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The Precipitants of the Tehran Hostage Crisis

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The Tehran hostage crisis lasted for almost 15 months. It began on November 4, 1979, when Iranian revolutionaries captured the U.S. embassy in Tehran and its staff, holding 52 of them hostage. It ended on January 20, 1981, when the captive Americans departed Iran from Tehran's Mehrabad airport. The television images of Iranian revolutionaries leading blindfolded diplomats down the steps of the U.S. embassy chancery are emblazoned on the minds of an entire generation of Americans and therefore, the hostage crisis continues to cast a shadow over Iranian-American relations.

In his landmark interview with CNN's Christian Amanpour on January 7, 1998, Iran's popularly-elected President, Mohammad Khatami, was asked whether the hostage crisis, "falls into the category of early revolutionary excesses?" Amanpour extended to President Khatami the opportunity to apologize for the hostage crisis and heal a wound in the American national psyche. Khatami's response reflected the Iranian perception of the causes of the hostage crisis:

> "The feelings of our people were seriously hurt by U.S. policies. And as you said, in the heat of the revolutionary fervor, things happen which cannot be fully contained or judged according to usual norms. This was the crying out of the people against humiliations and inequities imposed upon them by the policies of the U.S. and others, particularly in the early days of the revolution."[1]

In this paper I will explore the precipitants of the Tehran hostage crisis and delve into President Khatami's assertion that the United States bore some responsibility for the crisis. Utilizing an analytical model developed by Glen Snyder and Paul Diesing, I contend that the general precipitant for the Tehran hostage crisis was the interference of the United States in the internal affairs of Iran from 1953 onwards and that the specific precipitants were the outreach of the Carter administration to members of the Provisional Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran (PGI) and the admission of the exiled Shah to the United States. I will begin by examining how and why the Tehran hostage crisis began. This will involve a discussion of what Snyder and Diesing term the precipitant and challenge of a crisis:

> "Typically, the immediate cause of the crisis is an attempt by one state to coerce another by an explicit or implicit threat of force. The first act of severe coercion may be called the challenge; technically it starts the crisis by posing a distinct possibility of war. A challenge is stimulated or motivated by a precipitant, of which there are two broad types, external and internal. In the external type, a state perceives an intolerable situation developing in its environment as a result of action by

> another state or states. It may be intolerable for a variety of reasons: it is threatening to the state's external or internal security, it threatens the state's economic viability or affronts its national dignity and prestige. We may call this the general precipitant, which provokes the challenge. There is usually also a specific precipitant, a particular and especially provocative act by the opponent that is seen as the "last straw," or perhaps as the pretext for the challenge."[2]

There is little controversy over the challenge in this crisis. On November 5, 1979, one day after the U.S. embassy was seized by Iranian revolutionaries, Ahmad Khomeini, the son and spokesperson of Ayatollah Khomeini, warned the Prime Minister of the PGI, Mehdi Bazargan, that if he opposed the seizure of the embassy he would be opposing the Iranian people. Two days later the Bazargan government tendered its resignation to Ayatollah Khomeini. The refusal by Ayatollah Khomeini as the highest Iranian authority to allow the PGI to liberate the U.S. embassy constituted a failure on the part of Iran to fulfill its obligations towards the United States under Article 22 of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which reads: "The receiving State is under a special duty to take all appropriate steps to protect the premises of the mission against any intrusion or damage and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity."[3] This refusal endangered American lives and property and therefore brought Iran and the United States into conflict.

However a discussion of the precipitant for this challenge is more controversial. In the following section I will argue that interference by the United States in the internal affairs of Iran from 1953 to 1979 constituted the general precipitant for the crisis, and the decision by the Carter administration to establish links with member of the PGI while also admitting the Shah to the United States was the specific precipitant or 'last straw' that led to the challenge.

Although Iran had long suffered from foreign interference in its domestic affairs, particularly by Britain and Russia, the United States did not become significantly involved in Iran until the conclusion of the Second World War. In 1953, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in cooperation with the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) orchestrated a coup d'etat against the democratically-elected government of Iran, led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. The Mossadegh government passed legislation in the Iranian Majlis (parliament) in May 1951 nationalizing the British-owned Iranian oil industry. Premier Mossadegh enjoyed wide popular support in Iran and was warmly received by U.S. President Harry Truman in Washington in October 1951.

