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The 1953 Coup in Iran*

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN

ABSTRACT: *The New York Times* recently leaked a CIA report on the 1953 American–British overthrow of Mossadeq, Iran’s Prime Minister. It billed the report as a secret history of the secret coup, and treated it as an invaluable substitute for the U. S. files that remain inaccessible. But a reconstruction of the coup from other sources, especially from the archives of the British Foreign Office, indicates that this report is highly sanitized. It glosses over such sensitive issues as the crucial participation of the U. S. ambassador in the actual overthrow; the role of U. S. military advisers; the harnessing of local Nazis and Muslim terrorists; and the use of assassinations to destabilize the government. What is more, it places the coup in the context the Cold War rather than that of the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis — a classic case of nationalism clashing with imperialism in the Third World."

"Matters came to a head in August when, for three days, Mossadeq, backed by the communist party, seemed to be the irresistible dictator of Iran. One senior diplomat even advised that we should snuggle up to him . . . but fortunately, the loyalty of the army and the fear of communism saved the day."

— President Eisenhower

Sources

IT IS EASIER FOR A CAMEL to pass through the eye of a needle than for a historian to gain access to the CIA archives on the 1953 coup in Iran. These archives remain inaccessible even though half

* I would like to thank the Professional Staff Congress and the City University of New York for a travel grant in 1982 to carry out research in London on the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis of 1951–53. I would also like to thank Eric Hooglund for comments, and Hamid Ahmadi, Hedayatollah Matin-Dafari and Sina Saidi for useful source materials.

a century has passed, the Pahlavi dynasty has fallen, the Cold War has ended, most participants have died, and materials from other covert actions, such as Guatemala, have been released. What is more, an Executive Order from 1995 instructs government departments to “automatically” declassify documents after 25 years. In the early 1990s, the CIA sought more time to release the 1953 documents on Iran on the grounds it lacked funds to catalog these bulky files. In the late 1990s, however, it claimed these same files could not be released because they had been destroyed “unknowingly” in the early 1960s.¹

The mystery deepened in April 2000 when a CIA report on the coup inexplicably surfaced after lying dormant for 45 years. It appeared first in summary in *The New York Times* (April 16, 2000); then in an expurgated 80-page form on the web site of the same newspaper; and then in a less expurgated 169-page form on another web site (<http://cryptome.org/cia-iran-all.htm>). Entitled “Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran,” the report was written in 1954 by Donald Wilber, a CIA operative involved in the coup. It was commissioned by the CIA’s Historical Division, and was designed as a handbook for future coups. Its intended audience was senior officials not only in the CIA, but also in the Pentagon, State Department, White House, and Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

This document quickly attained the stature of an authoritative text. The *Times* billed it as “the secret history” disclosing “pivotal information” and “the inner workings of the coup” (April 20 and June 11, 2000). The London *Guardian* depicted it as the “very first detailed U. S. government account of the episode” (April 17, 2000). Similarly, the National Security Archive — an NGO formed to declassify official documents — hailed it as “extremely important,” an “after-action report from agency cable traffic and interviews with agents on the ground in Iran” (www.gwu.edu/nsarchiv).

This aura should raise some questions. True the report was written soon after the event, but the real primary sources — the dispatches between Washington, London, and Teheran — remain unavailable. True, the report was written by a participant; but the events and primary sources are filtered through his eyes. Thus the Cold War over-

1 For discussions concerning these documents see T. Weiner, “CIA Is Slow to Tell Early Cold War Secrets,” *New York Times*, April, 8, 1996; “CIA Destroyed Files on 1953 Iran Coup,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1997; “CIA, Breaking Promises, Puts Off Release of Cold War Files,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1998; W. Kimball, “Classified!,” *Perspectives*, February 1997, 9–10, 22–23.

shadows the oil crisis, and the role of the CIA dwarfs that of MI6. True, the report was confidential; but this did not mean Wilber did not exercise self-censorship. In writing a commissioned history, Wilber was careful not to dwell on the Pentagon and the State Department. It is one thing to focus on the role of the CIA in the coup — after all, the agency is supposed to carry out such actions. It is another thing to describe ambassadors and military advisers actively participating in the overthrow of their host governments. Similarly, it is one thing to admit that the CIA distributed “grey propaganda,” funded demonstrations, played “dirty tricks,” and urged officers to carry out the coup. It is another thing to admit that the CIA worked through local Nazis, and had a direct role in kidnappings, assassinations, torture, and mass street killings. This may explain why the CIA archives on Iran — unlike those on Guatemala — remain unavailable. In Iran, the U. S. role was direct; in places like Guatemala, it was mostly indirect.

Although the original CIA materials remain inaccessible, the main pieces of the 1953 puzzle can be put together from diverse sources: from British Foreign Office archives in the Public Record Office in London (although sanitized, these archives contain over 1000 files on Iran, including photocopies of U. S. documents); from memoirs written by Iranians (after the 1979 revolution numerous nationalist and leftwing officers came forth with their reminiscences); from two oral history projects (one with leftists (Ahmadi, 1985–95), the other with members of the old elite (Ladjevardi, 1993)); from accounts written by the two key coup planners (Kermit Roosevelt (1979), the CIA head of the venture, and Montague Woodehouse, his counterpart in the British MI6 (Woodehouse, 1982)); and from scraps of information dropped by lesser CIA and MI6 operatives, especially to academic researchers such as Mark Gasiorowski (1979) and Stephen Dorril (2000). This article intends to use these sources to reconstruct the coup.

Origins of the Oil Crisis (1948–51)

The origins of the coup go back to the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis of 1951–53, which, in turn, goes back to the abortive petroleum negotiations at the end of World War II. In 1948, the majlis (parliament) rejected a 1945 Soviet proposal for an oil concession in the northern provinces even though the agreement gave Iran equal shares in prof-

its, management, and distribution. The British Ministry of Fuel warned the Foreign Office:

The strength of British oil lies in the fact that we hold concessions all over the world, in which we are ourselves developing the oil and controlling its distribution and disposal. It would weaken our position if countries began to develop their own oil. If Persia began to develop her own oil in the north, it might not be very long before she would want to do this in the south also. We should not encourage them to develop their own oil. (*FO 371/Persia 1945/45443.*)

Mohammad Mossadeq, a patrician politician who had emerged as the “incorruptible” voice of national aspirations, vehemently opposed the Soviet offer on the grounds it would increase Moscow’s influence in the north and trigger off a new stampede of Western concession-hunters seeking contracts in the rest of the country. He warned that the end result would be the dismemberment of Iran.

Even more important, the majlis rejected a Supplement to the 1933 Agreement with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. By 1949–50, the AIOC had in Iran the world’s largest refinery, the second largest exporter of crude petroleum, and the third largest oil reserves. It provided the British Treasury with 24 million pounds sterling in taxes and 92 million pounds in foreign exchange; supplied 85% of the fuel needs of the British navy; and gave AIOC 75% of its annual profits. Much of this went to shareholders in England as well as to investments in Kuwait, Iraq, and Indonesia.

The Supplementary Agreement — negotiated in secret — offered Iran too little, too late. It offered to increase Iran’s royalties from four to six shillings per ton; Iran’s share of the company profits would rise from 17 to 24%. Iran, citing a recent American–Venezuelan Agreement, had sought 50%. The company, however, took the position that Iran should be grateful for the AIOC’s “civilizing mission.” It had invested generous sums in Iran, converted “deserts” into flourishing towns, created 75,000 jobs — over 70,000 of them for Iranians — and had provided “people with such amenities as swimming pools” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91604*). Moreover, it refused to set deadlines on earlier promises to promote Iranians to technical–managerial positions on the grounds that few had the “skills” needed for such “responsible” positions (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91449*).

Furthermore, the company failed to address many of Iran's other complaints: the duration of the contract (it ran until 1992); the payment of royalties in pounds (this tied Iran to the sterling area); the sale of oil to the British navy at substantial discounts; the sale of oil to Iran at world market prices rather than at local production costs (they differed substantially); the refusal to open up company books to Iranian auditors; the burning of natural gas instead of piping it for local consumption; and the running of Abadan as a company town where stores and clubs routinely discriminated against the "natives." What is more, the company was seen as a typical colonial power manipulating the host government, by making and unmaking ministers as well as governors, mayors, army commanders, police heads, majlis deputies, and, of course, local tribal chiefs.

