

Operation AJAX: Roots of a Tree Grown in Distrust

Carter Matherly

The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms.

– U.S. President Harry Truman, March 12, 1947

President Truman made the above statement during his famous speech in which he sought congressional approval to increase aid to Greece and Turkey, two countries whose economies were on the brink of failure. The collective fear was that their governments would turn to communism as an economic fix for continued survival. Truman's speech quickly formed the basis of U.S. policy towards communism and political entities that threatened democracy.¹ Even though this laid the groundwork of the U.S.'s public international policy, a far different and ironic action emerged. Just a few short years later President Eisenhower authorized the CIA, in conjunction with Britain's MI6, to carry out Operation AJAX.² At the heart of the operation's targets sat an elected Iranian prime minister, new-found Iranian national pride, a power-hungry shah, and a plot to overthrow a fledgling democracy. Overall, the operation was considered a success with regard to its objectives, but when compared to U.S. policy and interests, it was a horrible failure and arguably the focal point of almost a half-century of soured Iranian-U.S. relations.

The Operation

Operation AJAX was a false flag operation, a covert plan where CIA involvement was masked to look like an Iranian military coup to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. The hope of the operation was to realign political control of Iran in fa-

vor of an extremely U.S.-friendly monarch.

In late 1952 representatives of MI6 and the CIA met to discuss future warfare and involvement in Iran. During the two-month discourse MI6 mentioned its interest in the possibility of overthrowing Iran's Prime Minister Mossadeq. The CIA, surprised by the suggestion and completely unprepared for the topic, agreed to study the situation further before committing to such an action.³

Prior to this proposal the CIA had not been in the business of actively overthrowing governments. In fact, the CIA had only very limited experience in assisting coups, primarily as technical advisors, and had never attempted to take the lead in orchestrating the overthrow of a government. The CIA is credited with providing analytical and planning support in 1949 to Syrian Army Chief of Staff Husni al-Zaim for Syria's first coup d'état in March of that year.⁴ It has been proposed that the coup was also financially backed with funds provided by the CIA, however this remains unconfirmed. In 1952 the agency supported General Batista's coup to overcome his almost guaranteed loss in Cuba's presidential election.⁵

The first communication seeking approval for the CIA-led Iranian coup d'état came from the agency's director, General Walter Bedell Smith.⁶ General Smith established the official policy that the U.S. could no longer approve of the Iranian government and the continued influence that the National Frontist party had on it. He further cited a trend of overwhelming recklessness and destructive attitudes by the Iranian government, all inspired by Mossadeq, who was attempting to consolidate power for an eventual dictatorial bid.⁷ Citing Mossadeq's communist leanings is generally viewed as propaganda aimed at disguising the true inspiration for his removal from power – oil. Mossadeq was working to nationalize Iranian oil production, a move that would violate the terms of a questionable oil production contract that heavily favored the British.⁸

A complex plan involving protests, propaganda, exiled leaders and royalist military members was formulated and dispatched for immediate implementation. The operation dubbed TP-AJAX, AJAX for short, was intended to oust Mossadeq and reduce the influence of the National Frontists in an effort to reinstall Shah Reza Pahlavi to the forefront of political power in Iran.⁹

The operation commenced on August 15, 1953, barely nine months after MI6 first approached the CIA with its desire. Execution of the operation was intended to last approximately 18 hours, but ended up lasting a full 72 hours, coming close to failure numerous times. The first twelve hours went completely awry; the morning of August 16 found agents scrambling to salvage the operation by all means possible. Key components of the military portion of the operation had not come to fruition, setting in motion a cascade of failures. Numerous members of Mossadeq's cabinet were not arrested as planned. In turn, Mossadeq had received warning of the coup and had ample opportunity to fortify security around several governmental buildings, including his own residence.¹⁰

The fortification allowed Mossadeq to arrest Colonel Nematollah Nassiri as a conspirator when the colonel delivered the shah's farman (royal decree), announcing the dismissal of Mossadeq and installation of General Fazlollah Zahedi as the new prime minister.¹¹ As word spread, violent protests erupted in the streets. The shah, fearing for his life, fled to Italy. Mossadeq, believing the shah's departure signaled the end of the coup, called off the fortified security and quelled the protests in the streets.¹²

