



HOSTAGE CRISIS

HOSTAGE CRISIS, the events following the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran by leftist Islamist students in 1979 with subsequent wide-ranging repercussions on Iran's domestic politics as well as on U.S.-Iran relations. The crisis began on 4 November 1979, nine months after Moḥammad-Rezā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-79) had been overthrown and exiled and two weeks after he had been admitted to the U.S. for medical treatment, when some 300 leftist Islamist students stormed the embassy and took all personnel hostage. Mindful of the 1953 coup d'état (q.v.) that reinstated the shah to power, the students vowed to keep the hostages until he was extradited to Persia from the United States and placed on trial for his "heinous crimes" against the country. The embassy takeover developed into a momentous crisis that lasted 444 long days; it affected Iran's destiny for decades. The crisis ended on 10 January 1981, when the hostages were freed.

The events leading to the crisis. The hostage crisis took place in a sensitive period, when Iran was in revolutionary chaos and the direction of its revolution not clearly defined. Diametrically opposed groups were engaged in a ferocious power struggle. The hostage crisis intensified this power struggle. Ayatollah Khomeini and a number of leading pragmatic figures in the new regime, including 'Ali-Akbar Hāšemi-Rafsanjāni and Sayyed Moḥammad Ḥosayni-Behešti as well as the leftist Islamist students who initiated the event, manipulated and prolonged the crisis in order to craft a new political landscape for Iran. They used the hostage crisis to defeat their liberal and secular leftist rivals; to ratify a new constitution legitimizing the new regime;



to develop the institutions and infrastructure of the nascent republic; and to terminate the Iranian alliance with the U.S. Two months into the crisis, a perceptive Muslim statesman informed the U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance that “you will not get your hostages until Khomeini has put all the institutions of the Islamic Revolution in practice” (Christopher, 1985, p. 44). No wonder Ayatollah Khomeini called the hostage crisis “Iran’s second revolution, more important than the first one” (Khomeini, 1983, p. 301).

Soon after the *ancien regime* collapsed, “multiple centers of power” emerged. The Provisional Government (*Dawlat-e mowazqat*), controlled by Islamic and secular nationalists, was the least powerful of such centers. Ayatollah Khomeini appointed Mehdi Bāzargān leader of this government, but it was, as Bāzargān admitted, “a knife without a blade” (Bāzargān, 1982; Bakhash, p. 52). Competing with this government was the clandestine Council of Revolution (*Šurā-ye enqelāb*), established by Ayatollah Khomeini before the shah’s exile, which could veto governmental policies. The real center of power was the enigmatic Ayatollah Khomeini himself, Iran’s charismatic strong man. He and his Islamist supporters, of both rightist and leftist persuasions, shrewdly established a mini-state that was beholden to Khomeini alone. The mini-state operated with impunity outside the jurisdiction of the official state and consisted of Khomeini’s representatives in the government and in the newly established revolutionary institutions, such as the revolutionary tribunals (*dādgāhhā-ye enqelāb*), various revolutionary committees (*komitahā-ye enqelāb*), and the armed Revolutionary Guards (*Sepāh-e pāsdārān-e enqelāb-e eslāmi*; Bāzargān, 1982, *passim*; Ashraf, 1994, pp. 114-20, 129-42; Milani, 1988, pp. 147-51).

Behind these multiple centers of power within the new regime, three paradigms for Iran’s future collided. In the first paradigm, which Bāzargān symbolized, Iran was to become a democratic presidential system, with the Shi’ite ‘*olamā*’ playing a supervisory role in the affairs of state. In the second paradigm, advocated by leftist Islamists, Iran was to become an Islamic society, defined by social and economic justice. The leftist Islamists sought economic self-sufficiency, limits on agricultural landholding, nationalization of major industries, progressive labor and social welfare legislation; and they opposed rapprochement with the West, especially the United States. These followers of ‘Ali Šari’ati, the “ideologue” of the Islamic revolution, supported Khomeini because of his charismatic authority and not his “incumbency of the office of the supreme guide ‘*wali-e faqih*,’ “ (Ashraf and Banuazizi, 2001, pp.



240-41). In the third paradigm, which Ayatollah Khomeini championed, Iran was to become a puritanical Islamic theocracy, with the '*olamā*' as its rulers.

Khomeini and the coalition of his conservative and leftist followers methodically undermined Bāzargān. Having won the overwhelming majority of the seats in the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e kōbragān*) in June of 1979, they drafted a constitution which legitimized the doctrine of sovereignty of the leading Shi'ite jurispudent as representative of the Hidden Imam (*welāyat-e faqih*; see Ashraf, 1994, pp. 129-42, and Enayat, 1983, pp. 160-80). It was during the pivotal hostage crisis that the fate of this draft constitution was shaped and decided upon (see below).

Marxist-Leninist *Fedā'iān-e kalq* and *Sāzmān-e peykār* and Islamic socialist *Mojāhedīn-e kalq*, the main guerrilla organizations (see COMMUNISM iii.), as well as the pro-Moscow Tudeh Party, were very influential among the youth, especially in universities. Secular leftists persistently belittled Islamic groups as "petty bourgeoisie," questioned their revolutionary credentials, and accused them of being "soft" toward or even collaborating with "U.S. Imperialism." In this radical era, the predominantly young leftist Islamists were determined not to be outmaneuvered and marginalized by secular leftists. They mobilized the masses and founded various groups, including the Office for Consolidation of Unity (lit., Bureau for Strengthening Unity: *Daftar-e taḥkim-e waḥdat*) in the summer of 1979, which planned and executed the takeover of the American Embassy in October of 1979. Located on the periphery of power, the leftists of all persuasions relentlessly criticized Bāzargān's reformism and pushed the revolution toward radicalism, which aided the followers of Khomeini to consolidate their position. They were the most prolific exponents of radical politics during an era when extremism was camouflaged as mainstream thought. They popularized "anti-U.S. imperialism" as the main ethos of the Revolution, and they persistently called for the suspension of military, economic, and political treaties with the U.S. and the expulsion of U.S. military advisors. The leftists also set a precedent for hostage-taking. On 14 February 1979, the *Fedā'iān-e kalq*, who had found fame in the struggle against the shah, attacked the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking some of the staff hostage, including Ambassador William Sullivan. Ayatollah Khomeini refused to endorse this "Valentine's Day attack"; and Ayatollah Behešti and Ebrāhim Yazdi, members of the Council of Revolution and representing the government, resolved the conflict quickly and peacefully (Sick, 1985, p. 175; United States Congress, 1981a, p. 16). One month later, the U.S. Consulate in



Tehran suffered minor damage from a rifle grenade attack. Shortly after these attacks, Ambassador Sullivan permanently left Iran; and in June of 1979 Bruce Laingen arrived in Tehran as Chargé d’Affaires. Because of the attacks on the embassy, the U.S. accelerated staff reduction; embassy staff was reduced from 1,400 in 1978, to 60 by mid-1979 (Christopher, 1985, p. 57).

