

America Held Hostage: Why Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's Uncompromising Actions
Led to the Conflict of the Iranian Hostage Crisis

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Junior Division
Individual Paper
Word Count: 2,011

Introduction

Imagine being in a foreign country and being held hostage against your will for countless days, not knowing whether you will live or die, not being allowed to speak to the fellow American next to you. Now imagine sometimes being beaten, undergoing a mock execution¹, being held in solitary confinement for months at a time, or not knowing if your next meal will ever come. Then you hear of a rescue mission three months after it failed to take you home, and you start to lose hope of ever returning to your family and friends. This was the reality for 66 American diplomats. In 1979, the United States Embassy in Tehran, Iran was taken captive by thousands of Iranian demonstrators. The Americans were prisoners in Iran for 444 days². This conflict in history still affects the relationship the United States has with Iran today. Although this crisis seems like there is only conflict involved, I will show you that along with conflict, this crisis also has compromise, sacrifice, and strength. The Iranian Hostage Crisis conflict matters in world history because Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was not willing to compromise with America and broke the trust between Iran and America forever.

Treatment & Conditions

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers wanted to get revenge on Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and his government. On November 4th, 1979, 3,000 Iranian students invaded the American Embassy³ in Tehran, Iran and took around 90 people hostage⁴, 66 of whom were American diplomats. While held hostage in the Embassy, the hostages were

¹ Bowden, Mark. *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in the West's War with Militant Islam*. Atlantic Books, 2007.

² "Iran Hostage Crisis Fast Facts." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 20 Oct. 2017, www.cnn.com/2013/09/15/world/meast/iran-hostage-crisis-fast-facts/index.html.

³ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran Hostage Crisis." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 May 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis.

⁴ "Iran Hostage Crisis Fast Facts." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 20 Oct. 2017, www.cnn.com/2013/09/15/world/meast/iran-hostage-crisis-fast-facts/index.html.

frequently blindfolded and occasionally beaten. One of the most horrifying methods used to torment the hostages was a mock execution. Hostages were blindfolded, taken to the basement of the Embassy, and lined up against a wall. "Ready, Aim, Fire!" would then be spoken to the Iranian captors. Guns would be fired not at the terror-stricken hostages, but at the ceiling, floor, or walls, giving the hostages the impression they were being executed. The hostages were given two to three meals a day, but most of them lost a significant amount of weight. Often the hostages were not allowed to speak to the prisoner next to them. About three months after Operation Eagle Claw⁵, a failed rescue mission, occurred, some hostages heard about the failure and began to lose hope of freedom. Two hundred and seventy one days later, an agreement was signed and the 52 hostages in Tehran were welcomed home by President Jimmy Carter and their families (See Appendix A).

James "Jimmy" Earl Carter Jr.

Born on October 1st, 1924, Jimmy Carter was the 39th President of the United States and served from January 20th, 1977 to January 20th, 1981⁶. Carter joined the U.S. Navy in 1946 and later served his country as a Democratic Georgia Senator and President⁷. In the election of 1976, Carter beat Republican candidate Gerald R. Ford. Not even a year into Carter's presidency, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers launched an attack on the American Embassy in Tehran, Iran. Jimmy Carter responded to the crisis by freezing billions of dollars in Iranian assets and placing an oil embargo on Iran. At first, this didn't weaken the country's economy, but it gradually devastated their income. President Carter started to plan

⁵ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran Hostage Crisis." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 May 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis.

⁶ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Jimmy Carter." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2 Nov. 2017, www.britannica.com/biography/Jimmy-Carter.

⁷ "Jimmy Carter: Life Before the Presidency." *Miller Center*, 17 July 2017, millercenter.org/president/carter/life-before-the-presidency.

rescue missions to bring the hostages back home. Most plans ended in failure like Operation Eagle Claw, where 8 U.S. servicemen died while trying to rescue the hostages in Tehran. His first victory was on January 28th, 1980 when the 6 Americans that escaped the Embassy were returned home. The other 52 hostages were released from Tehran minutes after President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated⁸. Many people believe his failure to bring the hostages home cost Carter his second term as president (See Appendix B).

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi

Iran is ruled by kings known as Shahs. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was the Shah of Iran from 1941 to 1979. During this time, he was a fair leader who had a positive connection with America. In August of 1953, he was challenged in power by Mohammad Mosaddeq. Mohammad Mosaddeq was an Iranian nationalist who became so powerful, Pahlavi was forced to leave Iran. But with the help of the United States, Pahlavi was returned to power. After his return, Pahlavi lost support because of his new strict rules and violent secret police. In 1978, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini began to gain supporters and started the Iranian Revolution. The Iranian Revolution was a yearlong revolt to overthrow Pahlavi from power and replace him with Ayatollah. Pahlavi was diagnosed with cancer in 1979. He then fled to Egypt, Morocco, the Bahamas, and Mexico before being welcomed into the United States for cancer treatment. With the Shah gone, Ayatollah took control of Iran in the spring of 1979⁹. After receiving treatment in the United States, Pahlavi then flew to Panama and finally Cairo, Egypt, where he eventually died on July 27th, 1980 (See Appendix C).