The British attempted to oust the Mossadegh government without success and were forced to leave Iran in November 1952 when diplomatic relations were severed by Mossadegh. The British made plans to invade Iran, but they were opposed by Truman in September 1951. However in 1953, the newly elected administration of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower was more sympathetic to British claims that the 'instability' caused by Mossadegh left Iran open to a Communist takeover. On August 19 and 20, a joint operation by the CIA and MI6, code-named Operation Ajax, was carried out. A military coup, in cooperation with the Shah's court and elements of the Iranian armed forces, ousted the elected Mossadegh government and the Shah was installed as the absolute ruler of Iran.[4] A first hand account of Operation Ajax written by Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA officer in charge of the operation, was published in 1979.[5]

Over the next 26 years the United State built a client state in Iran, including significant cooperation between the CIA and Iran's National Intelligence and Security Organization, known by its Persian acronym SAVAK. SAVAK was used by the Shah over the next two decades to suppress any opposition to his rule.[6] The Anglo-American coup against Mossadegh and the American support for the Shah generated immense anger and mistrust by Iranians towards the United States. In the words of Mike Metrinko, an

American diplomat and hostage in Tehran, "in Washington there was a failure to understand the vast degree of suppressed hatred that had been caused by our bringing about the collapse of the Mossadegh government. That was Iran's chance to become democratic. We screwed it up, and we bragged about it."[7] These feelings of anger and mistrust created by American interference in Iran's domestic affairs constituted the general precipitant of the Tehran hostage crisis.

With the overthrow of the Shah's regime in 1979, the revolutionaries had every expectation that foreign powers would again intervene to divert the course of Iranian history. Snyder and Diesing write, "Quite obviously, a crisis always involves "severe conflict." There is, first, a deep conflict of interests between the parties. However, conflict of interest in itself is not sufficient to bring about a crisis. One of the parties must initiate some form of conflict behavior in an attempt to resolve the underlying conflict of interests in its favor."[8] The perception of Iranian revolutionaries at that time was that the victory of the Iranian Revolution would not be tolerated by the United States, which sought to protect its client state in Iran. When the United States attempted to reach out to members of the PGI many of the revolutionaries felt that this was an attempt by the United States to subvert the Revolution, just as it had subverted the Mossadegh government in 1953. From the Iranians' perspective this was a form of "conflict behavior" by the United States aimed as resolving the underlying conflict of interests between Iran and the United States in America's favor.

The outreach by the Carter administration to the PGI and the admittance of the Shah to the United States constituted the specific precipitants for the hostage crisis, i.e., the 'last straw' that compelled Iranian revolutionaries to seize the U.S. embassy. According to Carter's Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, the policy of the Carter administration after the victory of the Revolution was to "gradually develop improved relations" with Iran based on "a number of common interests".[9] For the United States, the overthrow of the Shah had not reduced Iran's strategic importance as a major global supplier of petroleum and as a geographic barrier between the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf. The U.S. adopted this policy of rapprochement despite awareness amongst Carter's advisors of the suspicions that Iranian revolutionaries harbored regarding American intentions. Vance writes, "In the fall of 1979, the Iranian revolution was far from over...Every faction seeking to dominate the revolution harbored paranoid fears of residual "pro-Shah" forces in the country and suspected that the United States would try, as it had in 1953, to restore the Shah to his throne."[10] Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, writes of a "common anxiety of the Shah's successors that the former monarch might somehow stage a comeback".[11]

According to Vance, in August 1979 the United States "exchanged intelligence with one or two members of the Bazargan government. This was done discreetly, since any contact with American intelligence officers could endanger our Iranian interlocutors."[12] These briefings began on August 5, 1979 in Stockholm when CIA Officer George Cave met with the Deputy Prime Minister of the PGI, Amir Abbas Entezam. On August 21 and October 15, 1979, CIA officers flew into Tehran to brief Bazargan, Amir Entezam and Iranian Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi.[13] From Vance's comments, it seems clear that the Carter administration was cognizant of the sensitivity in Iran of any meeting between Iranian and American government officials. Nonetheless on October 3, 1979, Vance met with his Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Yazdi, on the sidelines of a United Nations meeting in New York. According to Vance, at that meeting Yazdi inquired whether the United States would admit the exiled Shah. Vance sought to assuage the Iranians' fear of an American counter-revolution: "I told him that we recognized and accepted both the revolution and the new government and were doing nothing to destabilize Iran, as he charged early in our conversation." Vance also mentions that during his trip to New York, Yazdi met with other State Department officials to "discuss the straightening out of Iran's military assistance accounts."[14]

Just over two weeks after this meeting, on October 22, 1979, Carter admitted the exiled Shah to the United States for medical treatment. The Shah was admitted despite the cognizance of the State Department that his presence in the United States would arouse great suspicion in Tehran. Vance writes, "Staff studies pointed out that if the Shah were permitted to come to the United States, it would be seen by most Iranians as an indication that we intended to restore him to the throne and overturn the revolution."[15] These warnings had also reached the White House. Hamilton Jordan, President Carter's Chief of Staff, was aware that the Iranians didn't believe that the Shah was being admitted for medical reasons. He recalls that, "They were skeptical that it was true…they thought it was part of some conspiracy to try to return the Shah to power."[16] It seems clear that the State Department's concerns were well founded. Ayatollah Khomeini's biographer, Baqer Moin, writes that when the Shah was admitted to the United States, "Khomeini fumed at what he considered to be a provocative act. To him this was evidence of American plotting. His statements became increasingly belligerent, and he railed against the machinations of the 'Great Satan'."[17]

