

Who Really Ousted Mohammad Mossadeq?

More than half-a-century after Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq was forced from office after nationalizing British-run oil interests, historian Darioush Bayandor has written a book claiming that it was the Iranian clergy, and not the CIA and British intelligence, that exerted the strongest influence on the statesman's controversial ouster. • Bungling Washington and London, he insists, were both caught by surprise. •

by **Farian Sabahi**

In 1951, then-Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq nationalized the potent British-run Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which had run the country's oil industry since 1913, saying foreign management infringed on Iranian national sovereignty. The controversial move immediately put Shah Reza Pahlavi under intense political pressure from Britain and the United States. Both nations saw their regional interests as under threat and perceived nationalist Mossadeq as a loose can-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Darioush Bayandor is an Iran analyst and historian living in Switzerland. Born in Iran, he held diplomatic posts in New York and Tehran and was a lecturer on international law, diplomacy and international institutions at Tehran University and the National University of Tehran. Before the Islamic revolution, he also worked in the diplomatic school of the Iranian foreign ministry. In 1980 he joined the United Nations where, over a 20-year period, he headed several UN humanitarian offices in a number of countries. •

non. That he enjoyed support from the Communist-oriented Tudeh Party only made matters worse.

On Aug. 19, 1953, Mossadeq was forced from office in a coup d'état widely attributed to the Central Intelligence Agency, with extensive British complicity. In the days preceding the coup, the Shah had left the country, monitoring events from Rome.

Iranian leaders often quote the CIA operation, code-named Ajax, as an egregious case of foreign interference in the country's domestic affairs. In 1999, then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright actually apologized for American meddling in Iranian affairs during the Dwight Eisenhower presidency, without specifically mentioning the existence of a plot. Iranian General Fazlollah Zahedi, who had enjoyed the support of both Britain and the United States, swiftly replaced Mossadeq.

Now, more than half century later, Darioush Bayandor, an Iranian historian who lives in Switzerland, is contesting the subject's conventional wisdom. His new book, "Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mossadeq Revisited" suggests that the Anglo-American plot, which included paying for anti-Mossadeq street demonstrations, ultimately fell short of its stated goal. Bayandor instead contends that country's clerical hierarchy, led by Shiite Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Hassan Tabatabaei Boroujerdi, the country's leading religious figure, were responsible for Mossadeq's ouster. Farian Sabahi talked to Bayandor regarding his assertions.

For years, Mossadeq's removal has been attributed to the CIA and British intelligence.

You have a different view. Please explain it.

The CIA and the British secret service MI6 began plan-



Shah Mohammed Reza Palevi was exiled in 1979. He died in 1980.



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ning the overthrow of Mosaddeq beginning in April 1953. Their coup plot, code-named TP-AJAX, foresaw that the Shah of Iran would dismiss the prime minister, taking advantage of the parliamentary interregnum and replace him with General Fazlollah Zahedi, an opposition figure who was deemed friendly to the West.

The military aspects of the coup plan was intended to ensure that the royal decree met no resistance from the prime minister or his supporters, or was held up by the then-powerful Tudeh Communists.

This plan was put into effect on the late hours of Aug. 15, but it failed. The Iranian officers involved were arrested and Zahedi went into the hiding. The Shah, who had reluctantly ceded to Anglo-American pressures, was forced to flee the country in a panic. His flight unleashed a chain of events in the ensuing four days that culminat-

ABOVE Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, fifth from right, addresses an Iranian cabinet meeting in 1951.

RIGHT In 1953, members of Iran's Communist Tudeh Party bitterly denounced the United States and Great Britain for meddling.

ed in the Aug. 19 fall of Mosaddeq. Up to this point there is little difference between the existing literature and my findings. Things become fuzzy and disagreements appear beginning with the departure of the Shah on Aug. 16 and the actual downfall of Mosaddeq.

The CIA chief operator in Tehran Kermit Roosevelt later claimed that the fall of Mosaddeq had been carefully planned and choreographed by the CIA duty station in Tehran. My findings instead suggest that the fall of



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Mosaddeq, on Aug. 19, was a near fluke that was sparked by the Shiite establishment in Qom. The role of foreign intelligence operatives was marginal at best.

To be sure, the CIA duty station in Tehran wasn't idle, something that allowed Roosevelt to claim credit. In actual fact, while preparing to wrap up and leave the country, Roosevelt learned from his contacts in the Zahedi camp that Zahedi was preparing a military insurrection from one of the country's distant provinces. Eventually, Kermanshah (some 600 kilometers west of Tehran) was selected for this plan. But this was an inherently a mid-to long-term plan. Roosevelt provided some backstopping and logistical help in connection to that plan.

