

# **Iranian Hostage Crisis: American Government**

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## **Committee Overview**

Welcome to the Iranian Hostage Crisis: American Government Committee. You were chosen to serve on this committee for your expertise and diplomacy. Members are tasked, by President Carter, to find a peaceful and diplomatic resolution to the current hostage crisis, taking place in the U.S. embassy located in Tehran, Iran. This committee was created shortly after students of the University of Tehran took hostage 52 Americans working at the embassy on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1979. You must act swiftly to both rescue the hostages and create a plan to restore U.S.-Iranian relations.

## **History of American-Iranian Relations**

Prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States and Iranian governments rarely interacted with one another. As a result of American consumers' growing dependence on oil, the U.S. turned increasingly to the Middle East for a sustainable source of fuel. Iran was a major oil producer and provider to the United States. In the 50s Iranian prime minister Muhammad Mussaddeq successfully nationalized Iran's petroleum industry, thus increasing the country's revenue as well as the prices for foreign nations. Almost immediately, the U.S. began to intervene in Iranian politics to save the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, a British business that initially had monopolized the industry. The U.S. initiated a CIA coup of Musaddeq using the

support of the Iranian people, the military, and the common fear of communism as tools to create panic in Tehran. The CIA used undercover agents to first rally those who supported Musaddeq into storming the streets of Iran, protesting capitalism. These supporters started to destroy businesses and other symbols of capitalism, sparking fear in the Iranian people. The CIA then used another group of undercover agents to rally those who supported the Shia, urging them to fight back. The CIA used this blanket of confusion and destruction to capture Mussaddeq and replaced him with a leader of their choosing, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Pahlavi ruled Iran prior to the shift to democratic government. After the U.S. and Great Britain purchased 80 percent of Iranian oil, the U.S. allowed the Shah to return to Iran.

By 1975, Shah Pahlavi pronounced one political party, the Rastakshiz Party forcing most Iranians out of his government. To help control this single-party state, Pahlavi used his secret police, the Organization of Intelligence and National Security, or SAVAK. The SAVAK maintained peace through crowd-controlling force, curfews, and interrogating citizens who disagreed with the Rastakshiz Party's laws. Citizens opposed the police's brutality and totalitarian control over personal aspects of their lives. The Shah lost support and continually enraged Iranian citizens and his most powerful opponents, Shia religious leaders. The opposition mobilized both the volatile citizens of the younger generations and the older, devout Muslim groups, promoting leadership changes and encouraging a return to religion-based government.

In the United States, the government's knowledge of the Shah's rule was vastly inaccurate. The President and his cabinet gathered most of their information from the CIA which only had direct contact with SAVAK. They lacked insight from any disgruntled villagers or more importantly, the rebellious Shia religious leaders. The multiple American ambassadors to Iran could not provide much additional knowledge either, as they were not highly qualified. As a

result of the information gap, President Jimmy Carter traveled to Iran in 1977 and gave a speech, proclaiming that Iran was “an island of stability”. Back at home, Carter had more pressing issues to attend to than the seemingly docile situation in Iran. His public approval rating had begun to decline due to oil prices inflating and the increasing recession, as well as Congress refusing to cooperate on many of his changes to energy policies. The teetering strength of the American presidency made for a tumultuous setting for the beginning of a revolution in Iran.

The Shia opposition, led by prominent religious scholar Ayatollah Khomeini, usurped Shah Pahlavi out of Iran on January 16th, 1979. During his rule, Pahlavi had seen the threat Khomeini posed to his government and promptly exiled him. Khomeini then returned to Tehran on February 1st and made plans to create an Islamic Republic. He declared himself Supreme Leader of Iran and began to run the government of Iran. Still, the protests persisted, particularly against the U.S. and its involvement in any Iranian affairs. The American government helped nearly 40,000 Americans living in Iran at the time flee the country in hopes of avoiding any direct conflict with the angry religious or student groups.

