



2020

The Mosaddeq Coup: Cold War Strategy, Oil, and American Ideals

Mikhail W. Faulconer

Saint Louis University, mikhail.faulconer@slu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications>

 Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#), [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Faulconer, Mikhail W. (2020) "The Mosaddeq Coup: Cold War Strategy, Oil, and American Ideals," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 214.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/214>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

The Mosaddeq Coup: Cold War Strategy, Oil, and American Ideals

Mikhail Faulconer

Saint Louis University

Abstract

In 1953, the U.S. engineered a coup that overthrew the democratically-elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. While over twenty years of mostly good relations followed between the U.S. and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's Iran until the Revolution of 1979, the coup has left a bad legacy not only in American-Iranian diplomacy but in the U.S.'s relations with the entire Middle East. In this paper, I argue that control of Iran's oil resources and anti-communism were inextricably intertwined in U.S. policy-makers' calculations in Iran's case, using examples and analysis of official U.S. government documents from the State Department, the CIA, and the coup's architects, as well as Iranian sources. Scholars have debated since the 1980s what exactly motivated the U.S. to take command of the existing British plot, begun after Mosaddeq nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Corporation. Most arguments can be divided into two camps: those who emphasize ensuring American or British control of the oil was the prime motivator, and those who see fears of a takeover by the Tudeh, the outlawed Iranian Communist Party, as the main reason the U.S. undertook such a risky endeavor that ran counter to its expressed Cold War values of democracy promotion and anti-imperialism in the developing world. However, an analysis of U.S. sources in the context of the broader Cold War reveals that concern for oil resources and anti-communism were inseparable in Iran, and in the early 1950s, the prospect of losing Iran to communism loomed large in U.S. policy-makers' minds.

Keywords: Cold War, Mosaddeq, Iran, Oil, Foreign Policy, Coup

Introduction

“So this is how we get rid of that madman Mossadegh!” bellowed Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, after reading the CIA’s proposal for the operation codenamed TP-AJAX, which overthrew the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq via a coup on 19 August 1953 (Roosevelt 8). The coup d’état against Mosaddeq occurred at a time in which the United States was self-purportedly promoting democracy and national self-determination after World War II, and it resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

Mosaddeq was a giant of Iranian politics. *Time* magazine named him “Man of the Year” in 1951. The Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, who travelled to Iran and much of the Middle East, wrote of Mosaddeq in 1952 that “every goat herder in Persia loves Mossadegh and believes in him” and even compared the prime minister’s popularity to that of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the U.S. (Douglas). He was the first prime minister who was not a foreign client or lackey of the Shah (Collier 88). The Majlis, Iran’s parliament, elected Mosaddeq due to the wide popularity of his campaign to nationalize the country’s oil supply. The British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) had essentially owned the production and sale of Iranian oil since 1901 and gave the Iranian government only a small annual royalty of 17.5 percent of total profits (Amanat 520). Mosaddeq’s nationalization of Iran’s oil in March of 1951 led to a crisis that lasted over two years, in which the U.S. attempted to broker a deal between the Iranian government and the AIOC, of which the British government was the majority shareholder.

The U.S. had little direct economic interest in Iran in the early 1950s, but it was geographically important and therefore strategically critical. At the time of the oil crisis, Iran contained 20 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves (Amanat 533). Its relatively powerful Tudeh Communist Party or “Party of the Iranian Masses”, border with the USSR, and

confrontation with the USSR as recently as 1946 over Azerbaijan motivated the U.S. to seek a quick resolution to the dispute. The U.S. perhaps rightly saw global resources and those of its allies, in this case Britain's oil, as crucial to winning a potential war against the USSR, which aggravated its desire to protect Iran from a possible Tudeh takeover. Mosaddeq's failure or perceived failure to actively repress the outlawed Tudeh pushed U.S. policymakers from facilitating mediation to planning his replacement.

