THE 1953 COUP D'ETAT IN IRAN

INTRODUCTION

In retrospect, the United States sponsored coup d'état in Iran of August 19, 1953, has emerged as a critical event in postwar world history. The government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq which was ousted in the coup was the last popular, democratically oriented government to hold office in Iran. The regime replacing it was a dictatorship that suppressed all forms of popular political activity, producing tensions that contributed greatly to the 1978–1979 Iranian revolution. If Mosaddeq had not been overthrown, the revolution might not have occurred. The 1953 coup also marked the first peacetime use of covert action by the United States to overthrow a foreign government. As such, it was an important precedent for events like the 1954 coup in Guatemala and the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile,1 and made the United States a key target of the Iranian revolution.

Although the 1953 coup is thus an important historical event, its story has not yet been fully told. The most widely circulated account of the coup, that of Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA officer who directed it, contains many errors and omissions.2 This study seeks to clarify the roles played by the United States and Britain in the coup, based on recently released diplomatic records and on interviews with most of the key U.S. and British participants.3 This account is more complete than Roosevelt's and the others that have so far appeared. Moreover, because all of the major U.S. and British participants who are alive and willing to speak on the subject have been interviewed for this study, and because all of the currently available U.S. and British diplomatic records dealing with the coup have been examined, this study is likely to remain the most complete account of U.S. and British involvement in the coup for some time to come.

Three main questions guide this study. First, why did the United States become involved in the coup? Second, what roles did Britain and the various Iranian participants play? Third, how important was the U.S. role in the overthrow of Mosaddeq? While none of these questions can be answered definitively, the material presented in this study sheds considerable light on each.

THE ANGLO-IRANIAN OIL CRISIS AND BRITISH POLICY TOWARD IRAN

On April 29, 1951, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the late Shah of Iran, yielded to a rising tide of popular pressure and appointed Mohammad Mosaddeq to be
Iran's new prime minister. Mosaddeq was a lawyer and wealthy landowner who had been a prominent political figure in Iran since the early 1900s. In his long years in public service, Mosaddeq had gained a reputation as a liberal democrat and an ardent nationalist. By the late 1940s, he had identified himself with two main issues: a desire to transfer political power from the royal court to the parliament (known as the Majlis), and a desire to increase Iran's control over its oil industry, which was controlled by the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). In the late 1940s, these two issues were becoming increasingly prominent in Iranian politics. Moreover, they had become closely interrelated by this time: the British had become extremely powerful in Iran, due mainly to their control over the oil industry, and they used their power in part to help the Shah; the Shah, for his part, was widely viewed as a British puppet and had refused to renegotiate or nationalize the AIOC concession.4

These two issues came to eclipse all others in 1949, when a new oil agreement favorable to the AIOC was announced and when the Shah then tried to rig the 16th Majlis elections. These actions enraged the opposition. Large demonstrations ensued and an organization known as the National Front was formed to coordinate opposition to the Shah and to the British. Mosaddeq soon emerged as its de facto leader.

The National Front was a broad coalition of groups and political parties based mainly on the urban middle and lower classes. Its main components were the progressive, nationalist Iran party, led by Karim Sanjabi and Allahyar Saleh and composed mainly of leftist, anti-Soviet intellectuals; the Toilers' party, led by Mozaffar Baqai and Khalel Maleki and composed of both workers and leftist intellectuals; and the Mojahidin-i-Islam, led by Ayatollah Abul Qassem Kashani and composed mainly of workers, bazaar merchants, and rank-and-file clergy. Associated with the National Front (but not formally affiliated with it) was the Pan-Iranist party, a shadowy, ultra-nationalist group composed mainly of lower class toughs. The National Front also attracted a large number of unaffiliated individuals, particularly among the middle class. The main opposition organizations not affiliated with the National Front were the communist Tudeh party and the Fedayin-i-Islam.5

In 1950, the National Front led frequent demonstrations against the Shah and the British. It also managed to elect eight candidates to the 16th Majlis, including Mosaddeq. Once in the Majlis, the National Front deputies continued to press for a reduction of the Shah's powers and, after June 1950, for nationalization of the oil industry. In March 1951, Mosaddeq submitted a bill calling for nationalization of the oil industry to the Majlis. This bill was quickly passed, and Mosaddeq was soon appointed prime minister. On May 1, immediately after taking office, Mosaddeq signed the nationalization bill into law.6

The nationalization law quickly brought Mosaddeq into direct conflict with the British government, which owned 50% of the AIOC's stock and was not prepared to accept outright nationalization. In the ensuing months, the British adopted a three-track strategy designed to reestablish their control over Iran's oil by either pressuring Mosaddeq into a favorable settlement or by removing him from office.7
The first component of this strategy consisted of a series of legal maneuvers. The International Court of Justice was asked to arbitrate the oil dispute. A negotiating team was sent to Tehran with a proposal that recognized the principle of nationalization but called for the AIOC to market Iran’s oil on a 50–50 profit-sharing basis. This proposal was rejected by Mosaddeq in June 1951. Negotiations were reopened in August under a mission led by Richard Stokes. Stokes’s proposal differed little from the previous British offer, and was soon rejected by Mosaddeq. The British thereafter refused to negotiate directly with Mosaddeq and relied instead on appeals to the International Court, the United Nations, and on mediation by the United States.8

The second component of the British strategy was to undermine Mosaddeq’s base of support by imposing economic sanctions on Iran and carrying out military maneuvers in the region. The AIOC began a production slowdown in May and prevented tankers from loading oil at Abadan. By the end of July, these steps had evolved into a full-fledged blockade, which was joined by the other major oil companies. A British paratroop brigade was sent to Cyprus in mid-May and the cruiser Mauritius was sent to Abadan. These actions led Mosaddeq to announce that the first shot fired would “signal the start of World War III.”9

With the collapse of the Stokes negotiations, the AIOC announced that it would take legal action against anyone buying Iranian oil. Britain asked its European allies to discourage their citizens from seeking employment with the newly-formed National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). In early September, an embargo was begun on British exports to Iran of iron, steel, sugar, oil processing equipment, and goods that could be resold for dollars. Twenty thousand oil workers were laid off by the AIOC at Abadan, forcing Mosaddeq to put them on the government payroll. Sterling conversion privileges were cancelled and other financial restrictions were imposed which violated a memorandum of understanding between the two governments. Four British destroyers joined the Mauritius in September and held firing practice near Abadan. British land and air forces in the region were also strengthened.10

The third component of the British strategy was to try to remove Mosaddeq from office. This was to be achieved mainly through covert political action, undertaken with the help of a network of pro-British politicians, businessmen, military officers, and religious figures. The principal figures in this network were the Rashidian brothers, who had been the main British agents in Iran since the early 1940s. Another important element in the British net was a group of prominent, pro-British politicians. These included Sayyid Zia Tabataba’i, whom the British sought to install as prime minister, and Jamal Emami, who headed a pro-British faction in the Majlis.11

The British began to pressure the Shah to install Sayyid Zia even before Mosaddeq came to power. The Shah was apparently agreeable, and was reportedly discussing the matter with Sayyid Zia when the Majlis nominated Mosaddeq. These efforts continued after Mosaddeq assumed office. In June 1951, Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, leaders of the Conservative opposition in Britain, suggested to the Foreign Office that an Anglo-American approach
be made to the Shah to oust Mosaddeq. This meant, in their words, carrying out “a coup.” Plans for covert action had, however, already been developed by this time; the removal of Mosaddeq was viewed as “objective number one.” Oddly enough, several members of the British parliament began to lobby the Foreign Office at this time on behalf of Ahmad Qavam, a venerable Iranian politician and former prime minister. The Foreign Office responded that “certain other plans are now under way” and “we have our money on another horse,” referring to Sayyid Zia. Throughout the summer of 1951, pressure to remove Mosaddeq was brought to bear on the Shah, who was sympathetic but remained paralyzed with indecision.

After the collapse of the Stokes negotiations, all available means were used in attempting to oust Mosaddeq. Stokes met with the Shah shortly after the negotiations broke down and implored him to dismiss Mosaddeq. The Permanent Undersecretary in the Foreign Office called for an “indirect and behind the scenes” effort to remove Mosaddeq and noted “an encouraging growth of opposition in the Majlis.” This was a reference to efforts by Jamal Emami and his faction to disrupt the Majlis. The Foreign Office developed a set of guidelines for dealing with Mosaddeq’s successor, whom it presumed would be Sayyid Zia. These included a loan from the AIOC and a modus vivendi agreed to by Sayyid Zia calling for a return of the AIOC under a different name. The Minister of Fuel and Power optimistically speculated that these measures might just enable Britain to avoid full nationalization.

These efforts were taken one step further in early September by the British Ambassador in Tehran, Sir Francis Shepherd, who reported that the Shah was in favor of a change of government and the opposition was about to overthrow Mosaddeq. The Foreign Office then announced that the oil negotiations had been suspended and that it saw no hope of reaching an agreement with Mosaddeq. This statement, which was “designed to encourage the opposition group headed by Sayyid Zia,” led Mosaddeq to accuse the British of trying to overthrow him.

