Iran Hostage Crisis

Background
In subsequent decades, this foreign intervention—along with issues like unequal development, political repression, corruption, pro-Israeli policies, and the un-Islamic opulent Western lifestyle of the Iranian elite—united radical Islamists and leftists, spurring the overthrow of the Shah's regime in the Iranian revolution. The Shah was exiled in January 1979.

Following the Shah's overthrow, the U.S. attempted to mitigate the damage by finding a new relationship with the de facto Iranian government, but on October 22, 1979, the Shah, ailing from cancer, was admitted to the U.S. for medical treatment. This caused widespread anger in Iran. Furious at what he called "evidence of American plotting," revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini intensified rhetoric against "Great Satan," i.e. the United States.

Events

Public opinion in Iran following the admission of the Shah to the United States on November 1, 1979, Iran's new Supreme Leader, the Islamic radical Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini urged his people to demonstrate against United States and Israeli interests. Khomeini denounced the American government as the "Great Satan" and "Enemies of Islam." Islamic, leftist, and even liberal activists in Iran competed with each other to denounce the U.S.

November 4, for several days before the takeover, Asgharzadeh dispatched confederates to rooftops overlooking the embassy to monitor the security procedures of the U.S. Marine guards. Around 6:30 a.m. on the day, the ringleaders gathered 300 selected students, thereafter known as Muslim student followers of the Imam's line, and briefed them on the battle plan. To break the chains locking the embassy's gates, a female student was given a pair of metal cutters that she could hide beneath her chador.

The guard of Marines was thoroughly outnumbered, and staff rushed to destroy communications equipment and sensitive documents. Out of 90 occupants, 66 were taken captive, including three who were later taken from the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

444 days hostage
The hostage takers, declaring their solidarity with other "oppressed minorities" and "the special place of women in Islam," released 13 women and African American hostages in the middle of November. One more hostage, Richard Queen, was released in July 1980, after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The remaining 52 hostages were held captive until January 1981, and often paraded blindfolded before local crowds and television cameras. The crisis led to daily (yet seemingly unchanging) news updates, including the ABC late-night program America Held Hostage, anchored by Ted Koppel, which would later become the stalwart news magazine Nightline.

Although the hostage takers' initial plan was only to hold the embassy for a few hours, their plan changed. The Ayatollah Khomeini made no comment on the occupation for several days, waiting first to gauge American reaction to the hostage taking, which he feared might spur military action. No action was forthcoming. American President Jimmy Carter's immediate response was to appeal for release of the hostages on humanitarian grounds. Some credit this relatively soft line to his hopes for a strategic anti-communist alliance with the Islamic Republic for the Iranian. Khomeini, for his part, read Carter's response as weakness and decided not to release the hostages quickly.

In the United States, public opinion was also inflamed and all but unanimous in its outrage against the hostage-taking and its Islamic perpetrators. The action was seen "as not just a diplomatic affront," but a "declaration of war on diplomacy itself," by its violation of centuries old international law. President Jimmy Carter applied economic and diplomatic
pressure on Iran: Oil imports from Iran were ended on November 12, 1979, and around U.S. $8 billion of Iranian assets in America were frozen on November 14, 1979. In the politically charged atmosphere a number of Iranians in the U.S. were expelled.

The Muslim student followers of the Imam's line justified taking the hostages as retaliation for the admission of the Shah into the U.S., and demanded the Shah be returned to Iran for trial and execution. The U.S. maintained the Shah—who was suffering from cancer and died less than a year later in July 1980—had come to America only for medical attention. Other demands of the hostage-takers included an apology by the U.S. government for its interference in the internal affairs of Iran and for the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, and that Iran's frozen assets be released. Revolutionary teams displayed secret documents taken from the embassy, sometimes painstakingly reconstructed after shredding, to buttress their claim that "the Great Satan" was trying to destabilize the new regime, and that Iranian moderates were in league with the United States.

**Canadian Caper**

On the day of the seizure, American diplomats evaded capture and remained in hiding at the Swedish and Canadian Embassies. In 1979, the Canadian parliament held a secret session for the first time since World War II, in order to pass special legislation allowing Canadian passports to be issued to some American citizens so that they could escape. Six American diplomats boarded a flight to Zurich, Switzerland on January 28, 1980. Their escape and rescue from Iran by Canadian ambassador Ken Taylor has come to be known as the "Canadian caper."

**Rescue Attempts**

The wreckage of a Sea Stallion helicopter at the Desert One base in Iran. In the background is one of five abandoned RH-53D Sea Stallion Helicopters that now serve in the Iranian Navy. Rejecting the Iranian demands, Carter approved an ill-fated secret rescue mission, Operation Eagle Claw. On the night of April 24, 1980, as the first part of the operation, a number of C-130 transport airplanes rendezvoused with eight RH-53 helicopters at an airstrip called Desert One in the Great Salt Desert of Eastern Iran, near Tabas. Two helicopters broke down in a sandstorm and a third one was damaged on landing. The mission was aborted by executive order from the president, but as the aircraft took off again one helicopter clipped a C-130 and crashed, killing eight U.S. servicemen and injuring five others. In Iran, Khomeini's prestige skyrocketed as he credited divine intervention on behalf of Islam for the mission's failure.

A second rescue attempt was planned using highly modified YMC-130H Hercules aircraft. Outfitted with rocket thrusters fore and aft to allow an extremely short landing and take-off in a soccer stadium, three aircraft were modified under a rushed super-secret program known as Credible Sport. One aircraft crashed during a demonstration at Duke Field, Florida (Eglin Air Force Base Auxiliary Field 3) on October 29, 1980, when the landing braking rockets were fired too soon causing a hard touchdown that tore off the starboard wing and started a fire. All on board survived. The impending change in the White House led to an abandonment of this project. The two surviving airframes were returned to regular duty with the rocket packages removed. One is now on display at the Museum of Aviation located next to Robins Air Force Base, Georgia.

**Final months**

The death of the Shah on July 27, and the invasion of Iran by Iraq in September, 1980 made Iran more receptive to resolve the hostage crisis, while Carter lost the November 1980 presidential election in a landslide to Ronald Reagan. Shortly after the election, but before the inauguration of President Reagan, the Carter administration, with the assistance of intermediaries such as Algerian diplomat Abdulkarim Ghuraib, opened fruitful, but demeaning, negotiations between the U.S. (Still under President Carter) and Iran. This resulted in the "Algiers Accords" of January 19, 1981, committing Iran to free the hostages immediately. Essential to the Algiers Accords and reportedly a non-negotiable requirement of Iran that the weak Carter Administration reluctantly conceded was Point I: Non-Intervention in Iranian Affairs. It reads "The United States pledges that it is and from now on will be the policy of the United States not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs." Other provisions of the Algiers Accords were the unfreezing of 8 billion dollars worth of Iranian assets and immunity from lawsuits Iran might have faced. On January 20, 1981, twenty minutes after President Reagan's inaugural address, the hostages were formally released into U.S. custody, having spent 444 days in captivity. The hostages were flown to Algeria as a symbolic gesture for the help of that government in resolving the crisis, where former President Carter, acting as an emissary for the Reagan administration, received them. The flight continued to Rhein-Main Air Base in West Germany. After medical check-ups and debriefings they took a second flight to Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh, New York, and a bus ride to the United States Military Academy, receiving a hero's welcome all along the route.