by the mid-1980s. PDPA officials visited Damascus in 1985 and 1987, and Bagdad in 1985, 1986, and twice in 1987.⁵⁴ As explained later in this article, better relations with Iraq developed amidst Soviet disillusionment with Iran. In addition, a diplomatic Iraqi visit to Kabul in 1985 and a diplomatic visit from the PDRY in 1987 occurred.⁵⁵ Lastly, Libya accredited an Afghan ambassador in 1985.⁵⁶

Overall, the absence of contacts with Western-leaning Muslim countries illustrated the DRA’s isolation during most of the decade. Even with Soviet Muslim allies, whose number had decreased compared to the 1960s, relations fluctuated because of their reluctance to back the DRA unequivocally and mutual bickering.⁵⁷ In one representative example, the Afghans had to ask Moscow to help them get invited to an Islamic conference in Tripoli after their own approaches had failed.⁵⁸ Beyond this, the fact that Assad, the main communist ally, was an Alawite, a follower of a Shia sect that many Muslims saw as heretical and who had crushed a domestic Sunni Islamist revolt in 1982, did not help the PDPA’s attempts at using him to boost its standing in the Muslim world. Contacts with Assad may, in fact, have been counterproductive, as they created a parallel between two repressive regimes fighting Islamists.

⁵⁰Ibid. The Kremlin gave these instructions to its diplomats in Beijing but one can assume that other diplomats received similar ones.

⁵¹Mitrokhin, *KGB*, 105–6.

⁵²‘TASSA’, 26 September 1982, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 1617, l. 278, GARF; ‘TASSA’, 28 April 1983, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 3112, l. 164, GARF.

⁵³Brutents, *Tridtsat’*, Part IV, Ch. 3.

⁵⁴‘TASSA’, 13 May 1985, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 6177, l. 93, GARF; ‘TASSA’, 7 January 1987, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 8837, l. 145, GARF; ‘TASSA’, 11 November 1985, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 6180, l. 170, GARF; ‘TASSA’, 24 February 1986, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 7566, l. 268, GARF; ‘TASSA’, 3 January 1987, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 8837, l. 63, GARF; and ‘TASSA’, 6 June 1987, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 8841, l. 219, GARF.

⁵⁵‘TASSA’, 26 May 1985, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 6177, l. 162, GARF; ‘TASSA’, 10 December 1987, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 8845, l. 32, GARF.

⁵⁶‘TASSA’, 12 November 1985, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 6180, l. 181, GARF.

⁵⁷Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 155.

⁵⁸‘Dokumenty’, 28 August 1986, f. R6991, o. 6, d. 3376, ll. 137–8, GARF.

In 1987, the DRA launched a diplomatic offensive to promote its national reconciliation programme.⁵⁹ Moscow and Kabul logically considered it a breakthrough when Abdul Wakil, the DRA's foreign minister since 1986, visited Libya, Syria, Jordan and Kuwait in 1988. First, as explained later in this article, Wakil's trip came prior to an OIC summit that dealt with Afghanistan. It allowed Kabul to present its case to Western-leaning Muslim countries. Second, the Soviets and Afghans hoped that a closer relationship with Tripoli could serve as a conduit for the DRA to develop relations with other Arab countries.⁶⁰ In 1989, Afghanistan's diplomacy further expanded as Najibullah visited Turkey and Iran, showing how diplomatic contacts were no longer limited to Soviet allies.⁶¹

The Afghan diplomatic outreach remained, however, determined by the Soviet influence. Unlike in domestic affairs, where the PDPA was often more knowledgeable than Soviet experts and influenced policy, foreign policy remained under tighter Soviet control. Slinkin typically recalled how, because of a lack of diplomats and knowledge about the world in Afghanistan, he came to lead the PDPA's International Department after a request by its Afghan head in 1982.⁶² Hence, in addition to encouraging contacts with its allies, the USSR was also central to the DRA's improved relations with Western-leaning Muslim countries in 1987–8. The latter happened because of a thaw in Soviet relations with much of the Muslim world. Kuwait and the USSR hence moved closer in 1987 following the lease of three oil tankers to Kuwait by the Soviets.⁶³ In 1988, the Saudi foreign minister visited the USSR, likewise showing an interest in better relations.⁶⁴ Soviet relations furthermore improved with Egypt, Jordan, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Iran. These resulted from Gorbachev's New Thinking and readiness to leave Afghanistan, and led these countries to be less critical of the DRA. As we will see later in this article, even such limited diplomatic progress stirred Mujahideen protests.

Finally, the communists mobilised three additional instruments to develop the DRA's diplomatic relations and improve its Islamic image at home and abroad. First, they used pro-Soviet international forums. In 1981, the Lebanese Independent Nasserite Movement met with pro-communist Islamic scholars in Kabul.⁶⁵ Delegations from the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) also visited Afghanistan. In 1984, during one such visit, the director for mosque affairs of Egypt's Ministry of Waqfs publicly declared that 'Islam was being upheld in the DRA not only in words but also in deeds'. The PDPA informed him in return about its measures in support of religion and the 40 mosques it had built in Kabul since 1980.⁶⁶

Second, Islamic scholars and local leaders from South Asia also came to Afghanistan to support the PDPA. An imam from Karachi visited Kabul in 1982 and several Pashtun tribal leaders from the Pakistani side of the *de facto* border did the same in the mid-

⁵⁹Zapis', 20 July 1987, (Moscow, Russia: Gorbachev Foundation (GF), NSA), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//rus/text_files/Afghanistan/1987.07.20.Gorbachev-Najibullah.pdf accessed 14 July 2022.

⁶⁰Vasilii Khristoforov, *Afganistan* (Moscow: Granitsa, 2009), 120–1.

⁶¹Dopolnitel'nykh', 13 May 1989, f. 89, o. 10, d. 35, l. 1–4, RGANI; and Plastun, *Iznanka*, 539, 595.

⁶²Ramazan Daurov, ed., *Dnevnikovye Zapisi M.F. Slinkina* (Moscow: IV RAN, 2016), 14–15.

⁶³Melvin A. Goodman and Carolyn McGiffert Ekedahl, 'Gorbachev's "New Directions" in the Middle East', *Middle East Journal* 42, no. 4 (1988): 579.

⁶⁴Samuel Helfont, 'Islam in Saudi Foreign Policy: The Case of Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi', *The International History Review* 42, no. 3 (2020): 449–64.

