

HISTORICAL SECURITY COUNCIL
Topic B: Resolving The Iranian Hostage
Crisis (1979)

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SALMUN 2014

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Background Information

Overview

The Iran hostage crisis was a diplomatic crisis between Iran and the United States. The Crisis began on November 4th, when 52 Americans were held hostage after a group of Islamist students and militants, in support of the Iranian Revolution, invaded the American Embassy in Tehran. American historians in the past have described the hostage crisis as a muddle of "vengeance and mutual incomprehension". The Iranian hostage crisis was widely seen as an act of defiance against the United States; since the US was a supporter of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was recently overthrown by the revolution.



The Shah was Iran's supreme leader and he had been established to power in a 1953 coup organized by the CIA against the democratically elected nationalist Iranian government, led by the anti-Soviet and anti-British Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. However, years later, in the 1979 Revolution, a hostile nationalist movement started to grow within Iran, which eventually led to the hostage crisis. In the United States, the hostage-taking was seen as an outrage violating a centuries-old principle of international law granting diplomats' immunity from arrest and diplomatic compounds' inviolability. In the Middle East, the crisis reinforced the prestige of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the political supremacy of those who supported theocracy and resisted any relations with the Western nations. The crisis also marked the beginning of U.S. legal action and the international economic sanctions planted against Iran in the international spectrum.

The Start of the Revolution

It was in 1979 that Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, had been overthrown in a revolution, which would later on be known as the Iranian Revolution. For several decades prior to his deposition, the United States had allied with and supported the Shah. During World War II, Allied powers and the Soviet Union occupied Iran and required Reza Shah, the existing Shah of Iran at the time, to abdicate in favor of his son: Reza Pahlavi. This happened because the Allies feared that Reza Shah intended to align his oil rich country with Nazi Germany during the war. However, the Allies strongest motive to force the Shah's abdication was due to Reza Shah's Declaration of Neutrality, in which he refused to allow Iranian territory to be used to supply and act as a transport medium to the Soviet Union for its war effort against Germany. Iran was subsequently called "The Bridge of Victory" by Winston Churchill because of its importance in the allied victory.

In the 1950s, the Shah was engaged in a power struggle with Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq an immediate descendant of the previous monarchy, the Qajar dynasty. It was in 1953 that the British and US spy agencies helped Iranian royalists depose Mosaddeq's government in a military coup named Operation Ajax, which restored the Shah back to power. Thus, the Shah appointed himself a supreme king rather than as a constitutional monarch, with the aim of assuming complete control of the government and purging the disloyal. History records confirm that the US support and funding of the Shah continued until after the coup, with the CIA training the Iranian government's secret police, SAVAK. In succeeding decades, due to the foreign cultural and political US intervention, this lead to the overthrow of the Shah and prolonged hatred among terrorist organizations, as well as the public, of the US customs.

The Crisis:

Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, a Biology student at that time, planned what would become the Iranian Hostage crisis. He pursued heads of the Islamic associations of Tehran's main universities, and organized a anti-American

group known as the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line. According to Ebrahim, "the organization's aim was to object to the American government by going to their embassy and occupying it for several hours. We believed that announcing our objections from within the occupied compound would carry our message to the world in a much more firm and effective way; we intended to detain the diplomats for a few days, maybe one week, but no more".



The Iranian Hostage crisis had an overwhelming media coverage that indicated the fear of an American-backed return by the Shah. This was the reason stated publically by Ebrahim for the hostage crisis. However, later on, students involved in the crisis claimed that the true cause of the seizure was the long-standing U.S. support for the Shah's oppressive regime. Vital parts of the Islamic Revolution were propaganda and demonstrations against the United States and against President Jimmy Carter. After the Shah's entry into the United States for exile purposes, the Ayatollah Khomeini called for anti-American street demonstrations. Therefore, in November 4th, 1979, such demonstration occurred. This demonstration was organized by Iranian student unions loyal to Khomeini, which took place outside the walled compound housing the US Embassy.