Seizing an opportunity, agency case officers hurriedly circulated documents and fabricated interviews that spun the events as a plan by Mossadeq to overthrow Iran's increasingly democratic government in an attempt to place himself at the head of a new communist government.¹³ The plan created much confusion. When the shah's

newly appointed prime minister, now on the run, gave a speech via a pirate radio broadcast denouncing Mossadeq and accepting the shah's appointment, no one noticed that during the first few seconds the music playing in the background was the U.S. National Anthem! This of course was an accident and was quickly corrected by agents behind the scenes who were relaying the broadcast across Iran.¹⁴

This set the stage for an orchestrated pro-communist demonstration. The hired demonstrators began attacking private businesses and destroying shops in the bazaars. General Zahedi then rallied fearful citizens against the staged communist revolution. As the protest turned violent, General Zahedi mobilized the military to seize remaining elements of Mossadeq's cabinet. Initially fleeing arrest, Mossadeq eventually turned himself in to prevent further bloodshed.¹⁵ It was not until Mossadeq's arrest that the shah returned to Iran.

Despite these setbacks, the shah was in power, Mossadeq was tried and sentenced to life in prison though later commuted to house arrest, and the U.S. arguably now had a puppet monarchy at its disposal in control of Iran. For all intents and purposes Operation AJAX was considered a resounding success by all involved in the planning and execution of the operation. However, even though the primary goal was realized, an objective eye could easily note that the operation was a complete failure in accordance with standing U.S. policy as dictated by the Truman doctrine.¹⁶ Operation AJAX also failed in securing long-term U.S. relations and other interests within Iran.

His Imperial Majesty

As the dust settled, the irrevocable harm went undetected by key players behind the coup. Over three hundred Iranian Nationalists

were killed in front of Mossadeq's home, defending not only him, but democracy.¹⁷ Whether they ever knew or realized that the leaders of the free world and purveyors of democracy were actually behind the entire affair is unknown.

What followed was a long and oppressive reign of forced modernization and censorship under Shah Reza Pahlavi. The U.S. was no longer hidden behind the cloak and dagger veil of the CIA. President after president hosted the shah in the U.S. and brokered oil deals and weapons sales that predominantly benefited the U.S. economy.¹⁸ All the while, the working class of Iran suffered in poverty.

The shah had extravagant taste and spent enormous amounts of money to fund his lavish lifestyle rather than bestowing wealth on Iran and its populace for their betterment. A principal example of this excessive lifestyle was in his celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Iranian monarchy. The event took place in a tent city spanning 160 acres near the ancient but now impoverished city of Persepolis. The event itself cost over \$200 million in 1971 dollars and featured breast of peacock, a hard to find delicacy that can cost upwards of \$75 per pound.¹⁹

Outside of irresponsible economic decisions, political tyranny ran rampant. The principal organization behind the oppression was the infamous Ministry of Security known as the SAVAK. The product of another joint effort with the CIA, the SAVAK strove to eliminate threats to the shah through questionable tactics and policy. During his reign, the SAVAK scoured Iran, imprisoning thousands of political dissenters, subjecting them to various torture techniques, and summarily executing those seen as major threats to the monarch.²⁰ Amnesty International reported that by 1978 as many as 2,500 people were being held by the SAVAK. The number did not include those who had been released or killed and would only grow exponentially as protests and dissent ran deeper. Eventually this

strife culminated in the overthrow of the shah for—ironically—an even more repressive regime in 1979.²¹

Sixty Years Later

Most U.S. citizens do not realize that both the core of Iranian distrust towards the U.S. and the 1979 revolution that deposed the shah have significant ties to Operation AJAX. To test this claim, one hundred deployed U.S. military members of various ages and ranks were asked on an informal basis for the purposes of this paper to name a major event contributing to the fragile relationship the U.S. shares with Iran. Only one person polled cited Operation AJAX as a factor.²² By far, more recent events, including the 1979 revolution, the failed Operation EAGLE CLAW, nuclear threat, hatred towards Israel and violations of human rights, were the most common replies. All of these events rest on the forefront of American minds while Operation AJAX still evokes anger from most Iranians.²³

Prime Minister Mossadeq's government was the closest the Iranian people have ever come to having a true democracy. Mossadeq was not only a symbol of Iranian pride; he was the first leader in decades, if not at least a century, to whom the majority of the country's populace freely gave their loyalty as a true leader of the people.²⁴ Sadly AJAX did not just kill Iran's fledgling democracy before it could truly rule; it silenced the pride of a people and a nation.

