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444 Day Showdown – the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-81):  
catalyst for a New Muslim Identity

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*To my family and dear friends who always saw the best of me,  
and inspired me to do even better.*

## **ABSTRACT**

The main aim of this dissertation is to understand better whether the Iranian Hostage Crisis in Tehran (1979-1981), changed the world order during the final 10 years of the Cold War. This study aspires to elucidate the takeover of the American Embassy and other relevant events in that period, due to the radicalization of the Muslim World and the anti-American sentiment, in order to perceive if the Hostage crisis can be framed in terms of the Cold War. Was the hostage crisis a consequence of the US-USSR cold war conflict or was Iran not factoring in this concept? Was Iran solely under the influence of Islam 10 years before the end of the Cold War?

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## INTRODUCTION

The hostages who struggled in an international chess game held the world breathless for 444 days and are the starting point of this thesis. Acknowledging the outline of events that occurred from November 4, 1979 until January 20, 1981, the aim of the author is to understand the consequences of the Hostage crisis. The author wants to grasp the connection between the Tehran embassy seizure and other significant actions during those same years. Since the Iranian Revolution there has been a shift in the Muslim World, from a so-called Arab nationalism, which characterized countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to Islamic fundamentalism. This fundamentalism is characterized by hatred of the West and especially the United States. This hatred gave birth to the feeling of anti-Americanism that soon became very strong. The Tehran embassy seizure, a mix of this sentiment and the fear of a repetition of history, was a shocking event also because of how much time it lasted and how it became the point of departure of a new world order. The world was a bystander of Carter's negotiations who was not showing the usual American determination in finding a solution for the crisis and this gave even more confidence to Iran and its spiritual great leader Khomeini. Nevertheless, the period from 1979 to 1981 was still technically the Cold War, and the USSR was investigating U.S. behavior and acting consequently, and *vice versa*. The two superpowers believed that the whole world was still under their sphere of influence. In summary the author wants to understand why the Tehran Embassy was taken hostage and what were its consequences on the global scale.

Even if the U.S. confidential records on the crisis were declassified in 2000, not much research was done afterwards. Because of the high media coverage during that period, especially after the Vietnam war and throughout the crisis, not much information was kept from the public. Tabaar's "Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran" draws on a range of newly released original materials. On the American side of the story, there are many primary sources because of the great amount of people involved in the crisis. President Carter and the National Security Advisor, Brzezinski's biographies give us the White House's view and feeling about what they were going through. Sick's note-taking task in the White House, gathered in "All fall down", was also helpful to understand the feeling and decision-making process in the Carter administration during the ordeal. In addition, there are several books written by the hostages kept in Iran such as Charles W. Scott's "Pieces of the Game". These stories help us to understand their situation and frustration the hostages were dealing with, since the whole time they did not have any idea about what was going on and if their government was working to help.

Unfortunately, on the Iranian side, written documents concerning the Iran Hostage Crisis and its decision-making process probably do not exist. Given the almost complete absence of Iranian archival documents, the methodology adopted to analyze the importance of this event at an international level consists in the analysis of the available memoirs of hostages, students and key members who made decisions during the Iran case, examination of second-hand accounts and media resources, transcripts of interviews conducted by Iranian students or during Reagan's campaign. An important source to learn the students' perspective is

Takeover in Tehran by Massoumeh Ebtekar. She was not just a member of the Students Supporting the Line of the Imam, she was one of the spokeswoman of the group as a result of her great English-language skills. From her biography we can get closer to understanding the Iranian point of view. Again, Tabaar's "Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran" also draws its attention to original materials from Iranian Islamists and from the daily paper of the Soviet-backed Communist Tudeh Party. The limitations of the data coming from Iranian sources is taken into consideration by the author and she makes sure the reader is aware of them.

Academic papers and research were largely used, and most of them are taken by international studies and political science journals. The author found a great difference between research from before and after the end of the Cold War. Before the Cold War, papers analyzing the American or Soviet contexts motivate most of the events during that conflict. The United States, in particular, took great account of the Soviet position in the decision-making process to resolve the crisis. Instead, from the very few Iranian texts, not much attention was given to the international Cold War conflict. After the end of the Cold War, many studies were made to try and understand the reasons backing the students' actions. Their reasons were already out there during the hostage crisis but Washington could not fully recognize them until the Cold War went out of the picture.

Regarding other topics addressed in this dissertation, such as the Mecca Mosque and other embassy seizures or the Iran-Iraq war, and the USSR-Afghanistan war, the main sources used are newspapers and studies on the Arab Nationalism and the Islamic fundamentalism that characterized most of those actions. These countries' conflicts are necessary to grasp the revolution that was happening in the Muslim world and the impact that the hostage crisis had on it.

This thesis will help you understand how the hostage crisis ushered in the beginning of a new world order. Before going in depth to the causes and consequences of the Iranian hostage crisis, a pre-chapter analyses the timeline of the events. Chapter 1 describes the United States foreign policy towards Iran during the Iranian Revolution and its relationship with the Shah Reza Pahlavi, the foreign policy intended to resolve the Tehran embassy seizure by President Carter and that eventually led to the election of President Reagan. Carter's political and religious sides are the basis to understanding his behavior and the unusual foreign policy. Next, chapter 2 explains the motivations behind Iranian Revolution. The Shah iron hand regime was one reason, but the entire Muslim world was changing and going back to a more traditional and Islamic view of the state. Contempt for the West and anti-American sentiment have been expressed through the attacks to the U.S. embassies in Islamabad and Tripoli. Furthermore, the new widely spread fundamentalism can be better acknowledged through the attack on Mecca, the Great Mosque, and the assassination of Al-Sadat, the Egyptian President, by the Muslim Brotherhood. In chapter 3 the other side of the story is told, from the Islamic Revolution to the hostage crisis in Iran, from Khomeini's policy to the Iran-Iraq war. In the final and fourth chapter, there is an overview of the roles and actions of third-party actors. The USSR's role is fundamental to the core of this research as we must understand if the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was conducted because of the Cold War. Algeria was also a very important character since its representatives found a way to make the U.S. and Iran get to a resolution and bring all the hostages home safe.

In conclusion, the author will provide an overview of the role of the Cold War in the sequence of events arising from the Iran Hostage crisis. Were the motives of the US-USSR conflict behind those events or was the concept of the sphere of influence already overrated ten years before the end of it? Was it just the birth of a new third pole in the Middle East? So, in the end, can the Hostage Crisis be framed in terms of the Cold War? The author will try to respond to these questions based on the earlier analyzed events.

## THE IRAN HOSTAGE CRISIS FROM 1979 TO 1981

Sunday, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1979, was just another working day at the United States Embassy in Tehran, when a group of students stormed the compound. Earlier that morning a crowd of people began to assemble round the embassy, shouting Anti-American slogans, such as ‘death to America’, and burning American flags. It was around 10:30 AM, when three hundred demonstrators poured over the embassy walls and forced their way in the compound trying to get in the main buildings. The Embassy was attacked by the Muslim Student Followers the Line of Imam, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

What brought the Iranian students to storm the American Embassy was the fact that President Carter had admitted the dethroned Shah of Iran, Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi, in the United States to get medical treatment for cancer. When Carter gave the approval to proceed on the admission of the Shah, he knew the risks he was taking. Jokingly, the President wondered aloud in front of all his advisors what advice<sup>1</sup> they would give him if the Iranians took the embassy in Tehran and held the Americans hostages. Unfortunately, his comment proved to be more prophetic than he expected. In fact, students vowed to keep the hostages until the Shah was extradited<sup>2</sup> to Persia from the United States and put to trial for his “heinous crimes” against the Iranian people. Yet, the motives and intentions of the hostage takers remain something of a mystery to Westerners<sup>3</sup>. The Shah had ruled Iran with an iron hand for 26 years<sup>4</sup> in close contact with the United States, through a policy of westernization and though the SAVAK<sup>5</sup>, its secret police which was well-known for torturing and killing anyone who was against the monarch. He had been the symbol of the corrupt dictatorship that ruled over the country, destroying its culture and undermining its independence. He was finally kicked out of the country thanks to the Iranian Revolution which started at the beginning of 1978 and was still going on when the assault on the U.S. Embassy occurred. He was also considered a long-time friend of the U.S and that is why a sentiment of hatred had grown so much towards the Americans. However, the students wanted to underline they had nothing against the American people, as they were victims of their government’s decisions just as they themselves were, but that their action was intended against the American government, especially the Carter administration.

The Ayatollah Khomeini had been in exile since 1964 but even from far away he had been the real center of power since he managed to converge every Iranian political power against one common enemy – the Shah. From his exile in Iraq and then Paris, the Ayatollah conducted the revolution and gained power. On January 16, 1979, when the Shah left for vacation, the vacation he was never going to come back from, several

<sup>1</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 184.

<sup>2</sup> “Hostage Crisis,” Encyclopaedia Iranica, Mohsen M. Milani, last modified March 23, 2012, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hostage-crisis>

<sup>3</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>4</sup> James Risen, “SECRETS OF HISTORY: The CIA in Iran,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran* (Canada: Hignell Book Printing, 2000), 28-29.



political groups began to emerge. The dominant vision was the one given by Khomeini himself and presented the concept of an ideal Islamic state. He was followed by the ‘moderates’ who were nationalists in the classic sense and who had all sympathized with Mossadegh in the 1950’s, and finally the Islamic progressives that attempted to fuse the modern Western political doctrine and Islam. Khomeini was the only charismatic figure that had both Islamic rightist and leftist persuasions<sup>6</sup>. The day of the embassy seizure the Bazargan<sup>7</sup> cabinet resigned and was substituted by Bani-Sadr as first President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Ghotbzadeh as Minister of Foreign Affairs, with Khomeini as the Imam, the supreme leader of Iran, with the intention to write a new constitution following the Islamic traditions.

The assault of 4 November was not the first time the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was seized and its staff taken hostage. In fact, a similar attempt by Iranian protestors had been tried months earlier, on February 14th of that same year. In that occasion however the American diplomats and employees were backed by the Iranian police which managed to bring the situation back under control in a few hours. However, things on November 4<sup>th</sup> were different.

The second time around, most of the embassy staff barricaded themselves behind steel doors and managed to resist for a couple of hours, until the attackers got in. The employees were able to protect themselves because of the major modification that had been conducted after the first attack, especially in the chancery building that was going to be the principal target. There was bulletproof glass in the windows, electronic surveillance and with much more staff and assigned people. The new emergency equipment fulfilled its mission – to hold out unassisted for two or three hours – but help never arrived and, “better for the students who had more people that could be taken as hostages”, which made it almost or completely impossible for any kind of rescue mission. This was the first difference<sup>9</sup>.

After the first attack in February, the Carter administration had even thought of a total evacuation of Americans in Tehran, its embassy staff and all businessmen working there independently, but they underestimated the level of danger. It was also difficult for the employees to destroy with paper shredders all secret or top-secret documents present in the chancery building, before the students could get them. In fact, the students were looking for proof that the U.S. government was interfering with internal Iranian policies and it was, as they called it, a “den of spies”. Sometimes what they considered to be documents of particularly explosive content would be exposed on television<sup>10</sup>. However, to a practiced eye, those documents were nothing more than political reports<sup>11</sup> and internal management that could be found in any other embassy in the world.

<sup>6</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, “Hostage Crisis.”

<sup>7</sup> Iranian Prime Minister from February 1979 to 4<sup>th</sup> November 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 195.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 180.

<sup>10</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 192-3.

A second fundamental difference is in the reason why the students attacked the embassy, it must be understood why just admitting the Shah to the United States, because of his illness, would cause such a reaction in the Iranian population, especially since this act of seizing the embassy was considered to have unique characteristics and its status as a seemingly ‘unprecedented’ act<sup>12</sup>. The Shah’s admission in the U.S. was perceived by the people of Iran as a repetition of what had happened in 1953 after the CIA *coup d’état*. The *coup* was a setback for Iran’s political development, in fact, the population had managed to overthrow the Shah and place Mossadegh as the Prime Minister of Iran, but the U.S. government intervened because of fears about its oil interests and the possible spread of Communism<sup>13</sup>. The Iranian Parliament voted to nationalize the oil industry, but this had not been convenient for the United States, so, since the Shah Reza Pahlavi had always been a good friend to American governments, the CIA’s Operation Ajax had placed him back on his throne<sup>14</sup>. This time, the Iranians were afraid that the Carter administration was trying to do the same thing again by erasing the struggles of another revolution. Furthermore, the Shah’s leukemia had been a “state secret” during his reign and that is why many did not believe he was really ill. The students’ frantic search for spies showed how the behavior of the United States may have encouraged the misperceptions which led to the hostage taking and how the Shah’s departure fed conspiracy images, based in part on historical facts, in the heads of ordinary Iranians.

Another important fact that made Iranians think of a plot, once again, was when on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1979 Zbigniew Brzezinski, the United States National Security Advisor, found himself at an anniversary celebration in Algiers with Iranian prime minister Bazargan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Yazdi and Mustapha Ali Chamram, the Iranian Minister of Defense, who explained to Brzezinski their concern and how disturbing it was for the U.S. to host the Shah. This event made the plot that the Iranian population was suspecting even more real and that is why they decided they had to act as soon as possible.

Nobody thought that this hostage situation would last longer than a week, least of all the students; but this is what happened: 52 embassy employees and diplomats were kept hostage for 444 days in Tehran. After the long period of captivity that went from the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1979 to the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1981, the hostages were released, and many things happened subsequently.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 13 hostages – all women except for two – as well as all the low-level African-American officials<sup>15</sup>, were freed because they were not suspected of espionage by their captors. This discrimination against the African-American employees was intended to divide the American population, and this decision to free some hostages was ordered by the Imam based on what the students found in the embassy’s documents and by interviewing the hostages. There is little to no evidence that Khomeini knew anything about

<sup>12</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Risen, “SECRETS OF HISTORY: The CIA in Iran.”

<sup>14</sup> Risen, “SECRETS OF HISTORY: The CIA in Iran.”

<sup>15</sup> James Philips, “Iran, the U.S. and the Hostages: After 300 days,” The Heritage Foundation, April 29, 1980.

the takeover of the embassy<sup>16</sup>, but as soon as the students got in he started giving them orders. Mr. Khomeini, a devotee in Khomeini's inner circle, was the spiritual leader who stayed in the embassy with the students to provide help and to make sure everything was going how the Imam decided<sup>17</sup>.