In the first nine months of the revolution, Bāzargān sent conciliatory messages to the U.S. government. He hoped to develop friendly relations with the U.S. and thus consolidate his rule. He insisted only on terminating those U.S.-Iran treaties which he deemed detrimental to Iran’s national interests. Cabinet member ‘Abbās Amir Entezām declared that Iran should not expel all U.S. military advisors in order to “take maximum advantage of its military investment,” and Ebrāhim Yazdi noted that Iran must receive spare parts from the U.S. to insure that its mostly American-made weapons systems “would not turn into useless and worthless metal” (*Mardom*, 7 August 1979; Sick, 1985, pp. 176 and 189; Amir Entezām, 2001a and 2001b). Bāzargān was even prepared to welcome a new American ambassador, William Cutler; but Ayatollah Khomeini pressured him to inform Washington to withdraw the nomination after the U.S. Senate passed the “Javits resolution,” which strongly condemned summary executions in Iran (Bill, pp. 283-84). In most cases, the U.S. government did not support Bāzargān. It refused to deliver equipment previously purchased by the shah, and cancelled arms deliveries to Iran, such as 160 F-16 fighters. In short, the U.S. opted for a “wait-and-see” approach, hoping to normalize relations with the victor in Iran’s continuing power struggle (Bill, pp. 264-67).

The conciliatory policy of the United States government toward the exiled shah weakened Bāzargān and precipitated the hostage crisis. After a short sojourn in Egypt by invitation of President Anwar Sadat, the shah went to Morocco, the Bahamas, and then to Mexico. Ironically, the man who was among the world’s most powerful figures a year earlier was unable to find permanent asylum anywhere. Secretary Vance writes that, in December of 1978, when the shah was contemplating leaving Iran, Ambassador Sullivan informed him that “he would be welcome [in] the United States” (Vance, p. 370). During the first few months of exile, the shah rejected this offer to show his “displeasure with the United States” (Vance, p. 370). President Carter recalls that “we had left open our invitation for him [the shah] to come to the United States,” but adds that he later decided “it would be better for the Shah to live elsewhere” (Carter, p. 452).



Carter's decision to abandon an old ally intensified the rift within his administration; it also angered the shah's friends in the United States. On one side, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski favored reversing the policy, suggesting that "we must show our strengths and loyalty to an old friend even if it means personal danger to a group of very vulnerable Americans" (Carter, p. 453; Brzezinski, pp. 472-73). On the other side, Secretary Vance asserted that, if the shah were admitted to the U.S. before a new, stable government was in place there, it could endanger Americans in Iran who "might be taken hostage" (Vance, p. 370).

In May of 1979, David Rockefeller informed Carter that the shah was terminally ill with malignant lymphoma, which prompted Carter's re-evaluation of U.S. policy toward the exiled king (Carter, p. 454). Henry Kissinger also pressured the administration, linking his willingness to "support us on SALT to a more forthcoming attitude on our part regarding the Shah" (Brzezinski, p. 474). Many others cautioned the President not to reverse his policy, however. Chargé Laingen, who was in close contact with the Bāzargān government, warned Washington of potential U.S. Embassy seizure and hostage-taking by irate Iranians (United States Congress, 1981d, p. 230; Laingen, p. 9; and Carter, pp. 453 and 455). These contradictory recommendations resulted in Carter's confusion, forcing him to ask top advisors, "What are you guys going to advise me to do if they overrun our embassy and take our people hostage?" (Jordan, p. 5).

Ultimately, Carter decided to permit the shah to enter the U.S. for medical and humanitarian reasons. After this reversal of policy, the division within his administration intensified. Vance recommended that Bāzargān should be informed of the new policy; if Bāzargān vehemently opposed the decision, another assessment of the policy should begin. Brzezinski maintained that Bāzargān must "have no voice in the decision," and should simply be informed of the decision afterwards (Carter, pp. 455-56, and Brzezinski, p. 475). Brzezinski prevailed, and Laingen simply informed Bāzargān of the new policy. To convince Khomeini that the shah's entry to the U.S. was solely for medical reasons, Bāzargān requested that Iranian doctors examine the shah; Carter, however, rejected this proposal (Carter, p. 455). Although he was unhappy with the U.S. decision, Bāzargān nevertheless "pledged to help if the embassy was attacked" (Laingen, p. 10).

On 22 October 1979, the shah arrived unannounced in New York City for medical treatment at the Cornell Medical Center. The revolutionaries did not



accept the veracity of the claim that the shah was admitted for medical reasons, partly because the shah's leukemia had been a "state secret" during his reign (Sick, 1985, pp. 181-84). Instead, the shah's admission renewed bitter memories of the CIA-led 1953 coup d'état, in which the nationalist government of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq was overthrown and the shah's rule reinstated (Cottam, 1988). Many believed the U.S. was orchestrating a similar plan to restore the Pahlavi dynasty. Consequently, areas outside the U.S. Embassy in Tehran became a "Mecca" for leftists, who organized rancorous demonstrations against the U.S., demanding the extradition of the "criminal shah" to Iran (see Mirdāmādi, "Čerā sefārat ešgāl šod?" [Why was the embassy occupied?], in Sotudeh and Kāviāni, pp. 67-70; Ebtekar, pp. 44-45).

The Islamist followers of Khomeini displayed an even greater anti-American posture than secular leftists. Their political vernacular was becoming characteristically vitriolic toward the U.S., as they organized crowded and rancorous demonstrations outside the U.S. Embassy. Ayatollah Khomeini called on the masses to "force" the U.S. to return the "criminal shah" to Iran (for the text, see Sotudeh and Kāviāni, pp. 82-83). The Office for Consolidation of Unity, then an obscure and small Islamic organization, took this rhetoric to an extreme. After pictures appeared in Iranian newspapers of Bāzargān and his foreign minister Yazdi shaking hands with U.S. National Security Advisor Brzezinski in Algeria on 1 November 1979, half a dozen of the top leaders of the Office for Consolidation of Unity met secretly to plan the attack on the American Embassy in Tehran. Moṣṭafā Čamrān, a close confidant of Khomeini also met Brzezinski (Brzezinski, p. 475). The fateful meeting was called at the suggestion of Ebrāhim Asgārzādeh, an engineering student at the Šarif University of Technology. His call was supported by Moḥsen Mirdāmādi, an engineering student from the Polytechnic University, and Ḥabīb Biṭaraf, an engineering student from the University of Tehran. Those who attended formed a Coordinating Committee, which included two other students: Reżā Sayf-Allāhi, from the Šarif University, and Raḥim Bāṭeni, from the National University (later called Behešti University). The committee contacted Ḥojjat-al-Eslām Moḥammad Ko'inihā, a radical cleric who was Khomeini's confidant and his representative in the National Iranian Radio and Television. They discussed their plan to attack the American Embassy and asked him to seek Khomeini's advance approval. Ko'inihā supported the plan and joined the students as their spiritual guide (Ebtekar, Chapter 1; Macleod, pp. 58-59; and interview with Ko'inihā in *Majalla-ye hożur* 2, Ābān 1370 Š./November 1991, p. 2). The plan was kept hidden from the government as well as from secular



