

# Taken Hostage: A Crisis in Iran

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The relationship between the countries of the United States and Iran has been tense for decades. The source of conflict could be traced back all the way to 1979, when the shah of Iran fled his country and used the United States as a safe haven. His actions continued conflict between the countries that eventually led to almost 70 Americans being taken hostage in the United States embassy located in Tehran, Iran. The compromise to this conflict took place 444 days later when the hostages were released and safely returned to the United States, but not before eight Americans lost their lives, Jimmy Carter lost his second presidential election, and the relationship between Iran and America was permanently strained.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was the Shah of Iran from 1941 to 1979, except for a brief period in 1953 when the Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddeq overthrew him. With Mosaddeq in power, the United States became concerned with access of Iranian oil, oil prices and the Soviet influence in Iran<sup>1</sup>. With help from British Intelligence services, the United States was able to overthrow Mohammad Mosaddeq and Shah Pahlavi was able to return to power. After his return, he formed a close relationship with the United States and they helped the Shah modernize his country by supplying them with weapons, training and technical knowledge. Shah Pahlavi was opposed by many people, including fundamentalist Islamic leaders who believed his modernizing and dependence on America was negatively influencing Iranian culture and society.

2

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<sup>1</sup> "Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi." *The 80s Server: Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi*, [www.80s.com/Icons/Bios/mohammed\\_reza\\_shah\\_pahlavi.html](http://www.80s.com/Icons/Bios/mohammed_reza_shah_pahlavi.html).

<sup>2</sup> "The History Guy." *Iran-U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)*, [www.historyguy.com/iran-us\\_hostage\\_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf](http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf).

In the fall of 1978, the U.S. embassy in Tehran had “been the scene of frequent demonstrations by Iranians who opposed the American presence in the country”.<sup>3</sup> By 1979, hatred for the Shah and his relationship with the United States “turned into violent uprisings against his authority called the Iranian Revolution.” The Shah was exiled again in January after being overthrown by Ayatollah Khomeini. He traveled to several different countries, all the while trying to get permission to enter the U.S.<sup>4</sup> While he was traveling from country to country, the U.S. embassy in Iran was attacked and several members of the staff were killed or wounded.

5

In October of the same year, the U.S. State Department learned that Pahlavi needed medical treatment for cancer that was apparently only available in the United States. President Jimmy Carter hesitated to let him into the country because of the “possible consequences for U.S. interests in Iran”. After the Prime Minister of Iran promised that the embassy and its staff would be safe, the United States allowed the former Shah to be let into the country.<sup>6</sup> While November 4, 1979 was the official beginning of the Iran Hostage Crisis for the United States, many Iranians saw it differently. From their perspective, the origins of the crisis take place on October 23, 1979, which is the day that President Carter allowed former Shah Pahlavi into the United States.<sup>7</sup>

At the time, the current Shah of Iran and leader of the Shia Member clergy was Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shia are a large group part of the Islamic Faith, form a large portion of the

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<sup>3</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. “Iran Hostage Crisis.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 6 Dec. 2017, [www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis](http://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis).

<sup>4</sup> “The History Guy.” *Iran-U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)*, [www.historyguy.com/iran-us\\_hostage\\_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf](http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf).

<sup>5</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. “Iran Hostage Crisis.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 6 Dec. 2017, [www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis](http://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis).

<sup>6</sup> Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica

<sup>7</sup> Farber, David R. *Taken Hostage: the Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam*. Princeton University Press, 2005 p.13

Islamic population, and they led many demonstrations and propaganda against America and President Jimmy Carter.<sup>8</sup> Khomeini's people saw Pahlavi as evil and corrupt and America's alliance with him made them think the same thing about the United States. The way they saw it, the U.S. had no business meddling in the Iranian government.<sup>9</sup> On November 4, 1979, a large group of Iranian students finally decided to take action. They scaled the walls of the US embassy in Tehran and took 66 Americans hostage.<sup>10</sup>

Sunday November 4, 1979 started off as a normal day for the staff at the United States embassy in Tehran, making the attack a complete surprise to everyone, Washington D.C. especially.<sup>11</sup> Around 300 Iranian students had participated in the planning of the takeover, but a substantially larger group of students took part in the crime.<sup>12</sup> The students "poured through the main gate of the compound and clambered over the walls of the embassy. (see appendix image 1)" A former hostage named Tom Schaefer remembers:

"...it looked like a bunch of students this time were coming by. I was not even concerned that students were going by, until someone said 'They're coming through the gate.' I honestly felt that's all it was, it was a bunch of students. They probably just want to talk to us. And eventually we found that there was more than this because they were taking other American workers out of the outbuildings, blindfolding them, with guns to their heads and that was my first

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<sup>8</sup> "The History Guy." *Iran-U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)*, [www.historyguy.com/iran-us\\_hostage\\_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf](http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf).

