

What New Declassifications Reveal about the 1953 Coup in Iran

Written by Rajeesh Kumar

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RAJEESH KUMAR, SEP 7 2017

The US State Department recently released a volume of declassified documents on 1953 Iranian coup. The documents shed lights on how the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had planned and implemented Operation TPAJAX, which brought down Muhammad Mosaddegh, the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, in 1953. The papers also chronicle the US fear of growing influence of communists and Islamists in post-War Iran, particularly the sway of Tudeh Party.

Mohammad Mossadegh became Prime Minister in 1951 after the assassination of his predecessor, General Razmara. Mosaddegh's nationalization policies, primarily policies against the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, a British-owned company, resulted in serious tensions. However, Mosaddegh declared the waning imperial power as an enemy of Iran and ended all diplomatic relations with the UK. In response, Britain formulated 'rule or ruin Iran' approach that drove them towards the US, the new superpower of the post-War world, and both began to weave their plot to depose Mosaddegh.

The first result of these covert operations came in mid-1952. The constant pressure from CIA and British Intelligence, compelled the monarch of Iran, Reza Shah to sack Premier Mosaddegh. However, massive public protests across the country against the action of Shah forced him to reinstate Mosaddegh within days. One of the prominent groups who supported Mosaddegh and led the street protests were Iranian Communist Party. Consequently, the CIA concluded that the Iranian premier had radical socialist leanings and would move into the Soviet bloc if allowed to stay in power. This fear of communism was evident in many documents. For instance, a memorandum from the Director of the CIA to President Eisenhower on 1 March 1953, remarks:

Ever since the assassination of General Razmara in March 1951, the situation has been slowly disintegrating. The result has been a steady decrease in the power and influence of the Western democracies and the building up of a situation where a communist takeover is becoming more and more of a possibility.[i]

The *Draft Statement of Policy Proposed by the National Security Council* plainly explains the American fear of communism. It observed: 'Communist domination of Iran would damage United States prestige and seriously weaken, if not destroy, the will to resist in nearby countries.'[ii] The document further says; 'Communist domination of Iran could only be viewed as one in a series of military, political and economic developments the consequences of which would threaten the security interests of the United States.'[iii] Therefore, 'the United States should now make plans and preparations in conjunction with the United Kingdom to counter possible communist subversion in Iran.'[iv] To manage such a crisis, the CIA proposed 'special political operations' and some unusual tactics including creating internal schisms in the communist movement in Iran by creating a new communist party. One of the declassified documents states:

We are even investigating the feasibility of establishing a local or "Titoist" Communist Party as a possible means of splitting and therefore weakening the Soviet Communist movement in Iran. This is obviously a dangerous undertaking which, if not very skilfully handled, could turn out to be a boomerang. Its potentialities as an anti-Soviet weapon, however, demand that we give it careful consideration.[v]

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Similarly, a *Joint Estimate of the Situation in Iran* in November 1951 called for an 'immediate, mutual, and overriding United States–United Kingdom objective in Iran is to prevent that country from falling into communist hands.'^[vi] The agency also emphasized the urgency of taking the survey of 'Western assets' in Iran, to plot and implement a coup. The accounts of CIA's close contact with the Qashqai tribal leaders in southern Iran against northern communists and the supply of arms and ammunition and cash to these groups are fascinating. After studying the feasibility of a coup, the CIA also took the stock of the capabilities of the agency's clandestine services in Iran, such as mass propaganda, poison pen, personal denunciations, rumour spreading, street riots, mob demonstrations and support for the members of the internal security system in Iran.

On 3rd March 1953, the CIA Directorate of Plans informed the White House that the agency 'has means of making fairly effective personal attacks against any political figure in Iran, including Mosaddegh'.^[vii] In the event of a Tudeh takeover, the CIA had canvassed support of most of the powerful tribes in the country to undertake in resistance activities on behalf of the agency. The CIA signed an agreement with Qashqai tribal leaders to establish a secret base for an estimated 20,000 men from which guerrilla and intelligence operations could be conducted. They also designed the tactics for effective moral sabotage and stimulating various types of small scale resistance throughout the country. Interestingly, the CIA is yet not ready to declassify the actual amount of money they spent for the entire operation. The letter of Kermit Roosevelt, CIA Chief of the Near East and Africa Division, to Director Dulles, on 4 April 1953, reveals that the expenditure of funds was exempted from usual accounting procedures and keeping receipts.^[viii]

Equipping friends of the US in the region with additional arms aid; deploying of US ground and Air Force units in southern Turkey with a mission of assisting the Middle Eastern governments in their fight against communist infiltration; economic support to non-communist groups in Iran and non-recognition of communist government and aiding the anti-communist elements in Iran were some of the CIA plans to overcome the 'unlikely' event of a communist takeover. The CIA calculated for a sympathetic backing of Turkey, Iraq, and Pakistan towards the anti-communist elements in Iran since a communist government would be a mutual threat. As the letters and memoranda between different officials show at the eve of the coup, the agency had stockpiled small arms, ammunitions, demolition materials and essential food stuffs and clothing, which designed to supply a 10,000-man guerrilla force for six months.^[ix]

A telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran containing a message from President Eisenhower to Mosaddegh on 30 June 1953, is one of the more treasured documents. The letter itself could be a part of diplomacy curriculum to understand how enemy nations behave like friends on the eve of friction. It painted the ongoing crisis and difficulties in Iran as a development due to the conflict between the United Kingdom and Iran on oil and stressed that the US has no interest in it. Whatever involvement the US had would respect their 'deep feelings of friendliness for Iran and the Iranian people.' However, in private the CIA with British Intelligence and anti-Mosaddegh elements in Iran were already baking the final ingredients of the coup.