leftists. According to Asgārzādeh, the Coordinating Committee was particularly fearful that, if the plan was leaked, well-organized guerrilla organizations could seize the embassy before they could (Sotudeh and Kāviāni, pp. 90-92).

In an interview with this author, Kō'inihā stated that the militants felt that the Bāzargān government was getting dangerously close to the U.S. and was moving the Revolution in a misguided direction. They believed the shah's admission to the U.S. was part of a conspiracy by the U.S. to "destroy the Islamic Revolution" and remake Iran into a "U.S. puppet." They wanted to attack the embassy for its symbolic significance, which "would have world-wide repercussions and would allow them [students] to express their outrage against the U.S. and the shah's admission" (Milani, 1985, p. 165). Their original intention, Kō'inihā insisted, was to only occupy the embassy temporarily, a claim Laingen finds plausible (United States Congress, 1981d, p. 232). None of the students expected the occupation to become an enduring crisis. Whether Ayatollah Khomeini had advance knowledge of the takeover plan is difficult to establish, although Kō'inihā stated that the Ayatollah was deliberately kept in the dark, which Laingen confirms (United States Congress, 1981d, p. 234). After the takeover, Kō'inihā claimed that all the leading clerics he contacted expressed approval, except Ayatollah Mahdawi-Kani, who was a leading conservative, the head of the Revolutionary Committees, and a major figure within Khomeini's circle of advisors. The Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Kāẓem Šari'atmadāri, who was not contacted by Kō'inihā, however, refused to condone the takeover.

The seizure of the American Embassy. "Sunday, November 4, 1979," writes President Carter, "is a date I will never forget" (Carter, p. 457). On that day, some 300 militant students stormed and occupied the U.S. Embassy. Calling themselves the Muslim Students Following the Line of Imam [Khomeini] (*Dānešjuyān-e mosalmān-e payrov-e kaṭṭ-e emām*), they took the personnel hostage and started a major international crisis. The Bāzargān government was unprepared and powerless to provide assistance when the Embassy was occupied. Absent from the embassy at the time were Chargé Laingen, Political Counselor Victor Tomseth, and Security Officer Mike Howland, who were conducting diplomatic business at the Iranian Foreign Ministry building. They were taken hostage as well but were not transferred to the embassy compound. Six Americans managed to escape the attack, finding sanctuary at the Canadian and Swedish embassies, and they eventually fled Iran on 29 January 1980, using false documents and Canadian passports (Pelletier, 1981;



Sick, 1985, p. 189; for the list of those who fled Iran, see [Table 1](#)).

Ayatollah Khomeini remained silent during the first day of the crisis, gauging the country's mood. After Ko'in-ihā informed him about the identity of the captors and after his son, Aḥmad, visited the occupied compound on the second day, the Ayatollah publicly blessed the takeover. He proclaimed the hostage crisis to be a “war between Islam and blasphemy,” and stated that the “Great Satan was too impotent” to harm Iran. These comments fueled the militants' belligerence, elevating them as a new voice in the cacophony struggling to shape Iran's future (see Bāqi, pp. 31-32; Sotudeh and Kāviāni, pp. 102-3, 111-13).

Ko'inihā, Aṣḡarzādeh, Mirdāmādi, and 'Abbās 'Abdi, an engineering student from the Polytechnic University, formed the leadership of the captors. The militants organized six specialized committees to administer the daily affairs of the occupied compound: “The Operations Committee handled security within the compound; the Documents Committee was responsible for the translation, exposure and publication of the seized and reconstituted documents; the Public Relations Committee arranged media interviews, contacts with the public and meetings with officials; the Services Committee provided food and other basic necessities; the Information Committee was in charge of intelligence and security; and finally, the Hostage Affairs Committee dealt with everything related to our charges” (Ebtekar, p. 198). Students from the main universities were also provided with offices in the compound to hold regular meetings.

Some secular leftist organizations, such as the Tudeh, hailed the embassy attack as a major victory over “U.S. Imperialism,” but other groups were less enthusiastic. Khomeini, however, pressured one of these groups to voice their approval, stating that “I have not heard any word of support from the Fedā'iān-e Kālq, who consider the U.S. as the number one enemy of our people, for these young men who have captured the American Embassy and found it as the center of conspiracies” (as cited in Bāqi, p. 36; see also idem, pp. 14-15, 35-36; 'Abdi, *passim*; Sotudeh and Kāviāni, pp. 52-57; Ebtekar, pp. 49, 59).

Bāzargān steadfastly condemned the takeover as a violation of international law and civilized diplomacy. He demanded the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages, denouncing the militants for placing Iran on a dangerous collision course with the U.S. The militants ignored his demands and instead accused him of collaboration with the U.S. Within two days of the



crisis, Bāzar-gān submitted his resignation, attributing it to the interventions of the revolutionary institutions, which in the convoluted vernacular of the time was an unambiguous reference to Ayatollah Khomeini (Bāzargān, 1982, p. 290; Bāqī, pp. 33-35; Yazdi, *passim*; Mirdāmādi, *passim*). Thus, the forces of moderation and nationalism suffered their first major defeat, and Iran took a giant step toward becoming an Islamic theocracy.

