The Swiss and the Iranian Hostage Crisis

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by Dwight Page

Like the Kennedy assassination and the events surrounding the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in New York, all the world remembers the Iranian Hostage Crisis. For 444 days—from November 4, 1979, until January 20, 1981, all good and decent people around the globe were shocked, appalled, and disgusted by the endless stories of abuse and contempt to which the innocent American hostages—employees of the legitimate Embassy of the United States in Iran—were subjected by the Iranian student terrorists. Until this event, diplomatic immunity had always been a sacred concept, respected by all nations. On the rare occasion when the diplomat’s sacred person was violated, swift punishment by the authorities of the host nation was sure to follow. We recall that when, during the Chinese Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the German ambassador to China was murdered outside the Imperial Palace and the Forbidden City in Peking, the Empress Cixi immediately ordered the decapitation of the malicious culprits who had been involved in this unfortunate incident. In addition, at that time, in order to appease the
rightfully offended European and American Embassies in Peking, the Empress Cixi invited the numerous ambassadors from Europe and the United States then residing in Peking to the Imperial Court of China and, in the purest and most impeccable Oxfordian English, publicly apologized for this injury to international law. Such courteous behavior was the norm in the royal courts and the governments of the world of yesteryear, universally governed by the Law and Ethics, and by the wise teachings of the Christ, the wise teachings of the Koran or the wise teachings of the Buddha.

The recent film *Argo*, directed by Ben Affleck, has resurrected those unhappy events which transpired in Tehran during the fall of 1970 and throughout 1980. The film focuses upon the incident known as the Canadian Caper and traces the events leading to the rescue of six American diplomats who were hiding out at the residence of the Canadian Ambassador in Tehran, Ken Taylor, and at the residence of his colleague John Sheardown. The film has become extremely popular. Indeed, at the Academy Award presentations in February 2013, it won the award for Best Motion Picture of 2012.

The violation of the diplomatic immunity and sanctity of the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 was already deplorable and tragic enough. Unfortunately, this new film *Argo* has exacerbated the resentment surrounding the captivity of the American hostages in Iran by failing to properly acknowledge key players in the historical events leading to the release of those hostages on January 20, 1981. The film gives the erroneous impression that only the Canadians were involved in the efforts to help the beleaguered Americans. Indeed, early in the film, the CIA mastermind of the scheme to liberate the six trapped
Americans, Tony Mendez—played by Mr. Affleck—is briefed on developments by his CIA supervisor Jack O’Donnell. During the course of this briefing, Mr. O’Donnell explains that the six United States Embassy staff members had escaped the besieged American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and had been given refuge by the Canadians. He thoughtlessly states: ‘Brits turned them away, Kiwis turned them away.’

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Danes, the Swedes, the New Zealanders, and the British all gave freely of their time and contacts in order to try to rescue the six American hostages who had received asylum from the Canadians.

Naturally, the above-mentioned nations have been offended by the film makers’ perverse and incomprehensible distortion of history. Sir John Graham, now 86, who was Great Britain’s Ambassador to Iran at the time, said in a recent interview: “It is not the truth that they were turned away from the British Embassy. We gave them all help at the time. My immediate reaction on hearing about the claims of this film was one of outrage. I have since simmered down, but am still very distressed that the filmmakers should have got it so wrong. My concern is that this inaccurate account should not enter the mythology of the events in Tehran in November, 1979.”

Arthur Wyatt, 83, who was then the British chargé d’affaires in Tehran, said: “Hollywood’s record in this is certainly lacking in many cases. I’m disappointed to hear how we have been portrayed. . . . The Americans who had escaped from their embassy first fetched up at our summer compound in northern Tehran, and I think that they stayed there for one night before moving on to the Canadians. If it had been discovered we were helping them, I can assure you we’d all have been for the high jump.” Mr. Wyatt, who served as a diplomat for forty-five years, was awarded the Companion of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George for his work in Tehran, in recognition of the risks he took at the time.

In addition, the victims themselves—United States consular officer Robert Anders and the five colleagues who fled into hiding with him on November 4, 1979—have likewise expressed their profound regret that references to the helpfulness and thoughtfulness of so many nations in assisting them have been omitted in Argo.

