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Iran preserves the ethos of the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran by militant students in 1979



The staff of the US embassy in Tehran taken hostage (November 4, 1979, www.iranian.com)

1. The capture and release of the 15 British soldiers in Iran¹ calls for comparison with the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran by Iranian revolutionary students in 1979, which was a major turning point in Iran's ideological attack on the US ("the Great Satan") and the West.

2. Many student leaders responsible for the 1979 takeover have now become senior figures in the Iranian regime, mostly in the reformist bloc.² Even now, the incident remains widely popular in Iran and is considered one of the formative experiences of the Islamic revolution. Even though the latest incident shows that the Iranians are basically willing to employ such tactics, **there is a clear difference:** the current regime avoided making use of the incident to inflame the emotions of the Iranians and the rest of the world, and released the hostages within a relatively short time.

3. The ethos of the takeover of the embassy is used by Iran as a deterrent to demonstrate the country's firm stand against the international community, particularly as stances on the nuclear issue are becoming more polarized. Thus, for example, after Security Council Resolution 1737 was passed,³ President Ahmadinejad gave a speech at the site of the former US embassy in which he condemned the West (December 24, 2006). It should be noted that, over the years, violent demonstrations have been held in front of the empty US embassy compound (now called "Spies' Nest") and other Western embassies, which were targets for ritual penetration attempts.

¹ To which the American administration responded by saying that it was clearly a regime that, after several decades, continued to view hostage-taking as a tool of its international diplomacy.

² The reformist bloc of the regime, i.e., the institutionalized liberal left wingers in the heart of internal Iranian consensus. The senior echelon of the reformist bloc has taken an active part in running the country. Its supporters are in favor of achieving the main goals of the regime, and most of them do not object to the principle of *velayat-e faghih* (the rule of the jurisprudent); however, they are against achieving those goals at any cost, and disagree with the regime's way of achieving them. The reformists made significant achievements in the 1999 municipal elections. Since then, however, due to counter-measures taken by the conservatives, they suffered one failure after another. That changed in the latest municipal elections, in which the reformist bloc gained renewed momentum.

³ The UN Security Council Resolution dated December 23, 2006, which imposed sanctions on Iran after it refused to suspend its uranium enrichment program and its missile program as it was requested to do according to Resolution 1696, dated July 31, 2006.

4. The public debate on the takeover of the US embassy is once again gaining momentum in the past two years, centering upon claims of President Ahmadinejad's involvement in the incident. According to some claims (particularly those made by hostages), he took an active part in taking over the embassy and even in interrogating the hostages. According to some of the claims, he was responsible for planning the takeover but not taking part in it personally. Another issue that came to the forefront recently is the direct involvement in terrorism of senior regime figures, which followed on the heels of the publication of the investigative report about the terrorist attack on the Jewish community center building (AMIA) in Argentina (1994). The report indicated that senior figures in the Iranian regime, including the then President Rafsanjani, were involved, and called for international arrest warrants to be issued for some of them.⁴

5. Appendices:

- a. **Appendix A:** the takeover of the US embassy and the holding of the hostages
- b. **Appendix B:** the extent of President Ahmadinejad's involvement in the takeover of the US embassy
- c. **Appendix C:** the demonstrations in front of Western embassies in Iran
- d. **Appendix D:** Noted Iranians who were involved in the takeover of the US embassy in 1979

⁴ See our Information Bulletin "Following an appeal from the Argentinean Attorney General, Interpol issued international extradition warrants for five senior Iranians and one senior Hezbollah operative. The charge was involvement in the suicide bombing attack of the Jewish community center building (AMIA) in Argentina in 1994" (March 28, 2007).

Appendix A

The takeover of the US embassy and the holding of the hostages

1. **The takeover of the American embassy in Tehran (November 4, 1979) was led by the “Muslim Student Followers of the Imam’s Line”**, an activist student organization that served as an ideological framework for students who supported Khomeini. Their belonging to the organization was later to earn them Khomeini’s favor, and was one of the factors that turned many of them into senior figures in the Iranian regime.
2. During the takeover, hundreds of students assisted by a Revolutionary Guards force broke into the American embassy in Tehran and held its staff hostage for 444 days, subjecting them to isolation and lengthy interrogations. A failed rescue attempt operation in May 1981 (Operation Eagle Claw) led to the deaths of eight American marines and to President Jimmy Carter’s political downfall.
3. The takeover of the embassy was used by the revolutionary regime to criticize its opponents (presenting “proof” found in the embassy of their connections with the CIA), present the Islamic revolution in the world, and humiliate the then US President Jimmy Carter (the hostages were released on the day Ronald Reagan was sworn in). **The incident symbolized the beginning of the Iranian ideological assault on the US (“the Great Satan”) and the West, and was considered a formative event in the Iran-US relations. It was followed by a radical change in Iran’s position on the international scene and the severing of its ties with the US. Since the incident, the Swiss embassy has been representing American interests in Iran.**

4.

