Three Days in August: The Overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh and the Reshaping of Iranian Democracy

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Yes, my sin—my greater sin and even my greatest sin is that I nationalized Iran’s oil industry and discarded the system of political and economic exploitation by the world’s greatest colonial empire: Great Britain. – Mohammed Mossadegh, 1955.

History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak or the timid. – Dwight D. Eisenhower

On August 20th, 1953, Mohammed Mossadegh, the heralded, democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, was on the run for his life. After smoke cleared on a nine-hour battle that was waged over his government and its policies, the most powerful man in Iran and beloved leader, who nationalized his country’s vaunted oil supply, threatened the economy of not one but two world powers, and believed strongly in restoring democracy from within a corrupt political process, now came to stand at the end of “the most critical event in postwar world history” (Gasiorowski 261). His capture and overthrow signaled not only the dissolution of the “last popular, democratically oriented government in Iran,” but represented the first example of a “peacetime use of covert action” by two overwhelming global powers in The United States and Great Britain (Gasiorowski 261). Despite overtures at negotiation from Iran and Prime Minister Mossadegh, the Central Intelligence Agency, in tandem with Great Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service, plotted, coordinated and staged an overthrow of Iran’s government through a coordinated use of covert intelligence, propaganda, religious fundamentalism and armed violence. The coup was implemented primarily by the United States and with minimal assistance by Great Britain not only to remove Mossadegh from power and nullify his efforts to democratize Iran’s oil supply, but stop what the United States viewed as Iran’s support for a rising tide of communist ideals, foreign influence from Russia, and destabilization within Iran’s dueling political parties. There is also reason to believe the coup occurred as a way for the United States to counteract “fears of a communist takeover and ideology in Iran,” a notion devised under the Eisenhower administration and the leaders of his growing intelligence apparatus (Gasiorowksi 276). Thus, Iran was used as an example by the Central Intelligence Agency not only to showcase the United States’ methods of destabilizing foreign governments, but to
establish an economic, militaristic and political foothold in an emerging and influential part of the world to showcase its growing power as an indispensable arm of the United States government.

From its birth, Iran was a country shaped by the hunger, greed and influence of foreign powers, including that of Great Britain, Russia and eventually the United States. Iran’s sordid history with such powers began during the reign of the Qajar Dynasty ruler Nasir Al-Din Shah. As researched by Stephen Kinzer in All the Shah’s Men, a chronicling of Iran’s birth and tortured future, Al-Din Shah’s irresponsible rule was based not on the wellbeing of the Persian people, but the pleasure of “wives, concubines and eunuchs,” as well as the pursuance of his own greed and dependency on foreign money to fund his lavish lifestyle (Kinzer 31). Bored by “the pleasures” of Iran and its agrarian people, the Shah routinely left Iran and traveled to Europe for expensive trips, which in turn began to tear at the fabric of Iran’s largely agricultural economic base. As the cost of such trips rose and the Shah lacked capital to fund them, he was forced to “impose oppressive taxes” and “confiscate the fortunes of local merchants” that were essential to his popularity with the lower classes (Kinzer 33). These actions were only further harmful after Al-Din began the practice of selling Iranian industries to the British, including “the Iranian tobacco industry for a mere sum of 15,000 pounds,” which only led to Iranian people revolting against his practices for being so careless (Kinzer 32). As a critical export for the British, Al-Din’s failed to stop multiple uprisings against his decisions, which only increased the debt owed toward Great Britain and inspired deeper hatred from his people. Unable to pay Iran’s debt, the Shah began selling precious Iranian land to the highest bidder, including watchful and intrigued officials in Great Britain. They immediately began “building outposts” to protect the nearby colony of India, but Iran’s desperation for money soon grew to pique the interest of multiple countries, including Russia, who became terrified over Britain’s increasing influence and bought up even more land to assert some form of control over Iran. After years of “drifting away from reality,” Al-Din’s assassination in 1896 provided seemed to provide the country relief from such a chaotic ruler, but only allowed for his many successors to handle Iran’s many problems: surging debt, the newfound discovery of oil by British tycoons, and the resulting power that Great Britain would soon hold over the country (Kinzer 40).

It was one of Al-Din’s many sons, Muzaffar, who ascended to the throne under difficult circumstances. While Iranians held hope for his rule, they struggled under his reign and Great Britain’s influence over Muzaffar in pursuit of expanding its ownership of land in Iran. After the assassination of Czar Nicholas II in 1918, Russia was forced to sell much of its property in Iran, leaving Great Britain the opportunity to own and exploit their discoveries of oil, which would lead
to their increased role to the economy and government of Iran for the foreseeable future. After ruling only for a short while, Muzaffar sensed his own tenuous political hold and immediately sold London Financier William Knox D’Arcy “the special exclusive privilege to obtain, exploit, develop, and trade the selling of natural gas and petroleum” as a way to ease Iran’s debt (Kinzer 33). This seemingly harmless decision by Muzaffar to help Iran emerge from debt Iran’s effectively “changed all Iranian history”, as it allowed for D’Arcy, and by extension his British compatriots, to begin legally hunting for oil beneath Iran’s treasured land without repercussion (Kinzer 33). After Muzaffar was succeeded by Mohammad Ali Shah, the British became concerned with Ali’s fractured rule as well. Recognizing that Iran’s oil was, according to Winston Churchill, “a prize from fairyland beyond our wildest dreams,” the British quickly moved to secure their investment with the creation of the Anglo-Persian Agreement, which entitled Great Britain the opportunity to impose “martial law” and control Iran’s “army, treasury and transport” due to their fragile political situation, and in effect exert control over exterior elements of their ownership of Iran’s most valuable resource (Kinzer 39). By 1908, several British leaders noticed D’Arcy’s growing wealth, and, together with First Lord of Winston Churchill, bought “fifty-one percent” of D’Arcy’s stake to form an oil-dominant enterprise, which they officially named the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (Kinzer 39). They also further moved to build the company around the port of Abadan, which became the center place from which “oil began to flow” and likewise formed a bustling community of oppressed Persian workers to help facilitate the transport and production of oil for Great Britain’s expanding armada of battleships (Kinzer 39). As stated emphatically by Kinzer, D’Arcy’s fateful deal with Muzaffar not only encouraged the formation of a massive city-like structure at Abadan, one that oppressed Persians while maintaining British wealth, but it was “from that moment on that that the interests of Britain and Anglo Iranian Oil Company were tied together” (Kinzer 38). Sensing Iranian weakness only contributed to Churchill’s deeper belief that “if Persia were to be alone, there is every reason to believe she would be overrun by Bolsheviks” and that ownership of Iran’s oil only served to give Great Britain “a commanding interest in Persia” while keeping their own priorities, such as stockpiling oil reserves in the case of a war in Europe, at the forefront of their mind (Kinzer 49).

