

HOW THE HOSTAGE CRISIS VILIFIED IRANIANS

TARA YAZDAN PANAH

The Iran Hostage Crisis evokes strong memories for many Americans: media coverage of students jumping over walls of the U.S. Embassy, crowds yelling “Death to America!”, heartbroken families pleading for government action against Iran, and finally, Reagan welcoming the hostages back on his first day in office.

The Iran Hostage Crisis is deeply embedded within American political and popular culture. It has inspired many films and books, most of which are created by Americans. One of the most famous examples is *Argo*, the Oscar-award winning film directed by Ben Affleck. *Argo* tells the partially true story of a group of hostages who escaped Iran by disguising as a film crew with the help of the Canadian government. This film and other retellings of the hostage crisis are attractive to those who indulge in suspenseful historical dramas; however, these works neglect the Iranian perspec-

tive and fail to contextualize events in a way that humanizes Iranian society.

The crisis began in November 1979, when a group of armed Iranian college students entered the U.S. Embassy and held 52 Americans hostage. They were eventually released following a series of negotiations between both governments; however, the situation lasted 444 days. What most people don't know, however, are the students' intentions.

The students had not been interested in holding the American civilians hostage for so long; their original plan was to conduct a simple sit-in inside the embassy to protest the United States' protection of the Shah after he had fled the country. Once the more conservative, fundamentalist revolutionaries caught wind that the embassy had been taken over, they took advantage of the situation and ordered the students to keep the hostages until the Shah was released and returned to Iran.¹



During the late 1970s, there had been widespread anger towards the American government within Iranian society, but the hostage crisis was controversial among Iranians. Even those within the government disagreed on how to proceed, with reformists advocating for the release of the hostages and fundamentalists determined to keep the hostages as collateral for their demands. Following Ayatollah Khomeini's announcement to keep the hostages for even longer, the entire provisional government under President Bazargan resigned in protest of this diplomatic move.²

The crisis resulted in the widespread vilification of Iranians in the United States. Similar to the impact of 9/11, this individual event drastically influenced American foreign policy in the Middle East and dramatically shaped American perceptions of Middle Eastern and Muslim people. Americans began conflating followers of Islam with followers of radical Islamism and several protests broke out throughout the United States, where protesters held up signs plastered with inflammatory language like “Deport all Iranians.”³

This backlash against Iranians was partially caused by the lack of expertise of those who covered the crisis as it was happening; Edward Said critiqued these “experts,” who claimed to be scholars of early Islam but held orientalist views of the Middle East. These “experts”—many of whom had never stepped foot in Iran and could not speak Farsi—claimed that the root of the issue at hand was jihadism and martyrdom, not anti-colonialism.⁴ The media also fed into the anti-Iranian fervor, publishing inflammatory political cartoons, some of which referred to Tehran as “Terroran.”⁵ Neither the “experts” nor the media bothered to explain why the students were protesting in the first place, the U.S. government's intervention and support of the Shah, or widespread Iranian fear of another U.S.-backed coup in Iran after what happened in 1953. Instead, they largely focused on themes of Islamic terror against the West. These biased perspectives and incomplete reporting have had long-lasting effects on American public opinion of Iranians; in 1989, a decade after the crisis, only 5% of Americans said they viewed Iranians favorably.⁶

America's initial shock from the crisis was carried over to public perceptions of Iran today. The Iran Hostage Crisis remains a precarious



subject when it comes to diplomacy between the two countries, as neither country has formally addressed the situation. Iran's problematic methodology of protesting U.S. intervention through hostage-taking in 1979 is still being punished over 40 years later with heavy sanctions, travel restrictions, and an overall lack of interest in compromise between Iranians and their government.

The Iran that played a part in the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy differs from Iran today. The same hostage-takers that initiated the 444 days of diplomatic struggle are now critics of the Iranian government at the forefront of the reformist movement. Abbas Abdi, one of the hostage-takers, was imprisoned for seven years for the surveys he conducted, which revealed overwhelming public opinion against the hardline Iranian establishment.⁷ In 1998, Abdi met with Barry Rosen, one of the embassy employees he had taken hostage; both parties wanted to move past the traumatic memory and break down the “wall of mistrust” between Iranians and Americans.⁸ The hostage crisis was an undeniably tragic moment in history, but should be remembered within the full context of U.S.-Iran relations spanning the last century. With that in mind, we can separate average Iranians from the actions of a few and avoid harming marginalized people through incomplete retellings of history.