

Conference Call with Kevin Hermening

Barbara Ledeen: Hello and welcome. My name is Barbara Ledeen and I'm senior advisor on Iran at The Israel Project. On behalf of our entire team, I'm so very pleased that such a large group could join us on the phone this morning to hear from Kevin Hermening, retired U.S. Marine and former Iran hostage, a true American hero. Kevin is here with us to discuss his first-hand experience as a hostage as the American take-over Iran for 440 days, from 1979 through 1981. We are happy to have him here with us and we're anxious to hear what he has to say. Kevin will give a brief presentation and then we'll get to some of the questions that our audience submitted online. On November 4, 1979, which means that Wednesday is now the 30th anniversary of the take-over of the American Embassy in Tehran, about 400 Khomeini revolutionaries supported and surrounded by thousands of Iranians, many of whom were armed, broke down the door of the American Embassy in Tehran, stormed the compound and took 52 hostages. The hostage takers posed for cameras next to a poster with a caricature of then American President Jimmy Carter and the slogan. "America cannot do a damn thing." Khomeini did not release these prisoners until January, 1981, that is to say, January 20 at noon in 1981. Kevin Hermening was one of those hostages. He was the youngest of the 52 Americans held hostage at the U.S. Embassy. He served a total of 13 years in the Marine Corps and the Marine Corps Reserves and received an honorable discharge in 1994. He's the recipient of the U.S. State Department's Award for Valor and received the Prisoner of War Medal and the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the nation's highest peacetime military decorations from the Department of Defense. He has been involved in national and state and local politics for many years and has twice been a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives and the Wisconsin state legislature. And now, Kevin, I'd like to invite you to participate in the call and tell the people about your experience. Thank you.

Kevin Hermening: Well, thank you very much, Barbara, and I want to thank all of today's participants and would welcome some questions a little bit later on and I know you're going to moderate some of that, Barbara, and we had an opportunity to chat briefly about today's meeting and presentation and the use of technology is wonderful and perhaps technology will be part of the doom of the Islamic regime at one point in the future, one can only hope. Of course, two days from now, November 4, 2009 is the 30th anniversary of the take-over of the U.S. Embassy in downtown Tehran. I was a 20-year-old Marine security guard assigned to the Embassy. It was my first Embassy assignment and what began as one more of the daily demonstrations and protests by the Iranians, the mullahs in front of the streets, in the streets of the Embassy compound, turned ugly around 10:00 that morning as they began pushing through the gates and scaling the walls of the Embassy compound, eventually breaking into the buildings, the apartments in which some of the staff members were asleep because they were on the night shift, and into the other buildings on the compound, including the Consulate, where the staff would have been delivering visas to people wanting to travel to the United States for educational or business or political purposes. I would say that in two days Iran will have another day of celebration full of speakers and parades and chanting in the streets, "Death to America," something that has become commonplace each November 4 since 1979. Certainly November 4, 1980, which was Election Day in the United States, was a day of celebration in Iran as they were celebrating the one year anniversary of the take-over of the Embassy and their initial goal of seeking the return of the Shah, the former leader of their country for 25 years. They believed that because he deserved to be put on trial as a war criminal for crimes against their people, that the U.S. should turn him over. Of course, the Shah was very ill. He was admitted into the United States for medical treatment, would die just eight months into our time in captivity, and despite the fact he had died during our time in captivity, they continued to then change the game, if you will, to demand other things from our government, eventually extracting a big financial settlement from the U.S. government from the Carter administration. They also were

able to extract something that continues to paralyze our nation's political leaders to this day and that is an agreement made under duress in order to free the hostages and that was to supposedly never interfere in the internal affairs of the Iranian government or country again. And, again, it's paralyzed our country because, quite frankly, they just, our leaders really don't understand very well that one thing that the people of Iran who lead their country respect most is discussing and negotiating from a position of strength and they're the only ones who have continued, the Iranians are the only ones who have continued to hold that strong suit for the last couple, three decades and our country has continued to appear at least to be impotent in its response, whether it's based on its current nuclear ambitions or simply trying to keep the Iranian regime out of the war in Afghanistan or in Iraq and I think we're probably going to talk a little bit about that today. But as far as our situation is concerned, I know, Barbara, you were very kind in referring to me as a hero for what I had gone through. I just want to make things very clear at the outset and that is to say that I was more of a survivor, more of a victim of circumstance. I was lucky to get out, so fortunate to get back to our country, and to be able to live the life 30 years in freedom. But there were heroes in the hostage crisis; it just didn't include me. The heroes were the three Marines and five airmen who selflessly gave their lives in that failed rescue attempt in April, 1980 in an attempt to get us out of captivity early and, in that tragic helicopter and airplane crash in southern Iran, they never made it back to safety.