At the time America was seen as an ally by the Iranian people. Mossadeq visited the U.S. on numerous occasions and even visited the Tomb of the Unknown, laying a wreath in honor of fallen American soldiers.²⁵ Just a year later Iranian troops loyal to Mossadeq would die at the hands of an American-sponsored plot. It is no wonder that Mossadeq and the rest of Iran felt betrayed by the U.S.

Today Iran is comprised mostly of a population too young to

remember Operation AJAX, the rule of the shah, or even the revolution of 1979. Seventy-five percent of the country is under age 30.²⁶ The staggering percentage of youth in Iran is due to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) that claimed the previous generation's youth in a horrible slaughter of World War One style trench warfare, landmines and chemical weapons.

Iranians as a whole have a decidedly different view of the period of history leading to the 1979 revolution than their American counterparts. Iranians are taught about Operation AJAX in school. Amongst many Iranians the coup is still thought of as a feat of American might; both a blessing and a curse. A declassified CIA report notes that the average Iranian believes that Americans are omnipotent, given their ability to depose Mossadeq, and that the U.S. must have not only supported the 1979 revolution that brought the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power and later Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but have also helped the ayatollahs maintain an oppressive grip over Iran.²⁷ This view can be seen intensifying as the Ayatollah Khamenei has traveled throughout Iran giving speeches that call for an increasingly conservative government in order to deflect Western influence. The 2012 parliamentary elections and legislative actions have greatly favored Khamenei's political agenda.

Today many of the persons currently in power in Iran were alive to witness Operation AJAX, the rule of the shah, and the subsequent 1979 revolution. These were the planners and the participants that overtook the embassy and held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.²⁸ As the Ayatollah Khomeini gained power during the revolution, rumors and fears began to circulate throughout Iran that the shah and CIA were plotting to remove the Ayatollah and his supporters. It is believed in a few circles that the taking of the embassy was a preemptive plan by Khomeini to avoid the same fate Mossadeq had suffered in 1953 at the hands of the CIA.²⁹

Constant Reminders

The fear of continued American plotting can be seen at the heart of several recent high profile media stories breaking in Iran. These stories often showcase alleged U.S. spies and tell of foiled attempts to disparage the current Iranian national or political machine in light of its perceived divinely inspired Islamic course.

On July 13, 2010 Iranian nuclear scientist Shahram Amiri appeared in the Iranian interests section of the Pakistani embassy in the U.S. after disappearing during a religious pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia over a year earlier. The story he and the Iranian media put forth as the truth claims that the CIA kidnapped him at gunpoint on the way to a mosque in a plot to shake up Iran and its nuclear program. The CIA has had little to say on the matter and has maintained that Amiri came to the U.S. as a voluntary defector. For his defection and information on Iran's nuclear program he was to receive five million dollars and was never considered a prisoner in the U.S.³⁰ Before appearing at the embassy Amiri posted several videos online. One video claimed he was being tortured and held against his will under armed guard. Another alleges that he was in the U.S. under his own will, happily studying at a university. Amiri quickly returned to Iran, promising to make public the details of his entire ordeal and failed to do so. In an odd twist several news outlets reported that shortly after Amiri returned he was jailed on several counts of treason. Official Iranian news outlets maintain that he is still a hero of the Iranian people and has returned to work but have produced no verifiable evidence of his current whereabouts or condition.

A year earlier on July 31, 2009, three young UC Berkeley students hiking in Iraq were arrested and accused of spying in Iran. The Iranian judiciary claimed the trio was venturing into Iran with

“suspicious objectives” and would be tried appropriately.³¹ As the case was tried over two years, one student was returned on bail to the U.S. for humanitarian reasons due to her failing health. The verdict resulted in the two remaining backpackers’ conviction as spies “for the American intelligence agency” and illegal entry into Iran, with five and three year sentences, respectively, for a total of eight years in prison.³² The reference to “the American intelligence agency” is obviously a direct referral to the CIA. Despite Iran’s claims and the convictions, no evidence beyond the hikers’ nationality was ever publically offered.³³

A series of attacks inside Iran spanning from July 2010 to January 2012 have claimed the lives of four people and wounded one.³⁴ All the people targeted have been identified in the international media as scientists associated with Iran’s nuclear program in some way. Despite official condemnation for the killings, Iran continues to implicate the CIA as being, at least in part, behind the killings.³⁵ The sophisticated nature, surgical precision, and the fact that the killings directly benefit the U.S.’s policy of a non-nuclear Iran all give a strong backing to the argument that the U.S., or more specifically its clandestine specialists in the CIA, was somehow involved.