5. The great success of the takeover influenced the motivation for future acts of hostage taking, including the wave of abductions of foreigners by Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s.

Appendix B

The extent of President Ahmadinejad's involvement in the takeover of the US embassy

1. There are a number of versions on the extent of President Ahmadinejad's involvement in the takeover of the US embassy. According to some of the versions (particularly those presented by American hostages), **Ahmadinejad took an active part in the takeover and even in interrogating the hostages.** Other versions hold him **responsible for planning the takeover** but not actually participating in it.
2. According to the testimonies of some of the hostage takers, **Ahmadinejad was a member of the smaller group that planned the takeover. Since, however, unlike most members of the group, he was in favor of taking over the embassy of the USSR** (then considered a bitter enemy of the Islamic revolution), **he did not participate actively in the takeover** but joined his associates only after Khomeini, the then leader of Iran, gave his approval for the takeover.
3. **An alleged proof of Ahmadinejad's participation in the takeover of the American embassy are photographs taken at that time by a Soviet citizen** who was probably a KGB agent in Iran. **Published in the media some six months ago** (Kommersant,⁵ November 2006), the photographs show an armed gunman reminiscent of Ahmadinejad on the background of the American embassy building in Tehran.

⁵ A Russian newspaper founded on the basis of a Russian news agency headed by Vladimir Yakovlev, active since June 1988 (www.kommersant.com).



Find the differences: the photograph taken during the takeover of the embassy (left) and a recent photograph of the President of Iran (right) (Kommersant, November 2006)



A photograph attributed to Ahmadinejad (circled) near one of the hostages on the day of the takeover

4. It should be noted that all the claims on Ahmadinejad's direct involvement in the takeover are not confirmed. The President's spokesmen and even other Iranian politicians who admitted taking part in the takeover denied Ahmadinejad's direct involvement and claimed that, even though he participated in planning the takeover, he did not actually take part in the operation.

Appendix C

The demonstrations in front of Western embassies in Iran

5. The anniversary of the takeover of the American embassy (Aban 13 is the date of the takeover according to the Persian calendar, which is November 4) is officially marked in Iran. On that day, Western embassies across Iran become the focus of anti-Western processions and demonstrations (**particularly the British embassy**, which Iranians view as the closest thing to US presence in the country).

6. In recent years, these events have become a means to express protest and vent pressure against the activities of the West. **The regime seems to be encouraging and preserving the phenomenon.** Most of the demonstrations are organized by the Basij,⁶ which draws inspiration from the revolutionary ethos of the 1979 takeover of the American embassy. At times, the demonstrations are accompanied by attempts to break into the embassies and calls to recreate the incident, which is used also as a form of deterrent.

7. Following are prominent examples of recent demonstrations in embassies in Iran:

a. **Protest against the US and British policy in Iraq and the damage caused to holy sites in that country:** in May-June 2004, several demonstrations were held in front of the **British embassy in Tehran**. The demonstrators (students, Basij forces, worshippers and others) called for **closing down the British embassy, expelling the ambassador, and “repeating the events of November 4, 1979”**. In some of the demonstrations, the demonstrators burned British, American, and Israeli flags, confronted security forces present on the scene, threw stones on the embassy, and detonated grenades in its proximity. There was also a (ceremonial?) attempt by the students' Basij

⁶ The Basij forces are a semi-military militia, a civil guard of sorts, who are loyal to the regime.

to break into the embassy building, which was thwarted by the interior security forces. As the demonstrations came to an end (May 30, 2004), the religious college in Qom issued a statement warning that if the leader approved, “the Iranian people will repeat the scenario of closing down the embassies of occupying nations”, as was done in the American embassy in 1979.

b. Protest against the West’s policy on the Iranian nuclear program is nowadays the main grounds for demonstrations in front of embassies. Thus, for example:

1) Against the background of the Paris Agreement (to suspend uranium enrichment) and in protest against the European policy on the Iranian nuclear program, 500 Basij activists threw stones and smoke bombs on the **British embassy**, called for shutting down the embassy, and burned the British flag. The forces were fended off by the police as they attempted to break into the embassy (November 29, 2004).

