

Waking Up in Tehran

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Global Research, January 11, 2013

[War Is A Crime](#)

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According to one theory, U.S.-Iranian relations began around November 1979 when a crowd of irrational religious nutcases violently seized the U.S. embassy in Iran, took the employees hostage, tortured them, and held them until scared into freeing them by the arrival of a new sheriff in Washington, a man named Ronald Reagan. From that day to this, according to this popular theory, Iran has been run by a bunch of subhuman lunatics with whom rational people couldn't really talk if they wanted to. These monsters only understand force. And they have been moments away from developing and using nuclear weapons against us for decades now. Moments away, I tell you!

According to another theory — a quaint little notion that I like to refer to as “verifiable history” — the CIA, operating out of that U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1953, maliciously and illegally overthrew a relatively democratic and liberal parliamentary government, and with it the 1951 *Time* magazine man of the year Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, because Mossadegh insisted that Iran's oil wealth enrich Iranians rather than foreign corporations. The CIA installed a dictatorship run by the Shah of Iran who quickly became a major source of profits for U.S. weapons makers, and his nation a testing ground for surveillance techniques and human rights abuses. The U.S. government encouraged the Shah's development of a nuclear energy program. But the Shah impoverished and alienated the people of Iran, including hundreds of thousands educated abroad. A secular pro-democracy revolution nonviolently overthrew the Shah in January 1979, but it was a revolution without a leader or a plan for governing. It was co-opted by rightwing religious forces led by a man who pretended briefly to favor democratic reform. The U.S. government, operating out of the same embassy despised by many in Iran since 1953, explored possible means of keeping the Shah in power, but some in the CIA worked to facilitate what they saw as the second best option: a theocracy that would substitute religious fanaticism and oppression for populist and nationalist demands. When the U.S. embassy was taken over by an unarmed crowd the next November, immediately following the public announcement of the Shah's arrival in the United States, and with fears of another U.S.-led coup widespread in Tehran, a sit-in planned for two or three days was co-opted, as the whole revolution had been, by mullahs with connections to the CIA and an extremely anti-democratic agenda. They later made a deal with U.S. Republicans, as Robert Parry and others have well documented, to keep the hostage crisis going until Carter lost the 1980 presidential election to Ronald Reagan. Reagan's government secretly renewed weapons sales to the new Iranian dictatorship despite its public anti-American stance and with no more concern for its religious fervor than for that of future al Qaeda leaders who would spend the 1980s fighting the Soviets with U.S. weapons in Afghanistan. At the same time, the Reagan administration made similarly profitable deals with Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, which had launched a war on Iran and continued it with U.S. support through the length of the Reagan presidency. The mad military investment in the United States that took off with Reagan and

again with George W. Bush, and which continues to this day, has made the nation of Iran — which asserts its serious independence from U.S. rule — a target of threatened war and actual sanctions and terrorism.

Ben Affleck was asked by *Rolling Stone* magazine, "[What do you think the Iranians' reaction is gonna be?](#)" to Affleck's movie *Argo*, which depicts a side-story about six embassy employees who, in 1979, avoided being taken hostage. Affleck, mixing bits of truth and mythology, just as in the movie itself, replied:

"Who the FUCK knows - who knows if their reaction is going to be anything? This is still the same Stalinist, oppressive regime that was in place when the hostages were taken. There was no rhyme or reason to this action. What's interesting is that people later figured out that Khomeini just used the hostages to consolidate power internally and marginalize the moderates and everyone in America was going, 'What the fuck's wrong with these people?' You know, 'What do they want from us?' It was because it wasn't about us. It was about Khomeini holding on to power and being able to say to his political opponents, of which he had many, 'You're either with us or you're with the Americans' - which is, of course, a tactic that works really well. That revolution was a students' revolution. There were students and communists and secularists and merchants and Islamists, it's just that Khomeini fucking slowly took it for himself."

