

The Iranian Hostage Crisis:
Domestic and International Challenges for President Jimmy Carter
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Many of the United States' diplomatic difficulties with Iran began with the 1979-81 Iranian Hostage Crisis. The crisis resulted in a number of complex challenges for the Carter administration. On November 4, 1979, militant Iranian students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran, taking hostage the embassy staff in a gesture of protest against American foreign policy. The political nature of a revolutionary Iran greatly prolonged the crisis and forced President Jimmy Carter to explore many different avenues for the hostages' release. International and domestic concerns further complicated any possible response from the Carter administration. Carter initially sought to secure the release of the hostages through diplomatic negotiation and economic sanctions. The failure of these efforts prompted Carter to order a military rescue mission. The international fallout from the failed rescue mission caused further tests and diplomatic setbacks for Carter. The eventual resolution of the hostage crisis depended upon international assistance and Iran's internal political situation. The turmoil of the Iranian Hostage Crisis destroyed Iran's diplomatic relationship with the U.S. and posed complex domestic and international challenges for President Carter.

The Iranian Hostage Crisis was an unforeseen challenge for the Carter administration. In the context of the Cold War, Iran was a strategic U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf region. President Richard Nixon expanded an existing American policy, in which the U.S. provided military technology and advisement to the Iranian Shah; in return, the Shah remained a crucial American ally and protected U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf.¹ Jimmy Carter regarded the Shah as a valuable regional ally and took steps to preserve the existing American-Iranian partnership. Carter hosted the Shah for an official visit to Washington in November of 1977.² Carter visited Iran himself only six weeks later and proclaimed the Shah's regime to be an "island of stability" in an otherwise troubled region.³ The American-Iranian relationship was of undisputed value to

both the Shah and U.S. interests. It was nevertheless an exceedingly tenuous relationship. Iran was the only U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf region, leaving the U.S. without a “safety net” of similar allies.⁴ Conversely, the Shah’s regime depended on external American support.⁵ Nevertheless, the U.S. and the Shah possessed a mutually beneficial partnership that offered no indication of a future crisis between America and Iran.

The regime of the Iranian Shah was characterized by internal instability and the persecution of political opponents. The Shah possessed a secret police force, known as SAVAK, which actively repressed any public dissent.⁶ SAVAK engaged in a number of aggressive tactics, including secret arrests, torture, and the assassination of known dissidents.⁷ SAVAK and the autocracy of the Shah aroused significant public anger against the Shah’s regime.⁸ This public anger was reinforced by the social and religious concerns of a culturally Islamic country.⁹ Perhaps the Shah’s most prominent religious critic was the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Exiled in 1964, Khomeini was nevertheless an active revolutionary force with his recorded sermons and political discourses, which he sent to Iran.¹⁰ Khomeini condemned the Shah for his secular policies and his relationship with the United States.¹¹ Secular and pro-democratic activists also opposed the Shah.¹² Although a firm U.S. ally, the Shah ruled an unstable and divided country.

Iran’s social instability directly contributed to the 1979 revolution and the Shah’s abdication. The revolution began in January 1978 when security forces fired upon and killed a number of religious demonstrators in the city of Qom.¹³ Opposition leaders propagandized these deaths by organizing marches and memorials in honor of slain demonstrators.¹⁴ These demonstrations quickly escalated into massive riots, which the Shah’s security forces could do little to contain.¹⁵ The Shah was uncertain of how to resolve the situation and hesitant to employ

any military crackdown; he initially attempted to form a temporary democratic government and then abdicated in January of 1979.¹⁶ Khomeini returned to Iran less than a month later with the intention of creating an Islamic state.¹⁷ Millions of dedicated supporters greeted him upon his return.