Max Thornburg, a Standard Oil executive brought in as a consultant to the Iranian government, recommended rejection of the Supplementary Agreement on the grounds it was not based on the 50/50 principle and was "drafted so obscurely and so ambiguously that no one in the world" could possibly understand it (*FO 248/Persia 1951/1530*). The AIOC publicly insisted that the 50/50 suggestion was impractical because it was "extremely difficult to calculate profits," but privately told the British cabinet that such a division would be "uneconomical, absurd, and astronomical" (*FO 371/Persia 1949/1531*). In a blunt conversation with the Iranian premier, the British ambassador, Sir Francis Shepherd, declared that Iran was being "greedy" and the "only thing the company might be willing to add to these concessions was perhaps the free medical treatment of certain hysterical deputies who continued to denounce the Supplementary Agreement" (*FO 371/Persia 1950/1512*). In refusing to be flexible, the oil company as well as the British government expected Iran to give way — or, at least, to come back with new proposals. Few in London expected outright nationalization, even though Thornburg, on his return to Washington, warned that British intransigence was fueling the campaign for such a dangerous takeover (*FO 248/Persia 1951/1527*).

In rejecting the Supplementary Agreement, the majlis nationalized the oil industry and elected Mossadeq as premier on the grounds he was the only candidate eager to implement this nationalization law. On taking office in April 1951, Mossadeq promised fair compensation, set up a National Iranian Oil Company, and invited British

employees to work for the new authority. Although Mossadeq's supporters, the National Front, numbered only a handful in the majlis, they could sway the other deputies because few wished to be identified with the AIOC.

Shepherd begrudgingly admitted that Mossadeq had "captured the imagination of the people" (*FO 248/Persia 1951/1514*) and that "the National Front were playing a chord which awoke strong echoes among many classes of Persians" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91521*). His Charge d'Affaires added: "The Premier is able to control parliamentary and public opinion mainly because of his personal popularity" (*FO 248/Persia 1951/1514*). Early in the crisis when Mossadeq paid a visit to the United States, a State Department brief informed Truman that the prime minister was "supported by the majority of the population" and was "alert," "witty," "affable," "honest," and "well informed" (*Declassified Documents/1975/White House/Doc. 780*). Truman was advised to stir the conversation into generalities about communism, American "disinterest" in oil, and U. S. goodwill toward Iran. In a post-mortem of the whole crisis, the U. S. Embassy admitted — of course, only in confidential notes — that Mossadeq, the "demi-god," still had a "hold on public opinion," "symbolized the nationalist ideal," and cast a long shadow over his successors (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104573*). Similarly, a Foreign Office post-mortem stated: "In terms of class warfare, the movement led by Musaddiq was a revolutionary drive of the three lower classes against the upper class and the British who were identified with that class" (*FO 371/Persia 1957/127074*).

Premier Mossadeq (April 1951–August 1953)

Although the British had been slow to see the coming of nationalization, they were quick to draw three hard-nosed but down-to-earth conclusions: first, Mossadeq was serious about nationalization, striving for full Iranian control over the oil industry; second, Britain could not permit Iran to attain this control; third, the only way Britain could safeguard its vital interests was through Mossadeq's removal. London stuck to these conclusion through thick and thin until Mossadeq was overthrown 28 months later.

The British assessment was that the core issue for Mossadeq was not increased royalties, but national sovereignty — *i.e.*, control over extraction, production, and distribution of oil. For Mossadeq, Iran

would attain real independence only through the removal of British domination over its oil industry. Previous politicians, Mossadeq often reminded the public, had undermined national sovereignty by giving out economic concessions to the Great Powers. He would make Iran independent by denying them such concessions. He added that the Great Powers, assured their rivals were not getting advantages, would respect Iranian sovereignty. He termed this “the policy of negative equilibrium,” as opposed to that of “positive equilibrium” favored by politicians allied to Britain, Russia, Germany, or the United States (Key-Ostovan, 1950).

While the British government realized Iran wanted control, it was adamant this control should not be relinquished — at least, not to Iran. It was willing to pressure AIOC to share a concession with other companies — to enter a consortium with the so-called “seven sisters.” But under no circumstances was it willing to give Iran final say over how much oil to produce, when to produce it, and where to sell it. If Iran had this power, it could influence world prices and even choose to keep oil underground for future generations, selling only what was needed to buy essential goods. A Foreign Office memo stated bluntly: “Whatever new arrangements we arrive at, they should be such that we keep effective control of the assets. . . . We can be flexible in profits, administration, or partnership, but not in the issue of control” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91470*). Similarly, the Ministry of Fuel warned the U. S. State Department:

Musaddiq would be content to see the industry running at a low level without foreign management. This raises a problem: the security of the free world is dependent on large quantities of oil from Middle Eastern sources. If the attitude in Iran spreads to Saudi Arabia or Iraq, the whole structure may break down along with our ability to defend ourselves. The danger of buying oil produced on a reduced scale has, therefore, potentialities with dangerous repercussions. (*FO 371/Persia 1951/98608*.)

“Control” is the recurring theme in Foreign Office memos, even though the term rarely appeared in public pronouncements. It appeared so rarely that the Americans entered the fray thinking they could broker a more “equitable” concession. Likewise, many historians of the crisis have fallen into the trap of thinking a compromise could have been reached if one side, namely Mossadeq, had been

more forthcoming.² But the British government never fell into this trap. It realized from the very beginning that this was a zero-sum struggle. Either Iran obtained control; or it did not. Mossadeq knew the same.

Shepherd privately admitted Britain could accept even a 60/40 deal so long as it “retained control” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91606*). He added: “It seems very unlikely we can do anything at all to meet him. . . . We must keep effective control. We have explored a number of devices by which we could disguise this hard fact but found nothing that was not either too dangerous or too transparent for even the Persians to accept” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/19606*). The Treasury Department recommended concessions on peripheral matters but firmness of the vital issue of “control”: “Throughout the crisis the Persian Prime Minister has been absolutely consistent. There can be no doubt whatsoever about his fundamental objective. . . . He is first and foremost a Nationalist” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91606*). The Foreign Office spelled out the core issue in these words to the State Department:

The first effect of nationalization would be to put control into Persian hands. Seen from the United Kingdom point of view the present problem was not solely one of the fate of a major asset. It concerns *the* major asset which we hold in the field of raw materials. Control of that asset is of supreme importance. The point has already been made of the importance of that asset to our balance of payments and to our rearmament programme, but in the sphere of bilateral negotiations the loss of this, our only major raw material, would have cumulative and well-nigh incalculable repercussions. Moreover, it is false to assume an identity of interests between the Western world and Persia over how much oil should be produced and to whom it would be sold and on what terms. The Persians could get all the oil and foreign exchange they need from much reduced operations. For all these reasons the United Kingdom has to keep control of the real resources involved. Finally, there is the consideration that Parliamentary and public feeling in England would not readily accept a position where we surrender effective control of an asset of such magnitude. (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91471.*)

The third conclusion the British drew was that the crisis could end only with the removal of Mossadeq from the scene. In the very first week Mossadeq was elected premier, the British government

2 The main works are: Elwell-Sutton, 1955; Lytle, 1987; Bill and Louis, 1988; Elm, 1992; Bamberg, 1994; Farmanfarmanian, 1997; and Heiss, 1997.

claimed that he was merely riding a “temporary wave” and that concessions would only “buttress” him (*FO 248/Persia 1951/38229*). The Foreign Minister assured Dean Acheson, Truman’s Secretary of State, that Mossadeq would not last long, that weakening him would not risk a communist takeover, and that a “bad agreement would be worse than no agreement” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/38229*).

Ann Lambton — dean of Persian studies in England and former press attaché in Teheran — spoke strongly against settlement and instead recommended the systematic “undermining” of Mossadeq (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91609*). The Foreign Office reported that she repeated her emphatic “no” to the question “whether we should compromise.” She insisted Mossadeq would fall if “we kept steady nerves,” and recommended that the Americans should be persuaded that settlement was impossible. She added Americans had neither the “experience” nor the “psychological insight” to understand Iran. Similarly, Shepherd suggested negotiations should “simmer” for as long as possible until a new government appeared in Teheran (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91606*): “We could leave the proposals on the table for another government to pick up. We could promptly withdraw the staff from Abadan and oil fields. . . . This would mean his downfall. The Embassy view is that the only way to make progress is to administer a severe shock and to muster a firm front to Mussadiq’s negative and feminine tactics” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91580*).