The actions of the British government, as discussed above, were accompanied by a new round of further British economic sanctions and military activities. The United States protested vigorously; U.S. policymakers believed that Mosaddeq was “anxious to reach an agreement,” and advised the British to negotiate. The British decided instead to increase their pressure on Mosaddeq. After British workers were expelled from the oilfields on September 20, plans were made to invade Abadan. The Iranian naval commander at Abadan was persuaded by the British to put up only token resistance. Prime Minister Attlee notified President Truman of the invasion plan. Truman responded that the United States would not support an invasion and again recommended negotiations. Attlee was then forced to tell his cabinet that “in view of the attitude of the United States Government, [he did not] think it would be expedient to use force to maintain the British staff in Abadan.”

U.S. opposition caused the British to abandon their attempt to overthrow Mosaddeq at this time. The oil dispute was then brought before the United Nations, where Mosaddeq received a warm reception from U.S. officials and gained considerable sympathy in the international community. Having failed to reverse the nationalization law or to oust Mosaddeq, and with their main
candidate for the premiership by now thoroughly discredited, the British began to search for other options in Iran.

One soon materialized. Ahmad Qavam, whose overtures had been rejected earlier in 1951, sent several emissaries to the British in late 1951 and early 1952. In March 1952, Julian Amery, a Conservative MP with considerable experience in the Middle East, was sent unofficially to Paris to meet with Qavam. Qavam then returned to Tehran to build support for his candidacy. A list of possible cabinet ministers was drawn up and given to the British for approval. Support was given to Qavam in the form of help from pro-British Majlis members and an agreement on a plan to end the oil dispute. Qavam told George Middleton, the British Chargé in Tehran, that he would “ensure that the traditionally cordial relations [between Iran and Britain] were restored, that he wanted [the British] back as partners in the oil industry, that the British must return, and so on.”

He met in early June with U.S. Ambassador Loy Henderson. Henderson was “inclined to think that he might be the best bet” as a successor to Mosaddeq, although State Department officials were less enthusiastic.

By this time the British had also begun a covert effort through the Rashidians to create friction among the leaders of the National Front. Tensions emerged as early as March 1952, when Mosaddeq openly criticized Kashani’s attempts to rig the 17th Majlis elections. Tensions also emerged at this time between Mosaddeq and Hossein Makki, another key National Front figure. Robin Zaehner, an Oxford professor working for MI6 (the British intelligence service) in Iran at this time, claimed that this tension was “created and directed by the brothers Rashidian.” It is, of course, impossible to determine how important these British actions were in creating these tensions, but they may well have played a significant role.

Mosaddeq was evidently aware of these activities. He retaliated suddenly on July 16 by resigning from office, after clashing with the Shah over who would control the military. The Shah then appointed Qavam prime minister. Plans for Qavam’s accession had apparently not yet been completed. Massive demonstrations calling for Mosaddeq’s return were organized by the National Front. These demonstrations became violent; at least 69 people were killed and over 750 were injured. The Shah refused to use the police to crush the demonstrations. Since Qavam had no popular following, Mosaddeq’s supporters dominated the streets of Tehran and other cities. Mosaddeq was triumphantly swept back into office on July 21.

These events had ominous ramifications. Morale in the army dropped precipitously, particularly after Mosaddeq subsequently purged the officer corps. The British and their supporters were panic-stricken. Middleton reported that the court had been “fatally weakened,” and that henceforth it might not be possible “to stop the drift towards communism.” He described July 21 as “a turning point in Iranian history. Previously the small ruling class determined the prime minister, with [the] Shah as umpire. Now the consent of the mob is the decisive factor.”

The Qavam episode also created serious problems for the National Front. The Tudeh party was becoming increasingly powerful; efforts were made to bring it under control. Mosaddeq quarreled bitterly with Kashani and other National
Front leaders over cabinet appointments and over Mosaddeq's request for emergency powers. The Pan-Iranist party began to split into factions. More ominously, a group of military officers led by Fazlollah Zahedi began to plot with the Rashidians against Mosaddeq. Zahedi, a retired general and member of the Senate who also headed the Retired Officers' Association, had been arrested by the British in 1941 for planning "a concentrated move against allied troops in Persia." He had been a minister in Mosaddeq's first cabinet and had supported the National Front until the July uprisings, when the resurgence of Tudeh activity and the disintegration of the military apparently drove him into opposition.

Zahedi and the Rashidians began to plot against Mosaddeq shortly after the latter returned to office on July 21. A Kashani emissary and National Front leaders Makki, Baqai, and Abol Hassan Haerizadeh approached Zahedi and expressed their dissatisfaction with Mosaddeq. Zahedi apparently gained Kashani's support in exchange for a role in the selection of post-coup cabinet members. From this point on, Kashani, Makki, Baqai, and Haerizadeh worked against Mosaddeq in loose collaboration with Zahedi and were among Mosaddeq's staunchest opponents. Zahedi met with a British embassy official and expressed his opposition to the growth of U.S. influence in Iran. The embassy officer cabled London for advice, saying "I don't want to set [the Rashidians] off working up a coup d'état and then have to call it off."  

Zahedi spent August and September trying to build support. He obtained the backing of Abul Qasem Bakhtiari, a tribal leader with whom he had worked closely for the Nazis during World War II. Zahedi met with Middleton and asked for assurances that the British would not oppose him, would obtain U.S. acquiescence in the plot, and would agree to an oil settlement on terms similar to those reached with Qavam. Middleton reported this to London and was told to give Zahedi assistance. Arms were provided to the Bakhtiari by MI6. Middleton met with U.S. Ambassador Henderson, who was noncommittal about Zahedi. Either Zahedi or a close lieutenant also met with Henderson on September 8. Henderson was told that Mosaddeq could not stop the communists, but that a government which could would soon come to power.

As with the Qavam plot, Mosaddeq evidently learned of Zahedi's plans and moved to stop him before they could be implemented. Arrest warrants were issued on October 13 for the Rashidians and General Abdul Hossein Hejazi, a Zahedi ally who had been dismissed in August as head of the military college. A General Aryana was dismissed from the army in connection with the plot, and Zahedi was saved from arrest only by parliamentary immunity. Three days later, on October 16, Mosaddeq broke diplomatic relations with Britain. Lacking a base for operations inside Iran, the British henceforth were forced to rely on the United States to deal with Mosaddeq.

U.S. POLICY TOWARD IRAN UNDER THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION

In comparison with countries such as Germany, Italy, Greece, and China, Iran was not of great concern to U.S. policymakers in the late 1940s. The Tudeh
party had been seriously weakened in the 1945–1946 Azerbaijan crisis and Iran was relatively stable. The United States had no significant economic interests in Iran at this time. Anglo–U.S. military strategy called for Britain rather than the United States to defend Iran in the event of a Soviet invasion. Very little U.S. aid was given to Iran in the 1940s. Because of its long border with the Soviet Union, Iran was of some interest for espionage and other covert activities. However, these were on a much smaller scale than similar activities elsewhere and did not really affect Iran itself.

In 1950, the gradual reemergence of the Tudeh and growing unrest caused by the oil dispute and a severe recession within Iran led U.S. policymakers to become increasingly concerned about Iran. The Shah’s leadership ability was criticized. Iran was described as “dangerous and explosive,” and a possible “second China.” Steps were taken to remedy the situation. A $23 million per year military aid agreement was signed. A small Point Four aid program was begun. A $25 million Export–Import Bank loan was approved (although never actually granted) and a $10 million International Bank loan request was supported. The CIA and embassy staffs in Tehran were increased. Henry Grady, who had played a key role in the Greek Civil War, was named Ambassador to Iran.

By early 1951, U.S. involvement in Iran had increased considerably. After the nationalization law was enacted, the Truman administration pursued two main goals regarding Iran. First, Iran was to be kept in the Western camp at all costs. Second, stability was to be maintained in the world oil market. These goals did not call for undermining the Mosaddeq government. U.S. officials stated that they had “no intention . . . of challenging Iran’s sovereignty,” and frequently expressed support for Iran’s independence. Although a covert action program had been started in Iran by the Truman administration (see below), and while covert action had been used extensively elsewhere, this program was designed to weaken the Soviet position in Iran rather than that of Mosaddeq. U.S. policy toward Iran under Truman was to support the Mosaddeq government and seek an end to the oil dispute through diplomatic means. U.S. officials were, however, aware of British covert activities against Mosaddeq in this period and occasionally discussed these activities with their British counterparts.

Soon after the AIOC was nationalized, U.S. officials developed a plan to ease the effect of the British oil blockade on U.S. allies. Under this plan, U.S. oil companies were asked to provide oil voluntarily to those allies that had been adversely affected by the blockade. Some 46 million barrels of oil were delivered under this plan in the first year of the blockade, which was estimated to be 20% of Iran’s total 1950 production. Although it was undertaken to ensure that oil would be available to U.S. allies in the event of a general war, this plan had the effect of strengthening the British blockade and hence inadvertently helped to undermine the Iranian economy and the Mosaddeq government.

