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Another Achilles Heel for the Soviets? Jimmy Carter, the Cold War and Islam in West Africa

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6/ Another Achilles Heel for the Soviets? Jimmy Carter, the Cold War and Islam in West Africa

Laura MASCHIO

ABSTRACT: *This article asks how and to what extent the Carter administration integrated West Africa into its broader religious and psychological outreach to the Muslim world during the late Cold War. It shows that, although Washington developed a global approach to Islam as part of its containment strategy, its implementation in West Africa remained partial and uneven. Rather than constituting a coherent regional front, the region was integrated selectively through constrained propaganda initiatives and calibrated diplomatic engagement, shaped by local political sensitivities and the agency of regional actors. Drawing on declassified CIA assessments, State Department memoranda, and diplomatic records, and by focusing on a region largely overlooked in Cold War historiography, this article demonstrates that the instrumentalization of Islam under Carter was not only geographically differentiated, but also contingent on the specific contexts in which it was deployed.*

ABSTRACT: *L'articolo analizza l'integrazione dell'Africa occidentale nella più ampia azione di propaganda psicologico-religiosa elaborata dall'amministrazione Carter verso il mondo islamico. Basandosi su valutazioni declassificate della CIA, memorandum del Dipartimento di Stato e documenti diplomatici, il saggio dimostra che, sebbene Washington avesse concepito una strategia globale verso l'Islam nel quadro delle politiche di contenimento dell'influenza sovietica, la sua implementazione in Africa occidentale rimase parziale e disomogenea. La regione fu coinvolta in modo selettivo, tramite un'azione diplomatica modulata in base alle sensibilità locali e vincolata dal potere contrattuale degli attori politici regionali. In questo senso, lo studio evidenzia come la strumentalizzazione dell'Islam durante la presidenza Carter fu non soltanto differenziata sul piano geografico, ma anche dipendente dai contesti specifici nei quali venne messa in atto.*

Introduction

The late 1970s marked a profound reconfiguration in the relationship between religion and international politics. The Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan confronted the administration of Jimmy Carter with rising waves of anti-Americanism, and prompted US policymakers to explore new ways of engaging Muslim-majority societies. As a result, a new policy framework in which Islam was reconceptualized as a potential instrument of Cold War strategy gradually emerged. While existing scholarship has largely focused on the Middle East and South

Asia (the so-called “arc of crisis”), this article proceeds from the observation that such a perspective remains geographically incomplete¹.

By shifting the analytical lens to West Africa, this study brings into focus a region that rarely features in standard accounts of late Cold War diplomacy, despite occupying a significant place in US strategic thinking during the Carter presidency. Far from being peripheral, the region stood at the intersection of energy security, Cold War competition, and transnational Islamic and non-aligned networks. Drawing on diplomatic records and intelligence assessments, the article shows that West Africa was gradually incorporated into Washington’s emerging strategy toward the Islamic world, albeit in ways that differed significantly from its more visible and explicit applications elsewhere. In doing so, it moves beyond a geographically-bounded reading of US policy toward Islam in the late 1970s, highlighting the uneven and context-dependent character of its implementation.

In this context, the “Islamic world” is understood not as a fixed religious entity, but as a policy-driven category employed by US officials to designate Muslim-majority societies and geopolitically strategic regions. Similarly, “West Africa” is defined here according to the strategic boundaries used by the US government in the late 1970s, largely corresponding to the sixteen states overseen by the West Africa division of the Bureau of African Affairs: Benin, Cape Verde, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). As such, rather than adhering to a strictly geographic definition, this article adopts the spatial framework implicit in US policy documents of the period.

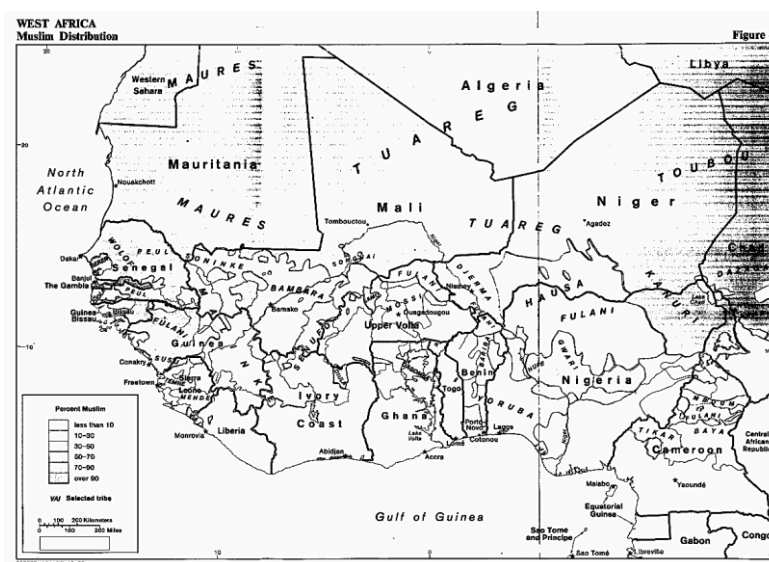


Figure 1. CIA Map of Muslim Distribution in West Africa (November 1982)².

¹ West Africa remains largely absent from standard accounts of the Global Cold War and superpower engagement in Africa. See, for example: WESTAD, Odd Arne, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

² Central Intelligence Agency, Office of African and Latin American Analysis, «West Africa: Patterns and

Against this backdrop, the article traces the evolution of US engagement with West Africa in three steps. The first section situates Carter's policy within the longer trajectory of US relations with the region, highlighting the combination of strategic interest and diplomatic subordination that characterized American policy in the wake of decolonization. The second examines the Carter administration's attempt to reconcile moral renewal with strategic continuity, showing how human rights discourse coexisted with persistent containment logics, as evidenced by its handling of African conflicts and its tendency to interpret political transformations in Iran and Afghanistan through a Cold War lens. The third and last section analyzes the emergence of a global strategy toward the Islamic world in the aftermath of the Iranian and Afghan crises, and demonstrates how West Africa was integrated into this framework through unrealized propaganda initiatives and carefully calibrated diplomatic engagement. A close examination of diplomatic exchanges with Senegal, Niger, and Nigeria reveals a cautious and selective deployment of religious rhetoric, in which traditional bilateral concerns and local agency shaped the parameters of engagement.

In doing so, the article advances two main arguments. First, it shows that the instrumentalization of Islam under Carter was neither confined to the "arc of crisis" nor fully coherent in its implementation, but instead geographically differentiated and politically contingent. Second, it demonstrates that this unevenness was not merely the result of bureaucratic limitations in Washington, but reflected the influence of regional dynamics and the agency of West African actors, who actively shaped the scope and content of American engagement. By highlighting the interaction between US global ambitions and independent local dynamics, the article shows that the operationalization – and effectiveness – of Cold War strategies ultimately depended on the specific contexts in which they were deployed, rather than unfolding according to a uniform, top-down logic.

