Iran Hostage Crisis
Background on US-Iranian Relations

Before we delve into the crisis at hand, we must explore the history of US-Iranian relations.

The first Iranian-US relations date back to 1856 when the US and Iran (then Persia) signed the treaty of commerce and navigation. Relations between Iran and the US up to World War II remained fairly amicable. Iran viewed the US as a third party that would liberate them from British and Russian dominance. This relationship between countries continued to mature when in 1911 the Iranian Parliament appointed American officials to reform and modernize Iran’s Department of Treasury and Finance.

1941 saw a major shift in Iran-US relations. During World War 2, Iran controlled many of the oil fields that the Allied powers needed in their fight against the Axis powers. Iran had stayed neutral throughout the war, but the Allies...
suspected that the monarch at the time, Reza Shah, was sympathetic towards the Axis powers. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ruled (mostly as a figurehead) from 1941 until his overthrow in 1979, pursued a Westernizing, modernizing economic policy, and an extremely pro-Western foreign policy. Much of the Iranian public, however, felt that the Shah had long neglected their basic needs (food and religious freedom, for example).

As the Cold War progressed into 1953, the United States helped to overthrow Mossadegh on the theory that “rising internal tensions and continued deterioration might lead to a breakdown of government authority and open the way for at least a gradual assumption of control” by Iran’s well organized Tudeh communist party. 

“Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh

Iran’s oil revenue during the 1960s and 1970s formed a crucial precursor to the Iranian Hostage crisis. According to scholar Homa Katouzian, this put the United States “in the contradictory position of being regarded by the Iranian public because of the 1953 coup as the chief architect and instructor of the regime,” while “its real influence” in domestic Iranian politics and policies “declined considerably.” Certainly, as the 1979 revolution came closer and closer, tensions increased rapidly.

Much of the Iran hostage crisis was predicted by the Carter administration. Although observers disagree over the nature of United States policy towards Iran under Carter as the Shah’s regime crumbled. According to historian Nikki Keddie, the Carter administration followed “no clear policy” on Iran. Nevertheless, it is clear that Carter pursued a policy of humanitarian interventionism, especially towards the Shah’s regime, which had garnered unfavorable publicity in the West for its poor human rights record. Even during this relatively amicable relationship

“In 1953, Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh was overthrown by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-organized coup in what has been called ‘a crucial turning point both in Iran’s modern history and in U.S. Iran relations.’ Many Iranians argue that the 1953 coup and the extensive U.S. support for the shah in subsequent years were largely responsible for the shah’s arbitrary rule,’ which led to the ‘deeply anti-American character’ of the 1979 revolution.”
between the Shah and the Carter administration, many high-up officials in the State Department believed that a revolution was inevitable. Why? These reasons will be explained in more detail in the next section.

Background of the 1979 Revolution

At the Federation of American Scientists, John Pike writes:

In 1978 the deepening opposition to the Shah erupted in widespread demonstrations and rioting. Recognizing that even this level of violence had failed to crush the rebellion, the Shah abdicated the Peacock Throne and fled Iran on 16 January 1979. Despite decades of pervasive surveillance by SAVAK, working closely with the CIA, the extent of public opposition to the Shah, and his sudden departure, came as a considerable surprise to the US intelligence community and national leadership. As late as 28 September 1978 the US Defense Intelligence Agency reported that the Shah “is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years.”

A number of issues led to the Shah’s downfall and the subsequent revolution: first, the Iranian people detested his Western, non-Muslim backers. The Iranian people also thought that Western culture was negatively influencing Iran. Mohammad Reza was also known to be oppressive, brutal, corrupt, and lavish in his own spending. Beyond those issues, Iran faced economic hardships including food shortages and skyrocketing inflation.

The Iranian people were perhaps most upset by the Shah’s constant suppression of Islam in an Islamic country. Mohammad Reza’s actions against Islam antagonized formerly apolitical Iranians into protesting. For example, he changed the national calendar from an Islamic one to an Imperial one and in so doing sparked further protests.