At the same time, diplomatic efforts were begun to try to resolve the oil dispute. U.S. officials called for a negotiated settlement and pledged not to interfere in Iran’s internal affairs. The British were advised to pay “lip service” to the principle of nationalization, accept a 50–50 division of profits, and refrain
from using force. British officials were "bothered" and "annoyed at the American attitude of relative indifference." Averell Harriman was sent to Tehran after the first round of negotiations broke down to press for new talks. His efforts led to the Stokes negotiations. While these ultimately failed, Harriman is credited by Dean Acheson with preventing a war between Britain and Iran. After the Stokes mission collapsed, the British began their covert efforts to install Sayyid Zia. U.S. officials repeatedly pressed the British to resume negotiations. As discussed above, Truman's personal intervention was largely responsible for preventing a British invasion of Iran at this time.

Mosaddeq went to the United Nations in October. He traveled to Washington and was received warmly by President Truman and other U.S. officials. Meanwhile, a new U.S. approach to the oil dispute was being developed. This plan recognized Iran's desire for an end to British control over its oil resources and distanced the United States considerably from the British. The U.S. proposal called for the establishment of a consortium to market oil purchased from the NIOC. This consortium was to be made up initially of Royal Dutch/Shell and other major oil companies. When anti-trust considerations led the U.S. majors to back out, a similar package was arranged involving independent U.S. oil companies. When this fell apart in the fall of 1952, a third plan was worked out in which anti-trust laws were to be waived to permit the participation of the U.S. majors. This package was rejected by Mosaddeq in late 1952, but was agreed to in essence by his successor in 1954.

In conjunction with these diplomatic activities, the United States began covert efforts to monitor and manipulate the political process in Iran. Since the late 1940s, the CIA had been carrying out five basic types of covert activity in Iran. First, stay-behind networks had been organized among the tribes in southern Iran to conduct guerrilla warfare in the event of a Soviet invasion. Second, escape and evasion routes had been set up for use in a major war. Third, cross-border espionage and subversion operations were being launched into the Soviet Union using Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and other ethnic groups living on both sides of the border. Fourth, Soviet activities in Iran were being monitored with espionage and counter-espionage operations. Finally, an operation codenamed BEDAMN had been started in 1948 to counter Soviet and Tudeh influence in Iran.

BEDAMN was a propaganda and political action program run through a network headed by two Iranians, codenamed Nerren and Cilley, and apparently funded at $1 million per year. Under the propaganda arm of BEDAMN, anti-communist articles and cartoons were planted in Iranian newspapers, books and leaflets critical of the Soviet Union and the Tudeh party were written and distributed, rumors were started, etc. The political action arm of BEDAMN involved both direct attacks on Soviet allies in Iran and so-called black operations designed to turn Iranians against the Tudeh. Attacks on Soviet allies typically involved hiring street gangs to break up Tudeh rallies and funding right-wing, anti-communist organizations such as the Somka and Pan-Iranist parties, who regularly battled Tudeh mobs in the streets of Tehran. Black operations included the infiltration of agents provocateurs into Tudeh demonstrations to provoke
outrageous acts, paying religious figures to denounce the Tudeh as anti-Islamic, and organizing attacks on mosques and public figures in the name of the Tudeh. These activities complemented more benign, overt activities with the same general goal carried out by the U.S. embassy staff and the U.S. Information Agency.

BEDAMN was also used to weaken the National Front by undermining its mass base, which consisted mainly of organizations such as the Toilers’ and Pan-Iranist parties and crowds led by popular figures such as Kashani. Efforts were made to detach Kashani and his followers from the National Front using propaganda, often quite vulgar, that depicted Mosaddeq as a corrupt and immoral person who was exploiting Kashani. Money was also given to a mullah named Mohammad Taqi Falsafi to try to build a clerical alternative to Kashani. Other mullahs were encouraged to adopt a more fundamentalist line to drive them away from Mosaddeq. Efforts were made to turn the Toilers and the Pan-Iranists against Mosaddeq and to provoke splits in these organizations. This was done by buying influence among the leaders of these groups through Iranians in the BEDAMN network, who disguised their CIA connections. In a particularly noteworthy case, a CIA contract officer approached Baqai in September or October of 1952 and encouraged him to break with Mosaddeq; Baqai was subsequently also given money. Similar approaches may have been made to Kashani, Makki, and Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Behbehani.

By November 1952, Kashani, Baqai, Makki, and several other National Front leaders had turned against Mosaddeq. Similarly, the Pan-Iranists had split into pro- and anti-Mosaddeq factions by this time, and Khalil Maleki and his followers in the Toilers’ party had split with Baqai and formed a pro-Mosaddeq organization known as the Third Force. It is, of course, impossible to determine the degree to which BEDAMN was responsible for this. Most Iranian political figures at this time were extremely opportunistic and ambitious, and could have had many reasons for turning against Mosaddeq. This was especially true of Kashani, Baqai, and Makki. Furthermore, the Rashidians were carrying out similar activities at this time on behalf of the British. The CIA officers who directed BEDAMN are themselves unclear as to its impact; one described it as “important” in encouraging Kashani and Baqai to split with Mosaddeq, while another said it was “limited” in scale. While the CIA thus cannot be credited exclusively with provoking these splits in the National Front, it may well have had a significant role.

An issue which is in some ways more important is the question of who authorized these attacks against Mosaddeq and the National Front. As described above, the official policy of the Truman administration was to support Mosaddeq and not to undermine his government. The State Department, headed at the time by Dean Acheson, unquestionably followed this policy. It thus appears that the decision to undermine Mosaddeq through BEDAMN was taken within the CIA itself. Since the top CIA officials with responsibility for covert operations at this time are now either dead or unable to recall who might have authorized these actions, it is impossible to determine where in the CIA chain of command this “rogue elephant” component of BEDAMN originated.
The overthrow of Mosaddeq

On November 1, 1952, the staff of the British embassy left Tehran in a caravan for Beirut, ending the long era of British domination in Iran. The Rashidian network and several deep-cover operatives had been left behind, but it was clear that the British position in Iran had become very weak. Accordingly, Christopher Montague Woodhouse, the chief MI6 officer in Iran at the time, was sent to Washington to seek U.S. support for a tentative plan to overthrow Mosaddeq.48

Woodhouse’s plan called for a coordinated uprising to be engineered by the Rashidians and certain Bakhtiari tribal leaders, with or without the Shah’s approval. Although the British had been conspiring with Zahedi since August, they put forward several names as possible leaders of the coup. Woodhouse took his plan first to the CIA. Frank Wisner, the head of CIA covert operations, Allen Dulles, Wisner’s deputy, and Kermit Roosevelt, Wisner’s Middle East division chief, all favored a coup. However, lower-level Iran specialists in the CIA were opposed to the idea, as was the CIA station chief in Tehran, who viewed it as “putting U.S. support behind Anglo-French colonialism.” Discussions were also held with State Department officials. Woodhouse was told that Truman would not agree to the plan, but that Eisenhower, who had just been elected president, probably would.49

Zahedi continued to intrigue in this period, although the departure of the British undoubtedly hampered his efforts. Arms and money continued to flow into the Bakhtiari region, where Abul Qasem Bakhtiari was trying to enlist the support of the other khans. Zahedi reportedly promised to establish a “Free South in Iran,” where the Bakhtiari would be given autonomy under the leadership of Abul Qasem. In January 1953, Zahedi’s Majlis allies, led by Kashani, fomented a major dispute in the Majlis, apparently trying to create conditions that would lead to Mosaddeq’s ouster. This effort came to an end on January 19, when Mosaddeq received a 59 to 1 vote of confidence.50

In mid-February, Zahedi approached several army generals about a possible coup. His son, Ardeshir, told U.S. embassy officials that he was about to seize power, and identified his probable cabinet. At about the same time, a group of Bakhtiari tribesmen led by Abul Qasem and members of the Retired Officers’ Association attacked an army column in Khuzestan province and caused many casualties. Mosaddeq retaliated by arresting Zahedi and several others and threatening to resign. The Shah then announced that he would take a vacation abroad, which provoked widespread unrest. A large anti-Mosaddeq crowd organized by Kashani, the Somka party, and pro-Zahedi military officers gathered at the Shah’s palace and marched toward Mosaddeq’s home, calling for his removal. Violent clashes then took place with a larger, pro-Mosaddeq crowd. The U.S. embassy reported that the “present probability is that the Mosaddeq Government will fall.”51 Mosaddeq managed to evade the hostile crowd, however, and loyal army units eventually restored order.