With the resignation of Bāzargān, Iran had virtually no visible government, but was run by the secret Council of Revolution and the revolutionary institutions. Henceforth, the struggle between opponents and proponents of establishing a theocracy became closely linked with the hostage crisis. Abu'l-Ḥasan Bani Ṣadr became the acting Foreign Minister at that critical time. A close advisor to Ayatollah Khomeini when in Paris, the French-educated Bani Ṣadr shared more in common with Bāzargān's liberal ideology than with Khomeini's radical interpretation of Islam. Like Bāzargān, he was mistrusted by the militant students as a Western-oriented Islamic nationalist. Four centers of power had thus emerged, each with its own agenda and a changing list of demands for the release of the hostages: Ayatollah Khomeini, the Council of Revolution, Bani Ṣadr, and the militant students themselves. It was clear from the start that Khomeini called the shots and was the ultimate decision maker. For him, the passage of the draft constitution via a national referendum was more critical than resolving the crisis. He understood that the national fervor of the crisis could be directed toward his goal of institutionalizing the new republic. To this end, he ordered the Council of Revolution to arrange for a constitutional referendum, but would not specify when the fate of the hostages would be decided (Bakhash, pp. 71-75).

American reaction to the crisis. The hostage crisis created a serious dilemma for President Carter: How to free the hostages while protecting U.S. national interests and prestige? Initially, President Carter used peaceful, diplomatic options to free the hostages. Only once did he resort to violence, when he ordered a rescue military operation in May 1980. After the aborted mission, he once again relied on diplomacy. Military retaliation against Iran during the Cold War was not a prudent option, as it would have undoubtedly caused the strategically vital and oil-rich country to ally with the Soviet Union. Moreover, Moscow had made it clear that any U.S. military action against Iran would not be tolerated.

Opting for a peaceful solution to the hostage crisis was a difficult choice for President Carter. There was a huge reservoir of public outrage toward Iran:



Americans were horrified to hear about mock executions of some of the hostages and see blindfolded hostages paraded through the embassy compound, angry throngs chanting “Death to America,” and the American flag desecrated. There were public calls for revenge and even “nuking Iran,” as many Americans felt humiliated to see a superpower paralyzed, unable to free its hostages from a Third World country. Despite such public outrage, the popular Family Liaison Action Group, or FLAG, which represented the families of the hostages, opposed any action endangering the safety of the hostages.

The hostage crisis became an obsession with the mass media and altered the national mood of the United States (for details, see McFadden, pp. 227-36). Popular news anchor Walter Cronkite ended each daily news broadcast on the CBS network by stating the continuing number of days the hostages were in captivity. ABC’s acclaimed program “Nightline” was created to cover the hostage crisis.

There were numerous reports of discrimination and violence against Iranians living in the United States. Two Iranian students were found gagged and shot to death in San Diego, California. Although police said robbery was the apparent motive, many Iranians believed the killings were linked to the hostage crisis (*The New York Times*, 5 January 1980). An Iranian student at Boston University was also killed (*The New York Times*, 20 May 1979). An Iranian student killed a teenager in “self-defense” when his apartment was attacked (*The New York Times*, 17 December 1980). Two Saudi Arabians were attacked by assailants who mistook them for Iranians; one of the men was hospitalized (*The New York Times*, 5 November 1980). Approximately 200 supporters of Khomeini were arrested and jailed in August of 1980 after demonstrating in Washington, D.C. During their ten days of imprisonment, the detainees claimed to have been harshly mistreated (*The New York Times*, 5 August 1980). A straight- “A” Iranian student at Atlantic City High School was barred from delivering the valedictorian address after 80 of the school’s 140 teachers signed a petition objecting to her as the valedictorian (*The New York Times*, 6 June 1980). Some U.S. banks refused to honor Iranian students’ checks (*The New York Times*, 18 December 1979). Sensing the prevalent distrust against them, many Iranians sought a defense by calling themselves Persians, which some Americans could not identify as Iran’s traditional name.

In the first phase of the crisis, President Carter pursued a three-pronged strategy: (1) build an international consensus to isolate Iran, (2) negotiate with Iran, and (3) use the political and economic might of the U.S. to render hostage-



taking too costly for Iran to keep the captives. Carter's diplomacy did have some results; the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the Arab League, the Western European countries, dozens of prominent religious leaders, including the pope, Nobel Peace Prize winner Sean MacBride, and many heads of state of Islamic countries called for the release of the hostages (see Bāqi, pp. 41-55; Ebtekar, pp. 85-87).

President Carter utilized all possible channels of communication with Iran. His first covert attempt to contact Ayatollah Khomeini failed after it was leaked to the U.S. media. In that attempt, Carter had asked former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, known for his sympathetic views on the Iranian Revolution, and William Miller, a former U.S. Senate staffer who spoke Persian, to deliver a hand-written letter to "Dear Ayatollah Khomeini." The letter offered the release of the hostages in exchange for friendly bilateral relations. Khomeini declined to meet Carter's envoys and banned the Iranian authorities from contacting them (*Eṭṭelā'āt* 17 Ābān 1358 Š./8 November 1979; see also Ebtekar, p. 119).

Iran's refusal to release the hostages forced President Carter to use economic pressure. The first major move was the announcement on 12 November 1979, that the U.S. would no longer purchase Iranian oil. On 14 November, President Carter signed an executive order freezing all assets, properties, and bank accounts of the Iranian government in the U.S. He also ordered all Iranian students in the U.S., estimated between 45,000 to 50,000, to register with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Those in violation of their visa terms were to be deported (Carter, p. 460).

The first break in the conflict occurred when Ayatollah Khomeini released thirteen female and African-American hostages on 18 and 19 November 1979 (see [Table 2](#)). Khomeini neither confirmed nor denied the assertion by the Palestine Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) that it had influenced the decision to release those hostages. By that time, there were 52 Americans still in captivity (see [Table 4](#), and Ebtekar, pp. 90-95).

Negotiations for the release of the hostages. The Iranian regime exploited the crisis to divert national attention from the debate over the draft constitution. The militant students had painstakingly pieced together shredded documents from the embassy, which they labeled the "Spy Nest," or the headquarters of the CIA in the Middle East. Systematically organized into sixty-six volumes, called the "Documents of the Spy Nest" (*Asnād-e lāna-ye jāsusi*), the documents



covered a variety of issues, from the Israeli MOSSAD to the profiles of Iranian intellectuals and politicians. While the released documents were authentic, the militants did not publish all of them, particularly those that showed the contacts between some clerics and U.S. officials in Iran. With Ko'inihā in control of the television network, the militants selectively released these documents at sensitive intervals to discredit any opponent as a U.S. spy or collaborator (see Ebtekar, Chapter IV). As a result, some people were imprisoned or exiled, and many other activists became demoralized and passive. 'Abbās Amir Entezām, originally assigned by the Bāzargān government as a liaison with the U.S. Embassy, was the first victim of this smear campaign. He was imprisoned and remains the longest-serving political prisoner of the Islamic Republic (Amir Entezām, 2002a and 2002b).