<sup>9</sup> Farber, David R. *Taken Hostage: the Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam*. Princeton University Press, 2005

<sup>10</sup> "The History Guy." *Iran-U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)*, [www.historyguy.com/iran-us\\_hostage\\_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf](http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf).

<sup>11</sup> Houghton, David Patrick. *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. p.50

<sup>12</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran Hostage Crisis." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 6 Dec. 2017, [www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis](http://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis).

indication really that this is more than just a student visit to our embassy, that this is serious.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite efforts by the staff, the students were able to take control of the building within a few hours and held 63 Americans captive. Three members of the U.S. Diplomatic staff were also taken as hostages at the Iranian Foreign Ministry, making a total of 66 American hostages.<sup>14</sup>

Although officials from both the embassy and Iranian government had warned the Carter administration that admitting the shah into the country could produce these actions, the American government in Washington D.C. was completely surprised by the takeover, but President Carter had anticipated the Iranians to take action.<sup>15</sup>

The attack happened around 2 A.M. in Washington D.C., and within the next few hours, groups of experts and advisors were meeting at the White House, and meetings within the US Government began immediately<sup>16</sup>. The Special Coordinating Committee, a committee used by President Carter to handle similar interests and concerns, was brought in to help figure out the motive of the attack and to find information about the captors. At this point, little was known about the current situation but most Americans thought the whole situation would end pretty quickly<sup>17</sup>. Bruce Laingen, a US chargé d'affaires who was trapped in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, claims “neither we nor probably any of our colleagues in the chancery thought then that the affair would be anything more than symbolic occupation that would be terminated and

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<sup>13</sup> Daugherty, William J. “Studies for Intelligence.” *A First Tour Like No Other*, 1996, p.6  
[www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol41no5/pdf/v41i5a01p.pdf](http://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol41no5/pdf/v41i5a01p.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. “Iran Hostage Crisis.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 6 Dec. 2017, [www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis](http://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis).

<sup>15</sup> Houghton, David Patrick. *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. P.50

<sup>16</sup> Houghton p.51

<sup>17</sup> Houghton p.75

somehow put right within a matter of hours".<sup>18</sup> Little did anyone know that his hostage crisis would last for not only hours or days, but more than a year.

Carter and the rest of his team had several ideas in order to free the hostages. The opinion of the public was to take military action but there were many reasons why President Carter was against doing that. Congressman Henry Ruesch related this hostage crisis to the Munich Massacre during the 1972 summer Olympics, where the German government used military tactics to try and free the hostages, but they all ended up dead, which was the opposite of what Carter wanted.

19

Carter's main objective was get all of the hostages back on American soil unharmed and he thought any type of military strike would cause the death of many or all hostages. He wanted to take a diplomatic approach rather than a military one. The administration thought of possibly sending a rescue team to Tehran, but President Carter concluded the chances of carrying out a successful rescue mission was small.<sup>20</sup>

President Carter tried multiple times to negotiate with Khomeini and even asked to meet with him, but he refused, so Carter wrote him a letter, asking him to release the hostages unharmed and send them back to the United States without delay and asked him to think about forming a better relationship with the United States.<sup>21</sup>

On November 12, the foreign minister of Iran claimed that the hostages would be released if America stopped getting involved in the Iranian government and it's affairs, if the shah was sent back to Iran for trial, and if the shah's possessions were declared as stolen

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<sup>18</sup> Laingen, L. Bruce. *Yellow Ribbon: the Secret Journal of Bruce Laingen*. Brassey's (US), 1992.p13

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, Dan. "Iranian Hostage Crisis ." WITI-TV, Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1979.

