

## **The Iran Hostage Crisis**

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**Grade Level:** High

**Duration of lesson:** 1 class period or 90 Minutes

**Overview:**

The Iran Hostage Crisis lasted from 1979-1981, but its aftereffects changed the political and diplomatic landscape between the United States and Iran for decades to come. On November 4, 1979 Iranian student demonstrators stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage. The hostages would be released only when the Shah came back to Iran to stand trial for crimes committed against the Iranian people. The former leader of Iran, the Shah had been voted out of office in 1950, but was reinstated after a U.S. led coup in 1953. He became a close ally of the U.S., but was wholly unpopular in Iran and was eventually overthrown in 1979.

The situation was only expected to last a short time, but it dragged on for 444 days. The Carter administration was seen as inept and ineffective in handling the crisis. A botched rescue attempt in 1980 only reinforced these views and Carter was not reelected in the 1980 presidential race. The hostages were released on January 20, 1981, the same day Ronald Reagan was sworn into office. In this lesson, students will examine primary source documents from throughout the crisis in an attempt to reconstruct the event. They will in essence be working backwards, trying to decipher what documents are more important than others as they construct a debriefing of the event. The instructor will then share the actual details of the crisis and students will be able to see how their close their interpretations were to what actually happened.

**Content Standards:**

**Era 10: Contemporary United States (1968 to the present)**

**Standard 2:** Economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary United States

**Historical Thinking Standards**

**Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation**

- A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
- D. Consider multiple perspectives.
- E. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas, and the role of chance.

**Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making**

- A. Identify issues and problems in the past.

- Students will analyze how Iran Hostage Crisis impacted an entire presidency of Jimmy Carter.

The Iran Hostage Crisis, which lasted from 1979 to 1981, was the first time the United States was forced to deal with Islamic extremists. The United States supported the Shah, or leader of Iran, as an ally of the United States from 1953 to 1979, despite his arbitrary arrests and excessive punishments of the Iranian people, including Iranian students. After years of abuse, they responded by following the words of a Muslim religious fundamentalist leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, to take back Iran and place him in power. The students took action by seizing the United States embassy, which they saw as both a symbolic and tangible source of support for the Shah's authoritarian regime. The Americans in the embassy were taken hostage and this ad hoc action morphed into a much longer drama that lasted for 444 days and would not end until President Carter left office. Overall, the Iran Hostage Crisis was an event that changed political and diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran for decades to come.

Iranian resentment of United States can be traced back to the 1950s. Since the beginning of the Cold War, the United States supported any regime that was not communist, no matter how unpopular they were with the people of their country. Under these circumstances Iran became an anti-communist country and the Shah became an ally of the United States.<sup>1</sup> In 1950 the Shah fled Iran when Mohammed Mossadegh was elected Prime Minister. Mohammed Mossadegh had long resented the British controlled oil industry in Iran and tapped into the anti-British resentment in his country to get elected and then expel the foreign influence over Iran's economy. After his election, Mossadegh exerted his power and nationalized the oil-industry in

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Paterson, J. Garry Clifford, Shane J. Maddock, Deborah Kisatsky, Kenneth J. Hagan, eds., *A History: American Foreign Relations Since 1895*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 409.

the country, ridding Iran of British influence over their most precious commodity, oil.<sup>2</sup> This event triggered fear in the United States. The state department felt that communists could exploit this chaos and the Middle East, especially Iran, could turn against democracy and the United States. The Shah, who had been in exile, contacted the United States and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) put together Operation AJAX to drive Mossadegh from Iran and put himself back in power.<sup>3</sup>

After the coup which brought him to power in 1953 the Shah became a close U.S. ally, often consulting with U.S. diplomats.<sup>4</sup> Over time his close ties to the U.S. became a source of unpopularity with the Iranian people, who opposed his growing repression and sympathized with Khomeini's charge that reliance on the U.S. diminished Iran's independence. Between 1953 and the early 1970s the U.S. supported the Shah's ambitious plans for economic development and regional leadership using the country's enormous oil wealth and the Shah reciprocated by purchasing billions of dollars in high-tech U.S. weaponry. The Shah felt it was necessary to purchase weapons for his security, because U.S. diplomats told him he was in danger, and he spent billions of dollars in oil-money to buy the weapons solely from the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The Shah also took the advice of the United States and started a special police force called the SAVAK. Trained by the CIA and very cruel towards the Iranian people, the SAVAK was not only a police unit, but also was a spying unit, gathering information on Iranian citizens.

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<sup>2</sup> William J. Daugherty, *In The Shadow Of The Ayatollah: A CIA Hostage In Iran*. (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 29-30; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 409.

<sup>3</sup> Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 409.

<sup>4</sup> David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter With Radical Islam*. (Princeton, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 2005), 103; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 409.

<sup>5</sup> Daugherty, *In The Shadow Of The Ayatollah*, 32; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 410.

