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### CASAR Public Lecture: October Surprise? Iran and Jimmy Carter's Electoral Defeat in 1980

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September 10, 2023 at 1 pm  
AUC New Campus Tim Sullivan Lounge  
Event Report by Maha Muehlhaeusler

Event Title: October Surprise? Iran and Jimmy Carter's Electoral Defeat in 1980

This event was the Center for American Studies and Research's (CASAR) first event of the Fall 2023 semester. Around thirty individuals were hosted, including faculty members from HUSS, GAP and interested students from across AUC. Snacks and coffee were offered as well. The event was co-hosted by CASAR Assistant Director & Adjunct Faculty Yasmien El Ghazaly and Director of the CASAR Dr. Mark W. Deets, who warmly welcomed Dr. Mike Reimer from the AUC Department of History to the podium. In his lecture, Dr. Reimer analyzed the relationship between the events in Iran and Jimmy Carter's electoral Defeat in 1980. Referring to his lecture as a "glorified book review", he emphasized that the main source and inspiration for his lecture on this topic is the book *October Surprise* by Gary Sick.

Before unpacking the complex political relationships and tensions Dr. Reimer provided historical and chronological context to what exactly led up to the relationship between Iran and the United States, as well as defining what an "October surprise" is. Dr. Reimer argued that it would be an oversimplification to portray the United States as an agent simply causing events to take place in the Middle East, and in this case study especially.

What was happening in Iran? Dr. Reimer summarizes that following the 1953 coup d'état in which Reza Shah Pahlavi was returned to power, the Shah set up the SAVAK, an Iranian version of the Egyptian "mukhabarat" according to Dr. Reimer. The Shah accepted United States aid, and most importantly, a massive number of arms imported from the United States. Here Dr. Reimer made sure to mention how the Shah was perceived by Iranian citizens as a "puppet" figure for the United States, and discusses the complexity behind this argument; after all, it was the United States that returned the rule of the Shah. In 1972 Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger (according to Gary Sick) visited the Shah, when Nixon looked across the table and told the Shah "protect me." This allowed Dr. Reimer to raise the question of, was the Shah a proxy or a partner to the United States? This alliance between Iran and the United States continued for three decades from the fifties to the seventies.

Dr. Reimer continued to discuss the turmoil *within* Iran that led to the demise of the Shah with the 1978 revolution. One important cause was the economic drop in oil revenue, which had induced "megalomania" in the decades beforehand. As a clergy-led revolution unfolded, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to Iran. Two years earlier in 1976, Jimmy Carter had been elected for the "advocacy of human rights." The Iranian perspective, according to Dr. Reimer, included some intellectuals being hopeful that Carter would push the Shah towards liberalization, an ultimate "human right."

In 1979, the same year that Khomeini returned to Iran, student Militants took over the United States embassy and held all American individuals hostage. This event is known as the Hostage Crisis. Dr. Reimer brings to attention that though some sources suggest that Khomeini "gave approval" to the students and was in support of the event, others suggested that the prime minister of Iran and other government officials were in disagreement with Khomeini's

radical decision to take over the embassy. This shows, as Dr. Reimer argued, the confusion and complexity of the political situation in Iran, as it is not clear who is in charge at this point in time.

The 1980 Reagan vs. Carter elections can be studied from the perspective of the Hostage Crisis, Dr. Reimer suggested. Since the hostages were released exactly five minutes after President Reagan's inauguration, one might easily think "there must be a connection," but Dr. Reimer debunks this fallacy as there was still more evidence to analyze. Did Khomeini keep the American hostages in order to humiliate Carter who was slowly growing unpopular in America for his failure to free the hostages? On a tangent, Dr. Reimer made sure to highlight the importance of historiography and the importance of analyzing sources and the possibility of new evidence arising. He also mentions that the author Gary Sick was on the national security council and worked for Jimmy Carter, and he himself argues that the hostages were kept to teach Carter a lesson.

New questions began to arise here: Did president Reagan's campaigner, William Casey have contact with Iran? Dr. Reimer looks at the evidence for this, which is that he was in Madrid and not Iran at the time he was mysteriously traveling, for "reasons unknown." The other important question asked by Dr. Reimer is why would Iran cooperate with the United States? The answer that Dr. Reimer suggested is weaponry: Iran even worked with Israel, for not only did they have a common enemy of Iraq, but since Israel received weapons from the United States, Iran and Israel shared the same weapon systems. Ultimately, Iran chose the "better deal" which would mean more arms, and would mean waiting to release the hostages until after the October elections. The "October Surprise" is defined according to Gary Sick as an electoral win when there is an expectation to lose.

"So what if this did happen? Why is it significant?" asked Dr. Reimer. The answer to this was the question of loyal opposition, which includes interfering with foreign policy of the Carter administration. It is also significant because it endangered the lives of fifty-two American hostages. Dr. Reimer reaffirmed the importance of the revision of history, and "setting the record straight" for the legitimacy of Reagan's victory over Carter. In this way, Reagan's presidency is put in a different light, where there is a continuation of the exchange of arms for hostages, putting him in the same position Carter was in 1980. Dr. Reimer concludes by stating how Gary Sick's "investigations show the importance of corroboration in the writing of history," how Israel's readiness to interfere in American domestic politics shows them trying to gain advantage, and how it is shown that Iranians who thought that some government leaders in Iran were involved with the negotiation of the Reagan campaign were ultimately correct.

In a brief amount of time Dr. Reimer allowed individuals attending to ask questions. Students asked whether Khomeini would have been at a disadvantage by taking the Reagan deal, to which Dr. Reimer suggested that it is difficult to know how much Reagan knew and how much his campaign manager knew, counting on the fact that Khomeini was angry with Carter. Another question focused on the need for arms in Iran. Dr. Reimer pointed out that that Iranians were aware in 1980 that they would eventually face war with Iraq, and that there was pressure to get arms. This led to the deal with Carter, but also the BETTER deal with Reagan. Another important question was that of which side the United States was on during the Iran-Iraq war, and the answer was both. Though Americans had ground troops in Iraq, the United States was providing arms for Iran to fight with. It was also asked what role the hostages played, or how they felt, which Dr. Reimer revealed that in interviews with them they described themselves as

“prawns in an internal struggle in Iran.” Dr. Reimer concluded his event by highlighting the fluidity of history and the importance of perspectives and disagreements in the discipline of history.