The Canadian Caper Revisited:  
Canada, the U.S. and Iran in 1979-1980

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The Iranian hostage crisis sparked turmoil in the relationship between the United States and Iran. It also led to the so-called “Canadian caper.” Six Americans who had avoided capture sought refuge from Canadian diplomats. Eventually, the Canadian government helped smuggle the six out of Iran. When news of the escape emerged, the Canada received widespread acclaim from the U.S. Unmentioned at the time, however, was that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had organized the extraction operation.

The Canadian Caper represented a form of dual dependency between Canada and the U.S. For the latter, there was the release of six Americans but, at the same time, this potentially put the freeing of the 52 hostages at risk. The revelation of the CIA’s participation in the Canadian Caper could have complicated the situation even more because of the controversy associated with the CIA in Iran over its role in the 1953 coup and its involvement with Savak, the Shah’s secret police. Hence, the Canadian angle provided useful cover for the Carter Administration in its wish to deflect attention from the American role in the escape.

The paper will re-examine Canadian participation in the “Canadian caper” through newly released American and Canadian government documents and will put the event into the longer context of Canadian-Iranian relations and Canada’s relation to the Middle East in general. Ultimately, the paper will argue that Canada’s involvement with Iran, both in 1979-1980 and in the years prior to the fall of the Shah, says more about the nature of Canada’s relationship with the U.S., and even with the United Kingdom, than it does about its relationship with Iran.