2) In early May 2005, students from Tehran University demonstrated in front of the **British embassy**, protesting against the British government’s “placing imaginary obstacles” in the way of the Iranian nuclear program. At the end of that month, the students’ Basij of Tehran University held a procession that passed **near the British, German, and French embassies** in Tehran in order to express support of Iran’s efforts to obtain nuclear technology.

3) Following the IAEA Council of Governors’ decision to forward the Iranian issue to the Security Council, some two hundred women, members of the Basij forces, demonstrated in front of the **British embassy** and burned American flags. On that day, a number of religious groups demonstrated in front of the **German embassy** in protest against the decision (February 4, 2006).

8. The publication of the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper in February 2006 (and their publication in other countries) sparked a wave of demonstrations in front of Western embassies in protest

against “the damage inflicted by the West to the values of Islam”. Thus, for example:

- a. Four hundred demonstrators attacked the **Danish embassy** and were dispersed by tear gas.
- b. Some 200 Basij members gathered around the **Austrian embassy** and threw stones and Molotov cocktails on the embassy as the police prevented them from breaking inside.
- c. The Basij forces demonstrated in front of the **British embassy** and threw stones at it (with the police forces taking part as well), in the wake of what the regime claimed to be the British reaction to the cartoons.
- d. A group of members of the Islamic Students Associations Union in Iran demonstrated in front of the **German embassy**.

Appendix D

Noted Iranians who were involved in the takeover of the US embassy in 1979

1. **Some of the students** who were involved in the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran **later became part of the government and political establishment, and some of them currently serve in official capacities. Most of them, however, became the leaders of the reformist bloc of the regime.** In our understanding, this is due to the fact that **most of the students involved in the takeover belonged to a group called the “Muslim Student Followers of the Imam’s Line” and came from the population of revolutionary students rather than the religious and defense establishment of that time.**

2. As a rule, **those involved in the takeover do not deny the fact of their involvement.** Sometimes it even features on their official résumés, and in testimonies of other (Iranian or American) participants in the incident. **However, while some of the reformists say that the act was right for its time and should not be repeated, the conservatives claim that it remains relevant to this day.**

3. **Personalities of note who played a role in the takeover include:**
 - a. **Mousavi Khomeini:** a cleric who headed the “Muslim Student Followers of the Imam’s Line” and was the source of religious inspiration for those who took over the American embassy. He was a **senior member of the reformist Assembly of Combatant Clerics** and formerly a member of the Salam newspaper, which was closed down. **He was a member of the first and second Experts Council, but he withdrew from it.** He was also a member of the Expediency Council (1998-2001) and a member of the first, second, and third majles.
 - b. **Mohammad Hashemi: the brother of former President Rafsanjani. He served as the Vice President of Iran for**

executive affairs (during the second Rafsanjani government and the first Khatami government); in the mid-1990s he served as a member of the Expediency Council and deputy foreign minister.

c. **Reza Khatami: the brother of President Khatami** and Secretary General of the reformist Islamic Iran Participation Front; **served as Vice Chairman of the sixth majles** and was also the Health Minister in the first Khatami government.



Reza Khatami

d. **Dr. Massoumeh Ebtekar: one of the leaders of the embassy takeover and spokeswoman of the hostage takers.** She appeared on American TV, accusing American diplomats of espionage and detailing the American “crimes” against Iran. After the situation calmed down, Ebtekar was appointed to a senior position in the newspaper Keyhan International. Following the events, she wrote a book titled Taskhir (occupation). **She was elected to the Tehran municipal council in the latest municipal elections** (December 2006). She was **President Khatami’s deputy on environmental matters.** Before that, she headed the scientific-technological bureau in the late 1990s.