Partially because of American intrusions into the Middle East in the last few decades, some have asked whether U.S. foreign policy towards the region was and may still be based more on securing oil resources for economic reasons rather than spreading American values and ideals. The evidence of Tudeh weaknesses, Mosaddeq's popularity, and lack of direct U.S. economic interest in Iran, beg the question of why did the U.S. stage the incredibly risky coup against Mosaddeq when the situation in Iran did not appear dire in terms of Cold War strategy? To answer this question, this paper will analyze the strength of the Tudeh during the oil crisis, the role of the "special relationship" between American and British officials in their perceptions of and approaches to solving the crisis, the influence of Western views of Mosaddeq and Iran, and the coup's legacy for the U.S.'s role in the Middle East. Ultimately, the American coup against Mosaddeq in 1953 was a preemptive strike motivated by anticommunism and concern for oil reserves. In the case of Iran, the two were intrinsically linked in the minds of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, which could not allow Iran's oil to be controlled by a potentially Soviet-aligned government, let alone the Soviets themselves, as this could have resulted in an unacceptable disadvantage in the Cold War.

Assessing Tudeh Strengths and Weaknesses

To examine the validity of American fears of a communist takeover during the oil crisis, one must first ascertain the real strength of the Tudeh during the period 1951-1953. The Tudeh had a noteworthy presence for a communist party in the Middle East, and it was likely the largest communist organization in the region (Behrooz 363). Before it was banned in 1949, the Tudeh had 40,000 party members and 355,000 blue and white collar workers affiliated in its unions (Miyata 313). Despite being outlawed, the Tudeh remained active and may have even grown in size, with one CIA report from 1952 estimating it had 20,000 “hard core members,” 8,000 of whom were strategically located in the capital Teheran (qtd. in Behrooz 364). It also had a sizable number of secret members and operatives in the military. Like other communist parties, the Tudeh generally followed Moscow’s orders and received funds from Moscow, which it proved by its support of the Soviet oil concession that the Majlis rejected in 1947.

While the Tudeh certainly had many strengths, it also was stymied by a number of weaknesses that limited its ability to operate. Principal amongst these was its illegal status, passed in 1949 after an assassination attempt against the young Shah was blamed on the Tudeh. Another damaging weak spot was the Tudeh’s lack of appeal amongst Iran’s peasants, who comprised 70 percent of the population (Miyata 327). Communication was frustrated by the strong regional dialects and language barriers with Turkish tribes that kept the Tudeh from creating a strong rural base (Miyata 327). Inside the important Iranian urban bazaar network, the party was faced with a similar lack of support by many merchants and shop owners who feared the radicalization of workers (Miyata 327). It was also beset by intraparty polemics and factionalism, partially because its leadership was split between those in exile and those in Iran. A high-ranking Tudeh member summarized the extent of the infighting by stating that “without exaggeration 90% of the executive committee’s time was spent on petty personal matters, on

avenging acts, on scoring points, and on creating a situation whereby one group could be ousted and another group could take its positions” (Behrooz 374-5).

Another weakness was that while the USSR supported the Tudeh throughout the oil crisis, its support may have been insignificant. Stalin’s death in March 1953 and internal changes within the USSR paralyzed Soviet direction and the party leadership (Behrooz 375). Moreover, the USSR might not have been greatly perturbed by the outcome of the oil crisis, as it found new oil prospects in Siberia at the same time (Amanat 521). The Soviet leadership also possibly distrusted the Tudeh, as it had made mistakes in interpreting Moscow’s wishes in the past, exemplified by a 1953 telegram to Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union Georgy Malenkov that lamented the lack of “proper leadership of the people’s movement” and the untrustworthiness of various Tudeh members (“Message to CC”). At the time of the coup, the Tudeh and the USSR did not believe Iran was ready for communism (Wilford 162). Additionally, no evidence of Tudeh or Soviet plans for a coup during the oil crisis has been found. (Behrooz 377). The Tudeh were still one of the strongest political organizations in Iran in the early 1950s. Nevertheless, they had significant weaknesses that prevented them from seriously challenging the CIA coup or attempting to seize power for themselves or their Soviet clients.

American and British policymakers frequently accused Mosaddeq of implicitly aiding the Tudeh during the oil crisis, yet the prime minister was far from their ally. A Soviet Politburo memo from 1949 on Mosaddeq’s party, the National Front, declared that he and his party were British agents who “pass themselves off as nationalists” (“Memorandum: ‘The National Front’”). Mosaddeq and his National Front voted against granting the oil concession to the USSR that the Tudeh supported. Mosaddeq, as a nationalist and populist, supported many of the reforms the

Tudeh desired to modernize Iran's economy, but he was not a socialist and kept the Tudeh at arm's length. The Tudeh withheld their intelligence on the impending coup, informing Mosaddeq of the threat only a day before the coup on 15 August, which did help Mosaddeq counter the first unsuccessful phase (Behrooz 369). During the coup, the Tudeh showed some street support for Mosaddeq but did not employ its military apparatus, with one CIA memo describing Tudeh action as having been "nonexistent" (*Foreign Relations Document 349*). This relative inaction may have been due to the Tudeh's internal division on whether or not to support Mosaddeq, and a number of cartoons from pro-Tudeh publications coincided with other negative public attacks on the prime minister during the oil crisis, often portraying him as an agent of Anglo-American imperialism (Behrooz 364, 370).