In the White House, the main problem was a tendency within the U.S. government to overestimate Iran's vulnerability<sup>18</sup> to external pressure, and the Carter administration was poorly equipped to comprehend the nature of the fury and hatred boiling in Tehran. Khomeini was a man riven with hate - hatred for the Shah, for Carter and America and for those who dared to oppose his vision. Moreover, the solution was even harder to find when the mutual incomprehension between the two leaders was discovered. In addition, what made the situation even more delicate was that the hostage crisis was becoming an obsession with the mass media which altered the mood of the United States. There were numerous reports of violence and discrimination<sup>19</sup> against Iranians living in the U.S. and national television remembered everyday how long the crisis has been going on which created a lot of frustration. In that period, many journalists from all across the world went to Iran to try and have an exclusive interview with the students to know more about their reasons, and most of all the position and health of the hostages, but every time instead they took the opportunity to explain their political message in the West. They did so because they believed that their message, the way they wanted it to be known, was not getting through to the world public opinion intact<sup>20</sup>.

The students inside the compound were divided into six specialized committees to administer the daily affairs of the occupied compound, from managing the hostages, to sticking the shredded documents back together in order to study and publish them. Carter, instead, was genuinely worried for the destiny of the hostages, but did not know how to handle the situation. He started with an embargo on Iran, such as a halt on all imports from Iran to the U.S, and then passed on to the total freezing of Iranian assets<sup>21</sup>. These sanctions severely complicated Iran's international position. While the United States tried to gain more support from the UN to hit Iran with other economic sanctions, Washington came up with a rescue mission. Carter was initially in agreement with Cyrus Vance, the United States Secretary of State, with his patient policy, in fact, he believed that only through diplomacy would the hostages be able to come back home safely. Brzezinski, instead, was tired of waiting and believed that military action was needed. Brzezinski and Vance were different and not personally close but they complemented each other. After the first Christmas in the embassy seizure, Carter started changing his mind and began to think that military action was needed. A solution to the hostage crisis was almost reached on a couple of occasions, and especially close after ultimatums were posed to Iran. A UN Commission was established to go to Iran to hear its grievances about the crimes of the Shah and then to

<sup>16</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 218.

<sup>19</sup> Risen, "SECRETS OF HISTORY: The CIA in Iran.

<sup>20</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 168-170.

<sup>21</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 235.

release the hostages. However, their visit did not turn out as planned, and in the end nothing changed. The President's opinion also shifted because of the accomplishment of the Canadian Caper mission<sup>22</sup>. A group of six Americans<sup>23</sup> managed to escape the embassy while it was being stormed and were then hidden in the homes of sympathetic Canadian and Western families until they were provided with fake Canadian passports and managed to head back home. Of course, the Canadian government took credit for the mission because it would not have helped negotiations if the mission had been undertaken by Washington.

A rescue mission became the only way-out the President and his core-group could think of, except for Vance, as he believed the mission was unrealistic and the only way to go was to keep economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran<sup>24</sup>. The mission was very complicated because of the geographical positions of Tehran and America's military bases. The rescue mission failed on the afternoon of April 24<sup>th</sup>, even before the helicopters could get to Tehran.

After the failed rescue mission, a very particular period began. The sentiment that spread in the international sphere was that the United States was not as strong as they seemed to be. Carter returned to active campaigning and there was a widespread recognition that nothing further could be done at that moment. The hostages were spread around the country of Iran and that set them in even more danger. Wisely, Carter decided not to implement a second rescue mission because he knew that 'even with maximum intelligence effort, there was no way to tell exactly where all of them were'<sup>25</sup>, inside Iran. At the same time, Iran and especially Khomeini realized the ongoing crisis was beginning to have more negative consequences than positive results such as Iran's isolation, later on in the outbreak of the war with Iraq, which started at the end of 1980, and not least of all the continuing economic sanctions<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, on 27<sup>th</sup> July of 1980 the Shah died.

The problem in Tehran was the fact that the real power and decision-making of the hostage crisis were held by Khomeini, while Bani-Sadr and Ghotbzadeh were powerless in the process. Also, elections for the new Islamic Republic were coming and that expanded the time-frame to make a decision that was good for the nation.

A long period of negotiation began, that went from September 1980 until a few minutes after Carter left the White House, in which Iran expressed requests such as the unfreezing of all the assets and the binding commitment of no U.S. military or political intervention in Iranian internal affairs<sup>27</sup>. Washington responded to all of these demands, and thanks to the Algerian government, a very efficient mediator, the 52 American hostages in Tehran finally got home. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1981, the plane carrying the former hostages left Iranian airspace as soon as Carter's plane landed in his hometown in Georgia.

<sup>22</sup> Dir. Ben Affleck, *Argo*, Warner Bros., 2012, Film.

<sup>23</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 259.

<sup>24</sup> Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 408.

<sup>25</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 139.

<sup>26</sup> Risen, "SECRETS OF HISTORY: The CIA in Iran."

<sup>27</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 309.

There are some allegations that representatives of Ronald Reagan's staff reached a deal with the Iranian radicals to delay the release of the hostages until he won the elections. <sup>28</sup> Anyway, the way Carter tried to resolve the hostage crisis did not win him a reelection and even on the last minutes of his presidency<sup>29</sup>, Khomeini did not let him be the one who saved the hostages. In fact, it is believed that Khomeini wanted to destroy Carter and to finally manage to influence the politics of the most powerful country in the world as they did to them for over 20 years. The students knew they had accomplished something vitally important: they had shattered the image of American superiority in the world<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 141-143.

<sup>29</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 319.

<sup>30</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 235.

## CHAPTER I - U.S. Foreign Policy in Iran

The American foreign policy in Tehran has always been a friendly one – at least until the Shah began ruling Iran. When he fled to the United States, after the Revolution had been going on in early 1979, the Carter Administration did not know the real situation in Iran. They did not know and could not even understand the feeling of hatred that grew in Iran over the 26 years of the Shah's reign. That is why Washington's campaign of reconciliation<sup>31</sup> provoked, even more, a spate of warning in the Iranian press, which was increasingly dominated by Islamic fundamentalists. The U.S. tried to keep the same relationship<sup>32</sup> with this new partner, Khomeini, but it did not work out. Tired and afraid of the United States the 'Students Following the Line of the Imam' seized the embassy. When the hostages were kept in captivity a long list of peaceful sanctions were used by Carter but turned out to be useless.

The objective of this chapter is to understand what goal was motivating the American strategy. Was it the safety of the hostages, the American international reputation, or the underlying Cold War? Were they trying to avoid a conflict with the Soviet Union? Did Carter fail or not? Did Reagan's campaign and election change the end of the ordeal of the hostages? To answer these questions we must try to understand the U.S. foreign policy before, during, and after the hostage crisis.

### 1. The Islamic Revolution and the U.S. Reaction

The Carter administration had not been well-informed by the American ambassador in Tehran about the scale of the Iranian Revolution, and this is why the policies they were trying to implement were not appropriate. The White House over-optimistically hoped to establish a working relationship with the triumphant revolutionary forces in Iran immediately after Khomeini's return. Despite a continuous torrent of anti-American statements by Khomeini, the Carter Administration adopted a conciliatory posture<sup>33</sup> towards the implacable Ayatollah and sought to accommodate the Revolutionary camp to save some of the American influence in Tehran. Americans were trying to reconstruct their old relationship and acted as the revolution had never happened. Unfortunately, this time they sought to establish cordial relations with violent anti-American and anti-Western forces that gained control over Tehran.

The new relation would be based on respect and non-interference in Iran's internal affairs and recognition<sup>34</sup> of the Revolution. The Administration believed that they needed Iran and that the latter still needed the former, as Iran with anarchy would be exploited for the Soviets. Washington believed it was better for Iran to be an

<sup>31</sup> Philips, "Iran, the U.S. and the Hostages: After 300 days."

<sup>32</sup> David Banks, "The Diplomatic Presentation of the State in International Crises: Diplomatic Collaboration during the US-Iran Hostage Crisis," *International Studies Quarterly* 63, (2019): 1163-1174.

<sup>33</sup> Philips, "Iran, the U.S. and the Hostages: After 300 days."

<sup>34</sup> Charles W. Scott. *Pieces of the Game*. (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers Ltd., 1984), 11-12.

anti-West government, as a strong and independent state, rather than a Communist or pro-Soviet state. This could have been possible in only one condition if the United States never backed the Shah. The feeling of anti-Americanism spread over Iran was somehow difficult to understand for the highest offices in the U.S. government. They privately and consistently assured the Iranian leaders that Washington had accepted the Iranian Revolution and had no intention of investing in the dying Shah any longer<sup>35</sup> but they did not accept what the situation was: America lost Iran the minute Khomeini was back from his exile.

## **2. The Carter Administration during the Hostage Crisis**

The hostage crisis created a serious dilemma for President Carter: how was he going to free the hostages, while protecting U.S. national interests and prestige? Initially, President Carter used peaceful diplomatic options to free the hostages, and then he resorted to violence when he ordered a military rescue mission in April 1980. He, then, relied again on diplomacy. Military retaliation against Iran during the Cold War was not a prudent option, as it would have caused the strategically vital and oil-rich country to ally with the Soviet Union<sup>36</sup>. But that was not the only reason. In fact, the U.S. really wanted to keep the friendly relationship they had long fought for. Anyway, opting for a peaceful solution to the hostage crisis was a difficult choice for President Carter as Americans were horrified to hear about the mock execution of some of the hostages, the ‘death to America’ chanting, and American flags desecrated. Many felt humiliated to see a superpower paralyzed, unable to free its hostages from a Third World country. The Carter Administration was passively turning the other cheek, down-playing the incident, and priding itself on the avoidance of overreaction. Apparently, Washington preferred inaction to overreaction.

The truth was Carter evaluated each alternative according to its ability to satisfy his personal primary criterion<sup>37</sup> on the domestic political dimension, the safe and immediate return of the hostages. In fact, at the negotiation stage, Carter’s biggest mistake was to subordinate other U.S. national interests to the question of the safety of the hostages and thus enhance the bargaining value of the hostages in the eyes of the Iranians. This gave Khomeini very little incentive to moderate their conditions for releasing the hostages.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the United States had consistently rejected Iran’s demands to extradite the deposed Shah but, hoping that the Iranian government would eventually secure the release of the hostages, it adopted a cautious low-key posture<sup>38</sup> desired to minimize tensions. Initially, the President really believed he could find a way to negotiate<sup>39</sup> with Khomeini and ‘work him’ based on religion, as it was the only thing they

<sup>35</sup> Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, “Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran: The Untold Account of the Communist threat,” *Security Studies*, July 7, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, “Hostage Crisis.”

<sup>37</sup> Brulé, “Explaining and Forecasting Leaders’ Decisions,” 99-113.

<sup>38</sup> Philips, “Iran, the U.S. and the Hostages: After 300 days.”

<sup>39</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 106-109.

had in common. Carter was recalling his strategic use of his Christian faith greased the negotiating process<sup>40</sup> resulting in the Camp David Accords<sup>41</sup>. He believed that having this apparent affinity would give him an insight into the Ayatollah's character and appeal to his rationality, but it was not the case. Talking directly to him turned out to be completely useless, as the emissaries the President sent to Tehran did not even manage to meet him.

Soon after, the UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim was asked by Washington to go to Tehran and negotiate with the Ayatollah. However, Khomeini refused to meet him and to recognize his authority. Another try was attempted when Christian Bourguet, a French lawyer and Hector Villalon, an Argentine businessman, were authorized to represent the Iranian government during the negotiations over the hostages' release. A commission that became known as the "French connection" was sent by the United Nations to Tehran. The UN commission of inquiry was formed, consisting of 5 liberal lawyers from Algeria, Venezuela, Syria, Sri Lanka, and France, and traveled to Iran to investigate the U.S. role in Iran under the Shah as well as the U.S. complaints against the Iranian seizure of the Embassy. The commission spent two weeks in Iran to understand the people's claims and decide about the release of the hostages. On the diplomatic front, international pressure was buttressed by negotiations conducted through several mediators of single states or from unanimous resolutions at the UN. Nevertheless, this approach was in vain too.

When on April 7, Khomeini's office announced that the hostages would not be released until the formation of the new government, President Carter announced the following measures:

- the breaking of diplomatic relations with Iran;
- the imposition of an economic embargo on all exports to Iran, except for food and medicine;
- the freezing of Iranian assets and the cancellation of all visas issued to Iranians for the entry into the U.S. and denial of future visas;
- the banning of all imports from Iran;
- the prohibition of travels to Iran for US citizens, except for journalists<sup>42</sup>.

These were the further and more determined economic sanctions the President decided to apply.

On the military front, the President appeared to rule out the use of force as an alternative. He did not want to cause bloodshed or arouse the unstable captors who could punish the hostages.

However, after many failed negotiations, the Administration arrived at its ultimate decision to try and save the hostages with a rescue mission. On April 24, eight U.S. helicopters<sup>43</sup> flew over the Iranian desert *en route* to a fueling *rendezvous* point. Their mission was to rescue the 52 American hostages still held inside the embassy. As a rescue mission with small task force they were trying to take the Iranians by surprise. Sadly, the mission

<sup>40</sup> Blake W. Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem? The Religious Dimension of the Iranian Hostage Crisis," *Diplomatic History* 39, No.3 (2015): 425.

<sup>41</sup> Further analyzed in Chapter II.

<sup>42</sup> Philips, "Iran, the U.S. and the Hostages: After 300 days."

<sup>43</sup> Brulé, "Explaining and Forecasting Leaders' Decisions," 99-113.



did not go any further than this. Because of bad weather, mechanical failure, and little margin for error the task force resulted in the abortion of the rescue mission. During the withdrawal from the initial *rendezvous* point, two helicopters collided killing eight men, and what was supposed to be a daring rescue became an embarrassing fiasco. The period following the rescue mission attempt was quite uneventful<sup>44</sup>, apart from the death of the Shah in Egypt on July 27.

Finally, thanks to the Algerian mediation<sup>45</sup> a solution to the crisis was found. The negotiation process took more than three months because the Iranian government was busy with the war in Iraq<sup>46</sup> but, after 444 days of captivity, the hostages made it home. When Carter finally met the hostages, he open-heartedly took all responsibility<sup>47</sup> for each and every action that was made during the crisis.