Mr. Anders, now 87, recently told The Sun Telegraph: “It is absolutely incorrect, absolutely untrue, what the British and the New
Zealanders turned us away.] On the contrary, they made us very comfortable, the British were very helpful and they helped to move us around to different places after that too. . . They put their lives on the line for us. We were all at risk. I hope no one in Britain will be offended by what’s said in the film. The British were good to us and we’re forever grateful.”

To be sure, to his credit, Ben Affleck, who also stars in the leading role, has admitted agonizing over taking such liberties with history but said that he had depicted events “as best I can, factually: I struggled with this long and hard, because it casts Britain and New Zealand in a way that is not totally fair,” he conceded. “But I was setting up a situation where you needed to get a sense that these six people had nowhere else to go. It does not mean to diminish anyone.”

Most significantly and most tragically, Argo makes only one slight reference to the tremendous and extensive amount of aid given by the Swiss during all phases of the Iranian Hostage Crisis: at the film’s conclusion the six American captives are air lifted out of the Tehran Airport to safety in Zurich by a Swiss American flight. The final scene of the film—a classic cliff hanger—shows the Iranian terrorists in jeeps gesticulating madly and pursuing the Swiss aircraft as it lifts off Iranian territory.

In fact, the Swiss government, more than any other, was from the beginning constantly involved in the efforts to secure a swift and honorable release of all the American hostages in Tehran. The author personally and vividly recalls that throughout the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the American news networks were continually reporting stories concerning the many Swiss efforts to free the hostages and to re-establish the lost entente between the United States and Iran.

Indeed, the principal objective of this article is to trace the various humanitarian and diplomatic acts of virtue engineered in those days on
behalf of the distraught hostages and the American people by our longtime friend and ally: the government of the Swiss Confederation.

However, in order that the reader will properly understand the obstacles facing the Swiss and the Americans in their efforts to release the hostages, it is first necessary to review the events leading up to the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. In February 1979, less than a year before the hostage crisis, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, had been overthrown in a revolution. For several decades prior to his deposition, the United States had allied with and supported the Shah. By the 1950s, the Shah was engaged in a power struggle with Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, an immediate descendant of the previous monarchy, the Qajar dynasty. In 1953 the British and U.S. spy agencies helped Iranian royalists depose the government of Mosaddegh in a military coup d'état codenamed Opera-
tion Ajax, and helped the Shah to extend his power. Thereupon the Shah appointed himself an absolute monarch and ruled as such rather than as a constitutional monarch, his position before the 1953 crisis, with the aim of assuming complete control of the government and purging the disloyal. United States support and funding of the Shah continued after the coup, with the CIA training the government’s secret police, SAVAK. In the subsequent decades of the callous Cold War period, various economic, cultural and political issues united opposition against the Shah and led to his overthrow.

Months before the revolution on New Year’s Eve, December 31, 1977, American president Jimmy Carter further angered anti-Shah Iranians with a televised toast to the Shah, declaring how beloved the Shah was by his people. After the revolution culminated with the return of Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini from France in February 1979, the embassy had been occupied and staff held hostage briefly. Rocks and bullets had broken enough of the embassy’s front-facing windows for them to be replaced with bulletproof glass. Its staff was reduced to just over 60 from a high of nearly 1,000 earlier in the decade.

The Carter administration attempted to mitigate anti-American feeling by finding a new relationship with the de facto Iranian government and continuing military cooperation in hopes that the situation would stabilize. However, on October 22, 1979, the United States permitted the Shah—who was ill with lymphoma—to enter New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center for medical treatment. The Department of State had discouraged the request, understanding the political delicacy of the situation, but after pressure from influential figures including former United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Council on Foreign Relations chairman David Rockefeller, the Carter administration decided to grant the Shah’s request.

The Shah’s admission to the United States intensified Iranian revolutionaries’ anti-Americanism and spawned rumors of another U.S.-backed coup and reinstallation of the Shah. Revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini—who had been exiled by the Shah for fifteen years—heightened rhetoric against the “Great Satan,” the United States, talking of what he called evidence of American plotting. In addition to putting an end to what they believed was American sabotage against the revolution, the hostage takers hoped to depose the provisional revolutionary government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, which they
believed was plotting to normalize relations with the United States and extinguish Islamic revolutionary ardor in Iran. Thus was set the stage for the Iranian Hostage Crisis.