It is impossible to determine how the Tudeh would have developed as an organization or how its relationship with Mosaddeq would have changed had the coup not taken place, but the Truman and Eisenhower administrations' deep fear of a communist takeover during the nationalization crisis finally precipitated the coup in August of 1953. Tension was brewing in Iran before 1951 because the Majlis had passed a ban on granting future oil concessions in 1947. In addition, the prospects that the "supplemental oil agreement," in which the AIOC offered a few small compromises on revenue and management to Iran, turned to none after word came that the Arabian American Oil Company had agreed to share profits with the Saudis at 50 percent in 1950. Even before the "supplemental agreement" had been rejected, President Truman applied the "domino theory" to Iran, worrying that communists "will start trouble if we aren't careful...[I]f we just stand by, they'll move into Iran and they'll take over the whole Middle East. There's no telling what they'll do if we don't put up a fight now" (qtd. in Collier 75-6 "Summary"). On the one hand, this comment ignores the comparative absence of prominent

communist parties in other Middle Eastern states, and the significant Arab-Persian divide that would hamper the growth of a communist movement from Iran. On the other hand, Truman's concern, shared by many at the time, is understandable in light of the rapid takeover of eastern European states by the Soviet Union in the post-war years.

Policy Calculations and the “Special Relationship”

The American and British governments believed instability, manifested in economic recession and political chaos, opened the door for communists, which they observed first-hand in Germany, Italy, and in eastern Europe. To combat the spread of communism by improving national economies, the U.S. created the enormous Marshall Plan and other aid packages to rebuild vulnerable European states. In order to develop Iran's largely agrarian economy and facilitate negotiation with the British, the U.S. had already extended two aid packages to Iran, Point Four and the Seven Year Plan, but both had not achieved the desired results by 1953. In attempting to remedy this the U.S. offered \$26 million to Prime Minister Razmara, who preceded Mosaddeq and was assassinated in March 1951 before any oil agreement could be reached. The Shah and Justice William O. Douglas both believed Iran needed closer to \$100 million in aid to adequately strengthen its economy, more on par with what Greece and Turkey had received (Collier 78).

After Mosaddeq nationalized Iran's oil that same year, Iran's economy declined significantly, raising American and British concerns of a Tudeh takeover even higher. This was in some ways Mosaddeq's fault because Iran did not have the skilled workers to replace the AIOC's, causing the refineries to lie fallow throughout the crisis. The U.S. offered and Mosaddeq accepted and rejected numerous offers of aid during the crisis. However, most hovered around \$10 million, which shows the decreasing confidence the U.S. had in his regime

relative to Razmara's brief stint, and the British discouraged granting aid, arguing offers of economic assistance helped the Iranian government avoid making a deal to end the oil crisis (Collier 79). Disagreements on economic aid were just one source of dispute between British and American policymakers that inhibited an agreement being made with Iran.

The "special relationship" between the U.S. and U.K. was inwardly strained by the oil crisis, as the two differed in their approach and outlook. From the outset of the crisis, the Labor and then Conservative British governments considered military intervention to secure the Abadan refinery, one of the world's largest. The U.S. dissuaded the British government from any military action because it would have violated the 1921 Russo-Persian Treaty of Friendship. This in turn could have led to another partition of Iran between Britain and USSR, which the U.S. was not willing to allow after experiencing the negative side effects of partitions between communist and noncommunist states in Germany and Korea. The U.S. also warned the British that shutting down the Abadan refinery and imposing a blockade, which it did in June 1951, would only aid economic collapse and the communists (Acheson 506).