A similar incident occurred in late April, when the chief of the National Police, General Afshartous, was kidnapped and murdered. MI6 had planned the kidnapping in order to provoke a coup, but had not intended that Afshartous be
murdered. Zahedi, Baqai, and several of their associates (including Kashani's son) were implicated in the killing, and warrants were issued for their arrest. Kashani, as president of the Majlis, helped Zahedi avoid arrest by giving him bast, or sanctuary, in the Majlis; Baqai was protected by parliamentary immunity. Mosaddeq charged that the conspirators had also intended to kill the defense and foreign ministers and that their goal was to install Baqai as prime minister. Afshartous had been regarded as courageous, uncorrupt, and staunchly loyal to Mosaddeq. His murder was a severe blow to the morale of the National Front and demonstrated clearly the ruthlessness of the conspirators.52

These events added considerably to the turmoil that had gripped Iran since the summer of 1952. After the February riots, rumors of a coup circulated in the army and unrest continued to simmer among the Bakhtiari. The pro-Mosaddeq Qashqai tribe made plans to attack the Bakhtiari and march on Tehran in the event of a coup. The Tudeh had been very active in the February riots and remained so in the weeks that followed, leading Mosaddeq to order a wave of arrests. Despite its increased visibility, however, the Tudeh apparently did not gain in strength during this period.53

More significantly, Mosaddeq's once-unchallenged position as leader of the nationalist movement grew increasingly precarious. As discussed above, key National Front figures such as Kashani, Baqai, and Makki had been conspiring against Mosaddeq since the summer of 1952. Inasmuch as these figures held great sway over the urban lower classes, this weakened Mosaddeq's base of popular support. The defection of these leaders into the opposition also undermined Mosaddeq's position in the Majlis. Kashani, as speaker of the Majlis, had tried to oust Mosaddeq in January 1953. After the incidents of February and April 1953, Majlis debates over the causes of the February incident and Baqai's role in the murder of Afshartous served as forums for further attacks against Mosaddeq. By the summer of 1953, battle lines had clearly been drawn between Mosaddeq and his supporters in the Iran party and the Third Force, on the one hand, and Zahedi, Kashani, Baqai, and their allies, on the other.54

While Zahedi and his associates were carrying out these attacks on Mosaddeq, the new Eisenhower administration began seriously to consider the idea of a coup. As mentioned above, top CIA officials had already decided that a coup was necessary. Since the November 1952 elections, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had been discussing the idea with his brother, Allen Dulles, who had been named director of the CIA. Top U.S. and British officials met on February 3, 1953, only two weeks after Eisenhower's inauguration, to review the situation. A decision was taken at this meeting to develop and implement a plan to overthrow Mosaddeq and install Zahedi. The operation was to be led by Roosevelt, and was given the codename AJAX. U.S. officials had previously described Zahedi as "unscrupulous" and "an opportunist"; now he was viewed as a strong figure who could take decisive steps to bring Iran back firmly into the Western camp.55

Roosevelt traveled to Iran several times in the following months to prepare for the coup. He and another CIA officer met frequently with Zahedi in this period, and financial assistance may have been provided to Zahedi. An American Iran
specialist working under contract for the CIA was sent to Nicosia in mid-May to develop a detailed plan for the coup with an Iran specialist from MI6. The American then went over the plan with Roosevelt in Beirut. The two flew to London in mid-June to discuss the plan with British officials. Final approval came at a June 25 State Department meeting.56

The coup plan had four main components. First, the propaganda and political action capabilities of BEDAMN were to be turned immediately against Mosaddeq. Second, opposition figures were to be encouraged to create a disturbance that would dramatize the situation by taking bast in the Majlis. Third, since the Shah had not been consulted about the coup, his agreement to dismiss Mosaddeq and appoint Zahedi was to be obtained. Finally, the support of key active-duty military officers was to be sought. The idea of a Bakhtiar uprising was dropped, presumably because Abul Qasem had recently been arrested.

These efforts were to be carried out with the help of the Rashidian and BEDAMN networks and several officers in the Tehran CIA station. The Rashidians had been turned over to the CIA by MI6 when the British left Tehran in November 1952. The CIA station was augmented for AJAX. The station chief (who had opposed the coup) was replaced by a former journalist who had covered the Azerbaijan crisis and knew many prominent Iranians. A CIA paramilitary specialist with recent experience in Korea was brought in and given responsibility for liaison with the Iranian military officers involved in the plot.

Mosaddeq’s position grew more precarious in June and July of 1953. Demonstrations by pro- and anti-Mosaddeq crowds and the Tudeh occurred almost daily. The Majlis was the scene of continual disputes between pro- and anti-Mosaddeq forces over issues such as the February riots, Baqai’s role in the Afshartous killing, control over the army, and elections for a new speaker. Fistfights broke out in the Majlis in early June. On July 1, Mosaddeq achieved a major victory over his opponents when Abdullah Moazami, a Mosaddeq supporter, was elected by a vote of 41 to 31 to replace Kashani as speaker. After further attacks by the opposition, a group of Mosaddeq supporters resigned en masse from the Majlis in protest. In late July, a group of deputies loyal to Haerizadeh and Baqai took bast in the Majlis. With the Majlis thus paralyzed, Mosaddeq decided to close it and seek new elections. Because of the opposition’s threat to prevent a quorum, Mosaddeq was forced to hold a public referendum on the issue in early August. The referendum was rigged which caused a great public outcry against Mosaddeq.57

The United States by this time had thoroughly committed itself to undermining Mosaddeq through BEDAMN. CIA participants have described this as “an orchestrated program of destabilization” and “an all-out effort.”58 BEDAMN was at least partially responsible for the demonstrations and Majlis activity that plagued Mosaddeq at this time.59 As with the anti-Mosaddeq BEDAMN activities described previously, it is impossible to gauge how effective these actions really were; but it seems safe to assume that they were significant.

Several efforts were made in this period to persuade the Shah to back Zahedi. Henderson met with the Shah on May 30. The Shah told him that Zahedi was not an “intellectual giant,” but that he would be acceptable if he had broad
support, would come to power through parliamentary means, and would be given “massive economic aid” by the United States or Britain.60 A second attempt was made in late July. A U.S. Army colonel and an MI6 officer were sent to France to locate Princess Ashraf, the Shah’s twin sister, who was gambling at the casinos in Deauville. Ashraf agreed to speak to her brother after receiving an unauthorized promise that he would be supported in the style to which he was accustomed by the United States if the coup failed. Ashraf arrived in Tehran on July 25, but Mosaddeq prevented her from seeing her brother.61 A third attempt was made a week later by U.S. Army General Norman Schwartzkopf, who had commanded the Iranian Gendarmerie in 1942–1948. Schwartzkopf managed to see the Shah, who refused to commit himself to the CIA plan. Schwartzkopf then advised Roosevelt to see the Shah personally. Arrangements were made through the Rashidians. The Shah agreed to support the plan after official U.S. and British involvement had been confirmed through a special radio broadcast.62

Having obtained the Shah’s concurrence, Roosevelt’s team was now able to go ahead with the coup. *Firmans* (royal decrees) dismissing Mosaddeq and appointing Zahedi were drawn up and signed by the Shah. On the night of Saturday, August 15, the firman dismissing Mosaddeq was delivered to him by Colonel Nematollah Nassiri, commander of the Imperial Guard. Mosaddeq had been warned of the plot, probably by the Tudeh; he denounced the firman as a forgery and had Nassiri arrested. Troops loyal to Mosaddeq set up roadblocks throughout the city. Opposition deputies, military officers suspected of plotting with Zahedi, and the Shah’s minister of court were arrested. A massive search was begun for Zahedi and a reward of 100,000 rials was offered for his arrest. Armored forces that had been assigned to move into Tehran in conjunction with the delivery of the firmans failed to arrive. Without informing Roosevelt’s team, the Shah fled the country in panic, first to Baghdad and then to Rome.63

The arrest of Nassiri completely disrupted the original coup plan, forcing Roosevelt and his team to improvise a new strategy. Contingency plans were made for Roosevelt, Zahedi, and a few other key participants to be evacuated in a U.S. military attaché’s airplane. Zahedi was brought to a CIA safe house, where he remained in hiding until Mosaddeq was finally overthrown. A number of diverse and uncoordinated actions were then undertaken by Roosevelt’s team in the hope that a second, successful coup could be triggered.