U.S. support for the Shah's regime strained the relationship with Iran's new government. Iranian revolutionaries had no immediate interest in a relationship with the pro-Shah U.S.¹⁸ Even non-revolutionaries were reluctant to associate with the U.S. government for fear of retribution.¹⁹ Khomeini and other revolutionary leaders feared that a U.S. coup could restore the Shah to power in Iran.²⁰ Moreover, an Iranian delegation to the U.N. demanded the extradition of "Shah-loyalists" currently in America.²¹ The Carter administration admitted the exiled Shah to the U.S. for medical treatment in October of 1979. This decision created additional tensions and disagreement with Iran's new government.²²

Despite Iran's political situation, the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran and the prolonged nature of the hostage crisis was a surprise development for President Carter. On November 1, the White House noted that "Iranian security protection" around the American Embassy was "excellent" and that there was no immediate cause for concern.²³ When militants overran the embassy on November 4, administration officials perceived the incident as a short-term crisis that could be resolved with the assistance of the Iranian government. Gary Sick, a member of Carter's National Security Council staff, believed that Iran's new regime would honor international law and take the necessary measures to free American diplomats.²⁴ Khomeini and Iran's revolutionary leaders had resolved a similar crisis nine months previously when the American ambassador had been kidnapped by a separate group of militants.²⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, assumed that this situation would

likewise be resolved with the friendly cooperation of Iranian officials.²⁶ Carter himself was “reasonably confident” that Iran’s revolutionary government would take measures to contain the crisis and to protect the American embassy staff.²⁷ Carter and his staff initially perceived the hostage crisis as a short-term emergency that could be resolved by means of constructive diplomacy with the Iranian government.

The political instability of a revolutionary Iran ultimately destroyed Carter’s hope for a constructive resolution to the hostage situation. After the capture of the embassy workers, Khomeini, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, and the country’s religious leadership offered their immediate support to the students. In Iran’s post-revolutionary environment, Khomeini’s influence was threatened by other leaders within the political establishment.²⁸ As Gary Sick later noted, Khomeini intentionally provoked a “major confrontation” with the United States in order to “galvanize public opinion behind him.”²⁹ Khomeini’s actions in the hostage crisis were also part of a broader effort to expand his ideological authority and to discredit the United States.³⁰ Khomeini used the hostage crisis as political capital, expanding his domestic influence and demonstrating the limits of American power.³¹ The unstable political situation in Iran directly undermined Carter’s efforts for a peaceful and expeditious resolution to the crisis.

As the hostage debacle evolved into a long-term crisis, Carter faced a number of domestic challenges related to the situation in Iran. The pro-Khomeini demonstrations by Iranian students in America resulted in a significant backlash from the American public.³² At a demonstration in Los Angeles, an angry mob attacked the Iranian demonstrators with baseball bats.³³ Many citizens wrote angry letters to Carter concerning the status of Iranian nationals in the U.S. One such letter demanded the “immediate deportation of all Iranian students” as a response to the hostage crisis.³⁴ Another letter demanded that Carter take reciprocal action by

detaining all Iranian students currently in the United States.³⁵ Despite public anger, three quarters of the American public approved Carter's diplomatic response to the crisis; those favoring alternative methods were a small yet vocal minority.³⁶ Nevertheless, Carter feared that public outcry or violence against Iranian nationals might provoke retaliation against American hostages in Iran.³⁷

The Carter administration took a number of measured steps intended to quell public outrage and to limit future demonstrations. Carter instructed immigration officials to review the visas of some 50,000 Iranian students and to deport any individuals in the country illegally.³⁸ The administration also banned Iranian demonstrations on federal property and encouraged state governments to take similar measures.³⁹ However, the U.S. was still obligated to protect all Iranian nationals legally in the country. As Carter himself acknowledged, his administration's public response was limited by provisions of both U.S. and international law.⁴⁰ Carter faced the paradoxical challenge of responding to public demands and expectations, while also upholding U.S. obligations under international law.

The hostage crisis also presented unique political challenges for President Carter. Carter's political opponents framed the capture of the hostages as the result of weak and indecisive leadership. A *Sacramento Union* newspaper editorial offered a blistering critique of Carter's foreign policy, accusing the President of incompetence and demanding his resignation.⁴¹ In a letter to the President, one man urged Carter to assert American authority with a military rescue mission.⁴² Another letter accused Carter of weakness in the face of terrorism.⁴³ Carter attempted to characterize himself as firm and decisive in the face of adversity, but his efforts were only partially successful. He was forced to exhibit restraint, or else risk retaliation against the American hostages.⁴⁴ "Caution in this delicate situation," the President wrote, "must not be

misconstrued as inaction.”⁴⁵ Carter publicly vowed to “protect [American] interests and ensure justice,” but in reality his options were limited.⁴⁶ The administration’s early response was restricted to economic and diplomatic negotiations.⁴⁷ Due to the nature of the crisis, Carter could not demonstrate American authority or military superiority to the satisfaction of his critics. As a result, Carter’s authority and presidential image were largely undercut by the circumstances of the hostage crisis.