Also, in order better to understand the developments in the wake of the seizure of the American Embassy on November 4, 1979, it is important that the reader understand the geographical location of the various hostages in the weeks following that event: the majority of the hostages remained within the American Embassy; three high-level officials—Bruce Laingen, Victor Tomseth and Mike Howland—were kept in seclusion at the Foreign Ministry; six of the hostages who had managed to escape the Embassy were being secretly housed at the home of the Canadian Ambassador Ken Taylor.

During the first couple of weeks after the takeover, the Iranian government reached the decision that thirteen hostages would be released. On November 19-20, 1979, the decision was made by American and European officials that these freed hostages would be taken to the United States Air Force hospital in Wiesbaden, Germany, for prompt medical care. The purpose of these medical visits was to ease the transition as hostages and families were reunited.

During this early period of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, a special relationship developed between American authorities and the government of Switzerland. Among the staff papers prepared in the early days of the crisis was the usual legal memorandum on appointing another government to look after United States interests if diplomatic relations were broken. It is a customary step when diplomatic relations are broken, for each government to appoint a “protecting power” to do its business in the other’s capital. Although relations between the United States and Iran were not broken till later, the Washington team during this early phase of the crisis developed close working and personal relationships with the Swiss that became central in later dealings with Tehran. The Swiss ambassador in Tehran, Erik Lang, and his colleagues in Bern and Washington, were thus gradually drawn into the crisis and would henceforward play crucial roles in its resolution.

When it was announced that the thirteen hostages would be released, the Swiss immediately offered an aircraft to fly them to Europe. They offered communication with Tehran through a channel beginning with the Swiss Ambassador to the United States, Raymond Probst, and his deputy, Franz Muheim, in Washington, going through Edouard Brun-
ner, the senior ministry official responsible for the Middle East in Berne, and Swiss Foreign Minister Pierre Aubert, and ending with Ambassador Erik Lang in Tehran. Increasingly, Lang became the bearer of sensitive American messages to key Iranians, a principal analyst of the political dynamics in Tehran, and an independent source of judgment on other negotiating channels. Probst would bring Lang’s thoughtful analytical messages to the Department of State in Washington, and when the State Department had replies, State Department officials would drive them to Ambassador Probst’s office late in the day, keeping him and his communicators at work well into the evening. Eventually, the following April, when the United States broke relations with Iran, Switzerland formally became the protecting power, but help far above and beyond the call of duty had by then already come to characterize the daily diplomatic relationship between the United States and the Swiss Confederation.

Two additional incidents further illustrate the close working relationship between the Swiss and the United States during this early phase of the Hostage Crisis, during the fall and winter of 1979-1980. First, the Swiss ambassador to Iran, Erik Lang, was secretly enlisted to carry sensitive information between the State Department and its chargé d’affaires in Tehran, Bruce Laingen, whom the reader will recall was being held hostage in the Foreign Ministry there.

Secondly, at this same time the Swiss were extremely helpful to one of the six Americans involved in the famed Canadian Caper, the subject of the recent award winning film Argo: they helped to hide an American agricultural attaché then residing in Tehran, named Henry Lee Schatz.

Mr. Schatz worked out of a leased office in a building occupied by the Swedes, which happened to overlook the United States Embassy compound. The morning of November 4, 1979, he watched from his office window as the Iranian students poured through the main gate of the Embassy and scattered to the various buildings inside. Early in the afternoon, Bruce Laingen directed him by telephone to lock up his documents and leave the building. On his way out, he bumped into some


Swedish diplomats, who welcomed him into their offices to wait out the occupation. He remained that first night in the Swedish embassy.

The next day, November 5, 1979, the Swedes got word that Schatz’s name was on the occupiers’ list of wanted Americans. For his safety, they agreed to move him immediately to the apartment of Swiss consular officer Celia Lithander, where he ended up staying for over two weeks. Schatz kept in close telephone contact with the other five houseguests hiding out at the Canadian Embassy, in particular Joe Stafford, but for security reasons they never divulged to each other where they were hiding.

