Iran's Hostage Crisis: International Legitimacy Matters

Rouhollah K. Ramazani

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume 25, Number 2, 2005, pp. 273-278 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

Iran's Hostage Crisis: International Legitimacy Matters

R. K. Ramazani

> The further backward you look, the further forward you can see.
> —Winston Churchill

A quarter century ago revolutionary Iran took over the American Embassy in Tehran and held fifty-two Americans hostage for 444 days—a crisis that has cast a long shadow on Iranian foreign policy behavior. A quarter century later U.S. hostility toward Iran continues. Whatever else might be said to be fueling this hostility today, there is little doubt that it is rooted in the hostage crisis of 1979–81. For example, America's current suspicion that Iran plans to go nuclear is based, above all else, on U.S. suspicion of Iran's intentions. Iran claims that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, whereas the United States alleges it is for making nuclear weapons. The jury is still out, but the objective assessment of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) so far does not support the Bush administration's allegation.

As important as the study of the hostage crisis is in terms of understanding U.S. relations with Iran, I believe that the crisis constitutes a significant case study of the importance of international legitimacy in international politics. Liberal international relations theorists such as Joseph Nye are not alone in acknowledging the importance of international legitimacy in world politics. No less a theorist than Hans Morgenthau, the leading traditional realist, believes in the relevance of legitimacy to state power. In his words, "Prestige has become particularly important as a political weapon in an age in which the struggle for power is fought not only with the traditional methods of political pressure and military force but in large measure as a struggle for the mind of men."[1]

Because the concept of "legitimacy" in international relations is elusive, I would like to say upfront what it means to me. I think legitimacy is an intrinsic aspect of national power, and balance of power alone fails to explain the dynamics of international politics. In other words, a nation may lose legitimacy in international politics when it dismisses the relevance of world public opinion. By contrast, a nation may win legitimacy when it exercises power according to widely accepted international rules, principles, and norms.

Defying the World Order

The hostage taking became the crucible of Iran's largely confrontational foreign policies for most of a decade. The crisis occurred amidst revolutionary political chaos, economic paralysis, acts of terrorism, armed insurrection, ethnic insurgency, summary executions, and generally a

1. See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), 95.

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East

Vol. 25, No. 2, 2005

basic lack of internal security in 1979–81, reminiscent of the chaos that marked the end of the constitutional revolution in 1911. A multitude of political factions vied for power, many with diverse ideological orientations. The Islamist students who took over the American Embassy claimed to follow the Khomeini line (*Khatt-i Imam*), the supporters of the National Democratic Front followed Musaddiq's secular path (*Rah-i Musaddiq*), followers of Fada'iyan-i Khalq espoused a version of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the members of the Tudeh Party pressed for Soviet-style communism, and the Mujahidin-i Khalq (People's Fighters) espoused a mix of Islamic and Marxist tenets.[2] The dominant ideology that influenced the students' action is difficult to identify. Massoumeh Ebtekar, the revolutionary students' spokesperson, claims that they were influenced by Ali Shari'ati, who, she says, "persuaded them to accept the leadership of Imam Khomeini with courage and devotion." I have not been able to verify this statement. She also claims that the students excluded the leftist groups from their rank.[3]

Khomeini's ideology, however, is more relevant than Shari'ati's to the development of the hostage crisis because he incited students against the United States before the takeover of the American Embassy, and he endorsed their action afterward. What follow are his statements on both occasions. Three days before the takeover, Khomeini used the anniversary of the shah regime's attack on the University of Tehran on 1 November to incite the students by saying that "it is . . . up to the dear pupils, students and theological students to expand with all their might their attacks against the United States and Israel, so they may force the United States to return the deposed and criminal shah."[4] Far more consequential, Khomeini endorsed unequivocally the students' takeover of the American Embassy. His endorsement made the takeover of the embassy the responsibility of the Iranian state. "Our young people resorted to this action," he said on 5 November 1979, "because they saw that the shah was allowed in America. . . . Today we cannot simply remain idle and watch things; today we are facing underground treason, treason devised in these same embassies, mainly by the great Satan, America. They must bear in mind that Iran is still in a state of revolution, a revolution greater than the first one. They must be put in their place and return this criminal [the shah] to us as soon as possible."[5]