While many Iranians were distracted, effectively becoming the collective hostages of the militant students, the regime held the referendum on the constitution on 2 and 3 December 1979. The militant students continued to accuse those who opposed the referendum proposal of betraying the Revolution and collaborating with the U.S. Despite opposition by secular leftists, nationalists, and even some leading clerics, the referendum proposal was overwhelmingly approved. It constitutionally transformed Iran into a Shi'ite theocracy—another dividend of the hostage crisis (Milani, 1988, pp. 154-55).

The most serious challenge to the constitution came from the moderate Ayatollah Šari'atmadāri, who issued a *fatwā*, or religious decree, against it. The militants countered by claiming that the embassy documents proved he and the leaders of the party he supported, the nationalist Muslim People's Republican Party (*Hezb-e jomhuri-e kālq-e mosalmān-e Irān*), had received lavish support from the U.S. and from the shah's secret police (SAVAK). A popular uprising in Tabriz supporting the Grand Ayatollah was violently crushed by the followers of Khomeini, and the Muslim Republican Party was subsequently dissolved. Eventually, Ayatollah Šari'atmadāri was placed under house arrest, was implicated in an abortive coup, and died in seclusion (Bakhash, p. 67; and Rouhani, 1985).

With the new constitution firmly in place and the hostages still in captivity the campaign for Iran's first presidential election began. Convinced that he could not secure the quick release of the hostages, Bani Šadr instead focused on his campaign for the presidency. On 28 November 1979, Šādeq Qoṭbzādeh, another close advisor to Ayatollah Khomeini, replaced Bani Šadr as Foreign



Minister. An Islamic nationalist, Qoṭbzādeh became more engaged in the hostage crisis than his predecessor, but he also failed to resolve the crisis. He, too, was mistrusted by the militant students who were becoming ever more aggressive. The militant students obstinately demanded the return of the shah and his “billions of stolen money.” They even threatened to kill the hostages if the U.S. attacked Iran or attempted a rescue. They talked about placing the hostages on trial for espionage, and demanded a U.S. apology for crimes against the Iranian people. The Carter Administration responded in November 1979 that, although the U.S. preferred a peaceful resolution, it would not hesitate to interrupt Iranian commerce if the hostages were placed on trial or even to retaliate militarily if they were harmed (Christopher, pp. 89-90). The militants took the veiled threat seriously.

The Carter Administration relied on multilateralism and particularly on the United Nations to resolve the crisis. On 4 December 1979, the U.N. Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 457, demanding the immediate release of the hostages and calling upon Iran and the U.S. to resolve their differences peacefully. Iran defied the resolution, however, and refused to release the hostages; this caused the Carter Administration to threaten to support U.N.-sponsored economic sanctions against Iran. At the urging of the Security Council, and in an effort to avoid sanctions, Kurt Waldheim, the United Nations Secretary General, visited Iran on the last day of the year 1979, even though Khomeini and the militants had announced that they would not meet with him. Waldheim had extensive discussions with Qoṭbzādeh, Bani Šadr, and some members of the Council of Revolution concerning a U.N. commission to hear Iran’s grievances against the shah and the U.S. Both Qoṭbzādeh and Bani Šadr believed that the formation of such a commission could lead to the release of the hostages. The U.S. expressed a willingness to discuss the formation of such a commission, provided that the hostages were freed first. When Waldheim failed to reach an agreement with Iran, the U.S. took its sanctions resolution to the Security Council. On 13 January 1980, the Soviet Union vetoed the resolution, which Iran hailed as another victory over the U.S. (United States Congress, 1981a, p. 84).

The first presidential elections in Iran were completed on 25 January 1980. Bani Šadr was voted into office, and he quickly warned the militant students not to disobey the “popularly elected president.” He soon found himself as powerless with the militant students as Bāzargān had been. In February of 1980, Khomeini emphatically stated that the yet-to-be formed Majles or



parliament should resolve the crisis. Parliamentary elections were thus scheduled for May of 1980. It was clear that Ayatollah Khomeini was planning to prolong the crisis until another major institution of the new republic, namely the Majles, was put in operation (United States Congress, 1981a, p. 11).

At the same time, a secret plan to resolve the hostage crisis was being mediated by two Paris-based lawyers, Christian Bourguet and Hector Vallalon. The pair, who were in close contact with Qoṭbzādeh, Bani Ṣadr, and the Revolutionary Council, contacted the Panamanian government about extraditing the shah to Iran. At that time the shah had left the U.S. and was living in Panama. After the Panamanian government informed the Carter Administration about the sensitive issue of the shah's extradition, the two lawyers met with U.S. officials in Europe. They crafted a scenario in which a U.N. commission would meet with the hostages and relay their deteriorating health conditions to the Revolutionary Council; the Council would then recommend that the hostages be moved to a hospital under its supervision. The real goal was to deprive the militant students of the custody of the hostages. Afterwards, the U.N. commission would produce a document about Iran's grievances to the U.N., which would then lead to the pardoning of the hostages. It is not clear if Ayatollah Khomeini knew about these secret negotiations (Sick, pp. 244, 274, 308; Bāqi, pp. 53-54).

As the first step of this scenario, Waldheim established a U.N. Commission of five prominent figures from Venezuela, Algeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, and France. The Commission was to hear Iran's grievances, although its members were reportedly unaware of the secret deal made by the two lawyers and the U.S. The commission's members arrived in Tehran on 23 February 1980. They met with Bani Ṣadr, Qoṭbzadeh, and some members of the Revolutionary Council, and heard from political prisoners of the shah's regime and families of the "martyrs of the Islamic Revolution." When they asked to meet the hostages, Ayatollah Khomeini responded that the commission would only be able to meet some of the hostages after its final report was publicized. The commission disagreed with the demand and left Tehran without results on 11 March 1980. There was another attempt to revive the scenario when Qoṭbzādeh and Bani Ṣadr convinced the Council of Revolution to transfer the hostages to its own custody. Once again, Ayatollah Khomeini intervened, reiterating that the hostages were to remain with the students and that the Majles alone could make the final decision about their fate (United States Congress, 1981a, p. 148). One major hurdle during this ordeal was that



Ayatollah Khomeini and President Carter had fundamentally different time tables; Khomeini sought to consolidate power in the Islamic Republic and was in no hurry to resolve the crisis, but Carter wished to free the hostages before his re-election was to be decided in November 1979.

Whether the U.S. government was to support the extradition of the shah from Panama remains unclear, but the Americans close to the negotiations deny it. What we know is that the shah learned of the secret negotiations from friends and quickly left Panama for Egypt on 23 March 1980. Afterwards, Bani Šadr angrily denounced the U.S. for undermining him and for not genuinely seeking to resolve the conflict. He also condemned the militant students for hampering the foreign policy of Iran (United States Congress, 1981a, p. 136).