Domestic considerations aside, the Carter administration faced the most apparent challenge of negotiating with Iran for the release of the hostages. A military rescue mission was not an immediate option, as adequate planning for such an operation would take considerable time.⁴⁸ Punitive military measures could result in retaliation against the hostages.⁴⁹ Diplomatic and economic pressures were the only other options immediately available to Carter. Accordingly, Carter responded by freezing the property and financial assets of the Iranian government in America.⁵⁰ In addition, Carter halted Iranian oil shipments to the United States to prevent the possibility or impression of American policy being dictated by the need for Iranian oil.⁵¹ Carter also attempted to exert international pressure by pursuing a U.N. resolution for further sanctions.⁵² But Iran ultimately refused to act, and the United States could not take aggressive action without endangering the lives of the hostages. As a result, Iran and the United States were locked in a diplomatic stalemate. The hostage situation demonstrated the limits of economic and diplomatic pressure in resolving an international crisis.⁵³

The U.S. partnership with the Shah presented its own share of difficulties for President Carter. Students responsible for the embassy takeover portrayed their actions as a response to the Shah’s asylum in the U.S. The students claimed that they would release the hostages after the U.S. returned the Shah to Iran.⁵⁴ Khomeini, who possessed no immediate interest in ending

the crisis, asserted likewise.⁵⁵ The Shah was a common enemy that Khomeini could easily use to rally Iranian public opinion behind him.⁵⁶ The U.S. decision to admit the Shah exacerbated an already volatile situation, and Khomeini succeeded in using the issue to manipulate Iranian policy. Iranian foreign minister Sadeq Qotbzadeh effectively parroted Khomeini and the students, demanding the U.S. “send back the Shah” to reduce tensions.⁵⁷ Extradition, however, most likely would have resulted in the trial and execution of the Shah.⁵⁸ Whatever his faults, the Shah was an American ally and Carter was reluctant to sacrifice him for expediency’s sake.⁵⁹ Moreover, Carter felt it “would have besmirched our nation’s honor to do so.”⁶⁰ The U.S. relationship with the Shah was a political dynamic that greatly complicated the hostage crisis.

Cold War tension with the Soviet Union posed another challenge for the United States in the hostage crisis. The Carter administration was highly conscious that a military confrontation with Iran would destabilize the region and potentially create a Soviet-Iranian alliance.⁶¹ Accordingly, the Soviet Union took deliberate actions to provoke the United States and prolong the hostage crisis. The Soviets vetoed a U.N. Resolution for sanctions against Iran, thereby undercutting international pressure for Iran to release the hostages.⁶² Additionally, the Soviet media offered regular criticism of the United States for its response to the hostage crisis. A Moscow Radio broadcast accused the United States of “provoking and insulting the people of Iran.”⁶³ A similar commentary claimed that U.S. policy was aggravating the hostage situation and jeopardizing “a steady oil supply.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, the Soviet foreign minister warned the U.S. against any military escalation, stating that his country would retaliate in kind if provoked.⁶⁵ In addition to the hostage crisis, Carter faced the complex challenges of avoiding an Iranian-Soviet alliance and preventing further tensions with the U.S.S.R. The American-Soviet rivalry

complicated the hostage negotiations and created further diplomatic difficulties for the United States.

The U.S. objective of international sanctions against Iran created friction with other countries as well. European leaders endorsed Carter's policy for sanctions against Iran and supported a U.N. Resolution to that effect.⁶⁶ But the Soviet veto of the U.N. Resolution nullified the legal basis for international sanctions against Iran.⁶⁷ As a result, Carter's European allies were no longer compelled to observe the sanctions, and none of them did.⁶⁸ France, desiring to protect its own commercial interests, asserted that economic sanctions would be ineffective and counterproductive.⁶⁹ France also expressed a concern that sanctions and international pressure "could push Iran into the arms of the Soviet Union."⁷⁰ Czechoslovakia and the Soviet-allied bloc of Eastern European countries also refused to enact economic sanctions against Iran.⁷¹ The United States won international support and united world opinion against Iran for the hostage crisis;⁷² but the broader U.S. effort to economically isolate Iran was unsuccessful. Conflicting national interests and Cold War dynamics limited the scope of international pressure on Iran.