Implications of the Islamic Revival», November 1982, ALA 82-10136, CIA FOIA Reading Room, URL: < <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83S00855R000200010003-0.pdf> >, p. 21 [accessed on 16 June 2026]. While the original digitization renders the specific percentage gradients difficult to distinguish, the map is reproduced here as an illustration of US spatial categorization of "West Africa" in the early 1980s.

1. Early Cold War Relations

Throughout the early post-war decades, West Africa – much like the rest of the continent – occupied a relatively peripheral position in US foreign policy. With the exception of Liberia, a state founded by freed American slaves, the region was largely perceived as falling within the French and British sphere of influence. This self-imposed subordination was paradigmatically articulated by Dean Rusk, Secretary of State under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, who described the United States as only a «junior partner» in Africa in the 1960s, arguing that Europeans powers should retain primary responsibility for African affairs, just as Washington managed Latin American and Asian issues³.

Yet this deference did not imply a lack of strategic interest. On the contrary, Cold War imperatives systematically shaped US engagement in the region, albeit often through indirect channels. Early diplomatic relations with post-colonial West African states were often conducted in close coordination with former colonial powers to avoid provoking a «catastrophic moral reaction» in the latter, simultaneously pressuring for a prompt decision to prevent newly sovereign governments from turning toward Soviet or Arab nationalist partners⁴. Similar considerations led Washington to rely on regional intermediaries, such as Liberian President William Tubman, who was tasked in 1957 with dissuading the government of Ghana from establishing formal diplomatic ties with Moscow⁵.

When West African states appeared to drift toward the Soviet orbit, the US did not hesitate to employ more assertive measures. A notable example is the CIA-supported 1966 coup that overthrew Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, whom US officials viewed as a dangerous ideological vector of Soviet influence in Africa.⁶ More broadly, Washington operated under the prevailing assumption that anti-Americanism in the Global South equated to communism – a simplification that also

³ Quoted in GLEIJESES, Piero, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p. 383.

⁴ In Department of State to the Embassy in France, telegram, 25 September 1958, in SCHWAR, Harriet, SHALOFF, Stanley, LAFANTASIE, Glenn (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Africa, Volume XIV*, Washington, USG Printing Office, 1992, doc. 306, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v14/d306> > [accessed on 16 June 2026], Washington acknowledged France's request to delay US recognition of Guinea, but urged the US Ambassador in Paris to coordinate with his French counterparts to preempt the USSR and Arab nations from establishing diplomatic ties first.

⁵ Richard M. Nixon and William V. S. Tubman, memorandum of conversation, Monrovia, 8 March 1957, in SHALOFF, Stanley and GLENNON, John (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Africa, Volume XVIII*, Washington, USG Printing Office, 1989, doc. 140, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v18/d140> > [accessed on 16 June 2026].

⁶ In Robert W. Komer to President Johnson, memorandum, 12 March 1966, in HOWLAND, Nina and PATTERSON, David (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIV, Africa*, Washington, USG Printing Office, 1999, doc. 260, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/d260> > [accessed on 16 June 2026], Nkrumah was described as «doing more to undermine our interests than any other black African» with his «strongly pro-Communist leanings».

characterized US involvement in the Congo crisis of 1964–65. On that occasion, fears of a communist takeover led the Johnson administration to intervene through support to a mercenary army commissioned to suppress the revolutionary forces and install pro-Western leaders. By contrast, during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the United States largely left mediation to Britain, remaining relatively unconcerned given Nigeria's fundamentally pro-capitalist orientation.⁷

With notable exceptions, during the early Cold War, the United States relied primarily on soft power to counter anti-Americanism and prevent political realignment in West Africa. However, the effectiveness of these efforts was structurally undermined by a glaring contradiction: as Washington sought to project an image of democratic equality abroad, the persistence of racial segregation at home constituted a major liability, complicating diplomatic engagement and providing a powerful rhetorical weapon for Soviet critics.

1.1 Economic and Development Assistance

The intellectual foundations for American engagement in West Africa were rooted in the containment strategies of the early 1950s. National Security Council Report 68 advocated the integration of economic and military instruments to contain the spread of communism, encouraging the use of financial aid and technical assistance as means of cultivating global influence⁸.

Underpinning these initiatives was a pragmatic interest in West Africa's vast natural resources. By 1950, British West Africa had become a critical supplier of raw materials and agricultural commodities essential to the US economy during the Second World War⁹. This economic nexus would define the relationship for decades: Nigeria, the regional powerhouse and primary recipient of US assistance, would emerge by the late 1970s as the second-largest source of US oil imports¹⁰.

Consistent with broader Cold War logics, US assistance was frequently recalibrated in direct response to perceived Soviet influence. This reactive pattern is particularly evident in the late 1950s, when Ghana and Guinea received military aid and economic assistance from the Soviet

⁷ GLEIJESES, Piero, *Conflicting Missions*, cit., pp. 384–386.

⁸ National Security Council, «United States Objectives and Programs for National Security», 14 April 1950 (NSC-68), in PETERSEN, Neal et al. (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, Volume I*, Washington, USG Printing Office, doc. 85, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v01/d85> > [accessed on 16 June 2026].

⁹ Specifically, British West Africa provided over 90% of the US supply of columbite and approximately 80% of its battery-grade manganese reserves. Commercial imports included natural rubber from Liberia; palm oil from the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; cocoa from Nigeria; and ginger from Sierra Leone. See: OYEBADE, Adebayo, FALOLA, Toyin, *West Africa and the United States in Historical Perspective*, in JALLOH, Alusine, FALOLA, Toyin (edited by), *The United States and West Africa: Interactions and Relations*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2008, pp. 17–37.

¹⁰ For a contemporary intelligence assessment of Nigeria's strategic and economic weight, see: CIA National Foreign Assessment Center, West Africa Background Papers for the Vice President, 10 July 1980, NFAC #4902-80, CIA FOIA Reading Room, URL: < <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00287R000101520001-4.pdf> > [accessed on 16 June 2026].

Union. In response, Washington exponentially increased its assistance, which rose from a combined \$3.4 million in 1959 to \$75.5 million by 1962¹¹. In an effort to counter Soviet ties with Nkrumah's Ghana, Washington also provided financial and technical support to the Volta River Project between 1961 and 1965¹².

In the 1970s, US assistance shifted toward a more explicitly humanitarian framework. The catastrophic Sahelian droughts of 1968–1974 prompted a dramatic surge in US bilateral aid to francophone West Africa: between 1972 and 1974, bilateral aid to Niger rose from \$3.8 million to \$21.4 million, while Mali saw an increase from \$1.8 million to \$16.4 million. Similar surges were recorded in Senegal (\$1.9 million to \$8.8 million), Mauritania (\$1.4 million to \$8.6 million) and Chad (\$0.5 million to \$6.8 million), while aid to Burkina Faso and Gambia more than doubled. By the early 1980s, annual disbursements to Senegal and Burkina Faso reached record highs of \$35.7 million and \$30.7 million respectively, marking a transition toward more direct and sustained US involvement in regional development¹³.