⁶⁵TASSA', 24 July 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 84, l. 163, GARF.

⁶⁶TASSA', 20 November 1984, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 4574, l. 169–70, GARF.

1980s.⁶⁷ In 1985, Muslim leaders from the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh came to make a joint declaration with the regime's High Council of Ulemas.⁶⁸

Third, the Soviets put their Islamic diplomacy at the DRA's service. Since the 1950s, Moscow had been using Soviet institutions dealing with Islam to connect with Islamic scholars abroad.⁶⁹ In 1980, it hence organised an Islamic conference in Tashkent to present its position on Afghanistan. However, the conference's lack of representativity and the criticism that even Islamic scholars from pro-Soviet countries expressed about the intervention undermined its impact.⁷⁰ Interestingly though, the Soviet propagandists in Afghanistan still referred to the Tashkent conference to highlight that the USSR respected Islam.⁷¹

The Soviets only returned to Islamic diplomacy on Afghanistan under Gorbachev. They then organised an Islamic conference in Baku, the largest ever to happen in the USSR, in 1986.⁷² The conference's declared goal was to 'bring to the attention of the Muslim world information on the settlement of the situation around Afghanistan'.⁷³ To that end, the Soviets instructed the Afghan delegation to carry out press conferences and interviews about national reconciliation, and meet with foreign Islamic scholars. The DRA's Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs and the High Council of Ulemas had to 'strengthen [their] ties with Muslim organisations' abroad.⁷⁴

While the Soviet accounts from the Baku Conference noted its positive results, its actual impact in the Muslim world was more difficult to assess. In fact, even Afghan Islamic scholars and the PDPA had reservations about Soviet *mullahs*.⁷⁵ As noted later in this article, the Baku conference nevertheless played a role in easing the OIC's criticism of the DRA. It and the visits of foreign Islamic delegations, although they did not completely balance the condemnations coming from Muslim governments, also helped the PDPA with propaganda at home and internationally by showing that not all Muslims opposed it. They moreover testified to the considerable resources Soviets and Afghans were mobilising to improve the DRA's Islamic image.

These initiatives' limitation was nevertheless obvious. As its outreach towards Muslim countries, the DRA's Islamic diplomacy and contacts with pro-Soviet international forums emphasised its dependence on its patron. The PDPA probably often failed to appear as an independent actor. As the next sections explain, the DRA's dealings with Iran, the PLO and the OIC also showed its over-reliance on Moscow.

⁶⁷TASSA', 11 January 1986, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 7565, l. 41, 110–11, GARF; Malley, 'Legitimacy', 719.

⁶⁸TASSA', 5 December 1985, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 6181, l. 40, GARF.

⁶⁹Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union, From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London: Hurst, 2000), 589; Tasar, *Soviet*, 242–98; and Eren Tasar, 'The Central Asian Muftiate in Occupied Afghanistan, 1979–87', *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 2 (2011): 213–26.

⁷⁰Fred Halliday, '“Islam” and Soviet Foreign Policy', *Journal of Communist Studies* 3, no. 1 (March 1987): 218.

⁷¹L. Shershnev and V. Granitov, eds., *Islam v Sovremennom Afganistane* (Tashkent: PA KTVO, 1982).

⁷²Roman Silantyev, 'Mezhdunarodnaya deyatel'nost' dukhovnykh upravlenii musul'man SSSR', *Vlast'* 22, no. 3 (2014): 154–6.

⁷³'Dokumenty', 22 May 1986, f. R6991, o. 6, d. 3377, GARF.

⁷⁴'Dokumenty', 28 August 1986, ll. 137–8.

⁷⁵Klimentov, 'Communist', 18–19.

The cases of Iran and the PLO

Kabul's contacts with Iran represented a fascinating attempt to use diplomacy to boost the regime's domestic and international legitimacy. Here again, however, the DRA depended on the USSR. The latter had an ambivalent relationship with Iran. On the one hand, Moscow was concerned as to the spread of Islamism to Soviet Muslims after the Islamic Revolution.⁷⁶ On the other, as Grachev noted, the revolution had been a geopolitical victory for the Soviets, 'the crash of the American system of strategic encirclement of the USSR'.⁷⁷ Most of all, the Kremlin approached Iran with pragmatism as it searched for a way to stabilise the Soviet southern border, limit support to the Mujahideen, and protect Soviet economic interests. Unlike with Pakistan, which the Soviets planned to contain by relying on India, Moscow believed that it might find a common ground with Teheran. It therefore avoided confrontational language. *The Truth about Afghanistan* therefore said nothing of Iran's support of the Mujahideen. The Soviets also advised the PDPA to keep a positive attitude towards Teheran.⁷⁸

Heeding Soviet advice, Karmal wrote to Khomeini soon after taking power. Addressing the Ayatollah, the Afghan communist was keen to sound as Islamic as possible. Opening his letter with 'in the name of Allah, the Almighty and the Merciful to the great brother Imam Ayatollah Khomeini', Karmal blamed bilateral tensions on the Khalqis, whom he compared to the deposed Shah. He claimed that they had been preparing an 'offensive policy' against 'the liberating Islamic Revolution', together with US imperialism.⁷⁹ Karmal argued that the DRA wanted good relations with Iran and could provide it with security guarantees considering Soviet presence. He also proposed a personal meeting. As elsewhere, he linked the April Revolution and the Islamic Revolution in a transparent attempt to prop up his own traditional and charismatic legitimacy by equating himself with Khomeini. On a domestic level, good relations with Iran were also important for the PDPA to quell protests among the Hazaras – the Afghan Shia minority – that Khalq's repressions had targeted and to return the refugees who had fled there. The millions of Afghans abroad were also undermining the PDPA's legitimacy at home.

Iran, however, immediately debunked Afghan calls for solidarity. The Voice of the Islamic Revolution, the official radio station, condemned the Soviets and praised the Mujahideen.⁸⁰ Remarkably, the PDPA kept to its narrative despite these rebuttals. As did the Soviets, it seemed to believe that Iran would eventually join communism in an anti-United States front.⁸¹ Karmal consequently criticised 'the imperialists' who tried to undermine the Afghan revolution and afterwards 'deal a fatal blow' to Iran.⁸² As he explained in June 1980, the Iranian revolution had 'an antimonarchic and anti-imperialist character. It was and remained Islamic. It had been supported and [would] continue to be supported' by Afghanistan.⁸³ The PDPA meanwhile appointed a Shia cleric who

⁷⁶Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya*, 121; and on Iranian-Soviet relations: Clément Therme, *Les relations entre Téhéran et Moscou depuis 1979* (Paris: PUF, 2012), 89–118.