This summed up British policy toward Mossadeq — with some improvizations. At first, the British expected Mossadeq to collapse of his own accord; after all, recent administrations in Teheran had typically lasted only ten months. When this expectation did not materialize, they actively urged the shah, the majlis, and the senate to remove him. When these, in turn, failed, they tried to destabilize him — through economic pressures, propaganda campaigns, and subsidies to the opposition. Finally, they turned to the United States and harnessed the CIA.

While awaiting Mossadeq’s demise, the British insisted with much fanfare they were more than willing to accept “reasonable compromise.” But, in fact, they were negotiating in bad faith throughout the crisis: beginning with the Harriman Mission in July 1951 (Truman sent Averell Harriman as his special representative to broker a deal); continuing with the Stokes Mission in August (Sir Richard Stokes, the Lord Privy Seal, was sent to Teheran to negotiate on behalf of both

AIOC and the Labour government); continuing further with the discussions in the UN, the Hague, and Washington in the autumn of 1951; and ending with more discussions at the State Department and the World Bank in 1953. Those who took British press releases at face value believed the negotiations failed because of Iranian intransigence. In fact, the recent *New York Times* cover article on the CIA report repeats verbatim Wilber's claim that these negotiations collapsed entirely because of Mossadeq (April 16, 2000).

Confidential British memos, however, reveal a different picture. Stokes told the Cabinet that the "principle of nationalization could be accepted" — after all, his Labour government had just nationalized a series of industries in England. But he stressed that in "this particular case it could not be genuine and practical" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91596*). He added that Britain should publicly accept nationalization but insist on clauses retaining AIOC control. In private he admitted he would accept the "flavor or facade of nationalization while retaining the substance of control" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91471*). During the Harriman talks, the British tried to fudge the issue by conceding "authority" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/1772*). During the Washington talks, the Foreign Office put forward proposals it knew the other side would reject in order to sabotage a "highly embarrassing" settlement (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91603*). Likewise, the Ministry of Fuel stated:

If Dr. Musaddiq resigns or is replaced, it is just possible that we shall be able to get away from outright nationalization and work out something more on the lines of a partnership. . . . It would certainly be dangerous to offer greater real control of oil operations in Persia. Although something might be done to put more of a facade on the setup, we must not forget that the Persians are not so far wrong when they say that our proposals are, in fact, merely dressing up AIOC control in other clothing. (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91587*.)

While dragging out the negotiations, the British lobbied aggressively in the United States. This did not require much effort with the oil companies. These companies may have favored the 50/50 principle, but certainly abhorred the notion of nationalization. Early in the crisis the British ambassador in Washington reported that the American companies were concerned about "probable repercussions in their areas, including Latin America and Indonesia": "In these circumstances, their thinking has been more on the lines of our own

basic contention, *i.e.*, that it is necessary for the UK to maintain control" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91470*). The Minister for Fuel noted that Royal Dutch Shell was as concerned about the "issue of control" as AIOC, and that Standard Oil of New Jersey and Socony Vacuum were "doing their best to convince the State Department that if nationalization pays off in Persia it would have disastrous effects on their concessions." He assured AIOC that the "big American companies do not see it in their interests to come to an agreement with Iran" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91610*).

The British representative at the UN reported that Harriman, even before his Teheran mission, had been persuaded by American companies that too many concessions would be dangerous to "other oil producing countries" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91610*). On his return Harriman assured the British that "an agreement with Musaddiq was not possible," and the two powers needed to work together to bring about a "change of government" in Teheran (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91472/91591*). In high-level discussions between the Foreign Office and the State Department, the latter reassured the former that they endorsed their policy of "maintaining control" (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91471*). In follow-up discussions, the two concluded that the "situation in Iran was becoming increasingly serious"; that Mossadeq would not relinquish "control"; that his government was "essentially a bad government"; and that the Shah should be "encouraged to replace him with a general." The meeting set up a joint exploratory group to "appraise" the military situation and the "question of the loyalty of the generals to the Shah" (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98608*). This meeting was held in February 1952, eleven months before Eisenhower replaced Truman but three months after Churchill supplanted the Labour government.

The British also waged a propaganda campaign. They requested the BBC to double its Persian-language programs, and requested the replacement of its uncooperative reporter in Teheran with a special permanent correspondent, who, under no circumstances, was to be Professor L. P. Elwell-Sutton, a former press attaché now perceived as being pro-Iranian (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91584/91536*).³ The Brit-

³ Throughout the 1950s, the Foreign Office persuaded the Iranian government to keep Professor Elwell-Sutton out of Iran on the grounds he was "anti-British, anti-colonial, and anti-Shah" (*F.O. 371/Persia 1957/127074*). Soon after the coup, Elwell-Sutton wrote *Persian Oil*, a rare book in that it was sympathetic to Mossadeq. No university nor commercial press in England would touch it. It was published by Lawrence and Wishart.

ish also planted articles in major British and American newspapers. Characteristically, the *Observer* profiled Mossadeq as a “Robespierre fanatic” and a “tragic Frankenstein” with a “gigantic head” impervious to “common sense” but “obsessed with one xenophobic idea” (May 10, 1951). *Time* describe him as a “timid” man who could become dangerously “brave” when “emotionally aroused” by his “martyrdom complex” (August 22, 1951).

A handwritten note in the Foreign Office mentions in passing that the Teheran Embassy was sending to the press attaché in Washington “a steady supply of suitable poison too venomous for the BBC.” It added that Washington was “making good use of this poison” (*FO 248/Persia 1951/1528*).⁴ Drew Pearson — the venerable dean of American journalism — claimed falsely in the *Washington Post* that Hossein Fatemi, Iran’s Foreign Minister, had been convicted several times for misappropriation of funds and court tampering. Do Americans want, he asked rhetorically, such a crook to continue “masterminding the whole Middle East oil crisis?”: “This man will eventually decide whether we have oil rationing — or possibly, whether we go into World War III” (July 11, 1951). The press attaché in Washington was tempted to “horrify” the public by spreading the rumor that Mossadeq “indulged freely in opium” (*FO 248/Persia 1951/1527*).

British officials assured others, as well as themselves, that the National Front was “nothing but a noisy bunch of malcontents”; that Mossadeq — a “wily Oriental” — was “wild,” “erratic,” “eccentric,” “crazy,” “gangster-like,” “fanatical,” “absurd,” “dictatorial,” “demagogic,” “inflammatory,” and “single-mindedly obstinate”; and that Iranians were by nature “child-like,” “tiresome and headstrong,” “unwilling to accept facts,” “volatile and unstable,” “sentimentally mystical,” “unprepared to listen to reason and common sense,” and “swayed by emotions devoid of positive content” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/98593/1772/1527*). In a printed document entitled “A Comparison Between Persian and Asian Nationalism in General,” Shepherd informed senior officials in the other ministries that Iranian nationalism was not “authentic” and desperately needed a “guiding hand”: “the salvation of Persia would be a twenty year occupation by a foreign Power (rather like the occupation of Haiti by the United States)” (*FO 371/Persia*

4 For an excellent analysis of how the American media portrayed Mossadeq, see W. Dorman and M. Farhang, 1987.

1951/91464). He added that Mossadeq was “cunning,” “slippery,” “completely unscrupulous,” “short with bandy legs,” “looks like a cab horse,” “diffuses a slight reek of opium,” and is “clearly unbalanced” since he shuns the title Excellency, refuses to use the ministerial motor car, and, as final clincher, has a “daughter in a mental home in Switzerland” (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91459*). Another printed memo from the British Embassy in Teheran theorized:

Most Iranians are introverts. Their imagination is strong and they naturally turn to the agreeable side of things — they love poetry and discussion, particularly of abstract ideas. Their emotions are strong and easily aroused. But they continually fail to test their imaginations against reality and to subordinate their emotions to reason. They lack common sense and the ability to differentiate emotion from facts. Their well-known mendacity is rather a carelessness to the truth than a deliberate choice of falsehood. This excess of imagination and distaste for facts leads to an inability to go conscientiously into detail. Often, not finding the world to their dreams, they relapse into indolence and do not persevere. This tendency is exaggerated by the fatalism of their religion. They are intensely individualistic, more in the sense of pursuing their personal interest than in the noble one of wishing to do things on their own without help. Nearly all classes have a passion for personal gain and are ready to do most things for money. They lack social conscience and are unready to subordinate personal interests to communal ones. They are vain and conceited, and unwilling to admit to themselves that they can be in the wrong. They are always ready to blame other people. (*FO 371/Persia 1951/91460*.)