The takeover of the embassy is an action virtually no one would advocate in retrospect, but asserting that it lacked rhyme or reason requires willful ignorance of Iranian-U.S. relations. Claiming that nobody knew what the hostage-takers wanted requires erasing from history their very clear demands for the Shah to be returned to stand trial, for Iranian money in U.S. banks to be returned to Iran, and for the United States to commit to never again interfering in Iranian politics. In fact, not only were those demands clearly made, but they are almost indisputably reasonable demands. A dictator guilty of murder, torture, and countless other abuses should have stood trial, and should have been extradited to do so, as required by treaty. Money belonging to the Iranian government under a dictatorship should have been returned to a new Iranian government, not pocketed by a U.S. bank. And for one nation to agree not to interfere in another's politics is merely to agree to compliance with the most fundamental requirement of legal international relations.

✘ *Argo* devotes its first 2 minutes or so to the 1953 background of the 1979 drama. Blink and you'll miss it, as I'm betting most viewers do. For a richer understanding of what was happening in Iran in the late 1970s and early 1980s I have a better recommendation than watching *Argo*. For a truly magnificent modern epic I strongly encourage getting ahold of the forthcoming masterpiece by M. Lachlan White, titled *Waking Up in Tehran: Love and Intrigue in Revolutionary Iran*, due to be published this spring. Weighing in at well over 300,000 words, or about 100,000 more than *Moby Dick*, *Waking Up in Tehran* is the memoir of Margot White, an American human rights activist who became an ally of pro-democracy Iranian student groups in 1977, traveled to Iran, supported the revolution, met with the hostage-takers in the embassy, became a public figure, worked with the Kurdish resistance when the new regime attacked the Kurds for being infidels, married an Iranian, and was at home with her husband in Tehran when armed representatives of the government finally banged on the door. I'm not going to give away what happened next. This book will transport you into the world of a gripping novel, but you'll emerge with a political, cultural, and even linguistic education. This is an action-adventure that would, in fact, make an

excellent movie — or even a film trilogy. It's also an historical document.

There are sections in which White relates conversations with her friends and colleagues in Iran, including their speculations as to who was behind what government intrigue. A few of these speculations strike me as in need of more serious support. They also strike me as helpful in understanding the viewpoints of Iranians at the time. Had I edited this book I might have framed them a little differently, but I wouldn't have left them out. I wouldn't have left anything out. This is a several-hundred-page love letter from a woman to her husband and from an activist to humanity. It is intensely romantic and as honest as cold steel. It starts in 1977.

On November 15, 1977, at the White House, our human rights president, Jimmy Carter, was holding an outdoor press conference with his good friend the Shah. The police used pepper spray on the protesters, including Margot White, in front of the White House. But then the wind shifted. Carter and the Shah ended up in tears as their wives fled indoors. Later that day, White and an Iranian friend were attacked with a knife, chased by spies, and occupied with hiding the wallets of anti-Shah protesters in a D.C. hospital from pro-Shah forces eager to identify them. In December, White was off to Iran to meet with the opposition, including those who had backed Mossadegh a quarter century before. She learned the size and strength of the movement and came to understand its power to overthrow the Shah better than did the U.S. government or the U.S. media. White was followed by the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, during her stay.

In 1978 White spoke in Europe and the United States about the growing revolution and its members' certainty that the Shah would be thrown out. She returned to Iran. She met with greedy Americans there who believed the Shah secure on his throne. She met with the opposition, including a grandson of Mossadegh, who believed the Shah was doomed and who saw the revolution as secular. He saw the mullahs as a danger and as a force susceptible to U.S. manipulation.