Adding further fuel to the Iranians' suspicions, Brzezinski met with Bazargan, Yazdi and Iranian Defense Minister Mustafa Chamran in Algiers on November 1, 1979, just three days before the U.S. embassy was seized. The meeting was held on the sidelines of Algeria's independence celebrations. According to Brzezinski, the meeting was held at Bazargan's request. Like Vance in October, Brzezinski made the point that "the United States was not engaged in, nor would it encourage, conspiracies against the new Iranian regime". He stated that "we are prepared for any relationship you want…we have a basic community of interests but we do not know what you want us to do." While Chamran raised the issue of American assistance to the Iranian military, Yazdi warned that the Shah's presence in the United States "disturbs us" and "leaves our people with the conclusion that the United States is involved."[18]

These contacts between the PGI and the Carter administration were viewed with immense suspicion by many Iranian revolutionaries, including Ayatollah Khomeini. Many revolutionaries mistrusted the Bazargan government, which was made up primarily of foreign-educated technocrats. The PGI was seen as overly liberal in its domestic policies and exceedingly accommodating towards the United States. Khomeini later expressed regret at ever having appointed Bazargan as Prime Minister: "We made a mistake, we did not act in a revolutionary way. We were two groups. One came from the school of theology, the other came from the outside...[Bazargan] did not have the revolutionary spirit."[19] These views were shared by the revolutionaries that stormed the U.S. embassy. As Massoumeh Ebtekar, the spokesperson for the revolutionaries holding the embassy, recalls:

> "Bazargan's cabinet, and his whole entourage, had an entirely different perspective on the revolution than the Imam [Khomeini] and other leaders of the Islamic movement. Bazargan was a sincere religious reformist at heart, not a revolutionary. He had mixed feelings about the Imam's tactics, even though they had led to the toppling of the shah. The monarchical system could be modified and improved, he believed. A cautious man by nature, Bazargan lacked revolutionary insight and vigor—precisely the two qualities that were needed at that moment. …the Provisional Government could not withstand the pressures and fulfill the responsibilities they were facing. Sooner than anyone had anticipated, they had entered into contact with Americans and other foreign elements, in clear violation of the spirit of the revolution."[20]

By 1979 the general precipitant for the crisis—the Iranian anger and mistrust created by American interference in Iran's domestic affairs since 1953—had created the necessary conditions

for the crisis. A general fear pervaded the revolutionaries that the United States would orchestrate a counter-revolution in Iran. The outreach to the PGI and the admittance of the Shah to United States fueled these suspicions and constituted specific precipitants for the challenge. Ibrahim Asgharzadeh, one of the Iranian revolutionaries who seized the U.S. embassy recalls, "the decision to occupy the embassy began with our reaction to what America had done. We felt that by allowing the Shah into America they were conspiring against the revolution."[21] Ebtekar quotes a fellow revolutionary on the day the Shah was admitted to the United States: "The U.S. has decided to admit the Shah," he said, his voice suddenly falling to a whisper as he looked around. "Look, do we need any more proof about what they think of the Iranian nation. There may even be another plot under way against us." Mohammad could have been shocked, but he wasn't. The news was no surprise. When the Shah had fled Iran earlier that year, most Iranians expected he would attempt a comeback, with help from Washington."[22] She then goes on to cite the Algiers meeting as evidence of this conspiracy.[23]

Undoubtedly, the United States bears responsibility for creating the precipitants that led to the Tehran Hostage crisis. The Iranian revolutionaries who stormed the U.S. embassy in November 1979 regarded their decision as a defensive act aimed at preserving the victory of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In this paper I have argued that the general precipitant for the Tehran hostage crisis was the interference of the United States in the internal affairs of Iran from 1953 onwards and that the specific precipitants were the outreach of the Carter administration to members of the Provisional Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran (PGI) and the admission of the exiled Shah to the United States.

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[1] Mohammad Khatami, interview by Christian Amanpour, Cable News Network, January 7, 1998 (accessed February 26, 2004); available from: http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html.
[2] Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision-making and System Structure in International Crisis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 11.
[3] *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and Optional Protocols (1961)* (accessed February 26, 2004); available from: http://fletcher.tufts.edu/multi/texts/BH408.txt.
[4] Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 57-84.
[5] Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979).
[6] Gasiorowski, *op. cit.*, 117-121.
[7] David P. Houghton, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 65.
[8] Snyder and Diesing, *op. cit.*, 7.
[9] Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 368.
[10] *Ibid*., 369.
[11] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 471.
[12] Vance, *op. cit.*, 368.
[13] James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 290-291.
[14] Vance, *op. cit.*, 371.

[15] *Ibid*., 370.
[16] Houghton, *op. cit.*, 61.
[17] Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 220.
[18] Brzezinski, *op. cit.*, 475-476.
[19] Moin, *op. cit.*, 222.
[20] Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran: The Inside Story of the U.S. Embassy Capture* (Burnaby: Talonbooks, 2000), 76-77.
[21] Houghton, *op. cit.*, 60-61.
[22] Ebtekar, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
[23] *Ibid*., p. 77.