According to BBC, it was around 6:30 a.m. on November 4th that the ringleaders gathered between 300 and 500 students in a university campus to discuss the possible actions against the Shah. These students were thereafter known as Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's



Line. Initially, the organization's plan was to only make a symbolic occupation, release statements to the press, and leave when government security forces came to restore order. However, little did they know that things would escalate to drastic proportions. "We don't mean any harm", said one of students involved in the occupation, "the idea was to make a peaceful symbolic demonstration". However, the occupation purposes changed when it became clear later, that the guards use of deadly force would instigate the large angry crowd that had gathered outside the compound to cheer the occupiers and jeer the hostages. According to one embassy staff member, buses full of demonstrators began to appear outside the embassy shortly after the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line broke through the gates.

According to Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, when he came to Qom to tell the Imam about the incident, Khomeini told the minister to "go and kick them out". However, later that evening, back in Tehran, the minister heard on the radio that Imam Khomeini had issued a statement supporting the seizure and calling it "the second revolution", and the



embassy an "American spy den in Tehran". Hence, things become more evident for the international spectrum that this was a hostile act against the West supported by the government, which initially was not.

Timeline

1953 August - Mossadeq is overthrown in a coup engineered by the British and American intelligence services. General Fazlollah Zahedi is proclaimed as prime minister and the Shah returns.

1963 January - The Shah embarks on a campaign to modernize and westernize the country. He launches the 'White Revolution', a program of land reform and social and economic modernization. During the late 1960's the Shah became increasingly dependent on the secret police (SAVAK) in controlling those opposition movements critical of his reforms.

1978 September - The Shah's policies alienate the clergy and his authoritarian rule leads to riots, strikes and mass demonstrations. Martial law is imposed.

1979 January - As the political situation deteriorates, the Shah and his family are forced into exile.

November 1979, Tehran: Iran hostage crisis begins with takeover of US Embassy in Tehran.

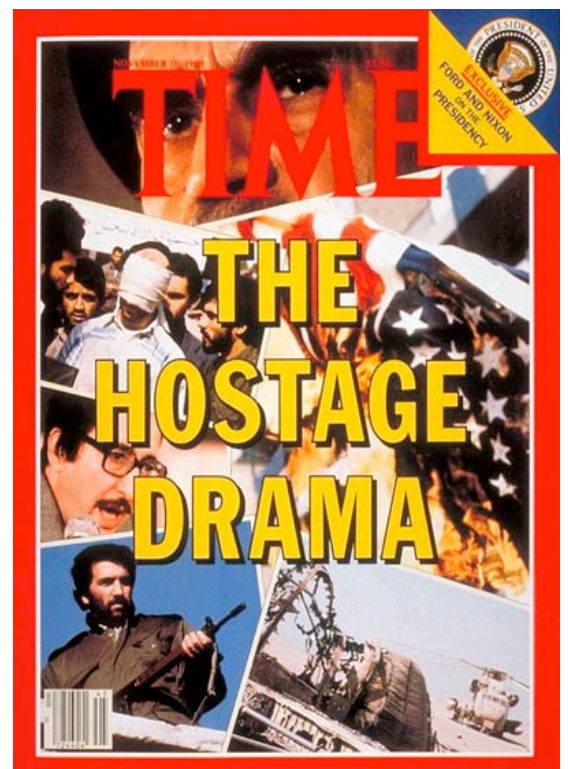
19-20 November 1979, Tehran: 13 hostages released

5 January 1980, New York: Charles Cogan meets with Cyrus Hashemi and Jamshid Hashemi in New York. The Hashemis promised to provide back channels to top Iranian officials, but asked for financial support for Ahmad Madani's presidential campaign, which they received.

