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by

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Iranians shocked the world in 1979 when they stormed the American embassy in Tehran, taking U.S. citizens hostage. These revolutionaries rattled the American public's sensibilities: just who were these people, many asked, and why do they have a grudge against us? This paper shows that the 1978-79 Iranian revolution, so fanatically anti-American in character, sprouted from seeds planted in the Iranian consciousness some 25 years earlier. What transpired in 1978-79 Iran is, according to Barry Rubin, wholly "unintelligible to those who know nothing of what occurred in 1953" (12, x). Motivated by self-serving political and economic concerns, the 1953 American covert intervention in Iran's internal affairs achieved a short-lived Cold War victory while breeding long-term Iranian animosity toward the United States.

American foreign policy became increasingly active in Iran during the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute of the early 1950s. Led by Charismatic National Front leader and Prime Minister Muhammed Musaddiq, Iranian partisans threatened to expropriate all holdings in the British-controlled Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) if a more equitable profit sharing system was not hammered out. Truman Administration policy concentrated on placating the British while convincing Musaddiq to compromise (1, 72-4). However, American ambivalence soon confused any attempt at impartial mediation. Though hoping to evict the British from Iran, the U.S. began to lean toward the British following Musaddiq's nationalization of AIOC interests, an action approved by the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, in March 1951 (11, 83). U.S. policymakers staunchly refused to cave in to Musaddiq's intransigent nationalist demands, ever wary of providing a dangerous precedent for other oil-rich nations to follow. It was this overriding concern for American oil interests in such places as Saudi Arabia and Venezuela that shifted U.S. policy toward a more British hard line (13, 117). Nevertheless, active American intervention was not feasible at the time. While Secretary of State Dean Acheson noted that the maintenance of American influence in the Middle East was "far more important . . . than it had ever been before," the Truman Administration balked at using any U.S. force that was not publicly requested by Iran (4, 137; 11, 88).

However, the American stance in the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute steadily and more stridently solidified into an anti-Musaddiq posture. Indeed, the United States soon drifted from protector and mediator to exploiter. Because Musaddiq nationalized the AIOC, Great Britain and most other Western nations imposed an informal boycott on Iranian oil, with quiet and indirect U.S. government support (10, 22). Following the 1952 presidential election, the new administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower began "tightening the noose even further" by rescinding

American aid to Iran, an act that Jonathan Kwitny claims "effectively underwrote the position of the oil companies" (5, 164). Despite continued U.S. pressure, Musaddiq refused to budge. In mid-1952, the cagy Prime Minister sought and received dictatorial power from the Majlis (1, 67). His hold on domestic power solidified, Musaddiq directly warned President Eisenhower that Iran might turn to the Soviet Union for development and military aid if U.S. assistance was not forthcoming. While hoping to spark an immediate American response, Musaddiq's extortionist strategy actually backfired. Already strongly identified with the Iranian communist party, the Tudeh, Musaddiq further frightened U.S. policymakers by raising the specter of Soviet influence (10, 38). Wary of squandering money on an intransigent nationalist with communist ties, American officials were increasingly in search of other options for resolving the crisis.

The United States eventually chose covert intervention to depose Musaddiq and shore up the weakened but pro-Western shah for various reasons, all intertwined in the minds of American decisionmakers. The most immediate reason stemmed from Great Britain's successful campaign for a U.S.-assisted interventionist solution to the crisis. While the United States was "still largely illiterate in matters Iranian," Britain was a relative expert concerning Iranian affairs (1, 84). Most American diplomats had sown their foreign policy oats in the Cold War theater of eastern Europe and had concentrated little upon the Middle East; even Central Intelligence Agency operative Kermit Roosevelt--one of the U.S.'s supposed experts--possessed only a "limited understanding" of Persian society (1,88). American policymakers' inexperience thus made the U.S. somewhat more susceptible to advice and pressure from their more knowledgeable British counterparts, who began pressing strongly for a covert solution to the situation after Eisenhower ascended to office (1, 89).

