

Why Iranians Took America Hostage

Why Iranians took the America hostage? I believe they did not take few Americans hostage but the whole America was taken hostage for 444 days! What happened in the November of 1979 affected the whole America. It made every American angry and concern! This incident not only made American concerned about the way Iran had dealt with them but also about their own foreign affairs and government conducts.

This paper was borne out of the questions in the writer's mind about the reasons Iranians took Americans hostage. Why are the Iranians so angry? Why do they call America the Great Satan? Why.....? We can not excuse bad behavior, but we can take a more objective look at Iran and its angry leaders. Let us try to understand how they feel and if there is anything America can do to repair the broken relationships.

Iranians, the Wounded People

“Pray as much as you like; it is your oil they are after-why should they worry about your prayers? They are after our minerals, and want to turn our country into a market for their goods. That is the reason the puppet governments they have installed prevent us from industrializing, and instead, establish only assembly plants and industry that is dependent on the outside world.”

-- Ayatollah Khomeini
Beyond the Mosque

“For years, Iran had been ruled by a staunch U.S. ally, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who had been restored to power with CIA help in 1953 and erected a repressive regime. The spiritual head of Iran's Shiite Islamic population, Ayatollah Khomeini, rallied opposition forces from his exile in Paris. In January 1979 the Shiite revolution toppled the shah, who fled Iran, Khomeini returned to impose strict Islamic rule and to trail against “the Great Satan” the United States. In early November Carter allowed the shah to enter the United States for cancer treatment. Shortly after, militant Iranians students stormed the U.S. embassy in Iran's capital, Tehran, and seized more than fifty American hostages. For 444 days the hostage crises paralyzed the Carter administration. A failed U.S. rescue attempt in April 1980 added to the perception of Oval Office ineptitude. And to Carter's bitter chagrin, the hostage crisis persisted through the 1980 presidential campaign. Not until January 20, 1981, Ronald Reagan's inaugural day did authorities release the hostages.” (Boyer, p. 712)

Iran and the West

Everything started with the Industrial Revolution in the West. It gave the Western world a strong appetite for oil and other natural resources. The less

developed countries like Iran with vast resources of energy and minerals became the target of domination by outside power. In the late 1800's the British went to Iran and discovered that Iran has vast amount of untouched oil. Of course, the Iranians were not aware of the value of their resources and soon they were manipulated to sign many contracts with the British, allowing them to take their oil with a minimal of charge. In 1909 the first Anglo- Iranians Oil Co. officially came into being.

In 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavei, the Shah's father, announced himself as the King of Persia (Iran). He ruled until 1941 when the British and Soviets drove him into exile for allying with Hitler. Reza Shah had asked Nazi Germany to help him to free Iran from British and Soviet exploitation. The Iranians were an Aryan race and therefore acceptable to Hitler.

In 1935 the government officially changed their name to Iran (land of the Aryans).

The United States and Iran

Due to Iran's geographic location, Iran has been invaded by military forces in every major wars. Iran is the easiest way from Asia to Europe and that is why she is called the gateway to the west.

During World War II, the American, the Soviets and the British occupied Iran. In 1941 Reza Shah's son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, was placed on the throne by the Allied powers at 22 years of age. From the very beginning this made the young Shah very insecure. He was afraid the Western powers were going to break up his country and what happened to his father would happen to him. The Iranians also were especially upset and suspicious of the British. Their self-serving attitude with complete disregard for the needs of the Iranian citizens had caused deep bitterness in people's heart. The Russians were also a large power that Iranians had to be aware of.

Within this period, both Britain and America made many important mistakes. The most important one was that they under-estimated Iranians' political forces. I believe the Americans have never been able to recognize the Iranians' political ability to decide about their own methods over the years. Iran has had many great leaders who have been forcefully removed but managed to protect Iran's independence. *America has often been responsible for the removal of Iranians leaders specially for the most important one; the Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq!*

Musaddiq was a strong supporter of democracy and his goal was to make Iran a democratic country. The most important job for Musaddiq was to nationalize Iranians oil from the hands of the British. The Iranians were very upset about foreign powers coming in and not only controlling, but receiving all of the profits from their natural resource.