Lack of international support effectively undermined any effect that U.S. sanctions might have had against Iran. The American sanctions merely provided an opportunity for other countries to expand their trade with Iran. A White House memorandum grimly noted the inefficacy of the sanctions.⁷³ As U.S. exports to Iran decreased, exports from Japan and Western Europe continued to increase.⁷⁴ According to U.S. calculations, Iran continued to import the "same assortment of food, industrial goods, and consumer goods as before the crisis."⁷⁵ Indeed, "drops in U.S. exports to Iran...were almost completely offset by increased exports by the Allies."⁷⁶ The U.S. sanctions had no significant economic impact against Iran or Iranian

interests. Lukewarm international support directly undercut Carter's negotiating leverage with Iran.

The persistent failure of international negotiations prompted Carter to order a military rescue mission to free the hostages. After prolonged negotiations, the U.S. agreed in February for a U.N. commission to travel to Iran and hear Iranian grievances against the Shah; in return, Iran would pardon and release the American hostages.⁷⁷ Khomeini, however, repeatedly thwarted attempts to transfer the hostages to government custody, organizing street demonstrations "to emphasize Iranian support for the militants."⁷⁸ Abdolhassan Bani-Sadr, Iran's elected president, made considerable effort to transfer the hostages to official custody, but he was virtually powerless against the militants and Khomeini.⁷⁹ Khomeini used the hostage crisis to solidify his domestic influence; prolonging the crisis only strengthened his hand further.⁸⁰ Realizing that the Iranian political situation could prolong negotiations indefinitely, Carter began to actively plan for a military rescue mission in late March.⁸¹ Death threats to the hostages and the failure of further negotiations prompted Carter to sever diplomatic relations with Iran and to order the rescue mission on April 11.⁸² Carter's decision to use military force was the result of unsuccessful and prolonged negotiations with the Iranian government.

The rescue mission ended in an unforeseen and tragic failure. The mission consisted of eight helicopters, six C130s, and a military rescue team to free the hostages from the embassy in Tehran.⁸³ The C130s would transport the rescue team personnel to a desert site outside Tehran; the team planned to travel covertly into the city, storm the embassy, and free the hostages.⁸⁴ The helicopters could then evacuate the rescue team and hostages from Tehran; the helicopters would thereafter join two transport aircraft, which would swiftly fly the Americans out of Iran.⁸⁵ Acting on the recommendation of military advisers, Carter canceled the mission when three of

the helicopters suffered mechanical failure.⁸⁶ During the evacuation process at the desert site, a helicopter accidentally collided with a C130, resulting in the deaths of eight servicemen.⁸⁷ The rescue attempt, which was already a failure, ended in disaster. The ignominious failure of the mission created additional diplomatic obstacles in the hostage negotiation process.

The ultimate failure of the rescue mission posed further international challenges for Carter. The Carter administration was forced to explain to the U.S., Iran, and the global community its decision to violate Iranian sovereignty. Moreover, the administration's response was also tempered by concern for the American hostages, who remained in Iranian custody. The administration characterized the attempted operation as a "solely humanitarian undertaking."⁸⁸ Secretary of Defense Harold Brown stated that the operation represented the "best course of action for getting our hostages out of Iran and...raised the least risk of harming the Iranian people."⁸⁹ When asked whether the operation might have resulted in the deaths of Iranians, Brown declined to comment.⁹⁰ The Carter administration's public disclosures were clearly calibrated to offset backlash from Iran and the international community. The administration's public response was dictated by international considerations and concern for the hostages.

The attempted rescue mission further complicated negotiations between the United States and Iran. Carter's efforts to cast the mission as humanitarian did little to alleviate the Iranian backlash. Iranian President Bani-Sadr claimed that the U.S. had damaged a peaceful negotiation process just when the situation appeared most promising.⁹¹ Khomeini used the U.S. failure for extensive propaganda. He accused the United States of "aggression against an independent country" and "violating international agreements."⁹² An Islamic judge at the occupied U.S. embassy claimed that the operation had been cover for an attack on Iran's "Islamic Republican Government."⁹³ Bani-Sadr concurred that the mission had been designed to overthrow the new

Iranian regime.⁹⁴ Bani-Sadr further admitted he was “not sure” whether the hostages remained at the U.S. embassy after the attempted rescue mission.⁹⁵ His admission indicates that Bani-Sadr and Iran’s elected government still possessed little control or knowledge of the hostage situation. Khomeini and his religious allies retained control of the hostage crisis and dictated the outcome of negotiations. The attempted rescue mission increased tensions with Iran and complicated negotiations for the hostages’ release.