These racial diatribes should not be mistaken as the real reason for the breakdown in negotiations, as some in cultural studies would have it. They were merely the reflection — or the side product — of that breakdown. The root reason was the British realization they had fundamental conflicts with Iran over control. In other words, the impasse came not because of racial prejudices but because of the clash of economic interests between imperialism and nationalism.

While awaiting Mossadeq’s fall, the British increased economic pressures on Iran. They froze Iran’s sterling assets in London. They forbade the export of oil equipment to Iran. They lobbied in Washington against aid to Iran — especially against a \$25 million loan from the Export-Import Bank. They persuaded AIOC employees not to work for Iran; to make sure all resigned they informed them their

salaries would not be convertible into sterling. Despite the loss of this personnel, Iran managed to keep the Abadan refinery and the main oil wells running. The British also persuaded others not to buy this oil, threatened to sue any who did, and intercepted the few tankers that tried to break the embargo. This embargo was easy to implement since the vast majority of the world's tankers were owned by the major oil companies.⁵ Iran, thus, had to survive on an "oil-less economy." It froze development projects; borrowed money; cut government salaries; and printed paper money to meet immediate expenses.

The struggle between Britain and Iran reached an impasse by mid-1952. For, despite all of the pressures, Britain had failed to engineer Mossadeq's dismissal, mainly because the majlis deputies, as well as the senators and the shah, were fearful of openly antagonizing the public. The British made one more attempt in July 1952. Seconded by the United States, they urged the shah and their supporters in the two houses of parliament to offer the premiership to Ahmad Qavam, a veteran politician, who, for years, had opposed Mossadeq's foreign policy.

The whole scheme, however, quickly turned into a bloody fiasco known as *Siyeh-e Tir* (July 21). Appealing to the public, Mossadeq charged that the oil industry was about to be handed back to the British and that the shah was interfering in politics through his manipulation of the armed forces. Citing the constitution, he argued that the monarch should reign not rule, and that the premier should have the power to appoint the chiefs of staff as well as the war minister. Large crowds, first from the National Front and then eventually from the communist Tudeh Party, came into the streets, clashed with the army, and after three days of bloodshed, forced the shah not only to recall Mossadeq but also to give him the war ministry portfolio.

A day after the crisis, the British Charge D'Affaires complained that the shah had "lost nerve" even though the army had kept "discipline" and the casualties had been fewer than 20 dead and 200 injured (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98602*). But two days later, the same diplomat admitted that the "disorders in the provinces were much more severe than we suspected," that crowds had taken over Isfahan, and

5 In 1951 the world had 1500 tankers: 395 were American, 214 Norwegian, and 155 Panamanian — almost all owned by the big oil companies. Only 10 were owned by the Soviets and the East Europeans (*F.O. 371/Persia 1951/ 91597*).

that the dead there alone reached 200 (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98602*). He stressed that a “coup is now necessary since Musaddiq’s megalomania is now verging on mental instability and he has to be humored like a fractious child.” He further stressed that Loy Henderson, the American ambassador, now concurred that “only a coup d’etat” could save the situation: “Musaddiq has so flattered the mob as the source of his power that he has, I fear, made it impossible for a successor to oust him by normal constitutional methods” (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98602*). Until then, Henderson, like much of the Truman administration, had favored using economic pressures and constitutional means to remove Mossadeq.

The day after the July 21, 1952 bloodshed, the British War Office telegraphed its military attaché in Teheran with the following urgent inquiries: the mood in the armed forces; their loyalty in the event of a “sharp clash between the Shah and Government”; their ability to carry out a coup d’etat; and their possible coup leaders (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98602*). The military attaché who earlier had reported that uniforms were so unpopular they were spat on in the streets of Teheran, promptly replied with four prospective coup leaders — including General Fazlullah Zahedi. He noted with relief that Mossadeq’s policy of curtailing military influence and retiring 136 senior officers had alienated the top brass (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98638*).

He also emphasized that the “coup would have to be in the name of the Shah.” Those familiar with the reports of the military attaché did not need further elaboration. Ever since ascending the throne, the shah had cultivated the armed forces meticulously — much as his father had done. He had taken personal interest in all matters military, including inspections, uniforms, barracks, and maneuvers; lobbied for more military expenditures and modern arms; jealously guarded senior appointments to the war ministry, general staff, army, gendarmerie, police, and military intelligence; and, most important of all, had personally vetted promotions above the rank of major, especially in the armored tank brigades. Obviously, such brigades would be critical in any coup attempt — either against or for him. The American embassy noted that after the July 1952 bloodbath the Shah continued to have the personal “loyalty” of many officers even though he had lost the power to make senior appointments and no longer received weekly reports from the chiefs of staff, police, gendarmerie, and military intelligence (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104601*).

Preparations for the Coup

British hopes for a coup received a major boost with Eisenhower's election in November 1952. The new administration, unlike its predecessor, showed no compunction in overthrowing governments, nor in being identified with the oil companies. It also began with some personal familiarity with the crisis since both John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, and his brother Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, were long-time partners in a law firm representing the AIOC in the United States (Dorril, 2000, 581).

Three weeks after his election and five weeks before his inauguration, Eisenhower met with Anthony Eden, Churchill's Foreign Secretary, to discuss the "Persian Question." A week later, MI6 pursued the same question in London with Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA chief for the Middle East. Soon after his inauguration, Eisenhower invited Eden to the White House to "find more imaginative ways" of solving the problem (Ruehsen, 1993, 474). According to the Wilber document, this gave the CIA and MI6 a green light to wage "just war." The British came with a blueprint named Operation Boot; the Americans came with a project started in 1948 against the Tudeh named Bedamn; the two plans were consolidated and expanded into TRAJAX. They set up headquarters first in London, then in Cyprus with its good communication links to England and Iran. The final plans were signed by Churchill on July 1, and by Eisenhower on July 11. Roosevelt, with no knowledge of Persian and little of Iran, was appointed "field commander"; he could travel in Iran without being recognized; as an American he had easy access to the U. S. embassy; and as grandson of Theodore Roosevelt and nephew of Franklin Roosevelt he would be listened to by the shah as the voice of the American president.

The British brought valuable contributions to the whole venture. First, they had experienced Iran hands. These included Lane Payman, the reclusive diplomat in charge of the Iran desk at the Foreign Office since the late 1930s. In 1952 the shah complained that Payman had personally engineered his father's 1941 abdication. Others were Norman Darbyshire, an old MI6 hand fluent in Persian, who had been stationed in Iran for much of World War II; Colonel Geoffrey Wheeler who had been in and out of Iran since the 1920s and had served as the main interpreter for the recent oil negotiations; Robin Zaehner, the press attaché and expert on Islamic mysticism who later became

the Oxford Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics; and, of course, Professor Lambton in London who continued to insist that Mossadeq must be overthrown. Woodehouse, the MI6 chief in Teheran, was not an Iran expert but had much cloak-and-dagger experience from the Greek Civil War.

Second, the British had an informal network within the armed forces. Dating from the war, this network was formed of conservative officers mostly from aristocratic families: General Hassan Arfa, Brigadier Teimour Bakhtiyar, Colonel Hedayatollah Gilanshah, and, most important of all, Colonel Hassan Akhavi, who for years had been chief of military intelligence. This network — mostly through Colonel Akhavi — promoted its own members, sidelined leftists from sensitive posts, and kept the British informed about military matters, particularly about the political leanings of fellow officers. Thus the MI6 had compiled an impressive military “Who’s Who,” something sorely missed at the CIA. According to Wilber, much of the MI6–CIA preparations in London involved studying these personality reports. The one clear lesson Wilber drew from the whole experience was that if the CIA was to pull off such coups elsewhere, it had to first compile its own military biographies. In his own words, it had to collect detailed personal information, “however trivial,” to know exactly “who the officer is, what makes him tick, who his friends are, etc.”

