

Report details CIA role in overthrow of Iranian government in 1953

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The *New York Times* published an extensive article April 16 outlining the US Central Intelligence Agency's role in the 1953 overthrow of the Iranian government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. While it has long been known that the American and British governments were behind the coup that removed Mossadegh—a leading proponent of nationalizing the oil industry—and restored Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the *Times* article provides the nuts and bolts of the affair.

Several things deserve to be noted about the publication of this piece. First, there is the matter of its timing. It is no secret that the US and Iranian governments, or at least elements within both regimes, have been trying in the recent period to effect some sort of rapprochement.

This took a more tangible form March 17 when, during a speech announcing the end of a ban on the import of Iranian luxury goods, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that her government wanted a “new relationship” with Tehran. Albright acknowledged the role of the US in the 1953 coup, noting that it “was clearly a setback for Iran's political development. And it is easy to see why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs.”

Iran's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi, responded positively to the Secretary of State's remarks. He welcomed the overture, observing that if “the United States is really for an improvement of ties with Iran, it should take practical steps in this regard and show that it has abandoned its hostile policy.”

Meanwhile the Iranian regime has taken “practical steps” to show its own good faith, by seizing numerous Iraqi ships suspected of transporting oil. The Tehran administration is signaling its willingness to operate as a regional policeman for imperialism in enforcing UN sanctions.

Although the document detailing the role of the US government and CIA in the 1953 events was leaked to the press, the exposure is effectively an act of contrition on Washington's part, as part of an effort to wipe the historical slate clean. James Risen, the author of the April 16 *Times* article, notes that the overthrow of Mossadegh “was a turning point in modern Iranian history and remains a persistent irritant in Tehran-Washington relations.” A *Times* editorial on April 18 echoed that theme: “If the United States and Iran are ever to restore good relations, both nations must understand the events that helped drive them apart.”

In his article Risen blames the anti-American strand in Iranian government policy following the coming to power of Ayatollah

Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 on the earlier coup and “the long American history of supporting the shah.” Although this brief reference is made to that “long history,” the reader of Risen's piece might be forgiven for thinking that the overthrow of Mossadegh was an unfortunate, but isolated incident in US-Iranian affairs.

In fact, the shah's regime was a central component of US strategy in the Middle East over the next quarter of a century. Iran was a key and dependable oil producer; one of the chief sources of oil for Israel and South Africa in particular. The American military and the CIA operated bases on Iranian soil for gathering intelligence against the neighboring USSR. The shah's military was used against national liberation struggles in the Persian Gulf region. The hated SAVAK secret police, responsible for the arrest, torture and murder of thousands, received its training from American advisers. US presidents John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter all feted the shah or were feted by him. Carter visited Iran only months before a popular explosion drove the monarch from power.

For its own reasons Washington is choosing to “come clean” about one chapter of that history, its involvement in the 1953 episode—an embarrassment perhaps, but a small price to pay if normalized relations with Iran can be re-established. Furthermore, CIA material on the coup could be useful as a weapon in the current power struggles in Tehran, the *Times* editorial suggests, in an obvious bit of blackmail, since it raises “tantalizing questions. For example, what role, if any, might some of the religious militants employed by the C.I.A. in 1953 have gone on to play in Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979? The C.I.A. reports that some of its records on the Iranian events have been destroyed. But much of what remains should be promptly declassified.”

The role of the *New York Times* in the current sequence of events should simply be noted. The secret history of the coup was “provided to The Times by a former official who kept a copy,” Risen writes. In an accompanying article, he provides some details as to how the American press was manipulated by the intelligence agency at the time (details that contradict the article's headline, “C.I.A. Tried, With Little Success, to Use U.S. Press in Coup”). Risen recounts how CIA officials planted articles with the Associated Press and *Newsweek* and made use of a *Times* correspondent in advancing the shah's cause.

The secret history complains, however, that the spy agency “lacked contacts capable of placing material so that the American publisher was unwitting as to its source.” If anything has changed over the intervening decades it is that the relations between the US

government, CIA and the press are far more intimate. In the recent conflict in Kosovo the news media, including quite centrally the *New York Times*, acted by and large as the unquestioning mouthpiece for the NATO high command and the US State Department. In publishing the history of the 1953 coup the *Times'* editorial staff means, one way or another, to serve American geopolitical aims, the accomplishment of which would only mean more suffering for the Iranian people.