The Soviet Union likewise used the failed rescue mission for domestic and international propaganda. Soviet officials publicly stated that the U.S.S.R. was responsible for the failure of the U.S. rescue mission in the Iranian desert.⁹⁶ The Soviets claimed that they had “jammed radio communication between the rescue force and its headquarters.”⁹⁷ The Soviets further asserted that they had utilized an “artificial moonlight” to confuse the pilots and cause the “collision between the helicopter and the C130.”⁹⁸ The Soviet Union regarded the American failure as a prime opportunity to undermine U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf region. Soviet officials desired to “demonstrate America’s military weakness” and thereby assert the regional dominance of the U.S.S.R.⁹⁹ The Soviet Union also intended to intimidate the surrounding Gulf States, which relied on American support and military protection.¹⁰⁰ Soviet involvement complicated the situation and caused additional concerns for Carter in the Persian Gulf region.

The attempted rescue did not receive broad support from American allies. Several countries expressed concern over U.S. military action. The United Kingdom urged “restraint on the part of Washington” and encouraged a diplomatic resolution to the crisis.¹⁰¹ China criticized the U.S. for “violating Iran’s territorial integrity,” fearing that such a move could encourage an alliance between Iran and the U.S.S.R.¹⁰² The Carter administration had sought to allay international concerns by characterizing the mission as humanitarian; this characterization,

however, was ineffective. The failure of the rescue mission created a certain degree of friction with the international community.

Carter's policy for sanctions gained additional international support during the second half of the hostage crisis. In late April, the European Community pledged active sanctions against Iran, unless there was "a decisive progress towards a release of the hostages by May 17."¹⁰³ Australia pledged to follow suit.¹⁰⁴ On May 20, Australia enacted a trade embargo on all commodities shipped to Iran, with the exceptions of food and medicine.¹⁰⁵ France likewise issued some limited trade restrictions against Iran.¹⁰⁶ The U.K., moreover, imposed sanctions of its own.¹⁰⁷ These sanctions were all enacted in the weeks following the failed U.S. rescue mission. Such measures may have been intended to discourage the U.S. from taking additional military measures against Iran. As Gary Sick observed, several countries "took only what they considered to be the minimum steps necessary to prevent the United States from moving to a military solution."¹⁰⁸ Regardless of the cause, the United States gained additional policy support during the second part of the hostage crisis.

The Soviet Union remained a thorn in the side of the United States throughout the latter part of the hostage crisis. Cold War dynamics significantly influenced Soviet policy with regard to Iran. The Soviets continued to support the Iranian Revolution for the sole reason that it opposed the U.S.¹⁰⁹ Soviet leaders hoped to capitalize on the Iranian situation by maintaining a tolerant and supportive role for the new government.¹¹⁰ The Soviet Union developed plans to sweep Iranian harbors if the U.S. attempted to mine them.¹¹¹ Moscow also planned to supply Iran with "food, medicine, and other necessities" to offset the possible effects of Western sanctions.¹¹² The Soviet Union was a considerable obstacle to the United States throughout the duration of the hostage crisis.

The attempted rescue mission did not significantly affect Carter's domestic standing. According to a Gallup Poll, 71% of the American public approved of Carter's attempt to rescue the hostages by military force; a mere 18% expressed their disapproval.¹¹³ Despite the mission's failure, public approval for Carter's handling of the crisis temporarily increased from 40% to 46% in the days following the attempted rescue.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, the crisis had an overall negative effect on Carter's presidency. In December of 1979, more than three quarters of the American population had supported Carter's response to the crisis.¹¹⁵ Public opinion, however, eroded with time. Khomeini's efforts to discredit the United States took their most visible toll on the Carter presidency. In less than a year, public support for Carter's response to the crisis shrank from overwhelming majority to less than fifty percent.¹¹⁶ The hostage crisis would have a significant impact on the outcome of the 1980 U.S. election.¹¹⁷ The attempted rescue temporarily improved Carter's domestic standing, but it did not change the overall effect of the hostage crisis on his presidency.