⁷⁷Grachev, Interview.

⁷⁸KHAD Head of Department, Interview.

⁷⁹TASSA', 13 January 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22311, l. 271–76, GARF.

⁸⁰TASSA', 21 January 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22313, l. 159, GARF.

⁸¹Laiik', *Afghanistan.ru*.

⁸²TASSA', 28 January 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22314, l. 245, GARF.

⁸³M. Danesch and D. Wild, 'Ist das die europäische Kultur?' *Spiegel*, 30 June 1980, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14328441.html> accessed 14 July 2022.

had studied under Khomeini as deputy head of the High Council of Ulemas in another attempt to assuage Teheran.⁸⁴

Iran in response upped its anti-DRA rhetoric. In an interview with a Lebanese daily, Abolhassan Banisadr, the Iranian president, argued that, contra Karmal's claims, the Islamic Revolution had 'provoked a second revolution in Afghanistan' that had forced the USSR to 'intervene to repress it'. He claimed that Iran's revolution had steered unrest among Soviet Muslims, echoing Soviet concerns about the spread of Islamism. In a final blow, Banisadr revealed that Arafat, the head of the PLO whom the Afghans were courting as shown later in this article, had told him that he too condemned the Soviet intervention.⁸⁵ Banisadr had therefore methodically debunked the communist arguments and had done so in Beirut where sympathies for Moscow ran higher.

During 1980, Iran's attitude did not change despite the heightened confrontation with the United States and the start of the Iran-Iraq War. This surprised the Kremlin since it, ignoring its Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Baghdad, had suspended arms deliveries to Iraq.⁸⁶ In 1981, Teheran continued to challenge Afghanistan by claiming that it wanted the NAM to replace Karmal's regime with the Mujahideen.⁸⁷ Yet Moscow still hoped for an Iranian turnaround.⁸⁸ Kabul, following Soviet advice, continued to frequently disregard the attacks coming from Teheran. An article in *HIS* in early 1982 then typically contended that 'the common enemy of the Afghan and Iranian people' was 'Imperialism'.⁸⁹ This continuing positive attitude was also in part the result of Iran temporarily reducing its criticism of the DRA after the sidelining of its more secular leaders, including Banisadr, in June 1981.⁹⁰

This situation changed radically between late 1982 and early 1983. The rapprochement between Baghdad and Moscow and accordingly between Baghdad and Kabul then played a key role. After Iran gained the upper hand in its war with Iraq, Moscow re-started arms shipments to Baghdad in 1982 before expanding assistance in 1983–4. The domestic factor was similarly important. The Iranian authorities, now under Khomeini's entire control, suppressed the pro-Soviet Fedayin-i Khalq and Tudeh parties.⁹¹ The Islamic Revolution was to be the vanguard of the Ummah (Muslim community). It had to oppose the atheists in Afghanistan and the USSR. In 1984, Teheran increased its support to the Hazara Mujahideen, which had so far been limited.⁹²

The Afghan communist media reflected this new situation. An article in *HIS* was one of the first to claim Iran had a leading role in supporting the Mujahideen.⁹³ In this context, Karmal continued to meet with the Hazaras, whose loyalty to the regime was in doubt. In 1985, he warned them of 'Iranian Reaction' and argued that Afghans did not want 'the export of the Islamic revolution'.⁹⁴ As on other issues, the regime's Islamic

⁸⁴Slinkin, *Stranitsy*, 19.

⁸⁵TASSA', 24 March 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22319, l. 168, GARF.

⁸⁶Freedman, *Moscow*, 126–8.

⁸⁷TASSA', 7 February 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 80, l. 100, GARF.

⁸⁸Freedman, *Moscow*, 99; and 'Protokol', 20 February 1981, f. 2, o. 6, d. 281, l. 11, RGANI.

⁸⁹TASSA', 26 January 1982, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 1614, l. 110, GARF.

⁹⁰Abdul Wakil, 'Iran's Relations with Afghanistan after the Islamic Revolution', *Orient* 32, no. 1 (1991): 102, 112.

⁹¹Halliday, "'Islam'", 221.

⁹²James Clay Moltz and Dennis B. Ross, 'The Soviet Union and the Iran-Iraq War, 1980–88', in *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, ed. George W. Breslauer (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 133–7; and Wakil, 'Iran', 102, 108.

⁹³TASSA', 25 July 1983, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 3113, l. 192, GARF.

⁹⁴TASSA', 25 December 1984, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 4575, l. 71–2, GARF.

institutions supported Karmal by condemning Iran and arguing that Afghanistan was Islamic enough already.⁹⁵

The DRA continued to criticise Iran until the Soviet withdrawal. Nevertheless, because Iran's support to the Mujahideen was modest, because the Iran-Iraq War had mobilised its resources, and because Teheran's international isolation reduced its options, Afghan criticism remained focused on Pakistan and the United States.⁹⁶ Eventually, as the Soviets began withdrawing from Afghanistan in 1988, Iran appeared more interested in an anti-United States alliance.⁹⁷ The ensuing improvement in Soviet-Iranian relations also led to better relations between Iran and the DRA. The DRA's diplomacy hence followed the Soviet lead again. In October 1989, Teheran cut its support to the Hazara Mujahideen and told them to negotiate with Kabul.⁹⁸ Najibullah then gave an interview to an Iranian daily.⁹⁹

This shift in Iranian-Afghan relations, which vividly showed how Teheran was ready to have geopolitics take precedence over Islamic solidarity and testified to the rising sectarian split in the Muslim world, came, however, too late and was not decisive enough to boost the standing and legitimacy of the discredited PDPA. As bitterly noted by a senior Afghan KGB operative, the Iranians had 'played during the war', but 'in the end, they had tricked Kabul and did not go for meaningful contacts' until it was too late.¹⁰⁰

Even more than Iran, Palestine came at the intersection of the DRA's diplomacy towards Muslim countries and international information campaign. On the one hand, the PDPA struggled to build ties with the PLO by relying on Soviet support. On the other, by highlighting their proximity with the PLO in local and international media, the DRA's leaders propped their rational – by showing international recognition – and charismatic – by associating themselves with Arafat and the formidable Palestinian cause – legitimacy.