The first was an effort to publicize the Shah’s dismissal of Mosaddeq and appointment of Zahedi. Copies of the firmans were made by CIA officers on Sunday, August 16, and distributed by Nerren and Cilley and two American newspaper reporters. Since Mosaddeq had not publicly announced receipt of the firman, this served to publicize the Shah’s actions. The two reporters were taken to meet Ardeshir Zahedi at the house of one of the CIA officers. Ardeshir told them about the firmans and characterized Mosaddeq’s attempt to arrest his father as a coup, since the latter had been appointed legally. This information was quickly published in *The New York Times* and elsewhere.64

After the firmans were distributed, efforts were made to generate support for Zahedi in the military. A declaration calling for the armed forces to support the Shah was drawn up and circulated. Military supplies were distributed to
pro-Zahedi forces by the U.S. military advisory mission. Efforts were also made to gain the support of garrisons in other cities. Messengers were sent to Kermanshah and Isfahan, using forged travel documents previously obtained from CIA headquarters. Colonel Teimur Bakhtiar, the garrison commander at Kermanshah, led a column of tanks and armored cars toward Tehran. The Isfahan commander refused to cooperate, however.\(^65\)

As these events were unfolding, Nerren and Cilley hired a large crowd to march into central Tehran on Monday, August 17, shouting Tudeh slogans and carrying signs denouncing the Shah. This “fake” Tudeh crowd, which was paid for with $50,000 given to Nerren and Cilley by a CIA officer the previous evening, was designed to provoke fears of a Tudeh takeover and thus rally support for Zahedi. The crowd was soon joined by real Tudeh members, who were not aware that it was a CIA provocation. The combined crowd attacked the Reza Shah mausoleum and tore down statues of the Shah and his father. These demonstrations continued on the following day, leading Henderson to demand that they be broken up by the police, who were still in their barracks at this time. In what was to be a fateful decision, Mosaddeq acquiesced. The Tudeh retaliated by ordering its cadres off the street. On Wednesday, most of the police were to turn against Mosaddeq, while Tudeh crowds remained off the streets and did not attack the pro-Zahedi crowds that appeared on that day.\(^66\)

Once the firmans had been publicized and steps had been taken to rally the military behind Zahedi, Roosevelt’s team began to look for ways to trigger an uprising against Mosaddeq. The most obvious way to do this was through the clergy, preferably through a popular figure such as Kashani. The CIA team had no direct ties with Kashani, so the Rashidians were asked to make such an arrangement through their allies among the clergy. The Rashidians reported back that such an uprising could not be arranged until Friday, when weekly prayers would be held. Fearing that Mosaddeq’s net would soon close in around them, Roosevelt asked the Rashidians how he could contact Kashani. He was directed to a Rashidian ally named Ahmad Aramesh. Two CIA officers met with Aramesh on the morning of Wednesday, August 19, and gave him $10,000 to pass on to Kashani. Kashani then apparently arranged to have an anti-Mosaddeq crowd march from the bazaar area into central Tehran. Similar crowds were probably organized independently by the Rashidians and by Nerren and Cilley, possibly through Ayatollah Behebhani and a mob organizer named Shaban Bimokh.\(^67\)

This crowd was joined by army and police units and by onlookers who were angered by the “Tudeh” demonstrations of the previous days or had become disillusioned with Mosaddeq. Government office buildings and the offices of pro-Mosaddeq newspapers and political parties were attacked. Mosaddeq refused to send the army or police to break up this crowd. A pro-Zahedi army detachment seized the radio station and began to broadcast pro-Zahedi bulletins. Air Force General Guilanshah led a column of tanks to the CIA safe house where Zahedi was hiding. Together with a group of pro-Shah demonstrators, these forces then seized the army headquarters and marched on Mosaddeq’s home. There a nine-hour battle ensued in which some 300 people were killed. The walls around
Mosaddeq’s house were destroyed with tank and artillery fire. The house was stormed, and Mosaddeq escaped over the roof. He surrendered to Zahedi the next day.

AN APPRAISAL OF THE U.S. ROLE IN THE COUP

The three questions posed in the introduction to this study can now be answered. What motives led U.S. policymakers to overthrow Mosaddeq? It is often argued that the main motive behind the coup was the desire of U.S. policymakers to help U.S. oil companies gain a share in Iranian oil production. On the face of it, this argument has considerable merit. The Eisenhower administration was certainly favorable to U.S. business interests, and the Dulles brothers’ law firm had often represented U.S. oil companies in legal matters. Moreover, the final agreement worked out in 1954 with the Zahedi government gave U.S. companies a 40% share in Iranian oil production, which had previously been controlled by the British.

While this view cannot entirely be refuted, it seems more plausible to argue that U.S. policymakers were motivated mainly by fears of a communist takeover in Iran, and that the involvement of U.S. companies was sought mainly to prevent this from occurring. The Cold War was at its height in the early 1950s, and the Soviet Union was viewed as an expansionist power seeking world domination. Eisenhower had made the Soviet threat a key issue in the 1952 elections, accusing the Democrats of being soft on communism and of having “lost China.” Once in power, the new administration quickly sought to put its views into practice: the State Department was purged of homosexuals and suspected communists, steps were taken to strengthen the Western alliance, and initiatives were begun to bolster the Western position in Latin America, the Middle East, and East Asia. Viewed in this context, and coming as it did only two weeks after Eisenhower’s inauguration, the decision to overthrow Mosaddeq appears merely as one more step in the global effort of the Eisenhower administration to block Soviet expansionism.

Moreover, the major U.S. oil companies were not interested in Iran at this time. A glut existed in the world oil market. The U.S. majors had increased their production in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in 1951 in order to make up for the loss of Iranian production; operating in Iran would force them to cut back production in these countries which would create tensions with Saudi and Kuwaiti leaders. Furthermore, if nationalist sentiments remained high in Iran, production there would be risky. U.S. oil companies had shown no interest in Iran in 1951 and 1952. By late 1952, the Truman administration had come to believe that participation by U.S. companies in the production of Iranian oil was essential to maintain stability in Iran and keep Iran out of Soviet hands. In order to gain the participation of the major U.S. oil companies, Truman offered to scale back a large anti-trust case then being brought against them. The Eisenhower administration shared Truman’s views on the participation of U.S. companies in Iran and also agreed to scale back the anti-trust case. Thus, not only did U.S. majors not
want to participate in Iran at this time, it took a major effort by U.S. policymakers to persuade them to become involved. The Eisenhower administration therefore seems to have been motivated mainly by fears of a communist takeover in Iran rather than by a desire to promote U.S. commercial interests. It should be noted that most middle level State Department and CIA officials did not believe that a coup was necessary to avert a communist takeover. Neither Henry Byroade, the Assistant Secretary of State with responsibility for the Middle East, nor Ambassador Henderson favored a coup in early 1953. As discussed above, Iran specialists in the CIA and the CIA station chief in Tehran were also opposed to a coup. CIA analysts did not regard Mosaddeq as a communist and the Tudeh was not believed to be capable of seizing power at this time. Rather, the Tudeh was thought to be pursuing a "popular front" strategy by infiltrating the army and the government bureaucracy and trying to gain favor with Mosaddeq and other National Front leaders. CIA analysts had concluded in November 1952 that a Tudeh takeover was not likely before the end of 1953. Moreover, the Iranian economy had become relatively stable by this time, so a general collapse was not viewed as imminent. The fears of a communist takeover that prompted the coup therefore seem to have originated at the highest levels of the CIA and the State Department, and were not shared by lower-level Iran specialists.

What roles did Britain and the various Iranian participants play? The British role in the coup itself appears to have been limited to assistance in the formulation of the original coup plan and the contribution of the Rashidian network. The original plan, of course, had little bearing on how the coup actually occurred, and the Rashidians do not seem to have played a particularly crucial role in the coup itself. Of much greater significance was the British role in undermining Mosaddeq's position throughout the time he was prime minister. The British plotted against Mosaddeq almost continuously, backing three major, protracted efforts to oust him. Britain also instituted an oil embargo and a variety of other economic sanctions against Iran. These activities were largely responsible for the gradual erosion of Mosaddeq's base of support. The consequent erosion that occurred contributed to his downfall, and as such, these actions helped to bring about the overthrow of Mosaddeq.

Four main groups of Iranians were involved in the coup. First, an obvious role was played by Zahedi and his immediate allies, including his son, Abul Qasem Bakhtiari, and military officers such as Hejazi, Nassiri, Guilanshah, and Bakhtiar. Zahedi and several of these figures had been conspiring against Mosaddeq for about a year before the coup; the others led military units or played important support roles in the coup itself. Second, former Mosaddeq allies such as Kashani and Baqai worked to undermine Mosaddeq's base of support in the year before the coup, and Kashani at least appears also to have played an important role in the coup. Third, Nerren and Cilley and the Rashidians played key roles in carrying out the coup and in supervising anti-Mosaddeq activities in the period before the coup. Finally, the Shah himself played a significant, although reluctant, role in acquiescing to the coup. Beyond these specific people, a relatively small but indeterminate number of Iranians either volunteered or were hired to participate in anti-Mosaddeq demonstrations and other activities.
How important was the U.S. role in overthrowing Mosaddeq? Although it is impossible to give a definitive answer to this question, the evidence presented here suggests that the coup could not have occurred at the time and in the manner it did without considerable U.S. assistance. U.S. officials planned and directed the coup, and financed it with at least $60,000.73 Zahedi, its nominal leader, hid in a CIA safehouse until the coup was virtually completed. The Shah was not consulted about the decision to undertake the coup, about its manner of execution, or about the candidate chosen to replace Mosaddeq; he was also quite reluctant to support the coup and fled the country at the first sign of failure. Moreover, the anti-Mosaddeq actions undertaken by the United States through BEDAMN in the year before the coup had played a key role in preparing the groundwork for it by undermining Mosaddeq’s base of support.