1.2 Winning Hearts and Minds

Alongside economic assistance, the United States deployed cultural diplomacy to cultivate a favorable national image and foster ideological alignment in West Africa. President Eisenhower argued that the Cold War battleground had shifted to the economic and propaganda fields¹⁴, prompting the Committee on Information Activities Abroad to recommend a substantial expansion of propaganda efforts in Africa to counter Soviet depictions of American racial injustices.

Consequently, the US Information Agency (USIA) promoted American culture through exchange programs, and the Voice of America (VOA) initiated broadcasts to sub-Saharan Africa in 1956¹⁵. Cultural exchanges guided by USIA “country teams” served key political and psychological purposes: while ostensibly expressing American support for the peaceful evolution of African independence, they sought to showcase the “ever-improving position” of African Americans in American society. In this context, celebrated performers travelled to West African capitals with racially integrated or entirely African-American bands to showcase racial progress; educational exchanges paired American universities with West African institutions; and the Peace Corps

¹¹ BANGURA, Abdul Karim, *U.S. Economic Assistance to West Africa*, in JALLOH, Alusine, FALOLA, Toyin (edited by), *The United States and West Africa*, cit., Table 15.1, pp. 268-304, pp. 270-271.

¹² BELL, Karen, *Developing a “Sense of Community”: U.S. Cultural Diplomacy and the Place of Africa during the Early Cold War Period, 1953-64*, in JALLOH, Alusine, FALOLA, Toyin (edited by), *The United States and West Africa*, cit., pp. 125-146, p. 129.

¹³ Data retrieved from US Agency for International Development and Department of States, ForeignAssistance.gov Country Summary, URL: < <https://foreignassistance.gov/data> > [accessed on 19 March 2026]. For historical consistency, all values are expressed in current USD; cross-referencing with constant-dollar equivalents confirmed the illustrated growth is substantive and not merely inflationary.

¹⁴ Quoted in BELL, Karen, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 132-133.

programme, established under President Kennedy, brought American volunteers to work alongside local communities.

Jazz diplomacy emerged as the centerpiece of these efforts: artists such as Louis Armstrong, Wilbur de Paris, Herbie Mann, and Duke Ellington served as international “race artists”, performing in Accra, Bamako, and Dakar in the 1950s and 60s. The huge impact of these tours was vividly recorded in the local press: Armstrong’s 1956 visit to the Gold Coast (now Ghana) drew crowds reportedly exceeding 100,000 people,¹⁶ while Ellington’s participation in the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar was celebrated as a symbolic representation of cultural exchange and transatlantic connection.¹⁷

These initiatives were complemented by academic partnerships and educational exchanges seeking to foster a new, pro-Western leadership, on the premise that student and teacher exchanges were a vehicle for the indirect penetration of American values. By showcasing high-level intellectual and artistic achievement, African American theater groups from historically black universities provided tangible reinforcement of the USIA’s narrative regarding Black educational advancement¹⁸.

President John F. Kennedy further expanded this framework through the creation of the Peace Corps program, designed to extend American influence at the grassroots level: acknowledging the limited reach of jazz tours and elite educational exchanges, the Kennedy administration sought to engage more substantively with the lives of average citizens. By placing volunteers within local communities, the program aimed to project a service-oriented image of the United States that functioned as a direct counter-narrative to Soviet portrayals of Western imperialism¹⁹.

1.3 The Color Line

Despite these efforts, the intersection of civil rights and foreign policy constituted the single greatest obstacle to American credibility in West Africa. The independence of Ghana in 1957 was emblematic in this regard: not only did it galvanize nationalist movements across Africa, but it also

¹⁶ «He’s off to the Gold Coast!», in *The Gold Coast Today*, 23 May 1956, as reproduced in CELENZA, Anna Harwell (ed. by), «Jazz Ambassador Louis Armstrong, Ghana 1956», 2016, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library, URL: < <https://library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/jazz-ambassador-louis-armstrong-ghana-1956> > [accessed on 16 June 2026].

¹⁷ «Le public dakarois attendait Duke Ellington avec impatience», in *Dakar-Matin*, 5 April 1966, as reproduced in PASLER, Jann, «Music and African Diplomacy at the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres, Dakar, 1966», in *Diplomatica*, 3, 2/2021, pp. 302-334. See also: MURPHY, David, «The first black arts festival was shaped by Cold War politics», in *The Conversation*, 1 April 2016, <https://theconversation.com/the-first-black-arts-festival-was-shaped-by-cold-war-politics-54926>, [accessed on 20 March 2026].

¹⁸ This was the case, for instance, of the Florida A&M University theater group, which toured Nigeria in 1958. See BELL, Karen, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.

¹⁹ «Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Cow Palace, San Francisco», 2 November 1960, in *The American Presidency Project*, URL: < <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/speech-senator-john-f-kennedy-cow-palace-san-francisco-ca-advance-release-text> > [accessed on 20 March 2026]. In this address, Kennedy explicitly framed the Peace Corps as a strategic counter-measure to the “missionaries for communism” being exported by Khrushchev.

emboldened African Americans in their struggle for civil rights and equality. Following his visit to Accra, the then-Vice President Richard Nixon recommended expanding US institutional engagement with Africa – prompted less by a moral reckoning with the inconsistency of «talking equality to the peoples of Africa and Asia and practicing inequality in the United States»²⁰, and more by a pragmatic understanding of Cold War stakes.

In practice, the cultural and diplomatic infrastructure designed to win “hearts and minds” in Africa often exposed Washington’s contradictions. As increasing numbers of West African diplomats, students, and officials visited the United States, they encountered systemic racial discrimination firsthand. Diplomatic incidents became frequent enough to prompt the creation of a Special Protocol Service Section within the State Department to mitigate the diplomatic fallout.²¹ These tensions extended even to cultural diplomacy: during his 1956 tour of Accra, Armstrong reportedly cut short a performance after police used force against the crowd, drawing explicit parallels with racial oppression in the American South.²² Such episodes undermined US propaganda by linking African anti-colonial struggles with the civil rights movement in the United States.

More broadly, paternalistic attitudes within US institutions, combined with continued support for segregationist regimes in southern Africa, further strained relations. Even after the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965), President Johnson’s rhetoric – dismissing leaders like Nkrumah as “arrogant” and lamenting “ungrateful” African Americans²³ – revealed a structural racial bias that cast doubt on Washington’s commitment to equality.