When a delegation of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a group part of the PLO, visited Kabul right after the Soviet intervention, Dost pledged Afghan 'support to the right cause of the Arab people of Palestine'.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, the Afghan prime minister Sultan Ali Keshmand declared in Beirut that 'Afghan and Palestinian revolutions [had] one common enemy – international Imperialism, world Zionism, and Reaction'.¹⁰² Afghan leaders and civil and Islamic organisations made similar statements afterwards.¹⁰³ The PDPA besides held regular demonstrations in support of the Palestinians in Kabul, commemorated the Sabra and Shatila massacres and denounced the Israeli occupation of Lebanon after 1982.¹⁰⁴

Increasing Afghan contacts with the PLO paralleled the propaganda campaign. Both sides had to tread carefully, though. After the Camp David Accords, the PLO and the

⁹⁵'TASSA', 10 April 1985, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 6176, l. 189, GARF.

⁹⁶Afghan Information Center, *Monthly Bulletin*, No. 39; and Wakil, 'Iran', 108.

⁹⁷'Stenogramma', 22 February 1988, f. 10003, GARF; O. 1, d. 248 (?), NSA, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Afghanistan/1988.02.22.Yakovlev-CC-CPSU-Conference-on-Afghanistan.pdf accessed 14 July 2022; and Grachev, interview.

⁹⁸Kalinovsky, *Goodbye*, 193.

⁹⁹Wakil, 'Iran', 108, 115.

¹⁰⁰KHAD Head of Department, interview.

¹⁰¹'TASSA', 20 February 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22316, l. 229, GARF.

¹⁰²'TASSIA', 16 February 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22931, ll. 214–15, GARF.

¹⁰³'TASSA', 15 January 1982, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 1615, l. 316, GARF.

¹⁰⁴'TASSA', 26 October 1982, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 1618, l. 88, GARF; and 'TASSA', 18 September 1984, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 4573, l. 142, GARF.

USSR had become closer. Arafat had led a delegation to Moscow, showing that even the more centrist Fatah was re-orienting towards the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁵ The intervention in Afghanistan, however, tested this rapprochement. In parallel, the closer relationship between the USSR and Syria and the Fatah leadership's attempts to reach out to Jordan and Saudi Arabia and meet Western officials also complicated relations in 1981–3.¹⁰⁶ The USSR then leaned towards the PFLP and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the leftist parties within the PLO, who unequivocally backed the DRA. For Kabul, the irony was that the increasingly conflicting and arcane politics within the USSR-Syria-PLO-Lebanon relationship limited the possibility of relying on Soviet Arab allies for diplomatic support. It was not until Gorbachev that Moscow rekindled its relationship with Arafat and brokered an understanding between the PLO and Syria. By that point, the value of Palestinian support had diminished for the DRA, while the Soviets were searching for a way out of Afghanistan.

For the PLO, the DRA was a problematic ally because many of its Muslim supporters and funders opposed it. Along with the Iran-Iraq war, Afghanistan had undermined the Arab unity achieved following Camp David. It likewise tested the PLO's unity. In 1980, Farouk al-Kaddoumi, one of Arafat's future opponents in Fatah, declared that the issue of Soviet help for Afghanistan was an internal Soviet-Afghan affair.¹⁰⁷ Afterwards, a delegation of the PFLP came to Kabul. In 1981, Tayseer Qubba'ah from the PFLP expressed his 'solidarity with the Afghan people' during another visit.¹⁰⁸ Arafat, meanwhile, had met with Dost in Beirut in 1980 and 1981.¹⁰⁹

Yet, for a long time, the PFLP and the DFLP were the only PLO parties to support the PDPA publicly. While the Afghan media published messages of support sent by Karmal to Arafat, no return message came from Arafat. A *Time* interview even quoted the latter as saying that the USSR had wanted to establish control over Middle Eastern oil by invading Afghanistan. TASS answered that claim by reporting Arafat's statement that it was a 'gross distortion'.¹¹⁰ Still, just like Banisadr's comment about Arafat's condemnation of the Soviet intervention, the comment showed Fatah's unease with the DRA and Kabul's difficulty at mustering full Palestinian support.

A shift in the PLO's relationship with the DRA only occurred after the Soviet Arab allies resolved their mutual conflicts. In 1983, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the PLO's relocation to Tunis, Arafat finally sent a message to Karmal that the Afghan media published. The Palestinian leader, however, only thanked the DRA for its support at the NAM Conference in New Delhi.¹¹¹ It was not until 1984 that Arafat's messages to Karmal became cordial. One of them noted that the 'PLO's goal [was] to strengthen the ties of brotherhood and solidarity between the Arab people of Palestine and the people of revolutionary Afghanistan'.¹¹² Contacts with the PLO remained friendly afterwards and a delegation led by Talaat Yacoub, one of the movement's hardliners who was close to Soviet Arab allies, visited Kabul in

¹⁰⁵Roland Dannreuther, *The Soviet Union and the PLO* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 105–7.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 110–12.

¹⁰⁷TASSA', 22 January 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22313, 180–2, GARF.

¹⁰⁸TASSA', 29 March 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 82, l. 16–17, GARF.

¹⁰⁹TASSA', 20 August 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 84, l. 347, GARF.

¹¹⁰Dannreuther, *PLO*, 110.

¹¹¹TASSA', 4 May 1983, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 3112, l. 189, GARF.

¹¹²TASSA', 27 June 1984, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 4572, l. 78, GARF.

1986.¹¹³ Along with delegates of pro-Soviet Muslim and communist countries, the Palestinians then attended the conference marking the launch of Najibullah's national reconciliation in January 1987.¹¹⁴

Afterwards, Arafat personally attempted to mediate between the Kabul regime and the Mujahideen in Islamabad in 1989. As noted by a Mujahideen journal, he was by then 'known among Afghans as a pro-regime and pro-Soviet politician. [...] In all international forums in which [the] PLO had had a voice it had opposed the Mujahideen'.¹¹⁵ Yet, because of Palestine's centrality for the Ummah, no one could simply ignore Arafat. He was important enough to meet the Pakistani prime minister and Sibghatullah Mujaddidi, the head of the Mujahideen's interim government in Peshawar.¹¹⁶ Beyond this, the Mujahideen saw Arafat as a channel to Moscow and to its Arab allies. They hoped that they might agree to pressure the Kabul regime into more compromises as part of post-withdrawal negotiations on a coalition government and on Soviet prisoners of war. The PLO then attempted again to mediate between Kabul and the Mujahideen during talks in Libya, Tunisia and Iraq in 1989–90.