The Shah’s controversial oil policies, which intended to increase the country’s income, ended up shooting up the price of oil. As a result, the West became less inclined to support Iran. That lack of support was reflected in Western politics, and especially in Jimmy Carter’s humanitarian concerns in Iran.

Perhaps the final straw came in 1977 when President Jimmy Carter gave a televised toast declaring American support for the Shah, greatly angering a majority of anti-Shah Iranians. The buildup of Iranian-US tensions, the antagonistic attitudes that each country had towards factions of one another, and the economic, political and social factors explained above all helped contribute to the hostage crisis once the 1979 Revolution finally took place.

1979 Revolution and Events leading up to the Hostage Crisis

Demonstrations against the Shah began in October of 1977, and developed into a campaign of civil resistance that was largely religiously based (with a number of secular elements involved as well). Between August and December of 1978, the strikes intensified, paralyzing the economic and political sections of the country. After the Shah left to America to receive medical attention (which further angered the Iranian public), Ayatollah Khomeini, an extremely controversial religious figure, was invited back to Iran by the de facto government, and returned to Tehran to a greeting by several million Iranians.9 Iran voted by national referendum to become an Islamic Re-
public on April 1, 1979, and to approve a new theocratic-republican constitution whereby Khomeini became Supreme Leader of the country, in December 1979.\textsuperscript{10}

The Ayatollah first came to political prominence in 1963 when he initiated the Iranian “White Revolution,” which encompassed a wide variety of reforms to break up land holdings and allow religious minorities to hold public office. Khomeini was arrested later that year for calling the Shah a “wretched miserable man.”\textsuperscript{11} Three days of major riots throughout Iran followed, with Khomeini supporters claiming 15,000 dead from police fire. Khomeini was released after eight months of house arrest and continued his agitation, condemning Iran’s close cooperation with Israel and its capitulations, or extension of diplomatic immunity to American government personnel in Iran. In November 1964 Khomeini was re-arrested and sent into exile where he remained for 15 years, until the revolution.

The ideology of the Revolution was mostly concerned undermining the progress of Westernization that the Shah’s regime had worked so hard to create. Most importantly, Khomeini preached that revolt, and especially martyrdom, against injustice and tyranny was part of Shia Islam, and that Muslims should reject the influence of both liberal capitalism and communism with the slogan “Neither East, nor West – Islamic Republic!”\textsuperscript{12}

It is also important to consider the economic situation of Iran after the revolution and how this has an effect on the Iranian public and the direction that the country will take collectively. Before the revolution, Iran produced 7 to 10% of the world’s total crude oil. It enjoyed high oil revenues. Furthermore, while oil had made up 30 to 40% of Iran’s industrial productivity during the 1970s, it fell to 9-17% in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{20} After the revolution, Iran’s productivity steadily declined. The GDP plummeted to what it was 15 years ago. Foreign investment in Iran, which accounted for 33% of all industries, fell to 12%. As a result of its declining industrial productivity—mainly due to lack of capital—Iran relied on imports way more than it had before.\textsuperscript{20} Furthermore, 11 million Iranians out of a total working population of 49.4 million people were unemployed, and the incentives and alluring nature of the Revolution and the hostage crisis might have played a role in distracting the economy and working class from the various problems that the country faced.\textsuperscript{20}

Do not underscore the various economic factors that played a role in shaping the conflict. Certain factors, such as an exodus of skilled workers from Iran and the conflicting interests of oil and OPEC had shaped US-Iran relations for a very long time, and manifested dramatically in the conflict.
Around 6:30 AM on November 4th, 1979, ringleaders of a plan to take over the American embassy gathered anywhere between 300 and 500 selected students, thereafter known as the Muslim Student Followers of the Iman’s Line, and briefed them on a battle plan. Originally, the students only intended on creating a symbolic act against Westernization and relations with America, but, when it became clear that the armed guards were not going to return fire, and as the crowd outside the embassy gates grew greater, the ideal goals of the occupation changed.

As the protesters and rioters had hoped, Khomeini supported the takeover. According to Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi, when he, Yazdi, came to Qom to tell the Imam about the incident, Khomeini told the minister to “go and kick them out.” But later that evening, back in Tehran, the minister heard on the radio that Imam Khomeini had issued a statement supporting the seizure and calling it “the second revolution”, and the embassy an “American spy den in Tehran.”