Meanwhile, the disgraced Shah tried to subsist in Mexico, burdened with disease. He appealed to the United States for medical asylum. President Carter, either moved by the Shah’s illness or unaware of the consequences, permitted Pahlavi to enter and seek refuge in the United States. When the news reached Iran, it infuriated already unhappy Muslim fundamentalists. They viewed this as the ultimate American betrayal. In the eyes of the Iranian people, the Shah was a tyrannical dictator who deserved his comeuppance from the Iranian nation. They called for the Shah to face indictment and eventually execution in Iran. When the United States offered no such resolution, young students of the University of Tehran became enraged, forming into volatile groups of rioters. They soon enveloped the U.S. embassy and set their sights on the 52

American citizens inside. Due to their unstoppable size, the protesters overpowered the gates and the guards and made their way inside.

### **Current Status of Hostage Crisis**

On November 4th, 1979 four hundred students from the University of Tehran stormed the embassy and took the employees hostage. These students, along with tens of thousands of other Iranians are currently protesting the U.S.'s involvement in Iranian government. At the time the embassy was taken over there were 52 employees in this embassy.<sup>i</sup> The hostages have been detained into a single room, and video evidence has been sent to the U.S. proving the hostages are being kept alive. Although the protestors have no direct relationship to the Iranian government, the Ayatollah has stated that he supports the overtaking of the embassy, and will use whatever force is necessary to defend Iran from U.S. insurgency.<sup>ii</sup> The protesters currently have two demands: first that the U.S. apologizes for our involvement in Iran's government and our turning Iran's petroleum resources to the international market.<sup>iii</sup> The Iranian people are infuriated over the CIA's influence in the return of the Shah and their pursuit of selfish monetary gain. Although it is unfavorable that the U.S. apologizes for our actions within the Iranian government, weakening our credibility and trust with other nations, this demand appears most pivotal, and therefore most likely it will have to be met. Their second demand is that the U.S. release Shah Pahlavi back to Iran and into the custody of the Ayatollah.<sup>iv</sup> The Iranian people believe that they have the right to the custody of the Shah on the basis that he has committed human rights crimes for which he must face indictment. The Shah is currently being treated for cancer within New York and if he were to be released most likely he would face execution. The U.S. would like to avoid releasing the Shah back to Iran, as he is currently our only connection to the Iranian government, thus severing a major economic bond.

With the hostile nature of these students and the growing number of protesters in the streets, the U.S. has no choice but to avoid action for the time being. Considering the worsening rapport between both governments, any rash or violent actions could certainly endanger the hostages and most likely result in a feud between Iran and the U.S. President Carter has run a tactical analysis of the area around the embassy, which concluded that any CIA insurgence would alert both the authorities and the protesters inside the embassy.<sup>v</sup>

With most rescue options impossible or highly dangerous it seems the U.S. will be forced to comply with the protester's demands. This would be unfavorable, as the U.S. would have to admit that its actions were wrong, weakening other nation's trust in the U.S. Under no circumstance are we to release the Shah back to Iran. The Shah is the U.S.'s strongest connection to Iran currently, and if he is executed the U.S. would lose all petroleum trade with Iran, exacerbating the recession.

Despite these challenges to rescuing the hostages, inaction is not a viable answer either. With each passing day the health and wellbeing of the hostages diminishes. Another crucial element to consider is President Carter's approval rating; ensuring support for Carter is vital in keeping the nation strong and united. President Carter's popularity has already started to wane due to the recession and oil shortage; prolonging this crisis will upset the American people, which will only create more difficulty for President Carter.<sup>vi</sup>

The limited options and urgency of the situation calls for swift and decisive actions from this committee. This committee is tasked with thinking of ways to neutralize this crisis, either by meeting the demands of the protesters, using military force to rescue the hostages, or finding a peaceful alternative that suits both parties. Possible solutions include apologizing to the Iranian

people, a solution that is unfavorable to the U.S., threatening the Ayatollah if he does not release the hostages, a move that could easily backfire but would be most favorable for the U.S., or finding something for which the Iranian people are willing to trade the hostages. Members of this committee must come prepared with possible solutions that take into account the safety of the hostages, the reputation of the U.S., and assuaging international tensions.