<sup>20</sup> Houghton p103

<sup>21</sup> "Letter from Jimmy Carter to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ." Received by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini , *Archives.gov*, 6 Nov. 1979, [www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=1106](http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=1106).

property.<sup>22</sup> By mid-November, several women, African-Americans, and one sick hostage were released by the captors, dropping the number of hostages to 52.<sup>23</sup>

Economically, attacking the embassy was not a good move for Iran. After first hearing about the embassy take-over, America stopped oil from exporting from Iran, exiled many Iranians living in the United States, and froze Iranian government assets.<sup>24</sup> While, Americans thought the only way to free the hostages was by taking military actions, the situation grew more complicated when Afghanistan, Iran's neighbors, was invaded by the Soviet Union. Iran was as oil-rich and hostile as ever, and President Carter was losing the support of his country.<sup>25</sup>

Although the entire country of America was very concerned for the hostages, they were actually treated quite well. They were fed and interacted with each other often.<sup>26</sup> A Red Cross agency interviewed 12 of the hostages and they reported that the hostages were in good condition, were being well-fed, and had decent living areas. The agency also reported that they had psychological issues from the expected strain of being kidnapped.<sup>27</sup> All the while, President Carter and his administration were brainstorming possible rescue mission ideas.

By April of 1980, the 52 hostages had been held captive for 5 months. President Carter knew he had to get the hostages out, but the problem was how. According to Stansfield Turner, the Director of Central Intelligence, they faced 4 major issues. The first being how to get the

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<sup>22</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Iran Hostage Crisis." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 6 Dec. 2017, [www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis](http://www.britannica.com/event/Iran-hostage-crisis).

<sup>23</sup> Lambert, Laura. "Operation Eagle Claw." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 20 Jan. 2015, [www.britannica.com/event/Operation-Eagle-Claw](http://www.britannica.com/event/Operation-Eagle-Claw).

<sup>24</sup> "Jimmy Carter: Foreign Affairs." *Miller Center*, 17 July 2017, [millercenter.org/president/carter/foreign-affairs](http://millercenter.org/president/carter/foreign-affairs).

<sup>25</sup> "The History Guy." *Iran-U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)*, [www.historyguy.com/iran-us\\_hostage\\_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf](http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf).

<sup>26</sup> Sickmann, Rocky, and Erin Leslie. Antrim. *Iranian Hostage: a Personal Diary of 444 Days in Captivity--*. Crawford Press, 1982.

<sup>27</sup> "Lewis, Dan. "Iranian Hostage Crisis ." WITI-TV, Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1979.

rescue force there and the second was how to get them out. The third and fourth problems were finding out where the hostages were in the embassy and how to get them out.<sup>28</sup>

Desperate to save his political career and the hostages, President Carter launched a rescue mission called “Operation Eagle Claw.” The mission was realistic, but also very complex, and it was a complete failure, causing eight Americans to lose their lives. The United States planned on flying all 4 armed forces services in helicopters and airplanes, but didn’t have access to an airport and there was no space to land near the embassy, so they planned on landing in the desert.<sup>29</sup> The rescuers planned on storming the embassy, using the help of a group of Iranians the CIA had recruited to help with the mission. The group reported that the students guarding the hostages had become lazy and their numbers were thin.<sup>30</sup> The Iranian group was going to put the hostages on an aircraft of some sort and send them back to the US.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, the rescue mission fell apart before any of that could be achieved.

On the way to Tehran, some of the aircrafts stopped in an Iranian desert to refuel, but there was equipment failure in one of the helicopters and sandstorms started building up, which reduced visibility, ultimately causing the mission to be aborted.<sup>32</sup> While making an attempt to leave, one of the helicopters collided with an airplane carrying fuel and the helicopter burst into flames, killing the 8 people inside. (see appendix image 2)<sup>33</sup> According to Philip Keisling, a politician from Oregon, the mission failed because of the lack of planning done by the United

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<sup>28</sup> Houghton, David Patrick. *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. p.113

<sup>29</sup> Lambert, Laura. “Operation Eagle Claw.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 20 Jan. 2015, [www.britannica.com/event/Operation-Eagle-Claw](http://www.britannica.com/event/Operation-Eagle-Claw)

<sup>30</sup> Houghton pg.122

<sup>31</sup> Sick, Gary. *All Fall down America's Fateful Encounter in Iran*. Tauris, 1985. p.337

<sup>32</sup> “Operation Eagle Claw.” *Helis.com*, [www.helis.com/featured/eagle\\_claw.php](http://www.helis.com/featured/eagle_claw.php)

<sup>33</sup> “The History Guy.” *Iran-U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)*, [www.historyguy.com/iran-us\\_hostage\\_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf](http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf).