By the late 1940s, The Anglo Iranian Oil Company’s ownership consisted of Great Britain’s most vaunted leaders, who were intent on maximizing their profit by any means necessary. Simultaneously, Iran struggled to emerge from a world shaped by the defeat of Germany and Japan, and was placed into a precarious situation of being led into a new global order by the United States, Great Britain and a reemergent Russia. In his methodically researched study entitled “Iran’s 1953 Coup Revisited: Internal Dynamics Versus External Intrigue,” Professor
Fariborz Mohktari, a Comparative Politics Professor at the University of Vermont, points out while that Iran worked with the United States during World War II, the United States had no “significant economic interest in Iran” and despite initially acknowledging the country having “remained neutral throughout the war,” Iran was faltering under the economic manipulation and colonist tendencies of the expanding British Empire (Mohktari 460). Having moved to occupy Iran more heavily in 1941 and stockpiling massive amounts of land over the previous decades, Great Britain now focused exclusively on the burgeoning country as fertile ground for the continued production of their oil exports and expansion of their refinery. This was due primarily to Iran’s emerging geographical appeal both in Great Britain and a newly dominant Russia. For Great Britain, Iran represented “a nation straddling the land routes to Britain’s most prized colony—India,” and for Russia, it allowed the country the opportunity to control “a large swath of their exposed border” by involving themselves both militarily and ideologically in Iranian politics (Kinzer 28). This process of occupation soon followed an emerging overall trend for Western powers across the world, who began to take an increasing interest in the Middle East. As described in Richard M. Cottam’s “The United States, Iran and the Cold War,” Cottam, a former Professor of Iranian Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, believes that while Great Britain cared predominantly for its oil stake in in Iran, the United States did play a larger role in Iranian affairs after the war’s end, and was led to become tangentially involved with the country due to both the rise of Communism across Europe and Russia’s increasing influence in the region. Cottam states that the United States lined up with other anti-communist countries, and came to believe that Iran’s “strategic location and supply of oil” made it a “focal point of the Cold War struggle” and the likely target of new “subversive” techniques by the much-despised Russia, thus pushing both the United States and its ally, Great Britain, to create a more unified and covert presence in the region, a presence unbeknownst to many (Cottam 5).

By 1949, the Anglo Iranian Oil Company now represented not only a vital economic resource for Great Britain but stood as Iran's most prized economic asset. In “The 1953 Coup D'état in Iran,” Marc J. Gasiorowski, a Professor of Iranian Studies at Tulane University, oil became “a singularly prominent issue” within Iran’s hotly debated, divisive and often violent political scene (Gasiorowski 262). As it continued to stir up fierce nationalistic pride, Great Britain was aware of such rhetoric and demanded an agreement with Reza Shah Pahlavi, the new, impetuous ruler of Iran, that would be “more favorable to the Anglo Iranian Oil Company” in exchange for helping the Shah win the latest round of elections in the upcoming 16th election of Iran’s newly formed legislative body: the Majlis (Gasiorowski 262). Based on both the Shah’s ploy to rig the electoral process and the perception that he supported British control over Iran’s oil, a cultural
divide erupted within Iranian society. This crack paved the way for the rise of two political factions: the communist-minded Tudeh Party and the Nationalist Front, which was comprised of “political parties based mainly on the urban middle and lower classes,” including but not limited to “left, anti-Soviet intellectuals” and even “the Pan-Iranist party,” which was a “shadowy group comprised of lower class individuals” that were employed to threaten and clamp down on competing political parties in the name of nationalism (Gasiorowksi 263). However, it was the Nationalist Front and the emergence of its leaders, Mohammed Mossadegh and Ayatollah Qassem Kashani, that lead to a critical shift in Iran’s government and the power of the Shah. Both men represented different ends of the political and philosophical spectrum and made for unlikely allies. Per Mokhtari’s evaluation and study of both men’s political ambitions, Mokhtari believes that Kashani’s lower-class upbringing contributed to his “anti-British and pro-German beliefs” during World War II and his exile by the British to Lebanon, which allowed him to become a martyr to downtrodden Iranians who sought his return to overthrow the British and stop their imperialistic practices (Mokhtari 461). Though his religious beliefs were concerning, Kashani was able to rile enough to support to begin heavily protesting the Shah and the current state of the government, making him a legitimate threat to win an open seat as the 16th election of the Majlis neared. Whereas Kashani led the more fanatical aspects of The Nationalist Party, it was Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh, a lifelong politician and the first Iranian to be awarded an advanced degree in Europe, who would represent the more logical, progressive elements of the Nationalist Front. Having left Iran for nearly a decade after watching Britain exploit his nation’s supply of oil, he now felt a responsibility to return, this time as a Professor of Legal Studies at Tehran School of Law and Political Science. Drawing on his experience as a member of the Majli parliament decades prior to his involvement with the Nationalist Front, Mossadegh viewed nationalizing Iran’s oil as a solemn duty to his country, but additionally that it was also his responsibility to maneuver his party, and fellow countrymen, toward a position of strength as confrontation with Great Britain drew closer.

