

Iran Hostage Crisis

1979–1981

The Iran Hostage Crisis lasted from 1979 until 1980. Earlier American intervention with Iran led to this incident. During World War II, the Axis Powers were threatening to invade Iran. Britain and the Soviet Union, both United States allies, stationed troops there to make sure the Axis Powers would not invade. After World War II, the Cold War began. Iran still was allied with the United States, but this time against the communist Soviet Union. Fearing the Soviet Union might threaten Iran, American troops were stationed in Iran.

Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951. The company, which the British owned, was forced to withdraw its employees. The company refused to produce any more oil and stopped oil revenue payments to the Iranian government. This damaged the Iranian economy, but Mossadegh planned to staff the company with Iranian workers and to produce more oil. The United States was in a predicament; two of its allies were in a disagreement. Because of its longstanding alliance with Britain, the United States suggested Iran reach an agreement with the British. The United States also was worried about the potential influence the Soviet Union might have on Iran. The United States and Britain did not support Prime Minister Mossadegh. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and those who opposed Mossadegh in Iran and Britain, launched Operation Ajax in 1953. They overthrew Mossadegh and replaced him with a leader more supportive of British and American interests. The new leader was Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a member of the former royal family of Iran. He now would be the Shah of Iran. The shah ruled Iran for the next twenty-five years.

As time passed, some Islamic leaders in Iran and other Mideast countries became dissatisfied with their position in the world and felt the rival superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, were mistreating them. Rejecting both the liberal democracy of the United States and the anti-religious communism of the Soviet Union, these Islamic leaders sought to return their countries to the greatness they had achieved in the Middle Ages. Adopting a strict interpretation of Islamic law, they attempted to establish religiously dominated Islamic states to counter what they considered the powerful, but decadent and godless superpowers. The dependence of the United States and the Soviet Union on Mideast oil resulted in western tolerance for these new Islamic states.

In Iran, resistance to the United States erupted in the absence of the shah when he traveled to America for cancer treatment in 1979. Iranians revolted against the shah's unpopular government. When the revolution succeeded, Iran's new leader and Islamic religious leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, demanded the United States return the shah to Iran to be tried for alleged crimes he had committed while he was in power. When the United States refused, Iranian revolutionaries stormed and captured the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. They took the Americans there as hostages.



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Iranian militants held fifty-two United States diplomats prisoner. The militants were part of the Muslim Students Followers of the Imam's Line. They were angry the United States had allowed the shah to enter the United States for medical care. They demanded he be returned to stand trial and to face execution. The Muslim Students also wanted a public apology from the United States for the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh.

United States President Jimmy Carter would not give in to the Iranians' demands. In the middle of November, thirteen women of African descent were released from captivity. The only other hostage released was Richard Queen after his multiple sclerosis diagnosis in July 1980.

The Iranians who took the Americans hostage assured their countrymen that the Americans were not truly hostages. According to Iran, the Americans were guests of the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. However, it was clear the Americans were treated as prisoners. The Iranians placed blindfolds over their heads and locked them in solitary confinement. The hostages were marched through Tehran. Originally, the Iranians were not supposed to take the Americans hostage. Nevertheless, Khomeini wanted to see what the United States reaction would be. Khomeini wanted to put as much pressure as possible on the United States. He believed America was in a weakened state after the loss of the Vietnam War. President Carter chose a peaceful approach. He wanted to negotiate with the Ayatollah for the release of the hostages. Many Americans wanted the country to declare war on Iran. However, Carter took diplomatic action against Iran. He ended oil imports on November 12, 1979. He also froze \$8 billion worth of Iranian assets.

In April 1980, Carter decided it was time to take military action. He approved a plan that would attempt to rescue the hostages, Operation Eagle Claw. Eight helicopters were to leave from the aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz* and fly to a landing strip in the Great Salt Desert. The helicopters would refuel and head to the hostages' location. Only six helicopters made it to the landing strip. Two of them had malfunctions. Sandstorms also impeded the pilots' vision. This caused them to fly at extremely high or low levels that were dangerous for the helicopters. The pilots were not allowed to converse with one another on the radio. This caused all of the helicopters to arrive separately. When another helicopter began to malfunction due to lack of fuel, Colonel Charles Beckwith recommended to President Carter that the mission be aborted. Carter agreed, telling the men to return to the *Nimitz*. As one helicopter was returning, it crashed into a transport plane. The helicopter crash killed eight and injured dozens. Carter addressed the nation that night. He informed them of the rescue plan and its failure. Carter's popularity and approval in the United States declined.

The shah died from cancer on July 27, 1980. In addition, Iraq invaded Iran. There had been constant border disputes between the countries. There was also a Shia insurgency in Iraq because some Shia were influenced by the Islamic revolution in Iran. These two developments spurred the Iranian government to resolve the hostage crisis. In November 1980, Carter lost the presidential election to Republican Ronald Reagan. Carter's diplomatic efforts to free the hostages had failed. However, Reagan's representatives negotiated the hostages' release during Carter's final days in office.

The 1981 Algiers Accords stated that Iran would release the hostages. The United States had to unfreeze the \$8 billion in Iranian funds and not threaten Iranians with lawsuits. As soon as Reagan was sworn in as the new president, Iran released the hostages into the custody of the United States. Former President Carter met them in West Germany, they were flown to Stewart Air National Guard Base in New York, and bused to the United States Military Academy. They were later feted with a ticker-tape parade in New York City.



*Hostages returning home:
January 27, 1981*

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Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the invasion of the Muslim Students Followers of the Imam's Line on the American Embassy in Iran.
2. Which hostages were released early?
3. The Iranians claimed the Americans were not hostages. What did they claim the Americans' status to be? How were the hostages treated?
4. What diplomatic action did President Jimmy Carter take in the wake of the Iran Hostage Crisis?