While the PDPA associated itself with the Palestinian cause and the Islamic Revolution, it is difficult to gauge what impact this strategy had in boosting its domestic legitimacy. The PDPA leaders could at least refer to Palestine in their speeches. At the same time, most Afghans remained illiterate, had only a limited knowledge of international affairs, and were suspicious of Shia Iran. The competing Iranian and Pakistani propaganda on the radio also influenced their worldview.¹¹⁷

At the international level, diplomatic relations with the PLO gave the DRA a voice on the most important issue for the Ummah. The PLO also supported Kabul in international forums throughout the 1980s. Yet, the significant time it took Arafat to embrace the PDPA, its dependence on the USSR, and the bickering among Soviet allies reduced the value of the PLO's support for the DRA. By the time Fatah unambiguously backed the PDPA, the Afghan War had irremediably transformed. The Soviets were leaving Afghanistan and rapidly losing influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict. As with Iran's, the PLO's support came too late to make a real difference for communist Afghanistan.

An impossible understanding with the OIC

Created by the Saudi king Faisal in 1969, the OIC became the main international Muslim forum. It developed the idea that Muslims were a 'unified religious – and presumably politic[al] – body transcending ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries'. It helped deal with the traumas of the Caliphate's disappearance and the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹¹⁸ The OIC's creation also marked the ascendancy of Saudi Arabia as leader of a nascent Muslim world, after socialism and Third World internationalism had failed to secure Muslim political objectives.¹¹⁹ During the Afghan War, the OIC became the

¹¹³TASSA', 17 July 1986, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 7570, l. 140, GARF.

¹¹⁴Slinkin, *Stranitsy*, 46.

¹¹⁵*Jamiat-e Islami*, *AFGHANews* 5, no. 13, 1 July 1989, 1–3.

¹¹⁶'Mujahideen', *Southeast Asian & Afghanistan Review* 9, no. 15 (June 1989): 5.

¹¹⁷Mikhail Slinkin, 'Afghanistan: uroki informatsionnoi voiny', *Kul'tura narodov Prichernomor'ya* 15 (2000): 89, 94.

¹¹⁸Turan Kayaoglu, *The Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Politics, Problems and Potential* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 6.

¹¹⁹Aydin, *Muslim*, 211.

forum in which supporters and critics of the DRA confronted each other, debating if the DRA's authorities were Islamic enough and *in fine* legitimate.

Days after the Soviet intervention, an Extraordinary Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) condemned the USSR and called for 'Islamic solidarity' with Afghanistan. As noted by the Pakistani Sharifuddin Pirzada, the OIC's future general secretary, it was the first time 'the intervention of a super power in the internal affairs of a member state of the OIC' had prompted such a reaction.¹²⁰ Importantly, the OIC moreover suspended Afghanistan's membership, a ban that it had so far only applied to Anwar Sadat's Egypt. When the OIC similarly excluded the DRA from following sessions, the PDPA denounced it for 'covering the anti-Islamic crimes and conspiracies of Imperialism and Zionism' by focusing on the Afghan War. Kabul nevertheless still explained that it would be ready to re-join the OIC if allowed to.¹²¹

This ambiguity would mark the attitude of the DRA towards the OIC throughout the 1980s. The reason for it was twofold. First, membership in the OIC helped uphold a state's Islamic credentials at home and abroad considerably. Due to its suspension, those of the DRA were in doubt. In fact, the Soviets feared that if the Mujahideen got the DRA's OIC seat, it would be the first step towards their broader international recognition.¹²² Second, the DRA could argue in OIC forums for Muslim countries to reduce financial, military and political support to the Mujahideen. Given its limited diplomatic contacts with most Muslim countries, the OIC forums would have represented a unique opportunity for the PDPA to make its case.

The 11th OIC CFM in Islamabad came after the failed attempt to free the US hostages in Iran. That event stole the spotlight from the Afghan War and gave more prominence to the Iranian delegation. Teheran, while criticising the United States, was also tough on the PDPA and even brought to the conference five Mujahideen leaders.¹²³ As noted by a PDPA official, this was a huge blow for Kabul.¹²⁴ The session's resolution then urged the 'unconditional withdrawal of all Soviet troops' and respect 'for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Afghanistan', as well as for its 'non-aligned status' and 'Islamic identity'.¹²⁵ The support the DRA received from the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front, a group formed by pro-Soviet Arab states after Egypt's 'capitulation' to Israel, however, mitigated that criticism. Gathering Syria, Libya, Algeria, the PDRY and the PLO in Damascus, the Front condemned the United States, pledged support to the USSR and, confirming the Soviet block's ambiguity towards the Islamic Revolution, solidarity with Iran. Its goal was to divert attention from Afghanistan to other Muslim causes.¹²⁶ In Kabul, Karmal enthusiastically thanked these 'heroic and truly Islamic countries' in his speeches.¹²⁷ This was again an example of how diplomacy towards Muslim countries translated on the domestic stage. Iranian delegates in turn

¹²⁰Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, 'Pakistan and the OIC', *Pakistan Horizon*, 40, no. 2 (1987): 25.

¹²¹TASSA', 8 April 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22320, l. 88, GARF.

¹²²Khristoforov, *Afghanistan*, 148.

¹²³TASSA', 29 May 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22322, l. 88, GARF.

¹²⁴Wakil, 'Iran', 107.

¹²⁵Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), *R19/11-P*, May 17–22, 1980, <http://www1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/fm/11/11%20icfm-political-en.htm#RESOLUTION%20No.%2019/11-P> accessed 14 July 2022.

¹²⁶Freedman, *Moscow*, 75.