American policymakers often privately expressed frustration with their British counterparts during the crisis. Averell Harriman, Director of the Mutual Security Agency, described British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden as "utterly impossible" to work with and stated that he "thought knew it all about Iran... [when in fact] he knew less than almost anybody" (Collier 110). Eden later lent some credence to Harriman's statement, when he and the British expressed their preference to wait for a new leader in Teheran in 1952, just when a new agreement was closest to being reached (Acheson 684-5). To CIA Officer Kermit "Kim" Roosevelt Jr., who played a major role in the coup, it seemed that the British acted "from burning desire more than judgement" (Roosevelt 15). The British government's more hardline stance

towards Mosaddeq can be explained by the expulsion of all its officials from Iran in 1952 after the discovery of the plot, which now needed American help. Two members of the Office of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Affairs stated it was “incredible that the British would expect us to believe the nonsense [they] put forward” (qtd. in Collier 87). President Truman’s Secretary of State Dean Acheson later wrote that Iran and the AIOC were willing to negotiate, but it ultimately became a semantics issue with broad political and economic implications.

The Iranians insisted that mutually agreeable terms must be based upon recognition of Iran’s sovereign right to nationalize; the British adamantly refused this, regardless of the terms, because of their asserted belief that otherwise all their foreign investments, their very life blood, would be jeopardized (Acheson 505).

The British were also concerned about communism in Iran, but their principal motive was perceived as economic, according to the CIA history on the coup (*The Battle for Iran* 19). This assessment omitted the factor of imperial prestige that Britain was trying to maintain in the face of hastening decline, as well as the fact the coup was far more damaging to the Iranian economy than to the British, who had made other recent discoveries of oil in Aden and Australia (Ruehsen 474).

With Britain’s economy recovering more slowly than the American, the British government hoped, like the French, that the U.S. could help support its flagging empire. The British were also angered by what they interpreted as American indifference, at least until 1953, towards reaching a settlement that was sufficiently favorable to sustaining Britain’s global interests (Gasirowski 268). However, like the U.S., Britain was committed to upholding the alliance after the USSR’s advances militarily, scientifically, and diplomatically in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The British needed the U.S. to maintain its influence in the developing world,

where national liberation movements were rapidly ending colonialism. This reliance eventually turned into a near complete transfer of British global hegemony to the U.S later in the Cold War, as the U.S. took up Britain's role in the "Great Game" against Russia aggression in Afghanistan and Central Asia, to which the 1953 coup in Iran may have been a prelude.

Truman and Eisenhower disliked colonialism and the idea of perpetuating it. Nonetheless, despite their British allies' arrogance and obstinacy, they also could not accept the potential loss of Iranian oil and felt the British were more experienced in Iranian affairs. Some in the U.S. even proposed bypassing British intransigence by negotiating with Iran unilaterally. Yet Acheson and others expressed skepticism about the logistical and legal constraints of U.S. oil companies attempting to replace the AIOC (Acheson 682). Furthermore, they felt that negotiating with Iran unilaterally could have a global negative consequence, as losing British support elsewhere in the Cold War could outweigh the gains that a possible U.S. solution in Iran would present (*Foreign Relations Document 147*). This U.S. restraint and deferment to its ally suggests that Cold War anticommunism and global security were higher priorities than potential American oil profits.

While the British were more content to hold out on negotiations and contemplate a coup to protect their economic interests and prestige, the U.S. was anxious to see the oil crisis resolved, as it perceived a communist takeover in Iran as a much more pressing and dangerous outcome. Unlike the British, the U.S. had few economic interests in Iran at the time of the coup. George McGhee, the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, stated that had there been no Cold War, the U.S. would leave the situation to the British and Iranians (Marsh 5). Kim Roosevelt argued in his memoir of the coup that while Britain's concern was undoubtedly oil, "we were not concerned with that but with the obvious threat of Russian

takeover” (Roosevelt 3). In November 1952, shortly after the British were expelled and Eisenhower elected, Christopher Montague Woodhouse, the MI6 Teheran station chief, made an appeal to top CIA officials to take over Operation Boot, the British-planned coup against Mosaddeq. Woodhouse later wrote, “Not wishing to be accused of trying to use the Americans to pull British chestnuts out of the fire, I decided to emphasize the Communist threat to Iran rather than the need to recover control of the oil industry” (Kinzer 3-4). This appeal coincided with direct British MI6 overtures to Roosevelt, who with other members of the CIA began working on what became TP-AJAX.

