

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Jun 10, 2013): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-myth-operation-ajax-4761>

## The Myth of Operation Ajax

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| January 24, 2011

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The Cold War began in 1945 when Russian leader Josef Stalin refused to take his troops out of Iran; the fall of the shah in 1979 marked the beginning of the war's end. Yet even today real and imagined ghosts of that war, in the shape of an eclectic history of U.S.-Iran relations, and of the role the United States played in the fall of Mossadegh, continue to haunt some of the diplomatic discourse on Iran. It is even reported that President Barack Obama's hesitancy in offering stronger support for the Iranian democratic opposition has been at least partially rooted in his desire to avoid the mistakes of the past. Clearly, only after a reckoning with the past and exorcising its haunting ghosts can prudent policy be formed.

The Soviet-British occupation of Iran in 1941 brought with it the creation of the Tudeh Communist party and the rapid rise of a Stalin-era Manichean view that divided the world into two camps: the gulag-laced Soviet Union was the land of light and America was the embodiment of evil. In one of its biggest demonstrations, with more than a hundred thousand fellow travelers in

attendance, Tudeh leaders demanded "the liquidation of America spy nests."

Almost three decades later, in offering his blessing to the students who had brazenly taken over the American embassy, Khomeini called it a "den of spies." There was more than lexical coincidence at work here. Khomeini and his allies took up the Cold War narrative and simply changed "proletariat" to "the disposed (*mostazaf*)," "imperialism" to "arrogance (*estekbar*)" and "America" to "the Great Satan." If Satan fell from grace because he defied God, America's "original sin" in this new political theology was its alleged role in the overthrow of Mossadegh in 1953. It mattered little in this transubstantiation of Communist theology to clerical dogma that the Communists were in 1951 Mossadegh's biggest foes, and that the decision of the clergy to go against Mossadegh in 1953 was far more crucial to his fall than any CIA plan. So what role did, in fact, the United States play in that fall and in the events preceding it? Any serious investigation of documents and facts will dispel most of the Cold War shibboleths.

The United States played a crucial, even determining, role in keeping Iran's territorial integrity from Soviet designs. Keen on getting an oil concession for the northern provinces on Iran's Caspian coast, Stalin ordered the creation of two separatist movements in the country, and threatened to dismember Iran if he did not get the northern oil concessions. Many Iranian nationalists were opposed to the idea of any spoils to the Soviets. Truman issued a virtual ultimatum demanding that the Soviets withdraw from Iran in 1946. Eventually Soviet forces were withdrawn, making it the only instance in the postwar years when Stalin's Red Army occupied a territory and was forced to give it up. Without the United States, in other words, there might not have been the Iran we know today.

When in 1951 Mossadegh led a movement to nationalize Iran's oil industry and end the British monopoly, Washington played a critical role in tempering London's jingoistic temptations—first to occupy the oil-rich provinces of Iran, and then to organize a coup to topple Mossadegh. Even before the nationalization laws were passed in 1951, America had from 1949 begun to pressure Britain to recognize the rise of nationalism in Iran and around the world, and reconsider the one-sided 1908 oil agreement and arrive at a more equitable settlement. The British refused and accused the United States of dangerous naïveté. After the appointment of Mossadegh to the post of prime minister, so pervasive was the behind-the-scenes U.S. support for his demands that, more than once in their confidential internal correspondence, the British surmised that Mossadegh might be in collusion with the Washington. Eventually, in a letter to Truman, Churchill made it clear that continued British support for the war effort in Korea would be predicated on American support for Britain and against Mossadegh in Iran.

By late November 1952, the Truman administration determined that neither the British nor Mossadegh were interested in a negotiated settlement. Even then some in the State Department suggested supporting Mossadegh. But by that time tensions within Mossadegh's nationalist camp, increased power of clerical opposition to his leadership, economic hardships resulting from the oil embargo and, finally, the increased import of Tudeh support for Mossadegh convinced the United States that supporting him was no longer an option, and that he was now vulnerable (to either a Communist coup, or a British-American-Iranian royalist attempt to remove him). Mossadegh had often reminded U.S. officials of—even threatened them with—the fact that he was the last bastion against Communism. Now that he seemed more than ever weakened and reliant on Communist support, the United States decided to join the British effort to topple Mossadegh while continuing efforts to find a mediated solution.