The morning of November 21, 1979, Ken Taylor got an unexpected call from Kaj Sundberg, Sweden’s Ambassador to Iran. He was calling to tell his Canadian counterpart that the American diplomat Mr. Schatz had been hiding at the home of his Swiss colleague. He was also calling Mr. Taylor to explain that Sweden and Switzerland could no longer harbor the young American, and that he must be moved.

The day after Kaj Sundberg told Ken Taylor about the hiding Schatz, November 22, 1979, Canadian diplomat John Sheardown appeared at Cecilia Lithander’s apartment building. Although the Swiss consular officer had obviously been informed of the decision, nobody had told Mr. Schatz that he was going to be moved, so Sheardown used the opportunity to play a practical joke on him. Without introducing himself, he escorted Schatz out of the building and ordered him brusquely into a waiting car. Schatz assumed that his mysterious driver was from the CIA, and imagined that he was about to be spirited out of Tehran. “I was pretty paranoid,” he later recalled. Only after they had been in the car for a while did Sheardown break a grin, introduce himself, and explain to the intimidated Schatz that he was to join his five American colleagues at his own home, where they would remain in hiding until the CIA figured a way to spirit them all safely out of Iran. The two had a good laugh, stopped at the Canadian Embassy to pick up some clothing for the other houseguests and then drove on to Sheardown’s house. There Schatz was reunited with his fellow diplomats Robert Anders, the Staffords, and the Lijeks. Through the benevolent intervention of the Swedes and the Swiss, he was the last of the fugitive American diplomats to be brought in from the cold.

Although Henry Lee Schatz was a key player in the Canadian Caper and in the events described in *Argo*, and although Mr. Schatz is obvi-
ously portrayed in the film, neither Ben Affleck nor his colleagues give the slightest hint that Mr. Schatz was given asylum by the Swedes and the Swiss. The movie *Argo* gives the misleading impression that the Staffords, the Lijeks, Robert Anders, and Henry Lee Schatz all made their way swiftly out of the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, then wandered desperately through the streets of Tehran until they all arrived together at the home of the Canadian official, John Sheardown, where they were given shelter until the arrival of CIA agent Tony Mendez, who briefed them on his ingenious plan for their escape. The film script makes no mention whatsoever of the hospitality offered to Mr. Schatz by the Swedes or by the Swiss consular officer Cecilia Lithander.

This omission on the part of the filmmakers is incomprehensible and deplorable. It is a most grievous diplomatic *faux pas* which has obviously offended many people in both Sweden and Switzerland.

Early in the crisis, there was a great outpouring of help around the globe for the beleaguered hostages. Numerous private American academic specialists with expert knowledge of the Mideast were in touch with Iran daily or actually went to Tehran to talk with contacts there at high levels and to report informally to the crisis team in Washington.  

There was a feeling by the end of November 1979 that the United States needed to give more attention to how it would be possible to work with the Iranian political situation, but American anger at the Iranians still made it very tricky to take any step that would look as if we were “dealing with kidnappers.” The long honored principle of diplomatic immunity had been violated, and the international community considered this to be clearly unacceptable. The United States and Iran were addressing each other on different planes. Iranian rhetoric was revolutionary and religious, whereas American rhetoric was primarily legal and unaware of the profound distress and trauma to which the Iranian people had been subjected by the ousted Shah’s regime. The American government needed to bridge the gulf between the two nations while protecting the American people’s honor. In the days ahead the Swiss would prove to be the principal engineers of this bridge.
Bilateral Relations between the Swiss Confederation and Iran

It is easy to understand why the United States chose Switzerland as its mediator, negotiator and representative during the difficult days of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, for Switzerland has long enjoyed a special entente with Iran. Cordial relations between Switzerland and Iran go back to the seventeenth century, when Swiss clockmakers settled in the Persian Empire. Economic ties expanded in the nineteenth century, especially in the transport and banking sectors. Swiss archaeologists also participated in excavations in Persia. The two countries signed a goodwill and trade agreement in 1873 and a goodwill agreement and an agreement on establishment in 1934. Iranians began coming to Switzerland in the twentieth century as tourists, refugees and students, and Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi even did his studies at Le Rosey school near Rolle, completing his studies there in 1935.