Judging how much the CIA and the remains of British intelligence forces the CIA relied upon knew about the Tudeh’s strengths and weaknesses is difficult. The CIA quite likely was aware of the party’s internal divisions and had some estimate of its military wing’s size because the CIA had infiltrated the Tudeh and attempted to defame it. Most U.S. intelligence reports from early 1953 projected that the National Front would hold onto power through the year and that the Tudeh gaining legal status or strength was unlikely (Collier 124).

Yet, despite reports suggesting the Tudeh’s weaknesses and Mosaddeq’s ability to maintain power, the U.S. still sanctioned the coup. Some point to the transition from the Truman to Eisenhower administrations as the turning point, arguing Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother the Director of the CIA Allen Dulles took a decidedly more aggressive stance towards international communism, advancing the Truman doctrine of “containment” to “rollback.” Eisenhower and Allen Dulles may have been more tolerant of clandestine operations than Truman was, due to their differing wartime experiences (Immerman 66). In National Security Council and cabinet meetings, the Dulles brothers had a commanding presence and discouraged opposing opinions, which several U.S. officials, like Henry A. Byroade, H. Freeman

Matthews, and Robert Richardson Bowie, possessed about the coup, yet they assented by their silence when the coup was finally decided (Roosevelt 4-5).

Although the Eisenhower administration did in some ways take a slightly more aggressive anticommunist stance than the Truman administration, some scholars argue that both viewed Iran as a Cold War issue and that their differences have been overestimated. They point to Eisenhower's uneasiness and reluctance to commit to the coup, and conversely, they mark the 1949 U.S. coup in Syria and war in Korea under Truman as examples suggesting the two were closer in approach than believed (Collier 119-120; Marsh 5). Domestic anticommunism grew over the course of both administrations, which coincided with the Second Red Scare.

Misconceptions and Miscalculations

More important than the existence of an actual imminent communist threat in Iran during the oil crisis was the perception of such a threat from the Truman and Eisenhower administrations' view. The most important aspect of this perspective focused on Mosaddeq as the unwitting accomplice of the Tudeh and, by extension, of the USSR. Mosaddeq even played on American fears of a communist takeover, once hinting to Ambassador Loy Henderson that without U.S. support Iran was vulnerable (Ruehsen 472). The U.S. and Britain recognized Mosaddeq was an anticommunist, but continual decline of the Iranian economy in 1953 and a small increase in Tudeh activity worried the two countries that Mosaddeq was leaving Iran, and consequently its strategic oil supply, vulnerable to communist skullduggery. Restoring stability in Iran was therefore the primary objective.

The view that the oil crisis was leading Iran into overwhelming instability was expressed in a variety of documents leading up to the coup. The USSR's leisurely withdrawal from northern Iran and the establishment of the Azerbaijan People's Republic in 1945-6 loomed large

in the minds of American policymakers. The National Security Council's proposed policy paper NSC 107/2 of 27 June 1951 stated that if the nationalization dispute was not resolved, the free world losing Iran would be a "distinct possibility through an internal communist uprising" or "through communist capture of the nationalist movement" (*Foreign Relations Document 32*). NSC 136/1 of 20 November 1952 mostly reiterated points of NSC 107/2 but added that, because the National Front had isolated all other sources of power besides itself and the Tudeh, "Present trends in Iran are unfavorable to the maintenance of control by a non-communist regime for an extended period of time" (*Foreign Relations Document 147*). In a March 1953 meeting of the National Security Council, John Foster Dulles conveyed that a resolution to the crisis through diplomatic means was becoming increasingly unlikely, as reasonable British proposals for a new agreement were rejected, and that the "loss" of Iran to communism was growing ever more likely under the current regime (*Foreign Relations Document 312*).

This pessimistic analysis was reinforced by Orientalist views of Mosaddeq. The same *Time* article which named him Man of the Year described him as a "dizzy old wizard" (Wilford 162). Churchill called him "Mussy Duck" and said that he was "an elderly lunatic bent on wrecking his country and handing it over to communism" (Collier 98). The view of Mossadeq as irrational and hyper-emotional was transposed to Iranians as a group, evidenced by Eden who said that Persians were little more than "rug dealers" with whom one had to heckle (Collier 110). American policymakers were likely affected by the same racist prejudices and their relative ignorance towards Iran.