White was followed and chased by SAVAK. The NSA (yes, the one based in Maryland) had wiretapped the whole country (yes, the Iranians' country) — an abuse that would later come home to the United States, as such things do. White met with torture victims. She visited Eagle City, a colony of the U.S. military industrial complex and its spouses and children. She met with many activists in the revolutionary movement, all of whom, in the summer of '78, saw the movement as secular. No one ever brought up the Ayatollah Khomeini, and if she brought him up (responding to his prominence in the U.S. media) they attributed no importance to him. White described the state of U.S. media coverage:

"The 'benevolent monarch' image was fast disappearing as the reality of the Pahlavi police state became widely exposed. Unfortunately, despite this, Iran's protestors were being referred to as 'mobs,' instead of the courageous, unarmed, exhausted and determined citizens that they were. Their demands for social justice and political participation were barely mentioned, leaving the impression the protests were senseless and inexplicable, some sort of collective 'over-reaction' to the Shah's 'excesses.'"

The movement was depicted as Islamic. White quotes one of her friends' reactions at the time:

“We think it’s a conscious decision, from several sources. It makes the Revolution seem ‘anti-West’ instead of ‘anti-US/Shah.’ It blurs the significance of Washington’s responsibility for most of the repression in Iran. It makes it sound like an ‘ideological’ movement, instead of a political one, like Iranians have some abstract, philosophical problem with Western ‘culture,’ rather than very concrete problems with jailing writers, torturing teenagers, and condemning millions of children to an early death from lack of clean water!”

White learned that Khomeini’s senior advisor in his exile in Paris was an Iranian-born American citizen named Dr. Ibrahim Yazdi, a close friend of Richard Cottam of the CIA.

By January 1979 the Shah was gone, and that spring White was back in Iran where Khomeini was consolidating power and turning against the movement that had toppled the Shah. There were huge protests on Women’s Day and May Day and on the anniversary of Mossadegh’s death. When one of the largest newspapers in Iran reported that the Islamic Republic was being run by men with ties to the CIA, the government shut down the newspaper. It banned the pro-democracy groups that had led the revolution. It sent U.S.-made airplanes to bomb Kurdistan. Activists began organizing within the Iranian military to resist orders to attack the Kurds.

After the embassy was seized in November, a crowd of reporters gathered daily outside the gates, many of them new to Iran. White spoke to some of them and tried to educate them about Iran’s past and present. They encouraged her, as an American living in Iran, to hold a press conference and express her views. She did so, and hundreds of reporters came. She pointed out that the students said they had seized the embassy as a protest against current, not just past, CIA presence and interference. She noted the “elaborate cameras, surveillance technology and radar equipment” they had found in the embassy, photographed, and publicized. She said Iranians had good reason to want “no further CIA presence in their country, having suffered years of political repression, torture and surveillance carried out by CIA-trained SAVAK state police.”

White’s statements were front-page news in the *International Herald Tribune* and big news around the world. The next day, Walter Annenberg, a wealthy Republican backer, placed a full page ad in the *New York Times* denouncing her. Also that day, the students in the embassy asked to meet her.

White was allowed into the embassy, where she met the students but not the hostages. Some of the students had studied in the United States and very much liked the United States, just not its government’s interference in Iran. During her meeting with the students, a mullah came into the room briefly. He clearly exercised authority over the students without actually holding their loyalty. The relationship fit with accounts of the mullahs having co-opted an action they did not initiate. The students told White they wanted the Shah returned to stand trial. They wanted his money returned. They gave White some of the many documents they were piecing back together following their shredding by the embassy staff. In *Argo* we see photographs of the six employees who escaped being pieced back together. In *Waking Up in Tehran* we learn that the documents given to White included U.S. plans to bring the Shah to the United States three months before he was actually brought there for medical care, as well as documenting the CIA’s presence in the embassy.

The hostage-takers in White’s telling were, among other things, an early version of WikiLeaks. They “continued to publish reconstructed Embassy documents, eventually producing 54 volumes of evidence of CIA operatives ... manipulating, threatening and

bribing world leaders, rigging foreign elections, hijacking local political systems, shuffling foreign governments like decks of cards, sabotaging economic competitors, assassinating regional, national and tribal leaders at will, choreographing state-to-state diplomacy like cheap theater.”