The Muslim Student Followers of the Iman’s Line demanded many things in return for the hostages, namely that the Shah return to Iran from America for a trial and subsequent execution. Other demands included America apologizing for its interference in Iranian internal affairs and for overthrowing Prime Minister Mossadeq.

Although these were the initial intentions for keeping the hostages, many long term benefits began to materialize. The Ayatollah himself told the Iranian president that: “This action has many benefits. ... This has united our people. Our opponents do not dare act against us. We can put the constitution to the people’s vote without difficulty, and carry out presidential and parliamentary elections.”

As of the present date, there has only been one serious attempt to rescue the hostages, known as Operation Eagle Claw. Eight helicopters flew from an American vessel to a remote air strip in the Great Salt Desert of Iran. Severe dust storms disabled two of the helicopters, and a third was found to be unusable for mechanical reasons. The commander of the operation, Col. Beckwith recommended the mission be aborted and his recommendation...
When we talk about blocs in the context of the crisis, it is important to understand what possible courses of action there are. One possible course is military action. The US has already shown a tendency to depend on military tactics and secret, covert missions, and additional plans aside from Operation Eagle Claw have been discussed among American officials.

Other courses of action include economic sanctions and embargoes. The Iran Hostage Crisis marked the beginning of US legal action resulting in economic sanctions against Iran, which further weakened the ties between the two nations.

Some individuals might be opposed to Iran but not want to take action. The USSR, for example, would not be on good terms with the country, as the Ayatollah himself stated that Islam was incompatible with communist (and atheist) ideals. Even so, the USSR wasn't considering taking action on the crisis.

There are many other courses of action that must be considered. But, in a situation where delicacy and creativity is important, you must be flexible where your character is willing to negotiate and staunch where he/she is not. Balance is the key, and for an answer to this problem to be addressed and passed in a resolution, it must be acceptable to a majority of the parties involved.

Others delegates will support Iran and its hold on the hostages. The Syrian government has long been allied with Iran and has shared a common animosity towards Israel, the U.S. and Western ideals. In terms of foreign interests and how the international community might respond, we must look to other countries and their alliances at the time. Allies of the U.S. in this crisis at this time were the members of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, a trade organization. Member nations...
The United States had the support of the Security council nations (excluding the USSR) during this crisis. These nations unanimously passed resolutions 451 and 467, calling on Iran to release the hostages. These resolutions also endorsed the United States’ embargo on Iranian oil, as well as other trade sanctions. Independently of U.N. organizations, Western Europe and Japan threatened to impose similar sanctions on Iran if they did not release the hostages. Those countries provided the backing for an international (and more threatening) response.6

“Clearly the Soviet Union took advantage of the political turmoil in Iran, and the relative power vacuum in the region, to move into Afghanistan. This classic maneuver of realpolitik so angered and alarmed the Carter administration that it withdrew the SALT II treaty from the Senate, imposed a limited embargo against the U.S.S.R., and started a campaign to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow.”25 The severity of U.S.-Soviet tensions was highlighted in the Carter doctrine, which stated that: “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”25 The fact that America declared so broad a doctrine to a place that was geographically unimportant highlights the mammoth importance that the Iranian Revolution and Hostage Crisis had on international relations.

The United States received reduced shipments of crude oil after the Ayatollah cut government spending on the oil industry. As a result, gasoline prices soared in the United States, and a recession soon followed; inflation entered the double digits, interest rates skyrocketed, and the American automobile industry was jeopardized.25

It is important that you are creative and resourceful in your applications to this problem, but there are a few guidelines that you should abide by. First, anyone allied with America will certainly have an incentive to support the freeing of the hostages, and might even support any course of action that the US chooses to take. Furthermore, countries and leaders that depend on the United States for resources, safety and security, or status in the international community will most definitely be supportive of the US.

Adversely, countries that maintain hostile relations with the US or have amicable relations with Iran will most definitely support Iran in its holding of the hostages.