In July, with the help of collaborator Fazlollah Zahedi, who succeeded Mosaddegh following the coup, CIA drafted the blueprint for the execution of the coup. Zahedi informed the CIA that he had the support of top Iranian military figures such as Col. Timur Bakhtiar (military governor of Isfahan and Khuzestan), Col. H. Akhavi (Chief of Army Transport), Gen. Derakshan (Assistant Chief of Police), Gen. Daftari (Commander Customs Guards) and Col. Nematollah Nassiri of the Imperial Guard. Based on this, the CIA outlined various plans of action which would trigger a cascading series of events and finally overthrow of Mosaddegh. These plans would result in four major developments:

- a) Shah to appoint Zahedi as the Prime Minister on grounds that Mossadeq forfeited office by "unconstitutional acts".
- b) Shah to dismiss Mossadeq without appointing successor.
- c) Shah appoints Zahedi as Chief Staff and immediate arrest the incumbent Chief Riahi by Zahedi.
- (d) Shah's appointment Zahedi Minister Court.

The agency believed that executing any of these programs would trigger a crisis in Tehran. To take advantage of it, two battalions of Imperial Guards prepared to move towards the Royal Court and the Prime Minister's home, and arrest Mosaddegh. As this occurred, Tehran's radio and streets were put under control and ten battalions of troops

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from provinces were drafted in to support the new government.

At the beginning of the month of August 1953, the CIA put forth some psychological, military and economic measures that must be taken in support of a successor government to Mosaddegh. It proposed the US government not to engage any comment in public upon the regime change in Iran to emphasize the traditional unwillingness of the US to interfere in the internal affairs of a free country. It then asked the government to avoid any statement that the oil question is involved in the transformation. However, the agency asked the US government to do as much as possible to support the new administration in private, including military aid, budgetary aid and subsidizing the pro-government newspapers for propaganda value.

However, when the collaborators were at the final stages of the coup, the CIA worried about the failure of the move and unpredictable aftermaths. On 18 August 1953, the agency asked its Iranian unit not to partake in any operation against Mosaddegh which could be traced back to the US. On the contrary, the Iranian unit of the agency was clear about the success of the coup and next day they sent the message back that “overthrow of Mossadeq appears on the verge of success” and they asked for 5 million US dollars to support the new government. Some of the documents confirm that CIA paid out US \$5.3 million (equivalent to approximately \$50 million today) for bribes. This suggests that most of the top officials in the Iranian security services were either paid agents of the CIA, or at least received bribes from the agency.

On 19 August 1953, the CIA personnel distributed photographs of the royal decrees dismissing Mossadeq and appointing Zahedi. The Shah also declared that he signed the orders to support the claim of Zahedi that a royal decree appointed him as the prime minister. On 20 August, the CIA sent congratulatory messages to the agents who planned and executed the coup successfully. The message stated:

CIA officials are joined by the appropriate divisional and branch officers in extending commendation and congratulations to all Tehran Station personnel. Kermit Roosevelt both in HQS and on the scene of action has distinguished himself and served US Govt and CIA well. We respect the Tehran group for their great staunchness in the face of difficulties and temporary discouragement. We are proud of the Tehran Station personnel who have all to varying degrees contributed greatly to the success of overthrow. Commendation is also extended to CIA official who has done an excellent job backstopping the operation and has handled with credit the sensitive task of conducting liaison. The DCI wished to extend his warmest personal congratulations to Kermit Roosevelt for a superbly and successfully executed mission.[x]

In sum, the newly released documents are a treasure featuring many things other than the CIA's expertise in toppling regimes. First, the American fear of communism and Islamism: hundreds of the 1007 pages released reveal that the US was more concerned about communists, especially Tudeh party, and their growing influence in Iran than the nationalist forces led by Mosaddegh. Secondly, the documents expose the British-US interest in Iranian oil. The British were making a huge profit by paying less than 16 percent commission to Iran. Following the coup, the US stepped in with an intention to increase the foothold of American oil firms. Third, the role of Middle Eastern elites as collaborators in Western plots against democracy, via bribes and enlistment. Finally, the papers expose the hypocrisy of the US, on the one hand, being the promoter of liberal democratic values and on the other, a nation engaging in ugly covert machinations against a democratically elected government.

Notes

[i] Memorandum from Director of Central Intelligence Dulles to President Eisenhower, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Iran 1951-54*, p.469.

[ii] Records of the National Security Council, Policy Papers, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Iran 1951-54* p.23

[iii] Ibid. p.24.

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[iv] Ibid.

[v] Memorandum From the Chief of the Political Operations Staff, Near East and Africa Division ([name not declassified]) to the Chief of the Near East and Africa Division, Directorate of Plans, Central Intelligence Agency (Roosevelt), note 1, p.65

[vi] Despatch From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, Tehran, November 23, 1951, note 5, p.154

[vii] Memorandum Prepared in the Directorate of Plans, Central Intelligence Agency, 'Capabilities of CIA Clandestine Services in Iran', note 1, p.473.

[viii] Memorandum From the Chief of the Near East and Africa Division, Directorate of Plans (Roosevelt) to the Director of Central Intelligence (Dulles), note 7, p. 514

[ix] Progress Report to the National Security Council, Washington, March 20, 1953, note 8, p. 503

[x] Telegram from the Central Intelligence Agency to the Station in Iran, Washington, August 20, 1953, note 9, p.703.

About the author:

Dr Rajeesh Kumar is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. He is the co-editor of two books *Eurozone Crisis and the Future of Europe: Political Economy of Further Integration and Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *Islam, Islamist Movements and Democracy in the Middle East: Challenges, Opportunities and Responses* (Delhi: Global Vision Publishing, 2013). His articles and reviews have appeared in *India Quarterly*, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *CEU Political Science journal*, and *Strategic Analysis*.