The Administration's diplomatic strategy was to unite the world against Iran and to divide Iran against itself. However, the President failed to effectively mobilize America's allies to maximize multilateral pressures on Tehran. Lengthy negotiations dissipated the sense of urgency and outrage while the on-again-off-again status of formal sanctions did little to reassure the U.S. allies of the faithfulness of the American purpose. The Carter administration's failure to react firmly to the embassy seizure failed to convince the public that Carter would respond in a manner that would discourage any such future events<sup>48</sup>. Yet, what prevented the United States from acting more decisively might have been the fear of the Soviet intervention and the creation of a new Soviet power base in the Middle East. Rumor has it that Carter more than once admitted that his "greatest fear all along is that this crisis could lead us into direct confrontation with the Soviets", in contradiction with what was thought to be his primary criterion. The Administration was afraid that the rescue mission, in particular, could have been seen as simple military action and thus push Iran into the hands of the USSR. Instead, even if the approach towards Iran remained peaceful, the approach towards the Soviets changed with a more confrontational one<sup>49</sup> since the invasion of Afghanistan<sup>50</sup>. It represented a serious threat in the balance of power in the Middle East, and the U.S. was not willing to make vain all the efforts made to keep Iran and other countries in that area under their influence.

Surprisingly, even if the population had different points of view on Carter's policies to solve the crisis, when the crisis hit the one-year mark the approval rating dropped, below pre-crisis levels, to 29 percent<sup>51</sup>. The end of the crisis brought the people together and created a new sense of patriotism<sup>52</sup> and spirit of unity, for the first time since WWII.

<sup>44</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 140-141.

<sup>45</sup> Further analysis of the Algerian mediation in Chapter IV.

<sup>46</sup> Further analysis of the Iran-Iraq War in Chapter III.

<sup>47</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 397.

<sup>48</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, "Hostage Crisis."

<sup>49</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 291.

<sup>50</sup> Further analysis of the conflict between USSR and Afghanistan in Chapter IV.

<sup>51</sup> Brulé, "Explaining and Forecasting Leaders' Decisions," 99-113.

<sup>52</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 401.

### 3. Reagan's Campaign and Election

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1980, a presidential debate was held between candidates Ronald Reagan and President Jimmy Carter. After almost a year since the beginning of the hostage crisis, it became one of the major arguments in the candidates' campaigns. President Carter, who was running for his re-election, wanted the American people to believe that the sanctions he was applying to Iran were beginning to bear fruits<sup>53</sup> and that his foreign strategies were eventually going to solve the crisis. The patience that the current Administration was showing made the American population wonder if that strategy really was the right one, and Carter lost most of his support as a result of these doubts. Instead, Reagan was often asked what he would have done in Carter's position and if the many allegations about his secret negotiations with the Iranian forces were true. Even if Reagan extensively denied these accusations, they probably brought him to gain support under the hostage crisis' point of view.

It was again during the period of campaigning that the difference between Democrats and Republicans towards the Arab world came out<sup>54</sup>. Carter tried as much as possible to be a pacifist and to not engage in any military action that would cause the complete loss of U.S.-Iran relations, and likely cause a war. Alternately, Republicans have always been considered more practical and confident in dealing with military action. It is not something addressed to Iranians, but something bound to their religion. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to express strong concerns about the rise of Islamic extremism and to see Islam as a religion that may encourage violence. Reagan believed he could have solved the confrontation faster than Carter if the allegations were false and he did not actually solve the crisis himself. Contrary to Carter, he was more worried about the image of the weak U.S. spreading around the world. Since the Cold War was still ongoing and the USSR was dealing with a territorially close country, Afghanistan, the United States was supposed to be seen as a threat. It was important for Washington not to lose its position in the Middle East as it would remain all under the Soviet influence.

Regardless, Reagan eventually had to face a similar situation during his presidency. Reagan defined his administration in opposition<sup>55</sup> to what he saw as Jimmy Carter's failure to quickly secure the release of the American captives during the Iranian Hostage crisis. For Reagan, the return of the hostages from Iran in 1981, soon after his inauguration, was one of the happiest moments of his administration. Unfortunately for Reagan, American captives held abroad also provided one of his darkest moments of tenure<sup>56</sup>. Throughout 1984 and

<sup>53</sup>“1980 Ronald Reagan/Jimmy Carter Presidential Debate,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, October 28, 1980, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/10-28-80debate>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Lipka, “The political divide on views toward Muslim and Islam”, January 29, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/29/the-political-divide-on-views-toward-muslims-and-islam/>

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Hemmer, “Historical Analogies and the Definition of Interests: The Iranian Hostage Crisis and Ronald Reagan's Policy Toward the Hostages in Lebanon,” *Political Psychology* 20, No. 2 (1999): 297-289.

<sup>56</sup> Hemmer, “Historical Analogies and the Definition of Interests,” 297-289.

1985, seven Americans were held hostages in Beirut<sup>57</sup>, Lebanon, and in an attempt to secure their release Reagan approved the controversial policy of trading arms for hostages. To convince the Iranian government to use its influence with the group in Lebanon that was holding the Americans, Washington decided to give the Iranians what they wanted:<sup>58</sup> weapons. The administration was also willing to trade intelligence, money, medical supplies, and more, rather than suffer a protracted crisis, which would represent everything the administration had defined itself against. At the same time, even if not as a primary objective, the Reagan Administration strategy was considered an opening move in a geostrategic plan to improve relations with Iran. Reagan's reaction was due to the hostage crisis in Iran, and he felt it was his duty to free the hostages in Lebanon at all costs. He refused to accept that he could now be as helpless and ineffective as Carter had been. Reagan did not want to be like Carter.

Carter's inability to secure the release of the American diplomats held for 444 days had become a metaphor for a paralyzed presidency and the decline of American power throughout the world<sup>59</sup>. During the captivity of the Americans in Lebanon, Reagan was frequently asked if the current situation was similar to the one in Iran but he strongly denied the validity of the comparison, until he later admitted that hostages have been the most frustrating situation he lived during his presidency and the only problem he shared with Jimmy Carter.

Carter declared that his priority was the safe return of the hostages, whereas Reagan promoted the importance of the U.S. national interests and prestige. Even if there was a major difference in their policies, they both feared the Soviet intervention in the Hostage Crisis. The United States could have been kicked out of the Middle East or could have started a war with Iran and the Soviet Union. However, even if the hostages have been in captivity for 444 days before they were freed, without Carter's patience and avoidance of a military conflict that would not have been possible. Accordingly, he avoided giving the Soviet Union a valid reason to start a war and to back the Iranian government. Finally, Carter managed to face revolutionary Iran without losing any of the hostages or opportunities of negotiations, at the price of his own re-election.

<sup>57</sup> Seven Americans were taken hostages in Beirut, Lebanon, by Hezbollah terrorists.

<sup>58</sup> Hemmer, "Historical Analogies and the Definition of Interests," 297-289.

<sup>59</sup> Baker and DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, war and peace, 1989-1992* (New York: Putnam, 1995), 262.

## CHAPTER II - Outburst of Anti-Americanism and Radicalization in the Muslim World

The anti-American sentiment has been growing in the Arab World since WWII but the United States was not able to recognize it. Islamic fundamentalists as political activists wanted to reconstruct the Muslim communities that were intoxicated by Western culture and neo-colonialism. Fundamentalists regarded countries like America and Israel as their main enemies. Westernization resulted in the decline of the Muslim society and political corruption<sup>60</sup>.

In the case of Iran, the sentiment spread because of the continuous fear of another *coup d'état* like the one in 1953, the consistent support to the Shah but most importantly, the Iranians have been taught and conditioned to loathe America. They considered the United States imperialistic, oppressive, amoral, scheming, and ungodly<sup>61</sup>. Did the United States have the power or the right to determine what form of government any country should have, just because any particular country may have been friendly to the United States?<sup>62</sup> This was what the Iranians wanted to prove wrong. Could the American government and Iranian people ever overcome the barriers of misconceptions and misjudgments that stood between them, and finally come to understand one another<sup>63</sup>?

Moreover, with the example of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, this sentiment was demonstrated by other countries in the Arab World. During November and December of 1979, two other U.S. Embassies were attacked and destroyed with vengeance.

Conflicts between nationalism and Islam in the Middle East also arose in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and deeply affected the political development in this area. Nationalism contributed tremendously to the realization of national independence but was the reason for the conflict between modernity and tradition<sup>64</sup> that awakened the fundamentalists. Western observers will regard Islamic fundamentalism as a more dangerous ideology and political movement than communism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the development of radical Islamic movements has been occurring in the Middle East before the end of the Cold War<sup>65</sup>. Fundamentalists like Khomeini or a group comparable to the Muslim Brotherhood tried to establish the Islamic sovereignty in the Muslim world through embassy seizure, or through the attack of the Great Mosque in Mecca or the assassination of the Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat. The Western interventions and the Camp David Accords might have been the cause of these extremist attacks.

<sup>60</sup> Byung-Ock Chang, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism," *Journal of International Development and Cooperation* 11, No.1 (2005): 58.

<sup>61</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, "1980 Ronald Reagan/Jimmy Carter Presidential Debate."

<sup>63</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 34.

<sup>64</sup> Zhongmin Liu, "The Relations between Nationalism and Islam in the Middle East," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 2, No.1 (2008): 69-78.

Liu, "The Relations between Nationalism and Islam in the Middle East."

<sup>65</sup> Chang, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism."

## 1. Anti-Americanism in Iran

During the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iranian people finally managed to force the Shah to abdicate. Yet, Iranians soon saw that the United States did not hesitate to continue their support for him by offering asylum after he had been driven from Iran. Whatever the Administration did to normalize relations with the new revolutionary government was seen as the destruction<sup>66</sup> of the Revolution.

The Iranians' bitter memories of the actions of the Americans against the interests of their country go back to 1953. Iran witnessed the first successful CIA *coup d'état* against a sovereign reign. That event deposed the popularly elected national and democratic Iranian government of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh and paved the way for the return of the Shah, who had escaped abroad in fear of public anger. It was because of the U.S. government's intervention that the dictatorial rule in Iran was reestablished for the following 26 years.

Nevertheless, the event of 1953 was a major one in the memories and experiences of the Iranians and so available for the students. Generations of Iranians were brought up in the shadow of 1953, and it became a defining experience and national rallying point in their lives. Massoumeh Ebtekar, a young student among the captors, who acted as the spokeswoman for the students in the embassy, often emphasized to the international media the importance of the 1953 analogy and that the embassy was a "nest of spies" conspiring against Iran. The CIA's *coup d'état* had become the stuff of Iranian folklore<sup>67</sup> during the years in which the students grew up, and the American decision-makers never understood it. The memory was fresh as it had happened a week ago. The meeting in Algeria<sup>68</sup> between Brzezinski, Bazargan, and Yazdi was the final cause for the Hostage Crisis.

When another Iranian leader whose political priorities clashed with the Western interests appeared on the scene, after the Shah's fall, Iran started to see a plot. However, there was really little concrete evidence as no documents suggested that Carter had the idea of another *coup*, the CIA lacked human assets on the ground and the President strongly resisted the admission of the Shah<sup>69</sup>. The problem was that none of this information was available to them and the conspiracy theories were already building up. Since the *coup* of 1953, the hatred towards the Americans in Iran continued to grow until it exploded on November 4, 1979.

In addition to the decades of hate towards Americans, Iranians felt that U.S. citizens living in Iran began to feel superior to Tehranis. The American businessmen had come to expect extra-respect, probably because the city began to look much more like a Western city rather than a Middle Eastern one. But Iranians,

<sup>66</sup> David Patrick Houghton, "Explaining the Origins of the Iran Hostage Crisis: A Cognitive Perspective," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 2 (25 January 2007): 266.

<sup>67</sup> Houghton, "Explaining the Origins of the Iran Hostage Crisis," 270.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem?"

<sup>69</sup> Houghton, "Explaining the Origins of the Iran Hostage Crisis," 267.

as Ebtekar wrote in her book<sup>70</sup>, felt that the “American lifestyle had come to be imposed as ideal. American popular culture over our country like a flood. This cultural aggression challenged the self-identity of people like us and we were wondering if there was some space left for our own culture.” The truth was that Iranians did not like it, as they already had their culture that they were proud of and only the Shah wanted to impose the Western lifestyle. Accordingly, when the Islamic Revolution began and the Shah fled the country, Americans were no longer invulnerable.

A powerful factor motivating the students’ action, argues Ms. Ebtekar, was a slanted if not hostile coverage of events in Iran by the international, and especially the American, media establishment. In their determination to explain the wrongs committed in and against Iran by a succession of United States governments and intelligence agencies, the students sought to address the American people directly. The sum of all these factors brought the “Students Following the Line of the Imam” to seize the embassy. The capture of the embassy would give them, they thought, both an ideal platform and the necessary leverage to finally get what they wanted, the Shah and independence from the U.S. Anyway, who they really hated was the government, Carter and especially the CIA<sup>71</sup>.

The embassy takeover was named by Khomeini ‘the second revolution, greater than the first’. This second revolution had great importance and was supported by most of the Iranian population so much that people would stay whole days and nights outside the compound and would also come from distant cities and villages just to show their support. It was Khomeini who called on the masses to organize demonstrations against the United States and to “force” the U.S. to return the “criminal Shah” to Iran<sup>72</sup>. That is when the students took the rhetoric to an extreme and were later blessed by the Ayatollah, sparking a full-scale crisis in the U.S. The Islamist followers of the Ayatollah displayed an even greater anti-American posture than secular leftists. Apparently, the Islamic government of Ruhollah Khomeini supported terrorist attacks against American interests and spread false rumors about the U.S. intervention in other countries of the Arab World mostly because they supported the past regime<sup>73</sup>. Iran has been depicted as the most anti-American nation in the world<sup>74</sup>, however, the threat of physical danger to the hostages was compounded by a series of other events elsewhere in the Arab World.

## **2. Attacks on U.S. Embassies in the Arab World**

That year, particularly the months of November and December, saw the occurrence of several events: the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the start of the Iran hostage crisis, the attack on the U.S. Embassies

<sup>70</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 61.

<sup>71</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 50.

<sup>72</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, “Hostage Crisis.”

<sup>73</sup> Risen, “SECRETS OF HISTORY: The CIA in Iran.”

<sup>74</sup> Tabaar, “Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran.”

in Islamabad, Pakistan and Tripoli, Libya. These events were caused by the wave of anti-Americanism after the Embassy seizure in Tehran shacked the equilibrium in the Arab World.

## 2.1 U.S. Embassy in Pakistan

The United States and Pakistan established diplomatic relations in 1947. Back then, the U.S. agreed to provide economic and military assistance to the country. Anyway, over the years the military aid continued but the economic programs stopped because Pakistan was developing a nuclear arms program<sup>75</sup>. For this reason, the relationship between the two nations became tenser, including several violent incidents against U.S. officials and diplomats working in Pakistan.