Public outrage against Iran was far less apparent in the second part of the hostage crisis. The attempted rescue operation effectively "cooled the political climate" and ended the many angry demands for government action.¹¹⁸ Much of the public appeared to realize that "nothing further could be done" to effect the release of the hostages in the immediate future.¹¹⁹ These circumstances resulted in an increasingly moderated response from the American public. One editorial called for national solidarity in a time of crisis and expressed regret for the failure of the rescue mission.¹²⁰ A letter to Carter even criticized the President for his "militaristic" response to Iran and encouraged moderation.¹²¹ The public response in the second half of the hostage debacle was more objective and rational, but there was less confidence in a resolution to the crisis.

The hostage crisis was a significant factor in Carter's 1980 electoral defeat. The hostage crisis was certainly not the only factor, but the ongoing debacle undermined Carter's foreign policy credibility and made him vulnerable to Reagan. Public approval for Carter's response to the crisis declined throughout 1980.¹²² Within weeks of the November election, a clear plurality expressed the belief that Reagan was better suited than Carter to handle the crisis.¹²³ Public opinion drifted dramatically away from Carter when it became apparent that the hostages would not be released prior to the election.¹²⁴ Carter himself acknowledged that failure to secure the hostages' release before the election devastated any chance of his reelection.¹²⁵ The hostage crisis reduced public support for Carter and contributed to Reagan's election in 1980.

Iran's new government and its revolutionary politics remained a difficult foreign policy challenge for Carter. During the summer of 1980, Khomeini's government contended with considerable domestic unrest and internal dissension, as it sought to eradicate all Western influence from Iranian life.¹²⁶ Carter's national security team speculated that Khomeini's government might be short-lived. An internal White House report noted Iran's social problems and predicted a swift collapse for Khomeini's regime.¹²⁷ Khomeini's government lacked popular support and loyalty from the military; Iran was beset with economic problems and there was no sign of improvement in the immediate future.¹²⁸ The report concluded: "The revolution has failed...Iranians are expecting a bloody summer and readying for the next revolution."¹²⁹ The report indicates a deep level of uncertainty in the Carter administration with regard to Iran's political situation. Carter was likely unsure of whether to negotiate with Khomeini or to await a more favorable situation in the near future. Iran's internal volatility inhibited Carter's decision-making process throughout the hostage crisis.

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war added further complications for Carter in the hostage negotiations process. Iraq invaded Iran over a border dispute in September of 1980. As a result, Iran began to actively consider military equipment as part of a settlement deal with the United States.¹³⁰ Iranian leaders requested an inventory of military equipment that Iran had ordered from the U.S. during the time of the Shah.¹³¹ Carter tentatively agreed to transfer \$150 million worth of military equipment that Iran had already purchased, in exchange for the safe return of the hostages.¹³² Despite Iran's wartime predicament, many Iranian leaders were reluctant to reestablish a military relationship with the U.S.¹³³ The issue devolved to debate in the Iranian parliament.¹³⁴ Furthermore, military equipment was not included in the final hostage agreement between the U.S. and Iran several months later.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the Iran-Iraq conflict impacted hostage negotiations between Iran and the U.S. and added some additional complications to the process.

The U.S. depended heavily upon international support in the final stages of resolving the crisis. At the request of U.S. officials, Algeria played a central part in negotiating an agreement between the United States and Iran.¹³⁶ Algeria first assumed its role as an intermediary in November of 1980.¹³⁷ As a Muslim country, Algeria was an effective "cultural broker" between the U.S. and Iran; its negotiators were highly effective communicators in light of the cultural disparity of the West and East.¹³⁸ The involvement of the Algerians illustrates the relative impotency of the Carter administration with regard to resolving the hostage crisis. Iran declined to negotiate with the U.S. directly, entrusting Algerian diplomats to implement an agreement.¹³⁹ The U.S. could only communicate its position indirectly through the Algerian government.¹⁴⁰ These developments suggest that Carter's international position was very weak; he did not have the ability to negotiate an agreement on behalf of the U.S., and he relied upon the Algerian

government to do it instead. The Carter administration was highly dependent upon Algerian support in the process of negotiating with Iran.