Switzerland opened a consulate in Tehran in 1919, which it raised to embassy status in 1936. Because of its political neutrality, Switzerland has also represented the interests of a number of countries in Iran—including Italy (1946), Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland and New Zealand (1952), South Africa (1952, 1979-1995) and Lebanon (1984). In addition, it has represented Iran's interests in relations with the Axis powers (1941-1946), in Israel (1958-1987), in Iraq (1971-1973) and in South Africa (1979-1994). Switzerland has represented the consular and diplomatic interests of the United States in Iran since 1980 and the interests of Iran in Egypt since 1979.

Iran and Switzerland have good bilateral relations. There are agreements between the two countries on air traffic (1954, 1972 and 1994), road and rail transport (1977), export risk guarantees (1966), protection of investments (1998) and double taxation (2002).

Beginning in 1984, victims of the Iran-Iraq War received medical treatment in Switzerland. After the severe earthquakes of 1997 and 2003, Switzerland helped to rebuild the infrastructure. Cooperation on the national level to prevent natural catastrophes was initiated in 2006. The two countries have been engaged in a human rights dialogue since 2003 and in discussions on migration since 2005.
Swiss Involvement in the Iranian Hostage Crisis
From the Camp David Summit Meeting of November 1979
Until the Release of the Hostages January 20, 1981

The Swiss began to play an even more prominent, vital and central role in the negotiations between the United States and Iran concerning the hostages at the time of the Camp David meeting of Friday, November 23, 1979. Attending this meeting were National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski; Secretary of State Cyrus Vance; Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Harold Saunders; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dave Jones; Director of the CIA Admiral Stansfield Turner; and White House Press Secretary Jody Powell.

At Camp David, President Carter began his talk to his group of advisors by stressing that his first and major premise was that the United States had only a matter of weeks to resolve the crisis. We could not let the matter become protracted.

Next the President asked why we could not break diplomatic relations with Iran, close Iranian consulates in the United States, and expel most of its diplomats. The wise Cyrus Vance, although he sympathized with the President’s frustrations, argued sagaciously that maintaining what slim contacts we had with Iran might be the only avenue for a feasible solution. The President, respecting the Secretary of State’s expertise in such matters, acceded to his request: diplomatic ties with Iran would be maintained.

The President’s Board of Advisors then moved on to Khomeini’s latest threat of putting the hostages on trial and the Iranian students’ renewed threat of killing them if the United States took punitive military action. Both were alarming. The President had already made up his mind on how he would respond. If our people went on trial, the United States military would mine some or all of Iran’s ports. If even one hostage were harmed, the United States would bomb the Abadan refinery. But the advisors wondered how they could get this message to Khomeini with maximum effect? Thereupon Cyrus Vance suggested using the Swiss ambassador in Tehran, Erik Lang, for this purpose, as the Swiss were already representing us there. The President concurred, and it henceforward became official policy of the American government to rely upon the Swiss government as our official representative in Iran.4

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The Camp David meeting ended that same Friday afternoon, and the advisory team was whisked via helicopter back to the White House lawn, where they dispersed, having decided not to meet on Saturday and Sunday. Thus, Days 21 and 22 would be the first without national security meetings since Day 2 of the crisis.

That afternoon, back at the office, Admiral Stansfield Turner briefed the CIA hostage team on what had come out of Camp David: the United States would use military force if the hostages were placed on trial or harmed, but the real hope for release was to find acceptable terms for a negotiated deal. The only terms the United States could see as acceptable were release of the hostages followed by a United Nations commission of investigation.

On Monday, November 26, Day 23 of the crisis, Cyrus Vance was informed that the unnamed Iranian envoy to New York had at first refused even to send these proposed terms back to Tehran. He thought them totally unacceptable. The envoy did relent and did send the terms to Tehran, but his attitude and Khomeini’s peremptory refusal to receive American envoys Ramsey Clark and William Miller left the State Department crisis team very skeptical about the prospects for negotiation. The gap between what was acceptable to the President and what Khomeini would agree to seemed immense. No one could see any signs that the State Department could close the gap either by pressure or persuasion.