In 1951, in response to Musaddiq efforts, the Iranian Parliament passed an act to nationalize Iranian oil. But the British would not negotiate. Then Musaddiq, representing the Iranian Parliament, went to the World Court in the Hague, Netherlands and won his case. This was the court of International Law set up by the United Nations.

In response to losing this case, the Western countries refused to buy Iranian oil on the world market. Two years of boycott left Iran with a devastated economy, and the people poured into the streets demonstrating against the Shah's rule. The Shah escaped the country on August 16, 1953.

In the same month, the British under Winston Churchill and the American CIA under Eisenhower overthrew the Iranian Musaddiq government in a project called "Operation Ajax." The CIA went to villages and hired people to beat Musaddiq supporters with clubs in the streets of Tehran. They executed many leaders of the Musaddiq government, returned the Shah, and put him back on the throne. Mohammed Musaddiq was arrested and in March 6, 1967 he died. All these happened twelve years before the 1979 revolution and the American hostage situation in Iran.

"The Iranians never forgave America for preventing what they believe would have been a stable, friendly democracy under the leadership of Musaddiq. Many Iranians feel Khomeini's triumph over Iranian politics was a direct consequence of decades of social, political and economic manipulation and interference in Iran's affairs by the outside powers. They think they would not have the Khomeini government today if they had been allowed to continue under the leadership of Dr. Musaddiq." (Shadzi, p. 111)

The United States and Shah

Shah and the United States had many reasons to get closer. Shah seeking personal and national pride and the United States seeking strategic advantage and oil had every reason for having a political marriage. Henry Kissinger, thinking of selling arms and pressed by the demands of the military due to the Vietnam War, was searching for a royal pro-American leader to assume guardianship for the Persian Gulf and Shah was the right person for the job. He assumed this responsibility in return of American military equipment and American training of his army and security forces. Consequently, in May 1972, the United States essentially made the Shah a partner in her global strategy.

The CIA then helped the Iranian government establish and train an internal security organization to protect the Shah. SAVAK, the terror organization was developed to crush and oppress its own people. Shah got rid of anyone within the country that gained political power or opposed him. Even I was arrested at age 13 for protesting against Shah?!

The United States elevated the Shah to the position of policeman of the Gulf.

In the four years that followed, the Shah would spend \$4 billion on American weapons, making Iran the largest importer of American-produced arms in the world.

Iranians' anger fumed beneath the surface from 1953 to 1979. Over the last three decades of his long reign, Shah had wanted different things for the Iranians; opposite of what they wanted for themselves. In a culture where spirituality dominates materialism as a value, the Shah had pursued physical development. Much like his father, he gave his people his own version and vision of modern Iran. But he took from those same people their freedom and their faith!

Beginning with the Shah appointment as the policeman of the Persian Gulf in 1972 until 1978, when the underground preparation of the revolution started, United States and Iran fused. Resting on a base of CIA and SAVAK agents in the field, the United States operated in Iran as absolute protector and keeper of the Shah.

Surely, the Shah of Iran had lost touch with reality. The United States gave Shah unlimited credit to buy American arms. Most of the oil money was going right back to the American economy. A group of Iranians' elite (most of them living in California now) gathering around the Shah were becoming rich and living lavish lifestyles while the needs of the people were going unmet. And with the aid of the Shah, the American community resident functioned as a privileged colony in Iran.

The Americans and the Iranians

The American presence in Iran began to expand in 1963, when the Shah's White Revolution call for economic development drew U.S. corporate giants such as Allied Chemical, Amco, and BFGoodrich to Iran. The invasion proved to be cultural as well as economic.

Europeans formed part of the western mixed cultural and economical invasion, but the majority of foreigners were American civilians and military personnel. Living with so many foreigners was a new experience for Iranians.

"The new aliens came to Iran to tend the machines of industrialization and war and too few of the technologists knew or cared about old Iranians culture. And too many, particularly those with limited education, took pride in calling highly developed Iranians culture "camel culture" and deriding Iranians as "sand-niggers," "rags," "stinkies," and--perhaps worst of all from an Iranians perspective- "Bedouins".

As early as 1958, It is the misfortune of so many foreigners in Iran that they have gone there is a superior, even patronizing role. The business man with his glossy Western products, the technical expert with his higher knowledge, even the missionary with his unspoken condemnation of the country's faith, all run the risk of evoking in those with whom they have to deal the reaction of the underdog." (Sutton, p.29)

The Americans lived in their own exclusive areas, where the movie theaters showed American films, fast-food restaurants sold American food, and shops sold only American-produced goods.