But neither the Zahedi camp nor the CIA station was in touch with mainstream events that took shape elsewhere without their knowledge. Contrary to what some schol-

ars later asserted, the Americans had no plan B. When TP-AJAX failed, they moved "to snuggle up to Mosaddeq," in the words of General Walter Bedell Smith, who ran the show then in Washington as the State Department's no. 2. I provide archive documents showing without a shadow of a doubt that the fall of Mosaddeq took London and Washington, even the American Embassy in Tehran, by complete surprise.

Both the CIA and the British intelligence headquarters did have, at least in those days, institutional reasons to accept Roosevelt's version, and to take credit without any hairsplitting. The literature on this episode henceforth was based on Kermit Roosevelt's debriefings, later expounded in his 1979 book "Countercoup: Struggle for the Control of Iran."

Shortly after its publication, scholars elaborated on

that flawed narrative, mainly through interviews with former CIA operatives. These operatives – I don't want to characterize them, since I have met none – helped themselves to chivalrous tales, none of which was later confirmed when the CIA's own secret account of the episode was leaked to "The New York Times" in 2000.

Why then did U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright make her public apology and mention U.S. meddling?

What Albright and later President Barack Obama have alluded to is historically accurate. The U.S. did try to overthrow Mosaddeq and their plot or meddling (as Albright puts it) set in motion a process that led eventually to the fall of Mosaddeq on Aug. 19.

As a result of the Shah's flight political forces from the left and the right clashed generating dynamics that resulted in the fall of Mosaddeq on Aug. 19. I am simplifying a highly complex set of events in one phrase but the point is that the eventual fall of Mosaddeq was in effect the backwash of that inappropriate meddling Albright is talking about.

This is not to say that what CIA operatives later claimed correspond to reality. Now, the more interesting aspect of Albright's statement is why it was made. It surely was not an act of Christian repentance to lighten the burden of a guilty conscience. The Clinton Administration then was preparing the ground for normalization of relation with the Islamic republic. The recent White House documents released under Freedom of Information Act and available on the web clearly shows this policy line.

Mohammed Khatami, a moderate, was the Iranian president at the time. The assumption in Washington, inculcated by some American historians, was that the regime's unremitting hostility towards the United States was at least in part related to the US being behind the fall of Mosaddeq and just as leaders from time to time come and make historical apologies for the past misdeeds the Clinton White House thought such statement would go a long way to clear the air. If anything the apology should have been unequivocally addressed to the Iranian people.

What role did the clergy play?

By focusing on the internal opposition and dynamics by no means do I endorse the claim by the late Shah and his imperial regime that the fall of Mosaddeq was the re-

sult of a "qiam'e melli," or a spontaneous national uprising. I argue that the demonstrations of Aug. 19 were the result of manipulation, but not the way the current literature assumes. I describe the character and the composition of the internal opposition, both secular and religious.

Mosaddeq had stepped on too many toes. His reform of the system did not spare any of the big stakeholders. This he did when he was also engaged in an existential conflict with the super power that Britain was at that time. The secular opposition did everything to destabilize the government; some of them joined the TP-AJAX plot.

The other part of opposition to Mosaddeq belonged to clerical ranks. Activist clerics, (Kashani, the Fadiyan-e Eslam of Navvab Safavi and the then mid-ranking Ruhollah Khomeini) turned against Mosaddeq for different reasons. But the members of the so-called "quietist" strain among the ulama, led by Grand Marja Ayatollah Boroujerdi, initially were not against him.

Mosaddeq however allowed a free sway to the Tudeh party in part because he used them as a scarecrow vis-à-vis Washington. Gradually and especially after the incident of Noheh'e Esfand (Feb. 25, 1953) the "quietist" perception and their attitude towards Mosaddeq changed. Mosaddeq's conduct, in the eyes of Boroujerdi, raised the specter of republicanism of the Turkish variety, to be followed, maybe, by a communist takeover. A regime change was unacceptable to the "quietist" ulama; you will recall the episode of 1924 when the clerical establishment prevented Prime Minister Reza Khan from creating an Atatürk-inspired republic.

Since the early 19th century – I am talking about chronicled cases – clerics have systematically been in a position to mobilize, at short notice, the rabble and make them pour into the streets in the service of their politico-religious objectives. This is what they did on Aug. 18 and 19, which sparked a fatal blow. Military coups are normally planned and executed at dawn. In this case no military unite entered the arena until the start of the afternoon. A full subsection in the book discusses the military aspects of the overthrow concluding that no organic link between the TP-AJAX coup and action by uniformed forces on Aug. 19 had existed.

What about the role of the Tudeh Party?

The Tudeh did in fact played a role but only by default, in the wider sense of this expression. Tudeh was

initially against Mosaddeq and his oil nationalization. But this attitude evolved and by September 1952 the Tudeh slogan was the formation of a United National Front, i.e. cooperation with Mosaddeq's anti-imperialist campaign. Mosaddeq played up the Tudeh to per-

Mossadegh addresses a crowd in 1951. Most say he was ousted by the CIA and British intelligence.



suaude Washington that if the nationalists failed, the Communists would take over. This tactic was a double-edged sword that eventually backfired.