At this difficult and delicate stage of the negotiations, Swiss mediation was especially crucial because the members of President Carter’s own advisory team were not working well together, and the confused President often vacillated between divergent and contradictory points of view. Thus was created an insidious Hamlet syndrome which was most detrimental to the effective resolution of the crisis. The Swiss fortunately compensated for this lack of internal unity and cohesion at the White House through their long and much appreciated experience in negotiating with and placating foreign powers.

The fundamental reason that the President’s advisors were not working well as a team was that Cyrus Vance was pushing in one direction and Zbig Brzezinski in another. Mr. Brzezinski, and most of his advisors, felt that this instance of hostage taking was so heinous that it had to be solved before the United States could discuss Iran’s perceived
grievances. Cyrus Vance, on the other hand, believed in keeping the door open for Iran to engage us in reasonable and constructive discussions. The Iranians, after all, felt that they had a legitimate grievance and held the United States responsible for much of what they hated about the Shah’s regime. Mr. Vance felt that if the United States antagonized or humiliated the Iranians, it would take longer for them to deal with the United States, even through intermediaries. He wanted to apply whatever pressure we could through parties, like the United Nations and Switzerland, countries friendly to and respected by revolutionary Iran, or through world leaders who had an amicable rapport with Khomeini. As the conciliatory Secretary of State, he hoped not to drive more of a wedge between the United States and the Iranians; rather, he wanted to make them realize that the hostage issue could cause them harm by isolating Iran from the community of nations. Mr. Vance’s wise approach, which ultimately prevailed, required considerable patience, diplomatic skills and the constant and concerted vigilance and support of America’s Swiss representatives and allies in Tehran.

Swiss assistance to the United States became much more necessary when United States-Iran diplomatic relations were formally broken on April 6th, 1980. Shortly thereafter, on April 24, 1981, the Swiss government officially assumed the representation of American interest in Tehran via a special interests section of its embassy there. Since that time Iranian interests in the United States have been represented by the Iranian interests section of the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, D.C. These Swiss professional diplomatic services were most welcome to the American government at this dreadful time. No nation in modern times had ever confronted such a problem as the United States now faced. Its diplomats were held hostage in a bitterly hostile and unpredictable country, with the approval and blessing of that nation’s putative leaders. Worse yet, the normal manner of resolving conflicts, dialogue between the two disputants, was no longer available to the Americans, because the only people with whom they had had previous experience and on whom they had counted in the event of any problems had suddenly left the government.

To compound the problem, while the leaders of the Iranian Revolution were all united in their allegiance to the Ayatollah, they were

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deeply divided among themselves. On one side were the “occidentals”, President Bani-Sadr and Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, and those aligned with them. On the other side were the religious groups who wished to discredit the “secularists” and take power themselves. Chaos such as that engendered by the hostage crisis precisely served the latter group’s interests.7

For these ultra-conservative and xenophobic clerics, the seizure of the hostages by the students had been tantamount to a gift from Allah. The students understood that. They supported their clergy and devoutly hoped that they would come to power so as to establish a true theocracy that would “purify” the Iranian revolution of any and all Western tendencies. Their support was undergirded by historical fact: it had been the clergy that had led the fight against foreign economic domination, be it British, Russian or American, for more than one hundred years.

On May 9, 1980, the Iranian students got their wish. That day the people of Iran, voting in parliamentary elections, gave their overwhelming approval to hard-line Islamic candidates. At last the Ayatollah and the religious leaders were in a position to gain effective control of the country—and they had used the hostages to do so.

On that same date, when the more liberal secular candidates for parliament were receiving a drubbing in Iran, the Swiss once again became central players in the drama of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, for on that precise historical date, the Iranian Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh was at the Hôtel Bellerive-au-Lac in Zurich with human rights activists Christian Bourguet and Héctor Villalón, trying, once again, to come up with a fruitful and mutually beneficial approaches to the crisis.

On the flight to Zurich, Ghotbzadeh had a guest, the Swiss Foreign Minister Pierre Aubert. “It’s important to keep talking and let time take care of everything,” he told Aubert. Aubert entirely agreed and guaranteed total Swiss support for Ghotbzadeh’s upcoming negotiations in Switzerland.