The eventual U.S. settlement with Iran was a lengthy and complicated process. Iran “refused direct contact” with the United States and Algeria maintained its intermediary role in the negotiation process.¹⁴¹ As a result, “each cycle of offer and counter-offer” could take two weeks to reach a consensus.¹⁴² Despite the illegality of the hostages’ detention, the U.S. was forced to compromise with Iran on a relatively equal level. The U.S. agreed to release frozen Iranian, in exchange for the return of the hostages.¹⁴³ Moreover, the U.S. and Iran each agreed to avoid legal or financial claims relating to the hostage seizure or assets freeze.¹⁴⁴ Algeria served as an arbitrator in the implementation of the settlement. The U.S. placed frozen Iranian assets into escrow in care of the Algerian government; Iran, for its part, permitted the hostages to be flown to Algeria and placed into custody of the Algerian government.¹⁴⁵ Algeria then transferred the hostages to U.S. control and simultaneously released the frozen assets to Iran.¹⁴⁶ The American-Iranian agreement was the product of intensive negotiations and resulted in an uneasy compromise between the two countries.

The hostages’ release was also contingent upon Iran’s internal political situation. Iran’s newfound willingness to negotiate was not the result of international or political pressure. The hostage crisis was simply no longer useful to Iran. Khomeini had succeeded in humiliating the United States and discrediting Carter with the hostage crisis; he therefore had no incentive to detain the hostages any longer.¹⁴⁷ Iranian officials also began to realize that the hostages were no longer useful for “internal political purposes” and that the situation was an international liability for Iran.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, Iranian officials probably concluded that they were less likely to win concessions from the incoming President Reagan, since he was less politically vulnerable

than Carter.¹⁴⁹ Iran's political situation was a major factor in both the hostage crisis and the hostages' eventual release.

The Iranian Hostage Crisis created a diverse array of domestic and international challenges and undermined a cooperative U.S. relationship with Iran. The political nature of a revolutionary Iran greatly prolonged the crisis and made its resolution difficult. The domestic problem of Iranian students created a public backlash, while the political implications of the crisis damaged Carter's image as President. Carter also faced the considerable challenges of negotiating with Iran's volatile government for release of the hostages. Moreover, the failure of the military rescue mission prompted further tensions with Iran and the world at large. Resolution of the crisis depended upon international support and the political crosscurrents of a revolutionary Iran. The Iranian Hostage Crisis was a complex international situation, which greatly challenged the Carter administration and altered the U.S. relationship with Iran.

Notes

¹ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York, NY: Random House Inc., 1995), 13-14.

² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

³ *Ibid.*, 29-31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁶ David Farber, *Taken Hostage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87-93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

¹⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 448.

¹¹ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 63-65.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 34-35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-36.

¹⁶ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 450-56.

¹⁷ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 104-06.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 109, 119-20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

²² Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 184-85.

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- ²³ Memo, *The Situation Room to David Aaron*, 11/1/79, National Security Affairs—President’s Daily Report File (11/1/79—11/10/79), Box 13, Jimmy Carter Library; hereafter annotated as JCL.
- ²⁴ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 176.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-76.
- ²⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York, NY; Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1983), 476-77.
- ²⁷ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 466.
- ²⁸ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 204-05.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.
- ³⁰ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 159.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 158-60.
- ³² Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 229.
- ³³ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 151.
- ³⁴ Personal Letter, Mary and Daniel O’Hara to Jimmy Carter, 11/09/79. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), 7/1/79—7/30/79, Box CO-33, JCL.
- ³⁵ Personal Letter, Morris Katz to Carter, 11/09/79. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), 7/1/79—7/30/79, Box CO-33, JCL.
- ³⁶ The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1979 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1980), 286-87.
- ³⁷ Jimmy Carter, Speech to the 13th Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO, 11/15/79. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), 7/1/79—7/30/79, Box CO-33, JCL.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ John P. McGoff, Sacramento Union editorial, 11/09/79. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), 7/1/79—7/30/79, Box CO-33, JCL.
- ⁴² Personal Letter, Paul C. Perry to Carter, 11/08/79. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), 7/1/79—7/30/79, Box CO-33, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁴³ Personal Letter, Randy Tucker to Jimmy Carter, 11/06/79. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), 7/1/79—7/30/79, Box CO-33, JCL.
- ⁴⁴ Jimmy Carter, Speech to the 13th Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO, 11/15/79.
- ⁴⁵ Personal Letter, Jimmy Carter to Randy Tucker, 11/15/79. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), 7/1/79—7/30/79, Box CO-33, JCL.
- ⁴⁶ Jimmy Carter, Speech to the 13th Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO, 11/15/79.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 477, 487-88.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 490.
- ⁵⁰ Jimmy Carter, Speech to the 13th Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO, 11/15/79.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 242.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 217-18.
- ⁵⁴ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 142.
- ⁵⁵ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 474.
- ⁵⁶ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 204-06.
- ⁵⁷ Daily CIA Brief, 12/4/79. National Security Affairs—President’s Daily CIA Brief file, 11/29/79—12/4/79, Box 23, JCL.
- ⁵⁸ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 476.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 476.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 476.
- ⁶¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 490.
- ⁶² Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 248.
- ⁶³ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 4/22/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 4/21/80—4/30/80, Box 15, JCL.
- ⁶⁴ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 4/24/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 4/21/80—4/30/80, Box 15, JCL.
- ⁶⁵ Memo, Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 4/18/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 4/11/80—4/20/80, Box 15, JCL.

