



Historical Crisis: Iran Hostage Crisis, 1979

Chair: Daniel Xu '25

Rapporteur: Peper Granskog '25

Esteemed Delegates,

My name is Daniel Xu, and it is my pleasure to serve as your Chair for the Iran Hostage Crisis committee at CAMUN XX! I look forward to engaging in a myriad of debates and diplomacy around one of the most pressing crises of the modern age, and I am so excited to get to know you all this upcoming March.

I'm currently a junior at Concord Academy, and I've been involved with Model UN since my freshman year. Since then, I've attended several conferences and served on the staff of CAMUN XIX last year. During this time, I have gotten to work with so many incredible delegates, both in and out of committee, and made lifelong friends and memories. I hope that this committee is able to provide a similar experience for you.

Outside of MUN, I am an avid writer and reader. I also run—both as a part of my cross country and track teams, as well as on my own time. In my spare time, you can probably catch me stargazing, strolling around Concord or Boston with friends, or whipping up some banana bread or a smoothie.

The Iran Hostage Crisis was a defining moment in modern history—it has shaped the national identities of both Iran and the United States, and its far-reaching effects can still be felt and seen in the Middle East today. To those who were personally involved, this event marked a treacherous period of their lives that required precise action, and careful diplomacy—all in pursuit of a then-uncertain future. I know that your discussion, directives, and notes will help bring this unique historical moment to life.

Writing a position paper is not required, but if you'd like to be considered for awards, please email your position paper to the chair by **March 29th**.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions!

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Background

In August 1941, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union invaded the Imperial State of Iran, which they considered a potential ally of Nazi Germany. Iran's monarch, Reza Shah Pahlavi, was forced to abdicate and was replaced by his eldest son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi¹, who enjoyed close ties to the United States. In 1946, for instance, the U.S. helped secure Iran's independence by pressing for the withdrawal of the Soviet Union.²

By the 1950s, Shah Pahlavi was engaged in a bitter power struggle against democratically-elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh had nationalized the Iranian oil industry from the British-controlled Anglo-Persian Oil Company (a predecessor of today's BP).³ In response, U.S. and British-backed Iranian royalists overthrew Mossadegh's government in a 1953 coup d'état codenamed Operation Ajax, granting the Shah high-uncontested power. Mossadegh's administration was supplanted by a government led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a religious cleric who had led one branch of the coup. For the next two decades, the Shah's absolute regime would continue to work closely with the United States, which aided in the training of his secret police and the purging of dissenters.⁴ In the ensuing decade, ideological tensions grew increasingly strained between Shah Pahlavi and Khomeini. In 1963, Pahlavi instituted a series of modernist reforms known as the White Revolution, which challenged the power and status of Khomeini's ulama scholars. This move was heavily condemned by Khomeini, who was subsequently exiled in December 1963.

By 1977, political unrest had become widespread in Iran, and anti-government demonstrations began to proliferate throughout the nation. The movement was backed by a wide range of supporters, including Islamic, nationalist, and communist political and militant groups, who opposed the political violence, economic policies, and Western influence brought on by Shah Pahlavi's regime. The movement was further galvanized by the death of over 400 people in the August 1978 Cinema Rex fire, which was widely believed to have been set on the orders of the Shah, despite later findings to the contrary.⁵ By late 1978, Iran was racked by large-scale protests, and Shah Pahlavi was forced into exile on January 17, 1979. On February 1, 1979, Khomeini was welcomed back to Iran, and just three

¹ Abrahamian Ervand, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 164.

² Mehrunnisa Ali, "Iran's Relations with the US and USSR." (Pakistan: Pakistan Horizon 26, no.3, 1973), 51.

³ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*. (New York City: Free Press, 2008), 149.

⁴ Suzanne Maloney, "1979: Iran and America." (Brookings Institution, 2019)

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/1979-iran-and-america/>.

⁵ Daniel L. Byman, "The Rise of Low-Tech Terrorism." (Brookings Institution, 2007)

www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rise-of-low-tech-terrorism/.

months later, Iranians overwhelmingly voted to replace the nation's millennium-long monarchy with the Islamic Republic.