It was stated that the SAVAK was so ruthless that it had female members spying on their husbands. Arbitrary arrests, imprisonments, and executions were carried out on a massive scale.<sup>6</sup>

The Shah was losing status in his own country and the United States wondered how long it could support such an unpopular leader. Starting in 1978, there were demonstrations month after month against the Shah.<sup>7</sup> In 1979 the Shah was overthrown by mass demonstrations inspired by the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, a charismatic Shia Muslim religious scholar who preached a conservative (later called fundamentalist) variant of Islam and built support in part by stroking Iranian resentment against U.S. support for the Shah's regime.<sup>8</sup> In this time of pandemonium in Iran the Shah was diagnosed with cancer and President Carter allowed the long time ally of the United States to come to New York to receive treatment.<sup>9</sup>

On November 4, 1979 at ten o'clock in the morning, Iranian time, student demonstrators assembled in the streets outside the United States embassy in Tehran stormed the walls and came into the twenty-seven acre complex. American marines inside the embassy compound sounded an alarm and the embassy went into a lock-down mode. Ten men were assigned the task of disposing of sensitive documents that the embassy had in storage. The embassy had directions from the federal government to only keep as many documents as could be incinerated in thirty minutes, but the incinerator broke as they began to destroy the documents.<sup>10</sup> The men did the next best thing and began to shred the documents. After a few hours the sixty-six Americans in the embassy could not hold out any longer and room by room they were captured. The hostages

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<sup>6</sup> David Harris, *The Crisis: The President, the Profit, and the Shah- 1979 and the Coming of Militant Islam* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 28; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 409.

<sup>7</sup> Daugherty, *In The Shadow Of The Ayatollah*, 83.

<sup>8</sup> Steven M. Gillon, *The American Paradox: A History of the United States Since 1945*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 327.

<sup>9</sup> Daugherty, *In The Shadow Of The Ayatollah*, 94; Gillon, *The American Paradox*, 327; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 409.

<sup>10</sup> Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 409; Harris, *The Crisis*, 28; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 409.

were told that they would be released when the Shah came back to Iran to face trial for the crimes he had committed against the people of Iran.<sup>11</sup>

The hostages thought the crisis would be over quickly but it dragged on for months. President Carter decided that since diplomacy was not working, he would use force to get the American hostages out of Iran. A Delta Force of ninety-seven soldiers and eight helicopters was assembled for a mission on the morning of April 25, 1980 to take control of the embassy and free the hostages.

Problems with the rescue mission started to occur once the team landed in Iran. Two helicopters malfunctioned before reaching Iran and one helicopter blew a hydraulic pump while in Iran and was unusable in the mission. When the Delta Force was down to only five helicopters it was decided that the rescue mission should be aborted. The disastrous mission did not end there. The Delta Force loaded into the remaining helicopters to return to base when they were caught in a sandstorm. Two helicopters collided and eight of the Delta Force soldiers were killed in the crash. President Carter had to address that nation that night and disclose the failure of the rescue mission.

The American peoples' response was not favorable toward the president. Most Americans felt that Carter was incompetent as a leader, in general, as well as in the crisis situation.<sup>12</sup> After the failed rescue mission the Carter administration and the American public realized that the hostage crisis was going to last longer than anyone expected. Every night news stations broadcast how long the hostages had been held, pointing out how inept Carter was as a

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<sup>11</sup> Daugherty, *In The Shadow Of The Ayatollah*, 104-110; Harris, *The Crisis*, 104; Gillon, *The American Paradox*, 327; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 409-410.

<sup>12</sup> Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 174; Harris, *The Crisis*, 352-361; Gillon, *The American Paradox*, 377; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 412.

president.<sup>13</sup> Carter began to speak with advisors to try to see what could be done to bring an end to the situation.

Four events unfolded that brought an end to the hostage crisis. First, Ronald Reagan won the election of 1980 and promised to end the Iranian Hostage Crisis by any means necessary. This pledge surely made the Iranian militants question how long it would be before another squad of Delta Force soldiers were on their way to the embassy.<sup>14</sup> Second, the Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters were elected to the Iranian parliament. This meant that there was no reason to hold the hostages to force any illegal political changes in Iran. Third, Iraq and Iran became involved in a war. Iranian assets had been frozen in the United States and they now needed access to the money or they risked losing their entire country. Finally, the Shah died in July 1980 while living in Egypt. Now what the students of Iran truly wanted, for the Shah stand trial in exchange for the hostages, was impossible.

The Iranian Hostage Crisis helped cost President Carter his reelection, as the hostage situation was a major campaign issue that lost him millions of votes. Many Americans viewed Carter as a president that was unfit in times of crisis. Others stated that he did not exhibit strength in the situation and made the United States look weak on the world stage. A deal was struck between the United States and the Iranian terrorists holding the hostages. The United States would unfreeze Iranian assets in the United States in the hostages were freed. Finally, on January 20, 1981 after 444 days in captivity the American hostages were freed, the day before Ronald Reagan took office.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gillon, *The American Paradox*, 327.