25 January 1980, Iran: Iranian presidential election, 1980 (won by Abulhassan Banisadr)

28 January 1980, Tehran: 6 US diplomats who had evaded capture were extracted from Tehran in the "Canadian Caper", later fictionalized in the 2012 film *Argo*

Early 1980, Paris: Early negotiations between Iranian Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh and Carter aide Hamilton Jordan in Paris led to "a complex multi-stepped plan", and on 19 February 1980 American Vice President Walter Mondale told an interviewer that "the crisis was nearing an end." The plan fell apart however after Ayatollah Khomeini gave a speech praising the embassy occupation as "a crushing blow to the world-devouring USA" and announced the



fate of the hostages would be decided by the Iranian parliament, the *Majlis*, which had yet to be seated or even elected.

March 1980, Washington, D.C.: Jamshid Hashemi, is visited by William Casey at Washington's Mayflower Hotel, who asks that a meeting be arranged with "someone in Iran who had authority to deal on the hostages".

21 March 1980, US: Jamshid Hashemi and his brother Cyrus Hashemi meet at the latter's home.

24 March 1980, Iran: Operation Eagle Claw, a failed rescue attempt

April 1980, New York: Donald Gregg, a National Security Council aide with connections to George Herbert Walker Bush, meets Cyrus Hashemi in New York's Shazam restaurant, near Hashemi's bank. Former Iranian President Bani-Sadr said in his 1991 book *My Turn to Speak* that he had "proof of contacts between Khomeini and the supporters of Ronald Reagan as early as the spring of 1980.... Rafsanjani, Beheshti, and Ahmed Khomeini [the Ayatollah's son] played key roles."

April 1980: Carter complains to Israeli PM Begin about a first shipment by Israel of spare parts (300 F-4 tyres) to Iran.

29 May 1980, Tehran: First meeting of the new Iranian parliament following the 1980 legislative elections.

11 July 1980: Richard Queen, a hostage who was seriously ill, released.

11 July 1980: 600 officers arrested over involvement in the planned Nojeh Coup

27 July 1980: Death of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, when time stops

Key Terms

Reza Pahlavi: as the ruler of Iran (Shah of Iran) from 16 September 1941 until his overthrow by the Iranian Revolution on 11 February 1979. He took the title Šâhanšâh ("Emperor" or "King of Kings") on 26 October 1967.

Diplomatic Immunity: is a form of legal immunity that ensures that diplomats are given safe passage and are considered not susceptible to lawsuit or prosecution under the host country's laws, although they can still be expelled.

Inviolability: prohibiting violation; secure from destruction, violence, infringement, or desecration: an inviolable sanctuary; an inviolable promise. incapable of being violated; incorruptible; unassailable: inviolable secrecy.

Coup d'état: sudden decisive exercise of force in politics; *especially* : the violent overthrow or alteration of an existing government by a small group

Islamic Revolution: or Iranian Revolution, was the 1979 overthrow of Iran's monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was replaced by the cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Ayatollah Khomeini: Iranian religious leader of the Shiites. He became the supreme religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, following many years of resistance to Shah Pahlavi.

Guiding Questions

- In what ways were the Iranian people being taken advantage from the Americans?
- To what extent was the Iranian Revolution valid?
- What are the most feasible solutions which minimize the damage to either party?
- Should Iran suffer international penalties for seizing the embassy and hostages? If so, which?
- Why has this been labeled a crisis of "misunderstanding"? In what ways are both sides liable to blame?
- Should there be penalties for Ayatollah Khomeini for the Iranian Hostage crisis?

Further Research

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruhollah_Khomeini

http://www.iranchamber.com/history/islamic_revolution/islamic_revolution.php

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14542438>- (Amazing explanations)

<http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-political-events>- (In-depth timeline)

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/01/iran-1979-revolution-shook-world-2014121134227652609.html>- (Analysis made of the Iranian Revolution)

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/04/middle_east_the_iranian_revolution/html/1.stm

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