However, it is possible that Zahedi or other Iranians, at a later date, could have overthrown Mosaddeq. Yet only three groups appear to have been capable of overthrowing Mosaddeq. First, Zahedi and his allies might conceivably have been able to oust Mosaddeq without U.S. help. Although a solo coup by Zahedi and his allies cannot entirely be ruled out, it seems unlikely that such an effort would have succeeded. Zahedi had been trying unsuccessfully for almost a year to overthrow Mosaddeq. He did not have substantial popular support, and the Shah refused to back him without a commitment from the United States. Moreover, warrants had been issued for Zahedi’s arrest which forced him to operate clandestinely.

A second possibility is that Kashani or some other popular figure might have seized power by coopting Mosaddeq’s base of support. As discussed above, Mosaddeq’s popularity had declined considerably by the summer of 1953 primarily because of the defection of Kashani and other National Front leaders. However, while Kashani had been a legitimate contender for the premiership in late 1952, his star had since faded. He had lost much of his support by breaking with Mosaddeq and associating himself with Zahedi. This is evidenced by his defeat in the July 1953 elections for the Majlis speakership and by his virtual disappearance from Iranian politics after the coup.74 Although Baqai might once have been able to challenge Mosaddeq, he too had been tarnished by his attacks on Mosaddeq and by his alleged role in the Afshartous murder. No other opposition figure had the popular support necessary to displace Mosaddeq as leader of the nationalist movement at this time.

A third possibility is that the Tudeh party might have overthrown Mosaddeq, either in a coup or through the gradual infiltration and subversion of the government. The Tudeh was, however, still much weaker than it had been at its peak in 1946. The U.S. embassy was deliberately overstating both the strength of the Tudeh and the degree to which Mosaddeq was cooperating with it in its public statements in this period. Since U.S. officials were the main source of negative information on the Tudeh, this suggests that the threat of a Tudeh takeover was widely overestimated in Iran at this time.75 The Tudeh had decided against a coup as recently as April 1953, and the CIA regarded a Tudeh takeover as unlikely at least until the end of 1953.76 While a Tudeh seizure of power through popular front tactics cannot be ruled out, this was at best a distant prospect. The Tudeh had no representatives in the Mosaddeq government and
was still illegal and thus forced to operate clandestinely. Most Iranians were very wary of the Tudeh. Mosaddeq had taken strong measures against the Tudeh as late as August 18, 1953, and presumably would have blocked any direct threat by the Tudeh as he had those of Qavam, Zahedi, and Kashani. Moreover, it can be assumed that the United States and Britain would have used force to prevent any serious attempt by the Tudeh to seize power.

Not only was a coup unlikely without U.S. help, but Mosaddeq’s position at this time was not as precarious as is commonly believed. Although the Iranian economic situation had been described by U.S. analysts as “desperate” in late 1951, stimulative fiscal policies begun in the summer of 1952 had produced a modest recovery by the end of the year. Efforts were made to sell oil to countries such as Japan and Italy in early 1953. Business was described as “brisk” in May 1953 by the U.S. commercial attaché in Tehran, and both agriculture and non-oil exports were reported to be doing well. Moreover, Mosaddeq still retained considerable support at this time in organizations such as the Iran party and the Third Force, among the urban lower and middle classes in general, and in the military.

CONCLUSION

Based on recently released diplomatic records and on interviews with many key participants, this study has presented an account of the 1953 coup in Iran that is more complete than others that have so far appeared. The main details presented here that have not appeared elsewhere are: (1) the British efforts to oust Mosaddeq in the period before the coup; (2) the closely related British efforts to undermine Mosaddeq through covert action carried out by the Rashidians; (3) similar U.S. efforts to undermine Mosaddeq through BEDAMN; (4) Zahedi’s activities in the year before the coup; and (5) several key details of the coup itself, such as the formulation of the original plan, the decision to evacuate after the original attempt failed, the U.S. role in organizing the “fake” Tudeh demonstrations, and the roles of Aramesh and (apparently) Kashani in organizing the crowds that stormed Mosaddeq’s home on August 19. These new details clear up some of the errors and omissions that appear in Roosevelt’s account. They also strengthen Roosevelt’s implicit contention that the U.S. role in the coup was decisive. After the coup, the Shah reportedly told Roosevelt “I owe my throne to God, my people, my army—and to you.” Although each of these forces may have played a role in the coup, this statement would have been more accurate if the Shah had reversed their order of importance.

The 1953 coup ended the slow, halting progress that Iran had been making since the early 1900s toward a more representative form of government and toward freedom from foreign interference. These two aspirations were embodied in Mosaddeq’s movement; with the coup, he became a martyr to these causes. In the years after the coup, an authoritarian regime was gradually consolidated in Iran with massive assistance from the United States. Martial law was instituted and remained in effect for several years. Thousands of National Front and Tudeh supporters were arrested. Pro-Mosaddeq demonstrations in the Tehran
bazaar and at Tehran University were broken up. A successor to the National Front known as the National Resistance Movement was suppressed. The Qashqai tribe was attacked and its leaders were sent into exile. Press censorship was instituted. A secret police force was established that soon evolved into the notorious SAVAK. Majlis elections in February 1954 were blatantly rigged.\(^7\)

Except during a brief period in the early 1960s, the instruments of dictatorship were kept firmly in place until the Iranian revolution began to unfold in 1978. By then, any hope of establishing a democratic alternative to the Shah had long since been lost.

The 1953 coup was thus a decisive turning point in Iranian history. Had the coup not occurred, Iran’s future would undoubtedly have been vastly different. Similarly, the U.S. role in the coup and in the subsequent consolidation of the Shah’s dictatorship were decisive for the future of U.S. relations with Iran. U.S. complicity in these events figured prominently in the terrorist attacks on American citizens and installations that occurred in Iran in the early 1970s, in the anti-American character of the 1978–1979 revolution, and in the many anti-American incidents that emanated from Iran after the revolution, including, most notably, the embassy hostage crisis. Latter-day supporters of the coup frequently argue that it purchased twenty-five years of stability in Iran under a pro-American regime. As the dire consequences of the revolution for U.S. interests continue to unfold, one can only wonder whether this has been worth the long-term cost.

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

NOTES

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Kermit Roosevelt, the leader of the coup, was asked to undertake similar operations against Arbenz in Guatemala and Nasser in Egypt. See The Los Angeles Times, March 29, 1979, 5–8. At least one participant in the coup went on to achieve considerable notoriety with similar operations in Syria, Nepal, and Vietnam. See The Wall Street Journal, October 19, 1979, p. 1. No less an authority than Richard Helms, CIA director from 1965 until 1973, described the 1953 coup to me as an important model for CIA covert operations elsewhere (telephone interview, Washington, D.C., July 26, 1984).

these omits many key details. A highly fictionalized and romanticized account by a key participant is Ardeshir Zahedi, *Five Decisive Days* (unpublished manuscript, n.d.). This is an English translation of an article published in the Iranian newspaper *Etela'at* soon after the coup.

The main diplomatic records used for this study are those available at the U.S. National Archives and the British Public Records Office. The people interviewed include all but one of the CIA officers directly involved in the coup who are alive today (one refused to speak on the subject), five CIA officers who worked on Iran at CIA headquarters in Washington at the time of the coup, two of the three most senior U.S. foreign service officers in Iran at the time (the third, Ambassador Loy Henderson, is now dead), two other foreign service officers and the U.S. Naval Attaché stationed in Tehran at the time, the two Assistant Secretaries of State with responsibility for the Middle East in 1951–1953, two of the key British participants, and many knowledgeable Iranians. These interviews were conducted by the author between the summer of 1983 and the summer of 1985. Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, the names of many key sources and participants cannot be revealed. Except where noted, all details reported here that were obtained in interviews have been corroborated with a second source to ensure their accuracy.


For the most complete account of British policy toward Iran in this period see Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, esp. chs. 16–18.


Documentary evidence on the British net is fragmentary, but gives some indication of its depth. See, for example, “Les Follies Imperiales,” 18 March 1952, FO/248/1541. This is a report by the British Chargé and the top MI6 officer in Tehran on the Shah's most intimate views, as recounted to them by his confidant Ernst Perron. “Action in the Persian Situation Advocated by M. Kaivan,” 3 July 1951, FO/371/91461, gives a list of pro-British political figures obtained from a British agent in the Iranian labor movement. For a description of this agent's network see “Trade Unions in Persia,” 6 January 1952, FO/371/98731. The Rashidians are referred to as “the brothers” in the account of these events by Woodhouse, *Something Ventured*, chs. 8, 9.


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19a. Assessment of the State of Public Opinion,” 4 September 1951, FO/371/91463; “Departmental Comments,” 19 November 1951, FO/371/91614; The New York Times, September 10, 1951, 1:7. Shepherd's report was heatedly disputed by Stokes, who argued that “mucking about with discredited old men . . . will get us nowhere.” See “Note by the Lord Privy Seal,” 22 September 1951, FO/371/91590. In fact, the Shah had recently told Shepherd that he preferred Qavam to Sayyid Zia, and on September 17 stated that Mosaddeq could not be replaced at that time. See “Discusses the Shah’s Preference in Regards to a Prime Minister to Succeed Mosaddeq,” 31 August 1951, FO/371/91462; and “Record of a Conversation with the Shah on 17th Sept.,” 18 September 1951, FO/371/91463. Not surprisingly, Shepherd was soon given another post.