But for many months the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, resisted any attempt to remove Mossadegh illegally. Then in early August 1953, Mossadegh's decision to hold a referendum and use it to dismiss a parliament picked in an election held by his own government, gave the shah the grounds he had long sought. Mossadegh's stalwart allies had warned him against the referendum for two reasons: it had dubious constitutional legitimacy, and it would afford the shah the chance to make recess appointments—firing Mossadegh and appointing a replacement. They pointed to the long tradition of such appointments. Even Mossadegh himself had earlier, in a hitherto surprisingly overlooked letter to the shah, affirmed his belief in Pahlavi's power to make such recess appointments. But now Mossadegh was betting that, in his own words, the shah did not have the guts to dismiss him; he was wrong. The referendum gave Pahlavi not just the courage but, at least in his own mind, the constitutional basis to join the effort to end Mossadegh's tenure.

Refusing to heed the shah's order dismissing him on August 16, arresting the messenger of the order, never telling the people of Iran about the existence of such a dismissal order and, finally, allowing his foreign minister to go on a verbal rampage against the shah and monarchy as soon as Pahlavi had fled the country on the were all acts with a dubious constitutional basis. The country experienced three days of near chaos—street clashes between Communist and right-wing forces, angry demonstrations by religious forces worried about Communist ascendancy in Iran. What sealed Mossadegh's fate on August 19 was a combination of these factors, as well as the fact that the clergy were already actively against Mossadegh, the military were fully in the shah's camp, and members of the bazaar and the middle class were disgruntled and had by August grown wary of the dire economic situation. There is incontrovertible evidence that the British and American governments were involved in plans to overthrow Mossadegh and tried to use "rented crowds." Far less clear is exactly what role these crowds played in comparison to the known fact that the clergy also brought out their forces in those days against Mossadegh and the Communists. What role did the royalist soldiers who first learned of the existence of the dismissal order play? What about the role played in the prime minister's fall by the disgruntled middle class and members of the bazaar and Mossadegh's erstwhile supporters? The United States has already offered words of apology about this role. The ruling clerics, of course, have never apologized to the people of Iran for their far more important but similar role in the overthrow of Mossadegh, nor have they apologized to the United States for egregious crimes like assisting in the death of Americans or occupying the American Embassy.

What sealed Mossadegh's fate was the fact that—in contrast to July 1952 when attempts to dismiss him brought four days of unrest by thousands, ending in his reinstatement—in August 1953 his policies had left him with a small base of support. In subsequent years, Iranian nationalists needed a hero, the CIA needed a Victory after a long list of embarrassing defeats (the book *Legacy of Ashes* by Tim Weiner is a sobering reminder of these failures), Iranian Marxist proponents of the Cold War needed a villain—and thus the simplified myth of the CIA coup to overthrow Mossadegh was born. The shah, for his part, created his own myth of the national uprising of August 1953 to reaffirm his monarchy.

Debunking this myth and replacing it with a more detailed account of what actually happened in the months leading to August 1953, and pointing to the long history of American pressure on the shah to democratize—pressures that had begun in Roosevelt's time, continued during much of the Truman administration, started again by the Eisenhower administration in 1957, redoubled by the Kennedy and Carter administrations—can free U.S. policy makers now and future from

the lingering legacy of the Cold War. The ruling clerics in Iran know well and hide effectively the fact that they could not have come to power without Jimmy Carter's human-rights policies. They know that the American embassy in Tehran played a critical role in neutralizing the Iranian military and convincing them to join Khomeini and his allies. Yet every time an American newspaper writes an article describing the state of Iran's democratic movement, they accuse Iranian democrats of complicity with the Great Satan. Knowing the actual history of U.S.-Iran relations, accepting and understanding America's mistakes no less than its contributions to the cause of democracy, can lead to a policy that is finally free from the ghosts of the Cold War.

Today, only a prudent policy free from the weight of jingoist bravura or unexamined shame can navigate its way through the inseparably complicated and interlinked problems of Iran's nuclear program and Iran's democratic dream. Only a democratic Iran, one that abides by Non-Proliferation Treaty while insisting on Iran's rights within the treaty, can solve Iran's nuclear impasse. It is as much folly to think that the regime will end its nuclear program as it is to imagine that not offering support to Iran's democrats will save them from the wrath of the regime or from the allegation that they are "lackeys" or tools of the United States. The fact that the regime makes these allegations have everything to do with its paranoid and isolated nature and all but nothing to do with what America or the West actually does. In writing about support for the Iranian democrats, I am in no way suggesting that the United States or other countries should interfere in Iran's domestic affairs. America and the world can help Iranian democrats by simply helping to level the playing field by serving notice to the regime that continued brutality against the people, and of the democratic leaders, will bring it even closer to complete isolation.

*A fuller treatment of the topic can be found in Abbas Milani's book, The Shah, published by Palgrave Macmillan this month.*

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