Third, the British had “friends” in high places: Ernst Perron, the Shah’s childhood friend from Switzerland (Perron lived permanently in the royal palace); Soleiman Behbudi, the chief of court protocol; Shapour Reporter, a Zoroastrian from Delhi who worked in Teheran as Counselor to the Indian Embassy, as special correspondent to the London *Times*, and as English tutor to Queen Soraya (soon after the coup he was knighted); Ayatollah Mohammad Behbahani, the son of a famous cleric who had led the 1905 Revolution; and, most visible of all, Sayyid Ziya Tabatabai, the head of the openly pro-British National Will Party. Sayyid Ziya had started his career as an Anglo-ophile journalist in 1919, participated in the 1921 coup, and served briefly as prime minister before being exiled by Reza Shah. Since 1941, his candidacy to the premiership often had been pushed by the British embassy, but had been blocked by the shah who feared his ambitions. By 1953, however, the shah had weekly meetings with him — mainly to sound out his pro-British views.

Fourth, the British had contacts in less visible but equally vital positions. These included some chiefs of the Bakhtiyari, Boir Ahmadi, Zolfoghari, Khamseh, Moqaddam, and Arab tribes (the Bakhtiyaris alone could mobilize over 10,000 armed men). These contacts also included the editors of at least three vociferous newspapers — *Dad* (Justice), *Atesh* (Fire), and *Farman* (Order) — and the three Rashidian brothers who imported British goods and financed the National Will Party (the British embassy praised them as “loyal” and “true friends” who kept a keen “eye for a business chance”) (*FO* 371/Persia 1955/114811). The Rashidians themselves had useful contacts in the bazaar: with Sha‘ban Jafari, nicknamed Sha‘ban Bimokh (Brainless), the most dangerous gang leader; with guild elders among butchers, bakers, confectioners, and sugar loaf-makers; and with middle-ranking clerics associated with the conservative Mojahedin-e Islam and the terroristic Fedayyan-e Islam (*FO* 248/Persia 1952/38572). Woodhouse estimates that the Rashidians funneled every month at least 10,000 pounds sterling to these clerics, politicians, and newspaper editors.

Finally, the British had been approached by General Zahedi, Mossadeq’s first Interior Minister, as early as October 1951. Zahedi presented himself as the best coup candidate by boasting a large following in the military. Although this proved hollow, he did have a few military supporters, some of whom, like himself, had been interned during the war for having links to Nazi Germany. He also had adherents among the Retired Officers Association, most of whose members had been recently purged.

Zahedi’s main strength, however, lay in the religious wing of the National Front: Ayatollah Abul-Qassem Kashani, the leading cleric in the nationalist movement (Kashani and Zahedi had been interned in the same British camp during the war); Seyyid Shamseddin Gonatabadi, head of the Mojahedin-e Islam; and three vocal deputies, Muzaffar Baqai, Hossein Makki, and Abul-Hassan Haerizadeh. In 1952, the relationship between the secular and religious wings of the National Front had strained over a host of sensitive issues: the interpretation of Quranic laws, women’s suffrage, bazaar taxes, sale of alcoholic beverages, and appointments to high offices, especially to the ministries of justice and education. The British embassy, thus, kept in touch with these unlikely figures through Zahedi as well as Sayyid Ziya and

the Rashidians (*FO 248/Persia 1951/1528*; *FO 371/Persia 1952/98602–98603*). These ties led Zaehner to equate Iran to *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (Woodehouse, 1982, 114). He could have noted that the British had found themselves strange bed-fellows. In May 1952, Zaehner reported:⁶

The interview ended with an impassioned defense by Perron of the Shah's "astute" policy. He claimed that the Shah had succeeded in detaching Kashani, Makki and Baqai from Musaddiq and that thanks to the Shah the National Front had practically ceased to exist. I did not dispute this but would put on record that the detaching of Kashani and Makki was due to quite other factors, and that these factors were created and directed by the brothers Rashidian. (*FO 248/Persia 1952/38572*.)

The Americans, meanwhile, brought to the coup plans their own assets — the most important being the embassy compound. The embassy became crucial after October 1952 when Mossadeq, citing British interference in Iran, broke diplomatic relations with London. The Foreign Office calculated that personnel with diplomatic status in the U. S. embassy numbered 59, compared to 21 in the Soviet, 9 in the French, and 21 in its own embassy before the diplomatic break (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98606*). The compound obviously contained CIA officials with the usual covers as cultural, press, labor, and commercial attachés. The Americans also had 123 military advisers assigned to the Iranian army and gendarmerie (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98638*). These missions, both started in 1942, were led by General Robert McClure, an expert on "psychological warfare" who had recently been rushed to Iran from Korea. These advisers were in daily contact with field officers, especially tank commanders. Since 1946, the Pentagon had been sending a steady stream of tanks to Iran. In 1952 alone, it delivered 42 Shermans, and took to America for training as many as 300 officers (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104572*). The embassy was happy to report in 1952 that even officers handpicked by the Mossadeq administration proved "amiable to American advisers" (*FO 371/Persia 1952/9859*). In preparing for the coup, McClure and his colleagues sounded out key officers — even Brigadier Taqi Riyahi, Mossadeq's trusted chief of staff (Nejati, 1986, 371).

6 R. Zaehner, Meeting with Perron, *F.O. 248/Persia 1952/38572*.

The CIA's main Iran expert was Wilber. Often described as a "gentleman spy," he was, in fact, a professional secret service officer who had traveled in and out of the Middle East since the 1930s under various disguises — archaeologist, art historian, and expert on forged manuscripts. His previous success had been the near elimination of the famous Persian poet Lahuti living in Moscow. Wilber had forged his "memoirs" and published them, claiming they had been smuggled out of Russia. Lahuti had been lucky to survive Stalin's paranoia.

The CIA also had a young operative in Teheran named Richard Cottam. A Fulbright fellow and later professor of political science at the University of Pittsburgh, Cottam collected information not only on the Tudeh — which he generously shared with the British Embassy — but also on Baqai's Toilers Party and the far right Arya (Aryan) Party and SUMKA (National Socialist Workers Party of Iran) (*FO 248/Persia 1952/1517*). These two mini-parties outdid each other in mimicking the Nazis, especially in denouncing Jews and communists. Their leaders had been interned with Zahedi during World War II. Cottam also wrote articles that were planted in the subsidized newspapers. One such piece claimed Fatemi was a convicted embezzler, a well-known homosexual, and a convert to Christianity as well as Bahaism. This would have earned him at least three death sentences in the eyes of fundamentalists. Not surprisingly, the Fedayyan-e Islam tried to assassinate him (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104566*). The CIA was also interested in finding in Mossadeq some form of Jewish ancestry (Gasiorowski, 1987, 284).

The CIA had at least four important local agents: Colonel Abbas Farzanegan; Ehsam Lankarani, and the so-called "Boscoe Brothers." Colonel Farzanegan, a desk officer, had just returned from Washington where he had received a crash course on covert operations. Commissioned to the General Staff, Farzanegan knew most field officers in Teheran. Lankarani was a Tudeh activist with a drug problem. Although not in the party leadership, he came from a prominent religious family and enjoyed the reputation of being a daredevil revolutionary. In other words, he was the perfect *agent provocateur*. The Boscoes, named by Wilber simply as Keyvani and Jalali, were most probably Farrukh Keyvani and Ali Jalali. The former was a reporter for *Ettela'at* and a stringer for the *Daily Telegraph* (Bozorgmehr, 1993, 188, 190, 209). The latter was the editor-publisher of the journal *Iran Parastan*. These two had connections to the Taj Sports Club as well

as to weight lifters, *lutis* (thugs), and *chaqukeshan* (knife wielders) associated with traditional *zurkhanehs* (houses of strength). They funneled CIA funds not only into their own papers but also into *Keyhan*, *Mellat-e Iran*, *Mellat-e Ma*, *Aram*, *Setareh-e Islam*, and *Asiay-e Javanan*. Roosevelt mentions that the CIA had prompted the Boscoes to attack a Tudeh rally on the day Harriman arrived in Teheran in July 1951. What he does not mention is that the attack resulted in heavy casualties and was instigated through the local Nazis.