What Iranians understood as American came from this fact that most Americans lived much better in Iran than they did in the United States. Some of the military technicians who had fought in Vietnam left army pay for a \$120,000 a-year salary in Iran. They were not unique. The combination of dollar salaries and employee bonuses such as large houses and luxury cars, servants and drivers was far beyond what they could have in the United States. In the United States, they could only have lived a middle-class life. This issue fed the Iranians' hatred of America that manifested itself in the Iranian Revolution and the Embassy situation.

“ In the mid 1970s the number of Americans living in Iran approached fifty thousand, making them among the largest minority communities. Their presence was ubiquitous. On July 4, 1976, the United States' bicentennial, Americans flocked to the campus of the Tehran American School for a massive celebration. With the permission of the Shah, it ended with an elaborate fireworks display. Below, in the city, Iranians saw the American flag blaze on a mountain of the Alborz (north east of Tehran). The next day, the news paper Kayhan International commented that in celebrating their country's birth the Americans “all had that air of flippancy, streak of irreverence, or whatever, which is typically American, and has brought praise and reproach alike.”

About the same time, Americans had become involved in recurring episodes of public rowdiness, drunkenness, and physical violence that were reported by Iranian newspapers. Although they could, and did, happen anywhere that Americans concentrated, the ugly incidents seemed to center in Isfahan, a conservative city where both the Bell helicopter plant and a large American military contingent were located. In October 1975, three American women clad in skimpy shorts laughing while Muslims prayed. On other occasions, American teenagers drove motorbikes through the venerable Royal Mosque; several well-dressed women turned over a table in a popular restaurant because service was slow; and an American in a taxi shot the driver in the head in a dispute over a fare. Every year the holidays associated with Ashura (a religious ceremony), became to many Americans an occasion for large parties where rock music blared from stereos and drunks staggered from house to house. In city after city, month after month, other incidents great and small offended and enraged the Iranians. Almost all the culprits went unpunished because the twenty-four thousand plus members of military enjoyed immunity under the Status of Forces Agreement, and the rest possessed their heart of Mohammed Reza Shah's Tehran. In that embassy, the diplomats assiduously stayed away from the villages, the urban slums, and, on the orders of the Shah, the clerics. They talked almost exclusively to the English-

speaking elite of Pahlavi in Iran, who themselves rejected the illiteracy, poverty, and religious traditions of their country”. (Mackey p. 251-252)

Iran and Khomeini

In 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini came on the stage of Iranians politics. A popular uprising calling for a better life in Iran started strikes and demonstrations. The participants were from every classes of society. The Shah’s police (SAVAK) were called out and thousands of Iranians were killed. Khomeini was arrested and put in prison and later released.

In addition to the above factors, there were many other factors that led to the revolution that ultimately toppled the Shah. One was the law passed by the Iranian Parliament that American military and their dependents were immune to Iranian law. Khomeini became very involved in the angry backfire from Iranian nationalists. Khomeini called it a *document of enslavement*. He was exiled to Turkey on November 4, 1964 for giving a speech regarding this issue.

The other factor, as I explained before was the fact that “Shah was spending much the oil income on weapons and military machinery while even large cities like Tehran didn’t have gas lines to their home. In 1967-68 the Shah purchased \$96 million in military equipment and in 1969-70; \$289 million. By the late-70’s Iran was spending an average of \$5 billion a year on the military.” (Bill, p. 173)

The final issue was the lavish 2500 year celebration of Persian monarchy the Shah in 1971. The big shots (for the lack of better word) from all over the world were invited and an estimated \$200 million was spent for this unessential anniversary. Speeches and messages from Khomeini in Iraq motivated college students to demonstrate against Shah and they were again attacked and beaten by the Shah’s police (SAVAK).

“From 1978 through February 1979 and estimated 10 to 12,000 persons were killed and another 45, 50,000 were injured because of demonstrations against government.” (Bill, p. 236)

The Aftermath: The Iranian Revolution

Everywhere in Iranian society, an unease about the American presence and the effects of Shah’s programs of modernization controlled large parts of population. Although the most educated Iranians accepted the need of modernization for economic advancement, it was very heavy emphasis put on Westernization as the only way of economic advancement. This issue inflamed Iranian anger toward the Shah and the U.S.