White had herself become a news story. She stumbled upon “a life-size photo of me near the gates at the front of the U.S. Embassy, looking rather baffled, my fist raised tentatively into the air. I felt awkward about it, not least because an American reporter had urged me to strike that pose. I’d asked the desk clerk where he’d gotten such a thing. He told me that someone had apparently enlarged the news photo into life size billboards that were being posted all around Tehran — at bus stations, the railway station, the Bazaar, and various other spots — all the way from Shoosh Square in the south up to Damavand. I’d begged the Manager to take it down and he had obliged.”

I asked White about *Argo*, and she said she’d watched it three times and taken notes. “As history,” she told me, “it’s worse than sloppy. The depiction of the students at the embassy is way off, as are several other things. Public hangings were over with long before November 1979. They occurred mostly in February 1979, and were mostly the upper echelons of SAVAK. The six Americans were being rescued in January 1980, almost a year later. Those things were not happening. Just the opposite — the Resistance was underway.”

White finds fault with other details: “Even the suggestion that the students were using ‘kids’ or ‘sweat shop children’ to piece together the shredded embassy documents is wrong. They had high school and college students doing it, mostly their own younger brothers and sisters. Kids of the age shown would not yet have been able to read Farsi, much less English! There is no way such children could piece together those documents.”

White objects to the general depiction of ordinary Iranians in the film: “Most troubling is the depiction of people in the Bazaar going after the Americans. That would never happen. Anyone visiting Iran would be treated as a ‘guest.’ The tradition of ‘the guest’ is so deep in Persian culture — dating back to the caravans of the silk road — that it reaches almost absurd proportions. But it precludes any such behavior as that depicted in the *Argo* Bazaar. Iranians, unlike Americans, don’t blame the people for their government’s policies. Iranian men, in particular, would never approach an American woman that way, with such aggression, and speak about politics. They might politely inquire why they were in Iran, what they thought of the country, and they might even offer them tea! They would never behave as depicted.

“Likewise, the banging on the car windows. On the contrary, cars were so thick in Tehran that crowds could not be in the streets at the same time. Also, the burning cars were long gone by January of 1980! In *Argo*, the crowds are shown shouting ‘down with the Shah’ long after the Shah was overthrown. The crowds in the streets were, increasingly — as in my book — from the Resistance!”

White continued: “There’s another troubling depiction in *Argo* that I question, but I have no way to prove this. It’s the scene showing mock executions. I doubt they happened. The reason I doubt this is that when the hostages were released, they had one ticker tape parade (as noted in my book) and virtually disappeared — no talk shows, no endless interviews, no lecture circuits. Why? Wouldn’t Washington have wanted to publicize the worst features of their ordeal? If the hostages had really been subject to that level of

torture, why keep silent about it? A) Reagan's deal with the Ayatollahs? B) they weren't tortured. Both A and B would be my guess. The students voted on their policies. They were a mixed group, but torture had been ruled out. I believe that is the case. Captivity, obviously, is a human rights violation, but torture is something else. Again, however, I have no way to prove this definitively."

In the spring of 1980 Iran began bombing the Kurds in northern Iran with U.S.-made planes, and soldiers began deserting to the Kurdish side. The Iranian military attacked Tehran University, killing unarmed students, advancing a plan to Islamicize the curriculum. The hostage crisis dragged on. President Carter launched an unsuccessful rescue mission.

