

Operation Ajax: 70 years since the CIA and MI6 joint venture in Iran

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70 years ago, in 1953, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its British counterpart, MI6, organised a coup d'état to oust Iran's first and last democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadeq.

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Details about the coup emerged after the CIA released a trove of documents about the mission, named "[Operation Ajax](#)". The release of the new documents provides the first official confirmation of the extent of the CIA's involvement in Iran's history.

Once upon a time it was oil in Iran

In the 1950s, after World War II and at the beginning of the Cold War, there were two major factors for American imperialism when it came to "managing" Iran. First, that Iran remained a politically reliable geographic buffer, which blocked Soviet Union access to the warm water of the Persian Gulf. Second, that Iran's profitable oil reserves remained in the hands of Western companies. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, owned by the British government, had been in the country ever since the discovery of large reserves in 1908.

Both of these priorities seemed threatened by the appointment of Mossadeq to the post of Prime Minister.

The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company had held a monopoly on the extraction, refining, and sale of Iranian oil. Anglo-Iranian's grossly unequal contract, negotiated with a corrupt monarch, required it to pay Iran just 16 percent of the money it earned from selling the country's oil. The company made more profit in 1950 alone than it had paid Iran in royalties over the previous half century.

Oil nationalisation

Now the champion of the fight against the all-powerful British Oil Company, Mossadeq brought together behind his personality a coalition of politicians hostile to the Shah, the merchants of the Bazaar, and the modern, Western-educated petty bourgeoisie. It took the name "National Front", found an echo among the poor urban masses, and at first had the support of the clergy.

In March 1951, the Iranian parliament, on the initiative of Mossadeq, adopted a recommendation calling for the nationalisation of the oil industry. In April, oil workers staged a general strike; solidarity strikes and street demonstrations took place in the capital, Tehran, and several major cities. Mossadeq's power and popularity had grown so great that the king, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was virtually forced to appoint him as Prime Minister on April 29, and the crisis focused on the oil question. Mossadeq was determined to expel the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, nationalise the oil industry, and use the money it generated to develop Iran.

On April 30, nationalisation was voted unanimously by parliament, and the Iranian National Oil Company was created. For the masses, this represented an unprecedented victory, revenge for decades of national humiliation. The population proclaimed "Oil is our blood". Mossadeq was considered a national hero: he dared to challenge this state in the state that was the Anglo-Iranian Company, with its gardens, its swimming pools, its housing, its restaurants, reserved for the exclusive use of the English. Some buildings even apparently displayed a sign saying: "*No dogs and Iranians allowed*".

The company responded with a categorical refusal of any compromise, the closure of the Abadan refinery, the biggest in the world at that time, the departure of engineers and technicians, and above all by its veto against any attempt by Iran to commercialise its oil production. After a delay, the American oil companies declared solidarity with the Anglo-Iranian Company, and no other country dared to confront them.

The blockade and the coup

In July 1952, a crisis broke out with the Shah when Mossadeq claimed control of the army. He received the massive support of the population of Tehran, who rose up, confronted the army and its tanks for five days, and ended up becoming almost masters of the city, although there were hundreds of deaths. Mossadeq would later be named by *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year of 1951."

British officials turned to the CIA for help. Presenting Mossadeq as a threat to America's global fight against communism, British intelligence services conspired with the CIA to undermine his regime. President Truman refused the CIA permission to initiate a coup d'état to help the British oil company. But as soon as Eisenhower became president in November 1952 the CIA renewed its request for a coup, arguing that Mossadeq was a "communist", and Eisenhower gave the go-ahead.

Under the CIA plan, the Americans would spend \$150,000 to bribe journalists, editors, Islamic preachers, and other opinion leaders to "create, extend and enhance public hostility and distrust and fear of Mossadeq and his government." Then they would hire thugs to carry out "staged attacks" on religious figures and other respected Iranians, making it seem that Mossadeq had ordered them. Meanwhile, General Zahédi (future Prime Minister and father of the Shah's son-in-law) would be given money to "win additional friends" and "influence key people." The plan budgeted another \$11,000 per week, a great sum at that time, to bribe members of the Iranian parliament. On "coup day," thousands of paid demonstrators would converge on parliament to demand that it dismiss Mossadeq. Parliament would respond with a "quasi-legal" vote to do so. If Mossadeq resisted, military units loyal to General Zahédi would arrest him.

Mossadeq was finally overthrown on August 19, 1953 by a coup d'état nominally instigated by General Zahédi, but in fact organised and financed by a CIA general collaborating with MI6, the American ambassador and the Shah's entourage. Thugs from the underbelly of Tehran were widely called upon to give the appearance of popular support to the Shah. He had already fled to Italy, but returned to Iran and was restored to his throne by American imperialism.

“Return to normal in Iran”, headlined the English newspapers the day after. The National Front was banned, Mossadeq tried and imprisoned, and one of his ministers executed. But the repression was particularly merciless towards the communists. There were thousands of arrests and convictions, and hundreds of executions.

The Shah’s dictatorship in the service of imperialism

Within a short period after the coup d’état, the Shah had tightened his grip on the country’s security services and imposed a dictatorial police regime, which ruled through brutality and fear.

And American imperialism was well served. His first priority had been to get his hands on the oil. In 1954, a consortium of oil companies was set up, of which American and Britain companies each secured a 40 percent interest. This was a sign of the new order, with the US muscling in on a formerly British preserve. Rockefeller, Special Assistant to the President for Foreign Affairs, was able to tell Eisenhower in 1962: “We have been able to ensure total control of Iranian oil... At present, the Shah cannot undertake the slightest change in the composition of his government without consulting our ambassador”.

From the outset, the military monarchy set up an instrument of repression, with the help of the CIA: the political police, SAVAK, the backbone of the Iranian State. This name inspired terror; after a few years, they began to systematically practice torture. Trained and supported by the CIA, SAVAK subjected the Iranian people to one of the most brutal and oppressive totalitarian regimes in the world. The US government reinforced the oppression with money, armaments, and training. All opposition political parties were banned, and many of the activists who participated in the movement for nationalisation of oil were arrested or fled the country.

For 25 years, the Iranian people suffered under the brutal dictatorship of the US-installed and US-supported Shah. In 1977, there were, according to Amnesty International, between 25,000 and 100,000 political prisoners in Iran.

That came to a screeching halt in 1979, when the Iranian people finally had had enough and decided to violently revolt.

The impact of the coup

Each year on August 19, the anniversary of the coup, millions of Iranians ask themselves what would have happened if the US and UK had not conspired all those years ago to overthrow Iran’s democratically elected leader. Certainly, the barbaric Islamic regime, which was much worse than the previous dictator, might not have existed.

Apart from rewriting the destiny of Iran and its neighbours, the coup d’état paved the way for a series of imperialist interventions and the toppling of democratically elected governments across the world. Perhaps Washington might have thought twice before plotting coups in Guatemala in 1954, Congo in 1961 or Chile in 1973 ..., if they’d been unable to overthrow Iran’s Prime Minister, Mossadeq, so easily and profitably.

In this way, the American coup d’état in Iran turned out to be one of the pivotal events of modern world history. It also laid the foundations for the anti-American and anti-dictator backlash of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, 26 years later.

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P.S.

- Amandla. Nov 30, 2023:

<https://www.amandla.org.za/amandla-90-91-stop-the-genocide/>

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