Under the Nixon and Ford administrations, this bias evolved into a policy of strategic neglect toward African states deemed peripheral to the global power dynamics. Under the Nixon Doctrine, high-level diplomatic engagement declined markedly, with visits by African leaders often postponed or cancelled. Notably, Nigeria’s General Gowon faced repeated last-minute cancellations despite Lagos’ growing importance as a major oil supplier in the early 1970s.²⁴

²⁰ DUNNIGAN, Alice, «Nixon Advises: “Clean Jim Crow House At Home,” Then Overseas», in *Atlanta Daily World*, 25 April 1957, as reproduced in Digital Library of Georgia, Georgia Historic Newspapers, URL: < <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn82015425/1957-04-25/ed-1/seq-5/> > [accessed on 21 March 2026]. Nixon’s report to Eisenhower, detailed in the article, argued that eliminating discrimination was a matter of national interest essential to maintaining the good will of African people.

²¹ For accounts of diplomatic incidents, including the refusal of service to Ghana’s finance minister in 1957 and Chadian ambassador in 1961, see: ASSANI, Amzat, *Cultural Imagery and Exchange Programs as Sources of U.S. Soft Power in West Africa: Unfolding U.S. Cultural Relations with West Africa from 1957 to 1991*, PhD Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2010, pp. 122-123; BORSTELMANN, Thomas, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 1, 125; NWAUBANI, Chidiebere Augustus, *The United States and Decolonization in West Africa, 1950-1960*, PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1995, p. 4.

²² CELENZA, Anna Harwell (ed. by), *op. cit.*

²³ BORSTELMANN, Thomas, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, cit., pp. 173-174; NYANG, Sulayman, «US-Africa Relations over the Last Century: An African Perspective», in *Social Research*, 72, 4/2005, pp. 913-934, pp. 929-930.

²⁴ HERSKOVITS, Jean, «Nigeria: Africa’s New Power», in *Foreign Affairs*, 53, 2/1975, pp. 314-333, p. 332.

This institutional retrenchment only came to an end in the mid-1970s, when the collapse of the Portuguese colonial regime and the successful intervention of Cuba and the Soviet Union spurred Washington's anxieties regarding communist expansion, thereby revitalizing its strategic interest in the continent.²⁵ Henry Kissinger's 1976 tour of Africa marked this shift, although his sudden rhetorical embrace of racial equality was widely received with skepticism and viewed as an attempt to counter Soviet influence rather than a genuine shift in values.²⁶

2. Between Moral Renewal and Strategic Continuity

The 1976 presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter represented a paradigmatic shift in American political branding. The former governor of Georgia deliberately distanced his candidacy from the Washington of Vietnam and Watergate, strategically portraying himself as an outsider aligned with a disillusioned electorate.²⁷ Yet beneath the "Jimmy who?" moniker lay a calculated reorientation of US grand strategy: the restoration of "American goodness" functioned less as a purely moral imperative than as a strategic prerequisite for reasserting US global influence at a moment of perceived decline.

Once in office, Carter's commitment to a more humane and humble foreign policy appeared to signal a departure from the «inordinate fear of communism» that had long dictated US engagement with the Global South²⁸. This rhetorical shift, however, did not entail a substantive departure from traditional Cold War logics. As historian Nancy Mitchell has demonstrated, Carter's Africa policy was consistently grounded in containment from the outset, challenging interpretations that locate his "hawkish" turn after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan²⁹. By surrounding himself with seasoned Cold Warriors, Carter ensured that his foreign policy remained oriented toward the overarching goal of countering Soviet influence.

Accordingly, the administration's early years were devoted to advancing an inherited Cold War agenda³⁰. A series of largely unforeseen crises – spanning Eastern and Southern Africa, Iran, and

²⁵ MITCHELL, Nancy, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2016, pp. 13-16.

²⁶ HERSKOVITS, Jean, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

²⁷ GLAD, Betty, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009, pp. 7-8; MITCHELL, Nancy, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-25.

²⁸ «Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame», 22 May 1977, in *The American Presidency Project*, URL: < <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-commencement-exercises-the-university-notre-dame> > [accessed on 23 March 2026].

²⁹ See, for instance, SKIDMORE, David, *Reversing Course: Carter's Foreign Policy, Domestic Policy, and the Failure of Reform*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1996.

³⁰ Key initiatives illustrating this continuity include the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China, viewed as a strategic counterweight to Soviet influence; the negotiation of the Panama Canal Treaties; and the pursuit of SALT II to institutionalize détente. For a comprehensive overview of Carter's

Afghanistan – would nonetheless dramatically reshape both the context and the instruments of US foreign policy. Understanding how West Africa was subsequently integrated into this evolving framework requires examining how these crises were interpreted and operationalized within the administration.

2.1. Human Rights, Race, and Superpower Competition in Africa

As Africa emerged as a primary theater of Cold War competition in the late 1970s, the Carter administration sought to address the “color line” liability that had historically compromised US credibility in the Global South. By elevating human rights to a central pillar of foreign policy and appointing Andrew Young as the first African American ambassador to the United Nations, Carter aimed to restore America’s image in Africa. This moral recalibration, however, remained embedded within a strategic framework: human rights functioned as an instrument for reshaping US influence in contexts where overt alignment with authoritarian regimes had proven counterproductive³¹.

The tension between human rights and Cold War imperatives became evident as early as 1977 in the administration’s response to the conflict in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, a long-standing US ally in the region, had tilted toward the Soviet orbit following the 1974 revolution that brought the Marxist-oriented Derg to power. In light of Somalia’s growing frustration with Soviet support for Ethiopia, Carter instructed Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski to «move in every possible way to get Somalia to be our friend».³² Initially framed in terms of economic and humanitarian assistance, US support gradually extended to indirect military aid, despite clear indications that Somali leader Siad Barre intended to use such assistance to pursue territorial claims in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia³³.

Similarly, the administration’s efforts to resolve the Rhodesian crisis were driven less by a principled commitment to racial justice than by concerns that prolonged instability might facilitate Soviet or Cuban influence. While some scholars have interpreted Carter’s approach as a principled commitment to human rights, it was arguably aligned with realpolitik considerations³⁴. In essential continuity with Henry Kissinger’s earlier efforts, Carter sought to manage the transition to majority rule in a way that would ensure the emergence of pro-Western leadership, preventing the

foreign policy agenda, see: GLAD, Betty, *An Outsider in the White House*, cit.; STRONG, Robert, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2000.

³¹ NOTAKER, Hallvard, SCOTT-SMITH, Giles, SNYDER, David (edited by), *Reasserting America in the 1970s: US Public Diplomacy and the Rebuilding of America’s Image Abroad*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016, offers an extensive analysis of how the US attempted to repair its global standing through public diplomacy.

³² «The White House: With Jimmy from Dawn to Midnight», in *Time*, 18 April 1977, URL: < <https://time.com/archive/6848635/the-white-house-with-jimmy-from-dawn-to-midnight/> > [accessed on 23 March 2026].