However, Mosaddeq may have sealed his own fate by being too uncompromising in the negotiations. Mosaddeq rejected a 50 percent profit share with the AIOC and similar offers because he demanded back-payments for the years the AIOC had cheated the Iranian

government—a reasonable proposal, but one unacceptable to the British. Acheson lamented that Mosaddeq could not see how his “passions [...] restricted his freedom of choice and left only extreme solutions possible,” describing the whole nationalization affair by altering Churchill’s famous statement on the role of the RAF in the Battle of Britain, “Never had so few lost so much so stupidly and so fast” (Acheson 503-4).

Despite the U.S. and Britain’s fear that Mosaddeq could not retain power or would be unwilling to compromise, he was very popular in Iran until the moment of the coup and secretly so after. His perceived theatrics were unusual for a Western politician, but they were more normalized in Iran, where public and highly emotional demonstrations have a long history of celebrating the martyrdom of ‘Ali and Hussein. In the summer of 1952, Mosaddeq briefly resigned when the Shah would not allow him to appoint the Minister of War, but popular protest forced the Shah to ask Mosaddeq to return. Even the conservative mullahs, Shi’a clergy, like the Ayatollah Kashani supported Mosaddeq until 1953, when the CIA augmented its offers for denouncing Mosaddeq (Jahanbegloo 18-20).

Mosaddeq may have been popular with many, but he also had enemies in Iran who became the coup’s primary actors. First among them was the Shah, with whom Mosaddeq had trouble working and attempted to pass referendums limiting the Shah’s power. The CIA knew the urban underclasses and the powerful bazaar of Teheran could be swayed against Mosaddeq (Jahanbegloo 50). His unwillingness to persecute the Tudeh further or censor the press invited outrage from the far-right, from groups like the *Feda’iyan-e Islam*.

The CIA payroll also included prominent Shi’a mullahs, such as the influential Ayatollah Kashani, because the largely conservative clergy likewise disapproved of Mosaddeq’s apparent soft position on communism. John Waller, the CIA station chief in Iran, asked Kashani why he

and other mullahs would work against Mosaddeq, when they were evidently being paid by a nebulous benefactor, “Kashani told me why he was dropping out of the Mossadegh coalition. Because the Tudeh Party were being tolerated by Mossadegh. They were synonymous with the Russians, and religious men don’t like communism” (Dreyfus 94). Similar to the U.S. and British, the more conservative Iranian groups wanted a return to stability.

U.S. policy favored the Shah as the best hope for restoring stability, due in part to the work of Kim Roosevelt. This hope in the Shah was expressed as early as NSC 107/2, which recommended the U.S. “strengthen the leadership of the Shah and through him the central government” (*Foreign Relations Document* 32). Acheson later wrote that the Shah was the best option, considering the other options for support in Iran were the Tudeh, mullahs, terrorists, and feudal reactionaries (Acheson 501). Roosevelt, who had to develop a personal relationship with the Shah for the operation’s success, saw the Shah as the natural source of power in Iran, even if the Pahlavi regime’s legitimacy was shaky at best.

Roosevelt, like many other CIA officers of the period, was an arabist. Before the Suez Crisis of 1956, Roosevelt and other CIA officials expressed admiration for Gamal Abdel Nasser and Arab nationalism, believing it was not susceptible to communism (Wilford 170; 240). The U.S. rejection of the British intervention in Suez and attempt to overthrow Nasser presents a counterexample to U.S. adoption of a British policy in Iran towards Mosaddeq under similar circumstances.

Confidence in Arab nationalism may not have been extended to Mosaddeq and Iran because there were comparatively few if any qualified persianists in the CIA or U.S. State Department because Iran had been an area of much greater British interest than American. In his history of the coup, Roosevelt confessed on Iran, “I knew roughly where it was but little more”

(Roosevelt 24). The few voices who did not favor the coup by the summer of 1953 might not have felt adequately qualified to dissent. The highest American officials who opposed the coup, such as Byroade, Matthews, Bowie, and initially Henderson were not persianists, which limited their authority to speak against the coup when the Dulles brothers and Roosevelt proposed it. In Roosevelt's case, he was possibly less likely to defer from his British intelligence counterparts, the architects of the coup, and more likely to take a more anglophile position towards the special relationship, due to his familial and personal links to the British aristocracy (Wilford 169; 174).