According to the secret history, written in March 1954 by Dr. Donald N. Wilber, one of the coup's planners, the credit for coming up with the idea of overthrowing Mossadegh must go to British intelligence, who proposed it to their US counterparts in late 1952. British interests had retained control of Iran's oil fields after World War II through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The decision by Iran's parliament to take over the oil industry, a struggle identified with Prime Minister Mossadegh, infuriated officials in London.

The American and British governments saw in the Mossadegh regime, or, more precisely, the popular forces behind it, a threat to their interests in the region. While unable to restore the direct or semi-direct colonial rule that had prevailed before World War II, the great powers were working out new political arrangements that would enable them to maintain their economic dominance. The proximity of the Soviet Union—this is at the height of the Cold War—made the character of the regime in Tehran a particularly sensitive issue.

Apparently plans for a coup got a boost in March 1953 when an Iranian general approached the US embassy about support for an army-engineered coup. In April CIA chief Allen W. Dulles authorized \$1 million to be spent “in any way that would bring about the fall of Mossadegh.” An initial coup plan was drawn up at a gathering of US and British intelligence officials in Cyprus in May 1953. The CIA began distributing “gray propaganda” in the streets of Tehran, including anti-government cartoons, and “planting unflattering articles in the local press.”

In June 1953 British and American officials finalized their conspiracy plan at a meeting in Beirut. Kermit Roosevelt, the grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, soon arrived in Iran to oversee its implementation. On July 11, President Dwight Eisenhower signed off on the plan.

The primary difficulty for the CIA at the time was convincing the shah to take part in the plot. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, father of the Persian Gulf commander, was enlisted to help gain the shah's cooperation. The British also attempted to sway Pahlavi.

Meanwhile the operation went ahead. One of the dirty tricks employed by the CIA was to have agents pretend to be Iranian Communists and threaten Moslem leaders with “savage punishment if they opposed Mossadegh.” In another incident the house of at least one prominent religious leader was bombed by CIA agents posing as Communists.

On August 3, according to Wilber's account, Roosevelt had a “long and inconclusive session with the shah,” during which he told the latter “that failure to act could lead only to a Communist Iran or to a second Korea.” Eight days later the shah finally agreed to sign decrees dismissing Mossadegh and installing General Fazlollah Zahedi as the head of the government.

The plotters scheduled the coup for August 15, but the operation was compromised when Mossadegh learned of the plan and pro-shah forces sent to arrest the prime minister were taken prisoner themselves. Tehran radio announced the next day that a coup attempt had failed. Roosevelt and the CIA, however, continued to believe that the coup could succeed. General Zahedi was tracked down in his hiding place and he was agreeable to carrying on.

CIA manipulation of the press played a role at this point. The coup plotters wanted to get out word of the signed decrees. They planted stories about the documents and the dismissal of Mossadegh in the Associated Press. At this time too Kenneth Love of the *New York Times*, after being shown the shah's statements by a CIA agent posing as the US embassy's press officer, wrote an article about the royal decrees.

The pro-shah forces began their counterattack, planning a new coup attempt for August 19. A leading cleric from Tehran was sent to the holy city of Qum “to orchestrate a call for a holy war against Communism,” according to Risen. Key army officers visited army garrisons to convince commanders to join the uprising.

On the morning of August 19 the army swung into action. “By 10:15 there were pro-shah truckloads of military personnel at all the main squares,” Wilber commented in his account. A little after noon the central telegraph office fell, and telegrams were sent throughout the country urging support for the shah. Tehran radio fell into the army's hands during the early afternoon and pro-shah speakers went on the air, broadcasting the coup's success. Mossadegh and others were arrested. Persecution of the Iranian Stalinists in the Tudeh party and other oppositionist elements began in earnest.

Wilber, in his account, wrote: “It was a day that should never have ended. For it carried with it such a sense of excitement, of satisfaction and of jubilation that it is doubtful whether any other can come up to it.” This is not the sort of thing that should be forgotten. The day that marked the beginning of a 26-year nightmare for the Iranian people under one of the cruelest regimes on the face of the earth evoked “excitement,” “satisfaction” and “jubilation” in the breast of the chief representative of the US government. All the chatter, past and present, about “democracy” and the “free world” collapse in the face of this sort of response.



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