American rescue mission. As diplomatic initiatives continued to fail, the U.S. finally resorted to military measures. This second phase of the hostage ordeal began when the U.S. officially broke off diplomatic relations with Iran on 7 April 1980, a move Secretary Vance opposed (Brzezinski, p. 491). Ayatollah Khomeini celebrated this as a “good omen.” Algeria and Switzerland agreed to represent the interests of Iran and the U.S., respectively. President Carter also imposed a unilateral economic embargo against Iran, excluding food and medicine, and prohibited financial transfers to Iran. The most drastic measure was the military operation. This general plan was approved by the president in a special National Security Council meeting on 11 April 1980. Brzezinski favored the rescue plans and also suggested that the rescue plan should be “accompanied by a contingency plan for an almost simultaneous retaliatory strike to provide a broader context in the event that the rescue mission should fail” (Brzezinski, p. 492). The controversial decision was reached when Secretary Vance was on vacation in Florida. Upon his return, he was “stunned and angry” (Vance, pp. 410-12). Before the operation began, Vance submitted his resignation to Carter, agreeing not to publicly announce his resignation until after the military operation (Vance, p. 411). After all, he had opposed “the use of any military force, including a blockade or mining, as long as the hostages were unharmed and in no imminent danger” (Vance, p. 408). Three days after submitting his resignation, the rescue attempt, dubbed “Operation Eagle Claw,” began. It appears that Carter’s losses in two presidential primaries a month earlier contributed to his decision to use force.

Plans for a rescue had been originally initiated immediately following the takeover of the embassy (Brzezinski, p. 487). Important to the implementation of the rescue plan was information from an Iranian “who was thoroughly



familiar with the compound, knew where every American hostage was located, how many and what kind of guards were at different times during the night, and the daily schedule of the hostages and their captors” (Carter, p. 509). Based on this vital intelligence, 8 helicopters were to fly from the aircraft carrier Nimitz in the Gulf of Oman to Tabas, about 280 miles southeast of Tehran. They would be joined by six C-130 Hercules transport aircraft carrying ninety rescue personnel. The helicopters were to take the rescuers to a secret location approximately 50 miles from Tehran. After a one-night stay, “the trucks our agents had purchased” would carry the rescue team into the city (Carter, p. 510). The rescue team would then simultaneously attack the foreign ministry building and embassy compound, freeing the hostages who were to be flown to Saudi Arabia (Carter, pp. 509-10). In the words of Colonel Charles A. Beckwith, leader of the operation, “it was our aim to kill all Iranian guards, we were not going in there to arrest them; we were going to shoot them right between the eyes, and to do it with vigor” (as quoted in Ryan, p. 60).

The rescue mission was aborted, however, during the first phase of the operation after three helicopters malfunctioned. In the rush to depart, one helicopter collided with a transport plane, killing eight American soldiers (for the names of the killed, see [Table 3](#); for details of the operation and the Iranian reaction, see Carter; Beckwith; Ryan; Ebtekar, chapter IX; and Bāqi, pp. 57-85). Sensitive documents, maps, and weapons were abandoned there in the desert (Sick offers a comprehensive analysis of the rescue mission in Christopher, ed., pp. 144-72). It is not clear why a commander of the Iranian air force ordered the detonation of an abandoned U.S. helicopter that supposedly contained sensitive information (Milani, 1984, p. 179). According to President Carter, there were some Iranians involved in the rescue mission. He wrote that he “met with 5 Iranians who had helped us with the mission. They were superb. I would not hesitate to put my own life into their hands” (Carter, p. 510).

The astonishing ease with which the U.S. had penetrated Iranian air space was embarrassing to the Islamic Republic. In Iran, different conspiratorial theories surfaced concerning the failed rescue attempt. One theory was that the mission was part of a conspiracy to topple the Islamic Republic. Another notion was that the real aim of the mission was to kidnap Khomeini and a few top leaders to barter for the release of the American hostages (for the role of conspiracy theories in Iranian politics, see Ashraf, 1997).

After the failed rescue attempt, Vance resigned in protest (Vance, pp. 407-13), and relations between Iran and the U.S. became even more tense. Testifying



before the Congress, Chargé Laingen recalled that “I find it difficult to see from what I knew of the situation then how it [the rescue mission] could have succeeded in the sense of getting us all out securely and without injury” (Hearing, 1981, p. 239). Despite Brzezinski’s insistence on another military operation, President Carter decided to rely solely on diplomacy; and he appointed former Senator Edmund Muskie as the new Secretary of State.

After the failed rescue attempt, the militant students dispersed the hostages, insisting they would not be released until all their demands were met. However, one of the hostages, Richard Queen, was released for medical reasons on 11 July 1980. Meanwhile, the power struggle between Bani Šadr and the followers of Khomeini intensified, as did the suppression of all forms of political dissident. In May 1980, Iran’s parliamentary elections were held, in which the followers of Khomeini won the majority of the seats of the first Majles. Ḥojjat-al-Eslām Hāšemi-Rafsanjāni, a close confidant of Khomeini, was elected president of the Majles. He agreed to address the hostage issue after receiving a letter from 187 U.S. Congresspersons demanding the release of the hostages. The Majles also pressured Bani Šadr to accept Moḥammad ‘Ali Rejā’i as the new prime minister. Bani Šadr was at that point practically excluded from policy decisions about the hostages, as was Qoṭbzādeh. Hāšemi-Rafsanjāni and Rejā’i thus emerged as two new players in the hostage crisis.

In July of 1980, the Islamic Republic claimed to have neutralized a U.S.-sponsored coup attempt, known as the Nuža coup, which sought, among other things, to bomb the residence of Ayatollah Khomeini. Stopping this coup resulted in the arrest, imprisonment, and execution of hundreds of officers (Gasirowski, pp. 645-66).

Two important events changed the calculus of the hostage crisis. Firstly, on 27 July 1980, Moḥammad-Rezā Shah Pahlavi died in Egypt. His death removed one of the major hurdles on the way to resolution of the hostage crisis. Secondly, on 22 September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran. The war solidified the power of the followers of Khomeini, while the nation rallied behind Khomeini. The regime blamed the U.S. for permitting Iraq to attack Iran, perhaps to avenge the hostage crisis. Bani Šadr noted, however, that Iran needed military equipment to wage this new war, which was a clear indication that Iran should quickly resolve the hostage crisis (Bani Šadr, 1991, pp. 73-91).