In November of 1979, with fear of another U.S.-backed coup looming in Iran, a group of 500 pro-Khomeini students known as the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line planned a temporary occupation of the American embassy in Tehran, broke through the embassy gates, and took the Marines and embassy staff hostage. While Khomeini initially opposed this act, he soon reversed his stance and issued a public display of support for the hostage-takers, deeming the seizure "the second revolution."⁶

In addition to fears of another U.S.-backed coup, the Student Followers of the Imam's Line were also angered by the U.S. government's recent actions, such as granting asylum to the Shah for cancer treatment. The hostage-taking was also meant to pressure Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, who was seen as a threat to the Revolution and a potential U.S. ally. Finally, the act was meant to pressure the U.S. into unfreezing \$8 billion dollars in Iranian assets, which it had frozen in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution.⁷

Delegates should be prepared to tackle the crisis as it climaxes in January 1980 and work with issues relating to diplomacy, human rights, statehood, and state sovereignty.

Subtopic 1: The Hostage Crisis

Upon its initial seizure of the U.S. Embassy, the militants also seized 66 American citizens, ranging from Marine Corps guards to secretaries to intelligence officers. The hostages were immediately blindfolded and paraded around by armed members of the Student Followers of the Imam's Line. While they were initially kept at the American embassy, a botched rescue mission led Tehran to scatter the detainees across Iran.

Iranian treatment of the hostages was disputed. Tehran claimed that its hostages were treated with humanity and dignity—even referring to them as "guests" in national broadcasts⁸—in accordance with

⁶ Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam*. (New York City: Grove Atlantic, 2006), 239

⁷ Suzanne Maloney, *The Revolutionary Economy*, ed. Robin B. Wright. (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 64

⁸ Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah*, 403

the initial goals professed by the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line. On the other hand, the United States has referred to the act as one of "terrorism and anarchy,"⁹ and a gross violation of international and basic human rights, such as the Vienna Convention. After their release, several hostages also claimed that they had been extensively tortured at the hands of Iranian guards. In the U.S., the event initially triggered a surge of patriotism that unified the American people.

Throughout the course of the crisis, the hostages were leveraged by Khomeini as a bargaining chip in an attempt to meet Iranian demands. While these were often unsuccessful, the hostage-taking intensified anti-Americanism within Iran. This simultaneously strengthened the power and position of politicians such as lead hostage-taker Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha, while weakening their more centrist opponents.

The hostages, however, were never intended to be kept for an extended period of time—the initial group of student militants only protracted the takeover after receiving Khomeini's support. This lack of direction and command resulted in a number of attempted rescue operations. The most famous of these operations was the Canadian Caper operation, where six American embassy workers—posing as crew members for a fictitious science-fiction movie—were able to escape Tehran with the help of the Canadian embassy.

Complicating matters were the classified documents within the embassy; Americans stationed there had anticipated a potential takeover but were unable to completely destroy classified documents due to a furnace malfunction.¹⁰ They were instead forced to shred such documents with cheap paper shredders, but exceptionally skilled Iranian carpet weavers may have reconstructed them.

Tehran had a powerful bargaining chip of prisoners and potential political secrets, but without the necessary food, water, medical resources, and most importantly, a plan, it was harder for them to move forward.

⁹ James E. Carter, "Address by President Carter on the State of the Union Before a Joint Session of Congress," ed. Kristin L. Ahlberg (Office of the Historian, 1980).

¹⁰ David Farber, *Taken Hostage*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 134

Subtopic 2: The State of Iran

By the time of the hostage crisis, the Islamic Republic of Iran had only existed for just over half a year, since the April 1, 1979 referendum that Iranians had overwhelmingly approved. Immediately, Iran's rapidly modernizing capitalist economy was subsumed by the state. The vast majority of industries, including the oil industry, were also nationalized.