³³ MITCHELL, Nancy, *Jimmy Carter in Africa*, cit., pp. 199-202.

³⁴ For a counter-perspective, see: DEROCHE, Andrew J., «Standing Firm for Principles: Jimmy Carter and Zimbabwe», in *Diplomatic History*, 23, 4/1999, pp. 657-685.

replication of the Angolan scenario, where Soviet and Cuban support of revolutionary forces had facilitated the establishment of a Marxist government³⁵.

Rhodesia thus represented what Mitchell characterized as the “soft underbelly” of US Africa policy in the 1970s, where the intertwinement of race and the Cold War created a paralyzing strategic dilemma: direct intervention against Cuban-backed forces risked associating Washington with Ian Smith’s white minority regime, while disengagement threatened both regional influence and international credibility³⁶. Within this constrained framework, the language of human rights provided a means of aligning US policy with African nationalist aspirations, securing the indispensable support of regional powers like Nigeria and preventing the Soviet bloc from claiming to be the sole champion of African liberation.

2.2. Iran, Afghanistan and the Limits of Cold War Interpretation

The same interpretive framework shaped the administration’s reading of events in Iran and Afghanistan, where policymakers often filtered complex political transformations through Cold War lenses, leading to a systematic underestimation of the autonomous mobilizing power of political Islam. Within the National Security Council (NSC), Zbigniew Brzezinski and his adviser Paul B. Henze advocated exploiting religious disaffection within the Soviet Union to rally global Muslim opinion against Moscow, suggesting that the Islamic revival unleashed by the Iranian revolution «could prove to be Achilles heel for the Soviets»³⁷.

The Iranian Revolution had caught Washington largely unprepared, exposing structural limitations in its ability to respond to a new non-state, ideologically driven movement. After months of mass demonstrations, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s followers toppled the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi – a bulwark of US influence in the Persian Gulf who had come to power through a CIA-backed coup in 1953. The subsequent decision to admit the Shah to the United States provided the symbolic pretext for the seizure of the US Embassy and the hostage-taking of fifty-two American personnel by a group of militant students – an act publicly endorsed by Khomeini as part of his broader denunciation of the United States as the “Great Satan”³⁸.

³⁵ Mitchell argues that Carter inherited Kissinger’s “nightmare” of a Cuban-Soviet axis in southern Africa, which they both viewed as an increasingly significant arena of Cold War competition. MITCHELL, Nancy, *Jimmy Carter in Africa*, cit., pp. 669-670.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 670-678.

³⁷ Paul B. Henze to Zbigniew Brzezinski, memorandum, 22 January 1979, as reproduced in Frank C. Carlucci to David Aaron, memorandum, 26 January 1979, in ZIERLER, David, HOWARD, Adam (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, vol. XII, *Afghanistan*, Washington, USG Publishing Office, 2018, doc. 34, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v12/d34> > [accessed on 23 March 2026].

³⁸ For an overview of events in Iran, see: SAIKAL, Amin, «Islamism, the Iranian revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan», in LEFLER, Melvyn, WESTAD, Odd Arne (edited by), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. III, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 112-134.

The administration's failure to anticipate or effectively respond to the revolution stemmed not only from intelligence failures and advisory oversights³⁹, but more fundamentally from a misreading of the religious opposition to the Shah. Internal deliberations reveal a persistent tendency to dismiss Islamic revivalism as a localized anomaly rather than a broader trans-regional trend. Key architects of foreign policy, including Brzezinski and Young, consistently underestimated the political traction of Islam, with Young notably asserting that the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic state in Iran was "impossible"⁴⁰.

As the Iranian crisis continued to dominate Washington's attention, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 presented both a challenge and an opportunity. While publicly greeted with profound frustration, the intervention had in fact been anticipated within the administration, which had already begun providing covert support to the *mujahideen* resistance as early as the summer of 1979⁴¹.

Within hours of the invasion, Brzezinski argued that Soviet aggression could be turned to Washington's advantage by framing the conflict as a theological struggle between devout Muslims and an atheistic superpower⁴². This strategy was epitomized both in his direct incitement of insurgents along the Afghan-Pakistani border – where he explicitly validated the religious motives of the fighters⁴³ – and in Carter's own rhetoric, which characterized the invasion as «a deliberate effort by a powerful atheistic government to subjugate an independent Islamic people»⁴⁴.

³⁹ GLAD, Betty, *An Outsider in the White House*, cit., pp. 176-177.

⁴⁰ In early 1979, Brzezinski privately reassured Carter that the «political strength of Islamic fundamentalism» was unlikely to be «the wave of the future», as quoted in GLAD, Betty, *An Outsider in the White House*, cit., p. 174. Young's dismissive projection is quoted in SIMPSON, George, «Seeking Gandhi, finding Khomeini: How America failed to understand the nature of the religious opposition of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the Iranian Revolution», in *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 8, 3/2017, pp. 233-255, p. 233.

⁴¹ After an attempt to wean Kabul away from Moscow through diplomatic engagement, the murder of Ambassador Adolph Dubs led to the victory of the "hawkish" faction within the administration, who advocated for clandestine support for the *mujahideen* to «increase the price» of Soviet involvement. See: RAKOVE, Robert, *Days of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan Before the Soviet Invasion*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2023, pp. 210-215.

⁴² The «extraordinary opportunity» to enhance US «psychological posture in Muslim minds, and to erode Soviet identification with the non-aligned countries» following the invasion of Afghanistan was articulated by the Director of the International Communication Agency in response to Brzezinski's request. Quoted in GIL GUERRERO, Javier, «Propaganda Broadcasts and Cold War Politics: The Carter Administration's Outreach to Islam», in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 19, 1/2017, pp. 4-37, p. 25.

⁴³ During a 1980 visit to the Khyber Pass, Brzezinski urged the *mujahideen* to double their efforts to get their homes and their mosques back again, reassuring that their fight would prevail, «because your cause is right and God is on your side». See: BATTEN, Simon, *Cold War: Soldiers of God [1977-1981]*, BBC/Turner Broadcasting System, United States, 1998, 47', available via the Internet Archive, URL: < https://archive.org/details/Cold_War_1998_CNN_Kenneth_Branagh > [accessed on 24 March 2026]. See also: STERBA, James, «Brzezinski at the Pass: Bonhomie, Bullets», in *The New York Times*, 4 February 1980, URL: < <https://www.nytimes.com/1980/02/04/archives/brzezinski-at-the-pass-bonhomie-bullets-talk-is-constantly-of-wars.html> > [accessed on 24 March 2026].

⁴⁴ Carter's televised address of January 1980 is quoted in GLAD, Betty, *An Outsider in the White House*, cit., pp. 199-200.

