

AUTHOR BIO:

Chance Coates

Chance Coates is a history major at Cal Poly. This paper was written for HIST 100: Introduction to the Study of History, with Dr. Kathleen Murphy.

Stigma on Campus: The Precarious Situation of Iranian Students at Cal Poly, November 1979

Chance Coates

***Abstract:** Exploring the ways in which the seizure of the American embassy and subsequent hostage situation of American nationals within Tehran in 1979 transcended international boundaries, this paper discusses the backlash that Iranian students at Cal Poly faced during this pivotal geopolitical crisis. In doing so, I review various protests and public statements that gave rise to a distinct social discourse that stigmatized Iranian students, effectively transforming this group into an “Other.” Further, I explore the ways in which the university as an institution contributed to this stigmatization. The paper overall concludes that the Iranian students on campus were, like the Americans in Tehran, held hostage within a hostile social matrix during and after November, 1979.*

In 1953, an event of international importance occurred that would reverberate through Cal Poly twenty-six years later as an intense social discourse and reaction, specifically through student protest, activism, and institutional control. That year, the United States and Great Britain engineered a military coup in Iran to maintain their control over oil resources within the country, leading to almost two decades of dictatorship and tyranny under the Shah.¹ Over time, social tension in Iran would develop, finally exploding in 1979 as the dramatic Islamic

¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Revolution and, some months later, the infamous seizure of the American embassy and subsequent hostage crisis in Tehran. This latter event, having occurred in response to the Shah's welcome into the United States, is what is crucial to this paper's inquiry. In fact, as shall be argued here, Cal Poly represented a microcosm of general American trends, with the Iranian student population on campus being held hostage to social stigma due to the events in Iran.

Nine days after the American embassy in Tehran was seized by Iranian protesters on November 4, 1979, around a dozen students gathered on the "quiet lawn in front of Jefferson Hall" at Cal Poly, all for a protest seemingly against the hostage crisis.² Already by this time, the discourse surrounding this event had reached a jingoistic — indeed, one could say, unhinged — sentiment on campus. "Save America-Nuke Iran," one sign declared. "Drown the Oil Rats," another complemented. Surrounded by what was considered an overinflated media presence, including reporters from such outlets as *KSBY*, *Telegram-Tribune*, and the *Mustang Daily*, not many students joined the protest, although "they were greeted by mostly smiles." Most of these demonstrators, it was reported, had vocally called for the deportation of all Iranian students, all while quizzically contrasting themselves from the "violent" acts that had occurred in Tehran.

This rhetoric displayed at the demonstration in front of Jefferson Hall, one should note, was not unique to Cal Poly. As is documented by the historian Will Teague, "social pressures" and discrimination were present across the United States, with demands to "deport" and "expel" Iranian students occurring in San Francisco; chants of "Camel jockeys go home" made in Beaumont, Texas; and

² Cathy Spearnak, "Anti-Iranian protest fizzles," *Mustang Daily*, November 14, 1979.

with student newspaper editorials elsewhere questioning whether such students were being educated in the United States so that they could “fight the US interests in Iran”.³ Clearly, the collective shock of the seizure of the American embassy was channeled into a collective anger against all Iranians, leading to students on campus facing stigma for their identity alone.

Meanwhile, the approximately forty Iranian students at Cal Poly,⁴ represented through such groups like the Iranian Students Association and the Muslim Students Association, had a complexity of opinions regarding the crisis. Although the student population “had kept a low profile” during this time, the Iranian Students Association officially backed the seizure of the embassy as an act of political dissidence. Parviz Boozarpour, the outgoing president of the group, observed: “We are [merely] students. We can’t solve the crisis of Iran,” going on to argue that the outrage that Iranians felt regarding the admittance of the Shah into the United States was similar to the shock that Jewish people would feel, in a hypothetical scenario, if Hitler were welcomed into the country.⁵

At the same time, clear divisions in opinion emerged between the two student bodies. For instance, the Muslim Students Association also backed the seizure of the embassy and, furthermore, it was supportive of Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolutionary leader of the new Islamic Republic of Iran. One member, who notably asked the *Mustang*

³ Will Teague, “Hostages of the Crisis: Iranian Students in Arkansas, 1979-1981,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Summer 2018), pp. 113-130.

⁴ *Mustang Daily*, “Immigration officer to check Poly Iranians,” November 16, 1979.

⁵ Spearnak, Nov. 14, 1979. Jill Hendrickson, “Poly Iranians keep low profile,” *Mustang Daily*, November 15, 1979.

Daily not to be identified, had considered Khomeini to be a “devout Muslim,” and thus he would not have the hostages killed: “That’s why [President] Carter’s resting on the case.” On the other hand, an undefined amount of students, as well as Boozarpour himself, associated with the Iranian Students Association vocally expressed a distaste toward the Ayatollah, with Boozarpour calling him “as fascist as the Shah.” Despite these differences, both associations worked to avoid any unnecessary confrontations.⁶

Iranian students, furthermore, expressed a deep displeasure with the lack of context given to the seizure of the American embassy. “[students protesting against the hostage crisis] don’t know the real reasons for the troubles in Iran,” observed Kazem Yazdi.⁷ In one article published by the *Mustang Daily*, three other Iranian students who were a part of the Muslim Students Association asked for empathy. “Americans should try and put themselves in the place of Iranians and see how they feel,” one observed. Reporting that they all had relatives and friends in Iran who were “disappeared” by the SAVAK, the Iranian equivalent of the CIA, these students considered the Shah “a tyrant who had reckless disregard for human life in his quest for modernization and westernization.” They further clarified that “it was the government, not the people, of the US that is hated” by Iranian demonstrators. Finally, the students argued that the seizure of the embassy “was the only form of retaliation available” that would grab attention across the globe and, thus, would make their voices heard.⁸

⁶ Hendrickson, Nov. 15, 1979.