One such incident occurred on November 21, 1979, when what began as a contained, non-violent protest outside the U.S. embassy wall spiraled into a mass demonstration with protestors attacking the compound<sup>76</sup> in Islamabad, Pakistan. Five hundred protestors entered the area and stormed the embassy<sup>77</sup>. Roughly a hundred embassy employees locked themselves in a secure vault in the Embassy to protect themselves. When the students lit the embassy on fire, the employees managed to get out from the roof. Only at that point, they exited the building, and the Pakistani Army managed to help them. The inability of the local Army to respond and incapacitate the mob<sup>78</sup> fast enough contributed to making the attack more destructive than it would have been. When the crowds were dispersed and the embassy employees got to safety, thirty-seven were injured and six people were counted dead, two American officers, two Pakistani employees in the embassy, and two demonstrators<sup>79</sup>. In the meantime, the American Cultural Center in Lahore was destroyed by fire, fortunately without any victims.

The attack occurred in concert with numerous other incidents that all seemed to gain inspiration from the entirely erroneous claim that the U.S. was behind the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca<sup>80</sup>- an instructive lesson in the ramifications of false information. It was instigated by an inaccurate report by Ayatollah Khomeini which went out in Pakistan stating that the holy city of Mecca was attacked and taken control of by American and Israeli troops<sup>81</sup>. The Iranian leader was blamed by the U.S. State Department to “create the climate” for the attack. However, some embassy employees later said that as an Islamic country, they had seen violence before, but they did not believe there was such strong anti-American sentiment in that

<sup>75</sup> Barry Shlachter, “U.S. Embassy in Pakistan Attacked,” November 22, 1979, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/politics/energy-government-and-defense-magazines/us-embassy-pakistan-attacked>

<sup>76</sup> Connor Martin, “Embassy Engulfed - Critical incident in a Watershed Year,” November 21, 2019, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/11/21/embassy\\_engulfed\\_\\_critical\\_incident\\_in\\_a\\_watershed\\_year\\_114861.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/11/21/embassy_engulfed__critical_incident_in_a_watershed_year_114861.html)

<sup>77</sup> Jeffrey Lunstead, “Survivor of 1979 Consulate Attack: Libya an Eerie Echo” *CNN*, September 13, 2012.

<sup>78</sup> Shlachter, “U.S. Embassy in Pakistan Attacked.”

<sup>79</sup> Martin, “Embassy Engulfed.”

<sup>80</sup> Further analyzed in Chapter III.

<sup>81</sup> Shlachter, “U.S. Embassy in Pakistan Attacked.”

country. This demonstrates again how Americans were not aware of the hatred from that population and that they did not have any more allies in the Middle East.

In the immediate aftermath, the embassy was left completely destroyed by the fire, the U.S. diplomatic presence significantly reduced and the relationship between Islamabad and Washington declined. Secretary of State Vance ordered about 300 non-essential U.S. personnel to leave Pakistan and return home. The attack on the Islamabad American Embassy was not going to be the last time U.S. diplomatic personnel was put in danger abroad. Exactly ten days later there has been another attack on the Embassy in Libya.

## **2.2 U.S. Embassy in Libya**

During the morning of December 2, 1979, about two thousand demonstrators, screaming pro-Khomeini chants, protested against the American Embassy in Tripoli. When the demonstration got out of control, the Embassy was stormed and set on fire. Fortunately, this time the dozens of Americans inside were all able to escape safely. Only the first floor was burned down and all classified documents were destroyed in time. Once again, as in Islamabad, the Libyan security forces were inadequate and unresponsive<sup>82</sup>. Good intelligence can help to prevent this kind of attack but, in the end, the host government has to be able and willing to intervene quickly enough<sup>83</sup>.

The embassy was very small and did not have an ambassador for over two years. Besides, this represented how cold the relation was between the two countries. For political reasons the U.S. did not allow Libya to take delivery of transport planes and the latter was apparently supporting terrorist groups<sup>84</sup>. Furthermore, in recent years, Libya took the lead in the so-called Arab “rejectionist” front against the Camp David Accords<sup>85</sup>, as many countries in the Arab world did not recognize the state of Israel. Instead, Libya’s position towards the Hostage Crisis was quite ambiguous. Even if the protestors seemed to be on the Ayatollah’s side, Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi<sup>86</sup> said he tried to persuade him to release the hostages following a statement by the then Libyan government<sup>87</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> The Times’s print archive, “Embassy of the U.S. in Libya is Stormed by a Crowd of 2,000,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 1979.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/03/archives/embassy-of-the-us-in-libya-is-stormed-by-a-crowd-of-2000-fires.html>

<sup>83</sup> Jeffrey Lunstead, “Survivor of 1979 Consulate Attack.”

<sup>84</sup> The Times’s print archive, “Embassy of the U.S. in Libya is Stormed by a Crowd of 2,000.”

<sup>85</sup> Further analyzed in Chapter III.

<sup>86</sup> Muammar al-Qaddafi has been the Brotherly Leader and Guide of the Revolution of Libya from 1969 to 2011. He was condemned by many as a dictator whose authoritarian administration violated human rights and financed global terrorism. Eventually, the government was overthrown and he was killed.

<sup>87</sup> The Times’s print archive, “Embassy of the U.S. in Libya is Stormed by a Crowd of 2,000.”



Although the Libyan Embassy got re-established, in 1979 the U.S. facilities in the area were removed. The instability, fundamentalist fervor, and indigenous populism challenged the interests of the Western world and could no longer be marginalized.

### **3. From Arabic Nationalism to Islamic Fundamentalism**

In the political evolution of the Middle East, the ties between Islam and modern nationalisms date back to the initiation of Islamic reformists, the origin of both political thoughts. The rise of Islamic nationalism in the area was the result of the breaking up of the Ottoman Empire after WWI and the birth of modern nation-states, the development of independence movements that aimed at casting off the control of Western imperialism and movements that aimed at religious reform<sup>88</sup>. Many leaders of the national liberation movements received their education in Western countries and, thus, were influenced by the political ideologies and values such as democracy, constitutional government, parliamentary systems, individual rights, and nationalism. Unlike the Islamic political ideal of the Muslim community, which was based on common beliefs founded on religion, Arab nationalism tried to integrate Islam as a cultural resource into the ideology. The constructive functions of Islam were no more than a supplement to nationalism. Unfortunately, the combination of nationalism and Islam did not work out. In countries like Egypt and Turkey, Arab nationalism prevailed but in countries like Iran, Islamic fundamentalism did. The Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran turned to secular nationalism and launched a modernization reform but gradually conflicts came into light and the Islamic Revolution began.

Islamic fundamentalism first posed real challenges against nationalism at the end of the 1960s. It completely denied various forms of nationalism and fought against the concept of modern nation-state with the traditional Islamic state. The nationalist states were challenged by fundamentalists, first of all because they did not know how to enact the development of their economies after the initial triumph of establishing independent states. The economic gap between the rich and the poor was becoming increasingly wide because of corruption, autocracy, and social backwardness caused by blind Westernization. Secondly, the Muslim states had to choose their own side in the Cold War, and so became victims of the conflict. Finally, Western support for Israel is one of the main reasons behind the failure of Arab leaders. In fact, the defeat of the Arabs by Israel in the 1967 war was the turning point for Islamic fundamentalists. The 1967 war, the Islamic Revolution, and the Hostage Crisis in Tehran demonstrated that the national “secular” regimes of the Middle East failed. This gave great encouragement to fundamentalists in the region.

When the Islam fundamentalists felt in danger, they essentially targeted U.S. and Israeli embassies in the region. Yet, the Western states failed to understand that what they considered terrorist attacks, were instead considered as a fight for liberation and freedom by Islamic fundamentalists. They are fighting their holy war and if they die, they are martyrs. Islamic fundamentalists gained power and for many people this meant the return to medieval backwardness and retrogression. It really means the religious and political movement that

<sup>88</sup> Liu, “The Relations between Nationalism and Islam in the Middle East.”

seeks a return to the golden age of the Prophet Muhammad and the Four Rightly guided Caliphs on the basis of pure Islam. They were against Westernization as it intoxicated the Muslim culture<sup>89</sup>. The conflicts between nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism were between the national and religious identity, the sovereignty of the state and Allah, secularization, and Islamization<sup>90</sup>. They could not have been easily overcome.

#### **4. Fundamentalist Attack on Mecca**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of November of 1979 the Great Mosque in Mecca was occupied by a group of armed Islamic fanatics. This attack was sudden and of great shock in the Islamic World. It affected the most sacred Moslem shrines on the eve of the fourteenth centennial of Islam and at the beginning of the holy month of Moharram. The incident lasted for two weeks and claimed the lives of more than 100 people. It was almost 5:30 in the morning when the attendants started to hear sounds of gunshots that turned the most sacred Muslim place into a stage for killers. The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>91</sup> in Egypt, Juhayman Al-Otaybi, and his followers, believed that the Mahdi, the divinely guided one<sup>92</sup> and endowed with extraordinary powers by God, had come. His name was Mohammed bin Abdullah al-Quhtani and Juhayman wanted the holy figure to be recognized and worshipped. Given the period on the Islamic calendar, the Great Mosque was full of foreign visitors who spoke little Arabic and did not know what was happening but the sight of gunmen, in a place where the Koran strictly forbids arms, stunned the visitors. Unfortunately, in one hour the takeover was completed<sup>93</sup>.

Within hours, wild rumors were circulating, that the holy Ka'aba was seized by foreigners and the media were telling many different stories. One included that the attack was the work of Israel with the assistance of the United States. This rumor<sup>94</sup> in particular was spread by a radio in Pakistan, a day before the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad was going to be invaded and burnt down.

All calls on the attackers to surrender themselves were useless. From the top of the sacred Mosque, snipers started gunning down people outside the Grand Mosque<sup>95</sup>. The Saudi prince and the National Guard were respectively in Tunisia and Morocco. Everything was left in the hands of King Khaled and the Defense Minister to coordinate a response, and they decided to order the assault. The rebels lit fires with carpets to generate heavy clouds of smoke to hide from the Saudi troops and the building soon became a killing zone. After the sixth day of fights, the Saudi troops managed to take control of the Sacred Temple but the remaining rebels retreated to a labyrinth of hundreds of rooms beneath the Ka'aba. The Saudi government needed help to capture the leaders of this movement alive, so they secretly asked for help from the French President Valéry

<sup>89</sup> Chang, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism."

<sup>90</sup> Liu, "The Relations between Nationalism and Islam in the Middle East."

<sup>91</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamic fundamentalist group founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 in Egypt.

<sup>92</sup>Eli Melki, "Mecca 1979: The mosque siege that changed the course of Saudi history," *BBC News*, published December 27, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Eli Melki, "Mecca 1979."

<sup>94</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 232-233.

<sup>95</sup> Al-Sulami and Al-Kinani, "When extremism began."

Giscard d'Estaing. The French team decided to fill the basement with gas through holes in the floor, to push out the rebels. The plan proved successful. 117 members of the deviant group were killed in the encounter<sup>96</sup>, 69 others were executed less than a month later and 19 received jail sentences. When they were executed, Juhayman Al-Otaybi was the first one to die.

The storming was a full attack on the Saudi royal family. The group believed that the country was gradually transforming into a consumerist Westernized society<sup>97</sup>. The Muslim Brotherhood believed Saudi Arabia was corrupted and only a heavenly intervention could bring salvation. Even if the attack resulted in the death of all these rebels, some things changed in Saudi Arabia. Some of the new Western customs were eliminated and the country returned to a more conservative lifestyle. This became another reason why they wanted to hide the help of French mercenaries<sup>98</sup>, so as to avoid any criticism of Western intervention in the birthplace of Islam, but surprisingly, Saudi Arabia had become more dependent on foreign troops. Apparently, the U.S. Army also helped to solve the Great Mosque attack.

## **5. The Camp David Accords and President Al-Sadat's assassination**

Most nation-states made their foreign policies for the sake of their own national interests and as the dominant ideology oriented to the unity of Arab countries, they created the League of Arab states. During the Arab-Israeli conflicts, Arab nationalist countries and their leader, Egypt, used nationalism as an ideological weapon with which they fought against Israeli Zionism and Western imperialism<sup>99</sup>. From the late 1960s, a period of challenges against nationalism began and Egypt received constant threats<sup>100</sup> from the Muslim Brotherhood. This group believed that the weaknesses of Muslims were due to the secular, materialistic ideologies of the West and that they had to restore the Muslim pride, power, and rule<sup>101</sup> by re-implementing God's law and that science and technology had to be used to avoid the secularization of the Muslim Society. This sentiment became more realistic after the Camp David Accords and the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was very different from his predecessor. When he took power, he reinstated a multiparty system and broke every tie left with the Soviet Union. In 1973 Sadat attacked Israel to get back his territories lost in the previous war<sup>102</sup> but lost again. This move, however, was Sadat's way to get attention from the West to try and get the United States to mediate the conflict. While Sadat was trying to

<sup>96</sup> Mohammed Al-Sulami, and Mohammed Al-Kinani, "When extremism began: 40 years since the Grand Mosque in Makkah was seized," *Arab News*, updated September 14, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Eli Melki, "Mecca 1979."

<sup>98</sup> David Hearst, "How The 1979 Revolution Reshaped Iran and Saudi Arabia," February 12, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/how-1979-reshaped-iran-saudi-arabia/5703483>

<sup>99</sup> Liu, "The Relations between Nationalism and Islam in the Middle East."

<sup>100</sup> Liu, "The Relations between Nationalism and Islam in the Middle East."

<sup>101</sup> Chang, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism."

<sup>102</sup> Israel attacked Egypt and won. Israel remained in control of the ex-Egyptian Sinai Peninsula since then.

negotiate some issues with Israel on his own, American president Jimmy Carter was elected and brought a fresh perspective to the various negotiations<sup>103</sup>.

