

US – Iranian Relations from 1977 to 1979

LECTURES IN DIPLOMACY: US - IRAN RELATIONS – LECTURES

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INTRODUCTION

Jimmy Carter served as the 39th President of the United States from 1977 to 1981.

¹He was awarded the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize for work to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.²

In foreign affairs, Carter set his own style. His championing of human rights was coldly received by the Soviet Union and some other nations. In the Middle East, through the Camp David agreement of 1978, he helped bring amity between Egypt and Israel. He succeeded in obtaining ratification of the Panama Canal treaties. Building upon the work of predecessors, he established full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and completed negotiation of the SALT II nuclear limitation treaty with the Soviet Union.

There were serious setbacks, however. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan caused the suspension of plans for ratification of the SALT II pact. The seizure of hostages of the U. S. embassy staff in Iran dominated the news during the last 14 months of the administration. The consequences of Iran holding Americans captive, together with continuing inflation at home, contributed to Carter's defeat in 1980. Even then,

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/james-carter/>

² For more information about President Carter, please visit The Jimmy Carter Library and The Carter Center.

he continued the difficult negotiations over the hostages. Iran finally released the 52 Americans the same day Carter left office.

BACKGROUND

In the late 1970s, American President Jimmy Carter emphasized human rights in his foreign policy, including the Shah's regime, which by 1977 had garnered unfavorable publicity in the international community for its human rights record. That year, the Shah responded to Carter's "polite reminder" by granting amnesty to some prisoners and allowing the Red Cross to visit prisons. Through 1977, liberal opposition formed organizations and issued open letters denouncing the Shah's regime.

At the same time, Carter angered anti-Shah Iranians with a New Year's Eve 1978 toast to the Shah in which he said:

Under the Shah's brilliant leadership Iran is an island of stability in one of the most troublesome regions of the world. There is no other state figure that I could appreciate and like more.

Observers disagree over the nature of United States policy toward Iran under Carter as the Shah's regime crumbled. According to historian Nikki Keddie, the Carter administration followed "no clear policy" on Iran. The American ambassador to Iran, William H. Sullivan, recalled that the US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski "repeatedly assured Pahlavi that the U.S. backed him fully". On November 4, 1978, Brzezinski called the Shah to tell him that the United States would "back him to the hilt." At the same time, high-level officials in the State Department believed the revolution was unstoppable.

After visiting the Shah in summer of 1978, Secretary of the Treasury W. Michael Blumenthal complained of the Shah's emotional collapse, reporting, "You've got a zombie out there ". Brzezinski and Energy Secretary James Schlesinger were adamant in their assurances that the Shah would receive military support.

Another scholar, sociologist Charles Kurzman, argues that, rather than being indecisive or sympathetic to the revolution, the Carter administration was

consistently supportive of the Shah and urged the Iranian military to stage a "last-resort coup d'etat" even after the regime's cause was hopeless.

THE 1979 REVOLUTION

The 1979 Revolution, which ousted the pro-American Shah and replaced him with³ the anti-American Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the United States government, its State Department and intelligence services, which "consistently underestimated the magnitude and long-term implications of this unrest". Six months before the revolution culminated, the CIA had produced a report, stating that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a 'prerevolutionary' situation."

Revolutionary students feared the power of the United States—particularly its Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow a new Iranian government. One source of this concern was a book by CIA agent Kermit Roosevelt Jr. titled *Countercoup: The Struggle for Control of Iran*. Many students had read excerpts from the book and thought that the CIA would attempt to implement this countercoup strategy.

Khomeini, who referred to America as the "Great Satan", instantly got rid of the Shah's prime minister and replaced him with a moderate politician called Mehdi Bazargan. Until this point, the Carter Administration was still hoping for normal relationships with Iran, sending its National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

The Islamic revolutionaries wished to extradite and execute the ousted Shah, and Carter refused to give him any further support or help return him to power. The Shah, suffering from terminal cancer, requested entry into the United States for treatment. The American embassy in Tehran opposed the request, as they were intent on stabilizing relations between the new interim revolutionary government of Iran and the United States. However, President Carter agreed to let the Shah in, after severe pressure from Henry Kissinger, Nelson Rockefeller and other pro-Shah political figures. Iranians' suspicion that the Shah was trying to conspire against the Iranian Revolution grew; thus, this incident was often used by the Iranian revolutionaries to justify their claims that the former monarch was an American

³ 1979: Iran and America by Suzanne Maloney January 24, 2019
<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/1979-iran-and-america/>

puppet, and this led to the storming of the American embassy by radical students allied with the Khomeini faction.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, had been a reliable U.S. ally since the 1953 Iranian coup d'état. During the years after the coup, the U.S. lavished aid on Iran, while Iran served as a dependable source of oil exports. Carter, Vance, and Brzezinski all viewed Iran as a key Cold War ally, not only for the oil it produced but also because of its influence in OPEC and its strategic position between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf. Despite human rights violations, Carter visited Iran in late 1977 and authorized the sale of U.S. fighter aircraft. That same year, rioting broke out in several cities, and it soon spread across the country.

