THE 1979 IRANIAN US EMBASSY SIEGE AND HOSTAGE CRISIS. WAS IT A COVERT CIA OPERATION?

By Finian Cunningham
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It was one of America's most humiliating episodes during the past 50 years, ranking along with the hurried retreat from Saigon in 1975 and the Bay of Pigs fiasco off Cuba in 1961 – the US embassy siege in Tehran when 52 Americans were held hostage for 444 days in Iran.

Now, more than three decades later, former hostages are seeking legal damages against the government of Iran for their ordeal. One of the Americans who had been held captive told the New York Times: "I don't understand the harebrained notion that we should not get compensation, and everybody else did get compensation — the financial offices, the construction companies."

But the question is: why is this painful period being resurrected now? There is no obvious anniversary date that would give the plight of the hostage survivors a "news hook" to merit prominent coverage in America's premier newspaper. Could it be that these hapless American citizens, who undoubtedly endured a traumatic experience some 30 years ago, are now being used as political pawns by the US political establishment, and being made to reopen old psychological wounds?

In 1979, radical Iranian students took over the US embassy in Tehran in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and the overthrow of the US-backed dictatorship of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. It was act of revenge against the "Great Satan" for Washington's support over nearly three decades for the hated Shah and his brutal secret police, the Savak. For the next 444 days, the world would watch the televised humiliating spectacle of blindfolded Americans paraded in the grounds of the embassy, their Iranian captors gloating over the spoils.

Hundreds of Iranians gathered outside the embassy would taunt the captives and the impotent Carter White House with shouts of "death to America", "America can't do anything".

Western media coverage would portray the maltreatment of the American hostages as evincing the "malevolence" of the newly declared Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. The siege intensified US sanctions against Iran and instigated the long-held official Western narrative of Iran being a "rogue state". The present day standoff between Western powers and Tehran can be traced back to that event.

However, some understanding of the nefarious involvement of Washington in Iran gives the US embassy crisis a very different perspective.

When the CIA, along with Britain's MI6, overthrew the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 in a coup d'état known as Operation Ajax it signalled the destruction of wide-ranging social and political reforms. One of Mossadegh's "missteps" was to nationalise the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, disenfranchising the British company that later became known as British Petroleum. The British had siphoned off Iran's oil wealth for decades, which the Mossadegh government attempted to redress for the country's national development. Mossadegh's replacement was the Shah of Iran, who ruled over his people as an absolute monarch but as an abject servant of the Western powers until he was deposed by the Iranian revolution in 1979.

The dictatorship of the Shah was instrumented by a brutal police state under the control of the National Intelligence and Security Organisation or Savak. Thousands of dissidents or suspects, including communists, trade unionists, writers and intellectuals, were disappeared by the Savak. They were rounded up, incarcerated, tortured and executed in a manner not unlike the Gestapo of Nazi Germany or the worst excesses of the Pinochet regime in Chile that the US would also later install.

The creation and operation of the Savak under the Shah was owed largely to the American Central Intelligence Agency. It was CIA personnel who taught the Savak all its techniques of surveillance, counterinsurgency, assassination, interrogation and torture. One former CIA analyst disclosed how the agency instructed the Savak in "Nazi torture techniques". These included water-boarding, extraction of nails and teeth, the dripping of acid into nostrils, rape and mock executions.

For nearly three decades under the US-backed Shah, Iranians lived in a state of terror, a veritable country-wide torture chamber. It was the CIA and American military that authored this living nightmare for Iran. Present day Iran may have its civil liberty flaws, but they are negligible compared with the crimes against humanity that prevailed under the US-backed Shah.

The CIA torture apparatus under the Shah explains why the radical students descended on the US embassy in 1979 with such fury. There were CIA and military personnel within the embassy whom the students associated with the appalling crimes of the Savak. The embassy symbolised in a very real way America's historic criminal role in Iranian affairs. When American personnel were subjected to blindfolding and mock executions and other degrading treatment, this was not born out of some irrational savagery. The Iranian hostage takers were replaying in macabre theatrical fashion the much worse conditions that American personnel had authored and overseen against thousands of Iranians.

What was the role of the CIA in the hostage crisis:

According to Iranian researcher Fara Mansoor: *"The U.S.-Iran hostage crisis was not a spontaneous act by Iranian mobs or a senseless act devised solely by the Khomeini regime. Rather, it was a politically manufactured event by the Bush-led CIA and top Iranian Islamic fundamentalists that was intended to promote the political goals of the Bush-Reagan coalition and Khomeini's regime simultaneously." (*quoted in [Saman Mohammadi, January 16, 2012](#))

Three related political objectives were sought:

"1. Sabotage and destabilize the Carter administration, and get Bush-Reagan into the White House.

2. Prop up the Khomeini regime and destroy all political opposition to the Islamic Republic.

3. Establish Iran as a permanent enemy of the United States and vice versa, in order to bring about a future conflict and justify the existence of anti-democratic political and legal structures within the two nations. There were definitely other motives for keeping Iran and America isolated from each other, but those are two big ones.

Clearly, the plan worked. Carter's presidency was weakened by the hostage crisis and allowed Bush and Reagan to seize the White House in a dishonest and undemocratic fashion. And Khomeini's loyalists consolidated power by dominating the narrative in Iran and violently exterminating opposition voices in Iranian society.

The left in Iran and America was basically destroyed by Bush and Khomeini. The Iranian left was impotent in the face of the regime's propaganda line: "If you are not for the Islamic Republic, then you are for the Great Satan and against Iran." (For further details see Saman Mohammadi, January 16, 2012)

Using the 1979 Hostage Crisis to Demonize Iran

American victims of the Tehran embassy siege are now joining with members of Congress to take up their plight and to sue the Iranian government for compensation. Tens of thousands of Iranian families could sue the American government for much worse suffering under the CIA torture apparatus of the Shah. But leaving that issue aside, the reason why the American hostages did not receive compensation in the first place was because the deal signed by the Carter Administration in 1980-81 for their release excluded them from a right to sue. Former US officials who were involved in the negotiations with the government in Tehran claim that the families of the hostages agreed to the no-litigation term because they were only too glad to have their relatives returned safely. On the other hand, US corporations affected by the siege were compensated.

From a legal standpoint, the US former hostages have no case, according to the deal signed up to by their own government. So, it is curious that a campaign is being driven now – 30 years later – with the help of members of Congress and prominent sections of the US mainstream media.

The desire for compensation among the victims of the siege is understandable. But it would seem that their plight is being cynically manipulated for ulterior political reasons.

It can hardly be coincidence that the episode of the US embassy crisis is being replayed just at the time of the P5 + 1 talks over Iran's nuclear programme. The US-led Western powers are using those negotiations as a way to browbeat Iran over its legitimate civilian nuclear energy development by painting Iran as a "rogue state" with sinister ambitions to build nuclear weapons.

The New York Times quotes one former hostage as saying that the 1979 US embassy siege "established Iran's ability to get away with bad behavior ever since." He added: "It's one thing after another, and they pay no price at all. It's time for someone to stand up and say, 'That's enough.' "

The chances of compensation for the former American hostages are slim. But one feels that the US political establishment is not really interested in winning compensation for the embassy victims anyway. The establishment didn't care back in 1981; why should it now. Rather it seems more likely that the painful past for the hostage victims is being dredged up for expedient political purposes – to serve the American ruling class and its long-held strategy for regime change in Iran and the wider oil-rich Middle East and Central Asian region.

In that way, the former victims of the US embassy siege in Tehran 30 years ago are today, more than anything, hostages of Washington's imperialist designs.

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