Khomeini did not see the takeover of the American Embassy as a violation of international law and an enduring blow to Iran's international legitimacy. In fact, he denounced the extant international system on the grounds that modern states "are the products of man's limited ideas" and that the world is "the home of all the masses of people under the law of God."[6] That is, that divine Islamic law (*sharia*) should be followed rather than man-made modern international law and the post-Westphalia international system of nation-states.

Since the international system was dominated at the time by the United States and the Soviet Union, Khomeini rejected both superpowers. His slogan "Neither East, nor West, but the Islamic Republic" reflected his confrontational orientation toward the superpowers of the day. It also underpinned his doctrine of the export of the "Islamic Revolution" worldwide.[7] In his words, "We should try hard to export our revolution to the world. . . . all the superpowers and all the powers have risen to destroy us. If we remain in an enclosed environment we shall definitely face defeat."[8]

As important as these ideas of Khomeini are in understanding his worldview in general and hostility toward the United States in

2. See R. K. Ramazani, ed., *Iran's Revolution: The Search for Consensus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 48–68.

3. See Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran: The Inside Story of the 1979 U.S. Embassy Capture* (Canada: Talonbooks, 2000), 45.

4. For the full text, see *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Middle East Africa*, vol. 5, no. 214, 2 November 1979.

5. For the full text, see ibid., 6 November 1979.

6. See R. K. Ramazani, "Khomayni's Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy," in *Islam in Foreign Policy*, ed. Addid Dawisha (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 9–32.

7. R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Export of the Revolution: Politics, Ends, and Means," in *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, ed. John L. Esposito (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990), 40–62.

8. See note 5 above.

particular, they were inseparable from his perception of the American threat to his revolution and Iranian independence. He believed that the success of the revolution guaranteed Iran's freedom from American domination. But the quest for independence in general has been as old as the history of the Iranian state and has been shaped largely by Iran's tragic experience with foreign invasion, occupation, and interference in Iranian affairs over the millennia.

Regardless of the militant students' claim that they were following Khomeini's ideology, they were no less influenced by the perception of the American threat to the revolution. According to the leader of the student movement, Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha, the students' takeover was an act of "protest against the admission of the shah to the United States."[9] The protest, according to Khoeiniha, sprang from Iran's bitter memory of the American-engineered coup against the popular prime minister Dr. Mohammad Musaddiq in 1953. I was told by a former American hostage that while in captivity when he admonished a student for hostage taking, the student responded, "Your country took my whole country hostage in 1953 and held it for a quarter century before the Islamic Revolution."[10]

The takeover and the fall of the gradualist and moderate government of Mehdi Bazargan no doubt helped entrench the Islamist faction in power at the time. However, contrary to conventional wisdom, Khomeini's endorsement of the takeover was not merely an effort to consolidate power. It was also a response to the perceived American threat. Specifically he was alarmed by the visit of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to the Middle East on 9 February 1979, only eight days after Khomeini's return to Iran. Secretary Brown stated unequivocally that the United States would defend its vital interest in the Persian Gulf oil supplies by military force "if appropriate."[11] This unprecedented statement was coupled with U.S. negotiations with Oman, Somalia, and Kenya for military facilities and with the dispatch of the USS *Constellation* and several supporting warships to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, as well as the strengthening of the small U.S. naval force in the Gulf itself.

With Khomeini's support ensured, after the fall of the Bazargan government revolutionary students blocked every effort made by Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, first acting foreign minister and then the first president of revolutionary Iran, and Sadeq Qotbzadeh, Iran's foreign minister, to settle the hostage crisis. The students also in effect rejected every move by outside powers, individuals, and the United Nations to mediate an end to the captivity of the Americans.[12] My own proposal to President Jimmy Carter for the dispatch of leading Muslim scholars to plead with Khomeini for the release of the hostages was aborted, and I received much flak from Iranian quarters for saying in interviews with *Time* magazine and NBC's *Meet the Press* program that the takeover was incompatible with Islam, with Iran's proverbial culture of hospitality, and with international law.