States. He claims that the defects and the difficulty in the operation were not properly thought out.<sup>34</sup> With Carter's reputation already on the line, this failure of a rescue mission reflected poorly on the President.

Because "Operation Eagle Claw" didn't save the hostages, the Carter administration was back to square one, and needed a new plan. As Stansfield Turner put it, 'having resorted to a rescue mission largely because we had run out of alternatives, we now had to study those alternatives all over again.' As soon as the first operation failed, Carter started planning another one, but it was much harder because news of the failed operation caused the Iranian students to move the hostages to 16 different locations in the country of Iran.<sup>35</sup> Based on what they learned from the first operation, they knew they had to make this rescue mission less complex and because the Iranian students would be expecting another attempt, they had to wait a long time before sending in another team.<sup>36</sup>

The only meaningful event to take place in the next 3 months was the death of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the deposed shah of Iran. He died in Egypt on July 27, 1980 because of his cancer. Two months later in September, the Iranians finally seemed interested in making negotiations and they even shortened their terms of release list. Because of how much resistance they had in the past 9 months, Carter was hesitant to accept any offers given to him by the hostage takers, but apparently the interest in resolving the crisis had come from Sadegh Tabatabai, a relative of Khomeini, who was told to negotiate on his behalf.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Houghton, David Patrick. *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Turner, Stansfield. *Terrorism and Democracy*. Houghton Mifflin, 1991. p.146

<sup>36</sup> Sick, Gary. *All Fall down America's Fateful Encounter in Iran*. Tauris, 1985. p.357

<sup>37</sup> Houghton p.140

On September 22, Iraq invaded Iran. Because Iran was temporarily distracted by this invasion, the pace of negotiations slowed down dramatically. This invasion also tempted Khomeini to release the hostages because the country of Iran now needed the economic sanctions that the US placed on it lifted because of Iran's conflict with Iraq 141, but the hostages still wouldn't be released for another 4 months.<sup>38</sup>

November 4, 1980 was election day in the United States, and President Jimmy Carter was running for his second term. Ironically, November 4, 1980 was also the one year anniversary of the day the embassy was seized and the hostages were taken. Because the hostages still had not yet returned and Carter had operated a failed rescue mission, he lost the election to California Governor Ronald Reagan.<sup>39</sup> Minutes after Reagan took office January 20, 1981, the hostages were put on a plane and sent back to the United States.<sup>40</sup> After 444 days of being held in captivity, every single hostage was alive and free.

The reason as to why the hostages were let go when they were still remains a mystery. Negotiations were ready to be made and conditions had been met in September, but the hostages weren't released until January. A deal was made only two days prior to Reagan's inauguration and the hostages weren't released until Iran received word that Reagan took his oath and was officially president.<sup>41</sup> Some speculate that Reagan's campaign caused the delay in the release of the hostages so that Carter would lose the election.<sup>42</sup> Also, according to Ebrahim Yazdi, Khomeini was trying to send a message that he had the power to control political outcomes in the

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<sup>38</sup> Houghton p.141

<sup>39</sup> "The History Guy." *Iran-U.S. Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)*, [www.historyguy.com/iran-us\\_hostage\\_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf](http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html#.Wj7KDYGPLrf).

<sup>40</sup> "The New York Times." *Presidential History Geeks*, [potus-geeks.livejournal.com/781100.html](http://potus-geeks.livejournal.com/781100.html).

<sup>41</sup> Houghton p.143

<sup>42</sup> Sick, Gary. *October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the the Election of Ronald Reagan*. Times Bks., 1991.

United States. He knew that releasing the hostages before the election would most likely get Carter reinstated, but by not releasing them, Carter would lose the support of the American people.<sup>43</sup>

The hostage crisis ultimately caused eight Americans to die, President Jimmy Carter to lose his presidency and permanently strained the relationship between Iran and United States. Although the release of the American hostages was a compromise to the hostage crisis, conflict still remains between the two countries today.

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<sup>43</sup> Houghton p.144