More prominent was the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. The Revolution had begun as an anti-dictatorial movement against the Shah and his Western-backed power base and featured a vast coalition that included affiliates from Marxists to Liberals to Muslims. Over the coming months, however, Khomeini would consolidate power for himself and his allies, naming himself as Supreme Leader. Three key Islamic bodies of the revolution were also elevated by Khomeini upon obtaining power. The Council of Islamic Revolution served as the primary legislative branch of the Republic but clashed with the official administration of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan.¹¹ The Revolutionary Guard was initially established by Khomeini as a military branch but was growing into a full-scale military force by the time of the hostage crisis. Finally, the Islamic Revolution Committee had cemented itself as a new police form—and according to the whispers of some, the new secret police of the new regime.

Khomeini's control over Iran was not unchallenged, however. In April 1979, just weeks after the ratification of Iran's landmark referendum, Marxist guerillas and federalist parties rebelled in the areas of Khyzistan, Kurdistan, and Gonbad-e Qabus. The Revolution had also crippled Iran's economy, government apparatus, and military forces—greatly weakening the new Republic. Finally, tensions had also been brewing between Iran and its Western neighbor Iraq. This was largely due to border conflicts and the ideological divide between Khomeini's administration—which was overwhelmingly comprised of Shia Muslims—and Iraq's Sunni-dominated ruling party.

¹¹ Nikki Keddice and Yann Richard, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 364

Questions to Consider

1. How do various factors that contributed to the crisis (e.g. The Shah's regime, Western and U.S. intervention) influence your approach?
2. What are specific ways you can resolve the crisis, or leverage it for your own benefit?
3. How can you prevent or mitigate both/either the U.S. or Iranian escalation of the Crisis?
4. How can you leverage the current balance of power in Iran to further your goals?
5. What are the external forces that can shape Iran in its current, premature state—and what are the ways that you can influence these interactions?
6. Is there a way to resolve the hostage crisis in a way that guarantees the future sovereignty and security of both Iran and the United States?

Resources for further research

- [Explore the Iran Hostage Crisis through Its Iconic Images - PBS](#)
- [The Iranian hostage crisis and its effect on American politics - Brookings](#)
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- Yergin, Daniel. 2009. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*. New York City: Free Press.

US Positions

1. President Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter was the 39th President of the United States, serving from 1977-1981. Internationally, Carter pursued conciliatory policies in the midst of the Cold War, as demonstrated through his role in arranging the Camp David Accords. However, the second half of his tenure was characterized by building pressure against the Eastern Bloc. Throughout his tenure, Carter's poor relations with other Democrats in Congress stunted many of his policies. Regarding the crisis in Iran, he is focused on pursuing a swift solution while maintaining the U.S.'s international reputation. Carter also has a reelection year coming up in 1980, and is mindful of the potential continued public ramifications of the crisis.

2. Vice President Walter Mondale

Walter Mondale was the 42nd Vice President of the United States under Jimmy Carter, serving from 1977-1981. He played a crucial role in the Carter's administration's foreign policy, traveling across the globe to meet and discuss policy with various world leaders. Historically, Mondale is remembered for transforming the Vice President role from a simple figurehead to a genuine presidential advisor, and full-time participant and ambassador for the administration. Despite his achievements, the current crisis presents a much more immediate challenge that Mondale needs to tackle quickly and efficiently, if he hopes to maintain the administration's domestic credibility—as well as his own.

3. Cyrus Vance

Cyrus Vance was the United States Secretary of State under President Jimmy Carter. Vance approached foreign policy with an emphasis on negotiation rather than conflict, especially in regards to the Eastern Bloc and the Third World. Vance was also an advocate for practical policy, especially disarmament. Vance often clashes with National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who has somewhat marginalized Vance's influence in Carter's administration. Nonetheless, he is still an important figure, who hopes to resolve the current crisis through negotiation with Ruhollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran as a whole.