The U.S. also proceeded with a covert operation because of Prime Minister Musaddiq's perceived personality deficiencies and irritating diplomatic bullheadedness. Clearly, few Americans like the Iranian nationalist. Time magazine's "Man of the Year" cover story on Musaddiq notes his "grotesque antics," calling him "an appalling caricature of a statesman" (7, 18-20). Kermit Roosevelt described him as an "ill-tempered, erratic old peasant" (11, 77). Such attitudes misperceived the wily, charismatic leader, belying an American ignorance of Iranian national politics. One author calls the aged Persian "one of the least understood political figures of this century," further noting that the United States "distorted and seriously hindered an understanding" of the Iranian leader. (1, 54-5).

Aside from personality clashes, the United States found Musaddiq increasingly intolerable because he refused to compromise with the British. President Eisenhower lambasted the septuagenarian for "contemptuously" rebuffing American attempts to solve the AIOC crisis (3, 161). Musaddiq's own political methodology ultimately proved self-defeating, as his strategy of raising the communist threat to gain U.S. assistance backfired. Eisenhower recalled in his memoirs that he had no intention of pouring "more American money into a country in turmoil in order to bail [Musaddiq] out of troubles rooted in his refusal to work out an agreement with the British" (3, 162). The Iranian leader's inability to compromise became his fatal flaw, preventing governmental stability that the United States so desperately desired.

The U.S. ardently sought this stability in Iran so that crucial western oil interests might be preserved. American giants like Exxon and Mobil already had substantial marketing agreements with AIOX partners, and they stood to lose huge profits if an unstable Iranian situation effectively shut them out. Concern over western access to Iran's profitable oil industry permeated the mindset of State Department diplomats, who maintained constant contact with U.S. oil interests throughout the Iranian crisis, even while the Department of Justice pursued an antitrust suit against them. This government-big oil connection proved especially intimate since both Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen, the CIA director, previously had worked as well-paid lawyers for the major oil companies at New York's Sullivan and Cromwell (5, 163). Sharing this concern over western access to Persian oil, Great Britain did not let U.S. intervention go unrewarded. Not only was America's share in Iranian oil preserved, but the British also allowed the United States to substantially expand its oil interests following the coup. In fact, the U.S. soon controlled 40% of foreign oil interests in Iran where they had previously held no direct interest at all, perhaps suggesting the possibility of a secret deal in the works (1, 80). Throughout the crisis, President Eisenhower held firmly to the position that "the oil of the Middle East must in no circumstances fall to Communism" (3, 130). By daring to threaten much hallowed U.S. property rights, Musaddiq made intervention easy for American policymakers to justify.

Additionally, as Eisenhower's comment suggests, the whole anti-Soviet mentality hung like a cloud over all American dealings with Iran. Ray Melbourne, head of the American embassy's political section in Iran during this time, remembers clearly the Cold War concerns governing the mindset of U.S. foreign policy in the 1950s: the perceived 'loss' of China, the unresolved Korean quagmire, domestic McCarthy-induced paranoia, the arms race, and the widely-

held fear of monolithic Communism (8, 346). Indeed, Secretary of State Dulles and Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson Sounded the alarm in early 1953, fearful that "political and economic conditions will continue to deteriorate and that important areas, such as Iran, might be lost Communism" (4, 220). President Eisenhower agreed that "Iran seemed to be almost ready to fall into Communist hands" (3, 1). These concerns led the U.S. to direct more energy toward both "overt and covert measures to discredit Soviet prestige . . . and to reduce the strength of communist parties and other pro-Soviet elements" (4, 513). With this Cold War mentality alive and well in the minds of U.S. decisionmakers, it is little wonder that people like Kermit Roosevelt were preoccupied with the "obvious threat of Russian takeover" (11, 11). The United States foreign policy establishment grew to despise Musaddiq, and Eisenhower perceived the Prime Minister as "a leader whom the Communists, having gained power, would eventually destroy" (3, 163). The arrival of Anotol Laurentiev, the director of the 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia, as the new Soviet ambassador to Iran, further magnified the fears of communist takeover already pervasive in the American Cold War psyche (12, 79). The U.S. increasingly felt challenged by the Soviet Union's assistance to the Tudeh party, feeling as though the Soviets "were flaunting their power . . . to intimidate us" (11, 119).