Barbara Ledeen: That's true. Some of our questions, let's start at the top, does it seem like 30 years ago, Kevin?

Kevin Hermening: Well, 30 years ago, prior to 30 years ago, Iran was not a household name in the United States and I venture to say in many parts of the world, or household word. I venture to say that most people in our country, even with only a cursory passing knowledge of history and/or world affairs, certainly know that Iran has been an adversary of the United States,

that we've not had diplomatic relations for three decades. For me, I was 20 at the time and, to me, it was a part of my life which has been a part of defining my life, but it's not what my entire life is all about. And I think, any time we get to one of these anniversaries, of course, in 440 days which it approaches the 30th anniversary of the release of the hostages from Iran, all of the news will be abuzz about anniversary stories and that kind of thing next April 25, the 30th anniversary of the failed rescue attempt. The rescue attempt will be in the news again. But, otherwise, I go about my life. I'm married; I have two teenage daughters, one in college, one in high school. I have a small business and, like most of the hostages, we've moved on with our lives. I do appreciate opportunities like this. This week, Wednesday, the 30th anniversary, the actual date itself, I'm actually going to be speaking to four high school classes at my daughter's high school, in fact, in the U.S. history classes, talking about our experience and answering the young people's questions. When I speak to older audiences, whether it's a civic organization, like the Rotary Club or Kiwanis Club or a political organization or a church or what have you, business group, which is a lot less frequent than it used to be, I take an opportunity during those presentations to thank the attendees. In retrospect, thank them for something they did 30 years ago and that was to pray for our release and to write letters of hope and appreciation to us, both while we were there for hope and appreciation for our service once we returned home, welcoming us back. And, from my perspective, I'm just so grateful that we weren't forgotten while we were there. The American people really got engaged during our time in captivity.

Barbara Ledeem: And what is the most vivid memories of your time being held against your will by those Iranian revolutionaries?

Kevin Hermening: Well, certainly the early days of the interrogations and the blindfolds, the handcuffs. We were tied to chairs during the day. We were seated in chairs. Our ankles were tied to the legs of the chairs, our bodies to the back of the chairs, and our hands were

handcuffed behind us. We were blindfolded most of the time for the first several days. We were not allowed to talk with the roommates we had, at least I wasn't, and many of my colleagues were not allowed to talk to the roommates we had until, literally, Christmastime, literally, seven weeks after we were captured. If we were caught talking, the Americans were immediately put into solitary confinement. I later found myself in solitary confinement. Probably, well, certainly a very vivid memory for me was after a failed escape attempt, I ended up spending 43 days in solitary confinement. The size of the room was 5 x 10 feet in size and the only thing other than me in that room was the bottom part of a box spring mattress, not the top comfortable part, but the bad part, from the bottom. First couple of days, handcuffed behind my back, days and nights. The only time I ever got out of that room was once a day when they allowed me to use the bathroom facilities and three times in the six weeks to use a shower. And I was so glad when I finally came out of solitary confinement. But, when I think about one of my colleagues, Thomas Ahern, who was accused by the Iranians of being in charge of our CIA office there, Tom Ahern spent 425, nearly the entire duration, in solitary confinement and I can only imagine how difficult that was for him. Because when you're in that situation, you wonder often, daily, whether you're the only one still left behind. We were scattered throughout the country after that rescue attempt that I spoke of earlier, in April, and that was to prevent another rescue attempt from being attempted that had any hope of success. Until June of 1980 at which point we were moved back to the city of Tehran and we were put into a maximum security prison, to Evin prison, and we spent six months there before the final 30 days at which point they moved us into nicer facilities and, by all appearances, it was an attempt by the Iranians to try to convince us that our conditions, our lifestyle, our housing conditions really weren't all that bad and, of course, you can't erase 400 days of horrible experience with 30 days living in a house that would have previously probably been owned or rented by people who had probably fled the country, no doubt.

Barbara Ledeen: Did you receive any financial settlement from the U.S. government for your service there for 440 days of misery?

Kevin Hermening: Good question. A couple of things. I was a Marine Corps sergeant and so, because I didn't have a wife and children back home who would have been receiving my paycheck, the Marine Corps just simply held and accumulated those dollars in a savings account for me. I think, if I'm not mistaken, my one year's pay was about \$10,300, if I'm not mistaken. We also received a \$2 per day hazardous duty check, which was commensurate when they considered inflation with the, for example, servicemen who would have been in Vietnam; that was the going rate with inflation adjusted. And then what they did about five years after we got out, each of the hostages received a check for \$22,000, which equaled \$50 per day, which was an inflation adjusted amount for POW's going back and calculated from whatever the amount was that POW's during World War II had received.

