

Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar. "Causes of the U.S. Hostage Crisis in Iran: The Untold Account of the Communist Threat." *Security Studies* 26:4 (2017): 665-697. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1336390>.

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In this detailed and scholarly article, Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar is definitely on to something. He argues that those who captured and occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979-1981 (the so-called "Moslem Student Followers of the Imam's Line") were responding to serious challenges from Iranian leftists. By their action, he argues, the occupiers were pre-empting the leftists' anti-American rhetoric and undercutting their claims to be the standard-bearers of Ayatollah Khomeini's campaign to end Iran's ties to the United States.

The author writes:

For political factions clamoring for power in a climate of uncertainty following the revolution, anti-Americanism was a commodity to be appropriated for political gain. Leftist and Islamist factions instrumentally deployed anti-Americanism to outbid one another's anti-imperialist credibility. This chain of strategic interactions culminated in the Islamists' seizure of the US embassy on November 4, 1979 (667).

In the author's view, in 1979 the students and their Islamist allies saw themselves threatened by their erstwhile leftist allies in the revolutionary coalition that had overthrown the Iranian monarchy months before. In order to defeat that challenge, the Islamists needed to outdo their rivals in the ferocity of their anti-Americanism rhetoric and by taking a dramatic action that would discredit leftists' claims to revolutionary purity and to being the true anti-Americans.

This motivation, according to Tababar, was far more important than other explanations for the event, such as a desire to bring down Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's interim government, the desire to humiliate the United States, the desire to prevent a repeat of the events of August 1953, or the desire to crush the hated Iranian liberals—both secular and religious nationalists—who had joined the campaign against the Shah.¹

Although he sometimes makes Iran's political contest clearer than it was at the time, the author's view makes sense. In Tehran (where I was a U.S. embassy hostage in Iran for fourteen months) I witnessed first-hand the intense and murky political struggles in late summer and early fall of 1979. One thing was clear: If the revolution had been about making Iranians masters in their own house, six months after the fall of the Shah there was no agreement about which Iranians should be masters in what kind of house. The leftists were openly active. Young women in dark blue smocks and head-scarfs sold their newspapers to motorists at busy intersections; kiosks in front of Tehran University peddled cassettes of Dhofari rebel (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Oman and the Arabian Gulf, PFLOAG) songs; leftist rallies were publicly announced; and the leftist student groups were especially strong on university campuses. In the weeks before 4 November, leftists occupied luxury hotels in Tehran, turning them into impromptu dormitories, and the authorities of the provisional government were powerless to stop them.

Whatever the reality, both Iranian Islamists and nationalists were worried about the growing power of the leftist groups. Although Khomeini had famously said (in January 1979) that Iranian Marxists, in the absence of conspiracies, would be free to express their ideas, the reality nine months later was different. Tehran's walls displayed Khomeini's warnings against the *joujeh kommunist* (baby Communists) presumably of the *Mojahedin-e-Khalq* (MKO) and *Fadayan-e-Khalq* (FKO) organizations. Leftist propaganda berated the provisional government and its "American patrons" for the arrest and imprisonment of Mohammad Reza Sa'adati, an MKO member accused of spying for the Soviet Union. (Sa'adati was executed in July 1981 in the reign of terror against the MKO).

In Mohammad Shirvani's 2007 film *444 Days*, we hear Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, who claimed to be one of the five original planners of the U.S. embassy attack, say that Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad (then an engineering student and later two-term president of Iran) urged the group to attack the Soviet Embassy instead of the Americans. His view was that the Soviets were supporting the most dangerous enemies of the Islamic Revolution, i.e. the Iranian left. The monarchist and nationalist agents of the Americans were, in his view, much less threatening than the Islamists' former leftist allies. When the rest of the group rejected Ahmadinezhad's proposal, he withdrew from the entire enterprise.

In 2014, when Asgharzadeh and I had a joint telephone conversation with the Tehran magazine *Andisheh-Pouya*, he claimed that if he and his friends had not acted when they did, a more violent (presumably leftist)

¹ See, for example, Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran* (New York: Pearson, 2007); and Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

group would have attacked the embassy.² I could hardly believe he was claiming to have done us some kind of favor and told the magazine, “*Menat sar-e-ma migozarad?*” (Now we’re supposed to be in his debt?)

In February 1979, the provisional government had been able to act decisively when armed leftists (FKO) attacked the U.S. embassy. The thesis is unprovable, but it is very likely that nine months later Khomeini decided to endorse the embassy attack once he understood its perpetrators were not leftists, but a faction of young Islamists. Once he did so, the feeble provisional authorities could not act, and what had begun as a 1970s-style student sit-in became a full-blown international crisis that would (among other things) crush Iran’s nationalists, secularists, and leftists, and end any possibility of Iranian democracy and an orderly relationship between the U.S. and the new system in Tehran.