Although this fear of monolithic communism was quite real, the existence of Soviet paranoia allowed the United States to ignore more complex Iranian domestic realities. By mislabelling Musaddiq as a communist dupe, Secretary of State Dulles and other Cold Warriors were able to ensure the silence of those who had questions about big oil's role in shaping U.S. intervention. When the Iranian situation was inappropriately painted as a choice between the shah or a communist Iran, any dissenters felt forced to hold their tongues for fear of being perceived as a communist sympathizer. In describing the meeting where CIA intervention was finally authorized, Kermit Roosevelt relates: "I was morally certain that almost half of those present, if they had felt free or had the courage to speak, would have opposed the undertaking" (11, 19). In fact, some experts suggest that the oil companies and Secretary of State Dulles consciously presented the crisis as one of communism and containment (13, 117-8). However, as Rubin notes, most of the Eisenhower team typically looked upon nationalist reform movements--such as Musaddiq's--as "disruptive and as likely to be capture by local Communists," a confusion of nationalism and communism quite common in U.S. foreign relations during the 1950s (12, 57). Whether intentional or not, the explicit association of Prime Minister Musaddiq and his National Front party

with communism effectively silenced those Americans in government who might have posed moral questions about the impending covert operation.

For these complex reasons, then, continuing Iranian intransigence and instability finally prompted the United States to act in 1953, when the Eisenhower Administration decided upon cover intervention to depose the Prime Minister. Approved by ranking American officials during a June 22 meeting, "Operation Ajax" set out to clean up the Iranian situation by calling for the shah to dismiss Musaddiq (12, 81). U.S.-orchestrated support was crucial, since the shah's similar attempt at removing the Prime Minister a year earlier had proven disastrously temporary. Brigadier General Norman Schwarzkopf, arrived for a quite visible visit to Iran in March of 1953, bolstering the shah's confidence and securing indigenous, high-ranking military support for the impending dismissal (11, 147-9; 1, 90). CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt--already named as Operation Ajax field commander during a February 3 consultation with British officials--made further clandestine contacts with the shah to reassure him of U.S. backing (11, 134 & 164). Armed with $100,000 in CIA money, Roosevelt developed an affiliation with "the lower-middle-class rent-a-crowd leaders of south Tehran" that would later prove useful in beefing up pro-shah demonstrations (1, 90).

After the shah fled the city after signing Musaddiq's dismissal into law, Roosevelt and other CIA 'employees' helped distribute copies of the decree to a confused Iranian public. As word of the Prime Minister's ouster spread, the streets of Tehran flooded with Tudeh party supporters on August 16 (11, 178-9). These mass pro-Musaddiq demonstrations waned three days later, as CIA-hired thugs emerged from Tehran's south slums to take control of the streets and assist the army in installing the shah's designated replacement for the Prime Minister. The shah soon reigned unchallenged, and Musaddiq was arrested and later sentenced to three years in prison. When Eisenhower recalled the situation in his memoirs, he cryptically understated that the U.S. "did not stop trying to retrieve the situation" (3, 164). On August 22, the shah triumphantly returned to Tehran, supposedly thanking Kermit Roosevelt with the tribute: "I owe my throne to God, my people, my army--and to you" (11, 199). In return, Roosevelt uttered a most ludicrous reply, telling the grateful shah that "there is no debt, no obligation" owed by him to the United States (11, 201). Roosevelt's dubious assertions aside, the U.S. government viewed the operation as a huge containment success. President Eisenhower exulted: "For the first time in three years Iran was quiet--and still free" (3, 166).

Both Washington and Tehran emphasized the overwhelming support for the shah as self-congratulatory justification for the CIA-induced coup. The shah

seemed to have tapped into a wellspring of domestic sentiment, returning stronger and more popular than ever before. The New York Times agreed, trumpeting the shah's return with the self-explanatory August 23 headline: "Shah, Back in Iran, Wildly Acclaimed; Prestige at Peak" (6, 5). This supports Roosevelt's assertion that the more noise the anti-shah demonstrators made, "the more the army and the people recognized them as the enemy" (11, 180). The CIA operative was not surprised, since his Iranian contacts had continually reassured him that the people would choose the shah over Musaddiq (11, 93). So overwhelming was the shah's indigenous support that one scholar likens the overthrow of the Prime Minister to "pushing on an already-opened door" (12, 89). Perhaps all the Iranian people needed was a little push to make the 'right' decision.