⁸ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran Hostage Crisis." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 May 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis.

⁹ Ibid

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

Born September 24th, 1902, Ruhollah Khomeini was a very powerful man who led the Iranian Revolution and controlled Iran after the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi¹⁰. In his lifetime, he was a Shī'ite religious leader in the city of Qom. In 1962, Khomeini spoke out against the Shah's ideas to give women rights, as well as reduction in the construction of religious buildings in order to use the land for more crucial things. These actions led to Khomeini being exiled from Iran. He settled in Al-Najaf, Iraq in September of 1965. Khomeini stayed there for 13 years until February 1st, 1979¹¹. During his time in Al-Najaf, Khomeini created an idea of what an Islamic state based on Islamic rules should resemble, called Velayat-e faqeeh. Khomeini began to teach surrounding Islamic schools about his ideas and ultimately gained popularity. He became the leader for the government opposing Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. From 1975 through 1978, protests were occurring in Qom¹². These protesters were typically followers of Khomeini. Mohammad was unhappy with these demonstrations and ordered for Khomeini to be removed from Iraq. Khomeini then settled in Paris in October of 1978, his final stop before his grand return to Iran¹³. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was diagnosed with cancer and forced to leave Iran for the United States on January 16th, 1979¹⁴. Khomeini returned to Tehran, Iran on February 1st, 1979, and took control. Khomeini executed hundreds of people who worked for the Shah's government, along with imprisoning or killing anyone who opposed his government¹⁵. On November 4th, 1979, followers of Khomeini invaded the

¹⁰ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Ruhollah Khomeini." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Sept. 2017, www.britannica.com/biography/Ruhollah-Khomeini.

¹¹ "Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 13 Oct. 2014, www.biography.com/people/ayatollah-ruhollah-khomeini-13680544.

¹² The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Ruhollah Khomeini." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Sept. 2017, www.britannica.com/biography/Ruhollah-Khomeini.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 15 Dec. 2016, www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammad-Reza-Shah-Pahlavi.

¹⁵ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Ruhollah Khomeini." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Sept. 2017, www.britannica.com/biography/Ruhollah-Khomeini.

American Embassy. Khomeini, along with all other Iranian leaders, have never apologized for the violent actions of the Iranian Hostage Crisis¹⁶. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini continued to rule Iran until his death on June 3rd, 1989¹⁷ (See Appendix D).

Operation Eagle Claw

After the U.S. Embassy was invaded, President Jimmy Carter planned a secret mission to rescue the hostages in Iran. On April 24th, 1980, Operation Eagle Claw began¹⁸. Carter sent a total of 8 planes into Iran in hopes their mission would succeed, but the hope was not long lived. One plane lost vision due to a desert storm and crashed into another plane. Two planes malfunctioned before take off. Four planes made it to Iran, but one broke down at the landing site. A total of 8 U.S. men died during Operation Eagle Claw¹⁹, their dead bodies taken by Iran and paraded around on public television. Embarrassed by the public humiliation, Jimmy Carter finally brought the bodies of the 8 U.S. servicemen home, bringing closure to their families. (See Appendix E).

Argo

During the invasion of the American Embassy, six Americans were able to escape undetected and flee to Ken Taylor's, the Canadian Ambassador's, house. The six were hidden and taken care of for 87 days until they escaped with the help of Hollywood and the CIA²⁰. Once

¹⁶ Dwyer, Devin, and Robin Gradison. "Former Iran Hostage: President Obama Must Demand Apology, Compensation for Americans Held in 1979." *ABC News*, ABC News Network, abcnews.go.com/Politics/iran-hostage-president-obama-demand-apology-compensation-americans/story?id=32062789.

¹⁷ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Ruhollah Khomeini." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Sept. 2017, www.britannica.com/biography/Ruhollah-Khomeini.

¹⁸ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran Hostage Crisis." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 May 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis.

¹⁹ "Operation Eagle Claw." *Helis.com*, www.helis.com/featured/eagle_claw.php.

²⁰ Baglio, Antonio Mendez Matt. "The True Story Behind Operation 'Argo' to Rescue Americans From Iran." *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 17 Sept. 2012, www.thedailybeast.com/the-true-story-behind-operation-argo-to-rescue-americans-from-iran.

America found out the 6 Americans escaped the Iranians, the U.S. thought of how they were going to rescue the “Canadian Six.” CIA member Antonio “Tony” Mendez²¹ thought of the the winning idea. The CIA and Hollywood would team up to bring the six home undetected by making a fake movie. *Argo*, named after the Greek ship that sailed from Iolcos to Colchis and did the impossible by bringing the Golden Fleece back home, was now the name of not just a science fiction movie but also a ploy to bring the six “house guests” in Iran back home. The “house guests” were simply told that visitors were coming to help them escape. There was no mention to the six that the CIA and Hollywood were behind this daring mission. On January 25th, 1980, Tony Mendez and his partner Julio flew to Iran and met up with the six “house guests” hiding in the Canadian Ambassador’s house. Mendez gave each of the six each roles in the movie, a fake script, and a fake Canadian passport. After two days of memorizing fake passports and Tony preparing them for every possible situation, it was time to head back home²². Without the Iranian Revolutionary Guard suspecting a thing, Tony Mendez and the six Americans made it home safely on January 28th, 1980. To this day, the CIA will not fully reveal how the operation was successful, in case they have to carry out a similar mission²³.