The Coup's Legacy

The U.S.'s decision to violate the ideas of national self-determination and democracy it previously supported can be understood by examining the coup in Iran in a larger Cold War context. Whether due to a dearth of reliable information or from relying on the wrong people, the U.S. often failed to recognize national liberation leaders and how their movements represented people's hopes, which cost the U.S. dearly later in Vietnam (Dreyfus 94). The Truman and Eisenhower administrations had great difficulty distinguishing between national liberation movements with socialistic tendencies and "imported communism" (Immerman 65). Rather than attempt to foster relationships where the U.S. had virtually none, the U.S. frequently chose to rely on its British and French allies in the developing world, even when doing so contradicted U.S. anti-imperialist rhetoric, as was the case in Iran. Unfortunately, the security interests the U.S. shared with Britain and France and its desire to spread democracy were rarely aligned during the Cold War (Collier 105). The support for the Shah and more conservative factions parallels the support of other conservative elites in South Korea and Saudi Arabia during the Cold War.

Interestingly, the U.S. and British actors involved in ordering and carrying out the coup might not have even seen it as violating Iranian self-determination. The CIA's internal history on the coup and a British memorandum from the coup's aftermath assert that the Shah's *firman* that dismissed Mosaddeq was constitutional (*Foreign Relations Document 362*). Roosevelt's history of the coup titled *Countercoup*, written on the eve of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, asserted that a majority of Iranians supported the Shah in his power struggle against Mosaddeq and that the CIA merely exposed to the Iranian populace how it had to choose between the communist-backed Mosaddeq and the Shah, and in doing so protected Iranian sovereignty (Roosevelt 11; 210). This narrative that the U.S. had intervened to save Iran from a communist takeover or Mosaddeq's demagoguery is hard to conclusively support historically, due to the unconstitutional nature of the coup and the evidence of Tudeh weakness, and is perhaps a form of self-justification. The coup's success was much more likely due to the control of mass demonstrations, some encouraged by money, and the bribery of key military group in the capital.

In trying to answer what in the end exactly motivated the U.S. to stage an illegal coup against a democratically elected prime minister in Iran, oil and anticommunism cannot be separated. Iran's oil supply was just one important piece in a global chess game that the U.S. saw as being increasingly won by the Soviets. U.S. oil companies did gain a significant share of 40 percent in the new Iranian oil consortium, but this might have been more of a repayment from the British and AIOC rather than the prime motivator for the coup.

Additionally, the American oil companies that formed the consortium had worked in the negotiations to prevent such a result because at the time the world oil market was saturated, and the U.S. did not want to cut back on production in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that had increased since 1951 (Gasiorowski 275). Moreover, American oil companies understood any investment in

Iranian oil was risky at a time when nationalist sentiments were high, which caused the Truman administration to persuade the oil companies to enter into a possible solution by rolling back an antitrust case against them (275). A memo of 21 August from Byroade to Bowie just after the coup predicted that Zahedi would be as nationalistic as Mosaddeq had been, reinforcing this interpretation (*Foreign Relations Document 325*). Together, these factors demonstrate that the U.S.'s interference in Iran in 1953 was largely reluctant. To secure the Iranian oil for the U.S. and its allies in time of war with the USSR, the U.S. was willing to compromise its own values to ensure that the U.S. would not be denied Iranian oil in a time of war.

Domestic politics also may have played a role. Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities' highly publicized communist witch hunts coincided with the time of the oil crisis, and the need to appear "hard" on communism might have made the coup appear like less of a gamble, as the idea of losing Iran so soon after China and during a sluggish war in Korea could have seemed to be an even greater electoral risk than exposure. H. Freeman Matthews, the Deputy Undersecretary of State under John Foster Dulles, later denied in an oral interview that McCarthyism affected foreign policy (McKenzie). However, as someone who was involved in the decision-making process it would have been understandable for him to minimize the role that anticommunist paranoia could have played in determining foreign policy.

Initially after the coup, it appeared to be a major success. Roosevelt's *Countercoup* opens prophetically with, "This book ends in triumph" (Roosevelt ix). Zahedi, the U.S.-backed general who replaced Mosaddeq as Prime Minister, repaid the U.S. by cracking down on the Tudeh to the point that it was no longer a real political force after the mid-1950s.