The delegates to this committee have been chosen so as to foster the most lively and heated debate possible. Do not think that, just because a delegate is from Iran, that they support everything the Ayatollah does. The same must be said for American delegates.

Ultimately, it is important to consider how many factors are at play. Although the event may seem small in the scope of history, the relations between countries and the existing economic, social and political incentives at play all have serious implications. You have a chance to rewrite
history; who knows what you will choose to do?

Whoever you character is, is is important that you maintain his/her ideology and beliefs and work within the historical context of the character. Furthermore, when preparing for debate, keep in mind the wide range interests at this committee. While there will certainly be obvious alliances and obvious estrangement between certain delegates, be creative with who you work with, for creativity is vital in proposing a solution that can pass.

**Conclusion**

Remember: the goal of this committee is to work together as an international community despite differences and hostility and come up with a joint resolution for dealing with the hostages. This is a fairly lofty goal, and so, if a joint resolution cannot be realized, it is allowable for any individual and any bloc to carry out their own missions and plans, and at the end of the conference, we can discuss, as students, how we think the missions and plans that we have put in place would actually have worked out in reality and how they would have been received globally.

1. To what lengths is the United States willing to go to retrieve the hostages? Namely, is it willing to go to war?

2. Will potential courses of actions threaten western access to the Persian Gulf and its oil supply?

3. Can your plans work within the framework of everyone’s ideals and beliefs? Or is it a plan that will probably have to be carried out in secret?

4. How will your plans for rescue be received by the international community?

5. A nice way to understand the beginnings of where your character will end up ideologically is to examine their relationships with other countries. How is their relationship with the US? Iran? Israel? Iraq? etc.

**(Questions for Consideration)**
DELEGATES

JIMMY CARTER - PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES
AYATOLLAH KHOMENEI - SUPREME RULER OF IRAN
ABOLHASSAN BANISADR - PRESIDENT OF IRAN
HENRY KISSINGER - FORMER AMERICAN SECRETARY OF STATE
CYRUS VANCE - FORMER AMERICAN SECRETARY OF STATE
EDMUND MUSKIE - CURRENT AMERICAN SECRETARY OF STATE
JAFAR SHARIF-EMAMI - IRANIAN POLITICIAN
Gholam Reza Azhari - IRANIAN POLITICIAN
SHAPOUR BAKHTIAR - IRANIAN POLITICIAN
MEHDI BAZARGAN - IRANIAN INTELLECTUAL AND POLITICIAN
LEONID BREZHNEV - GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE USSR
ZENKO SUZUKI - CURRENT PRIME MINISTER OF JAPAN
EBRAHIM ASGHARZADEH - A LEADER OF THE MUSLIM STUDENT FOLLOWERS OF THE IMAN'S LINE
KARL CARSTENS - PRESIDENT OF WEST GERMANY

MENACHEM BEGIN - PRIME MINISTER OF ISRAEL
POL POT - LEADER OF THE KHMER ROUGE
SOONG CHING-LING - VICE PRESIDENT OF CHINA
ANWAR SEDAT - PRESIDENT OF EGYPT
SADDAM HUSSEIN - PRESIDENT OF IRAQ
ROBERT BYRD - AMERICAN SENATE MAJORITY LEADER
THOMAS “TIP” O’NEILL - AMERICAN SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE
RAYMOND BARRE - PRIME MINISTER OF FRANCE
EBRAHIM YAZDI - LEADER OF THE IRANIAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT
MOHAMMAD MOUSAVI KHOEINIHA - MEMBER OF THE PARLIAMENT OF IRAN
JAMES B. VAUGHT - UNITED STATES ARMY GENERAL AND LEADER OF OPERATION EAGLE CLAW
PIERRE TRUDEAU - PRIME MINISTER OF CANADA
IRANIAN STUDENT - MEMBER OF THE MUSLIM STUDENT FOLLOWERS OF THE IMAN'S LINE
TONY MENDEZ - AMERICAN CIA TECHNICAL OPERATIONS OPERATOR
MARGARET THATCHER - PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM
JOE CLARK - FORMER CANADIAN PRIME MINISTER