Poor economic conditions, the unpopularity of Pahlavi's "White Revolution", and an Islamic revival all led to increasing anger among Iranians, many of whom also despised the United States for its support of Pahlavi and its role in the 1953 coup.

The Carter administration's new demands for human rights angered the Shah and split itself internally. Vance and the State Department made it a high priority, while Brzezinski warned that it would undermine the strength of America's most important ally in the region. The State Department's Bureau of Human Rights took an activist approach, under Derian's leadership. Carter allowed the sale of riot control equipment to suppress increasingly vocal and violent protests, especially from the religious element.

By 1978, the Iranian Revolution had broken out against the Shah's rule. Secretary of State Vance argued that the Shah should institute a series of reforms to appease the voices of discontent, while Brzezinski argued in favor of a crackdown on dissent. The mixed messages that the Shah received from Vance and Brzezinski contributed to his confusion and indecision. The Shah went into exile, leaving a caretaker government in control. A popular religious figure, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, returned from exile in February 1979 to popular acclaim. As the unrest continued, Carter allowed Pahlavi into the United States for medical treatment. Carter and Vance were both initially reluctant to admit Pahlavi due to concerns about the reaction in Iran, but Iranian leaders assured them that it would not cause an issue. In November 1979, shortly after Pahlavi was allowed to enter the U.S., a group of Iranians stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 66 American captives, beginning the Iran hostage crisis. Iranian Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan ordered

the militants to release the hostages, but he resigned from office after Khomeini backed the militants.

The crisis quickly became the subject of international and domestic attention, and Carter vowed to secure the release of the hostages. He refused the Iranian demand of the return of Pahlavi in exchange for the release of the hostages. His approval ratings rose as Americans rallied around his response, but the crisis became increasingly problematic for his administration as it continued. To rescue the hostages, Carter launched Operation Eagle Claw in April 1980. The operation was a total disaster, and it ended in the death of eight American soldiers. The failure of the operation strengthened Ayatollah Khomeini's position in Iran and badly damaged Carter's domestic standing. Carter was dealt another blow when Vance, who had consistently opposed the operation, resigned. Iran refused to negotiate the return of the hostages until Iraq launched an invasion in September 1980. With Algeria serving as an intermediary, negotiations continued until an agreement was reached in January 1981. In return for releasing the 52 captives, Iran accepted over \$7 billion in monetary compensation and the unfreezing of Iranian assets in the United States. Iran waited to release the captives until hours after Carter left office on January 20, 1981,

1979: IRAN AND AMERICA

Four decades have now passed since a mass political movement espousing the triumph of sacral authority over secular toppled Iran's absolute monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and his seemingly impregnable state. Just as definitively, the revolution that abrogated the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979 scuttled a set of assumptions about religion, modernity, and political development that were previously considered axiomatic.

Widely considered unthinkable even as it was unfolding, the ouster of the shah and the assumption of authority by an inchoate coalition of leftists, liberals, and Muslim clerics captivated the world. The subsequent establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran dramatically transformed the nation's internal politics, economy, and society and its impact echoed well beyond its borders to reconfigure the regional landscape, the geostrategic balance in the Middle East.

For Washington, the revolution represented a devastating strategic loss. Since the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, Iran had become the cornerstone

of America's security architecture for protecting Western interests across the region. As both the "pivot in the price hike" and the sole regional leader willing to buck the Arab oil embargo, the shah had made himself equally consequential for energy markets and the global economy. Iran's revolution reshaped the country, the region, and its interaction with the rest of the world, especially the United States. Forty years later, the legacy of the revolution lives on in both Washington and Tehran in the mutual antagonisms it brought to the fore.

On 4 November 1979, the revolutionary group Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, angered that the recently deposed Shah had been allowed into the United States, occupied the American embassy in Tehran and took American diplomats hostage. The 52 American diplomats were held hostage for 444 days. In Iran, the incident was seen by many as a blow against American influence in Iran and the liberal-moderate interim government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, who opposed the hostage taking, resigned soon after. Some Iranians were concerned that the United States may have been plotting another coup against their country in 1979 from the American embassy. In the United States, the hostage-taking was seen as a violation of a centuries-old principle of international law that granted diplomats immunity from arrest and diplomatic compounds sovereignty in the territory of the host country they occupy.

The United States military attempted a rescue operation, Operation Eagle Claw, on April 24, 1980, which resulted in an aborted mission and the deaths of eight American military men. The crisis ended with the signing of the Algiers Accords in Algeria on January 19, 1981. On January 20, 1981, the date the treaty was signed, the hostages were released. The Iran-United States Claims Tribunal (located in The Hague, Netherlands) was established for the purpose of handling claims of American nationals against Iran and of Iranian nationals against the United States. American contact with Iran through The Hague covers only legal matters. The crisis led to lasting economic and diplomatic damage.

On 7 April 1980, Carter severed diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States, and they have been frozen ever since. Since 21 May 1980, Switzerland has been the protecting power for the United States in Iran. Contrary to usual practice, the US Embassy was not given into the charge of the Swiss Embassy. Instead, parts of the embassy complex were turned into an anti-American museum, while other parts became offices for student organizations. Iranian interests in the US were

initially represented by the Algerian Embassy. However, Iran later chose Pakistan to be its protecting power in the United States.