Barbara Ledeen: Great. You mentioned Carter in the financial settlement with Iran.

Kevin Hermening: It was about \$9 billion.

Barbara Ledeen: How much?

Kevin Hermening: About \$9 billion. It was about \$7.2 million in cash and the transfer of assets, if you will, cash assets, to various banking institutions that was basically conducted at the exact moment that the hostages were exchanged in Algiers. Your listeners may recall that the Algerians were the intermediaries between the United States and Iran because we did not have diplomatic relations to conduct anything through at the time; that had been severed about six months after we were captured. And so, when Warren Christopher went to the airport tarmac

in Algiers when we landed, he basically exchanged some kind of banking information with the Iranians in which he notified them that \$7.2 million, a billion dollars, with a B, had been transferred to the Iranian institutions and about \$1.5 billion, so \$8.7 or \$8.8 total, \$1.5 billion in gold bullion was the other part of the financial settlement.

Barbara Ledeen: As a hostage, were you in favor of this?

Kevin Hermening: No, I think, absolutely not. Let me, that's a great question. First of all, we had no say; second of all, we didn't even know about it. One thing that was part of the agreement further was that the Iranians demanded that the former hostages be prohibited for life from being able to file a lawsuit against the Iranian government for any kind of financial, punitive, what have you, kind of damages in the case of litigation. Now, numerous former hostages and, in fact, currently a class action lawsuit of many of the former hostages and their families has been meandering its way through courts in Washington, D.C. and in every single case, so far, the U.S. State Department has taken the side of the Iranian government in the lawsuits that have been brought by former hostages and it's kind of ironic that the U.S. State Department would have made the decision that they did to allow the Shah of Iran into the United States, back in 1979 to begin with, knowing full well that there would be great difficulty for the Embassy staff, but then to continue to side with the Iranians against the American citizens. I know that a lot of my colleagues have been extremely bothered by this for many, many years.

Barbara Ledeen: Yes, I imagine. Some of our questions also include, Did you see Ahmadinejad? Was he running the show?

Kevin Hermening: Good question. At the time, he was only a college student. He was the student leader at Tehran Polytechnic University. He was the student body president and he,

along with four other student body presidents from the other local universities, they met about three weeks before the Embassy was seized and they had a meeting as to how they best could move on the next level of their revolutionary interests and, kind of, take on a leadership position in the Khomeini regime and, at the time, Ahmadinejad was a member of the Tudeh Party, which is the Iranian Communist Party. I believe the spelling of that as we would interpret it is, T-U-D-A-H. And he was outvoted actually by a vote of 3 to 2, as far as taking over an Embassy or going onto an Embassy compound. He wanted to go onto the Soviet Union Embassy grounds and, again, he was outnumbered, outvoted and so the Iranian students, they, of course, then decided to pursue taking on the U.S. Embassy. About 15 of my colleagues, 13 or 14 or 15 of my colleagues and I all have recalled that Ahmadinejad was involved in the initial assault on the Embassy in the form of interrogating some of the Americans and myself in those first couple of hours after we were captured. Of course, he does not speak English; he would have needed an interpreter and I cannot, myself, say that I recall meeting him any time after that first day, about two hours into the situation. Some of my other colleagues have indicated, Dave Roeder, for example, Don Sharer have indicated that they remember seeing him as many as two to three weeks into the crisis. And, let's face it, it's very difficult in that country to rise to a position of leadership or true power, whether in the religious community or in the so-called secular community, which there's very much an overlap in Iran in those two cases, unless you believed in the fervent support of the take-over of the Embassy, unless you very much followed the line of the Imam Ayatollah Khomeini and Ahmadinejad, of course, later became the mayor of Tehran prior to when he became the president of the country and he has continued to hold this hard line stance in support of the Islamic Republic and in basically not rejoining the community of nations now for his entire tenure.

Barbara Ledeen: Well, having had personal contact with Ahmadinejad, how worried are you about Iran's nuclear development in this regime?

Kevin Hermening: Well, I don't think that most people would have to say that it's because they met with him or saw him or were interrogated by him before they should be fearful of Iran having nuclear weapons. I don't think anybody opposes the idea that they should be able to have nuclear power for peaceful purposes. It's what the mullahs and Ahmadinejad as president are likely to use that nuclear capacity for and, when you look at how they have continued to build alliances with countries which are not particularly friendly with the United States when it comes to diplomacy or military concerns, as they have fought to develop long range weapons, the ability to deliver those, whether to Israel or to Western Europe or God forbid potentially, even to the United States. I think it's very important that our nation take a very strong stance and continue to retain our allies on board in an effort to prevent Iran from ever achieving nuclear weapons.