¹²⁷TASSA', 25 May 1980, f. R4459, o. 43, d. 22322, l. 180, GARF.

complained that ‘some friendly countries took the position of non-alignment because of their relations with Soviet Russia’.¹²⁸

Before the Islamic Summit Conference of Heads of States (ISCHS) in Mecca in 1981, the DRA again called on the OIC to stop wasting time with the ‘Afghan question’.¹²⁹ In response, the OIC adopted a resolution denouncing the violations of Afghans’ rights in terms similar to 1980, as well as noted that Afghanistan preoccupied ‘the entire Islamic World’. However, the rest of the resolution was mild in its criticism of the DRA.¹³⁰ It replaced the call for Soviet withdrawal with one for the withdrawal of all ‘foreign troops’.¹³¹ The resolution also abstained from calling for ‘*jihad*’ in Afghanistan while using the term in its call to fight the ‘Zionist enemy’. In toning down the resolution, Agha Shahi, the Pakistani foreign minister from 1978 to 1982, supported the pro-Soviet front. He would be the only Pakistani politician to seriously explore a negotiated solution to the Afghan War.¹³² Ultimately, the resolution fell short of the unequivocal support the Mujahideen hoped for.¹³³ It showed the disagreements of the Muslim countries as to the Afghan War’s importance. Iran even noted that the OIC had still spent too much time on Afghanistan, ironically echoing the PDPA’s argument.¹³⁴

In fact, the DRA was undoubtedly very satisfied with the OIC’s focus on Palestine, given its engagement with the PLO. The tension between Palestine and Afghanistan was by then so evident that Habib Chatty, the OIC’s general secretary, had to emphatically address it at the conference in Baghdad in 1981. He underlined that the OIC needed to ‘find the right balance between Islamic principles and relations with [the USSR]’. However, ‘the support of the Palestinian question by [the USSR] did not mean that [the OIC] would give it away the land of the Afghan brothers’.¹³⁵ Still, Afghanistan was de-emphasised in Baghdad while the OIC focused on the Iran-Iraq War and Jerusalem.¹³⁶ In this context, the emergence of Iran as an alternative pole of attraction in the Muslim world was an issue for Saudi Arabia and its US ally. It also became the OIC’s role to contain it. Coupled with the support provided by Soviet allies, it explained why OIC resolutions adopted in Niamey in 1982, Dhaka in 1983 and Sana’a in 1984, resulting from compromises, remained restrained in their criticism of the DRA. After the session in Dhaka, the OIC held its 4th ISCHS in Casablanca. The latter produced another resolution on the Afghan War in the same mould.¹³⁷

The stalemate achieved at the OIC did not provide the PDPA with tangible legitimacy gains or a reduction in Muslim countries’ support for the Mujahideen. Kabul therefore continued both to denounce the OIC for its ‘reactionary and anti-Muslim actions’ and argue its readiness to re-integrate into the organisation. The DRA wanted no one to scold it

¹²⁸TASSA’, 23 May 1980, *Ibid.*, l. 158, GARF.

¹²⁹TASSA’, 18 January 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 79, l. 172–5, GARF.

¹³⁰OIC, *R3/3-P (IS)*, 25–8 January 1981, [http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/3/3rd-is-sum\(political\).htm](http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/3/3rd-is-sum(political).htm) accessed 14 July 2022.

¹³¹*Ibid.*

¹³²Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 64.

¹³³TASSA’, 30 January 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 80, l. 31, GARF.

¹³⁴TASSA’, 28 January 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 79, l. 253, GARF.

¹³⁵TASSA’, 7 June 1981, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 83, l. 113, GARF.

¹³⁶‘Relations’, 10 June 1981, US Embassy, Afghanistan, NSA, www.proquest.com accessed 14 July 2022.

¹³⁷OIC, *R9/4-P (IS)*, 16–19 January 1984, [http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/4/4th-is-sum\(political\).htm#09](http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/4/4th-is-sum(political).htm#09) accessed 14 July 2022.

on Islam and saw itself as 'an important member of the world Muslim community'.¹³⁸ The High Council of Ulemas' and the Directorate of Islamic Affairs' appeals to the OIC to stop 'undermining the positions of the DRA in the Islamic world' reinforced this claim.¹³⁹ Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, while the communists were still engaged in a sovietisation process, they had increasingly put an Islamic veneer on their regime. Unlike in Taraki's time, no PDPA leader spoke of emptying the Afghan mosques.¹⁴⁰

Pirzada becoming the OIC's general secretary in 1984 also did not help Kabul's cause. The development marked, in Pirzada's own assessment, 'a recognition of Pakistan's role' in the organisation.¹⁴¹ For Islamabad, the Afghan War was significantly more important than Palestine. It was the reason for the massive US military support and the chance to establish a client regime in Kabul.¹⁴² Pirzada plainly declared to an Egyptian daily that 'Afghanistan's membership in the OIC had been suspended because its ruling regime was not considered Muslim'.¹⁴³ The 16th OIC CFM in Morocco in 1986 confirmed the OIC's tougher stance against the backdrop of increased Soviet military operations in Afghanistan in 1984–5. Its resolution praised for the first time the Mujahideen's 'heroic struggle'. It also included what was simultaneously an incentive and a warning to Moscow, stating that the 'withdrawal of [Soviet] forces from [Afghanistan]' would 'remove a major obstacle in [its] relations [with] the Islamic Countries'.¹⁴⁴

Afghanistan continued nevertheless to divide the Muslim world according to the Cold War paradigm. That divide also paralysed the OIC. The latter was for one still not talking of *jihad*. This was surely ironic given that the Mujahideen, the Saudi-sponsored Muslim World League, notably when writing to Soviet institutions dealing with Islam, the Saudi king Fahd at a Hajj greeting, and Pakistan abundantly used the term.¹⁴⁵ As to the Mujahideen, they again complained that the OIC conference had been side-tracked. This time it had concentrated on the US attacks on Libya while the 'Afghan issue was not given its proper importance'.¹⁴⁶

The deadlock in the OIC only eased after Gorbachev came to power and the USSR changed gears on Afghanistan. In late 1986, Pirzada visited Moscow, taking advantage of the favourable atmosphere created by the Baku Conference, and declared that 'the problems around Afghanistan [would] be soon resolved'.¹⁴⁷ Both parties were ready to help a Soviet withdrawal. In parallel, Najibullah explained that he hoped the OIC, along with the NAM, the United Nations and the Islamic countries, would help bring peace in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁸ His regime then notably intensified its international information campaign about national reconciliation in the hope of influencing the upcoming OIC

¹³⁸TASSA', 23 January 1984, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 4570, l. 73, GARF.

