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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/10/ayatollah-khomeini-jimmy-carter-administration-iran-revolution>

US had extensive contact with Ayatollah Khomeini before Iran revolution

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Iranian leaders have reacted with fury to reports that newly declassified US diplomatic cables revealed extensive contacts between Ayatollah Khomeini and the Carter administration just weeks ahead of Iran's Islamic revolution.

It was previously known that Ruhollah Khomeini, the charismatic leader of the Iranian revolution, had exchanged some messages with the US through an intermediary while living in exile in Paris. But new documents seen by the BBC's Persian service show he went to a great lengths to ensure the Americans would not jeopardise his plans to return to Iran – and even personally wrote to US officials.

The BBC's reporting suggests that the Carter administration took heed of Khomeini's pledges, and in effect paved the way for his return by holding the Iranian army back from launching a military coup.

The BBC Persian service obtained a draft message Washington had prepared as a response to Khomeini, which welcomed the ayatollah's direct communications, but was never sent.

The corporation also published a previously released but unnoticed declassified 1980 CIA analysis titled Islam in Iran, which shows Khomeini's initial attempts to reach out to the US dated back to 1963, 16 years before the revolution.

The BBC's reports have created a huge row in Iran: if true they would undermine the myth that Khomeini staunchly resisted any direct links with the US, which remained taboo for three decades until the recent nuclear negotiations.

Earlier this month, Khomeini's successor, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, denied the report, saying it was based on "fabricated" documents.

Other Iranian politicians have also questioned the BBC's revelations, including Ebrahim Yazdi, Khomeini's spokesman and adviser at the time of the revolution, and Saeed Hajjarian, a reformist figure.

Two former White House advisers to Jimmy Carter, speaking to the Guardian, did not question the authenticity of the documents but denied that the US had abandoned the shah.

In contrast to his later tirades against the "Great Satan", Khomeini's messages to US officials just weeks before his return to Tehran appear to have been strikingly conciliatory.

"It is advisable that you recommend to the army not to follow [Shah's prime minister Shapour] Bakhtiar," Khomeini said in one message, according to the BBC. "You will see we are not in any particular animosity with the Americans."

In another message sent via a US emissary written in the same month, he attempted to assuage American fears that their economic interests would be affected by a change of power in Iran: "There should be no fear about oil. It is not true that we wouldn't sell to the US."

Khomeini returned to Tehran on 1 February 1979, two weeks after the shah had fled Iran. The Iranian military, which was under US influence, soon surrendered, and within months Khomeini was declared the supreme leader of a new Islamic republic.

The 1979 Tehran embassy crisis sparked a 36-year chill between the US and Iran. Last month's nuclear deal could finally mark its end. Now two men who were there – a hostage-taker and his captive – explain why it's time for a thaw

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Relations with the US were wary from the start, because America was closely identified with the shah's regime, and links with Washington broke down completely in November 1979 when a group of students stormed the US embassy and took 52 diplomats hostage for 444 days.

But despite confrontational rhetoric on both sides, the revolution did not mark an end to direct talks between Iran and the US. The current president, Hassan Rouhani, is believed to have been involved in covert negotiations in which the US agreed to covertly ship arms to Tehran to secure the release of American hostages.

The 1980 CIA study says "in November 1963 Ayatollah Khomeini sent a message to the United States Government through [Tehran University professor] Haj Mirza Khalil Kamarei", in which he explained "that he was not opposed to American interests in Iran" and that "on the contrary,

he thought the American presence was necessary as a counterbalance to Soviet and possibly British influence”. Iranian leaders have vehemently denied that Khomeini ever sent such a message.

The Guardian did not have access to the newly declassified documents and was not able to independently verify them. The BBC published the CIA document, but has not published further documents. Most of them appear to be diplomatic cables from Paris and Tehran embassies containing Khomeini’s first-person messages, which the corporation said were in the public domain.

BBC Persian has not explained its decision not to publish those documents, which has not helped the scepticism among Iranian critics, but the reporter who broke the story, Kambiz Fattahi, answered questions by email.

“The documents clearly show that Khomeini was less heroic, and far craftier, behind the scenes,” Fattahi said. “He quietly courted the US government, making all kinds of promises about the future of core US interests in Iran.”

“The documents are significant because they show Khomeini’s legacy is complicated, as it involves the ayatollah courting two US presidents behind the scenes. They illustrate a pattern of behaviour – that Khomeini at critical moments during his long struggle for an Islamic republic, secretly engaged what he would call ‘the Great Satan’.”

Gary Sick, a member of the National Security Council staff during the period of the Iranian revolution, said “the documents are genuine” but to the best of his knowledge he never saw the CIA study about the 1963 contact, and had no knowledge of the alleged communication.

“As far as I can tell, assuming the report is accurate, the message from Khomeini to the US government had no effect on actual policy – either in the Kennedy administration or later. So I regard this as an anomaly,” he told the Guardian.

Sick said the US wanted to preserve the Iranian military as an institution and ensure that the transition would be orderly and not collapse into bloodshed and civil war, but said the talks with an American emissary in 1979 had little significance.

“The Khomeini forces were concerned that the Iranian military would launch a coup, which they definitely wanted to avoid at all costs. The US side tried to preserve the threat of a coup as a bargaining lever.”

Stuart Eizenstat, a former chief White House domestic policy adviser to Carter, said talks of the US abandoning the shah was “not historically accurate”. He said: “We did everything we could to keep the shah in power. There was no notion that we were trying to facilitate the Ayatollah coming into power.”

He also commented: “Ebrahim Yadzi, the first foreign minister under Khomeini, was making regular public statements on behalf of Ayatollah Khomeini saying this will be a tolerant democracy, nothing about an Islamic revolution. I believe that Yadzi believed that.”

Mark Toner, deputy spokesperson at the state department, was asked about Khomeini making contact with the Carter administration. “I apologise. I’m not – I’m not aware of that and I don’t have any updates to offer,” he said.

The Guardian also approached Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was national security adviser to Carter from 1977 to 1981. He declined an interview on the subject, but said “there were a lot of maneuvers by people at that time and I do not have any special information particularly on the Ayatollah and his role in it. Probably in some fashion there was some involvement but nothing specific that I can recall.”