On September 5<sup>th</sup> of 1978, after a series of failures to bring peace between the two countries, President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin of Israel arrived in the United States to attend Carter's summit meeting in the presidential retreat in Maryland at Camp David<sup>104</sup> for two weeks of intensive negotiations, from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, that resulted in the Camp David Accords<sup>105</sup>. For Carter, it became a personal gamble of historical proportions to which he dedicated his life by the minute and without him, it would have been impossible for the two Arab nations to negotiate with success. The Camp David Accords signed by President Carter, President Sadat, and Israeli Prime Minister Begin on September 17, 1978, provided two different agreements. It established "a Framework for peace in the Middle East"<sup>106</sup> which intended to potentially deal with the Palestinian question in the future. However, this framework was considered by the two parts very ambiguous and the question was never answered. Instead, the second agreement was for "a Framework for peace between Egypt and Israel" which became a real peace treaty signed in March 1979. Unfortunately, this was not an easy process. After the two statesmen finally found an agreement in the territories and other several issues, the summit successfully produced a solid basis for an Egyptian-Israeli peace. However, the process of translating the Framework documents<sup>107</sup> prepared at Camp David into a formal peace treaty took much longer. Israeli failed to gain the support of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Egypt had reservations over the impact of a peace treaty on its obligations to other Arab states, and the U.S. government was so distracted by the Iranian revolution that it had to appoint a "special negotiator"<sup>108</sup>.

According to Sadat's fears, many Arab states felt betrayed by Egypt, thinking that their President was putting his own nation before the Arab League partners<sup>109</sup> and so agreed to impose economic and political sanctions on Egypt. The Arab League headquarters were moved from Cairo to Tunis, Tunisia. The other Arab nations were not the only ones to be upset by the Peace treaty: Israel's people were happy about the future of normalized relations but were afraid of their relations with Palestine, and some people in Egypt were happy but most of them did not want to recognize Israel as a state and turn their backs on the other Arab partners and ally with the U.S. Egypt started receiving money from the United States for their effort in the peace-making process and from then on became always more dependent on the American aid and an asset of the latter.

<sup>103</sup> Mohammed Abdul Rahman Bani Salameh, "The Camp David Accords: Lessons and Facts," *The Arab Journal for Arts* 10, No.1, (2012): 1-28.

<sup>104</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Camp David Accords," Encyclopaedia Britannica, last modified March 2002, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Camp-David-Accords>

<sup>105</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 51.

<sup>106</sup> Bani Salameh, "The Camp David Accords."

<sup>107</sup> Carter, "Camp David Accords."

<sup>108</sup> Carter, "Camp David Accords."

<sup>109</sup> Bani Salameh, "The Camp David Accords."

Arab-Israeli peace shocked the Islamic fundamentalists greatly<sup>110</sup> as the elimination of Israel has always been one of their most inspiring slogans. Furthermore, the fundamentalists knew the strengthened economic and political relations with the United States would go against their principles of Muslim culture. Since his changes were so revolutionary, the Egyptian Islamic Fundamentalists thought that Sadat had to be removed from office at any cost.

The threats from the Muslim Brotherhood towards Egypt's government increased until they culminated with the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981. On October 6, assassins posing as soldiers opened fire on Egyptian President Anwar Sadat as he watched military parade to mark Egypt's 1973 war<sup>111</sup> with Israel. They waited for the military parade to pass in front of the President's viewing stand and shot him.

Aboud Al-Zomor, a military intelligence officer who was in jail for plotting and supplying weapons for Sadat's assassination, was interviewed in 2011 by an NBC News reporter and said that the only reason why he regrets killing Sadat is the fact that Mubarak took power and is ruling as a tyrant. After Sadat's death, corruption increased and Egypt's economy became completely dependent on American aid. Al-Zomor says his group does not regret their actions since killing Sadat was not the goal of the operation but part of a bigger picture. The goal was to change the regime through a revolution. The decision to proceed with the assassination was because of reasons which characterized Sadat's presidency: he opposed the implementation and application of Sharia (Islamic law), he dissolved the People's assembly and had no opposition figures, thus making him a tyrant, and finally, the peace with Israel at Camp David. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood welcomed the Ayatollah Khomeini-led Islamic revolution, and maybe that is what gave them the confidence to overthrow their country's secular regime<sup>112</sup>. Eventually, Zomor's group efforts were useless because the revolution never happened and instead, Mubarak was a much worse President<sup>113</sup>. Moreover, it destabilized<sup>114</sup> Egypt, the keystone nation where Asia and Africa meet, and would lead to regional chaos in the Arab World.

President Carter believed that Camp David could become the basis for a peace agreement between Israel and all the other Arab states which would follow the Egyptian example. Sadly, it turned out to be the exact opposite, the Arabs felt betrayed and did not stand on the same side of Sadat but witnessed a huge loss in political, military, and strategic terms. Furthermore, there have been very big issues with the cultural normalization between the two countries.

To answer the question as to whether the American government and Iranian people could ever overcome the barriers and come to understand one another we must look at it from both countries'

<sup>110</sup> Chang, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism."

<sup>111</sup> Richard Engel, "Sadat's assassination plotter remains unrepentant," *NBC News*, May 7, 2011.

<sup>112</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, "Why London's Muslim Brotherhood Killed President Sadat," *EIR Special Report* 8, No. 41 (October 1981): 18-20.

<sup>113</sup> Engel, "Sadat's assassination plotter remains unrepentant."

<sup>114</sup> Dreyfuss, "Why London's Muslim Brotherhood Killed President Sadat."

perspectives. Americans could find a way to forgive Iran as it was considered useful for their position in the Cold War and for domestic interests. Iranians, instead, had this anti-American feeling growing for too long and they were not able to overcome it. The people had long been awaiting their independence and were not afraid to fight a superpower for it. This concerns Washington's relation with Iran. Even though the U.S. involvement was different in the case of the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty, it turned out to be only on paper and even if it ended the loss of life on both sides<sup>115</sup>, conflicts in the Arab World did not end. The Accords increasingly radicalized the Islamic fundamentalists feelings, and the Iranian hostage crisis gave them the right amount of confidence to take action. The conflict between nationalists and Islamists became too deviating: Egypt got kicked out of the Arab League, the Great Mosque was seized, and Sadat assassinated to make another Islamic revolution.

<sup>115</sup> Bani Salameh, "The Camp David Accords."

## CHAPTER III – The revolution in Iran and the Hostage Crisis

To dismiss the behavior of the Iranian revolutionaries as simply ‘irrational’ misses the point that there was some objective basis<sup>116</sup> for the popularity of conspiracy theories. We are here not only referring to the 1953 *coup d'état* and the Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi admission to the U.S. for medical treatment, but we are going even further into history. In fact, during the two previous centuries, Iranians have lived almost continuously under the shadow of external powers. Throughout the nineteenth century both Britain and Russia were interested, and each state jealously sought to draw Iran under its sphere of influence.

After 20 years under the rule of the Shah Reza Pahlavi, Muhammad Reza's father, he began to display some Nazi sympathies and that is why Iran was invaded by Britain and the Soviet Union during World War II. Given Iran's strategic, geographic and economic position during the Cold War, the United States began to play an increasingly active role in the country. This happened especially when, after the end of World War II, the allies withdrew their forces from Iran and the Soviets tried to establish a puppet regime<sup>117</sup> through manipulation and intimidation. It became a ground of extreme importance in the struggle between the two superpowers, but the strong U.S. support for Iran in the UN made the Soviet Union withdraw its troops and refrain from direct intervention. After Moscow's intentions and years of Washington's support for the Shah, Iranians had no better memory of the Russians than of the Americans, which brought Iran to the Islamic revolution at the beginning of 1978.

### 1. Building an Islamic State

The Islamic Revolution of Iran began as a reform movement against a non-democratic imperial regime. It became a movement against a government that strongly suppressed any freedom and did not refrain from the liberal use of instruments such as exile, imprisonment, torture, and execution to suppress any kind of political dissent<sup>118</sup>. During all the years in which the Shah established and enforced his power, it was at the expense of Iranian students, academics, clerics, and all other strata of society, who knew the American government supported and protected him. Eventually, through the loss of thousands of martyrs, the Iranian people finally managed to force the Shah to abdicate. Public discontent finally exploded into mass protests<sup>119</sup>.

The revolution began in January 1978, in the religious city of Qom<sup>120</sup> and the Shah left Iran during that summer. Khomeini, the key figure in maintaining unity<sup>121</sup>, was orchestrating the rebellion from his exile, first

<sup>116</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 57-58.

<sup>117</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 5-6.

<sup>118</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 28.

<sup>119</sup> Banks, “The Diplomatic Presentation of the State in International Crises.”

<sup>120</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 34-35.

<sup>121</sup> Banks, “The Diplomatic Presentation of the State in International Crises.”

in Iraq then in France, until he came back. The Shah underestimated the power and talent of Khomeini and was only the first of a long sequence of political enemies to fall into his trap.

Even if the Ayatollah wanted an anti-west theocracy, the Shiite clerics who were increasing their power in Iranian political life, saw it in their own interest to cooperate if only tacitly with the United States, assuming themselves a degree of insurance in the event of a civil war which would put the Marxist left against the Islamic right<sup>122</sup>. In the beginning, Khomeini's statements against America were not confrontational, but rather expressed a collective sense of victimhood that implicitly offered Washington an opportunity to remedy<sup>123</sup> its past mistakes. However, the political arena in Iran became increasingly polarized in the period of the revolution. Islamists were far more worried about the immediate domestic threat of the Communist left than the paranoia for American spies all over Iran<sup>124</sup>, and thus sought to maintain normal relations with the U.S.

Nonetheless, the leftists, especially the Soviet-backed Communist Tudeh Party, capitalized successfully on the popular animosity against Americans and that is when anti-Americanism became a commodity for political gain in Iran. In fact, the embassy occupation effectively undermined the Left's cohesion and was probably one of the expected results that contributed to the seizure of the embassy. The takeover was a deliberate attempt by the Islamists to unify the nation and to divert the people's attention from other internal crises because it broke the leftists' monopoly over anti-imperialism<sup>125</sup>. Even Mrs. Ebtekar acknowledges that the rivalry with the Left "might have been one of the factors" in the student's decision. The Muslim Students Following the Line of the Imam distinguished them from the Leftists and Marxists groups but took advantage of the anti-American propaganda made by the latter and so eliminated them as soon as the Embassy was seized. Islamist students published a picture of blindfolded American hostages with the quote from Khomeini: "Others Talk, We Act."

The occupation of the U.S. Embassy certainly created an external enemy for the Islamic government, but it weakened the more immediate internal adversary. Without the internal competition, the Islamists would not have turned into anti-Americans. And without resorting to anti-Americanism and occupying the U.S. Embassy, the Islamists might not have consolidated their power.

## **2. Khomeini and the Hostage Crisis**

The Islamic fundamentalists fractured the Iranian ties<sup>126</sup> with the U.S. and the West and diverted the attention of Iranians from social and economic problems to the embassy occupation which could be used to

<sup>122</sup> Philips, "Iran, the U.S. and the Hostages: After 300 days."

<sup>123</sup> Tabaar, "Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran."

<sup>124</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 166.

<sup>125</sup> Tabaar, "Causes of the US Hostage Crisis in Iran."

<sup>126</sup> Philips, "Iran, the U.S. and the Hostages: After 300 days."



humiliate a superpower. Actually, the hostages were essentially an insurance policy against the U.S. intervention.

The secular nationalist forces in Iran, represented by the provisional government of Bagarzan, were substantially weakened by the return of Khomeini from his exile, and the growth of the clergy's power. Yazdi's efforts to release the hostages were completely useless. Bagarzan realized that as the mob listened to the religious extremists that their political authority diminished. Apparently, Khomeini did not know about the plan to seize the embassy and when it happened, he said nothing for some days, he had to gather his thoughts and assess the potential advantages and disadvantages of their action. He made his move back to the students when he realized the advantages outweighed the cons<sup>127</sup>. He then quickly endorsed the embassy seizure as a way to consolidate support<sup>128</sup> for the upcoming vote on the Islamic constitution and further cripple the secular leadership in Iran.

Due to the strong Left, the students continuously felt the urge to clarify that they had no support from any political party. In fact, the name 'Muslim Students Following the Line of the Imam' was to underline that they were students only and their conviction was based on Islam alone<sup>129</sup>. They believed Khomeini was the great leader of the new day in Iran and that a good Moslem should seek happiness through conflict with the world. If they wanted to achieve peace and spiritual union with their God<sup>130</sup>, they had to be willing to struggle to destroy the ungodly government and institutions. At any given moment the students knew that the Imam had always displayed the same lucidity throughout the years and knew that his decisions would not be influenced by personal aspirations or tainted by selfishness. He would choose what was correct and in the high interests of his country. At least that is what the students were certain of. They had to be since they trusted him to have their lives in his hands. They were listening to every word the Imam would say and act consequently without even questioning. What many of the hostages could not understand was why such young students as their captors were would get into such a situation. In fact, many of the students were well-educated and had prosperous lives ahead of them but felt the urgency to continue the revolution<sup>131</sup>, to seek the real independence of Iran and dedicate their lives to the satisfaction of God.

After Iran's first parliamentary elections under the Islamic Republic, in July 1980 the Majlis was convened and they had to decide the fate of the hostages. However, it was after many sessions that the deputies almost found an agreement for the release of the hostages on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October. It took so much time because of the continuous interruption by the Iraqi provocations along its border with Iran. The only reason why the hostages

<sup>127</sup> Houghton, "Explaining the Origins of the Iran Hostage Crisis," 266.

<sup>128</sup> Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem?"

<sup>129</sup> Massoumeh Ebtakar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 62.

<sup>130</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 118.

<sup>131</sup> Massoumeh Ebtakar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 162-163.

were set free is that the Imam knew he did not need them anymore and believed they already had a potent impact<sup>132</sup> on world public opinion.

Carter's defeat in the election of 1980 was considered by Khomeini and his supporters as a result of the Iranian Revolution and thus a victory against 'the Great Satan'. Thanks to their actions many of the students who seized the embassy are today's top reformists of Iran. Ironically, many of them now support the normalization of relations with the U.S., the country they once described as "Iran's natural enemy"<sup>133</sup>. The people of Iran had immense expectations on the students.

More sober judges of the Middle Eastern scene within the Carter Administration argued that the embassy had been taken for domestic political reasons. The Ayatollah was by no means fully in control of Iranian politics in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution and the Shah's fall, so he engineered a way to mobilize Iranians against one common foe<sup>134</sup>. The real issue was Khomeini's constitution and the realization of his vision of an Iranian Republic. It seems beyond question that those around Khomeini manipulated the hostage episode for political gain in the weeks and months after it had actually occurred. He had to put all the institutions of the Islamic revolution in place<sup>135</sup>.