Just how forceful this 'little push' needed to be is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the intervention to discern, even with the benefit of over 30 years of hindsight analysis. Certainly, the coup could not have succeeded without substantial, willing assistance from the Iranian people. However, the Iranian populace "would not or could not have acted without American/British direction and the psychological support that this involvement carried with it" (1, 93). And while support for the shah was indeed widespread, post-Musaddiq Iranian society still experienced spasms of dissent. In mid-November, the shah and his rejuvenated army "smashed a well-planned major effort" by Tudeh remnants to protest his ouster of Musaddiq (2, 2). Tehran later trotted out the security police in full force to prevent any demonstrations during Vice President Richard Nixon's visit to Iran in early December (9, 3). Despite beginning an immediate purge of former Tudeh supporters, the shah still had to contend with substantial Iranian ambivalence toward his U.S.-assisted grip on power.

No such ambivalence characterized the reaction from Washington. Not only did covert U.S. intervention extract the troublesome Musaddiq thorn from the western world' side, but the CIA operation's success also heralded a welcome victory against the forces of communism. Ray Melbourne took great satisfaction from his belief that Musaddiq's overthrow was "viewed by the Soviets as a great defeat" (8, 358). By establishing a Cold War alliance with Iran, some experts think the U.S. realized important gains in both regional politics and the global advancement of an anti-Soviet agenda (10, 46). Certainly the U.S. was "almost completely able to control the course of internal events" in post-coup Iran (14, 81). As well, the message that the United States stood opposed to nationalism apparently took told within the Third World; aside from the Suez Canal, no country expropriated any foreign holdings for more than 20 years. The 1953 covert

success also provided the U.S. government with what it thought was yet another means of implementing American foreign policy, the Central Intelligence Agency. By elevating the CIA's status as a foreign policy instrument, the 1953 Iranian coup provided the impetus for a number of successive (though not necessarily successful) covert operations, beginning with Guatemala in 1954 (1, 93).

These gains aside, the United States intervention seriously damaged foreign relations by forcing the Iranian people to make a decision that they likely would not have made on their own. Diplomat Ray Melbourne recalls that the people "like the institution of the monarchy, and to them [the shah] was as important a figure as Musaddiq. In the public mind of 1953, they were still linked" (8, 349). Iranians probably would have like to have kept both leaders of the constitutional monarchy. Instead, since the 1953 coup, Kwitny states that the Persian people were "forced to live under brutal dictatorships," harsh regimes that were closely identified in the Iranian conscience with the meddling United States (5, 175). by forcing Iranians to choose the shah over Musaddiq, the United States embittered many Iranians and undermined its credibility in the Middle East for years to come.

If one accepts the noble premise that U.S. foreign policy attempts to serve the best interests of the American people, then the 1953 covert operation must be considered a failure. Though initially creating a pro-American government that was beholden to the U.S., this intervention actually served to "protect an oil cartel whose interests were not at all synonymous with those of the American people" (5, 5). The coup actually resulted in higher American gas prices, it directly contributed to the climate that eventually allowed the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan (5, 5). More importantly, even as early as 1952, anti-American incentive grew because of the carrot-and-stick nature of American aid to the shah's government (12, 73). In 1953, the United States firmly planted the seeds of discontent that would subsequently mature into a violent eruption of anti-American hatred (1, 31). Thus, in the final assessment, interference in Iranian politics proved to be a long-term disaster.

While this may have been a short-term victory, one political scientist notes that the CIA meddling in Iran "left a running would that bled for twenty-five years . . ." (1, 86). The 1980 return of exhausted American hostages, repatriated after a full 444 days in captivity, engendered painful images that branded themselves upon a humiliated and bewildered American conscience. Indeed, the effects produces by the 1953 American intervention in Iran eventually boomeranged to cause the United States a painful would of its own.

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