"Interestingly," writes White, "most people suspected the truth even though they couldn't prove it: that the hostage situation was being deliberately prolonged — and not by the students inside, but by those unseen forces typically referred to as 'they.' Why were the negotiations taking so long? The students had continued, of course, to print and publicly display copies of the embassy's classified documents, many of them meticulously re-assembled, pieced together strip by shredded strip. They revealed decades of clandestine CIA operations throughout Eurasia and the Middle East, conducted primarily out of this particular embassy in Tehran — precisely the interventions and atrocities against Third World peoples described by John Stockwell's book. They also revealed ties with CIA on the part of certain powerful Iranian clerics dating back to the 1953 coup The students boldly sought publicity for the documentary evidence, but their efforts were repeatedly blocked by the regime. ... [I]f such documentary evidence existed and was published, it would destroy the current regime's credibility overnight. The students were being subjected to a news 'blackout,' and no wonder. Western media, for the most part, however, continued to refer to the embassy takeover as an action of Iran's government, something done by the regime, rather than by its critics, or by 'Iranians' as a whole. Negotiations to resolve the crisis were necessarily between the two governments, reinforcing the perception that the regime had initiated and endorsed the action — instead of frantically trying to block it at every turn, fearing what would be revealed."

The next unusual request for a meeting that White received came from Khomeini's grandson. She agreed to meet with him. He asked her if Carter would lose the coming election if the hostages were still not freed. "We don't like Carter," the grandson told her.

The day Reagan was inaugurated, the hostages were freed. That week massive roundups of activists began in Iran. Crackdowns targeted anyone and anything "insufficiently Islamic." Arbitrary arrests were followed by executions of "infidels," including poets and leaders of the revolution. A May Day rally in 1981 was attacked. Pro-democracy and anti-Shah activists were going to prison in large numbers.

That summer, two men began standing all day, every day on White's street and watching her house. She and her husband made plans to leave for the United States. They attended one more protest, an anti-Khomeini rally on June 20th. Then things really got interesting. I'll leave it to you to read the book. I'll mention only this: White herself was the victim of a mock execution. She knows in a very direct way that mock executions happened and how and by whom they were employed.

She also knows what war is and what sacrifices in the struggle against war involve. The reason the United States should stop threatening war against Iran today is not that the

United States has mistreated and abused Iran in the past. It is not related to the quality of Iran's current government. It is entirely related to the evil of war. There is nothing worse than war that war can be used to prevent — not even greater war, something that war has always made more — not less — likely. Stephen Kinzer, in his book *All the Shah's Men*, relates a conversation he had with another grandson of Mossadegh:

"He told me that a few weeks before the 1953 coup, he attended a reception at the home of an Iranian diplomat in Washington and overheard the wife of Colonel Abbas Farzanegan, a military attaché who was on the CIA's secret payroll, boast that her husband was involved in a plot that would soon make him a cabinet minister. The next morning Mahmoud Mossadegh cabled this intelligence home to his grandfather. 'Later on, after the coup, I asked him if he had received my cable. He said, "Of course I did." When I asked him why he hadn't done something about it, he told me there was nothing he could have done. He said he knew full well that this coup was coming. His choice was to surrender or arm his supporters and call them out to civil war. He hated to think about giving up everything he believed in, but the other alternative was out of the question.'"

Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her work on behalf of human rights, women's rights, and children's rights in Iran. She is a critic of the current Iranian government, and lives in exile. In [a message written for RootsAction.org](#), Ebadi opposes any attack on Iran:

"Not only military attack but even threat of military attack would slow down the progress of democracy in Iran because the government, under the pretext of safeguarding national security, would further intensify its crackdown on pro-democracy activists and critics. Moreover, such an eventuality would incite people's nationalist sentiment, which would cause them to forget their criticisms of the government."

If we cannot learn from our own history or this kind of common sense, let us learn from Mossadegh. War is not a solution. War is not a tool of public policy. War is not the first option, the second option, or the last resort. War is out of the question.

David Swanson's books include "[War Is A Lie](#)." He blogs at <http://davidswanson.org> and <http://warisacrime.org> and works as Campaign Coordinator for the online activist organization <http://rootsaction.org>. He hosts [Talk Nation Radio](#). Follow him on Twitter: [@davidcswanson](#) and [FaceBook](#).

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