Today

Iran, once an ally of the U.S., was the victim of a covert CIA operation to overthrow its prime minister in favor of an oppressive shah. This single act became the catalyst of over a half-century of sour relations between America and Iran. Today little has changed; high tensions and fierce rhetoric are mostly still as prevalent as they were during the 1979 revolution.

The results of the 2009 Iranian presidential election were widely disputed amongst the Iranian people and the international community. Many of the citizens united in a very similar fashion as during

the 1979 revolution. Popularly dubbed the Green Revolution, this movement was short-lived as the government brutally suppressed it. In the 2012 legislative and 2013 presidential elections Ayatollah Khamenei toured the country, warning of Western plots brewing in order to influence the elections through Iranian solidarity. He told his countrymen to be wary of Western pressure, hinting at the possibility of a subversive plot against not just Iran but Islam itself.³⁶ His hopes were to unite the younger generation—not yet born to witness the 1979 revolution—with the ruling regime to try to prevent the West, specifically the U.S., from influencing Iranian citizens. Shortly after the elections the candidates supported by Ayatollah Khamenei claimed victory, including Hassan Rouhani as the new president. The Ayatollah later thanked the people for thwarting the enemies of Iran and those that conspire against it. This was pointedly directed at the U.S. and its allies.

This younger generation holds the only possible key to freeing Iran from its dictators and oppression. They blame Khamenei and his regime for creating a republic based on Islamic fascism with no opportunity for success in the emerging global economy.³⁷ These Iranians were just young children during the Iran-Iraq war and have little firsthand knowledge of the terror associated with chemical weapons and trench warfare. They do know, however, the pain that comes from being orphaned by warfare. Even before the most recent round of international bitterness aimed at Iran's nuclear program this large demographic struggled to earn a living. The susceptibility of this generation to external influence is extremely high. To them Western ideology presents an opportunity for prosperity and freedom to choose their path.³⁸ Much like Martin Luther's famous stance against the elitism of priests within the Catholic Church, Iranian youth are Islamic but want to be able to worship without fear of jail or torture for not conforming to the Ayatollahs' oppressive

brand of Islam.³⁹

Reza Kahlili's book *A Time to Betray* asserts that a number of younger Iranians are willing to work for the U.S. Kahlili claims that he was a CIA proxy who worked inside Iran under the codename Wally.⁴⁰ Even though credibility issues surround the author's story and claims, perhaps the ruling regime is right to worry about subversive covert action. Operation AJAX demonstrated the U.S.'s ability and willingness to take action to guarantee its interests are maintained. The successful use of covert operations lends credibility to the possibility of future operations. While the most critical was AJAX, another notable operation conducted within Iranian borders was Operation ARGO. ARGO was a successful bid to rescue a few U.S. embassy workers in 1979 with CIA operatives posing as a Canadian film crew.⁴¹

Conclusion

In 1947 the U.S. had proclaimed that one of its major international roles was to support nations struggling to maintain a democracy, demonstrated by Truman's plea to increase aid to Greece and Turkey to thwart the threat of communism. This policy was completely ignored when it came to approval of Operation AJAX in 1953, creating the ironic act of destroying a fledgling democracy. Twenty-six years after the U.S.-backed coup, the shah was deposed in a revolution headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini. From that time until very recently relations between Iran and the U.S. have been severely strained. Iranian leaders are fearful of another coup attempt or other event sponsored by the CIA to further undermine their power.⁴² Moreover, younger Iranians do not see the U.S. as their ally; they believe the U.S. placed the Ayatollahs in power and are keeping them there. Both beliefs are founded in the failure of Operation AJAX to legitimately support stated U.S. international doc-

trine. As this research shows, operation AJAX was a major factor causing almost a half-century of soured Iranian-U.S. relations. Most recently there have been signs of compromise between the two nations. Only continued time and diplomacy will show if operation AJAX is no longer relevant to these stated international relations.

Notes

¹ Speech by U.S. President Harry Truman to the U.S. Congress on March 12, 1947.

² Moyara Ruehsen, "Operation 'AJAX' Revisited: Iran, 1953," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (1993): 467-486.