Despite the original perception of "triumph", the coup's legacy has haunted the U.S. in the Middle East. Whereas Iranian opinions of the U.S. were mostly positive before the oil crisis,

they quickly soured under the brutality of the U.S.-supported Pahlavi government until they exploded in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Iranian Revolution consummated the transition of the U.S.'s relationship with Iran, and in some ways the region as a whole, from benevolent observer before World War II to the manifestation of everything wrong with Western society. Iran has transformed from a state friendly to the U.S. to a sponsor of terrorist groups. Epitomizing the unprecedented changes in Iranian society, the *Feda'iyan-e Islam*, who assassinated Mosaddeq's predecessor, is now a fully legal political party. Issues of mutual *mis*understanding continue to plague relations, as seen in the deterioration of diplomacy since the failure of the controversial Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or "Iran Nuclear Deal" from which the U.S. withdrew in 2018, and the future of relations seems similarly bleak, if the U.S. struggles to understand and work with political Islam in the twenty-first century as it did with national liberation movements in the last.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Acheson, Dean, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), 503-685.

The Battle for Iran, 1-79. <https://archive.org/details/CIA-Battle-For-Iran/page/n37>.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/satire-under-bright-red-star>.

Director of the Office of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Affairs (US Department of State) to the Assistant Secretary of State of Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs, memo, Dec. 20, in *FRUS, 1950*, 5:634. Qtd. in Collier, 87.

Douglas, William O., “The Power of Righteousness,” *The New Republic*, Apr. 27, 1952.

<https://newrepublic.com/article/85416/the-power-righteousness>

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume X Iran, 1951–1954, eds. Carl N. Raether and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 32.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume X Iran, 1951–1954, eds. Carl N. Raether and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 147.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume X Iran, 1951–1954, eds. Carl N. Raether and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 312.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume X Iran, 1951–1954, eds. Carl N. Raether and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 349.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume X Iran, 1951–1954, eds. Carl N. Raether and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 352.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Volume X Iran, 1951–1954, eds. Carl N. Raether and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 362.

"Memorandum, 'The National Front in Iran'," Oct. 28, 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 1220, ll. 30-32. Obtained by Jamil Hasanli and translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119116>

"Message to CC CPSU G.M. Malenkov about Obstacles in Iranian Azerbaijan," 1953, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, GAPPOD, f. 1, s. 89, i. 187. Obtained for CWIHP by Jamil Hasanli and translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120062>

"Report to I. V. Stalin on Exchange of Letters between Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh and US Ambassador Henderson," May 13, 1952, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 1219, l. 100-102. Obtained by Jamil Hasanli and translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119166>

Richard D. McKenzie interview with H. Freeman Matthews, Jun. 7, 1973, Washington D.C.

<https://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/matthewh.htm#note>

Roosevelt, Kermit, *Countercoup: The Struggle for Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 2-210.

“Summary of the conversation with President Harry S. Truman regarding intentions of the Chinese Communists vis-à-vis Korea.” June 26, 1950, George M. Elsey Papers, HSTL.

Secondary Sources

Abrahamian, Ervan. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1982, 320.

Amanat, Abbas. *Iran: A Modern History*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, 520-557.

Behrooz, Maziar. “Tudeh Factionalism and the 1953 Coup in Iran.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2001, pp. 363–382.

Collier, David R. *Democracy and the Nature of American Influence in Iran, 1941-1979*. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2017, 75-144.

Dreyfus, Robert. *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*. New York, Metropolitan Books, 2005, 94-117.

Gasiorowski, Mark J. “The 1953 Coup D'etat in Iran.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1987, pp. 261–286.,

Immerman, Richard H. *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy*. Wilmington, Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999, 60-70.

Jahanbegloo, Ramin. *Democracy in Iran*. Houndmills, UK, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, 1-67.

Kinzer, Stephen. *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*. Hoboken, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2003, 1-83.

Marsh, Steve. “The United States, Iran and Operation 'Ajax': Inverting Interpretative Orthodoxy.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1–38.

Osamu Miyata. "The Tudeh Military Network during the Oil Nationalization Period." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1987, pp. 313–328.

Moyara de Moraes Ruehsen. "Operation 'Ajax' Revisited: Iran, 1953." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1993, pp. 467–486.

Wilford, Hugh. *America's Great Game: The CIA's Secret Arabists and the Shaping of the Modern Middle East*. New York, Basic Books, 2013, 146-262.