Even from inside my embassy prison cell and with no access to news, in early 1980 I heard evidence of the Islamist-leftist struggle. Large demonstrations outside the embassy walls included the slogan “*marg bar monafegin*” (“death to the hypocrites”), a play on the name *mojahedin* and a reference to seventh-century betrayals in Medina. In March 1980, a leftist group demonstrated outside the embassy against rumored plans to put us in the custody of the Iranian Foreign Ministry (presumably as a first step to release). In contrast to the more disciplined mainstream groups, this group sounded small, disorganized, and its slogans and shouts close to hysterical. In the fall of 1980, I spent a few cold weeks in a cell in Evin Prison where the walls were covered with leftist slogans (apparently from FKO prisoners) about “armed movements of the masses.”

Drawing from Islamist, leftist, and foreign sources, the author makes a persuasive case. A question remains: Were the Islamists’ fears justified and could the left have defeated its rivals in the chaotic power struggles of 1979-80? Whatever the answer, there is ample evidence that many—including Ayatollah Khomeini and young engineering student Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad—took the threat from the left—particularly the MKO—very seriously. Throughout 1980 and 1981 the detested “hypocrites” became a perceived existential threat to the regime, and their assassinations took a heavy toll of senior officials. In response, the authorities launched a bloody campaign of suppression culminating in the mass executions of prisoners in 1988.

Much of this history has become clear only in retrospect. At the time, matters were much more confused, and boundaries among groups and terms like ‘left,’ ‘right,’ and ‘Islamist’ remained imprecise. Similarly, the motivations behind the Embassy takeover were mixed. The desire to outflank the left’s anti-Americanism was important, but there were other motives: the desire to end any possibility of orderly U.S.-Iranian relations; the fear of a pro-monarchy coup repeating the events of 1953; the desire to crush the hated ‘liberals,’ many of whom held posts in Bazargan’s interim government and were seen as lacking revolutionary fervor. At the personal level, there was the chance for young people to miss university classes and to meet members of the opposite sex.

At the same time, things were not going well for the new order: the promised paradise had not arrived; there were serious problems in the Kurdish regions; there were shortages of basic goods; and there was disorder on university campuses. What better way to address these problems than to manufacture hysteria and a crisis with a foreign enemy whom many Iranians already believed to be responsible for all the abuses of the old regime and the failures of the new.

² “Which Hostage? Which Hostage-taker?” *Andisheh Pouya*, (November 2014/Aban 1393): 37-45. (In Persian).

Among the student-occupiers of the embassy, most of whom were studying engineering, it was difficult to find any coherent ideology. Their ideas were a mish-mash of ahistorical leftist and religious notions imperfectly understood. In that context it is surprising that the author makes no mention of the works of Dr. Ali Shari'ati (d. 1977), sometimes called the “intellectual godfather” of the Islamic Revolution and whom our captors held in great respect. His utopian ideas mixing Shia Islam and European thought had so strongly influenced them that when I asked for reading material in Persian, they gave me Shari'ati's essays, usually transcripts of his lectures from the 1970s. One was “Father, Mother, We are Accused”.³ In that short work Shari'ati ridicules the formalistic ideas of older Iranians and argues for a modern, militant interpretation of such Shia principles as sacrifice and *entezar* (expectation of the return of the hidden Imam).

Ayatollah-Taba'ar's article is a major and welcome contribution to the history of events that are still not well-understood. The author has provided a clear, coherent, and scholarly account of a murky and violent time. In his effort to clarify, however, he sometimes risks making boundaries between competing groups clearer and better defined than they were at the time. In 1979, Iran experienced a confused and many-sided struggle for power with shifting alliances and allegiances. Capturing and occupying the U.S. embassy was one event in that struggle—an event that both cemented factional control and brought most Iranians war, brutality, authoritarian rule, and international pariahdom. The author has made an outstanding effort to make sense of these events and the seemingly self-destructive actions that, at first glance, worked against every interest of Iran's new revolutionary and Islamic order.

John Limbert is Class of 1955 Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the U.S. Naval Academy and the author of numerous books and articles on Iran. During a 34-year diplomatic career, he served mostly in the Middle East and Islamic Africa (including two tours in Iraq), was Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and served as deputy assistant secretary of state responsible for Iranian affairs. Beginning in 1964, he worked in Iran as a university and high school teacher, and later served at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, where he was held hostage in 1979-1981.

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³ Lecture originally delivered at the Hosseiniyeh—ye-Ershad (Tehran) on 12 November 1971. The original title is “accused” (*mottaham*) while the English versions use “responsible”. Recording available (in Persian) on www.shariati.com/audio/mottaham.html.