Khomeini got all the attention by placing the population of Iran against one common enemy – the United States. That is why the crisis of the hostages lasted so long and made the Imam so reluctant to negotiate. There were so many political benefits<sup>136</sup> from allowing the crisis to remain unsolved. He knew it was a useful domestic device to neutralize the appeal of the other radical groupings<sup>137</sup> in the wake of the Iranian Revolution. Although the Revolution was taking much longer than expected and there still was corruption and people in power oppressing others for their own purposes. Only when the entire cabinet was in place, did Khomeini authorize an initiative to open serious negotiations<sup>138</sup> to release the hostages.

Khomeini disliked the Soviet Union as much as he did the United States. When the Soviets attacked Afghanistan and fought against Moslem, anti-communism rebels<sup>139</sup> the population claimed not to be afraid of the Russians as it was only another superpower, and that they had already managed to bring down one superpower in negotiations.

<sup>132</sup> Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 227.

<sup>133</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, "Hostage Crisis."

<sup>134</sup> Houghton, "Explaining the Origins of the Iran Hostage Crisis," 265.

<sup>135</sup> Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem?"

<sup>136</sup> Banks, "The Diplomatic Presentation of the State in International Crises."

<sup>137</sup> David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 174.

<sup>138</sup> Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem?"

<sup>139</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 308.

### 3. Iran-Iraq War

Iran's independence was forged with extreme suffering. In an eight-year war against Iraq, launched a year later, it lost an estimated more than one million lives repelling Saddam Hussain's invasion of the oil-producing province of Khuzestan<sup>140</sup>, in Iran. This war has become the bloodiest and most destructive military conflict<sup>141</sup> since WWII.

On September 4, 1980, the conflict that had been simmering along the border between Iran and Iraq erupted into full-scale hostilities. The Iraqi bombers launched surprise attacks<sup>142</sup> against military targets in Iran, and the ground forces poured across the border into Khuzestan. Both countries were more or less evenly matched but displayed a high level of military incompetence<sup>143</sup>, with tactics reminiscent of WWI<sup>144</sup>, which caused the war to last eight years and to make both nations spend approximately 1 billion dollars a month. Some analysts believed that the war started primarily due to a boundary dispute since they have been fighting for centuries over their borders. Yet, many observers believe that it was only a pretext and that the causes were of a different nature. First, there was personal animosity between Saddam Hussein and Khomeini since the former expelled the latter from his exile in Iraq. Secondly, the centuries of war over the borders reflected the ethnic animosity between the Arabs and the Persians, thus between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Finally, differing political ideologies played a role as Iraq's prevailing ideology was Arab Nationalism and Iran's was Islamic Fundamentalism. Despite calls for a ceasefire by the UN Security Council, the war ended on August 20, 1988.

Khomeini and his political techniques permitted him, as in the Hostage Crisis and the war against Iraq, to not necessarily seek any confrontation but to exploit the dramatic circumstances of each case to whip up public emotions, to mobilize political support behind his own leadership when it showed signs of erosion, to weaken or crush domestic opposition, and to press for the adoption of controversial elements of his theocratic plans even at the risk of more turmoil and sacrifice. The outbreak of this war was seen by the Iranian government as a heaven-sent chance to strengthen its position and to consolidate the Islamic Revolution. A glorious jihad<sup>145</sup> and a test of Iranian national character.

Since the Embassy takeover and throughout the 1980s, Iraq was the beneficiary of an oil boom<sup>146</sup> that saw it take in 33 billion dollars from the U.S., since the latter stopped purchasing it from Iran, which was the American major supplier. Iraq wanted to gain some independence from the Soviets and improve their relations

<sup>140</sup> Hearst, "How The 1979 Revolution Reshaped Iran and Saudi Arabia."

<sup>141</sup> Will Swaeringen, "Geopolitical reasons of the Iran-Iraq War," *Geographical Review*, October, 1988.

<sup>142</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 313

<sup>143</sup> Swaeringen, "Geopolitical reasons of the Iran-Iraq War."

<sup>144</sup> Adam Zeidan, "Iraq," Encyclopaedia Britannica. Last modified January, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq>

<sup>145</sup> *Jihad* is an Arabic term which literally means striving or struggling, especially with a praiseworthy aim. In the Islamic context, it can refer to almost any effort to. Make personal and social life conform with God's guidance.

<sup>146</sup> Zeidan, "Iraq."

with their Arab neighbors<sup>147</sup>. Since Iran was busy dealing with the Islamic Revolution and Iraq had all this money from the U.S., it was spent on both civilian and military projects to elevate Saddam's country to become a strong regional power.

As soon as the war began, the Iranians, especially the most Anti-American ones, believed that the Iraqis were backed by the United States<sup>148</sup>. Although, the President said they would "maintain our position of neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war"<sup>149</sup>, the Americans were quickly accused of encouraging Saddam Hussein's invasion. Iranians believed Iraqi attacks were part of a larger U.S. plot<sup>150</sup>. Actually, the U.S. regarded Iraq as a counterbalance to revolutionary Iran and supplied them with arms. Iraq was using chemical weapons, but the UN remained silent because the "United States prevented the UN from condemning Iraq"<sup>151</sup>.

Nevertheless, the USSR has been Iraq's ally since 1972 and was the main supplier during the war. Even if Moscow was scared Hussein could rely too much on new suppliers in the West, the Soviets had a strong distraction<sup>152</sup> : the war in Afghanistan<sup>153</sup>.

The military conflict lasted for eight years and many alliances and necessities changed but in the first three years both the Americans and the Soviets supplied Iraq. What was interesting was a common attempt of the Cold War powers to wipe out Iran/Islamic fundamentalism as a third competitor, who might have been able to break up the Cold War, which in the end suited both more than an unruly third actor on the scene. Regardless, the revolution in Iran was strengthened and radicalized.

<sup>147</sup> Kazimierz Grzybowski, "The Regime of Diplomacy and the Tehran Hostages," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 30, (1981): 42-58.

<sup>148</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 339.

<sup>149</sup> Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, "1980 Ronald Reagan/Jimmy Carter Presidential Debate."

<sup>150</sup> Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem?"

<sup>151</sup> Zeidan, "Iraq."

<sup>152</sup> Pavel Baev, "How Bad Judgement Calls Brought a Chain of Blunders: Soviet Responses to the Iranian Revolution," *Brookings*, March 7, 2019.

<sup>153</sup> Further analyzed in Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER IV – The Soviet Union and Third Actors’ Role During the Hostage Crisis

As mentioned in Chapter I, the U.S. strategic dimension was largely concerned with the implications of the remaining alternatives for such factors as the global balance of power. In 1979 and 1980 the U.S and the Soviet Union often challenged each other to obtain military or material advantages<sup>154</sup>. A noteworthy international development that occurred during the Hostage crisis was the Soviet invasion of Iran’s neighboring Afghanistan, in December 1979.

### 1. URSS, Iran and the Hostage Crisis

The Soviet leadership was surprised by the Iranian revolution to an even greater degree than the Americans, even if their interests were less directly affected. One of the main perspectives on developments in Iran was focused on the Leftists parties and primarily the Tudeh party<sup>155</sup>. One year before the hostage-taking, the Soviet leader, Brezhnev, warned the U.S. against any interference in Iran’s internal affairs. This message set off a bureaucratic issue as they wanted to make Iran and the USSR seem they were preparing a Revolution. Even if Khomeini denied any cooperation<sup>156</sup> with Marxism and the Soviet Union’s oppression of Moslems, the Soviet strategy was established. The U.S. was scared to lose their credibility in the region and was scared to facilitate an Iran-Soviet strategic alliance by acting against the Revolution in Iran.

Furthermore, since the Iranian Revolution, the Soviets opened new dialogues with Pakistan, India, Iraq, and other nations whose relations with the U.S. were already strained. Many in America believe that Iranian hate towards them was the result of effective disinformation<sup>157</sup> orchestrated by the Soviets and others who compete with them.

A few months into the Hostage crisis in Tehran, the Carter Administration was having trouble finding a compromise with the Ayatollah for the release of the hostages, and presented the hostage matter to the UN. The Soviet Union as a permanent member of the Security Council vetoed the American resolution, primarily to take Iran from the U.S. and bring the whole Middle East under their sphere of influence. Altogether, the Soviets really believed there could have been spies at the American Embassy in Tehran, and thus be a threat because of their close proximity. During that period, it was very common for the Soviet government to overstaff their embassies<sup>158</sup> with full-fledged spies who did not have cover stories.

<sup>154</sup> Brulé, “Explaining and Forecasting Leaders’ Decisions,” 99-113.

<sup>155</sup> Baev, “How Bad Judgement Calls Brought a Chain of Blunders.”

<sup>156</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 95-96.

<sup>157</sup> Scott, *Pieces of the Game*, 9.

<sup>158</sup> Grzybowski, “The Regime of Diplomacy and the Tehran Hostages.”

The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union dramatically changed the entire security balance in the Persian Gulf region. Since the U.S. no longer had the Shah, they abandoned their efforts to seek peaceful accommodations and moved towards a position of military readiness and political confrontation with the USSR.

## 2. Soviet War Against Afghanistan

During April 1978 a pro-communist faction overthrew the government of Mohammed Daoud<sup>159</sup> in Afghanistan during a sudden and unexpected *coup d'état*. A period of uncertainty and revolution began in Afghanistan. On Christmas Eve 1979, the Soviet Union launched an armed invasion in Afghanistan, killing the Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin and put in his place their puppet, Babrak Karmal<sup>160</sup>. USSR invaded the country to prop up the communist government against a growing insurgency. The brutal Soviet intervention was the first use of Soviet military force outside its own satellite states since WWII<sup>161</sup>. A narrow circle of elderly decisionmakers in the USSR described the Soviet military intervention as “brotherly help” and the performance of “international duty” would be criticized but accepted<sup>162</sup> by the West. This is because the USSR visualized this war as a small-scale intervention<sup>163</sup> and they did not expect it to grow into a decade-long war involving one million soldiers.

Moscow managed to keep the situation under their control until 1986. That year was a turning point for the war because the mujahideen, who became well supplied and trained by the U.S., started to win many confrontations. In the end, the mujahideen prevailed and the Soviet Army was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan in February 1989. Although Afghanistan won the war, what survived was a shattered country in which the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, seized control.

Still in the Cold War mentality, the USSR wanted to make it a socialist country under the eastern sphere of influence, yet, the United States and the European allies, guided by their own doctrine of containment, sharply criticized Moscow’s move and devised numerous measures to make them withdraw. When Afghanistan came under the invasion of the USSR, under the banner of Islam, the Afghan mujahideen received support mainly from the U.S., as well as from the Muslim bloc<sup>164</sup>. The American army went so far as to approve an Islamic holy war and to teach the guerrilla warfare tactics that accompanied their terrorism.

<sup>159</sup> Mohammed Daoud Khan was the President of Afghanistan from 1973 to 1978.

<sup>160</sup> Babrak Karmal was an Afghan politician who was installed as President of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union when they intervened in 1979 until May 1986.

<sup>161</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 247-249.

<sup>162</sup> Baev, “How Bad Judgement Calls Brought a Chain of Blunders.”

<sup>163</sup> Rafael Reaveny, and Aseem Prakash, “The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union,” *Review of International Studies* 25, (1999):693-708.

<sup>164</sup> Chang, “Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism.”

Initially, the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan changed the entire geopolitical context of the Iranian hostage crisis and the American strategy. It was then that they realized that a military strike against Iran would push the latter in the Soviets' arms. The situation changed eventually because Khomeini disliked the Soviets almost as much as the Americans. This invasion even forced some Iranians to reconsider the continuation of the crisis<sup>165</sup> so that they could be more easily united with the Islamic World against the USSR. Despite the continuing conflict with the U.S., Iran strongly opposed the Soviet invasion and supported the mujahideen. Iran sharply reacted to the Soviet invasion of the Islamic neighbor with very violent anti-Soviet demonstrations in Tehran, including a mock attack of the USSR Embassy. Iran and the United States found themselves fighting against the same enemy and pursuing almost identical efforts to mobilize opposition to the Soviet Union.

The geopolitical gain for the Soviets from the breakdown of the alliance between Iran and the United States was negated by the severe deterioration of its position<sup>166</sup> caused by the mismanaged Afghan War. Most scholars view wars as key causal factors in empire breakdown and regime change, and this war was definitely a factor in the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Domestic and structural problems<sup>167</sup> such as the high costs of the Cold War, the large military forces required to hold this enormous empire and the internal ethnic tensions surely played a major role. However, the Afghan war deteriorated the political leadership's perception and efficacy of using force held respectively by the government and the army.

### **3. Third Actors' and the Algiers Accords**

America's allies, Third World clients<sup>168</sup>, and international organizations were all allied against Iran. That became clear after the United Nations Resolution 457 on December 4<sup>th</sup> of 1979 and the December 15<sup>th</sup> ruling of the International Court at The Hague, and the political and economic sanctions that followed. In addition, hostile propaganda began to spread on hundreds of radios, television channels, and newspapers from all different countries. The American government pursued negotiations through various channels<sup>169</sup>, including the good offices of friendly governments, and through the UN Secretary-General.

Vance made also clear during a NATO foreign ministers meeting that the alternative pacific economic sanctions towards Iran would be an individual U.S. blockade<sup>170</sup>. The European countries agreed they would join the economic sanctions even if the Soviet Union vetoed the decision in the Security Council. However, since they were hesitant to follow Washington's policy zigzag, many European allies, who had interests in Iran, unanimously decided to not cooperate and to display patience.

<sup>165</sup> Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem?"

<sup>166</sup> Baev, "How Bad Judgement Calls Brought a Chain of Blunders."

<sup>167</sup> Reaveny and Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union."

<sup>168</sup> Massoumeh Ebtakar, *Takeover in Tehran*, 117.

<sup>169</sup> Grzybowski, "The Regime of Diplomacy and the Tehran Hostages."

<sup>170</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 240-241.

On October 18, for the first time of many others, the Algerian team and the Iranian Prime Minister met to discuss the ending of the Hostage crisis. The Algerians had been contacted by the U.S. and this represented one of the first instances of direct Algerian involvement<sup>171</sup> in an intermediary role. The Algerian team was formed by the Algerian Foreign Minister Benyahia, Ambassador Malek, Algerian Ambassador Gharaid, and the governor of the Algerian Central Bank, Mostafai. They made sure their role was strictly one of the intermediary.