¹³⁹TASSA', 14 May 1984, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 4571, l. 184, GARF.

¹⁴⁰Klimentov, 'Communist', 9.

¹⁴¹Pirzada, 'Pakistan', 35.

¹⁴²Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden*, Kindle (New York: Penguin, 2005), Loc. 451–3585.

¹⁴³TASSA', 11 December 1985, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 6181, l. 72, GARF.

¹⁴⁴OIC, *R19/16-P*, 6–10 January 1986, <http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/fm/16/16%20icfm-political-en.htm#RESOLUTION%20NO:%2019/16-P> accessed 14 July 2022.

¹⁴⁵Tasar, *Soviet*, 284–5.

¹⁴⁶*Jamiat-e Islami, AFGHANews* 2, no. 2, 19 January 1986, 3.

¹⁴⁷Silantyev, 'Deyatel'nost', 154–6; TASSA', 5 December 1986, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 7573, l. 85, GARF.

¹⁴⁸Slinkin, *Stranitsy*, 44–5.

conference in Kuwait.¹⁴⁹ Gorbachev meanwhile sent a message to the OIC, an unprecedented gesture from a Soviet leader.

The resolution adopted by the OIC in 1987 reflected this new situation. It, on the one hand, still celebrated the Mujahideen's 'heroic struggle' but, on the other, welcomed national reconciliation that, it noted, 'reflected the will of the people of Afghanistan and their Islamic character'.¹⁵⁰ The nod to national reconciliation was a strong positive sign to Najibullah and Gorbachev. Finally, the resolution repeated that leaving Afghanistan would help Moscow improve its relations with the 'Muslim world', a term that the OIC now strikingly used. This was the closest the organisation would, however, ever come to accepting the DRA.

In Kabul, *Bakhtar* and other Afghan media praised the OIC's support for the 'efforts at national reconciliation'.¹⁵¹ While on a trip to Czechoslovakia, Najibullah rejoiced that the 'extremists' had not received Afghanistan's OIC seat.¹⁵² He was also pleased that the OIC had this time invited the regime's journalists.¹⁵³ Satisfaction was also clear in Moscow. According to a former KGB head in Kabul, the OIC had finally displayed objectivity on Afghanistan. The 'covert intrigues of the leaders of the Afghan opposition, present at the conference as observers, their attempts to obtain from the OIC their reconnaissance as "lawful representatives of the Afghan people" had proven futile', he exulted.¹⁵⁴ For Kabul and Moscow, this was proof that Muslim countries were increasingly ready to recognise Najibullah's regime as representing the Afghan people. They believed that the OIC and the United States might then agree for Najibullah to stay during a transition period after the Soviet withdrawal.¹⁵⁵

The Mujahideen, by contrast, did not like the OIC's new tone. Jamiat-e Islami, one of their main parties, listed their reproaches to the Kuwaiti conference. 'The Amir of Kuwait [had] personally read Gorbachev's message to the conference',

the conference [had] reluctantly allowed the Mujahideen representative to speak [...] and only then at improper times, [...] it had] passed the weakest resolution about Afghanistan ever, the [United Arab Emirates] and Oman [had] established diplomatic and economic relations with the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁶

For Jamiat-e Islami, the OIC was too afraid of Iran and the USSR was using that fear to boost its influence. The OIC was 'the real target of Soviet penetration'. In addition to the 'friends' it had there, Moscow could rely on Kuwait, which was 'afraid to make the Soviets angry' because it needed the country to protect its oil tankers. Some Muslim countries were ready to 'ignore an invasion and the suffering of millions of Muslims' to advance their own interests, the Mujahideen complained.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁹'Hearing', 17 February 1987, US Congress, NSA, www.proquest.com accessed 14 July 2022.

¹⁵⁰OIC, *R11/5-P(15)*, 26–29 January 1987, [http://www1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/5/5th-is-sum\(political\).htm#11](http://www1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/is/5/5th-is-sum(political).htm#11) accessed 14 July 2022.

¹⁵¹'TASSA', 3 February 1987, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 8838, l. 191, GARF.

¹⁵²'Report', 6 May 1987, WC, File 02/1, State Central Archive, Prague <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113125> accessed 14 July 2022.

¹⁵³Slinkin, *Stranitsy*, 48.

¹⁵⁴Victor Spolnikov, *Afganistan, Islamskaya oppositsiya* (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 128.

¹⁵⁵Kalinovsky, *Goodbye*, 122–46.

¹⁵⁶*Jamiat-e Islami*, *AFGHANews* 3, no. 12, 1 June 1987, 5.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, no. 14, 15 July 1987, 1–3.

By 1987, Gorbachev's new policies promised sweeping changes in Afghanistan and the OIC's Mujahideen supporters believed that they had to encourage them. This, though, meant that the OIC aimed its resolutions more at Moscow than at Kabul at a moment when it looked like the USSR would retain influence in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁸ When it appeared that the Soviets would leave without a deal and that the United States would continue supporting the Mujahideen, these countries quickly reversed their stance. While negotiations between Moscow and Washington entered their final stage in late 1987, a *communiqué* from the OIC noted its 'grave concern' regarding the surge in communist military operations in Afghanistan. The OIC now claimed that Afghans had rejected the 'so-called national reconciliation' under 'Soviet occupation'.¹⁵⁹ Its *communiqué* put pressure on Gorbachev to commit publicly to a withdrawal.

The Soviet leader would do so after King Hussein of Jordan's landmark visit to the USSR in February 1988. For the Soviets, the support of Muslim countries and the United States was vital to leave Afghanistan on honourable terms.¹⁶⁰ As noted earlier, Wakil then went on a trip to Kuwait and Jordan, hoping it could be a 'step toward the restoration of Afghanistan's membership' in the OIC.¹⁶¹ Although Moscow and Kabul likely understood that this would be complicated, Wakil was at least to obtain a reduction in anti-DRA statements and the OIC's support for the Soviet-US negotiations on Afghanistan by relying on countries most favourable to the USSR in the Western-leaning group. Increasingly, to Kabul's probable displeasure, the diplomacy towards Muslim countries had become about helping the Soviets withdraw from Afghanistan.¹⁶²

The 17th OIC CFM in Amman in 1988 marked a new take on Afghanistan. Its resolution, while welcoming Gorbachev's commitment to a withdrawal, showed greater support to the Mujahideen.¹⁶³ Declaring for 'the Geneva Proximity Talks', the OIC announced that it would keep Afghanistan's seat open 'until the complete withdrawal of foreign forces', 'the return of the Afghan refugees, and the formation of a government acceptable to the people of Afghanistan'.¹⁶⁴ This meant that the DRA would not be part of the organisation any time soon. It, moreover, showed that the OIC increasingly looked forward to a Mujahideen victory.