The eventual settlement of the U.S.-Iran dispute, however, did little to repair the damage done to Iran's international legitimacy. As said before, to date, the suspicion of Iranian moves on the world stage may be at least in part traced back to America's prolonged anguish over the hostage crisis. Ironically, the unintended consequences of the takeover first gripped the students themselves.[13] Their intention to seize the American Embassy for only 3 days resulted instead in an unforeseen 444 days, an agonizing period that helped develop international distaste for the revolutionary regime.

Damaging International Legitimacy

The takeover of the American Embassy impaired Iran's international legitimacy. Although the damage lingers on, Iran's major players at the time realized the problem. For example, Bazargan condemned the takeover as a violation of international law and civilized norms of diplomacy and called for the immediate release of the hostages. Khoeiniha was reluctant to

9. See Khoeiniha's preface to Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*.

10. Bruce L. Laingen's conversation with the author, 11 November 2004.

11. See R. K. Ramazani, "Security in the Persian Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, 57 (1979): 821–35.

12. Ibid.

13. According to Ebtekar, "At the time, no one ever dreamed takeover would last any longer than three days" (*Takeover in Tehran*, 54).

inform Khomeini in advance of their plan to occupy the American Embassy, apparently on the ground that such an action would amount to "the violation of international rules."[14] In contrast, the former revolutionary students, who attempt today to justify their action as having been compatible with international law on the ground that it was taken in self-defense under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, seem to be clutching at straws because in reality the international community reacted disapprovingly to the takeover both politically and legally.

To mention some of the most obvious examples of international disapprobation, one must start with the United States itself. The hostage crisis lay at the heart of the 1980 American break of diplomatic relations with Iran, which continues to the present time. It triggered the American containment policy toward the revolutionary regime economically, politically, and militarily. It fueled the suspicion that Iran helped the suicide bombings in Beirut in 1983. It led to the American support of Iraq in the war against Iran after the Iranian offensive against Iraq began in 1982. In addition, it enabled the United States to pressure other nations to curtail their dealings with Iran.

The cost of the students' dismissal of the importance of international legitimacy in world politics far exceeds these and many other American moves against Iran. It isolated Iran in the international system in general as evidenced by the world outcry of disapproval through international forums. A few examples of disapprobation include the unanimous Provisional Order (29 November 1979) and the Judgement (15 May 1980) of the International Court of Justice, the UN Security Council's Resolution 457 (4 December 1979) and Resolution 461 (31 December 1979), and the resolutions of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in January and May 1980.

Perhaps one of the most telling indications of the depth of international anger against Iran is to be seen in the contrast between the international community's attitudes toward the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait ten years later in 1990. In the case of Iran, it took the UN Security Council six long days after the Iraqi invasion on 22 September 1980 to adopt Resolution 479, which even then characterized the invasion as merely "the situation between Iran and Iraq." The resolution called on Iran, the object of aggression, to "refrain immediately from further use of force" and failed to call on Iraq to withdraw its forces from Iranian territory. By contrast in the case of Kuwait, the council adopted its Resolution 660 on the very day of the Iraqi invasion, condemned the invasion, and also demanded that Iraq withdraw "immediately and unconditionally all its forces to the positions in which they were located on 1 August 1990."[15]

No less indicative of the international community's displeasure with Iran was the cool reception given to the former UN secretary-general Javier Perez de Cuellar's report of 9 December 1991 to the Security Council in which he named Iraq's invasion of Iran as an act of "aggression."[16] Furthermore, the American media either ignored this important report or questioned the secretary-general's motives, suggesting that he designated Iraq as the initiator of the war because he desired to reward Iran for its help in the release of the Western hostages held in Lebanon. Such an insinuation, of course, disregarded the fact that the secretary-general at the time was fulfilling his responsibility under paragraph 6 of the Security Council's Resolution 598 of 20 July 1987, which eventually provided the basis of a cease-fire between Iraq and Iran. The timing of his report had more to do with the fact of his imminent retirement than with anything else.