The main concern of the Carter Administration was, at that point of the crisis, that the issue had to be satisfactorily resolved by the time the new President was inaugurated on January 20, 1981, or else no one could predict what would happen. Fortunately, on December 17, Washington learned that the Algerian team managed to receive a positive answer from the Iranians and were beginning to prepare the hostages for their return home. On Christmas day 1980, the Algerian Ambassador in Tehran visited the hostages, which was a big step for them since the last time the hostages were seen was before the failed rescue attempt. Both the U.S. and Iran were not making promises to each other, but only to Algeria as this had been a point of great psychological importance for the Iranians.

On January 19, 1981, the Government of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria, having been requested, presented a bilateral treaty that was signed by the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and called the Algiers Accords. The first and most important point of the treaty was a pledge by the U.S. to not intervene in Iran's internal affairs in any way. After a long period of mediation that lasted from September 1980 to January 1981, the Algerian ambassador confessed these were not negotiations, but rather an extensive seminar<sup>172</sup>. The Iranians had to learn everything about the American legal, banking, and political systems and had to explain to Washington the politics of revolutionary Iran.

<sup>171</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 315-332.

<sup>172</sup> Jones, "How Does a Born-Again Christian Deal with a Born-Again Moslem?"



## CONCLUSION

Throughout the Iranian hostage crisis, the recurring issue of contention was not so much the substantive outcome itself but rather how the staging of this event would appear in the eyes of the domestic public opinions that were highly sensitive to the presentation of their respective states. Domestic public opinions are often satisfied by many diplomatic outcomes if they think a state's dignity and reputation are being maintained before an international audience. The Iran Hostage Crisis was such a difficult situation to handle for the United States, that its relations with Iran are still paying the price today. Regarding the Soviets, Washington was afraid Iran could turn to them for help, and, as a consequence, their policies were adjusted to that fear, even if Iran wanted independence from everyone. The two superpowers were still playing the sphere of influence game but Iran wanted to be out of it.

However, considering the American hostages taken during the Cold War, was the American strategy a consequence of this rivalry, or was it the birth of a third pole in the Middle East? What the author is asking is if Iran, from the time of the Islamic Revolution to the end of the Hostage crisis, can be framed in terms of the Cold War. One of the aims of the Iranian Revolution was to become independent from the international powers that be, and to create their own sphere of influence. The Cold War was transformed from a bipolar to a three-polar system because of the appearance of an Islamic pole or a third ideology, able to blackmail superpowers. The concept of "neither Eastern nor Western road, only Islam" or "the third road" is unique to the Islamic world<sup>173</sup>. This idea of the formation of a new, third ideology could imply that the concept of the Cold War was already over. So, did the Cold war end ten years before it actually did? The author believes this question cannot be fully answered. Legitimately, the Hostage crisis turned out to be the beginning of a change in the world's power structure. The Cold War continued to influence the United States and the Soviets until 1991, both in their relationships with each other and concerning their participation in other conflicts: the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets lasted until 1989 and Washington's help with Iraq against Iran lasted until 1988. Nonetheless, Muslims in the Middle East were sacrificed to the superpower rivalry between the U.S. and the USSR. Even if the former was more successful<sup>174</sup>, the real winners were the Islamic fundamentalists. The Soviet failure to control Afghanistan and the United States' failure to solve the Hostage Crisis faster and at their conditions showed that Islamic Fundamentalism could fight the superpowers. Iran found a way to be freed from the US/USSR subjugation.

As mentioned above, the incomprehension between Iran and the United States has been going on continuously since then. The latest great proof of this behavior is the U.S. dropping out of the Iran nuclear deal. On July 14, 2015, Iran, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and the European Union, met in Vienna to finally sign the Joint Plan of Action that would limit and control Iran's use

<sup>173</sup> Liu, "The Relations between Nationalism and Islam in the Middle East."

<sup>174</sup> Chang, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism."

of nuclear energy. However, in May 2018, President Donald Trump decided to drop out because he did not trust Iran's use of nuclear energy. Instead, the U.S. adopted new economic sanctions and later killed Qasem Soleimani, one of the most important Generals for Iran, with an air raid. Furthermore, Islamic fundamentalism is seen as a dangerous ideology since the radical groups launched a fierce war against established authority through terrorist means such as kidnapping, assassination, and bombing. Many Western politicians and scholars regard Islamic fundamentalism as the new global security threat. The war between Communism and the West has been replaced by a war between the West and Islamic fundamentalists<sup>175</sup>. Since 9/11, the United States launched an international military campaign known as the War on Terror, against terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Yemen, as well as Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq. One of the most famous and effective results of this war has been the killing of Osama Bin Laden by an American secret military action. What many people fail to understand is that Islamic fundamentalism does not mean these people are terrorists. Extremism is not taught in the Koran, but political leaders and the West often relate the entire canon of Islam to a reductionist, fundamentalist conception, and as a result, people just do not know the difference. Instead, the majority of Muslims are offended by the actions of such extremists who use the name of Islam in vain. Most of the problem comes from the media, who make a profit by demonizing a group on account of a select few individuals.

In conclusion, it is interesting to understand how an action carried out by a group of students, that was supposed to last two or three days, challenged *both* the superpowers during the Cold War. The past between the two countries, the timing of the events, together with the embassy seizure itself, changed the course of history. The superpowers, and the United States in particular, learned that they could not always get involved in other states' internal affairs, that not everybody wants to be friends with them, and finally, that they were blackmailed by what is widely considered a Third World country.

<sup>175</sup> Chang, "Islamic Fundamentalism, Jihad, and Terrorism."

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## **LA CRISI DEGLI OSTAGGI A TEHRAN (1979/81) - LA RESA DEI CONTI DOPO 444 GIORNI**

Gli ostaggi che hanno lottato in una partita internazionale di scacchi che ha tenuto il mondo senza fiato per 444 giorni, al rogo in questa colossale gara, sono il punto di partenza di questa tesi. Riconoscendo lo schema degli eventi che si sono verificati dal 4 novembre 1979 al 20 gennaio 1981, l'obiettivo dell'autore è quello di comprendere le conseguenze della crisi degli ostaggi soffermando la propria analisi sul sequestro dell'ambasciata di Teheran e altre azioni significative di quegli stessi anni. Con la Rivoluzione Iraniana si è verificato uno spostamento nel mondo musulmano, da un cosiddetto nazionalismo arabo, che caratterizzava Paesi come l'Arabia Saudita e l'Egitto, al fondamentalismo islamico, caratterizzato dall'odio verso l'Occidente e soprattutto verso gli Stati Uniti. Tale astio ha dato vita a un sentimento di anti-Americanismo che ha avuto effetti e conseguenze molteplici.

Il sequestro dell'ambasciata di Teheran è stato un evento sconvolgente per vari motivi: innanzitutto per quanto tempo sia durato, ma anche perché è diventato il punto di partenza di un nuovo ordine mondiale. Il mondo è stato testimone delle trattative di Carter che non ha mostrato la solita determinazione americana nel trovare una soluzione alla crisi e questo ha dato ancora più fiducia all'Iran e al suo grande leader spirituale Khomeini. Tuttavia, nel periodo che va dal 1979 al 1981, la Guerra Fredda era ancora in atto, motivo per cui l'Unione Sovietica stava indagando sul comportamento degli Stati Uniti, agendo di conseguenza, e viceversa. Le due superpotenze credevano che il mondo intero fosse ancora sotto la loro sfera d'influenza.

In sintesi, l'autore vuole capire perché l'ambasciata di Teheran fu presa in ostaggio e quali furono le sue conseguenze su scala globale; egli fornirà una panoramica del ruolo della Guerra Fredda nella sequenza di eventi derivanti dalla crisi degli ostaggi iraniani, interrogandosi su varie questioni: Le ragioni del conflitto tra Stati Uniti e Russia erano alla base di quegli eventi o il concetto di sfera d'influenza era già sopravvalutato dieci anni prima della sua fine? Era la nascita di un nuovo terzo polo in Medio Oriente? Quindi, alla fine, può la crisi degli ostaggi essere inquadrata nello schema della Guerra Fredda?

La crisi degli ostaggi fu un evento che si instaurò tra gli Stati Uniti e l'Iran quando furono presi come prigionieri 52 membri dell'ambasciata americana a Teheran. L'ambasciata fu attaccata da un gruppo di studenti islamici e attivisti e occupata dal 4 novembre 1979 al 21 gennaio 1981, per un totale di 444 giorni. Questo però non era stato il primo tentativo di attacco nei confronti dell'ambasciata statunitense: già a febbraio dello stesso anno altri studenti avevano provato lo stesso ma l'occupazione durò solo poche ore, fu infatti interrotta a seguito dell'intervento della polizia iraniana.

Per capire le motivazioni dell'attacco bisogna, anzitutto, capire la Rivoluzione Islamica. A gennaio del 1978 cominciò la rivoluzione in Iran contro il governo dello Scià Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Quest'ultimo governava l'Iran dal 1941 con il pugno di ferro soprattutto grazie alla SAVAK, i servizi segreti imperiali, famosi per l'imprigionamento di chiunque opponesse lo Scià. La sua politica di modernizzazione della società, che cercava di avvicinarsi più possibile alla cultura occidentale non andava bene alla popolazione iraniana. Inoltre,

l'Iran stava diventando uno dei tanti burattini degli Stati Uniti, che lo pretendevano sotto la loro sfera d'influenza durante il periodo della Guerra Fredda. Nel 1953, il popolo iraniano era già riuscito in una rivoluzione che aveva allontanato lo Scià; avevano creato la Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran e come Primo Ministro Mossadeq, un politico molto seguito e supportato dalla popolazione. Quest'ultimo voleva nazionalizzare il petrolio, ma questo agli Stati Uniti non conveniva e preferivano avere lo Scià come loro alleato; successivamente la CIA fece un colpo di stato e rimise lo Scià Palhavi a capo dello stato.

Durante l'inverno del 1979 la rivoluzione ancora andava avanti e lo Scià, oltre che odiato, anche molto malato, lasciò definitivamente l'Iran per andare in Marocco e in seguito negli Stati Uniti. Quando questi accettarono il loro vecchio alleato sul suolo americano per delle cure mediche, la popolazione iraniana pensò a un complotto per rimettere lo Scià a capo del loro paese come era già successo la volta prima. Questo pensiero fu fomentato ancora di più a causa di una persona molto carismatica, da poco tornata in Iran, l'Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini era da anni una figura di spicco nel mondo Islamico e proprio per questo era stato esiliato dallo Scià; ma nonostante questo, gran parte della rivoluzione era stata organizzata da lui mentre si trovava in esilio. I mesi passarono e gli studenti si convinsero sempre di più nella teoria del complotto finché un incontro fra il Primo Ministro iraniano Bazargan e il Consigliere per la Sicurezza Nazionale americano fece arrivare gli studenti l'idea che dovessero agire in fretta. Così, il 4 novembre attaccarono l'ambasciata senza neanche avere l'approvazione dell'Ayatollah. L'unica richiesta da parte degli studenti era l'estradizione dello Scià perché potesse essere giudicato per tutti i suoi crimini contro l'Iran. In seguito a più di un anno di tentate contrattazioni e la morte dello Scià, grazie al Governo Algerino che fece da mediatore, gli ostaggi furono rilasciati.

Nel primo capitolo della dissertazione viene affrontata la politica del Presidente Carter per la risoluzione della crisi degli ostaggi. Inizialmente, il governo di Carter tentò di negoziare direttamente senza però arrivare a nessun risultato, motivo per cui intervenne l'Organizzazione delle Nazioni Unite. Il Segretario Generale Kurt Waldheim fece visita a Khomeini ma quest'ultimo non fu neanche disposto a incontrarlo. In seguito, fu istituita una commissione formata da cinque giudici dall'Algeria, dal Venezuela, Siria, Sri Lanka e dalla Francia per investigare sul ruolo degli Stati Uniti in Iran durante il governo dello Scià e per discutere della liberazione degli ostaggi. Anche in questo caso non ci furono risultati e questo portò a sanzioni economiche e diplomatiche ancora più severe di quelle che erano già in atto, stavolta anche da altri membri dell'ONU. Ad Aprile 1980, Washington decise d'intervenire militarmente con una piccola missione di salvataggio che però non andò a buon fine. Infatti, quest'incarico era stato considerato estremamente rischioso, essendo presente un'alta percentuale di fallimento, ma Carter sentiva la pressione delle future elezioni e sapeva che la popolazione americana voleva vedere un aiuto concreto nei confronti degli ostaggi. Carter non riuscì mai a trovare un punto d'incontro con Khomeini e questo gli costò il secondo mandato di presidenza. Ronald Reagan fu eletto futuro presidente in quanto Carter fu visto come un l'uomo che aveva lasciato che gli Stati Uniti si piegassero davanti a uno stato del Terzo Mondo.

La creazione delle teorie di complotto e dell'odio verso Carter non furono scaturite solamente a cause del colpo di stato del 1953. Infatti, da quel momento in poi, si era creato in tutto il mondo musulmano un

fortissimo sentimento antiamericano, di cui gli americani non erano al corrente. Questo odio nei loro confronti e della cultura occidentale si era radicalizzato ma il governo di Carter tuttavia non era riuscito a capirlo (questo viene illustrato nel capitolo due). Inoltre, questo sentimento si trasformò in azioni, non solo in Iran, ma anche a Islamabad in Pakistan e a Tripoli in Libia. Il 21 novembre del 1979, le proteste pacifiche fuori dall'ambasciata a Islamabad divennero violente e gli studenti dettero fuoco all'ambasciata, più o meno lo stesso accadde il 2 dicembre, appena 10 giorni dopo all'ambasciata americana a Tripoli. Questo forte antiamericanismo si è sviluppato in maniera così violenta anche a causa dell'ascesa del fondamentalismo islamico. Fino a quel momento stati come l'Egitto o l'Arabia Saudita erano caratterizzati dal nazionalismo arabo che li aveva resi gli stati più potenti della regione. I fondamentalisti erano contro l'occidentalizzazione in quanto intossicava la cultura islamica. I conflitti principali tra quest'ultimo e il nazionalismo arabo erano molteplici: l'identità religiosa contro l'identità nazionale, la sovranità di Allah contro quella dello stato e infine, l'islamizzazione contro la secolarizzazione. Due eventi che mostrarono la vera natura dei fondamentalisti islamici furono l'attacco alla Grande Moschea della Mecca e l'assassinio del Presidente egiziano Al-Sadat. Il 20 novembre del 1979, un gruppo d'islamici armati entrarono nella Moschea in cui milione di pellegrini si trovavano per l'inizio del loro primo mese sacro, il Moharram, e la occuparono. Per diversi giorni le autorità saudite non riuscirono a fare nulla finché non trovarono una tecnica per fare uscire tutti i terroristi rimasti, che si erano nascosti nei labirinti sotterranei della struttura. Questo attacco fu contro la famiglia reale saudita perché il gruppo che aveva attuato l'assalto credeva che il paese si stesse gradualmente trasformando in una società occidentalista e consumista.