3. Geopolitics of Faith: Ambitions and Limits

Events in Iran and Afghanistan prompted Washington to formulate a comprehensive strategy toward the Muslim world. This took the form of a global campaign directed at Muslim populations, combining diplomatic initiatives with an expanded propaganda apparatus, in which religious identity was weaponized to achieve traditional containment goals⁴⁵. Initially conceived as a damage-control effort aimed at amending relations between the United States and Muslim societies in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, this strategy rapidly evolved into an attempt to redirect Islamic political mobilization against the Soviet Union following its invasion of Afghanistan. As encapsulated by NSC staffer William Kirby, the wave of Islamic sentiment unleashed by the Iranian revolution was no longer to be regarded «as a challenge to be confronted but as an opportunity to be seized»⁴⁶.

West Africa – home to a politically diverse Muslim population estimated by the CIA at sixty million in the early 1980s – was both deeply embedded in transnational Islamic networks and central to a set of critical geopolitical balances. Although historiography has largely privileged US engagement with the “arc of crisis”,⁴⁷ contemporary intelligence assessments and diplomatic maneuvers suggest that West Africa gradually emerged as a distinct, yet largely overlooked, front in US public and religious diplomacy.

Regional developments had in fact been monitored with growing concern since the early 1970s. A 1973 intelligence report identified a «growing Arab influence» in West Africa, noting that pan-Islamic sentiment was increasingly leveraged by Arab states to secure West African diplomatic alignment on the Arab-Israeli conflict⁴⁸. This trend acquired added significance later that year, when the oil embargo imposed by the Arab nations of the OPEC in retaliation to US support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War sharply increased Washington’s dependence on Nigerian energy supplies. At the same time, policymakers expressed mounting concern over the expansion of Soviet influence across the region, both through direct engagement with socialist-oriented regimes – such

⁴⁵ GIL GUERRERO, Javier, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-34.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Brzezinski famously argued that «if you draw an arc on the globe, stretching from Chittagong (Bangladesh) through Islamabad to Aden, you will be pointing to the area of currently our greatest vulnerability». See: Zbigniew Brzezinski to President Carter, memorandum, 2 December 1978, in AHLBERG, Kristin, HOWARD, Adam (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy*, Washington, USG Printing Office, 2014, doc. 100, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d100> [accessed on 23 March 2026]. This geographical framing parallels the regional focus of works such as PRESTON, Andrew, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, New York, Anchor Books, 2012; MUEHLENBECK, Philip (edited by), *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2012.

⁴⁸ Bureau of Intelligence and Research, «West Africa: Arab Influence Grows», Research Study RAAS-1, 26 January 1973, in KEEFER, Edward et al. (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume VE-6, Documents on Africa, 1969-1972*, Washington, USG Printing Office, 2006, doc. 2, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve06/d2> > [accessed on 24 March 2026].

as those in Benin, Guinea, and Mali – and through Libya, widely perceived in Washington as a Soviet proxy⁴⁹. Taken together, these dynamics uniquely positioned West Africa at the intersection of energy security, Cold War competition, and public diplomacy.

3.1. From Damage Control to Cold War Asset

In the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the Carter administration attempted to mitigate anti-American sentiment through propaganda broadcasts, cultural exchanges, and public affirmations of respect for Islam. These religious appeals were nonetheless dismissed by Ayatollah Khomeini as insincere and manipulative, and failed to resolve the hostage crisis⁵⁰. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan marked a decisive turning point: as Brzezinski argued, the United States could shift from a defensive to an offensive posture by redirecting Islamic fervor against the “atheistic” Soviet Union. By supporting the mujahideen and coordinating propaganda efforts with Muslim allies, Washington could in his view transform a regional liability into a «compensating factor» that channeled the anger of revolutionary Islam away from Washington and toward Moscow⁵¹.

The intellectual foundations of this strategy can be traced to Brzezinski’s inner circle. Paul Henze argued that the United States required a coherent, global approach to Islam in order to counter «Moscow’s ride on the anti-imperialist wave», suggesting that Washington expose the Soviet Union’s «tawdry record towards Islam»⁵². In collaboration with academic specialists, he helped design a set of coordinated diplomatic and propaganda initiatives intended to reach Muslim-majority societies globally⁵³.

On the diplomatic front, proposed measures included symbolic gestures by President Carter – such as visits to mosques and public recognition of key moments in the Islamic calendar; consultations with academic specialists and religious authorities; and official receptions for delegations of Muslim leaders. These initiatives were complemented by efforts to refine the administration’s public discourse on Islam, projecting an image of cultural sensitivity and religious respect. In parallel, propaganda initiatives sought to expand radio broadcasting toward Muslim audiences, intensify cultural and educational exchanges, and mobilize the approximately 100.000 Muslim students enrolled in American universities as informal ambassadors of US goodwill toward Islam⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ For a contemporary assessment see CIA, «West Africa: Patterns and Implications of the Islamic Revival».

⁵⁰ GIL GUERRERO, Javier, *op. cit.*, p. 10; JONES, Blake, «How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem? The Religious Dimension of the Iranian Hostage Crisis», in *Diplomatic History*, 39, 3/2015, pp. 425-442.

⁵¹ Quoted in GIL GUERRERO, Javier, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 8, 11-12.

⁵³ Henze’s collaboration with academic circles is outlined in KALINOVSKY, Artemy, *Encouraging Resistance: Paul Henze, the Bennington school, and the crisis of détente*, in KEMPER, Michael, KALINOVSKY, Artemy (eds.), *Reassessing Orientalism: Interlocking Orientologies during the Cold War*, New York, Routledge, 2015, pp. 211-227.

⁵⁴ GIL GUERRERO, Javier, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

These proposals were partially institutionalized in a Special Coordinating Committee meeting on 11 December 1979, which endorsed the expansion of broadcasting capabilities directed at Muslim audiences. While prioritizing the “arc of crisis”, these programs were intended to reach «Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia», emphasizing the contrast between US and Soviet approaches to Islam, particularly with regard to the treatment of Muslim minorities within Soviet borders⁵⁵. Acting on Brzezinski’s recommendation, Carter formally approved the plan on 2 January 1980, including provisions for expanding VOA broadcasts in Hausa, a language widely spoken across West Africa⁵⁶.

Despite its ambitious scope, the implementation of this strategy encountered significant bureaucratic and diplomatic obstacles, including funding delays, interagency disagreements, and unsuccessful attempts to secure transmitter facilities in Saudi Arabia⁵⁷. In his own retrospective account of results, Brzezinski reported that, although eleven additional hours of daily broadcasting had been introduced, only two new languages – Farsi and Dari – had been added, thereby falling short of the initial global ambitions⁵⁸.

3.2. Propaganda Shortcomings and Diplomatic Efforts in West Africa

Even as Hausa-language broadcasting failed to materialize, diplomatic initiatives contributed to refining the administration’s public discourse on Islam and projecting an image of cultural sensitivity and religious respect. Within this framework, West Africa emerged as a secondary front in which such discourse could be cautiously articulated, albeit subordinated to security and economic concerns.