Repairing the Damage to International Legitimacy

In a sense the very settlement of the hostage crisis in 1981 marked the beginning of the long process of gradual reintegration of the Iranian state into the international community and the rehabilitation of Iran's international image. Khomeini himself recognized the importance of diplomatic ties with other nations

14. Quoted in Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 166.

15. See R. K. Ramazani, "Who Started the Iraq-Iran War? A Commentary," *Virginia Journal of International Law* 33 (1992): 69–89.

16. For the text of the secretary-general's report see Ramazani, "Who Started the Iraq-Iran War?"

once he felt that his revolution was secure. He admonished the extremists who rejected Iran's relations with any other country. He told them that isolation in world affairs would amount to "annihilation." He condemned the mining of the Suez Canal in 1984 on the ground that it was, in his words, "against the sentiments of the world, against Islam, and against common sense."[17] During his lifetime Iran sold oil to the United States indirectly, purchased arms from Israel secretly, and resumed economic relations with Western Europe openly, making the continent one of Iran's main trade partners.

The process of reintegration of Iran into the international community intensified after Khomeini. President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani in his eight years in office in effect turned on its head the doctrine of "Neither East, nor West" by expanding Iran's relations with both and by reaching out to the pro-Western Persian Gulf monarchies to an unprecedented extent.[18] With respect to the United States, he observed a strict policy of neutrality in the first Persian Gulf war and upheld UN resolutions.[19] He also helped in the release of American and other Western hostages in Lebanon.[20] With regard to the Soviet Union, even before he was president, Rafsanjani set a new foundation for Iranian-Soviet economic and military relations. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, he vigorously pursued diplomatic, cultural, and economic relations with the newly independent republics in Transcaucasia and Central Asia.[21] He also pressed for greater trade relations with Western Europe and Japan and enhanced the role of Iran in the OIC as a major player.[22]

Efforts to reintegrate Iran into the international system have reached an unprecedented height since the presidency of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. It came as a surprise to most observers that his first major foreign policy statement addressed the American people. He called for people-to-people exchanges between Iran and the United States as a first constructive step toward the goal of breaking down the wall of distrust that has existed between the two countries since the hostage crisis. His overall conciliatory foreign policy underscored the importance of reducing international tensions, with the knowledge of course that such an emphasis could enhance Iran's image, prestige, and legitimacy in the international system.

In keeping with the essentially conciliatory thrust of his foreign policy, Khatami took the initiative of pressing for dialogue among civilizations in the United Nations. The General Assembly took up his initiative in a resolution calling for the designation of 2001 as the year of dialogue among civilizations. Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for international conferences, seminars, and other forums and the dissemination of scholarly studies worldwide for enhancing dialogue among civilizations.[23]

Khatami took the necessary step on 22 September 1998 toward removing the main stumbling block in Iran's relations with Europe. He described Khomeini's life-threatening fatwa against Salman Rushdie as the expression of Khomeini's own view as an Islamic jurist and declared, "We should consider the Salman Rushdie issue as completely finished."[24] Two days later Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi told British foreign secretary Robin Cook, "The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever to threaten the life of the author of *The Satanic Verses* or anybody associated with his work, nor will it encourage or assist anybody to do so."[25] A good example of Iran's efforts to breach the wall of distrust with the United States is the Khatami government's help to Washington in destroying the Taliban regime through Iran's proxy, the Northern Alliance; its constructive participation in the Bonn

17. R. K. Ramazani, "Iran: Burying the Hatchet," *Foreign Policy*, no. 60 (1985): 52–74. For a study of this tension between religious ideology and pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy since ancient times, see R. K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 58 (2004): 549–59.