4. Zbigniew Brzezinski

Zbigniew Brzezinski was the United States National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. Brzezinski approached international relations (particularly with the Eastern Bloc) with a focus on Western-centric détente (the straining of intense relations), often bringing him into conflict with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Despite this, Brzezinski promoted military action when facing external aggression, especially vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. In regards to the current crisis, he hopes to control the aftermath of the Revolution and implement military action to limit the power of rising leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

5. Warren Christopher

Warren Christopher was the United States Deputy Secretary of State under President Jimmy Carter, and would go on to serve as the secretary of state under Bill Clinton. Unlike many members of the administration,

Christopher was one of the few U.S. representatives to conduct direct negotiations with members of the Iranian government. His work alongside Algerian and Iranian representatives would ultimately allow him to propose the successful Algiers Accords in 1981, which formally ended the crisis. He seeks to promote his personal power domestically, and believes that the Crisis could provide a key opportunity to do so.

6. Ramsey Clark

Ramsey Clark was a former United States Attorney General who served under President Lyndon B. Johnson. Known for his work with civil rights and civil liberties, as well as his dedication to U.S. antitrust programs, Clark supervised both the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Following his attorney general career, Clark continued his social justice work, and was active in the anti-Vietnam War effort. Despite no longer occupying an official government position, Clark has been sent by President Jimmy Carter to seek open negotiations with Iranian authorities.

7. Kenneth Kraus

Kenneth Kraus was a United States Marine who was kidnapped by the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas on February 14, 1979, before the events of the current Crisis. Kraus alleges that after surrendering to secure the release of the American embassy's noncombatants, he was tortured by militant members. He was later returned to the U.S. after a week of negotiations. Kraus is currently looking to seek financial compensation from Iran, but also hopes to see a hardline stance taken on the new regime.

8. James B. Vaught

James B. Vaught was a United States Army Lieutenant General who fought in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. During his time in Vietnam, Vaught helped propagate and support the policy of Vietnamization, which sought to equip South Vietnamese forces while reducing the number of U.S. Combat Troops. He has been chosen by President Jimmy Carter's administration to lead any potential military action, if necessary.

9. Joe Clark

Joe Clark was a Canadian businessman and writer who served as the 16th prime minister of Canada. Clark famously aided six American diplomats by issuing false Canadian passports, thereby allowing them to escape under the guise of being a film crew for the fictional movie *Argo*. Clark was hailed as a hero in America, but his Canadian impact was limited due to a no-confidence vote and runoff election loss shortly after assuming office. Clark sees the current crisis as a way to strengthen Canadian-American relations, while cementing his own shaky status in Canadian politics.

Iranian Positions

10. Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini

Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini was one of the central figures of the Iranian Revolution, and its de facto leader. After returning to Iran, Khomeini almost immediately seized power, and advocated for the creation of a theocratic state with himself at its head. So far, his vision has been successful, and Khomeini has attacked and/or closed down several opposition parties. By the time of the current crisis, Khomeini has just been instituted as the Supreme Leader of Iran, but his authority is still far from cemented. He hopes to use the current crisis to demonstrate and cement his newfound power, both domestically and abroad.

11. Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri

Hussein-Ali Montazeri was one of the leaders of the Iranian Revolution, and a leading Shia theologian, advocate for Islamic democracy, and human rights activist. He is a close friend and ally of Ayatollah Khomeini, as well as one of his most devout pupils. It is strongly believed that Khomeini will name Montazeri as his successor, but he is unpopular in both the upper class and religious elite. Despite his close ties to Khomeini, Montazeri is troubled by the crackdown against opposition groups and widespread violence that have characterized the aftermath of the revolution. He instead hopes to see Iran move in a dual democratic-Islamic direction.

12. Mehdi Bazargan

Mehdi Bazargan was the first post-revolution prime minister of Iran. Unlike many other leaders of the revolution, Bazargan was an advocate for both democracy and liberalism in the new republic, despite having been invited to the Council of the Islamic Revolution. This frequently brought him into conflict with the revolution's more radical leaders, including Ayatollah Khomeini, who originally appointed Bazargan. A great admirer of democratic revolution, Bazargan is frustrated with the increasingly theological approach post-revolutionary Iran has been headed in, and his new government's inability for action. He is a critic of the current crisis, and does not support the hostage-taking movement.