<sup>14</sup> Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 181; Harris, *The Crisis*, 328; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 412.

<sup>15</sup> Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 175; Harris, *The Crisis*, 406; Gillon, *The American Paradox*, 327; Patterson, *American Foreign Relations*, 412-413.

As Americans were trying to forget the loss of the Vietnam War, cope with the stagflation of the 1970s, and deal with left wing revolutionaries in Africa and Central America, the episode in Iran conveyed the inability of the United States to decisively shape world affairs. The United States has tried to stay ahead of militant and terrorist groups around the world, not just those in the Middle East, with varying degrees of success. Since the Iran Hostage Crisis it has been evident that the United States has to work with other countries, rather than control them. Can the United States truly make this change from dominance to cooperation still remains to be seen, for if the country and its leaders cannot, more acts of aggression and terrorism seem imminent.

Daugherty, William J. *In The Shadow Of The Ayatollah: A CIA Hostage In Iran*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001.

Farber, David. *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter With Radical Islam*. Princeton, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 2005.

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**Jimmy Carter-** 39th President of the United States.

**Iran-** a republic in Southwest Asia, the capital is Teheran, formerly, until 1935, was Persia.

**Iran Hostage Crisis-** On November 4, 1979, Iranian militants stormed the United States Embassy in Tehran and took approximately seventy Americans captive. This terrorist act triggered the most profound crisis of the Carter presidency and began a personal ordeal for Jimmy Carter and the American people that lasted 444 days.

**Ayatollah Khomeini-** Iranian political and religious leader who lived from 1902 until 1989.

**Robert C. Ode-** was one of the fifty-two American citizens taken hostage by Iranian students in November 1979 at the American embassy in Tehran. They were held for a total of 444 days and finally released, after lengthy negotiations, on January 20, 1981.

[Insert Teaching Procedure Here](#)

### **Shredded CIA Cable reporting on information provided by an Iranian contact**

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB21/04-01.htm>

When the United States embassy was overtaken by Iranian militants the employees of the embassy tried to destroy as much information as possible, usually by shredding. After the embassy was taken the Iranians put back together most of the shredded documents which contained names and important information given to the CIA by Iranian informants. This is just one example of what the Iranians put back together. Students may not know what this document is at first but it can be pulled into their narratives if teachers explain what it is after students have started the activity

### **A picture of the Ayatollah Khomeini escorted by military officers upon his return to Iran.**

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/iran/irbroch.html>

This picture was taken when the Ayatollah returned to Iran with his Islamic fundamentalists and overthrew the shah's doctoral regime. The shah was not in Iran at the time. He was in the United States receiving treatment for cancer. This picture should give students insight into the fact that this man is important because he is surrounded by so many people.

### **Farsi Survival Guide from the 1980 Iran Hostage Rescue Mission**

[http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/DOCUMENT/DOC-PIC/930728\\_1.gif](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/DOCUMENT/DOC-PIC/930728_1.gif)

This was part of the survival kit given to Delta Force commandos during the failed rescue mission in April 1980. The statements were to be used to try to bring compassion to the commandos if they were captured or their helicopter was downed and they were trying to get out of Iran safely. Students should realize the importance of such a document to someone who would be lost in a foreign country and not know the common language.

### **The Hostages and the Casualties**



[http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/list\\_of\\_hostages.phtml](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/list_of_hostages.phtml)

This document is a list of all the hostages, released hostages, and Special Forces members who were involved directly in the Iranian Hostage Crisis. This document shows that these people were real, had families, and lets students understand that this tragedy could happen to anyone.

### **Letter from Jimmy Carter to Ayatollah Khomeini**

[http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital\\_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=595328&st=b&rp=details&nh=1](http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=595328&st=b&rp=details&nh=1)

President Carter tried a diplomatic approach before signing off on the rescue mission that would eventually fail in April 1980. This letter is what he sent to the Ayatollah to try to end the hostage crisis but the Ayatollah did not give in and the hostages were not freed. This document should show students that proper communication lines were open between the countries during the crisis but even with this communication the hostages were not released.

### **Executive Summary of the Failed Mission to Rescue the Iranian Hostages**

<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=n&rn=1&nw=n&nh=1&st=b&rp=summary&si=0>

This is a summary of the planned mission to rescue the hostages from Iran. The summary gives timeframes of when the mission was planned and when it was to be conducted. The document also gives reasons for why the mission failed and best of all gives recommendations on how the United States should handle counter-terrorism actions in the future.

### **Robert C. Ode Diary**

[http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/r\\_ode/](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/r_ode/)

Robert C. Ode was the oldest of the hostages and actually retired from diplomatic service. He took a job to travel to Iran and only expected to be in Iran for a few months. He was allowed to keep a diary by his captors and this is a rare look into the mind of someone who lived through the ordeal.