Per quanto riguarda l'assassinio di Al-Sadat, tutto cominciò con gli Accordi di Camp David. Il Presidente Carter infatti era riuscito a riunire il Presidente egiziano Al-Sadat e il Primo Ministro israeliano Begin nella sua residenza estiva, per due settimane, per firmare un trattato di pace. Al-Sadat era deciso a firmare questo trattato in seguito a diverse guerre nei confini con Israele che potevano essere evitate. Ma l'Egitto, il paese leader della Lega Araba, non poteva compiere un gesto tale per due motivi: non poteva pensare innanzitutto al suo proprio e unico bene, ma doveva pensare a quello della regione, e inoltre perché Israele era odiato tanto quanto gli Stati Uniti. L'eliminazione d'Israele era sempre stato uno degli slogan più ispiratori dei fondamentalisti Islamici. Un trattato di pace tra l'Egitto e Israele voleva dire che Al-Sadat era dalla parte degli occidentali e che sarebbe economicamente dipeso dagli Stati Uniti, e quindi un altro burattino come era stato l'Iran sotto lo Scià. Il 6 ottobre 1981 durante una manifestazione militare alcuni assassini travestiti da soldati aprirono il fuoco sul il Presidente Al-Sadat. Gli islamisti egiziani volevano fare la loro rivoluzione e l'uccisione del presidente era solo il primo passo, ma furono imprigionati e la rivoluzione non avvenne. Inoltre, il successore di Al-Sadat fu odiato ancora di più in quanto si rivelò un vero tiranno.

Il terzo capitolo della tesi si concentra di nuovo sulla rivoluzione iraniana e sulla crisi degli ostaggi ma questa volta dal punto di vista degli studenti che occuparono l'ambasciata e dal loro leader, l'Ayatollah Khomeini.

La Rivoluzione islamica in Iran è iniziata come un movimento di riforma contro un regime imperiale non democratico. Divenne un movimento contro un governo che opprimeva con forza qualsiasi libertà e non si

asteneva dall'uso liberale di strumenti come l'esilio, la prigionia, la tortura e l'esecuzione per reprimere qualsiasi tipo di dissenso politico. Durante tutti gli anni in cui lo Scià ha stabilito e fatto rispettare il suo potere, è stato a spese degli studenti iraniani, degli accademici, dei chierici e di tutti gli altri strati della società, che sapevano che il governo americano lo sosteneva e lo proteggeva. Alla fine, attraverso migliaia di martiri, il popolo iraniano riuscì finalmente a costringere lo Scià ad abdicare. Il malcontento pubblico esplose infine in proteste di massa. La rivoluzione iniziò nel gennaio 1978, nella città religiosa di Qom e lo Scià lasciò l'Iran durante poco più di un anno dopo. Khomeini, la figura chiave per il mantenimento dell'unità, ha orchestrato la ribellione dal suo esilio. Lo Scià sottovalutò il potere e il talento di Khomeini e fu solo il primo di una lunga sequenza di nemici politici a cadere nella sua trappola. Anche se l'Ayatollah voleva una teocrazia anti-Occidentale, i chierici sciiti che aumentavano il loro potere nella vita politica iraniana, vedevano come proprio interesse cooperare, se non altro tacitamente, con gli Stati Uniti, assumendosi un grado di assicurazione in caso di una guerra civile che avrebbe messo la sinistra marxista contro la destra islamica, di cui facevano parte. All'inizio le dichiarazioni di Khomeini contro l'America non erano conflittuali, ma esprimevano piuttosto un senso collettivo di vittimismo che implicitamente offriva a Washington l'opportunità di rimediare ai suoi errori del passato. Tuttavia, l'arena politica in Iran si è sempre più polarizzata nel periodo della rivoluzione. I fondamentalisti islamici spezzarono i legami iraniani con gli Stati Uniti e con l'Occidente e dirottarono l'attenzione degli iraniani dai problemi sociali ed economici all'occupazione dell'ambasciata che poteva essere usata per umiliare una superpotenza. In realtà, gli ostaggi erano essenzialmente un'assicurazione contro l'intervento americano. Khomeini per ottenere tutta l'attenzione della popolazione iraniana puntò agli Stati Uniti come nuovo nemico comune. Questo fece durare la crisi degli ostaggi così a lungo che rese l'Ayatollah così riluttante a negoziare. Solo quando l'intero gabinetto era al suo posto, Khomeini ha autorizzato un'iniziativa per aprire seri negoziati per il rilascio degli ostaggi, per la prima volta.

A Khomeini non piaceva l'Unione Sovietica tanto quanto gli piacevano gli Stati Uniti. Quando i sovietici attaccarono l'Afghanistan e combatterono contro i musulmani, i ribelli anticomunisti sostennero di non aver paura dei russi, perché si trattava solo di un'altra superpotenza, e già erano riusciti a farne cadere una solo attraverso dei negoziati.

Nei due capitoli finali della dissertazione viene analizzata anche l'influenza di due guerre nel territorio, quella tra Iran e Iraq e quella fra Unione Sovietica e Afghanistan, soprattutto durante la Guerra Fredda.

Dopo diversi problemi al confine, l'Iraq invase l'Iran il 4 settembre del 1980. Appena iniziata la guerra, gli iraniani, soprattutto quelli più antiamericani, credevano che gli iracheni fossero appoggiati dagli Stati Uniti. Infatti, gli americani sono stati rapidamente accusati di aver incoraggiato l'invasione di Saddam Hussein, il Presidente iracheno. Gli iraniani credevano che gli attacchi iracheni facessero parte di un grande complotto americano. In realtà, gli Stati Uniti consideravano l'Iraq come un contrappeso all'Iran rivoluzionario e gli fornivano armi. L'Iraq usava armi chimiche, ma l'ONU rimase in silenzio perché "gli Stati Uniti impedirono all'ONU di condannare l'Iraq".



Tuttavia, l'URSS è alleata dell'Iraq dal 1972 ed è stata il principale fornitore durante la guerra. Anche se Mosca aveva paura che Hussein potesse contare troppo su nuovi fornitori in Occidente, i sovietici avevano una forte distrazione: la guerra in Afghanistan. Il conflitto militare durò otto anni e molte alleanze e necessità cambiarono, ma nei primi tre anni sia gli americani che i sovietici fornirono armi ed addestramenti all'Iraq. Interessante è stato il tentativo comune delle due superpotenze di spazzare via l'Iran/il fondamentalismo islamico come terzo concorrente in grado di spezzare la Guerra Fredda, che alla fine si è rivelato più adatto a entrambi che a un terzo attore indisciplinato sulla scena. Durante la Vigilia di Natale del 1979 l'Unione Sovietica invase l'Afghanistan. Sempre nella mentalità della guerra fredda, l'URSS voleva farne un paese socialista sotto l'influenza orientale, eppure gli Stati Uniti e gli alleati europei, guidati dalla loro stessa dottrina del contenimento, criticarono aspramente la mossa di Mosca ed escogitarono numerose misure per farli ritirare. Per questo i mujaheddin afgani ricevettero sostegno soprattutto dagli Stati Uniti, oltre che dal blocco musulmano. L'esercito americano si spinse al punto di approvare e vincere una guerra santa islamica e di insegnare la tattica della guerriglia, accompagnando il loro terrorismo. Nonostante il continuo conflitto con gli Stati Uniti, l'Iran si è opposto con forza all'invasione sovietica e ha sostenuto i mujaheddin. L'Iran ha reagito duramente ai sovietici e all'invasione del vicino islamico con manifestazioni antisovietiche molto violente a Teheran, compreso un finto attacco dell'ambasciata dell'URSS. L'Iran e gli Stati Uniti si sono trovati a combattere contro lo stesso nemico e a perseguire sforzi quasi identici per mobilitare l'opposizione all'Unione Sovietica. Il vantaggio geopolitico per i sovietici derivante dal fallimento dell'alleanza tra Iran e Stati Uniti è stato vanificato dal grave deterioramento della sua posizione causato dalla cattiva gestione della guerra afgana. I finanziamenti da parte delle due superpotenze furono molto controversi perché, nonostante fossero ancora in pieno periodo di Guerra Fredda, entrambe volevano almeno un paese nel mondo arabo e del Medio Oriente sotto la loro sfera d'influenza; ma questo voleva dire finanziare lo stesso paese o un paese che poi si è rivoltato contro di loro.

Durante tutta la crisi degli ostaggi iraniani, la questione ricorrente non è stata tanto l'esito sostanziale in sé, quanto piuttosto come la messa in scena di questo evento sarebbe apparsa agli occhi di un pubblico interno molto sensibile alla presentazione dei propri stati. Il pubblico nazionale è spesso soddisfatto di molti esiti diplomatici che hanno dimostrato di ritenere che la dignità e la reputazione di uno stato siano mantenute per il pubblico internazionale. La crisi degli ostaggi iraniani è stata una situazione talmente difficile da gestire per gli Stati Uniti che le relazioni con l'Iran ne pagano ancora oggi il prezzo.

Per quanto riguarda i sovietici, Washington temeva che l'Iran potesse rivolgersi a loro per chiedere aiuto e, di conseguenza, le politiche di Carter sono state adeguate a questo, anche se l'Iran voleva l'indipendenza da tutti. Le due superpotenze si stavano ancora giocando la carta della sfera d'influenza, ma l'Iran voleva uscirne.

Tuttavia, essendo che gli ostaggi americani furono presi durante la Guerra Fredda, la strategia americana era una conseguenza di questa ideologia, o era la nascita di un terzo polo in Medio Oriente? Quello che l'autore si chiede è se l'Iran dalla Rivoluzione Islamica alla fine della crisi degli ostaggi possa essere inquadrato in termini di Guerra Fredda. Uno degli scopi della Rivoluzione iraniana era quello di rendere l'Iran indipendente dallo

schema più ampio delle sfere d'influenza e di creare un proprio polo. La Guerra Fredda fu trasformata da un sistema fondamentalmente bipolare a un sistema tripolare a causa della comparsa di un polo islamico o di una terza ideologia capace di ricattare le superpotenze. Questa idea della formazione di una nuova terza ideologia potrebbe significare che il concetto della Guerra Fredda era già finito. Ma allora bisogna domandarsi: la guerra fredda è finita dieci anni prima? L'autore ritiene che a questa domanda non si possa dare una risposta completa. Innegabilmente, la crisi degli ostaggi si è rivelata l'inizio di un cambiamento nella struttura del potere mondiale. La Guerra Fredda ha continuato a influenzare gli Stati Uniti e i sovietici fino al 1991, sia nei loro rapporti reciproci sia per quanto riguarda la loro partecipazione ad altri conflitti: l'invasione dell'Afghanistan da parte dei sovietici è durata fino al 1989 e l'aiuto di Washington all'Iraq contro l'Iran è durato fino al 1988. Ciononostante, i musulmani in Medio Oriente sono stati sacrificati alla rivalità delle superpotenze tra Stati Uniti e URSS. Anche se il primo ebbe più successo, i veri vincitori furono i fondamentalisti islamici. L'incapacità sovietica di controllare l'Afghanistan e l'incapacità degli Stati Uniti di risolvere la crisi degli ostaggi più velocemente, ha dimostrato di poter combattere le superpotenze. L'Iran trovò il modo di liberarsi dalla sottomissione USA/USSR.

Come già detto, l'incomprensione tra Iran e Stati Uniti è andata avanti da allora. L'ultima grande prova di questo comportamento è che gli Stati Uniti hanno abbandonato l'accordo nucleare con l'Iran. Il 14 luglio 2015, l'Iran insieme ai cinque membri permanenti del Consiglio di Sicurezza delle Nazioni Unite e l'Unione Europea, si sono riuniti a Vienna per firmare finalmente il Piano d'azione congiunto che limiterà e controllerà l'uso dell'energia nucleare da parte dell'Iran. Tuttavia, nel maggio 2018, il presidente Donald Trump ha deciso di ritirarsi perché non si fidava dell'uso dell'energia nucleare da parte dell'Iran. Piuttosto gli Stati Uniti hanno adottato nuove sanzioni economiche e successivamente hanno ucciso Qasem Soleimani, uno dei più importanti generali dell'Iran, con un raid aereo. Inoltre, il fondamentalismo islamico è visto come un'ideologia pericolosa da quando i gruppi radicali hanno lanciato una feroce guerra contro l'autorità stabilita attraverso mezzi terroristici come il rapimento, l'assassinio e i bombardamenti. Molti politici e studiosi occidentali considerano il fondamentalismo islamico come una nuova minaccia globale. La guerra tra il Comunismo e l'Occidente della Guerra Fredda è stata sostituita da una nuova guerra tra l'Occidente e i fondamentalisti islamici. Dopo l'11 settembre, gli Stati Uniti hanno lanciato una campagna militare internazionale nota come Guerra al Terrorismo contro gruppi terroristici come Al Qaeda, i Talebani in Afghanistan e Yemen e il governo di Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Uno dei risultati più famosi ed efficaci di questa guerra è stata l'uccisione di Osama Bin Laden da parte di un'azione militare segreta americana. Quello che molti non riescono a capire è che il fondamentalismo islamico non significa che queste persone siano terroristi. L'estremismo non è insegnato nel Corano, ma i leader politici e l'Occidente hanno spesso collegato l'Islam ad esso e ora la gente non conosce la differenza. Invece, la maggioranza dei musulmani è offesa dall'azione di coloro che sono estremisti in nome dell'Islam. La maggior parte del problema viene dai media che creano un modello demonizzando un gruppo a causa d'individui selezionati.

In conclusione, è interessante capire come un'azione svolta da un gruppo di studenti, che doveva durare due o tre giorni, abbia messo in discussione entrambe le superpotenze durante la Guerra Fredda. Il passato tra i due Paesi, la tempistica degli eventi, insieme al sequestro dell'ambasciata stessa, hanno cambiato il corso della storia. Le superpotenze, gli Stati Uniti in particolare, hanno imparato che non sempre potevano essere coinvolti negli affari interni di altri Stati, che non tutti volevano essere loro amici e, infine, che sono stati ricattati da quello che consideravano un Paese del Terzo Mondo.