**Topic I: The Iranian Hostage Crisis**

History

On the morning of Sunday, November 4, 1979, a large group of Iranian students conducted an anti-Western demonstration outside the United States embassy in Tehran. They eventually stormed the gates, took control of the building and held 66 Americans hostage. The origins of the crisis, much like any historical event, reach back nearly a century.

Iran has long been one of the world’s leading producers of oil. In 1901, the British-based Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) signed a sixty-year contract with the shah of Iran for exclusive rights to all oil-related ventures in the area. In 1908, AIOC struck oil in southwestern Iran, resulting in a series of complaints by the Iranian government against AIOC. They claimed AIOC kept improper books, manipulated the market price of oil, skirted international customs laws, caused massive ecological damage, interfered with regional tribal affairs, and more[[1]](#footnote-1).

Discontent with AIOC and failed contract renegotiation continued until May of 1951, when Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq’s oil nationalization law was ratified by parliament and set into action[[2]](#footnote-2). By 1953, Britain had become tired of failed negotiations to regain complete control over Iranian oil production. In a joint operation with the United States, the Secret Intelligence Service and Central Intelligence Agency staged a coup d’état, overthrowing Mossadeq and installing a military government under Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi[[3]](#footnote-3).

The new government was extremely Western and shockingly progressive – Mohammed Reza Shah himself notes in his memoir that “Iran placed itself ideologically squarely in the camp of the Western democracies”[[4]](#footnote-4). The Shah’s regime laid the framework for a number of progressive reforms, and vigorously pursued “such revolutionary ideas as land reform, political and social equality for women”[[5]](#footnote-5).

The state of Iranian society may have progressed too quickly for some, though. By 1978, countless Iranians were staging anti-American protests and rallying behind Ruhollah Khomeini, an exiled religious leader who advocated for a religious society based on Islamic law. On January 16, 1979, the Shah was forced to abdicate the throne, and Iran became an Islamic republic less than a month later[[6]](#footnote-6).

As David Houghton points out, the 1953 Mossadeq Coup may have played a major role in the revolution. A general anti-imperialist sentiment “had been growing steadily since the 1820s, when Iran had found itself wedged in between two expanding empires – Russia from the north and Britain from the south”[[7]](#footnote-7). Many Iranians – even though they may not have been alive in 1953 – “had not forgotten their own history and the role played by external powers in it … [The] direct covert operation left a running wound that bled for twenty-five years” and may have acted as a tipping point – a century of imperialism eventually culminated in massive anti-American demonstrations and a strong contempt for Westernization[[8]](#footnote-8). The climax of these demonstrations was the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and 66 American citizens on November 4, 1979.  
  
UN Actions

In 1946, the UN passed a series of Security Council resolutions that attempted to settle a land and oil dispute between the USSR and Iran[[9]](#footnote-9). Outside of encouraging “both parties … to seek a solution of the matter at issue by negotiation” [[10]](#footnote-10) and “relying upon the assurances of the USSR Government that” a solution was being sought, little was done[[11]](#footnote-11). Not a single UN resolution regarding economic negotiations between Iran and foreign oil companies was ever drafted.

The day the hostage situation began, the UN called “on the Government of Iran to release immediately the personnel of the Embassy of the United States of America being held in Teheran,” and urged both Iranian and US governments to peacefully settle their remaining issues[[12]](#footnote-12).

During the time between the resolutions in 1946 and 1979, there were no Security Council or General Assembly resolutions regarding Iranian economic involvement or foreign policy.

1. Ervand Abrahamian. *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S. - Iranian Relations*. New York: The New Press, 2013. 14-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Patrick Houghton. *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gholam R. Afkhami, *The Iranian Revolution: Thanatos on a National Scale*. Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 1985. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Houghton, *US Foreign Policy*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. UN Security Council, 40th meeting. *Resolution S/RES/5,* 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. UN Security Council, 5th meeting. *Resolution S/RES/2,* 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. UN Security Council, 30th meeting. *Resolution S/RES/3,* 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. UN Security Council, 2178th meeting. *Resolution S/RES/457,* 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)