20 “Text of Reply From President Truman,” 26 September 1951, FO/371/91591; “Persian Oil Dispute,” 28 September 1951, FO/371/91592; “Draft Telegram to Tehran,” 27 September 1951, FO/371/91592; “Record of a Conversation with the American Ambassador,” 1 October 1951, FO/371/91596; CAB 128/20, pp. 231–34 (British cabinet records). The subordination of the Iranian commander and the plan to invade Abadan were recounted to me by a retired MI6 officer involved in these events in a January 1985 interview. Kermit Roosevelt, CIA operations deputy for the Middle East, was aware of these activities at the time, and confirms the critical role played by Truman (personal interview, Washington, D.C., June 5, 1985). Roosevelt was also aware of the British plots with Qavam and Zahedi described below, but did not discuss them with the British at the time. The United States had also expressed strong opposition to British plans to use military force in Iran in May 1951. See “The Position of the United States With Respect to Iran, NSC Action No. 473,” May 17, 1951, Record Group 59, Box 4107.


22 Ibid.; Acheson to Henderson, June 16, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 29.


24 Henderson to Acheson, August 3, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 29. Ample evidence that the British were not yet ready for Qavam to assume the premiership is contained in “Internal Situation.”


26 Henderson to Acheson, July 7 and 21 and October 17, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 29.

27 “Internal Situation.” Kashani was also intriguing with the Tudeh at this time. In a 90-minute meeting in late September, Tudeh leaders reportedly agreed to back Kashani for the premiership in exchange for a promise to expel U.S. military advisors, close U.S. consulates in Iran, and restrict the movement of U.S. citizens in northern Iran. See Henderson to Acheson, September 28, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 42. Kashani was also reported to have taken money from the Tudeh. See “Internal Situation.” Kashani was quoted by a Time reporter as saying “since the Tudeh party is fighting against imperialism, they are with us.” See “The TIME Correspondent’s Interview with Ayatollah KASHANI,” October 18, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 129. Apparently believing that Kashani was trying to seize power with Tudeh help, a Special Estimate was prepared by the CIA on Mosaddeq’s chances of remaining in office. See “Prospects for Survival of Mosaddeq Regime in Iran,” SE-33, 14 October 1952. Sayyid Zia told a British embassy officer on October 12 that Kashani was
supporting Zahedi with the intention of eventually deposing him and seizing power himself. See "Internal Situation."

22Ibid.; "Tribal Affairs and Tribal Policy," n.d., FO/248/1521; Middleton interview (London, January 16, 1985); Henderson to Acheson, September 9, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 29. Zahedi is not named in the latter telegram, but it clearly refers to him. The supply of arms to the Bakhtiari was related by a confidential source in a January 1985 interview and is confirmed in "Intrigues Among the Bakhtiari Tribes," November 28, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 28. Since the early 1900s, Britain had maintained close ties with most of the Bakhtiari khans, whom they paid to protect the oilfields. Abul Qasem Bakhtiari was not pro-British; rather, he was regarded as a "troublemaker" by the British and their Bakhtiari allies for inciting tribesmen against the other khans. See "Tribal Affairs and Tribal Policy."

23New York Times, October 13, 1952, 4:1; October 16, 1952, 6:4; "Annual Report on Persian Army for 1952," 9 December 1952, FO/371/98638. It seems unlikely that Zahedi was prepared to act against Mosaddeq at the time of these arrests. One indication of this is that the MI6 officer in charge of the Rashidians was in London on leave at this time (confidential interview with an associate of this officer, January 1985).

24Much of the material presented in this and the following section was obtained in interviews with participants in these events. Except where indicated, all material provided by these sources was corroborated with at least one additional source. Since these sources spoke to me on a confidential basis, they are not named here. In order to establish the veracity of this account, confidential sources for certain critical events are identified below by the roles they played rather than by name.

25See U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Documents Resulting From Conversations with the British in Regard to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, JCS 1819, November 25, 1947.


29See the discussion below on the BEDAMN program. On CIA covert action under Truman see Ray S. Cline, The CIA Under Reagan, Bush, and Casey (Washington: Acropolis Books, 1981), pp. 119–26. The Truman administration’s opposition to the use of covert action against Mosaddeq was emphasized to me in interviews with the two Assistant Secretaries of State responsible for the Middle East at this time: William Rountree (Maggie Valley, NC, August 25, 1984), and Henry Byroade (Potomac, Md., August 7, 1984).

30Conversations of this sort occurred frequently between embassy and intelligence officials stationed in Tehran. Higher level talks were first held in Washington in May 1952, as the British were plotting to install Qavam. A British specialist on Iran discussed with State Department officials a list of 18 possible candidates, including both Qavam and Zahedi. See U.S. Department of State, "Memorandum of Conversation, Subject: Iran," May 16, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 29. On July 29, shortly after the tumultuous Qavam episode, similar talks were held in which at least one U.S. official was perfectly willing that the possibility of a coup should be examined. See "Anglo-U.S. Discussions About the Persian Internal Situation and the Oil Question," 29 July 1952, FO/371/98691. These participants in these events. Except where indicated, all material provided by these sources was corroborated with at least one additional source. Since these sources spoke to me on a confidential basis, they are not named here. In order to establish the veracity of this account, confidential sources for certain critical events are identified below by the roles they played rather than by name.

31See U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Documents Resulting From Conversations with the British in Regard to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, JCS 1819, November 25, 1947.


35See the discussion below on the BEDAMN program. On CIA covert action under Truman see Ray S. Cline, The CIA Under Reagan, Bush, and Casey (Washington: Acropolis Books, 1981), pp. 119–26. The Truman administration’s opposition to the use of covert action against Mosaddeq was emphasized to me in interviews with the two Assistant Secretaries of State responsible for the Middle East at this time: William Rountree (Maggie Valley, NC, August 25, 1984), and Henry Byroade (Potomac, Md., August 7, 1984).

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This general description of CIA activities in Iran and that of the BEDAMN program in the next few paragraphs were pieced together from interviews with seven former CIA officers who were active in Iran in this period. For a feasibility study of stay-behind networks in the Qashqai region see "United States Attitude Toward Formation of 'Free Government' in Iran," Record Group 59, Box 6980a, October 14, 1948. The CIA was also engaged in routine intelligence-gathering activities in Iran at this time. This involved maintaining contact with a broad cross-section of Iranian political figures, monitoring the Iranian press, meeting with allied intelligence officers, etc.

A particularly effective project carried out under BEDAMN was the production of a fictionalized autobiography of the Iranian poet and Tudeh member Abul Qasem Lahuti, who was living in the Soviet Union. Although Lahuti subsequently denounced the forgery over Radio Moscow, many Iranians still believe it to be accurate. The figure of $1 million was related to me by one former participant in this program in an August 1983 interview.

One such operation was the organizing of a "fake" Tudeh attack on the Harriman mission in the summer of 1951. See Roosevelt, Countercoup, p. 95. Several people were killed in the ensuing riots, which were blamed on the Tudeh. Roosevelt believes that this operation may have been carried out by Nerren and Cilley, without the approval of their CIA superiors (Roosevelt interview).

Kermit Roosevelt believes that these other figures may have been approached, but cannot say this with certainty (Roosevelt interview). I was unable to confirm or disprove this in interviews with other participants in these events. All other details related in this paragraph were obtained from the sources described in footnote 42 and confirmed independently by at least one additional source.

The split in the Toilers' party occurred on October 12, 1952. British embassy officials were aware of U.S. support for Baqai at this time. See "Internal Situation," n.d., FO/248/1531. On the split in the Pan-Iranist party see "The Friendly Relationship . . .," 10 June 1953, FO/371/104568, and "Pan-Iranism: The Ultimate in Iranian Nationalism," February 6, 1952, Record Group 84, Box 29. The latter document refers to a "mysterious mastermind" directing the Pan-Iranists, whom one knowledgeable CIA figure believes was the CIA director of BEDAMN (August 1983 interview). The Soviets were apparently aware of these activities. In early August 1953, a statement was made on Radio Moscow that the United States had armed Baqai and his followers. See "Visit of General Schwartzkopf to Persia," 6 August 1953, FO/371/104569. The Iran party, Mosaddeq's strongest supporters in the National Front, had even split by the end of 1952. See "Internal Affairs," 2 April 1953, FO/371/104567.

CIA covert operations were authorized under National Security Council Directive NSC-10/2, which permitted activities "against hostile foreign states or groups or in support of friendly foreign states or groups." See William M. Leary, ed., The Central Intelligence Agency: History and Documents (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1984), p. 132. In the parlance of the time, this meant that covert action could be used against the Soviet Union and its allies. See Cline, The CIA Under Reagan, Bush, and Casey, pp. 119–26. While the anti-Soviet and anti-Tudeh activities carried out under BEDAMN clearly fell within these guidelines, activities against the National Front clearly did not, since the National Front was not regarded as communist or pro-Soviet. It therefore seems unlikely that this component of BEDAMN would have been authorized by the CIA Director or his top deputies. My assumption is that it originated either with the director of the BEDAMN program or with the head of Near East operations.