³ Donald Wilbur, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran* (Washington, DC: Clandestine Service History, CIA, 1954), 20.

⁴ Irene Gendzier, *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945-1958* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 98.

⁵ Howard Lewis, "The Cuban Revolt Story," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 37 (1960): 19.

⁶ Ludwell Montague, *General Walter Bedell Smith as Director of Central Intelligence October 1950 - February 1953* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1992), 55-56.

⁷ Wilbur, *Overthrow*, 20.

⁸ Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 106.

⁹ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), 72.

¹⁰ Wilbur, *Overthrow*, 26.

¹¹ Mark Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah, Building a Client State in Iran* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 17.

¹² Milani, *The Shah*, 182.

¹³ Mark Gasiorowski and Malcom Byrne, *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 261.

¹⁴ Wilbur, *Overthrow*, 56.

¹⁵ Milani, *The Shah*, 189.

¹⁶ Howard Jones, *A New Kind of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 43.

¹⁷ Wilbur, *Overthrow*, 43.

¹⁸ Marvin Zonis, *Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1991), 240.

¹⁹ D. Streusand, "Contemporary Iran," *Marine Corps University Command and Staff College, Cultural and Interagency Operations* 2 (2011): 11.

²⁰ "Ministry of Security SAVAK," FAS Intelligence Resource Program, <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/iran/savak/index.html> (accessed February 20, 2012).

²¹ FAS Intelligence Resource Program.

²² An informal polling that occurred from February 2012 until March 2012. Participants were approached at random in an area of public commerce and verbally asked what they thought to be the major originating cause of tensions between the US and Iran.

²³ Gasiorowski and Byrne, *Mosaddeq*, 274.

²⁴ Gasiorowski and Byrne, *Mosaddeq* 262.

²⁵ Truman Library, "Prime Minister Mossadegh of Iran at Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of WWI," (Truman Library, 1951) Image #66-8010.

²⁶ *CLA World Fact Book* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2009).

²⁷ Scott Koch, *Zendeabad, Shah!: The CIA and the fall of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh* (Washington, DC: History Staff CIA, 1998), 46.

²⁸ David Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

²⁹ Chua Lu Fong, "Operation Eagle Claw, 1980: A Case Study in Crisis Management and Military Planning," *Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces* 28 (2002): 42.

³⁰ Richard Spencer, "Iranian nuclear scientist Shahram Amiri flies home from US," *The Telegraph*, July 14, 2010.

³¹ Jack Healy, "Iran says 3 hikers will be tried over crossing," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2009.

³² Aljazeera, "Iran convicts US 'hikers' as spies," *Aljazeera*, August 21, 2011.

³³ David Goodman and Alan Cowell. "American Hikers Leave Iran After Prison Release." *The New York Times*, September 21, 2011.

³⁴ Brian Murphy and Akbar Dareini, "Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, Iran Nuclear Expert, Dead In Car Bomb," *The Huffington Post*, January 11, 2012.

³⁵ Aljazeera, "US condemns Iranian nuclear scientist killing," *Aljazeera*, January 12, 2012.

³⁶ Robert Worth, "Iran invokes west to motivate voters," *The New York Times*, February 29, 2012.

³⁷ Elliot Hen-Tov. "Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism." *The Washington Quarterly* 30 (2007):163-179.

³⁸ William O. Beeman, *The Great Satan vs. the Mad Mullabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2005), 185.

³⁹ Beeman, *Great Satan*, 86.

⁴⁰ Reza Kahlili, *A Time to Betray* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 1.

⁴¹ Antonio Mendez and Matt Baglio, *Argo* (Penguin Group: 2012), 10.

⁴² Kahlili, *Betray*, 62.

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M. Carter Matherly earned an ABA 2004 followed by a BM in 2006. Carter then commissioned with the USAF in 2009 as an Air Battle Manager. He recently served at Robins AFB, GA, where he deployed in support of numerous conflicts aboard the E-8 Joint Stars C4ISR aircraft. Currently stationed at Ft Lewis, WA, Carter serves as an Air Liaison Officer to I Corps where he supports and advises the US Army and international partners on Air Power employment. He has also been designated the sitting Red Team expert for I Corps. Carter recently earned his MSI from AMU, authoring a thesis that shifted the foundation of Red Teaming. When he is not working Carter enjoys brewing beer and wine or spending time with his wife, Becca, camping in the Pacific North West.