The Nationalist Front’s methods of protesting against the Shah’s rule and Great Britain’s presence worked. After accusations of fraud were labeled against the Shah for the handling of the recent Majli election, in which none of the Nationalist Front’s members were elected, it was only after “frequent demonstrations in the street” that Kashani and Mossadegh were elected to parliament with unanimous support (Gasiorowksi 263). With Iran’s independence and nationalizing the oil at stake, both men seized the opportunity to confront the issue upon being sworn in. To combat such divisive rhetoric and placate the parliament that Mossadegh was turning against the him, the Shah chose General Ali Razmara as the next Prime Minister of Iran.
Hailed as a hero for combatting Iran’s foes during World War II, Razmara was a man of culture and known for speaking to even “the lowliest of petitioners” (Mokhtari 466). Still, Razmara harbored little love for Mossadegh and Kashani’s plan to disrupt international relationships that brought Iran relative peace, including an alliance with Great Britain he viewed as essential to Iran’s future. In turn, they met his appointment with aggression, opposition and protest. As Razmara settled into his role, he was also not seen favorably from others in Parliament. They viewed him not as a staunch defender of Iran, but rather as “a friend of the West,” and even accused him “collaboration with the British for opposing nationalization” (Mokhtari 467). Despite such fierce opposition, Razmara began to negotiate with the British over taking a greater percentage of the oil company’s revenue, but privately believed that Iran “lacked the ability to market” its oil internationally, even as the British were open to negotiating a larger percentage for Iran (Mokhtari 466). Around the same time, Mossadegh and Kashani created the Parliamentary Petroleum Commission to publicly counteract the negotiations and assert Iran’s right to nationalize its oil in public. This occurred as Great Britain was nearing a deal with Razmara, who was perturbed at Mossadegh and Kashani’s attempts at diverting his plans. However, his hopes of sealing such a deal would never come to fruition. Days after discussing the final outline for Iran to take back at least some of its oil, Razmara was brutally assassinated by a radical Muslim fundamentalist, who believed that Razmara was a “traitor” against the Iranian people for being willing to concede ownership to the British over Anglo Iranian Oil Company, furthering splintering the country and the choices now laid before them.

Razmara’s death sent a ripple effect across Iran and tore apart the fabric of the Parliament by creating an opening for a new Prime Minister. Sensing a rare moment to exploit Razmara’s death for political gain, Kashani offered praise Razmara’s assassin, naming him a “hero” and asking for his release, while putting forth Mohammed Mossadegh’s name for Prime Minister of Iran. As fellow parliament members “publicly celebrated Razmara’s death,” the Shah, terrified of being forced to appoint Mossadegh, opted for a little-known cleric in Hossein Ala (Mokhtari 469). Unpopular to a fault and known throughout Parliament as a “nationalist” and “pro-Western statesman,” Ala was unable to muster enthusiasm from within his own party after he introduced a less than inspiring cabinet. His prompt resignation, partially out of fear for Kashani’s actions, all but sealed the victory for Mossadegh. After Ala stepped down, Kashani issued an edict declaring Mossadegh “the only legitimate candidate for the premiership”, and with the support of local terror networks that were willing to disrupt Parliament, the Shah was forced to appoint Mossadegh as Prime Minister on April 30th, 1951, much to the satisfaction of the parliament and Kashani (Mokhtari 469). Now the most powerful man in Iran, Mossadegh additionally
formed the Committee of Expropriation to “wrest from Britain the control of the oil industry” (Mokhtari 469). Even after being elected by a near unanimous vote, Mossadegh struggle alongside Kashani to contain competing factions, including the overtly religious Faidayan-e Islam and the empowered Tudeh Party, from grabbing influence by publicly protesting many of Mossadegh’s initial decisions. Their actions did not work to disrupt Mossadegh’s immediate influence and power over parliament, but began to lay the groundwork for Mossadegh’s once strong political alliances beginning to fray and splinter before Mossadegh was able to govern and select a cabinet.

Armed with shaky but firm support from the National Front and certain factions of the Tudeh Party, Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh assumed office on May 1st, 1951. He wasted little time. On May 3rd, 1951, he announced the nationalization of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company. Great Britain was stunned and “was not prepared to accept outright nationalization” under any circumstances (Gasiorowksi 262). Though aware of Mossadegh’s antics in the prior months, his act of signing the Nationalization Bill into Iranian law “pulled him into direct conflict with the British government,” which by this point owned “fifty-percent of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company stock” and was increasingly reliant on oil as a critical export for their economy and parts of their military (Gasiorowski 262). Mossadegh’s actions were met with acclaim by the Iranian people and unanimous support from within his party, but now prompted the ire of a global power that was willing to engage in a multitude of ways to stop his ratified government from assuming control over their oil facilities. This was only made further abundant after Mossadegh ordered the seizure of the critical oil port of Abadan and renaming of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company, which Mossadegh ordered to be called the National Iranian Oil Company. Despite Great Britain’s anger, the situation only grew worse for both countries as the year progressed. With no other option, Great Britain adopted a “three-track strategy” to stop Iran from reclaiming their oil: legally prevent Iran from taking control of their facilities through the world court system, undermine Mossadegh’s base of support throughout Iran, and remarkably, outright remove Mossadegh from office by force, internal conflict or military coup (Gasiorowksi 262). Although the first two methods were successful in gaining national attention from Great Britain’s allies, including the United States, Mossadegh refused to negotiate. Based on both fear and the further recommendation of Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, two popular political leaders in Britain at the time, Great Britain now turned toward their last, so-called “Anglo-American” approach to solving the situation: planning a secretive coup to capture, overthrow and permanently remove Mossadegh from power (Gasiorowksi 264).
Intent on carrying out their coup, including failed pleas to the Shah to dismiss Mossadegh, the collapse of Great Britain’s negotiating team and minimal success within the international judicial system forced them to turn toward the United States to overthrowing Mossadegh. Emerging from a post-World War II glow and the waning years of the Truman Administration, The United States was reluctant to agree to such a drastic measure, even after Mossadegh’s unsuccessful to the United Nations. In Marc Gasiorowksi’s “The CIA’s TPBEDAMN Operation and the 1953 Coup in Iran,” Gasiorowksi believes that despite Mossadegh being elected during Truman’s final term, Truman’s government was not especially concerned with what they believed was a “stable” political climate in Iran, even coming to admire Mossadegh’s love for democracy (Gasiorowski 4). If anything, the United States was far more worried about “conditions in Europe and Asia” while developing an “internationalist posture” toward competing countries, including the spread of communism throughout Russia and the increasing conflict in Korea that would soon break out into war (Gasiorowski 6). The clearest sign of a new foreign policy under the administration was the government’s radical reshaping and restructuring of the Office of Strategic Services. Originally named the Strategic Services Unit and later the alternating titles of the Office of Special Operations, the Special Procedures Group and finally The Central Intelligence Agency, the primary intent of a newly redesigned intelligence service created under President Truman was to “carry out covert intelligence-gathering activities abroad” without upsetting the fragile state of the world in Europe and Asia (Gasiorowski 5). However, it was early in World War II that the Office of Strategic Services began operating openly and broadly in Iran. This included the creation and use of certain types of “grey and black” propaganda that agency began to propagate and test. According to Gasiorowski, the agency used the term gray to define a “source that was purposefully left ambiguous” and black to “define a source that was deliberately misrepresented to place blame on specific political targets” (Gasiorowski 7). To expand its interest and oppositional research facilities in Iran, the agency also began relying heavily on the services of two heavily educated Persian scholars, Joseph Upton and Donald Wilber. Together, both men traveled discreetly to Iran and began filing “hundreds of reports” on the emerging political parties, including specific analysis on the growing power and influence of communist-minded Tudeh Party, which was slowly amassing a large following and dominating much of Iran’s daily atmosphere.