In Zurich, Foreign Minister Aubert kept his word, arranging to have representatives of the Swiss Foreign Office to join in the counsels and deliberations on Iran. Their combined efforts came up with two expressions of the same idea: the first, an “Islamic initiative,” the

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second, a "Socialist initiative." The Islamic initiative envisioned the creation of a "front" of Islamic nations whose representatives would approach the Ayatollah with a plea that he invoke the tenets of the Koran calling for generosity, understanding and forgiveness. "There has to be forgiveness," they would tell him. "The time has come to forgive and forget and release the hostages." The Socialist initiative on the other hand, would enlist a group of progressive European leaders whose independence of either major political bloc might recommend them to the Iranians. These European Socialists, too, would attempt to persuade the Iranians to resolve the crisis in their own interest.  

The Islamic initiative got nowhere. The Socialist initiative did not fare much better. Felipe González, the leader of the Spanish Socialist Party, liked the idea, and he became even more enthusiastic when he discovered that other major European Socialist leaders had arrived independently at the same notion. In fact, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt; Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme had already gathered in Hamburg to discuss the matter. They had an active ally and soul mate in Tehran, Ali Reza Nobari, the governor of the Iranian Central Bank.

The European Socialist leaders who finally made the trip to Iran, González, Kreisky and Palme, managed to get through to the clerics, among them Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, the leader of the Islamic Republican Party, which had just taken control of the Iranian parliament. The European Socialists counseled Beheshti that putting the American hostages on trial would be the worst thing that the Iranians could possibly do.

Unfortunately, however, these visiting European Socialists found that the power structure in Iran was still so fragile, in spite of the recent elections, that the Iranians would not budge on their position, and no single leader in Iran would come forward to demand the release of the hostages.

A month later, Jimmy Carter would stop off in Madrid on his way home from an economic summit meeting in Venice. There would be much pomp and ceremony, but Carter's most important visit in Madrid would be with González. Carter would take home a sober message: with the ongoing power struggle in Iran, nothing could be done im-

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8Ibid., p. 249.
mediately to bring about the release of the hostages. One by one, the various initiatives were failing, and the back doors were closing.

On May 30, 1980, the efforts of the influential Egyptian journalist Mohammed Heikal as a mediator ended. That same day Heikal received another message from Harold Saunders via the same Egyptian courier whom the American diplomat had used several times before. “This is an opportunity for Heikal to go to Teheran while the new Parliament is forming,” Saunders optimistic message said. “He could contribute to a climate which could bring about the release of the hostages and suggest ways in which the United States might relate constructively to the political process in Teheran.”

Heikal refused. The best way for the American government to get its messages to the Iranians, now, he counseled, was through the Algerians and the Swiss.

Mohammed Heikal’s refusal and advice heralded the advent of a period of much more intensive Swiss involvement in the negotiations to free the hostages. Working with Algeria and the United States, the Swiss Confederation fervently sought an optimal resolution of the crisis.

Swiss aid during this final phase was characterized by an unusually high level of solicitude for the welfare of the hostages. Swiss Ambassador Fritz Lang, for example, constantly saw to their health and medical well being and was their benefactor on so many occasions.

Indeed, the very first person to greet the freed hostages when they boarded their flight home on January 20, 1981, was Ambassador Lang. Bruce Laingen recalls that when he boarded this humanitarian rescue flight in Tehran, he saw Ambassador Lang, who, with one of his staff, was meticulously recording the name of each and every one of the relieved American hostages as they appeared on board: the Swiss were determined not to leave the plane until they were absolutely sure that they had accounted for the presence of all the hostages. Thus, from the beginning until the end of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, Swiss help, concern and benevolence were exceedingly prominent and important.

Conclusion

The entire world knows that the long and arduous Iranian hostage crisis led to a formal agreement—the Algerian Accords of 1981—which

9 Ibid., p. 250.
produced the release of the American hostages on Ronald Reagan’s Inauguration Day, January 20, 1981. The entire world also knows that the Swiss and the Algerians were deeply involved in the negotiations which generated that famous agreement.

And yet Switzerland’s participation in the dialogue between Iran and the West by no means ceased with the resolution of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1981. Switzerland remains to this day the principal means for Iran to have access to international business and diplomacy.