⁷ Cathy Spearnak, “Anti-Iranian protest draws little support,” *Mustang Daily*, November 16, 1979.

⁸ Tom Fulks, “U.S. must realize the Iranian motive,” *Mustang Daily*, November 15, 1979.

These observations by various Iranian students at Cal Poly are similar, in ethos, to those made by Palestinian cultural critic Edward W. Said in 1981, reflecting on his position as an evocative public intellectual and professor at John Hopkins University at the time of the crisis:

Thus when Iranians seized the United States Embassy in Teheran they were responding, not just to the former shah's entry into the United States, but to what they perceived as a long history of humiliation inflicted on them by superior American power: past American actions 'spoke' to them of constant intervention in their lives, and therefore as Muslims who, they felt, had been held prisoner in their own country, they took American prisoners and held them hostages on United States territory, the Teheran embassy.⁹

In making this argument, Edward W. Said was critiquing the conventional intellectual as well as popular discourse surrounding the hostage crisis as it presented itself on campus.

Meanwhile, the social matrix at Cal Poly remained tense. Days after the first protest on the front lawn of Jefferson Hall, a second, relatively unorganized, demonstration and march occurred.¹⁰ With chants of "USA all the way" and "Free our people," in addition to the carrying of signs declaring "Deport all Iranians," the ethos of this protest was captured by James Witty, a student whose "letter-to-the-editor" in the *Mustang Daily* expressed sympathy for the event. The body of the letter explains "60 American hostages are being held by

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (Vintage Books, 1997), vi.

¹⁰ Spearnak, Nov. 16, 1979.

Moslem [sic] militants at the U.S. embassy in Tehran,” with Witty going on to chastise President “Carter and his ilk” for “allowing our country to drift aimlessly into an insidious mediocrity and beyond.” Finally, the student calls for “all Iranians” to be deported “back to where they belong—in Iran. Simple, direct action.” It is safe to say that many of the protesters shared these sentiments, with one protest leader further claiming that many students “showed their support” during the march as well.¹¹

During the following weeks, Cal Poly’s Iranian student population was ordered to meet with immigrations enforcement to prove their full-time status. This was due to President Carter’s order, handed down on November 10, 1979, that all Iranian students in the United States meet with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and subjected to a variety of criteria that could lead to their potential deportation. “As long as they’re attending school and are in good standing,” claimed the INS representative for San Luis Obispo, “I don’t see anything to worry about.” On the other hand, the further monitoring of the university’s students by the U.S. Border Patrol was causing “concern among some Iranian nationals.” The Dean of Students, Russell Brown, justified the requirement of Iranian students to have their photos taken, forcing some students, such as Masoud Kasaei, threatening to “walk out” in protest, given that “everyone [was] uncomfortable” with these efforts.¹²

In a sense, one could argue, the difference between those calling for deportation and the actions by the university was small: functionally making those Iranian students into an “Other,” with the

¹¹ James Witty, “Good and Mad,” *Mustang Daily*, November 16, 1979.

¹² *Mustang Daily*, Nov. 16, 1979. Teague, 118. Jill Hendrickson, “Agents on campus,” *Mustang Daily*, November 28, 1979.

threat of being coerced out of the country hanging overhead. Thus, a “dangerous situation” was made worse by the university’s actions, which were sharply condemned in a “letter-to-the-editor” in the *Mustang Daily* from Gary Brozio, who had called the policies “a mockery and farce,” setting “a precedent whereby the federal government uses college as an administrative tool” for “discrimination [sic]”. According to Kasaei, the social discourse could, in some ways, only be distinguished by how much it degenerated. Consider a retired professor’s comments permitted in the student newspaper, calling for all Iranians, “legal and otherwise,” to be “placed in ... military camps,” appealing to the internment of Japanese citizens in World War II (an appeal that was made elsewhere in the United States during this time).¹³ The retired professor then reveals just how little they value Iranian lives, going on to argue that “whatever is done to just *one* of our Americans” at the Tehran embassy should “be accorded to just 100 of the ‘protected’ Iranians” in the proposed military camps. The crucial distinctions, then, are the disparities in power between the institution of the university and the protesters and, furthermore, the disparities in rhetoric.

From the available primary source documents, it is not known whether any Iranian students at Cal Poly were deported. In fact, it appears to be unlikely that any were, given that only a relatively small proportion of the Iranian student population in the United States were subject to such procedures during this “witch hunt,” to quote an

¹³ Gary Brozio, “Government puppet,” *Mustang Daily*, November 30, 1979. Millard J. Fotter, “More on Iran,” *Mustang Daily*, November 28, 1979. Teague, 116.

American Civil Liberties Union official.¹⁴ But this is ultimately beside the matter. Crucial to this paper's inquiry is that Iranian students on campus found themselves within a very hostile social matrix subsequent to the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. By way of protests, discourse, and institutional control exercised by the university, a stigma was attached to a student population whose opinions on the controversial event at hand were, as argued above, quite diverse and at times in contention with each other. What occurred in November 1979, then, was a hostage crisis that transcended spatial dimensions: emerging as a seizure of the embassy in Tehran and, following this, the seizure of Iranian students at Cal Poly, serving as a microcosm of the United States, as an "Other," to be held hostage until the overall geopolitical crisis ceased.

¹⁴ Teague, 118, 129. By 1980, according to Teague, around 56,000 Iranian students were interviewed by the INS, with roughly seven hundred being forced out of the country.

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