Barbara Ledeen: Will the Iranians commit to sanctions? This I'm asking on behalf of someone who signed his question, "Semper Fi" so he writes, Will the Iranians submit to sanctions or be forced by a military intervention to stop making nuclear weapons? I have been on convoys hauling fuel in Iraq when we were on the receiving end of Iranian EFP's; it's a form of IED. They're not a pretty sight for people wounded or killed. Semper Fi.

Kevin Hermening: Well, that's a great question and, of course, I don't think it's any accident that the two main frontiers, if you will, where we have, the United States has its military operations and a forward operating basis are on either side of Iran, one in Afghanistan and, of course, one in Iraq; although, I think the one in Afghanistan is increasingly uncertain under the current administration. But being on either side of Iran should be sending a message that we're not going to tolerate them achieving nuclear weapons. Certainly for a long time, many of the Western European nations and Japan as well and certainly North Korea and China, Russia,

now Russia, previously the Soviet Union, they have always fought to bypass the sanctions that have been attempted by our country. Economic sanctions are one thing, but unless we as a nation and as an alliance, if you will, are willing to back up those sanctions, perhaps not with military force in offensive effort, but certainly from a blockade. Yes, it would be painful for Americans and for people in the West and our economies would struggle for a short period of time if we had an economic blockade in the Persian Gulf and we prevented some of the ships from going and coming, whether it's with fuel or whether it's with medical supplies or other goods, but we need to ensure that we have more of a sense of security. I mean, I don't think it's any, it certainly is not a coincidence that, Barbara, you and your organization are sponsoring this call. I mean, we as, the United States government and the American people have had a long partnership with the nation of Israel and the very idea that we would let them, standing on their own, I mean, Iran already has the ability to deliver weapons, missiles to Israel. The idea that they would be able to laden them with nuclear weapons is a very frightening prospect, I think, for world peace anywhere.

Barbara Ledeen: Can you talk about the Iranian mindset a little bit with regard to, for example, there's a lot of questions that we've gotten from people about asking about Iranian expansion into Venezuela, it's relationship with Turkey. What do you think is going on there?

Kevin Hermening: Well, I think that they're trying to build alliances with people who, in some cases, are not particularly friendly with the U.S. government and, in other cases, if they can expand their influence into Turkey a neighboring country, they, the Iranian government and the mullahs, feel that they're going to be able to, kind of, keep Turkey as a neutral player as this whole war of words, if you will, escalates over the course of the next couple of months and years. But I think that there is such a disparity when we talk about the Iranian people and the Iranian government. The Iranian people are, we saw what the Iranian people want over the

course of the last four months. We know that the Iranian people would like to have a democratic society with the values that they appreciate in other parts of the world, whether it's freedom or in the way of freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of press, freedom to congregate, protest, choose their own leaders, to observe religious freedom, to be able to expand their economies, if you will, whether internally or even through foreign trade. The Iranian government has, they're very afraid of technology. They're very frightened of Western influence, not all of Western influence is particularly good, I think, we'd all agree. But I think that the protest that we saw in the streets and I think it's particularly vital to, not only acknowledge, but praise the reality that when you have middle class people take to the streets in opposition to the inner workings of their government and the way that their country is treated abroad and the way that their leaders treat the rest of the world, I think that it portends the beginning of the end. I think that Ahmadinejad is operating in a very defensive fashion right now and certainly reaching out to leaders, such as Chavez and North Korea and even to Putin. I think it's an indication that he's not particularly viewing his future as very secure.

Barbara Ledeem: Well, we're coming to the end of the call, Kevin. Is there any other thing that you'd like to say that we haven't asked you about?

Kevin Hermening: I think the only thing I would add is that I know that the president of the United States has indicated that he would welcome unilateral conversations with the government of Iran and I just hope that our president isn't played for a fool by the Iranian government, by the Iranian leaders and recognizes and understands that the people of Iran prefer looking for and would still very much welcome an outward and very expressive showing of support for their willingness to take the risks that they've taken on in bringing about change to their country.

Barbara Ledeen: Well, I agree with that certainly. Thank you so much, Kevin, and for being our guest. We are all hoping for a peaceful end to what looks like a nuclear crisis forthcoming. We thank you for taking the time to join us and we thank all of our guests who participated in today's conference call by sending us questions to ask. For more information about Israel's security threats and the dangers of a nuclear Iran, please be sure to visit www.theisraelproject.org and take advantage of our online Iran press kit. Kevin, in my book, you're a hero.

Kevin Hermening: Thank you, Barbara. You folks have a good day.

Barbara Ledeen: Thank you.

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