The final stage of crisis. By the fall of 1980, the followers of Khomeini were well entrenched, controlling the Majles, the judiciary, the cabinet, and the



revolutionary institutions. They were also in charge of the war effort against Iraq (Ashraf, 1994, pp. 129-42). At the same time, the ongoing hostage crisis was beginning to have more negative consequences than positive results, such as Iran's isolation, war with Iraq, and the continuing economic sanctions. Iran's willingness to negotiate at this point was the segue to the final phase of the hostage crisis.

Although U.S. private banks and some Iranian officials had held their own secret discussions as early as May 1980, it was only in early September, before the start of the war with Iraq, that the German ambassador to the U.S. informed the Carter Administration that Iran was prepared to settle the crisis. The ambassador was approached by a close relative of Ayatollah Khomeini, Şādeq Ṭabāṭabā'ī. On September 12th, 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini declared four conditions for the resolution of the crisis: (1) the return of the shah's wealth to Iran; (2) cancellation of all financial claims against Iran; (3) a pledge of military and political non-interference in Iran; and (4) the release of Iranian assets. The announcement broke the deadlock. Three days later, Warren Christopher, former Deputy Secretary of State, secretly met with Şādeq Ṭabāṭabā'ī. At Ṭabāṭabā'ī's request, the German Foreign Minister also attended the meeting. This was the start of the final negotiations for the release of the hostages. Algeria was the main intermediary in these secret negotiations (Christopher, pp. 297-324).

The Majles approved the four conditions set by Khomeini on November 2, but in greater detail, appointing seven deputies with Behzād Nabavi, a leading radical, as the chief negotiator to manage the secret negotiations. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie agreed in principle with the four conditions. The resulting negotiations produced the Algiers Agreement, which led to the release of the hostages (Ebtekar, Chapter X; United States Congress, 1981d, pp. 263-85).

According to the Algiers Agreement, or what the militant students called a *bayāniya* or declaration, "the United States pledges that it is and from now will be the policy of the United States not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs" (United States Congress, 1981d, p. 263). The U.S. also agreed to disallow lawsuits by hostages or family members against their captors or against the Iranian government, and to cooperate with the Islamic Republic's legal battles in the U.S. courts to obtain the Pahlavi family's wealth. Additionally, the U.S. agreed to release the frozen Iranian financial assets. Approximately \$7.98 billion were transferred to Iran's



escrow account, “Dollar Account 1,” at the Bank of England, of which about \$3.67 billion was transferred to the New York Federal reserve to cover Iran’s debts to U.S. banks (United States Congress, 1981d, p. 140). The agreement established an international tribunal for the judgement of commercial claims of U.S. citizens against Iran; this tribunal was backed with \$1.4 billion from Iranian assets. The Iranian government therefore received only \$2.88 billion (United States Congress, 1981c; Bāqi, pp. 99-109).

Two days before the inauguration of President-Elect Ronald Reagan, the Majles officially approved the Algiers Agreement. On 20 January after the Bank of England confirmed the transfer of funds, the hostages were taken by bus to the Mehrābād Airport in Tehran. Less than one hour after the Reagan’s inauguration, three Algerian aircraft took to the skies, taking all hostages to freedom. None of the hostages was killed, but many were emotionally and psychologically harmed during their 444 days of captivity (for the list of hostages freed on 20 January 1981, see [Table 4](#)). After their return to freedom, some of the hostages retired, some changed careers, and some of them published books about their captivity.

The Algiers Agreement provided President Bani Šadr and former Premier Bāzargān with ammunition against Premier Rejā’i, Nabavi, and the leftist Islamists. They emphasized that Americans made no official apology, the hostages were not tried, the shah’s wealth was not returned, and that Iran had lost access to its assets in the U.S. for over a year. The hostage crisis, they argued, made Iran a pariah state and vulnerable to Iraqi invasion. They also complained that Iran did not obtain a U.S. commitment to provide the necessary military equipment for Iran’s war effort. (Bani Šadr, 1983, pp. 143-75; also the list of articles in *Enqelāb-e eslāmi*, Bani Šadr’s daily newspaper, and in *Mizān*, the daily organ of Bāzargān’s *Nahzat-e āzādi*, as presented in Bāqi, pp. 443-54; see also a commentary on this issue in Bāqi, pp. 111-41; for Rejā’i’s response, see Rejā’i, pp. 24-33).

The regime tried to sell the agreement as a major victory over the “Great Satan.” Speaker Rafsanjāni declared the hostage crisis to have proven that a Third World nation could challenge the world’s mightiest military power. “We demonstrated that the decision is with us. When we desired, we talked. When we desired, we remained silent; we got everything we wanted” (Hāšemi Rafsanjāni, 1983, p. 39). He added that U.S. sanctions forced Iran into self-reliance, developing its indigenous industries. Prime Minister Rejā’i boasted that the hostage crisis “forced the greatest satanical power to its knees”



(United States Congress, 1981a, p. 31).

The *hostage crisis and the 1980 presidential election*. The hostage crisis was also a contributing factor in the electoral defeat of incumbent Democratic President Jimmy Carter and the landslide victory of the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan. The timing of the hostage release later fueled suspicions that representatives of the Reagan/Bush campaign may have covertly struck a deal with the Iranians; this was dubbed the “October Surprise.” According to this theory, the Iranians pledged not to release the hostages before the presidential election, in exchange for a promise by the U.S. to provide Iran with weaponry (Sick, 1991). Investigations by the Congress, however, have not produced any proof for the allegation (United States Congress, 1992a, 1992b, 1993).

The exertion of influence over the 1980 U.S. presidential election was a contentious issue among Iran’s governing elite. Foreign Minister Qoṭbzādeh, President Bani Šadr, and Ayatollah Ḥosayn-‘Ali Montazeri, among others, favored the early release of the hostages to help Democratic incumbent President Carter. Qoṭbzādeh believed that “we have information that the American Republican Party, in order to win the upcoming election, is trying very hard to delay the resolution of the hostage question until after the American election” (Sick, p. 89). Montazeri was apparently influenced by his radical son, Shaikh Moḥammad, who was in close contact with the Libyan President Muammar Ghadhafi, who preferred Democrats to Republicans (Montazeri, p. 257, and Bāqi, p. 48). Montazeri tried in vain to convince Khomeini to release the hostages before the U.S. presidential election in 1980, telling him that the victory of the Revolution owed a great deal to Carter’s human rights policy and that Democrats were preferable to Republicans (Montazeri, pp. 257-58). Both the militant students and Khomeini saw no qualitative differences between the two American political parties. They seem to have developed a vendetta against Carter for freezing Iranian assets in the U.S. and for his ill-fated rescue operation. In their view, helping to defeat Carter would demonstrate Iran’s leverage on American politics (Ebtekar, p. 230). There were also widespread rumors in Iran that Khomeini’s Islamist followers were deliberately delaying the release of the hostages to prevent President Carter from being re-elected. Denying such rumors, Deputy Moḥammad Kaẓā’i pointed out that “the only reason for any delay in this matter is the regular process of Majles legislation” (*Majles-e šurā-ye eslāmi, Moḍākerāt*, 11 Ābān 1359 Š./2 November 1980, pp. 4-5).

