9 Small-State Mediation in International Relations: The Algerian Mediation of the Iranian Hostage Crisis
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INTRODUCTION

On 4 November 1979, a group of students who would later become known as the Students Following the Imam’s Line took over the American embassy in Teheran. What is thought to have started as a sit-in planned to last at most three to five days evolved into a siege that lasted 444 days, contributed to the political demise of an American president, and threatened a military confrontation between Iran and the United States.

From the beginning of the crisis, there was no dearth of potential mediators. Both on their own initiative and at the request of the American government, a variety of individuals and organizations tried to mediate between the governments of Iran and the United States. These included: Pope John Paul II; Yasir Arafat, chairman of the PLO; United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim; American private citizens known for their support of human rights causes, such as former Attorney General Ramsey Clark and former foreign service officer William Miller; United States Congressman George Hansen; a United Nations Special Commission; and officials from West Germany, Switzerland, Syria, Turkey, Libya, and Pakistan. All these ‘mediators’ shared one common difficulty; they lacked the legitimacy of an official endorsement by the Iranian leadership. Only Yasir Arafat was partially successful in effecting the release of thirteen hostages, mostly women and blacks, on 18–19 November 1979.
ALGERIA AND THE HOSTAGE CRISIS

It was not until 2 November 1980, almost a year from the day the siege began, that the Iranian government publicly endorsed Algeria as the legitimate channel of communication between Iran and the United States. At that time, the Iranian prime minister’s spokesperson declared that there would be no direct talks between the US and Iran, and that all contacts between the two governments would be conducted via the offices of the Algerian embassy in Washington.

Between 4 November 1980 and 20 January 1981, a team of Algerian intermediaries shuttled back and forth between Teheran, Algiers, and Washington. Despite all the publicity surrounding their moves, they succeeded in keeping their activities secret. Even now, eleven years later, the Algerian intermediaries have refused to reveal publicly details of their involvement in the hostage crisis. Efforts to probe beneath the official statements and the diplomatic talk have met with little success. Officials at the Algerian embassy in Washington believe that making public the Algerian activities during the hostage crisis would jeopardize the possibility of Algeria fulfilling similar roles in the future.

This chapter attempts to analyze Algeria’s role in solving the 1980 hostage crisis between Iran and the United States. Ultimately, it seeks to address the characteristics of small-state mediation. Experts have so far shied away from addressing fully the role small states can play in the field of international relations. The strategic weaknesses of the small states do usually endow their attempts at mediation with a moral superiority, to which superpowers cannot claim rights. Because of their nonthreatening postures, small states are often accepted as mediators by most parties. For the powerful party, a small state can provide a face-saver to whom capitulations can be made without threatening the public-bargaining posture of the powerful party. For the weaker party, a smaller state can provide a sympathetic ally who can understand what it means to negotiate from weakness. Instead of power and coercion, small states resort to persuasion. Thus, they can succeed in mediating conflicts without leaving the residual feelings of resentment and unfair treatment that usually follow similar interventions by superpowers. The sources for this chapter are primarily newspaper accounts, analytical writings by American officials who were personally involved at the time, and interviews conducted with both American and Algerian officials. Iranian sources declined to provide any information.