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## IRAN

In 1979 the United States was caught up in one of its greatest ever Middle East crises. A major ally – the Shah of Iran – had been forced out of the country, the US Embassy was overrun and 53 diplomats were held hostage. Although it was the world's leading super power, the US seemed powerless against an elderly extremist Islamic religious leader

On January 16 1979 the Shah of Iran fled his country, never to return. Iran was sliding into chaos, with a variety of Islamic and political groups all united against him. He was in poor health and lacked the determination to fight on.

On February 1 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini, the main Islamic leader, returned in glory from his exile in Paris. Having used the communist and other left wing groups as partners in the revolution to overthrow the Shah, he then turned on them. From August 8 1979 he started denouncing them. He wanted to impose a constitution based on his own religious ideas.

All major decisions would now have to be in accordance with conservative Shiite religious thinking. For example, the Shah had encouraged greater religious tolerance, importation of American consumer goods and education for women. These were all now stopped.

President Jimmy Carter watched in horror at the increasing chaos in Iran. The CIA had failed to predict any of this, especially the hatred towards the Shah, the power of the Islamic religious leaders, the poor state of the Shah's health, and the vulnerability of American facilities to attack (on November 4 1979, the Iranian students who took over the embassy just walked into the embassy grounds and grabbed the staff without a struggle).

American political commentators were amazed that a country that seemed so set on modernization could suddenly start reverting back to medieval Islamic religious ideas. This was contrary to the optimistic American belief that all countries want to become modern, secular and pro-western.

The tensions between the Shah and Khomeini went back a long way. In 1963, the Shah launched the "White Revolution", with a package of comprehensive social and economic reforms to modernize the country. He also gave women the right to vote.

The religious leadership opposed these reforms. Ayatollah Khomeini was a major critic and so he was arrested. The following year he was exiled to Turkey. Then he went to Iraq in 1965 (where about 60 per cent of the population are Shia). Under pressure from Iran, Iraq sent him out of the country and he lived in Paris. Meanwhile, the Shah thought he was safe to increase links with the US.

The US had been deeply involved in Iranian affairs since the early 1940s. The country was largely controlled by Britain and the Soviet Union but the US wanted to have a role in it because of its vast oil reserves. The young Mohammed Reza Shah assumed the throne in 1941, after the British replaced his pro-Nazi father. The US offered to train his military and supply him with military equipment.

In 1953 there was a power struggle between the young Shah and his nationalistic Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. The Shah fled Iran. The US and UK acted on behalf of the oil companies and removed the prime minister, and returned the Shah to power.

This was the CIA's first covert operation outside the Cold War and it was one of its greatest successes. Most Americans forgot about how the CIA had removed the prime minister and returned the Shah to power in 1953. But most Iranians did not – and this experience coloured their thinking 25 years ago.

After 1953, the US developed a special relationship with Iran. In 1957, the CIA assisted in the creation of SAVAK (the National Security and Intelligence Organization, Iran's brutal secret police).

The Shah became the US's main arms customer, buying with his oil wealth some of the world's most sophisticated military equipment. This equipment needed many thousands of skilled technicians to maintain, repair, support and operate. For example, 15 skilled technicians were needed to keep one F-14 fighter aircraft in combat-ready condition.

All this weaponry could not save the Shah. His regime fell quickly. The Ayatollah inherited one of the world's best equipped defence forces (for example it had more British tanks than the British Army could afford to buy).

Now it was the Shah's turn to be on the run. Few countries wanted to have him. In October 1979 the President Carter allowed him to enter the US for cancer treatment.

Iranians remembered how in 1953 the US had assisted the Shah in exile and how the CIA, based at the US Embassy in Tehran, organized a coup to get him back. They would not make that mistake for a second time.

On November 4 Iranian students walked into the American embassy in Tehran, took it over and grabbed 52 diplomats as hostages. They were to spend 444 days in captivity.

President Carter responded with an embargo of Iranian oil. On November 6 1979 secret meetings began in the US on how the hostages could be rescued, while Carter said publicly that the US would not try to rescue them and instead would rely on negotiations.

The April 1980 Operation Eagle Claw was a complicated mission calling for the use of eight helicopters to fly into Tehran, rescue the diplomats and transfer them to a mountain hide-out south of Tehran where CIA agents would look after their exit from Iran. The operation was highly controversial within the secret meetings: Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned over it and the CIA warned that it would fail.

The operation was a disaster. The navy argued that since the operation was to be launched from an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, then the helicopters had to be naval ones. But the navy's helicopters were mine-sweeping ones and not really suited for this task.

There was no one overall commander to get all the pieces of the operation together and so no one to improvise as things started to go wrong. The planners did not know about the "haboobs", the giant dust clouds that can linger over the Iranian desert for hours. The dust clouds were a navigation hazard.

Not enough helicopters were allocated for the mission. Eight were used and three crashed, with eight soldiers killed. They got nowhere near Tehran. The Iranians were jubilant over the American tragedy – they took it as divine support for their revolution.

The US had no choice but to negotiate. Arab countries acted as intermediaries and the hostages were released in January 1981. They returned in reasonable health to a hero's welcome.

But by this time Iran had another problem. Saddam Hussein had come to power in Iraq and in September 1980 he used the chaos in Iran as an opportunity to launch a surprise invasion.

Unfortunately for him, Iran was well equipped and ready to defend itself. The war was to last for eight years, kill millions and bring both countries to the verge of bankruptcy.

The US, with its hatred of Iran, helped arm Saddam Hussein's Iraq. This explains why when it fought Iraq over Kuwait in January 1991, it was facing some of its own equipment.



The Shah died virtually alone in Egypt in July 1980. Ayatollah Khomeini died in office of a heart attack in June 1989. Huge crowds turned out for the funeral and at one point his corpse fell to the ground. The hysterical crowds, overwhelmed by grief at the loss of their hero, somehow did not want him to leave them.

The US remains troubled by both Iraq and Iran. It is bogged down in a war in Iraq, and it is fearful that the Islamic regime in Iran is secretly trying to build nuclear weapons.

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