Dr. Massoumeh Ebtekar

e. **Hassan Habibi:** a reformist. **One of President Khatami's deputies** (1997-2001).

f. **Ebrahim Asgharzadeh: one of the leaders of the students who took over the embassy.** A senior reformist activist, he served as Secretary General of the Solidarity Party (2001-2005), **was candidate for presidency in 2001**, and served as a member of the City Council of Tehran (1999-2001) and a member of the sixth majles.

g. **Mohsen Rezai: former commander of the Revolutionary Guards.** The Revolutionary Guards' support of the students during the takeover, and the backing they gave them, provided the students (in the Iranian view) with immunity from persecution by the law. He now serves as the **Secretary General of the Expediency Council.**



Mohsen Rezai

h. **Hossein Sheikholeslam:** one of the leaders of the takeover; served as the chief interrogator of the hostages. Serves as a member of the current majles. He is a senior official in the Foreign Ministry and formerly Iran's ambassador in Syria (2001-2004). **In this capacity, he had very close relations with Iran's decision-makers.**



Hussein Sheikholeslam

i. **Cyrus Nasser:** one of the leaders of the takeover. Serves as Deputy Chairman of the Board of Kish Oriental, a petroleum company. He was formerly a special advisor in the disarmament committee in the Iranian Foreign Ministry. **From 1991 to 1998, he served as Iran's representative in the UN institutions in Geneva, and was a chief negotiator on the nuclear program.** In Hassan Rowhani's time, he served as the Secretary General of the Supreme National Security Council (2003-2005).

j. **Ahmad Tavakkoli:** a conservative majles member who holds radical views and belongs to the Abadgaran coalition, which is comprised of the "second generation" of conservatives. An economist by education, formerly a lecturer in the Shahid Beheshti University, he objects to privatization and foreign investments. He served as the **Work and Welfare Minister in Mousavi's first government (in the early 1980s) and as the Economy Minister in Rafsanjani's government.** He founded the conservative newspapers Resalat and Farda. **He ran for presidency in 1993, 1997** (when he was not one of the final candidates) **and 2001, and lost all three races.** He announced that he was going to run for presidency in 2005, but he withdrew his candidacy.



Ahmad Tavakkoli

k. **Habibollah Bitaraf: served as the Energy Minister in Khatami's government. Heads the Joint Staff of the Reformist Groups**, which was founded to promote increased cooperation during the latest presidential elections in Iran.



Habibollah Bitaraf

l. **Mohsen Mirdamadi: one of the leaders of the students who took over the embassy. He served as a majles deputy on behalf of the reformists (the Islamic Iran Participation Front) and was even a candidate to head the second majles, but he was not elected. He was the Secretary General of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the sixth majles and the governor of the province of Khuzestan.**

m. **Abbas Abadi: one of the leaders of the takeover. A senior reformist journalist, a member of the Islamic Iran Participation Front, and one of the most prominent reformist opponents to the Islamic regime. He is considered the main philosopher of the Islamic Iran Participation Front.**



Abbas Abadi

- n. **Reza Seyf Allahi: a member of the Expediency Council.** A senior member of the Revolutionary Guards intelligence and **former commander of the interior security forces.**
- o. **Akbar Refan:** a conservative. Formerly the Air Force Commander of the Revolutionary Guards.
- p. **Mohsen Mohajeri:** the former **Iranian ambassador to Spain** and the social advisor to President Rafsanjani in his second government (1989-1992).
- q. **Mohammad Naimipour:** a member of the Islamic Iran Participation Front and formerly a member of the sixth majles.
- r. **Said Hajarian:** a close associate of President Khatami and a senior reformist, who was hit in a terrorist attack perpetrated by radicals. He was **President Khatami's advisor on national security** and a member of the Tehran City Council and the general council of the Participation Front (2004-2005). It is possible that he served as the **head of the Political and Defense Department in the Supreme National Security Council in 2004.**
- s. **Dr. Mohammad Hashempour Yazdanparast:** a former member of the "Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line", the group which planned and carried out the takeover of the embassy. A conservative. Served as a senior lecturer in the University of Shiraz. **Writes for Jomhuri-ye Eslami,** a daily considered one of the mouthpieces of Leader Khamenei.
- t. **Mohammad Reza Behzadian:** a reformist. Head of the Chamber of Commerce (2003), **Deputy Interior Minister for economic affairs,** administration, and funds in the first Khatami government; ran for mayor of Tehran in 1999 but was not elected.
- u. **Tahara Rezazadeh:** one of the guards of the American hostages held in the embassy. The wife of Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, a senior reformist figure and former majles deputy, whom she met during the takeover. **Served as the representative of Shiraz in the majles (2000).**