Throughout the Carter administration, US engagement with the region remained largely structured around traditional containment logics. Concerns over Soviet military activity in Mali, for example, prompted internal deliberations on potential countermeasures as early as 1977.⁵⁹ By mid-1979, intelligence assessments pointed to an intensification of Soviet activity in West Africa, albeit not necessarily to Moscow’s benefit⁶⁰. More consistently, diplomatic and intelligence

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 26-31.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁵⁹ Proposed countermeasures to Soviet military ties with Mali included the use of intermediaries such as France and Nigeria, but were ultimately abandoned after Ambassador Byrne warned that external interference would be deemed «unacceptable» by a government that viewed itself as «independent and non-aligned, acting in its own interests and no one else’s». See: NSC Staff, «Soviet Activity in Mali», undated, doc. 23; Stansfield Turner to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 18 June 1977, doc. 24; and Embassy Bamako to State, telegram, 26 July 1977, doc. 27; all in WOODROOFE, Louise, HOWARD, Adam (edited by), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, vol. XVII, Part 2, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington, USG Publishing Office, 2018.

⁶⁰ Ghana rejected a \$5 million aid offer; Nigeria requested the withdrawal of Soviet military advisers; and Guinea restricted transit for Soviet military equipment to Mali. CIA, National Intelligence Officer for Africa, «Warning Report: Sub-Saharan Africa», 21 August 1979, NFAC #4425-79, CIA FOIA Reading Room, URL: < <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83B01027R000300100004-3.pdf> > [accessed on 24 March 2026].

reporting highlighted efforts by Qadhafi's Libya to destabilize West African governments by leveraging the Islamic sentiment that was resurgent across the region⁶¹.

In response to growing anxieties over Soviet bloc ties, Washington intensified diplomatic engagement with regional partners. This renewed focus culminated in Vice President Mondale's July 1980 tour of West Africa. While he led the US delegation in bilateral talks with Nigeria, the visit was extended to include Senegal, Niger, and the Cape Verde Islands. Supported by detailed CIA briefing materials emphasizing the «predominantly Muslim» character of these societies, Mondale's mission offers a clear articulation of US strategic interests in the region⁶². The mobilization of religion was neither uniform nor systematic across the region: instead, it was deployed selectively, reflecting a cautious and spatially differentiated approach.

In Senegal, diplomatic engagement reflected a broader effort to consolidate relations with a historically pro-Western regime that had received relatively limited high-level attention during the early Carter years⁶³. By 1980, concerns over political succession and potential shifts in foreign policy orientation prompted renewed diplomatic activity⁶⁴. In Washington, during a private meeting with President Léopold Senghor, Carter emphasized the «compatibility of ideas» between the two countries regarding the Soviet and Cuban presence in Africa, calling for greater Western cohesion in opposing «the use of Soviet surrogates to destabilize Africa»⁶⁵. Framed in the familiar language of shared democratic values and human rights, Mondale's rhetoric in Dakar similarly underscored concerns over Soviet activities in the continent, and over the «unacceptability of Soviet troops» in Afghanistan⁶⁶. Notably, this framing deeply resonated with Senghor's own

⁶¹ Perceptions of Libyan destabilization were reinforced by regional actors, notably Senegal and Niger, and subsequently integrated into US Cold War frameworks. See: MemCons with Senghor (1978, 1980) and Embassy Niamey to State, 25 July 1980, all in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, vol. XVII, part 2; CIA, «Benin: A Growing Base for Libyan Subversion», 4 November 1981. On local discourse, see AHOUNOU, Alfred, «Conférence de solidarité avec le Peuple arabe libyen : le Bénin réaffirme la nécessité de renforcer le front anti-impérialiste», in *Ehuzu*, 17 September 1981, as reproduced in Islam West Africa Collection, URL: < https://islam.zmo.de/s/afrique_ouest/item/45969 > [accessed on 31 March 2026].

⁶² CIA, West Africa Background Papers; and MONDALE, Walter, *Vice Presidential Papers*, Box 153, Folder 14.7B, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul (digitized copy provided by the archive).

⁶³ Available records indicate only one formal meeting between Carter and Senghor in June 1978, focused on containment strategies and regional security concerns. See: Jimmy Carter and Leopold Sedar Senghor, memorandum of conversation, 8 June 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, vol. XVII, part 2, doc. 35, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p2/d35> > [accessed on 20 June 2026].

⁶⁴ CIA assessments suggested Senghor's successor would «almost certainly not be as forceful a proponent of Western views on the international scene». See: Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, «US-Senegalese Relations», 25 March 1980, CIA FOIA Reading Room, URL: < <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00287R000100780001-7.pdf> > [accessed on 20 June 2026].

⁶⁵ Carter and Senghor, memorandum of conversation, 8 April 1980, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, vol. XVII, part 2, doc. 54, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p2/d54> > [accessed on 20 June 2026].

⁶⁶ Vice President Mondale's Press Comments, Dakar, Senegal, 18 July 1980, *Mondale Papers*, Box 153, Folder 14.7B.

strategic positioning, as he sought to leverage Cold War tensions to secure sustained economic support from Western partners⁶⁷.

A similar rhetoric was deployed in Niger, where Mondale expressed disquiet about «Soviet aggression against its peaceful, non-aligned neighbor» while avoiding explicit references to Islam.⁶⁸ Although Niger's strategic position within transnational Islamic networks was acknowledged in intelligence assessments, its ties with Libya created a more delicate diplomatic environment. As a result, the religious dimension remained largely implicit, with emphasis placed instead on shared political values and multilateral cooperation. In this context, Mondale's praise of President's Kountché international role – serving as the vice-chairman of both the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, and sitting in the UN Security Council – served to reinforce Niger's diplomatic alignment without direct recourse to religious discourse⁶⁹.

Despite hosting the largest Muslim population in West Africa⁷⁰, Nigeria was approached with similar caution. CIA assessments prepared for Mondale's visit emphasized that the country's internal religious divisions required President Shagari to maintain «a low profile on contentious Middle East and Islamic issues». While Kano was identified as a potential epicenter for rising Islamic activism, US intelligence did not yet regard this as a significant political threat: Muslim elites, they reported, remained broadly aligned with the government and were more immediately concerned with the risk posed by Communism and Libyan-sponsored radicalism, of which Lagos too was growing increasingly wary⁷¹.

Within this context, engagement with Nigeria's Muslim north offered a seizable opportunity to project an image of the United States as both respectful of and compatible with the moderate forces of Islam. In a move that suggests an effort to extend the administration's broader Islamic outreach into West Africa, Mondale visited Kano between negotiations in Lagos. There, he met with the Emir, whose vision of Islam as a «modern as well as old» force, adaptable to changing circumstances, was

⁶⁷ In Dakar, Senghor emphasized that Africa could not resist communist penetration without stronger Western support, citing low aid levels (0.30% of GNP for Europe, 0.25% for the US). See: US and Senegalese Delegations, memorandum of conversation, Dakar, 18 July 1980, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, vol. XVII, part 2, doc. 63, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p2/d63> > [accessed on 20 June 2026].