Given the emergence of communist ideology in Iran and the United States’ turn toward a strategy of supporting “non-communist countries,” the newly renamed Office of Public Policy moved to establish a program to counteract and destroy the influence of the Tudeh Party through the creation of a propaganda-based operation, one the agency named internally as
TPBEDMAN. As further stated by Professor Gasiorowksi in an analysis of his own studies and newly released documents by the Central Intelligence Agency, he describes the program as an “anti-Soviet covert psychological warfare operation” that was intentionally “codenamed TPBEDAMN,” both to imply action against the Tudeh Party and the damning tactics they soon use against them enemies (Gasiorowksi 9). Though a wide array of opinions on the program exist, Professor Gasiorowski believes it was created primarily to combat The Tudeh Party and prevent Iran from turning toward communism. In “Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers and Spooks,” noted professor Ali Rahnema, a leading scholar on the coup, concurs with Gasiorowksi’s understanding of the program, but delves deeper into its numerous physical and psychological capabilities. Through his study of the agency’s earliest years in Iran, Rahnema asserts that TPBEDMAN “was entirely focused on containing The Iranian Communist Tudeh Party” and was mainly aimed at “undermining Communist influences in Iran” (Rahnema 86). Rahnema also posits that TPBEDMAN was not specifically a “combat-oriented” operation, but instead that a main thrust of the operation was “producing and propagating disinformation, defamation, and imitating the style of local newspapers” to convince Iranians that communism was inherently evil and worth fighting against to uphold the ruling monarchy of the Shah (Rahnema 86). Similarly, Gasiorowksi states that the heart of the operation consisted of material that was intended to “discredit the Soviet Union and Tudeh Party” while “extolling the West by describing the poor living conditions of Russia and the Soviet Union” to make Communism less appealing (Gasiorowksi 12). Outside of discrediting the Tudeh Party, the operation also included other, less obvious components that would be used to later influence Iran’s political scene before Mossadegh’s arrival. This included the agency’s efforts to “influence and control certain Iranian newspapers, including the planting of anti-Tudeh cartoons and articles,” and spread enormous amounts of untraceable money to “finance agent provocateurs,” who in turn would start “violent acts and publicly blame them on the Tudeh Party” (Rahnema 86). Worse, the agency also secretly supported the use of violent protests, which were primarily run by seedier, less well-funded religious organizations, including the controversial Toilers Party, that “hired thugs to disrupt Tudeh rallies” and create chaos in the streets to provoke awareness and anger from local Iranians toward communist practices (Rahnema 87).

The agency had high hopes for the success of TPBEDMAN, but they also needed to develop a structure and operational team that would work in tandem to keep their propaganda effective. This resulted in the Office of Public Policy asking Kermit Roosevelt, the head of Near East Division and grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, to recruit Iranians to help facilitate entryway, influence and power in Iranian media and clerical circles. By gaining their trust, this would help
to destabilize the influence of the Tudeh Party and stop their rising power in the region. Roosevelt dutifully accepted the assignment and proceeded to meet with two prominent Iranians, nicknamed Jalali and Kayvani, who “wanted to work against the Tudeh party” as they had “extensive contacts among Iranian journalists and in political and clerical circles” (Gasiorowski 10). Roosevelt was “deeply impressed with them” and offered to bring them to the United States for training. They accepted, were judged to be “reliable and promising” by senior officials upon arrival, and were hired to become “principle agents” within TPBEDMAN’s operation (Gasiorowski 10). After only three months of training, they were given codenames of Nerren and Cilley, and returned to Iran with an annual budget of “nearly one-million dollars” to begin cultivating sources and outlets for the agency’s future use of propaganda (Gasiorowski 11). Armed with a firm mission to manipulate fellow Iranians and plant seeds of doubt against the Tudeh Party, it would take less than two years for Nerren and Cilley to amass nearly “one-hundred and thirty sub-agents in their network,” which would prove to be an essential network for the agency to rely on during their later overthrow of Mossadegh (Rahnema 87). Both men also worked extensively to make deeper contacts with “newspaper editors and journalists,” who in turn began producing articles and cartoons to “discredit the Soviet Union and the Tudeh Party” (Gasiorowski 11). Despite relying heavily on Nerren and Cilley to help place material in Iranian newspapers, agency officials carried out more types of operations and smears to discredit the Soviet Union and Tudeh Party within Iran. This often included the disbursement of leaflets, agency-authored books, and even a “sham autobiography of a well-known poet” to destabilize the perception of key public figures that Iranians trusted (Gasiorowski). Although the money paid to specific journalists and editors to help publish this material was at first believed to be from Iranian sources, these outlets had little idea that the propaganda came not from Iranian circles, but rather “CIA specialists, including Donald Wilber, that were holed up in Washington,” often creating new pieces of art on a weekly basis depending on incoming agency reports on the success of the program (Gasiorowski 16).