Finally, the CIA forged links with the religious elements of the National Front. In November 1951, the British Charge D'Affaires reported that Kashani had "put out various feelers and established contact with the U. S. embassy as well as the Shah" (*FO 371/Persia* 1951/91465). The Foreign Office heard from other sources that Baqai's Toilers Party was receiving secret funds from the Americans (*FO 371/Persia* 1951/91609). In the week of the coup, the CIA channeled so much through the clerics that the term "Behbahani dollars" gained currency, and the black market value of the dollar fell by as much as third (Love, 1960, 40).

In preparing for the coup, the CIA and MI6 worked closely to stiffen the shah's resolve. They sent top emissaries to assure him both that the coup was feasible and that two powers were fully behind it. Colonel Akhavi, the former chief of military intelligence, gave him a list of key officers willing to participate. Princess Ashraf, his forceful sister, returned home from Switzerland at Allen Dulles' behest, conveying personal messages from London and Washington. Roosevelt smuggled himself into the palace a number of times to bring personal assurances from Eisenhower. Similarly, Brigadier Norman Schwarzkopf, who had headed the American mission to the gendarmerie from 1942 until 1949, visited Teheran in early August to repeat these same assurances. He also took the opportunity to see many of his former trainees, no doubt to make sure they threw their weight behind the coup.

Although the British and the Americans ascribed the shah's hesitation to his "Hamlet-like" personality, he had reasons for hesitation. He wanted full assurances that key officers would support him. He also wanted firm commitments that the coup would be followed up with large-scale American aid and a face-saving oil agreement. In 1949, after an assassination attempt on him, he had carried out a mini-coup himself, revising the constitution, bolstering royal prerogatives, and

arresting much of the opposition, only to find the Americans had held back on aid and the British had offered the embarrassing Supplementary Agreement. The TRAJAX plans included not only promises of “adequate American aid,” but also written guarantees from the British that they would “reach an early oil agreement in a spirit of good will and equity.” Finally, the shah wanted assurances that Zahedi would not pose a future threat. Zahedi offered to sign his own undated letter of resignation (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104564*). Having obtained these reassurances, the shah lent his name to the coup — with one significant reservation. He declined to sign the royal decree dismissing Mossadeq as prime minister. In case of failure, he wanted plausible deniability. Wilber had to forge the royal signature — which means the legal cover for the coup was itself bogus.⁷

The Coup

In the months leading up to the coup, Britain and the United States intensified what Wilber describes as a “war of nerves” and “massive propaganda campaign designed to further weaken the Mossadeq government in any way possible.” This involved portraying it as “favoring the communists,” “threatening Islam,” “creating public disorder,” “giving power to unscrupulous politicians,” and “deliberately leading the country to economic disorder.” Eisenhower, according to *Time*, announced America was not willing to buy Iranian oil or extend economic aid so long as Mossadeq refused to resolve the dispute with Britain (July 20, 1953). The U. S. embassy described this as “one of a series of shock treatments” (*FO 371/Persia 104572*).

The destabilizing campaign was not restricted to propaganda activities. Weapons were dropped quietly to the tribes. Less quietly, an armed gang — formed of retired officers linked to Zahedi and Baqai — kidnapped General Mohammad Afshartous, Mossadeq’s chief of police (Sarreshteh, 1994, 37–85). A few days later, his badly

7 In the CIA memo, Wilber writes that according to Colonel Nasiri the Shah signed the decree at the urging of Queen Soraya, but adds that “this can not be confirmed.” In a conversation with me in 1969, Wilber left me with the distinct impression that he himself had forged the signature. This may explain why the first coup attempt was postponed by two days. Roosevelt claims the delay was due to Iranian incompetence and a mixup with the decree in the royal palace. But it could have been due to the decree being flown out to Cyprus for Wilber to sign. After the ransacking of Mossadeq’s home, the original decree conveniently disappeared.

tortured body was dumped outside Teheran. This was a major blow to the government. It proved that even the police chief was vulnerable, even in downtown Teheran. It sent a clear warning to other officers. It created an aura of acute instability. And it prompted rumors that others were on a hit list. When Mossadeq canceled public appearances and instead carried out government business from his residence, the Western media claimed he was being paranoid and melodramatic. A note at the Foreign Office stated ambiguously: "You might well consider it desirable to put about the story that the communists are plotting against Musaddiq's life, and are trying to plant the responsibility onto the British" (*FO 371/Persia 1952/9859*). Along similar lines, Lankarani bombed the home of a prominent cleric, and sent leaflets to others in the name of the Tudeh heralding the imminent dawn of a bright new "atheistic" republic. This frightened some, including future leaders of the Islamic Republic (Kianuri, 1992, 252).

Wilber also writes that suitable articles were planted in Western papers and then replanted in Iranian newspapers. Publications such as *Newsweek* raised the hue and cry that the country was on the edge of falling into the communist abyss (August 10, 1953). They claimed that the Tudeh had infiltrated the National Front; that leading members of the government — namely, Fatemi, Abdol-Ali Lofti, the Justice Minister, and Mehdi Azar, the Education Minister — were secret fellow-travelers; that Mossadeq was about to make a deal with the Soviets; and that if he did not do so the Tudeh was poised to launch an armed insurrection.

Throughout the crisis, the "communist danger" was more of a rhetorical device than a real issue — *i.e.*, it was part of the cold-war discourse. The British and American governments knew Mossadeq was as distrustful of the Soviet Union as of the West. In fact, they often complained to each other about his "neutralism." They knew perfectly well that the so-called "fellow-travelers" were staunch nationalists (after the coup some of them obtained refuge in the United States). They also knew that the Tudeh, even though the largest political organization, was in no position to seize power (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98597*; *FO 371/Persia 1953/104573*; *Declassified Documents/1981/CIA/Doc 276*). Despite 20,000 members and 110,000 sympathizers, the Tudeh was no match for the armed tribes and the 129,000-man military. What is more, the British and Americans had enough inside information to be confident that the party had no plans to initiate armed

insurrection. At the beginning of the crisis when the Truman administration was under the impression a compromise was possible, Acheson had stressed the communist danger and warned if Mossadeq was not helped the Tudeh would take over (*FO 371/Persia 1051/1530*). The Foreign Office had retorted that the Tudeh was no real threat (*FO 371/Persia 1952/98608*). But, in August 1953, when the Foreign Office echoed the Eisenhower administration's claim that the Tudeh was about to take over, Acheson now retorted that there was no such communist danger (Roosevelt, 1979, 88). Acheson was honest enough to admit that the issue of the Tudeh was a smokescreen.

The plan for the coup itself was strikingly simple. In the middle of one night, Colonel Nehmatollah Nasiri, the commander of the 700-man Imperial Guards, was to take one armored car, six officers and two truck-loads of soldiers, and, in one clear swoop, arrest the chief of staff and the leading ministers, many of whom shared a home in northern Teheran near the Imperial barracks. Nasiri was then to proceed to Mossadeq's residence and deliver him the royal decree dismissing him. If he refused to abide by the decree, Nasiri was to arrest him too. Meanwhile, another contingent of Imperial Guards was to cut the phone lines to the bazaar and take over the main communications center as well as the headquarters of the chiefs of staff. At the same time, Zahedi was to head a tank convoy to the radio station where he would read the royal decree naming him premier.

Little resistance was expected. Mossadeq was protected by the lightly armed Customs Guards. Although officered by Colonel Ali Daftari, a staunch nationalist and a nephew of Mossadeq, these guards were under the overall command of General Mohammad Daftari, who, despite his own family ties to the prime minister, was secretly cooperating with the royalists. What is more, McClure and Akhavi had quietly won over most of the tank commanders, especially those in the large Sultanabad barracks in northern Teheran. One officer later wrote that in the days leading up to the coup American military advisers as well as Colonels Akhavi and Farzandegan visited the barracks, telling commanders that Mossadeq was the only stumbling bloc to a favorable oil settlement (Nejati, 1999, 81). According to the coup plans, Mossadeq supporters would wake up in the morning with a *fait accompli*. Kashani supporters were expected to stay home — especially since Ayatollah Behbahani had obtained from Grand Ayatollah Boroujerdi a new *fatva* (decree) against communism.