⁶⁸ Remarks of Vice President Walter F. Mondale, News Comments, Niamey Niger, 20 July 1980, *Mondale Papers*, Box 153, Folder 14.7B.

⁶⁹ Remarks of Vice President Walter F. Mondal, Dinner Toast, Niamey, Niger, 19 July 1980, *Mondale Papers*, Box 153, Folder 14.7B.

⁷⁰ CIA estimates placed Nigeria's Muslim population at approximately 40.1 million (47% of the national population) by 1984, representing nearly two-thirds of the region's Muslims. Although compiled later, the report draws on late-1970s intelligence reporting. See: Central Intelligence Agency, «Islam and Politics: A Compendium», Reference Aid, April 1984, NESA 84-10092, CIA FOIA Reading Room, URL: < <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84S00927R000300110003-7.pdf> > [accessed on 20 June 2026].

⁷¹ CIA, West Africa Background Papers. In retrospect, the relatively cautious assessment appears striking, considering the outbreak of the Kano riots only months later.

saluted⁷². The tone of this encounter, marked by respect for tradition alongside an emphasis on modernity, constituted a clear form of discursive signaling aligned with broader efforts to project cultural sensitivity.

Yet the central pillar of this relationship remained Washington's dependence on Nigerian oil- In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, CIA analysts warned that Lagos had begun adopting a more assertive oil policy that «for the first time involved the use of Nigerian oil as a political weapon»⁷³. This shift exposed the asymmetry of the relationship and effectively reaffirmed Nigeria's status as a critical negotiating partner, capable of influencing US policy priorities. This imbalance permeated diplomatic practice, with Washington displaying marked sensitivity to Nigerian concerns, extending beyond security and energy to encompass commercial and educational issues⁷⁴. Beyond its economic significance, Nigeria functioned as a de facto anchor of regional stability in US strategic thinking, with its political cohesion viewed as essential to limiting Soviet and Libyan influence. Ultimately, Lagos's capacity to leverage its strategic position underscores the extent to which US policy in West Africa was shaped not only by Cold War imperatives, but also by the agency of regional actors.

⁷² Remarks of Vice President Walter Mondale, Emir's Palace, Kano, Nigeria, 21 July 1980, *Mondale Papers*, Box 153, Folder 14.7B.

⁷³ This strategy sought to condition continued US access to Nigerian oil as a "preferred costumer" on Washington's support for majority rule in southern Africa and its commitment to import Nigerian liquified natural gas. See: Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, «Nigeria: Oil and Politics», November 1979, PA 79-10517, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, vol. XVII, pt. 2, doc. 51, URL: < <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p2/d51> > [accessed on 20 June 2026].

⁷⁴ While mutually beneficial, educational cooperation illustrates how strategic dependence extended US responsiveness to Nigerian concerns beyond security and energy. Following Nigerian dissatisfaction, Carter instructed that «even the small problems» be referred to the Secretary of State, and the US agreed to consider multiple-entry visas for students. See: MemCons with Obasanjo, 2 April 1978, doc. 33; and with Shagari, 7 October 1980, doc. 69; and Tarnoff to Brzezinski, 26 August 1980, doc. 67; all in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, vol. XVII, part 2.

Conclusions

This study has shown that, although the Carter administration articulated an increasingly global approach to Islam as a component of Cold War strategy, its implementation in West Africa remained partial, cautious, and uneven. Far from constituting a fully integrated regional front, West Africa occupied an ambiguous position within this broader framework. Its strategic significance – at the intersection of energy security, Cold War competition, and transnational Islamic and non-aligned networks – made it a key site of engagement; yet the form and scope of US initiatives in the region were decisively shaped by local sensitivities and the agency of regional actors. At the same time, the planned expansion of Hausa-language broadcasting to engage regional Muslim audiences ultimately failed to materialize, revealing the practical and bureaucratic limits of Washington's global ambitions.

A close examination of diplomatic exchanges during the final year of the Carter presidency further indicates that the absence of fully operational propaganda efforts did not preclude the articulation of a distinct discourse on Islam in the region, which was conveyed selectively through high-level diplomatic engagement, most notably during Vice President Walter Mondale's 1980 tour of West Africa. Its deployment, however, was neither uniform nor systematic. In Senegal and Niger, religious references remained largely implicit, subordinated to familiar Cold War language emphasizing shared political values and opposition to Soviet influence. By contrast, engagement with Muslim authorities in northern Nigeria provided a more strategic setting in which to signal respect for Islamic traditions and their compatibility with political stability and modernization. These variations point to a calibrated and context-dependent approach, in which the religious dimension of US diplomacy was adapted to local political sensitivities rather than applied as a coherent regional strategy.

More broadly, the case of West Africa underscores the extent to which US efforts to integrate Islam into Cold War policy were constrained not only by institutional limitations, but also by the geopolitical and economic realities of the region itself. Nowhere was this more evident than in Nigeria, whose strategic importance as a major oil supplier and regional power invested it with significant leverage in its negotiations with Washington. This asymmetry shaped both the tone and priorities of US diplomacy, limiting the scope for ideological experimentation and reinforcing a pragmatic emphasis on stability and cooperation. In this context, West African actors did not merely receive or react to US initiatives, but actively shaped their contours, imposing constraints that contributed to the uneven and selective character of Washington's Islamic outreach.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the incorporation of Islam into US foreign policy at the end of the Carter presidency was less coherent and more geopolitically differentiated than existing accounts of late Cold War strategy often imply. In West Africa, religious diplomacy did not

emerge as a fully fledged strategic instrument, but rather as a flexible and subordinate component of a broader engagement structured by traditional concerns of containment, resource security, and regional stability. By highlighting the uneven extension of this strategy beyond the “arc of crisis” and the decisive role of local agency in shaping its implementation, the article demonstrates that the operationalization of US global ambitions depended fundamentally on the regional contexts in which they were negotiated.

L'AUTRICE

Laura MASCHIO ha conseguito la laurea magistrale in Relazioni internazionali presso l'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, con una tesi sulle relazioni tra Stati Uniti e Africa occidentale durante la presidenza di Jimmy Carter. Il suo lavoro si colloca all'intersezione tra storia della Guerra fredda e storia dell'Africa, con particolare attenzione al Sahel. Ha maturato esperienza nell'analisi di policy a Bruxelles e attualmente collabora con il Centro de Estudios de Política Internacional dell'Università di Buenos Aires, dove contribuisce a un progetto di ricerca sulle dinamiche di sicurezza e cooperazione nel Sahel contemporaneo.

URL: < <https://www.studistorici.com/progett/autori/#Maschio> >