By the end of 1951, the conflict between Iran and Great Britain reached a breaking point. After concluding that a coup was necessary to oust Mossadegh, Great Britain suspended all negotiations with Iran and began a plan of military action to take back the port of Abadan, which Mossadegh’s military continued to hold as a sovereign right over the newly renamed National Iranian Oil Company and further as a sign that Great Britain’s colonial rule was finished in Iran. Great Britain stopped their plans for an assault only after President Truman intervened, suggesting strongly that despite Iran’s fractured state and dubious leadership, that “negotiation” was the best route toward peace and compromise. Although willing to abandon more
aggressive efforts, Great Britain started looking for alternatives to a military campaign, and began building their own intelligence operation within Iran. They recruited multiple Iranian agents, including two men known only as the Rashidian Brothers, to “create friction between leaders of the National Front” and weaken Mossadegh’s negotiating position from within (Gasiorowksi 16). They achieved the desired result when Mossadegh took note of such activities and, unable to wrest control of the military from the Shah, suddenly resigned from his post in protest. After days of street demonstrations from Pro-Mossadegh supporters in Tehran, the Shah was forced to reappoint him, and thus allowing him a “triumphant” return into office and more power (Gasiorowksi 270). Having amassed more public support than before, Mossadegh quickly reorganized all military that was in open support of the Shah and began a crackdown on all those that opposed him politically, causing “morale to fall dramatically after Mossadegh purged the officer corps” (Gasiorowski 265). This was based on his advance knowledge that a primary military leader, General Zahedi, had been working in tandem with Great Britain to overthrow him by means of a violent coup. After receiving this information, which included that his once close friend in Kashani was working against him with Zahedi and British forces, Mossadegh issued an arrest warrant for Zahedi, stopped all communication with Great Britain, and ordered that all British residents living in Iran leave immediately or face certain arrest. This single action by Mossadegh not only stopped any chance of a successful negotiation and “all diplomatic relations,” but pitted Iran against a newly elected President and his intent for a different type of world order.

After offering Prime Minister Mossadegh a “negotiated settlement” that would split profits from the National Iranian Oil Company with Great Britain, Iran still refused to negotiate, and Mossadegh’s tenuous political hold and the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower prompted the Central Intelligence Agency to be convinced that Iran was a failed political state and in need of intervention. Though Great Britain had made overtures to the United States to play a role in their multiple coup attempts, President Truman’s commitment to democracy, even as he signed off on the functionality and structure of TPBEDAMN, stopped this from happening. Now that Eisenhower had ascended to the Presidency amidst a stirring victory, he brought with him titanic-sized figures in the form of John Foster Dulles, the newly appointed Secretary of State, and Allen Foster Dulles, the director of the C.I.A, who sought to reshape the structure of the Middle East during the tenure of Eisenhower’s administration. Weeks after Eisenhower’s inauguration and with increased attacks by former Nationalist Front members on Mossadegh’s parliament, the C.I.A. “began to seriously consider the idea of a coup,” and top C.I.A. and British officials convened to “review the situation” and devise a realistic way to overthrow Mossadegh
with the least amount of collateral damage and blowback on the United States (Gasiorowski 271). Despite believing that Mossadegh was “not a communist” or even “a soviet ally,” the meeting not only determined Mossadegh’s fate, but it was decided for the coup to work, Mossadegh’s replacement would need to be General Fazlollah Zahedi, who conferred the most loyalty from Iran’s vaunted Officer Corps. Likewise, the agency would need to win support from the Shah, who held the key to getting rid of Mossadegh legally through his right to issue a royal Farman or “decree” that would be legally binding once issued. It was in this meeting that the key leaders of the coup were also chosen. Given his vast experience in the Middle East and previous experience in constructing and operating TBPEDAMN for nearly three years, Kermit Roosevelt was selected to lead the ground operation against Mossadegh, while Persian expert and propagandist Donald Wilber would continue to produce material through the creation of The C.I.A. Art Group, and continue to assist a larger team of agency operatives in spreading and executing operations, movement and disbursement of propaganda throughout Iran.

On June 25th, 1953, a final, four-part plan for the coup was approved by the Central Intelligence Agency, which was now given the codename of Project TPAJAX. The Central Intelligence Agency first decided that the operation would rely exclusively on the prior components of TBPEDAMN and the elements of the program “were to be turned immediately on Mossadegh” and “opposition figures were to be encouraged to create a disturbance,” including and most importantly supporting the agency’s propaganda arm to weaken Mossadegh’s credibility on the ground and in the eyes of his people (Gasiorowksi 272). After restarting the infrastructure of TBPEDAMN, they would then facilitate money to opposition figures, such as Kashani and other clerics, to publicly denounce Mossadegh, and Roosevelt would be responsible for convincing the Shah to cooperate by ordering him to issue a royal “Farman” dismissing Mossadegh from power. Lastly, the support of “key active-duty military officers” would be sought to control the situation on the ground and wrest the power of the government away from Mossadegh and install General Zahedi as the new Prime Minister. The intelligence operation would also be supported with help of the Rashidian Brothers and Roosevelt’s sources, who were actively working with British intelligence services to drum up crowds of opposition against Mossadegh before the Central Intelligence Agency arrived at their embassy in Tehran. Around the same time of the coup’s operational planning, the agency began placing forms of propaganda within Iran to weaken Mossadegh’s position and “create already existing tension between Mossadegh and Kashani” (Gasiorowksi 14). This included tampering and bribing members of the Parliament, instigating “pro and anti-Mossadegh protests,” and accusing Mossadegh of rigging a public referendum to remain in control, thus destroying his image as a fair-minded leader.
(Gasiorowski 14). From Mossadegh’s continuously weakened political position, these pieces of propaganda only increased his paranoia, especially as he was informed that overtures were now being made to Kashani and other clerics to accept money in exchange for supporting a U.S. backed coup. With Mossadegh’s government descending into chaos, including “fistfights in the middle of the Majlis” and protests by Tudeh Party “occurring daily,” the Central Intelligence Agency was left with little choice but to move with their plan for a coup by the end of June. On July 11th, 1953, it was presented to President Eisenhower. He approved it.