In 2016, the BBC published a report which stated that the administration of United States President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) had extensive contact with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his entourage in the prelude to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The report was based on "newly declassified US diplomatic cables". According to the report, as mentioned by The Guardian, Khomeini "went to great lengths to ensure the Americans would not jeopardize his plans to return to Iran - and even personally wrote to US officials". According to the report, in turn, Carter and his administration helped Khomeini and made sure that the Imperial Iranian army would not launch a military coup.

The BBC report also showed a 1980 CIA analysis, which portrays Khomeini's attempts to contact the US as far back as 1963, during John F. Kennedy's administration.

Iran's political elite has dismissed these declassified reports. Ayatollah Khomeini stated that "it was based on fabricated documents". Ebrahim Yazdi (formerly a close associate of Khomeini) and Saeed Hajjarian viewed the BBC report with skepticism.

A declassified cable shows that on 9 November 1978, William H. Sullivan, then-US ambassador to Iran alerted the Carter administration of the Shah being "doomed". Sullivan stated that the US should get Iran's Shah and his most senior generals to exit the country and construct an agreement between secondary commanders and Ruhollah Khomeini. In January 1979, General Robert E. Huyser was dispatched to Iran.

According to the narrative of Carter's government, Huyser was sent to promise US support for the Shah. However, the declassified reports show that Huyser was in fact sent to Iran in order to prevent the Iranian military leaders from orchestrating a coup in order to save the Shah. He was also reportedly tasked with convincing the Iranian military leaders to meet Mohammad Beheshti, Khomeini's second in command. Huyser was soon faced with accusations of neutralizing the Iranian military and for paving the way for Khomeini's ascension to power. However, Huyser himself always strongly denied these claims. Huyser's reports to Washington have not yet been published. In the meantime, US ambassador William Sullivan actively

worked behind the scenes in order to undermine the Shah's Prime Minister, Shapour Bakhtiar:

On 9 January 1979, David L. Aaron told Zbigniew Brzezinski to target Bakhtiar with a military coup and then form a deal between Iran's military leaders and Khomeini's entourage which would remove the Shah from power. On 14 January 1979, with the Shah's government still in power, Cyrus Vance sent a message to the American embassies in France and Iran:

"We have decided that it is desirable to establish a direct American channel to Khomeini's entourage."

On 15 January 1979, Warren Zimmermann, an official of Carter's government in France, met with Ebrahim Yazdi in Paris. Zimmermann met with Yazdi on two more occasions in Paris, the last meeting being on 18 January 1979. Meanwhile, on 16 January 1979, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had left Iran; suffering from terminal cancer, he had been told by Carter a few days earlier, on 11 January 1979, to "leave promptly".

On 27 January 1979, Khomeini told the US just weeks before the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's government:

It is advisable that you recommend to the army not to follow Bakhtiar (...) You will see we are not in any particular animosity with the Americans. (...) There should be no fear about oil. It is not true that we wouldn't sell to the US. (...)

In mid-to-late January 1979, according to the declassified documents, Carter's government de facto admitted that it would have no issues with the abolishment of the Iranian monarchy and its military, who were having daily talks with Huyser — as long as the eventual result would come gradually and in a controlled way. Khomeini and his entourage now realized that Carter had discarded Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

FEBRUARY 1979

Two days before Khomeini's return from France, commander-in-chief Abbas Gharabaghi told Khomeini's entourage that the Iranian military was not against political alterations, particularly with regard to "the cabinet". On 1 February 1979, Khomeini arrived in Tehran. By 5 February 1979, the Iranian military was not resistant to changes in the type of government anymore, as long as these changes

were conducted "legally and gradually". By this point, junior officers and conscripts deserted and a mutiny erupted in the Air Force. On 11 February 1979, Iran's military leaders, behind Shapour Bakhtiar's back, declared neutrality, which de facto meant that they had surrendered.

Gary Sick, former member of the National Security Council during the period of the Islamic revolution has stated to The Guardian that "the documents [shown by the BBC] are genuine". However, he added that he was unaware of Khomeini's alleged attempts to get into contact with the US back in 1963.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE IRAN HOSTAGE CRISIS

Before the Revolution, the United States was Iran's foremost economic and military partner. This facilitated the modernization of Iran's infrastructure and industry, with as many as 30,000 American expatriates residing in the country in a technical, consulting, or teaching capacity. Some analysts argue that the transformation may have been too rapid, fueling unrest and discontent among an important part of the population in the country and leading to the Revolution in 1979.⁴

After the 1979 seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran, the United States Executive Order 12170 froze about \$12 billion in Iranian assets, including⁵ bank deposits, gold and other properties. According to American officials, most of those were released in 1981 as part of the Algiers Accords to release the hostages. Some assets—Iranian officials say \$10 billion, but US officials say much less—remain frozen, pending resolution of legal claims arising from the Revolution.

⁴ https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/hostage_crisis_in_iran

⁵ <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/teacher-resources/jimmy-carter-and-the-iranian-hostage-crisis/p1>

FURTHER READING

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