Woodhouse, Something Ventured, pp. 116–19.

Ibid.; Roosevelt interview; Byroade interview. The quotation of the station chief's view was related to me by a retired CIA officer in an August 1983 interview; this officer claims to remember it from a telegram written at the time.

Intrigues Among the Bakhtiari Tribes"; Henderson to Acheson, January 18, 1953, Record Group 59, Box 4115; Henderson to Acheson, January 19, 1953, Record Group 59, Box 4117. See also articles in The New York Times for this period. The Majlis vote was on a bill to extend Mosaddeq's emergency powers.

"An Assessment of the Internal Situation in Persia," 2 March 1953, FO/371/104563; "Internal Affairs," 10 March 1953, FO/371/10463; "The Friendly Relationship..." The British embassy was, of course, closed at this time. Material in the British files on this period was obtained primarily from U.S. and Commonwealth sources.


See "Iranian Political Developments from the End of March to the Overthrow of the Mosaddeq Regime...", October 28, 1953; and Cottam, Nationalism in Iran, pp. 277–82.

Roosevelt interview. The February meeting is described in Roosevelt, Countercoup, pp. 120–24. For U.S. views on Zahedi see Department of State, "Memorandum of Conversation, Subject: Iran."

These events and the outline of the original coup plan given in the next paragraph were recounted to me by the American Iran specialist in an August 1984 interview.

The events of this period are fairly well covered in The New York Times. See also "Dr. Musaddiq's Move to Dissolve the Majlis," 21 July 1953, FO/371/104569; "Dissolution of the 17th Majlis," 4 August 1953, FO/371/104569; USARMA Tehran to DEPTAR, WASH DC, 3 March 1953, Record Group 59, Box 4113; "Political Events July 25–31, 1953," July 31, 1953, Record Group 59, Box 4110.

These quotes are from confidential interviews conducted in July and August of 1984. One activity undertaken through BEDAMN at this time was a propaganda campaign to portray Mosaddeq as having Jewish ancestry.

Mosaddeq later charged that this Majlis unrest was the work of foreign agents. See "Prime Minister's Radio Address of July 27, 1953," July 28, 1953, Record Group 59, Box 4116. Six new anti-Mosaddeq newspapers suddenly appeared in Tehran at this time. U.S. embassy officials, unaware of the CIA's activities, were suspicious about the source of funding for these newspapers. See USARMA Tehran to DEPTAR, 3 March 1953.

This account is from a confidential interview with the colonel, conducted in March 1984. For Ashraf's account of these events see Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, Faces in a Mirror (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), pp. 134–40.

Roosevelt, Countercoup, pp. 147–49, 156–57.

The details of the coup presented in this and the following paragraphs are based on my interviews with key participants and on New York Times articles from this period. Many people argue that the handwriting on the firman indicates that it had been drafted on a blank sheet of paper that had previously been signed by the Shah. The Tudeh party had evidently infiltrated the network of officers recruited for AJAX; details of the coup plan were reported by Tass on July 15 and in Tudeh newspapers as early as August 13. See "Dr. Musaddiq's Move to Dissolve the Majlis"; "Persian Army Officers Attempt to Overthrow Dr. Musaddiq," 16 August 1953, FO/371/104569. In Baghdad, the Shah asked the U.S. ambassador whether he should publicly express opposition to Mosaddeq. See "Situation in Persia," 19 August 1953, FO/371/104569. The Shah's ultimate destination apparently was London. See The New York Times, August 19, 1953, 1:3–4.

One participant in these events claims that Nerren and Cilley wanted to end their involvement in AJAX at this point, but were persuaded to remain by Roosevelt, who threatened to have them killed (August 1983 interview). The role of the two reporters is described in Kennett Love, "The American Role in the Pahlavi Restoration On 19 August 1953" (unpublished manuscript, The Allen Dulles Papers, Princeton University Library, 1960).

Kermanshah. Local army and air forces were to establish a base from which to seek control over the whole country. Key oil and rail installations in Tehran were to have been sabotaged to create a diversion. While a number of plans were discussed by the American and Iranian conspirators, none of the CIA sources I interviewed could recall such a plan.

The CIA role in organizing this “fake” Tudeh crowd, which played a critical role in the coup and is not discussed in other published accounts, was confirmed to me in interviews with at least five CIA participants. One retired CIA officer told me that the station later learned from its Tudeh informants that the Tudeh’s decision to pull its crowds off the streets came after it realized that the original crowd was a “fake” (August 1983 interview). Several of my sources indicated that Nerren and Cilley may have used their contacts with leaders of the Pan-Iranists to mobilize part of this crowd. This is consistent with the observation by U.S. embassy personnel that this crowd contained “an unusual mixture of Pan-Iranists and Tudeh” members. See Mattison to Dulles, August 17, 1953, Record Group 59, Box 4110. Henderson’s conversation with Mosaddeq is described in his 1972 interview with the Columbia University Oral History Research Office (pp. 15–18). The Tudeh later reevaluated its role in these events and concluded that it should have been more supportive of Mosaddeq. See Sephr Zabih, The Communist Movement in Iran (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 219–21.

A report of the plan to organize demonstrations on Friday appeared several weeks later in The Times of India. See “Transmits a Further Series of Articles,” 16 June 1953, FO/371/104568. One CIA participant told me in an August 1983 interview that by Wednesday Mosaddeq’s forces had located the general neighborhood where Zahedi was hiding and were preparing to seize him. Neither of the CIA officers who delivered the money to Aramesh could confirm to me that it went to Kashani; both, however, believe that it did (August 1983 and March 1984 interviews). Several days after the coup the British received a report from the Iraqi ambassador in Tehran that the Shah and Zahedi together had visited Kashani, kissed his hands, and thanked him for his help in restoring the monarchy. See “An Account of Conversation,” 1 September 1953, FO/371/104571. One CIA officer told me that Kashani’s son visited him several times after the coup to remind him of the role played by his father (July 1984 interview). An observer of the coup reported later that so much American currency had found its way into the bazaar that the black market exchange rate fell from over 100 rials to the dollar to under 50. See Love, “The American Role in the Pahlavi Restoration,” pp. 40–41. All of the people involved either directly or indirectly in the coup whom I spoke to believe that the Aramesh–Kashani connection was not the only source of funding for the crowds that appeared on August 19. Most of these sources assumed that the other figures mentioned here were also involved, though none could confirm this positively.


Byroade interview; interviews with Gordon Mattison (Bethesda, MD, June 30, 1984) and Roy Melbourne (Chapel Hill, NC, February 1, 1984). Byroade and Henderson both went along with the coup reluctantly, according to these sources. Central Intelligence Agency, Probable Developments in Iran Through 1953, NIE-75, 13 November 1952 (this document was obtained from the CIA under the Freedom of Information Act); Department of State, Office of Intelligence and Research, Iran’s Political and Economic Prospects Through 1953, OIR No. 6126, January 9, 1953; National Security Council, United States Policy Regarding the Present Situation in Iran, NSC 136/1, November 20, 1952. The Tudeh’s “popular front” strategy was described to me in a confidential interview with the CIA desk officer for Iran at this time (July 1984). The original proponents of the coup seem to have been the Dulles brothers, Wisner, and Roosevelt.
Although the coup is widely portrayed as the culmination of a struggle for power between Mosaddeq and the Shah, I found no evidence that the Shah took an active role in any of the events that led to Mosaddeq’s overthrow, other than to give it his reluctant approval. The U.S. and British diplomatic records are full of references to the Shah’s weakness and indecision in this period. Indeed, Zahedi was selected by U.S. and British officials rather than by the Shah, and they had to go to great lengths to persuade him to cooperate.

This figure refers to the payment used to hire the “fake” Tudeh crowd and that given to Aramesh. In addition, an indeterminate amount of money from the normal operating budget of BEDAMN ($1 million per year) was used to pay for the disturbances that immediately preceded the coup. This figure compares favorably with Roosevelt’s statement that the entire cost was under $100,000 (Countercoup, p. 166). After the coup, roughly $1 million that had been provided for AJAX but not spent was given by Roosevelt to Zahedi or the Shah to meet government expenses (Roosevelt interview).

Kashani’s support in the Tehran bazaar, once his greatest stronghold, had declined considerably by the summer of 1953. See “Comments on the Political Significance of the Tehran Bazaar Organization,” 19 December 1953, FO/371/109986.

This view was expressed to me by Anthony Cuomo, the U.S. embassy officer responsible for monitoring the Tudeh in Tehran at this time (personal interview, Rome, January 5, 1985). Much the same was said by several CIA officers stationed in Tehran at the time.

See footnote 71. The CIA had penetrated the Tudeh party at a very high level at this time and was intercepting all of the orders given to its cadres, so these reports can be regarded as very accurate.


Roosevelt, Countercoup, p. 199.