Interestingly, the belligerents had mixed assessments of the Amman conference. The Soviets were glad that the Mujahideen did not obtain recognition for their interim government despite sending 14 representatives to Amman. Jordan had here backed the Soviet allies. The KGB saw that as not the worst of outcomes given that an OIC recognition might have had a domino effect in the Muslim world and the West.¹⁶⁵ The Soviets hence still took the OIC seriously and hoped that the situation on the ground might eventually force it to recognise Najibullah.

Yet, the Amman conference really marked the beginning of the Mujahideen's victory and foreshadowed a shift in the OIC's stance.¹⁶⁶ The following year, only four weeks after

¹⁵⁸Kalinovsky, *Goodbye*, 147–78.

¹⁵⁹TASSA, 7 October 1987, f. R4459, o. 44, d. 8843, l. 247, GARF.

¹⁶⁰Freedman, *Moscow*, 279; Grachev, Interview.

¹⁶¹Khristoforov, *Afganistan*, 120–1.

¹⁶²On Soviet-Afghan tensions over the Geneva Accords: Kalinovsky, *Goodbye*, 138–64.

¹⁶³OIC, R23/17-P, 21–5 March 1988, <http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/fm/17/17%20icfm-political-en.htm#RESOLUTION%20NO.%2023/17-P> accessed 14 July 2022.

¹⁶⁴OIC, R23/17-P.

¹⁶⁵Spolnikov, *Oppositsiya*, 143–4, 149–50.

¹⁶⁶*Jamiat-e Islami*, AFGHANews 4, no. 1 April 1988, 1.

the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan, the OIC conference in Riyadh saw the Saudi and Pakistani position finally triumph. The OIC threw its full support behind the Mujahideen as they launched an offensive on Jalalabad with Pakistani support. In a shorter resolution, the OIC then used the term '*jihad*' in relation to Afghanistan for the first time. After praising the April 1988 Geneva Accords, it furthermore invited the Mujahideen to occupy Afghanistan's seat.¹⁶⁷ This settled the matter: the window of opportunity when it seemed that the PDPA and the Soviets could leverage increased acceptance from the OIC into rational and Islamic traditional political legitimacy in Afghanistan had closed. It was now obvious to all, including pro-Soviet countries, that the communists would end up on the losing side of the war.

Conclusion

Throughout the Afghan War, the Soviets and the Afghan communists put considerable efforts into strengthening the DRA's Islamic credentials on the international stage. Moscow mobilised its Muslim allies, integrated Afghan Islamic scholars into its Islamic diplomacy, and used the KGB and pro-Soviet forums to improve the DRA's image among Muslims. In their endeavour, the Soviets and the Afghan communists relied on the support of Soviet Muslim allies – Syria, Libya, Iraq, the PDRY and the PLO – and leveraged the Soviet influence on the Arab-Israeli conflict. By legitimising the DRA internationally, they hoped to reduce political, financial and military support to the Mujahideen. The PDPA was to be the legitimate ruler of Afghanistan, recognised by other Muslim countries and international forums such as the OIC. In the same way as they hoped to wait out the Mujahideen's opposition in Afghanistan, the Soviets and the PDPA believed that the Muslim world would eventually have to accept the DRA. As shown by their success in blocking the Mujahideen's international recognition, including by the OIC, which had, remarkably, recognised the secular PLO, that strategy encountered some success in the 1980s.

Building international support in the Muslim world was also important domestically. The PDPA leaders used international successes to present themselves as legitimate rulers in Afghanistan. By stressing their contacts with the PLO and with Muslim countries, Karmal and Najibullah equated themselves with Arafat, Assad and Hussein. By republishing positive articles from the foreign press, they wanted to show that they had support abroad. By comparing their revolution to Iran's, they suggested that both had anti-colonial roots. By taking advantage of Soviet Islamic initiatives, they bolstered the pro-PDPA Islamic scholars. To use Weber's terms, they channelled their international recognition into domestic rational and traditional Islamic legitimacy and boosted their own charismatic legitimacy.

Unfortunately for the communists, the strategy to build the DRA's Islamic credentials had two limits. First, it relied entirely on the USSR and made the DRA appear as a passive actor. Second, it yielded only mixed results, even among Soviet Muslim allies. Those remained a disparate group that the Soviets had trouble getting in line. While professing to the Mujahideen that they had 'open and secret positions' on Afghanistan, Soviet

¹⁶⁷OIC, R18/18-P, 13–6 March 1989, <http://ww1.oic-oci.org/english/conf/fm/18/18%20icfm-political-en.htm#RESOLUTION%20NO.18/18-P> accessed 14 July 2022.

Muslim allies backed the DRA only in exchange for incentives from the Soviets.¹⁶⁸ During the Afghan War, organising their steady support for the DRA proved challenging and diminished their impact. Perhaps if Moscow had been able to muster the PLO and Iraq's full backing for the PDPA in 1980, it would have helped it reintegrate the OIC and fill in its enormous legitimacy deficit in Afghanistan.

After the Soviet and the Afghan communists had become bogged down in their fight with the Mujahideen in the mid-1980s, the Soviet allies' support mattered less. By then, the Soviets had decided to leave and the PDPA had discredited itself by waging a brutal war in Afghanistan. In this context, the improvement of relations between the DRA and Western-leaning countries and Iran was not the product of them believing that the PDPA would prevail, but testified to these countries tactically manoeuvring to get the USSR out. The OIC's position testified to that irony. While it seemed to welcome Najibullah's national reconciliation in 1987, it reversed course the moment Gorbachev announced the withdrawal. With the Cold War out of the way, the Muslim world, with the notable exception of Shia Iran that focused on regional geopolitics, finally saw Islamic solidarity prevail over Cold War *Realpolitik*.

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¹⁶⁸*Jamiat-e Islami, AFGHANews* 4, no. 2, 15 January 1988, 7.