Although Switzerland and Iran have greatly reduced their bilateral economic cooperation since the United Nations Security Council took up Iran’s nuclear enrichment program in 2005, and although the Swiss government has been cooperating with the United States to freeze banking accounts and other financial assets belonging to individuals involved in the Iranian nuclear program, Switzerland has remained committed in recent decades to the restoration of the entente between the United States, the European Union and Iran.

The current chief Iranian negotiator is Mohammad-Javad Larijani, the secretary of the Iranian Human Rights Council, the director of the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics in Tehran, and an advisor to the supreme leader of Iran. Mohammad Larijani has plenty of experience in direct, bilateral negotiations with the United States. He goes back to the Reagan years, having met with Robert McFarlane in Iran in May 1986.

Mr. Larijani’s numerous recent negotiations with American and European officials concerning the controversial Iranian nuclear program have taken place most frequently in Switzerland. In addition, the Swiss government—our official diplomatic proxy for discussions with the Iranian government—has been active in these recent bilateral deliberations. The present Swiss Ambassador to Tehran, Livia Lev Agosti, spent several hours with a Khamenei aide shortly before the November 2012 elections, and a few days after Obama’s victory, Mohammad Larijani flew to Switzerland to meet with Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter.

The Iranian-Swiss talks produced an outline of what an acceptable agreement between Iran and Europe and the United States might look like in 2014. Both sides were to make good-faith gestures at the outset. The Iranians promised to let the IAEA return to inspect Parchin, and they agreed to new talks with the so-called 5 + 1 (the United States,
Germany, France, England, China and Russia). The Iranians have delivered on both counts.

For their part, the Iranians have several demands, including easing sanctions. However, their number one requirement for an American gesture is right out of the historic playbook: hostage releases.

As incredible as it may seem, both Americans and Iranians are still in captivity. The Iranians insist on the return of the 48 “pilgrims” captured by the Free Syrian Army in Damascus in August 2013. These men are not pious tourists at all; their name is a misnomer. They are mostly from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and their superiors in Tehran badly want them back, in no small part because some of them are senior officers who know a great deal about Iran’s global operations.

In exchange, the Iranians offer to release several Americans under arrest in Iran. The most recent American arrested there is Saeed Abedini, a pastor who reportedly converted to Christianity in the United States. The list includes a former Marine, perhaps a former FBI agent, and an elderly Iranian-American scholar. And there are others, whose names have not appeared in any account, whom the Iranians believe to be CIA agents.

Thus, ironically, in 2014 there is a new Iranian hostage crisis. This situation would seem to be an endless saga of international relations, and a permanent element of the East-West dialogue.

In Geneva on Sunday, November 24, 2013, the United States and Iran agreed to a halt on nuclear development for six months. In the wake of the Geneva talks, supervised by the Swiss diplomatic corps, the Vice President of Iran Masoumeh Ebtekar has stated optimistically that the United States and Iran could cooperate in the reduction of the proliferation of nuclear armaments, as well as in fostering world peace. Apparently a new day of international good will has dawned in Iran. There is light at the end of the seemingly infinite tunnel of East-West mediation and negotiation.

Given all these historical facts and revelations, it would seem that Ben Affleck owes more than an apology to the international community of diplomats for his grotesque omissions in his film Argo.

Mr. Affleck is to be commended for his sensitive appreciation of the genuine plight of the Iranian people on the eve of their revolution in 1979-1980. After all, when the Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran...
from his exile in Paris on February 1, 1979, two million Iranians took to the streets in order to express their joy at the arrival of their supreme Holy Man and the fall of the Shah’s regime. Moreover, in the opening scenes of his film, Mr. Affleck provides an excellent and insightful summary of the historical reasons for the Iranian people’s distress and rage.

Hollywood often does remakes of its films, and directors, as they mature, often greatly improve their technical skill and competence, as well as their ethical sensitivity and their human understanding. It is certainly devoutly to be hoped that Ben Affleck will reconsider a remake of his motion picture Argo, and that in this new film he will pay proper respect for historical accuracy and for the many kind and compassionate acts of mercy toward the hostages shown by Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain, and most notably by the Swiss.

- Bryan College