Even after losing the election, President Carter tried indefatigably to free the



hostages before leaving office. Behzād Nabavi, Iran's chief negotiator in Algiers, claims that President Carter sent him the following message through the Algerian foreign minister: "I would sign the required executive order to release Iran's frozen funds in the U.S. banks if the Iranian government promises to release American hostages before I leave the White House" (as cited in Bāqi, p. 103).

Iran in the aftermath of hostage crisis. As a result of the hostage crisis, the Islamic Republic emerged with an institutionalized infrastructure and with the followers of Khomeini in full control. The hostage crisis, which placed Iran and the U. S. on a dangerous collision course, was certainly a major contributing factor in Saddam Hossein's impudent decision to invade Iran in September 1980. For eight long years, the two Islamic countries were engaged in a devastatingly bloody war.

Bāzargān's vision of turning Iran into a democracy, shared by Bani Šadr, Qoṭbzādeh, and many others, was all but shattered. Instead, the followers of Khomeini used the hostage crisis to establish a Khomeini-style theocratic order. After forcing Bāzargān to resign, they focused on Bani Šadr. The militant students declared that "we are 100 percent, not 99 percent, sure that Bani Šadr was cooperating with the CIA." They claimed "embassy documents prove that Bani Šadr had committed treason" (Ioannides, 1984, p. 66). In March 1980, Bani Šadr secretly fled to France and sought asylum. In November of 1980, Qoṭb-zādeh was arrested. In September of 1982, he was found guilty of plotting a coup, and was subsequently executed. Rejā'i and Behešti were killed in bomb blasts. Rafsanjāni became one of the most powerful figures in the Islamic Republic, winning the presidency twice in 1989 and 1993.

During the hostage crisis, and for a time afterwards, Islamist followers of Khomeini suppressed secular and Islamic nationalists. Members of the secular National Front, inheritors of Moṣaddeq's legacy, and the Islamic-nationalist *Nehzat-e āzādi* (Liberation Movement), who collectively had dominated the provisional government, were banned from holding governmental offices and participating in elections.

The hostage crisis provided a golden opportunity for the regime to suppress and even liquidate the leftist organizations. Secular leftists and the Mojāhedīn were devoured by the revolution they had so relentlessly supported. After Ayatollah Khomeini disqualified their leader from competing in the 1980



presidential election, the Mojāhedīn declared war on the Islamic Republic and took responsibility for a number of terrorist operations that killed many top leaders of the regime; and war is exactly what they got. Khomeini's security forces responded ferociously and mercilessly, arresting and killing many of the Mojāhedīn, forcing them underground or into exile, first to France and then to Iraq. The fate of secular leftists was not much happier than the Mojāhedīn's. Marxist-Leninist and Maoist organizations were declared illegal, their headquarters were ransacked by the Hezḡbollāhis, and many of their leaders were killed or arrested. They, too, were forced underground. The Tudeh party, the most seasoned of the secular groups, developed a tenuous but transparently opportunistic relationship with the Islamic Republic, praising Khomeini as an anti-imperialistic, progressive leader. They, too, had underestimated Khomeini. Khomeini gave the Tudeh a bit of its own medicine. He exploited the Tudeh to divide, weaken, and eventually disarm other secular leftists. By 1983, when the Tudeh served no other useful purpose, the Islamic regime arrested and imprisoned its top leaders and declared the organization illegal. By that time, secular leftists were demoralized and divided, operating outside of Iran.

During the 1980s, with Khomeini's blessing, Islamist leftists, who were closely associated with the militant students, exercised a considerable degree of control over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. They also were influential in the powerful revolutionary institutions, the intelligence and security forces, and the broadcast and print media. When Ayatollah Khomeini died in June of 1989, there was a major power shift in Iran; Kāmena'i replaced Khomeini, Hāšemi-Rafsanjāni was elected president, pro-Rafsanjāni pragmatists and conservatives ascended to positions of prominence, and leftist Islamists were pushed to the periphery of power (Ashraf and Banuazizi, 2001, pp. 241-43, and Milani 2001, pp. 29-35). Thus removed from the corridors of power, Islamist leftists began to go through a remarkable ideological metamorphosis and gradually evolved to champion a relatively moderate and liberal interpretation of Islam. Many factors contributed to this transformation, including the failure of the regime to fulfill its egalitarian promises, erosion of the legitimacy of the ruling clerics, resistance of the youth and women to the repressive cultural and social policies of the regime, popularity of a liberal interpretation of Islam by Iranian religious intellectuals, and the worldwide decline in acceptability of revolutionary ideas in the post-Cold War era (Ashraf and Banuazizi, 2001, pp. 249-53). Wearing a new ideological robe, leftist Islamists, once the symbol of



Iran's extremism and adventurism, became the main mobilizing constituency behind the momentous victory of President Sayyed Moḥammad Kātami in the 1997 election. They have become architects of the new reform movement, which seeks to make the Islamic Republic less harsh, more tolerant, and more transparent. Many of today's top reformists, such as 'Abdi, Asḡarzādeh, Mir-dāmādi, and Ebtekār were yesterday's leading hostage-takers (Macleod, p. 58). Ironically, many of them support normalizing relations with the U.S., the country they once described as "Iran's natural enemy." 'Abdi, for example, initiated a cordial meeting with Barry Rosen, a former hostage, in Paris in 1998 (Macleod, p. 59). He is now serving a prison term for publishing a public opinion poll that revealed the desire of a large majority of Iranians to establish diplomatic relations with the U.S. The Office for Consolidation of Unity, too, has become one of the main advocates of democratic reforms and even threatened to boycott the 2004 parliamentary elections.

In the wise words of former hostage Barry Rosen, the hostage crisis was "closer to defeat for both sides" (as quoted by Bill, p. 301). The hostage crisis served as an effective tool for the Islamist followers of Khomeini to consolidate the Islamic Republic and create a new Islamic order. Iran as a county, however, suffered from the hostage crisis; its international reputation, prestige, and national interests were gravely damaged, and it became entangled in a bloody war with Iraq. The magnitude of this damage will be determined by future historians.

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