The Tudeh influence was on the rise, something that could plainly be observed during the anniversary rally of the 30 Tyr uprising on July 21, 1953 when according to "New York Times" correspondent Kenneth Love, the Tudeh demonstration dwarfed that of the pro-Mosaddeq



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nationalists Tudeh had deeply penetrated the armed forces. It was the Tudeh that blew the whistle on the TP-AJAX coups helping Mosaddeq to foil the coup. After the flight of the Shah the Tudeh vigorously campaigned for regime change.

This campaign was the main factor why the clerical establishment in Qom got alarmed and decided to engage in a tug of war with Mosaddeq.

What role does the 1951 oil nationalization play in the story?

In a nutshell in the post war period in Iran the country was run by an oligarchy, comprising tribal leaders big landlords, few high-caliber and plenty opportunistic

The Shah of Iran saluted by soldiers.

politicians of whom some were anglophile. This structure was under nominal allegiance to a young Shah who unlike his father did not firmly hold the reins of power.

Socio-political forces comprised a quiescent Shiite hierarchy run from Qom, within which an activist strain emerged by mid forties and played a significant role during the nationalization process. On the left of the spectrum was the pro-Soviet Tudeh party. Oil nationalization as an idea was propelled by the National Front led by Mosaddeq in reaction to a half-baked oil accord, which aimed at increasing Iran's oil revenues. The nationalist

deputies rejected this accord as patently inadequate and proposed legislation for the nationalization of the oil industries; the idea was initially cold-shouldered by the Majles (the lower house).

Only after the extremist Islamists assassinated Prime Minister Haj Ali Razmara in 1951 did the Majles come around to accommodate Mosaddeq. Both the Tudeh on the left and Anglophile deputies on the right were against the idea.

How would you define Mossadeq as a person and as a politician?

He stood for the rights of a most fragile and weak nation confronting the super-power that Britain then clearly was. Mosaddeq is also in the vanguard of Third World emancipation. That said, Mosaddeq was certainly not infallible. He has been stereotyped in the West as the "democratically elected leader" overthrown by the CIA after which put the shah back on his throne." In reality Mosaddeq was a product of the prevailing oligarchic system, which brought him to power. Mosaddeq was secular and incorruptible; he must have been a democrat at heart but the oligarchic system did not lend itself to democratic ways in the western understanding of the term. In order to effectively govern he trampled all the state institutions and towards the end created a system of governance that resembled more a benevolent dictatorship. He allowed legitimacy, which was undisputedly his, to trump legality. More importantly his strategic errors in handling of the oil dispute prompted the Eisenhower Administration to join hands with Britain and with his internal detractors to plot his overthrow.

How did Shah behave in this period?

The Shah disliked Mosaddeq. He disliked all strong prime ministers that could overshadow him, or worse, unseat him. But he still remained a constitutional monarch. He successfully resisted several serious attempts by Britain, later joined by the Americans, to dismiss Mosaddeq. These episodes happened in October 1951 and in May 1952. Even a year later when the U.S. ambassador approached the Shah in the context of the TP-AJAX to sound him out about the appointment of General Zahedi, the Shah balked and pleaded to Henderson to support Mosaddeq financially to let him handle the oil crisis.

This information comes from official State Department records. Later in order to enlist the Shah's support for the TP-AJAX coup plot, the Americans literally blackmailed him.

What sources did you use?

Primarily material from U.S. archives (including the CIA) as well as British Foreign Office documents. To a lesser extent I cite the memoirs of the main Iranian protagonists, including Mosaddeq himself, his interior minister, Dr. Sadiqi, Ardeshir Zahedi, and Tudeh Party leader Dr. Nureddin Kianouri

I also cite material from Dean Acheson, Eisenhower, Kermit Roosevelt, the British intelligent agents. I scanned The New York Times, the London Times, Time Magazine and the Iranian press of the period. Secondary and tertiary evidence has always been checked for consistency with primary evidence.

What do you hope to accomplish by laying out this new evidence?

Induce academic debates as well non-partisan professional reviews. Get scholars who have so far defended the conventional account of the event to become involved.

I also hope that public perception, especially the Iranian intelligentsia, undergoes a transformation. We are now working on the Farsi translation of the book, but again this transformation will take time.

We the Iranians adore conspiracy theories, be it about the fall of Mosaddeq in 1953 or the fall the monarchy in 1979. There are many with an ideological slant that refuses to look the history in the face.

What made you write the book?

The short answer is frustration with foreigners distorting of Iranian history. By that I don't just mean Mosaddeq's 27 months in office. Little that has been written about Iran's over the past 50 years, including by big-name academic s, is free of mistakes and ideological bias. Our history has become a victim of foreign-made clichés and reduced to bumper-sticker statements.

The sad part is that our compatriots take published stuff in the West as gospel. My book as such is an attempt to set the record straight by extensive use of archive documents.