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- ⁶⁶ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 242.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.
- ⁶⁹ Memo, Brzezinski to Carter, 4/16/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 4/11/80—4/20/80, Box 15, JCL.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 11/20/79, NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 11/11/79—11/20/79, Box 13, JCL.
- ⁷² Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 217.
- ⁷³ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 5/19/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 5/11/80—5/20/80, Box 15, JCL.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 255-57.
- ⁷⁸ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 4/24/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 4/21/80—4/30/80, Box 15, JCL.
- ⁷⁹ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 260, 265, 278.
- ⁸⁰ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 159.
- ⁸¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 487-88.
- ⁸² Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 515-16.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 519-20.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 519-20.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 519-20.
- ⁸⁶ Carter’s Report to Congress, 4/26/80. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), Executive—4/26/80—1/20/81, Box CO-32, JCL.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁸⁸ Letter, Stuart Eizenstat (Assistant to the President) to Col. J.A. Donovan, 6/09/80. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), Executive—4/26/80—1/20/81, Box CO-32, JCL.
- ⁸⁹ Briefing by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, 4/25/80. WHCF, Subject File CO 71(Iran), Executive—4/26/80—1/20/81, Box CO-32, JCL.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*
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- ⁹² Daily CIA Brief, 4/28/80. NSA—President’s Daily CIA Brief File, 4/24/80—4/30/80, Box 27, JCL.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁴ Daily CIA Brief, 4/27/80. NSA—President’s Daily CIA Brief File, 4/24/80—4/30/80, Box 27, JCL.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*
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- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*
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- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*
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- ¹⁰⁹ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 6/16/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 6/11/80—6/20/80, Box 15, JCL.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*
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- ¹¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹¹³ The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1980 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1981), 102.
- ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.
- ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 102, 128.
- ¹¹⁷ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 577.
- ¹¹⁸ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 306.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 306.
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- ¹²¹ Letter, Bishop Paul Moore Jr. to Carter, 5/21/80. WHCF Subject File CO 71 (Iran), General 1/1/80—1/20/81, Box CO 33, JCL.
- ¹²² The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1980, 50, 159.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*, 215.
- ¹²⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 576-77.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 577.
- ¹²⁶ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 307.
- ¹²⁷ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 6/9/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 6/1/80—6/10/80, Box 15, JCL.
- ¹²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁰ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 313-14.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 313-14.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, 314.
- ¹³³ *Ibid.*, 314.
- ¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 314.
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- ¹³⁶ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 315.
- ¹³⁷ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 181.
- ¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 181-82.
- ¹³⁹ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 315, 320.
- ¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 320.
- ¹⁴¹ The Declarations of Algiers, 1/21/81, 1.
- ¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 1
- ¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1-2.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.
- ¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-9.
- ¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.
- ¹⁴⁷ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 182.
- ¹⁴⁸ Memo, Situation Room to Brzezinski, 10/20/80. NSA—President’s Daily Report File, 10/11/80—10/20/80, Box 17, JCL.
- ¹⁴⁹ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down*, 319.

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