Based out of the United States embassy in Tehran, the focal point of the ground operation and its background propaganda effort was to convince The Shah to sign royal decrees dismissing Mossadegh and appointing General Zahedi. Despite receiving assurances of the Shah’s complicity ahead of time through “a secret radio broadcast” over Radio Tehran, The Shah’s initial meetings with the agency were fruitless, and he resisted their efforts to blindly overthrow Mossadegh without ensuring his protection and paranoia. The Shah also preferred and wanted a “parliamentary recommendation” before moving forward legally, in addition to “massive military aid from Great Britain and the United States” to play a role in the coup (Gasiorowski 273). Unable to convince him alone, the agency enlisted the help of the Shah’s sister, Princess Ashraf, who returned to Iran only after being bribed by officials with luxurious goods. Her efforts to convince her brother to sign the royal documents did not work. Instead, it furthered Mossadegh’s deep fear of being overthrown after being told of her arrival, and more so after the Shah refused to see her, believing that it would only worsen the tension between he and Mossadegh. At the same time, Mossadegh’s parliament was crumbling because of the Tudeh Party “overplaying its hand” and succumbing to pressures from competing leadership to hold violent demonstrations. This coincided with increased propaganda attacks by the agency in June and July to further weaken the perception that Mossadegh was unable to control the Tudeh Party. Armed with “a large quantity of anti-Mossadegh propaganda” from Washington, operatives began disseminating said propaganda to various newspapers, including The Azerbaijan Province, and making “threatening phone calls” to clerical leaders while privately paying members in the Majli to speak out against Mossadegh’s support for the Tudeh Party. More critically, the agency sought in this period to portray the Tudeh Party as amassing power, and in the process “persuade the Iranian public that Mossadegh and armed forces that he should be removed from power” (Gasiorowski 18). This, coupled with Mossadegh arresting countless government officials, contributed to the Shah’s decision to sign orders dismissing Mossadegh and fully cooperate with the Central Intelligence Agency’s overarching goal.
The coup to oust Mohammed Mossadegh began on the night of August 15th, 1953. With the central officers now being in possession of the Shah’s Farman’s, they recruited Colonel Nasiri, the commander of Iran’s vaunted Imperial Guard, to play the crucial role of delivering the written decree to Mossadegh personally. The plan hinged on Mossadegh being arrested and General Zahedi being nominated as his replacement in the aftermath. Minutes after delivering the Farman from the Shah to Mossadegh’s residence, Colonel Nasiri was surprised by the appearance of Mossadegh’s military guards, who proceeded to accuse him of being an enemy of the state and had him arrested. Believing that Nasiri was part of a military takeover, Mossadegh had been warned hours before by anonymous Tudeh Party members of the pending coup, and used his remaining time to prepare the arrest of Nasiri and alert the people of Iran. Minutes after the arrest, Mossadegh tasked Radio Tehran, the most widely listened to radio station, with delivering his version of events: that a “military coup had been attempted” on Mossadegh’s government but had now been foiled by his overwhelming military strategy (Mokhtari 482). By the morning of the August 16th, Mossadegh convened a high-level cabinet meeting to discuss the next steps for Iran’s government while forcing all radio stations to air news of the coup, while also requesting that General Zahedi, his supposed replacement, surrender. Additionally, Mossadegh’s foreign minister, Hossein Fatemi, asked that the Shah not be received by any of Iran’s allies and turned over directly to the government to face his role in helping plan to the overthrow. After leaving his meeting, Mossadegh launched multiple countermeasures and methods of his own propaganda to prevent conspirators, Western or otherwise, from gaining an edge. This included arresting most of the available military, dissolving the parliamentary government, and removing the vaunted Imperial Guard that was used to protect the Shah so that he would struggle to garner support in case of a potential return. To make matters worse, Mossadegh advocated for the removal of all pictures of the Shah, and even requested that his name be removed from all morning and evening prayer throughout the country (Mokhtari 483). By day’s end, Mossadegh had consolidated most of the remaining power in Iran, while the Central Intelligence Agency struggled to ascertain the next steps of the operation having now been outsmarted by Mossadegh’s deep network of spies within Iran.