“In this meeting of two highly developed but very different cultures, the Iranians could not seem to absorb the West and make it their own as they had absorbed previous invasions. This invader brought not only himself but Western quantitative thought, rationalism, certitude, mass-produced uniformity, a linear view of history, and the assurance of secularism, all of which clashed with the characteristics and values of Iranians culture. Consequently, the West and Iran failed to meet as equals. The West was technological, Iran mystical; the West was rich and powerful, Iran, despite the oil boom and the shah’s massive miniaturization, was poor and weak. On these unequal terms with the West, the Iranians collective consciousness feared the drowning of our ancient Persian culture in a mindless imitation of the West.” (Farman Farmaian, p.274)

The Iranians Revolution began in early 1978. Following the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 to 1911 and the Nationalist Movement of 1951 to 1953, it was Iran’s third revolution against monarchy and foreign powers especially the United State’s. This revolution formed around Khomeini, the secular descendants of the Constitutionlists and the National Front joined the masses of farm worker and laborers.

After many incidents, secularists and the clergies pressured Shah and finally, in January 1979, Shah decided to flee. I personally believe he himself realized there was no longer any way to force himself on a people that never wanted him. Few weeks after his departure from Iran, when he was permitted into the United States for his cancer treatment, the Iranians took the American hostage.

The Iranians thought America was going to repeat “Operation Ajax.” This time they were going to be tough, so no one could ever overthrow their government again.

“With the collapse of the centuries-old institution of kingship, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran to complete the revolution. In its initial phases, the revolution reordered Iran’s social hierarchy and renounced the alien presence of the West. This was the revolution powered by the political, economic, and social inequities of Pahlavi Iran and driven by nationalism. But another revolution followed. Bridging mid-1979 to mid-1981, Iran’s revolution within a revolution pitted group against group in a violent struggle for the right to define the culture of the Iranians state. From that struggle, Iran emerged as the Islamic Republic committed to the preservation of traditional Shia culture, governed by a new elite composed of the Shia clergy, and ultimately, ruled by a Shia authority figure- Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.” (Mackey, p. 272)

The Conclusion

“We were slowly beginning to realize that we were surrounded by millions of Iranians who saw their country through very different eyes from ours. They felt

exploited by the extravagances of the regime- so obviously baked by Western interests.”

--Paul Hunt, chaplain to the Bishop of Iran
Inside Iran

Maybe the Iranians could have adopted themselves better if the supporter of the Shah's modernization had not been American. Feeling invaded, opponents of the Shah questioned every move he and the America made. They became suspicious of everything attached to the United States.

The United States became such imposing threat because Shah allowed it. He allowed it because he needed American weapons to sustain his power over Iran. Without the military strength he believed that neither his Persian Empire nor the developments necessary to realize his dream of a "Great Civilization" were possible.

“As a consequence, there developed in the last two decades of the shah's reign what might be called the Iranians syndrome. “At the hear of that syndrome lay the interplay between the Shah's personality traits and the deep-rooted problems of social, economic, political, psychological, and cultural continuity and change of the Iranians society.” (R. K. Ramazani, p.7)

A major part of this Iranian syndrome has been Iranians' anger toward the United States government and not the people. Over the last 15 years, Iranians have educated themselves about the American political system. They have realized that Americans are heavily influenced by their political machine, media and the Holy Wood. Usually, they are not informed about the ways their government operate in the foreign countries. For Americans, America is a great country with great expenses. America has to survive and government has to do everything possible to maintain the Americans lifestyle.

How far our government can go to maintain our lifestyle? Who will be effected and how? Do we have the right to do it? What is the cost and what are the risk involved? How about government's integrity? Why we have so many enemies? Why so many people hate our government?

Did you hear questions such as these at the previous election times? All I heard was cutting taxes, decreasing budget deficits, welfare issues and the bridge to the 20th century.

We can not excuse bad behavior, but we can take a more objective look at Iran and its angry leaders. Let us try to understand how they feel and if there is anything we can do to repair the broken relationships. As an American- Iranian, this is what I am hoping..

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