Freedom

²¹ “Tony Mendez.” *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 28 Apr. 2015, www.biography.com/people/tony-mendez-21063189.

²² Kottoor, Naveena. “Tony Mendez, the Real CIA Spy in *Argo*.” *BBC News*, BBC, 20 Feb. 2013, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21504409.

²³ Baglio, Antonio Mendez Matt. “The True Story Behind Operation ‘Argo’ to Rescue Americans From Iran.” *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 17 Sept. 2012, www.thedailybeast.com/the-true-story-behind-operation-argo-to-rescue-americans-from-iran.

On November 17th, 1979, only two weeks after the embassy was invaded, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered for the release of 13 women and black Americans²⁴. Then on July 11th, 1980, one hostage was released because of a sickness, bringing the total number of hostages to 52. On January 20th, 1981, 444 days later, freedom finally came for the 52 hostages still kept in captivity. An agreement was signed between the United States and Iran, stating that Iran would release the hostages, and America would unfreeze \$8 billion dollars in Iranian assets. Minutes after Ronald Reagan gave his inaugural address, the hostages were safely flown home²⁵. Today the 32 hostages that are still alive are being offered \$10,000 for each day they were held captive in Tehran (See Appendix F).

Importance In History

The Iranian Hostage Crisis is very significant in history because it was the first direct conflict between Iran and America. This caused a very hostile relationship between the two countries, which still remains today. The conflict also marked the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Many people believe the crisis is the reason Jimmy Carter lost his second term as president to Ronald Reagan. Iran is a very dangerous country with which to work, and considering Iran's actions in 1979, the United States has to be cautious due to their unpredictable behavior. This behavior continued in 2011 when America discovered that Iran was secretly strengthening their nuclear program²⁶. If another event like the Iranian Hostage Crisis were to occur in history again, it would cause further distrust between Iran and America. Overall, I believe the crisis was a large conflict in history

²⁴ R, Jonathan C., and Al. "Women, Blacks Ordered Freed in Iran." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 18 Nov. 1979, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/11/18/women-blacks-ordered-freed-in-iran/66947cbd-c9b1-4933-ac10-0e400c67e215/?utm_term=.388d5416024f.

²⁵ Network, The Learning. "Jan. 20, 1981 | Iran Releases American Hostages as Reagan Takes Office." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 20 Jan. 2012, learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/20/jan-20-1981-iran-releases-american-hostages-as-reagan-takes-office/.

²⁶ Ibid

without a clear compromise. I believe this because the United States still does not have a positive relationship with Iran, Iran has not apologized for the event, and due to terror acts in the United States, the president has placed a travel ban on seven countries - one being Iran. The ban, however, has been presented by the president and rejected three times by the U.S. Court. The ban is only in partial effect. It stops immigrants from entering the United States²⁷. When looking at the surface of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, there is only conflict visible, but when viewed closer, compromise is evident. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi compromised the Muslim religion for money and power. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini compromised his own people to keep the Muslim religion in order. As president, Jimmy Carter compromised the democratic voting methods in Iran to keep oil supplied to the United States. If the world fails to see beyond cultural differences and unite as one, I believe war may become reality for most of the world.

²⁷ Gonzales, Richard. "Trump Travel Ban Allowed To Take Partial Effect." *NPR*, NPR, 13 Nov. 2017, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/11/13/563923136/trump-travel-ban-allowed-to-take-partial-effect.

Appendix A

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/middleeast/gallery/iran-hostage-crisis/index.html>



Here you see hostages blindfolded and have their hands tied behind their back. Silently they sit awaiting their unknown fate.



During the riots before the invasion, people looted stores, burned furniture, and threw sometimes important documents into the streets.

Appendix B

<https://www.biography.com/people/jimmy-carter-9240013>



Jimmy Carter poses for the camera as he takes the position of President of the United States of America.

Appendix C

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/middleeast/gallery/iran-hostage-crisis/index.html>



Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi shakes hands with the future government leader of Iran days before he flees the country.

Appendix D

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ruhollah-Khomeini>



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini addresses his country of Iran in 1979.

Appendix E

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/middleeast/gallery/iran-hostage-crisis/index.html>



The crash site of failed mission Operation Eagle Claw. A total of eight servicemen died during this crash.

Appendix F

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/middleeast/gallery/iran-hostage-crisis/index.html>



Hostages are finally back on American soil after 444 days in captivity.



Families and friends welcome home the 52 hostages on January 27th, 1981.

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