That same night, the next steps of the coup were being deliberated by Kermit Roosevelt and other agency officials at their embassy in Tehran. Having put General Zahedi in a safe house after Colonel Nasiri’s arrest and watching from afar as the Shah was given safe harbor across Europe, the Central Intelligence Agency, in coordination with Great Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service, determined that “all hope was lost” and that Roosevelt needed to disband the coup and
return to Washington (Gasiorowksi 273). Though understanding of the agency’s concerns, Roosevelt believed that the existing structure of TPBEDAMN afforded the CIA one last opportunity to turn the tide against Mossadegh, whose confidence was growing by the hour as he advocated for Tudeh protesters to begin dispersing in the street. Roosevelt sensed an opportunity and, along with other officials, began “thinking of ways to trigger an uprising against Mossadegh” (Gasiorowksi 274). This began with the initial step of using Nerren and Cilley to hire the first group of “fake Tudeh” protesters to bombard the capital of Tehran and make the civilian population believe that a communist takeover was in the process of happening. They agreed and quickly amassed a group. As this group marched into Tehran, their imposter crowds were soon joined by “real Tudeh supporters,” who believed that Mossadegh had ordered an additional march and were unaware of the Central Intelligence Agency’s instigation of the event. As a single mass moving throughout the capital, the crowd now attacked specific remnants of the Shah’s rule, including statues and the valued local mausoleum. This greatly outraged both Mossadegh, who believed that the Tudeh Party was overstepping and causing too much unneeded chaos, and leading to his decision to order the riots to be broken up by his own police force. After Mossadegh issued an order propagating violence against his own people, Roosevelt moved to publish the Shah’s religious orders through the various journalists that the Central Intelligence had paid through TPBEDAMN’s sprawling network. By publishing the royal documents in both U.S. and Iranian newspapers, including The New York Times, it ensured the Shah’s legitimacy in dismissing Mossadegh and advocating for General Zahedi. Now, Mossadegh’s once boisterous standing with the Iranian people began to weaken considerably with both these newfound revelations spreading rapidly throughout the country.

After the demonstrations began on the 18th, the situation only grew direr for Mossadegh’s tenuous government by August 19th. After publishing the Farman’s that carried the Shah’s unmistakable signature and support of General Zahedi, Roosevelt, along with minimal assistance from Great Britain’s intelligence sources, began to make overtures to Mossadegh’s most feared enemy: Ayatollah Kashani. Believing that Kashani could facilitate Anti-Mossadegh crowds while turning the clergy against Mossadegh, they paid Kashan nearly ten-thousand dollars to ensure the presence of anti-Mossadegh protesters. After a meeting with two CIA officers, Kashani accepted the money and gave assurances that the crowds would form to remove Mossadegh, who he believed had overstepped constitutionally and no longer stood powerfully against the West. Additionally, the CIA relied heavily on Nerren and Cilley to facilitate crowds as well, and even provided the mysterious Rashidian Brothers with capital to produce banners with the Shah’s visage available to protesters. Toward the afternoon, crowds
supporting the Shah and denouncing Mossadegh began to appear in the streets of Iran’s capital, Tehran. According to Rahnema, the hired groups had a four-part plan to confront equally angered Pro-Mossadegh supporters: first, they would “mobilize and organize unruly ruffians” and have them “occupy Tehran’s key streets and squares with clubs and sticks” to intimidate Pro-Mossadegh supporters (Rahnema 178). Then, they would deploy an additional “two-thousand individuals to the central streets of Sepah, Shahabad and Shah,” both to clog the central streets of Tehran and start additional riots. After a so-called “leadership team” of thugs and spooks arrived to direct the crowds, they subsequently provided “armed personnel” that then “triggered an armed insurrection” (Rahnema 180). As most of the crowds began to converge, army and police units entered the fray, having been angered by their inability to limit the impact of the crowds the previous day and now becoming suspicious of Mossadegh’s motivations in overthrowing the Shah.

The crowds soon moved further into Tehran, and began attacking “Pro-Mossadegh newspapers and office buildings” at both the CIA’s discretion and the growing wave of support for the Shah to return (Mokhtari 484). As more and more crowds formed to express their discontent and anger toward Mossadegh’s actions, Roosevelt and his team pulled General Zahedi from his hideout and pushed him to begin advocating for the Shah over Tehran’s widely distributed radio station, Radio Tehran. Zahedi’s appearance, and participation in the day’s protests, largely worked in inspiring protesters to continue with their support for the Shah. In “Analysis of Radio Propaganda in the 1953 Iran Coup,” Professor Mervyn Roberts argues against the conventional belief that the Central Intelligence Agency’s propaganda operations were the only decisive factor in ousting Mossadegh. Instead, Mervyn believes that Radio Tehran, both before and after the coup, contributed to a “commoners believing the Shah now held power” (Roberts 776). Though historians such as Marc Gasiorowksi give more credit to the forms of propaganda and the agency’s willingness to hire fake crowds that then directed their members toward specific and critical landmarks of the Shah’s power, Roberts furthers suggests that Iran was host to an “ideologically complex media environment,” and that after being overtaken by Pro-Shah supporters, the subsequent messages broadcast by his supporters, including that General Zahedi was now Iran’s rightful leader and Mossadegh was a fraud, reached far more people and in effect “tipped the scales” by “encouraging fence sitters by emphasizing the communist threat by the Tudeh Party was real and must be acted upon” to join in with the protests and march on Mossadegh’s estate to reassert the Shah’s right to stay on the throne (Roberts 777).
By the night of August 19th, a pro-Zahedi and pro-Shah military detachment gained control of various artillery, including the use of tanks. With Radio Tehran broadcasting messages of support for The Shah and the protest groups unstoppable, they proceeded to march further into the capital and attacked government buildings, eventually overtaking them in hopes of swinging the balance of power against Mossadegh. By the morning of August 20th, Mossadegh had lost control over his government after refusing the opportunity to attack and put down the various methods the Central Intelligence Agency was using against him. As an ardent believer in free speech, he did nothing about the Iranian and U.S.-backed reports that were discrediting him, and even less about the Tudeh Party that he believed would not dare turn violent. This deeply misguided mistake now led to an army of thousands marching on his residence, with the Central Intelligence Agency continuing to add to the crowds while remaining located at the embassy in Tehran. As Zahedi’s forces gathered outside of Mossadegh’s estate, a nine-hour battle ensued to oust Mossadegh. This took place between the somewhat well-armed protesters and the remnant of Mossadegh’s military, who stood little chance of success. Nearly “three-hundred people were killed” during the protracted battle and Mossadegh’s house was destroyed (Gasiorowksi 274). Despite barricading his quarters, Zahedi’s forces were able to overwhelm the fornications and capture Mossadegh as he was escaping over the roof. The next day, Mossadegh officially surrendered to General Zahedi, and Radio Tehran was the first to broadcast such news. As dawn began to break over Iran, more of Mossadegh’s men were hunted down and arrested, as well as General Zahedi officially taking control over the remaining government. To appease his supporters, Zahedi brought the Shah back to Iran, where he landed and made “an emotional message” to thank his supporters while claiming his departure from Iran upon the coup’s failure was a “tactical move” to avoid his arrest (Rahnema 270). With the objective achieved, Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA team left the Tehran Station and returned to England to begin making plans and appointments for Zahedi’s government. In the months after Mossadegh’s arrest, he was charged with treason and put on trial for disobeying articles of Iran’s constitution. Terrified of another Mossadegh-inspired occurring, and backed officially by the “warm friendship” Iran now shared with United States and Great Britain, the Shah consolidated his power by rewriting the constitutional laws and working with the United States to establish a secret police force known as the SAVAK (Organization of National Intelligence and Security). This only left the matter of the oil as last piece of the coup to be decided between Western powers, who claimed certain victory. According to Ervand Abrahamian in his highly controversial recounting of the coup, entitled “The Coup: 1953, The CIA, And the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations,” the National Iranian Oil Company was dissolved into a
“consortium” and divided into “profit-sharing agreement” with the participating countries: “forty percent to the Anglo Iranian oil Company, now renamed British Petroleum, fourteen percent to Royal Dutch Shell, six percent to Compagnie François, and thirty-five to major American interests, including Gulf, Texaco, Mobil, Standard Oil of New Jersey and California” (Abrahamian 207). As an inadvertent result of the new deal, the British effectively had “controlling shares” of Dutch as well, sharing the power of Iran’s oil supply with the United States for the next five decades (Abrahamian 208).