18. See R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South," *Middle East Journal* 46 (1992): 393–412.

19. See R. K. Ramazani, *Future Security in the Persian Gulf: America's Role*, Special Report, *Middle East Insight* (Washington, DC, 1991), 1–28.

20. See R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), with a new epilogue on the Iranian-American arms deal.

21. See Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy."

22. See R. K. Ramazani, "The Emerging Arab-Iranian Rapprochement," *Middle East Policy* 6 (1998): 45–62.

23. See R. K. Ramazani, "Dialogue: The Need for a Theory," *Global Dialogue* 3 (2001): 46–55.

24. As quoted in *New York Times*, 23 September 1998.

25. As quoted in *Washington Post*, 25 September 1998.

Conference that resulted in the interim government of Hamid Karzai; and its commitment of more than $500 million to the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.[26]

Relations with America and International Legitimacy

As important as Iran's efforts to regain international legitimacy may be, repairing relations with the United States could further aid those efforts. At the moment, however, the hostility of the Bush administration toward Iran is, to say the least, discouraging. President Bush included Iran in his moralistic "axis of evil" along with Iraq and North Korea. He also threatened Iran with a preemptive strike as a "rogue" state that might provide terrorist groups with weapons of mass destruction. The bellicose attitude of President Bush toward Iran has not spared even the reformist government of President Khatami because his denunciation of the whole regime necessarily included Khatami's government. This position was a complete reversal of the Clinton administration's sensitive and responsive approach to Iran after Khatami was elected president.

Maybe, as the saying goes, enemies over time become like each other. The confrontational attitudes of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration today resemble those of the radical conservatives in the Iranian regime. During the hostage crisis, Iranian extremists dismissed the importance of international legitimacy, and today the Bush administration seems to be doing the same as evidenced, for example, by its internationally unauthorized invasion of Iraq. The Iranian hardliners supported the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the American neoconservatives pressed for the invasion of Iraq. However, one of the most significant features of the Iranian political scene today is the remarkable attitudinal transformation among the former hostage takers. They are among the leading advocates of improving relations with the United States. Whether or not this transformation reflects their striving "to expiate" past wrongs, the fact remains that it is useful for the future of Iran's relations with the United States. Massoumeh Ebtekar claims that "the ultimate aim" of her account of the "fateful" takeover of the American Embassy is to alleviate tensions between Iran and the United States and "to engage the two diverse and different cultures in a constructive dialogue."[27]

Conclusion

Improving relations with the United States could further help Iran's efforts for regaining greater international legitimacy. It could also enable Iran to resolve at least some of its major economic problems, particularly by removing the longtime American opposition to its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Yet no degree of international legitimacy could make up for the regime's waning domestic legitimacy. The shah's regime, as I wrote before the revolution, acquired considerable national power and international legitimacy, while it lost internal legitimacy.[28] Ayatollah Khomeini called for "law" and justice, but the regime has so far failed to fulfill the revolution's promise of a better life for all the people. At the moment, the reversal of the fortunes of the reformists in the Majlis and the prospect of further reformist setbacks as a result of the impending presidential elections would seem to doom the prospects of change for the better.

To stop here, however, would ignore the popular demands for economic, social, and political change. The continued acts of repression will not stop these demands. They will surely further alienate the people from the regime and undermine its legitimacy. In closing, I reiterate what I said in my address of 4 September 2000 to President Khatami at the United Nations: "I believe there can be no durable political order without equitable justice under the law and no justice without liberty."[29]

26. See Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy."

27. See Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran*.

28. See R. K. Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy, 1941–1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975); Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972); and Ramazani, *The United States and Iran: The Patterns of Influence* (New York: Praeger, 1983).

29. For the text of the address, see R. K. Ramazani, "The Role of Iran in the New Millennium: A View from the Outside," *Middle East Policy* 8 (2001): 43–67; for a discussion of the Iranian quest for democracy in history, see R. K. Ramazani, "Iran, Democracy, and the United States," in *The Future of Liberal Democracy: Thomas Jefferson and the Contemporary World*, ed. R. K. Ramazani and Robert Fatton Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 184–201.