In case the Tudeh and remaining members of the National Front — the Iran Party, the Mellat-e Iran Party, and the *Niru-ye Sevom* (Third Force) — came into the streets, the coup planners were confident of crushing them. Of the five brigades stationed in Teheran, four — the First Mountain, the Second Mountain, the First Armored, and the Second Armored Brigades — were under the direct command of royalists. Only one — the Third Mountain Brigade — was commanded by a nationalist, Colonel Ezatollah Mumtaz. But even his second-in-command was in the royalist camp. After July 1952, Brigadier Riyahi, the chief of staff, had placed these five brigades under the command of nationalists — most of whom, like himself, were sympathetic to the Iran Party and had graduated from French military academies. But most of the field commands had remained in royalist hands trained in America and Britain. Roosevelt, as well as the shah, had been assured by Colonels Akhavi and Farzanegan that most of the 40 line commanders in Teheran would support the coup. Mumtaz's Third Mountain Brigade was not expected to offer much resistance since it was an infantry contingent. In the unlikely event it did so, the royalists could count on tank reinforcements being rushed in from Kermanshah by Colonel Bakhtiyar and from Rasht by Colonel Valiallah Qarani. Wilber boasts that the CIA did not spend "one cent" to purchase these officers.

To give the coup a veneer of popular support, the Rashidians and the Boscoe brothers were to gather in the bazaar members of SUMKA, Arya and Fedayan-e Islam, athletes from the Taj Club, as well as lutis, thugs, and hanger-ons from the red light districts. This motley crew was to proceed to the radio station, and, on the way, loot the homes of cabinet ministers as well as the offices of pro-Mossadeq organizations. At the radio station, they were to be joined by truckloads of farmhands brought in by the army from Sayyid Ziya's and General Arfa's estates outside Teheran. In other words, the main function of the crowd was to provide the coup with acoustical side-effects.

The plan was put into effect in the late hours of August 15 (Davar-Pana, 1979). It quickly went haywire when an Imperial Guard — most probably a secret Tudeh member — tipped off his party leaders who in turn tipped off Mossadeq.⁸ Riyahi, the chief of staff, rushed rein-

8 The Tudeh had two members within the Imperial Guards: Major Abdul-Samad Khair-Khah and Major Mehdi Hodayuni. For the possible role of these two in preventing the coup, see Javanshir, 1980, 278–79; Kianuri, 1992, 264–66; Amir-Khosravi, 1996, 526–27; Khosrowpana, 1998, 241–73.

forcements to the premier's residence from the Third Mountain Brigade. When Nasiri arrived there at midnight — having arrested Fatemi and two other ministers — he was confronted not only by the Customs Guards but also by infantry troops backed with heavy armor. Instead of Nasiri arresting Mossadeq, Mossadeq had Nasiri arrested. Mossadeq also dismissed the decree as a fake, arguing that the shah could not have signed it since he did not have the constitutional authority to remove prime ministers.

Immediately after the fiasco, Riyahi rounded up the obvious suspects: the officers from the Imperial Guards (including inadvertently those who had saved the day); Perron and Behbudi from the palace; Colonel Akhavi; Baqai and Makki from the majlis; and General Nader Batmangelich from the Retired Officers Association. But they were all placed in low-security jails; Akhavi was even permitted to take residence in a hospital on the grounds he was seriously ill. Riyahi, however, did manage to place three tanks outside the radio station, and a full battalion from the Third Mountain Brigade with three tanks outside the premier's residence. These measures gave the government a false sense of security. On hearing of the fiasco, the shah fled on his single-engine plane to Baghdad. The coup planners in Cyprus gave up in desperation.

But in Teheran Roosevelt improvised a new plan. He even threatened to kill anyone indulging in defeatist talk (Dorril, 2000, 592). Under the new plan, the four royalist brigades would carry out the arrests as well as occupy the strategic positions, while tank reinforcements would start rolling toward Teheran from Rasht and Kerman-shah. But for the four royalist brigades to obtain ammunition from closely guarded depots and move without sparking off a counter-reaction, Roosevelt hit upon an ingenious idea: Mossadeq would be hoodwinked into calling in the brigades himself. Wilber, as well as Roosevelt and Woodhouse, leave this most innovative aspect of the coup out of their accounts so as not to implicate the American ambassador. The new plan was put into effect on August 19.

Two days earlier — on August 17 — Henderson had requested an urgent meeting with Mossadeq. Immediately after the botched attempt, he had rushed back to Teheran on a special military plane. He had been absent for 11 weeks in part to help plan the coup from abroad, and in part to be out of sight when the anticipated overthrow occurred. At the airport, he was greeted by Mossadeq's son and a contingent of military guards. Mossadeq's son was there to keep lines

open to the United States; the guards to protect the ambassador from angry crowds roaming the streets denouncing the shah, calling for a republic, and pulling down royal statues. Although most of these demonstrations were spontaneous reactions against the attempted coup, some were organized by Lankarani, the Rashidians, and the Boscoe brothers. According to Wilber, these agents burned down the offices of the Mellat-e Iran Party and looted stores in downtown Teheran — all in the name of the Tudeh Party.

Henderson had his private meeting with Mossadeq in the late afternoon of August 18. A short and misleading summary of this interview was sent to the State Department by Henderson himself. But a far more detailed one appeared in an uncharacteristically informative piece in *Time*.⁹ Henderson began by hinting that Washington was not sure whether Mossadeq was still the lawful prime minister. Mossadeq countered that according to the constitution parliament had the authority to elect premiers, and, therefore, he would remain so until the next parliament convened: he stressed elections for a new parliament would be held in the immediate future.

Henderson continued by warning that Iran could not possibly expect U. S. sympathy while crowds roamed the streets threatening American property and shouting “Yankee Go Home!” He threatened to evacuate all Americans — embassy staff as well as women and children — unless firm and prompt action was taken to establish law and order. This sounded like an ultimatum: if such action was not taken the United States would cease recognizing Mossadeq as the lawful head of government. Conversely, Henderson implicitly held out the promise if such action was taken the United States would consider further assistance. In Henderson’s presence, Mossadeq telephoned the military governor of Teheran and ordered him to use necessary force to clear the streets. *Time* commented that “things began to happen immediately after this interview,” and that Mossadeq’s “fatal mistake” was this unleashing of the army (August 31, 1953).

Mossadeq not only banned street demonstrations but also appointed General Daftari, his nephew who was secretly working with the

9 “Iran Mob, Riot for their Shah,” *Time*, August 31, 1953. Only Henderson could have leaked this information about his private interview with Mossadeq. In his official report to Washington, he played down his ultimatum. See U. S. Embassy, “The Ambassador’s Interview with Mossadiq,” in *F.O. 371/Persia 1953/104570*. Henderson’s private papers confirm the longer unofficial version as reported in *Time*. See Ruehsen, 1993, 479–80, 486.

coupists, chief of police as well as military governor of Teheran. The National Front, as well as the Tudeh eager to form a united front, asked their supporters to stay off the streets. The U. S. embassy telegraphed Washington that Mossadeq himself had ordered the army into the streets (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104570*). In a post-mortem on the coup, the British embassy remarked that Mossadeq's "orders to break up demonstrations was instrumental in his downfall" (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104572*). Similarly, the Foreign Office, commenting on a sanitized U. S. embassy report, stressed that the "crucial moment" in the whole crisis came when Mossadeq sent the army into the streets (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104572*).

Thus August 19 began with Mossadeq supporters avoiding the streets while the royalist brigades, as well as the police and gendarmerie, moved into the heart of the city with orders from the government itself to establish law and order. Most crucial of all, the First Armored Brigade readily obtained fuel and ammunition for its 32 tanks from the quartermaster at the Sultanabad barracks. Meanwhile, the pro-Mossadeq Third Mountain Brigade remained in barracks, confident that these troop movements were for the protection of the government itself. Once in the city, the royalist brigades swiftly implemented the original coup plan. They occupied the main communication center and the radio station; cut telephone lines to the bazaar and the Third Mountain Brigade; released royalist prisoners (the Imperial Guards as well as gang leaders and the killers of Afshartous); and arrested the chief of staff and some of the leading ministers.