The coup was a decisive moment for Iran and the future of the Central Intelligence Agency. In choosing to stay silent amidst the many protesters that were amassing outside of his estate, Mossadegh all but assured that the agency would achieve victory and topple his government. By not fighting back against the specific types of propaganda used, including the use of bribery, the infiltration of media, and violence, Mossadegh only gave the Central Intelligence Agency’s tactics credibility and ensured that they would be used again over successive days to maximum effect. As critical as the coup’s success was to shaping Iran from a democracy to a dictatorship under the emboldened power of the Shah, the operation mattered more to the Central Intelligence Agency and signaled its massive, unwieldy future as an organization dedicated to covert operations and infiltration. After the overwhelming success of Operation TPAJAX, the CIA, at the direction of President Eisenhower, continued in its efforts to destabilize foreign governments by utilizing similar forms of propaganda across the globe, including and most particularly the manipulation of the media to topple governments. In a personal interview conducted with Professor Gasiorowksi1 regarding the coup’s legacy and the United States’ signature role, he fervently believes in retrospect that the coup in Iran was viewed by the Central Intelligence Agency as “practice” for future endeavors and merely “the pre-cursor” of a much larger, albeit failed, world order that was being put into place by the Eisenhower’s State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency. Conversely, Gasiorowski believes that while the agency acted inappropriately, the general perception that Iran is “innocent” is flawed, as “they interfered with just as many governments in prior decades,” and that the Middle East is a “deeply troubled and chaotic” place as a result. Moreover, when considering the elements that were involved in the coup, including the building of secret infrastructures, the agency’s printing presses to disperse specific forms of propaganda to produce fake newspapers, leaflets and local intelligence sources, these ideas provided a clear and obvious template for use by the agency in such as places as Guatemala and Lebanon in succeeding years. Professor

Gasiorowksi believes these ideas pre-emptively laid the groundwork for the government’s future use of the so-called Eisenhower Doctrine within the Middle East, and formed the basis for a flawed, ineffective strategy that produced little in the way of defeating Communism abroad or restructuring the Middle East in a manner to the United States’ liking.

By removing Mohammed Mossadegh, installing General Zahedi and restoring The Shah to the Peacock Throne with unanimous support, it can be determined that the sole force behind these actions was not Great Britain or even the internal figures of the Iranian political scene, but rather the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency in pursuit of stopping communism, asserting the beginning of the Eisenhower Doctrine, and amassing a greater percentage of Iran’s oil through the creation of an interconnected consortium of global dominance. Eager to prove its power on the world stage and under the auspices of a new, demanding President, the agency utilized the existing infrastructure of The Truman Administration’s TPBEDAMN program as well as exploiting domestic fears that communism was taking hold on foreign continents such as Europe and the Middle East. Though claims that the Central Intelligence Agency was helped in part by various members of Iran’s religious clergy have some merit, including Ayatollah Kashani’s assistance in providing anti-Mossadegh supporters, it was the Central Intelligence Agency’s propaganda campaign against Mossadegh that had a far greater and everlasting effect on Mossadegh’s credibility, including the publishing of the Shah’s Farman’s ousting Mossadegh and appointing General Zahedi. Moreover, because overthrowing Mossadegh included the use of specific propaganda and paid demonstrations, the agency’s revealing methods contributed directly to Iran’s fierce anti-Western rhetoric and instability in succeeding decades. Although a forceful regime was installed under the Shah, the rise of Ruhollah Khomeini less than two decades later was a direct result of United States involvement and meddling in Iran, beginning primarily in the aftermath of the coup. While noted academics such as Marc J. Gasiorowksi, Ali Rahmena, Richard Cottam, Mervyn Roberts and Fariborz Mokhtari all come to differing conclusions over what contributed to the coup’s success, including that internal Iranian relations played a larger role than the Central Intelligence Agency, few of their conclusions hold weight when the significance of TPBEDMAN’s role in producing propaganda and influencing the outcome of the coup is considered. The United States’ decision to overthrow an unstable but promising democracy in Iran led to a false, undemocratic and violent regime. It also served as the starting point for the Central Intelligence Agency to become one of the most feared intelligence organizations in the world, one that would continue its ruthless creation of covert programs to propagate methods of overthrow, intervention, and organized chaos in
pursuit of stopping a flawed ideology of communism the Eisenhower Administration believed would take hold over Europe, Asia and the entirety of the Middle East. It never did.