13. Abolhassan Banisadr

Abolhassan Banisadr was the first president of Iran. Banisadr's father was a close friend of Ayatollah Khomeini, and had been appointed to the Council of the Islamic Revolution after Bazargan's departure. At the time of the hostage crisis, he served as minister of finance to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. Despite possessing close ties to Khomeini and other theocratic leaders of the revolution, Banisadr hopes to see Iran move in a more democratic direction. Consequently, he does not support the Khomeini's consolidation of power and has conversely engaged in diplomacy with several anti-government groups. In regards to the current crisis, Banisadr is opposed to Iran's holding of American hostages.

14. Behzad Nabavi

Behzad Nabavi is an Iranian reformist politician. During the aftermath of the revolution he helped form several Islamic Revolution committees, which worked by force to suppress armed opposition parties and militias.

Nabavi played a crucial role during the hostage crisis, as he served as the chief negotiator of Iran. Despite taking a hardline stance on the crisis in order to cement his political credibility, Nabavi is a democratic reformist who is a believer in individual and public rights.

15. Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha

Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha was the spiritual leader of the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, who led the seizure of the U.S. embassy. This act strengthened his relationship with Ayatollah Khomeini, who subsequently appointed him to several prominent government positions, including Prosecutor General and member of the Supreme Judicial Council, following the conclusion of the hostage crisis. Despite this, Khoeiniha's views are considered by many to be significantly more liberal than the mullah hegemony, and he supports several liberal initiatives, such as the freedom of press and protest.

16. Morteza Motahhari

Morteza Motahhari was an Iranian Shia Scholar who formed and chaired the Council of the Islamic Revolution. Considered a devout follower of Ruhollah Khomeini, Motahhari's ideologies helped shape the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran. Unlike some other revolutionary figures, Motahhari was a devout Shi'ite who shunned other ideologies, especially Marxism. One of Motahhari's most distinct contributions was to help pioneer the contemporary religious tradition of post-revolutionary Iran that would shape its culture over the following decades.

17. Mohammed Benyahia

Mohammed Seddik Benyahia was an Algerian politician and militant who fought in the Algerian War. After Algerian independence, Benyahia held several notable posts in the Algerian government, including Minister of Information, Higher Education, and Finance. At the time of the hostage crisis, he served as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Ultimately, he would be one of the leading figures that helped broker the Algiers Accords, which would put an end to the hostage crisis. Benyahia hopes to leverage the current crisis to propel Algiers onto the international stage, and cement his country as a legitimate international force.

18. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was the last monarch of the Imperial State of Iran. His rule was characterized by several notable reforms, but also the use of widespread public and private violence against dissenters. Despite not being directly involved in the hostage crisis, Pahlavi played an important role, as his admittance to the United States for cancer treatment was one of the main actions that sparked the hostage taking. In his later years, Pahlavi was considered by some to be depressed and inactive as a result of his likely impending death, but he still held tremendous sway—both as a tyrant to the majority of Iranians, as well as a shining emblem for his limited supporters.



CONFERENCE POLICIES

Gratefully adapted from the NAIMUN LX delegate guide

1. Position Papers

Position Papers are required for all delegations who wish to receive an award. Position papers should be emailed to the chair by March 29, 11:59 p.m. ET. Please email the chair with any additional questions regarding position papers.

2. Plagiarism and Pre-writing

Plagiarism is strictly prohibited at CAMUN. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, verbatim or near-verbatim copying from digital or physical sources. This rule applies to any document submitted by delegates throughout the conference, including position papers, draft resolutions, directives, and other documents. Additionally, CAMUN prohibits the use of artificially intelligent generators like ChatGPT in the creation of written documents. All work will be thoroughly checked for plagiarism.

3. Technology

CAMUN prohibits the use of technology in committee sessions, including but not limited to computer and cell phones, except during unmoderated caucuses as directed by the Chair.

4. Accommodations

For questions and requests related to disability and special accommodations, please email the CAMUN secretariat at ModelUN@ConcordAcademy.org. CAMUN will do its best to fulfill all appropriate requests.