At the same time, troops escorted a motley crew as it moved from southern Teheran burning the offices of five organizations and eight newspapers. Not surprisingly, Western journalists were too busy to photograph these "true representatives of the public." One such journalist mentioned in passing that the "royalist crowd" — armed with clubs — numbered less than 500 and swelled to 3000 only because of the arrival of soldiers, policemen, and gendarmes (Marigold, 1953). Another called it a "grotesque procession" (Harkness, 1954). The crowd also may have contained some Kashani supporters; an Iraqi diplomat reported that the shah, a day after his triumphant return, took the "unprecedented step of calling on Kashani at his house and thanking him for his cooperation in the restoration of the monarchy" (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104571*).

The final act came in the afternoon as 27 Sherman tanks besieged Mossadeq's residence defended by Colonel Mumtaz's battalion and his three tanks. The battle lasted three hours and left much of the building in ruins. During the siege, Tudeh leaders offered help but Mossadeq declined — either because he had a realistic assessment of their capability, or because he still believed in Henderson (even at his trial he did not publicly blame the United States). Mossadeq may also have acted as he did because he did not want further violence; those trapped with him reported that he refused to appeal even to his National Front.¹⁰ One minister explained that he wanted to avoid civil war at all costs because it could have led to a British and Soviet partition of Iran (Ladjevardi, 1993, "Interview with Mehdi Azar").

According to the *New York Times* reporter, who was on the scene throughout the coup, the casualties in the pitched battle outside the Premier's home totaled 100 wounded and 300 dead (August 20, 1953). *Time* gave a similar estimate (August 31, 1953). But Arnaud de Burchgrace, then correspondent for *Newsweek* and later editor of the *Washington Times*, arrived on the scene a week later to claim that only 63 had died in "this public revulsion" against Mossadeq (August 31, 1953). Similarly, the *Christian Science Monitor* claimed that a "popular uprising" had occurred because the Shah was "liberal," "progressive," and a "true champion of reform" while Mossadeq had been "nihilistic," "anti-foreign" and "indulged in an orgy of mob rule" (September 21–22, 1953). Of course, the few papers published in Teheran avoided casualty figures and instead waxed eloquent on how "patriotic people" from the bazaar, the poor southern districts, and "even from neighboring villages" had enthusiastically poured into central Teheran to express their undying devotion to their Shah.

The dust had not yet settled before Eisenhower told a White House audience that the patriotic army together with the public had "saved the day" because of their revulsion against communism and love for the monarchy (*Declassified Documents*/1978/White House/Doc 318). This set the tone for three decades — especially for academics with "inside knowledge." Peter Avery, Lecturer in Persian at Cambridge University, claimed the "tide had turned" against Mossadeq entirely because of his own shortcomings — his tantrums, flirtations with the

10 For evidence of the Tudeh offer to help, see FO 371/Persia 1957/127075; Davar-Pana, 1979; Kianuri, 1992, 276–79.

Tudeh, dictatorial methods, and, of course, inability to compromise with Britain (Avery, 1965, 416–19). George Lenczowski, Professor of Political Science at Berkeley, argued that “dedicated” civilians — “without the intervention of foreign troops” — had “preserved” the country’s “independence” by fighting heroically to remove the “disident premier” (Lenczowski, 1979, 443, 451, 465). Similarly, Cottam — even after his disenchantment with the CIA and the shah — maintained that August 19 had been predominantly a “spontaneous uprising” reflecting the country’s fear of communism and “disillusionment” with Mossadeq (Cottam, 1964, 224–29).

Aftermath

The coup inaugurated the denationalization of the oil industry. The new government gave a concession to a consortium of major companies. In theory, the National Iranian Oil Company remained in charge, but in reality this consortium gained full control over management, refining, production, and distribution of oil. In this consortium, 40% of controlling shares went to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, renamed British Petroleum; 14% to its ally Royal Shell (thus giving majority vote to the British); 40% to a group of American firms; and the remaining 6% went to the French state company. The consortium was to give 50% of profits to Iran. In the words of the new British Charge D’Affaires, “a formula” was found that “gave the consortium the control they considered essential” (*FO 371/Persia 1954/114805*). To make the deal more palatable, the United States sent Iran \$40 million in aid — on top of \$28 million rushed in September, and \$5 million secretly delivered the day after the coup.

The coup also inaugurated an era of political repression. Immediately after the coup, the military arrested Mossadeq, his closest ministers, and some 1200 Tudeh activists. The figure climbed to over 4000 by August 1954 when army intelligence, helped by the CIA, uncovered an organization of 520 members of the Tudeh within the armed forces (Zibayi, 1955–57; Military Governor, 1956). This impressive-looking figure led some to wonder why the Tudeh had not forestalled the coup. In fact, the total was small relative to the military’s overall figure of over 15,000 commissioned and 51,000 non-commissioned officers (*FO 371/Persia 1950/82356*). What is more, the vast majority of the 520 were cadets, doctors, engineers, instructors, and offi-

cers in the police, gendarmerie, and infantry, mostly in the provinces. Only 26 were in the cavalry, and only two had tank commands in Teheran (one helped defend Mossadeq's residence and the other fought outside the radio station) (Mohammedi, 1993–95, 1999).

The new regime, on the whole, dealt leniently with the National Front but harshly with the Tudeh. Mossadeq as well as most of his ministers and trusted military officers were given three-year sentences. Mossadeq's much publicized trial proved a major embarrassment; instead of the military court putting him on trial, he managed to put the court on trial. Of his ministers, only Fatemi was executed; after the failed coup attempt, he had called for the establishment of a republic, and after August 19, he had taken shelter in the Tudeh underground and had pushed for a Tudeh–National Front alliance.

Harsh treatment was meted out to the Tudeh. Between 1953 and 1958, the regime tortured to death 11 of its members; executed 31; condemned to death another 52 (their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment); condemned another 92 to life with hard labor; and gave hundreds terms varying from one to 15 years. According to British and American embassy reports, the first executions were given much "gory publicity," but the later ones were kept secret because of "public revulsion," because of the "bravado" and "uncompromising defiance" of those facing death, because of the reluctance of firing squads to shoot straight, and, most important of all, because of "widespread suspicion" that the United States had pressured the shah into such "un-Persian" behavior (*FO 371/Persia 1954/104805; Declassified Documents/1975/CIA/Doc 309A*).

These suspicions were well founded. The Foreign Office explained that the magnitude of the repression was due to the "desire to impress the U. S. government from which so much is expected" (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104573*). In a detailed study on the Tudeh, the U. S. embassy argued that only massive repression would break it and socioeconomic improvements would have little effect, since most party members were either employed professionals or relatively well-paid factory workers (*FO 371/Persia 1953/104573*). The report proposed "suppression for some time to come on the same principle that a broken leg is placed in a cast to prevent harmful movement until the fracture has been healthily rejoined." It added ominously: "The notion that communism feeds on suppression is itself communist inspired."

The original TRAJAX plan had warned that if the operation failed the United States could suffer a major “blowback” — CIA jargon for damage — in the form of a break in diplomatic relations and expulsion of all Americans. Of course, the coup succeeded and no such “blowback” occurred. But if any of the original planners are still alive they might well admit that the long-term consequences were far more disastrous. The coup tarred America with the British brush: being perceived as the “colonial power,” a perception that created deep distrust between Iran and United States. It set up a dictatorship that became increasingly unpopular and corrupt. It put a nail in the coffin of the same monarchy by inseparably linking it to the imperial powers. It discredited the army by identifying it with the shah, the CIA, and the MI6. It destroyed the secular parties — both the Tudeh and the National Front — and so paved the way for the emergence of Khomeini’s religious opposition. The “neutralist” Mossadeq was exchanged for the “fundamentalist” Khomeini. The Mossadeq movement failed to bring national liberation; but the same liberation eventually came in the shape of the Khomeini movement. The coup’s imprint on Iranian culture was equally deep: the suspicion that sinister “foreign hands” controlled Iran; and the conviction that only force could forestall repetition of 1953. In short, the coup struck a hard

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blow at liberalism as well as at socialism and secular nationalism. In 1981 — on the 14th anniversary of Mossadeq's death — Ali Khamenei, then a relatively unknown Khomeini disciple and now Leader of the Islamic Republic, declared: "We are not liberals, like Allende (and Mossadeq) whom the CIA can snuff out." Such attitudes continue to cast a long shadow on contemporary Iran.

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