### **People to Know**

- Cyrus Vance: President Jimmy Carter appointed Cyrus Vance Secretary of State on January 21, 1977. When he first began work with President Carter, they both shared similar interests in preserving human rights and avoiding gratuitous military engagements. Vance often argued against the counsel of the National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski.
- Zbigniew Brzezinski: Chosen as National Security Advisor in 1977, Brzezinski served as a skilled foreign policy expert whom Carter consulted daily for perspective. He chaired a committee within the National Security Council (NSC) called the Special Coordinating Committee (SCC) which dealt with intelligence and crisis containment.
- Ruhollah Khomeini: Prior to his ascension to power in Iran, Khomeini dedicated his life to the study of the Shia religion and Muslim doctrine. As an “ayatollah”, official Shia scholar, his anti-Shah, anti-West teaching quickly spread and grew in popularity, laying the basis for a strong Shah opposition. Upon the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, Khomeini returned to Iran having been exiled years earlier. With the support of the nation evident in a referendum, he had no trouble rising to power. He continued to promote anti-American feelings and endorsed the increasing protests. Eventually, he fully supported the students who occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran.

- Hojatoleslam Seyed Ali Khamenei- Like Khomeini, Khamenei was arrested by the Shah's secret police for teaching classes which challenged the Pahlavi rule. His release coincided with the crumbling of Shah Pahlavi, which he took advantage of by creating Jame'ye Rouhaniyat Mobarez (Combatant Clerics Association) in 1977. This organization soon grew in prominence and helped Ayatollah Khomeini form the Islamic Republic Party. Khomeini recognized the talent and leadership ability of Khomeini and recruited him as a member of Iran's new government in January of 1979. He became a prominent member of the Revolutionary Council, the Deputy Minister of Defense, a representative on the Supreme Council of Defense and soon acted as a dominant figure in the Majlis (the national legislature). As the United States began its negotiations with Iran, Khomeini was instrumental in helping both country's explore their political options
- Shah Reza Pahlavi- On September 16th, 1941 Shah Pahlavi became the political leader of Iran. Shah Pahlavi had used American and British resources to become Shah, and as a result began to align views with these two countries, changing Iran to a more western, capitalist nation. Shah Pahlavi continued to alter Iran, slowly shifting away from traditional Persian values and customs. Eventually the Shah's changes and police went too far and the Iranian people erupted in protest.

### **Questions to Consider**

- What extremes should the United States government take in order to rescue the hostages?
- Are all future U.S.-Iran relations now destroyed due to this conflict?
- How important is American control over Iran? How much interest does the U.S. government have vested in Iran's continual development as a capitalist and democratic nation?

- How important is the United States' stake in Iran's oil production?
- How can the U.S. uphold their image as the most powerful country in the world without igniting a fully fledged war over the hostages?
- Can the crisis be solved completely diplomatically or are military strategies the most efficient methods of rescue?
- What does the U.S. have to gain from its protection of Shah Pahlavi?
- How might President Carter's approval ratings affect his ability to lead efforts in the crisis?
- What measures should the U.S. take to prevent a crisis like this from happening again?

### **Useful Sources**

Any and all delegates wishing to do further research on this issue are welcome to use these sources and any other academic sources he or she finds useful.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-hostage-crisis/>

An excellent academic resource with a thorough background and rounded coverage of the many issues at play.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kz6O9L7QBno&noredirect=1>

An academic video that explains the whole of the crisis, including minute details and important pre-crisis history.

<http://www.history.com/topics/iran-hostage-crisis>

An academic resource for those delegates who would prefer a more concise read.

<https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/iraniancrises>

An academic resource that focuses more on the struggles and pressure faced by the President and his cabinet.

[http://www.whitehousehistory.org/whha\\_classroom/classroom\\_9-12-transitions-carter.html](http://www.whitehousehistory.org/whha_classroom/classroom_9-12-transitions-carter.html)

An academic resource for those delegates who prefer more in depth reading.

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<sup>i</sup> "The Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979 Explained.", Keith Hughes

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> "Islamic Revolution of 1979."

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> "Interview with Jimmy Carter."

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid