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Iranian Ulama & the CIA: The Key Alliance Behind the 1953 Iranian Coup D'état

By Anthony Lucey

Abstract: Much of the anger and hatred that is a part of US-Iranian relations, which has exploded onto the world stage since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, stems from the 1953 coup d'état which removed Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq¹ from power. A large field of scholarly work has been dedicated to the 1953 coup, specifically surrounding the participation of US and British intelligence. However, one interesting and surprising aspect of the 1953 coup which has not been sufficiently investigated is the role of Iranian religious clerics, known in Iran as the ulama, in assisting the CIA and their Iranian sub-agents in carrying out the overthrow of their own country's democratically elected prime minister. As new documents are released, we can refine our understanding of the complex dynamics and array of participants in this event. Further illuminating this history is particularly relevant because it is the ulama that leads the 1979 Revolution and establishes a new government.

It is August 19, 1953 in Iran's capital city of Tehran. Demonstrators are in the streets looting, rioting, chanting, and protesting. Beautiful mosques, main government and office

¹ Various spellings of the name Mohammad Mossadeq are used in this article. All references made by the author are spelled as above, but spellings used by other scholars (when quoted or in the titles of their work) may differ, most common being the spelling Mosaddeq.

buildings are being demolished and a local Tudeh (Iran's Communist Party) theater and office equipment are burned to the ground. The demonstrators continue their march and attack local newspaper offices, leaving them in ruins. Trucks and buses now arrive flooding the streets with local tribesmen from surrounding areas who join the madness. The will of the people becomes too much, and soon the occupying army units join the movement. Civilians and soldiers, side by side, proceed to take over the main squares of the city and ultimately seize the broadcasting facilities of Radio Tehran. This historic Persian city has officially erupted into total chaos. Tremendous fear from local families caught in the fray fills the air. The demonstrations seem to have taken on a life of their own as they continuously grow in size. The mob moves on to take over the telegraph office, the foreign ministry, press and propaganda bureau, the police and army headquarters. Finally, they come to the home of the man who is the ostensible cause for all of the mayhem, their Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq. A battle breaks out between Mossadeq's supporters and the anti-Mossadeq crowds, leaving hundreds of people dead on the streets. The overthrow is now complete, and later the same day Army General Fazlollah Zahedi announces that he is Iran's new Prime Minister and that his forces now control the city.² At the time, and for many years following the *coup d'état* which overthrew Prime Minister Mossadeq almost no one, outside of British and US intelligence and their Iranian operatives and collaborators, would have ever dreamed that this horrific scene was entirely fabricated, designed, and orchestrated by a new world power—the United States of America and their top intelligence agency, the CIA. Hard to believe as it might be, this is no movie scene, but a sad narrative that lies at the heart of modern US-Iranian relations.

This research seeks to shed light on the relationship between the CIA and prominent Islamic religious figures and their participation in the 1953 Iranian coup. This work will draw much

² Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The CIA's TPBEDAMN Operation and the 1953 Coup in Iran." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 4 (2013): 20.

of its information from declassified CIA documents like CIA Operative Dr. Donald Wilber's contemporary historical account titled "*Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952 – August 1953*," CIA Historian Claud Corrigan's "*The Battle for Iran*," CIA Staff Historian Steve Koch's more recent CIA history titled "*Zendeabad Shah!*," as well as the newly declassified British memorandums titled "*Persia: Political Review of the Recent Crisis*," which provides key information regarding the payoffs of Iranian clerics by the CIA as well the expectations the CIA held for those clerics in return for said payoffs, the actions taken by both the CIA and key members of the Ulama, and the roles played by prominent groups and individuals throughout the major sectors of Iranian society. This research aims to deepen and enhance our understanding of the inner workings of the CIA, their role within the unfortunate tale of the 1953 coup, the motivating factors behind the CIA involvement, as well as the contributions of Iran's own religious elites towards the toppling of Dr. Mossadeq.

The first portion of this research will provide a deep historical context of the events leading up to the ousting of Prime Minister Mossadeq from office with the aim of providing sufficient background to facilitate the understanding required to make sense of this complicated course of events. First, it is necessary to return to the beginning in 1901 with the notorious D'Arcy oil concession of Iranian oil rights to the British, continue into the early 1950s with the nationalization of Iranian oil, and conclude with the unfolding of the coup itself. The second portion of this study will focus on Mohammad Mossadeq himself, providing a background on the type of man he was and the positions he stood so strongly for. In this section we will also look into why the US and Britain both wanted to remove Mossadeq and their motivations for conducting the coup. This segment also aims to cover the regional and economic goals desired from the removal of Mossadeq and the consequences that followed. The third section of this paper will provide a background on the ulama, their role within Iranian society, and possible motivations for their participation in the coup. Section four will inquire into the relationship between the

CIA and members of the Ulama as well as their direct involvement through forming and implementing anti-Mossadeq street demonstrations, by using their influence in the political realm in Iran, in exchange for bribes in the form of cash as well as potential backing for power positions within the Iranian government, and by filtering “black” and “gray” propaganda through the mosques and their religious circles in hopes of toppling Mossadeq. This research will also help to show the inner workings of the CIA at this time and other activities they carried out in congruence with ulama networking and bribery that facilitated the coup. Lastly, I will introduce and analyze the primary source documents from the CIA and British Intelligence (MI6) that give context to the entire process of the coup as well as irrefutable, incriminating evidence of the CIA utilizing money to bribe influential Iranian clerics into participating in the 1953 Iranian coup.

This work could not come at a time of greater importance in regard to current US-Iranian relations and is necessary to highlight the gravity of the effects that the decisions of today’s American leaders might have on Iran’s people, just as the decisions made by those in power back in 1953 have continued to have unforeseen consequences over the last 66 years. Current US regime change efforts in Venezuela should be viewed in much the same way, with the understanding that such efforts will carry with them their own set of long-lasting undesirable results. According to United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo when discussing current US efforts in Iran, “It’s not about changing the regime, it’s about changing the behavior of the leadership in Iran to comport with what the Iranian people really want them to do.”³ While current US leadership under the Trump administration knows the history of the 1953 coup in Iran and the tremendous blowback it has caused well enough to know to change their verbiage when publicly discussing their current attempt at regime change in Iran,

³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Pompeo: U.S. Looks to Change Iranian Behavior, Not Regime” (May 25, 2018). <https://www.rferl.org/a/pompeo-u-s-looks-to-change-iranian-behavior-not-regime/29251208.html>

their actions and their intentions have changed very little. This is not surprising as the current leadership in Iran was born out of the 1979 Revolution which itself came out of the ashes of the CIA-led 1953 coup. This has further entrenched both sides against one another and has created an unending closed circuit of hatred and a distaste for coming to a mature, mutual understanding. The United States is continuing their aims to control Iranian Oil through the use of extremely harsh sanctions and by stopping the majority of Iran's oil clients from doing business with them. Through this kind of an economic chokehold the US hopes to make life so miserable and unbearable for the Iranian people by causing mass forced starvation and a total depletion of life's necessary resources that the Iranian citizens will rise up and overthrow their current government themselves. So, while the United States may not openly admit to attempting to force a regime change in Iran, this is without a doubt their one true goal.⁴ We may not know exactly how today's actions against Iran will play out over the coming years, but we do have the ability to use 1953 as a lesson which if understood correctly, could drastically and positively change and even save the lives of the Iranian people today and could shape future US-Iranian relations for many generations to come.

While the 1953 coup was born out of the Anglo-Iranian Oil crisis, it is necessary to go back a further 50 years and examine British-Iranian history to find its roots. Coming second in size and breadth only to the Reuter concession of 1872, a British oil prospector named William Knox D'Arcy was responsible for one of the largest and internationally most significant purchases of natural resources in world history, known as the infamous D'Arcy Concession of 1901. D'Arcy made an agreement with the Iranian monarch, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, for the exclusive rights to explore, extract, refine, and export all oil products that spanned the entire nation of Iran for the next 60 years, with the exception of a few

⁴ If this route were to be successful, the United States would be able to push the blame onto the actions or inactions of the regime leadership, rather than where it should be; on the United States government.

small regions bordering Russia.⁵ The shah handed over all of his country's rights to what would become their largest and most valuable resource for only £50,000 directly into the shah's pocket, another £20,000 in shares to be spread amongst other key Iranian political elites, and an agreement to pay the Iranian government a total of 16 percent of net annual profits. It wasn't until 1908 that oil was first discovered in Masjed-e Suleiman in the province now known as Khuzestan. Not long after oil was struck, D'Arcy decided to sell his rights to the Burmah Oil Company, controlled by representatives of the British government, which later took on the name of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC).⁶

At this time in history, as it still is today, oil became of the utmost importance to the British. Unable to produce oil of their own, the British, led by the "oil maniac" Lord Admiral John Fisher, were set on converting the British Navy away from coal power to petroleum power.⁷ With these changes in mind, the British were able to secure 52.5 percent of the voting rights within the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Along with majority voting rights, the British government held two director positions within the company, giving them the right to veto any decisions made by the Board of Directors.⁸ With what amounted to basically full control over the APOC, the British were set to reap tremendous profits from Iran's oil since they could control the price and output.⁹ In 1912 the British entrenched themselves even further into the region by linking their major oil well in Masjed-e Suleiman with a pipeline to an island in the Persian Gulf known as Abadan.¹⁰ The British were able to convince the chief of the largest Arab-

⁵ Amin Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: New Press, 2013), 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹ The higher the output of oil by the British government means the lower the price, therefore even though they are still profiting, Iran is getting fewer royalties and more resource exploitation.

¹⁰ Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, 13.

speaking tribe in all of the southwest region, Sheikh Kha'zal, the leader of Abadan, to allow them to build the largest oil refinery in the world, allowing Britain to turn Iranian oil into a major export sector. The APOC quickly began producing more than 357,000 barrels of oil per day, cementing themselves within the rankings of the Seven Sisters of oil who held a virtual monopoly over the worldwide oil industry.¹¹ This resulted in more than £24 million a year in taxes and £92 million in foreign exchange for the British and as figured by the Ministry of Fuel and Power, the Abadan refinery alone was bringing in more than \$347 million per year.¹² These numbers greatly eclipsed what the Iranian government was receiving in the form of taxes, royalties and profit sharing.¹³

Not surprisingly, the success of the APOC and the British in the mass production of oil within Iran began to cause some serious public discontent, but with the Abadan oil refinery producing enough fuel to cover 85 percent of Britain's Royal Navy and Royal Air Force's needs in Asia, public discontent would hardly be enough to stop the British imperial enterprise.¹⁴ Not only were the Iranian people angered by the negligible profits they were being given by the British from the production of Iranian oil, while the British government and the APOC's investors were raking in tens of millions of pounds per year, they were also tired of the racism and exploitation of Iranian locals working for the APOC by the British management and leading officials. They were refused full-time positions and instead were hired as temporary contract laborers to limit job security. Iranian workers were forced to live in Shantytowns, while the European employees enjoyed superior housing. The Iranians were looked down upon and referred to as "wogs," a derogatory and racist British term and were also kept out of management positions. Iranian anger and frustration continued

¹¹ The Seven Sisters of the oil industry consisted of: Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, Gulf Oil, Texaco, British Petroleum, and Shell.

¹² Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 18.

¹³ Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, 14.

¹⁴ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 19.

to build as they realized they had no real control or say over their country's most valuable resource.¹⁵ Iran was going through an immense economic collapse and the Iranian people were greatly impoverished, as the British continued to collect most of Iran's oil profits. ARAMCO reaching a 50/50 deal with Saudi Arabia in December 1950 would be the last straw for Iran.¹⁶ In 1951, with their unrest boiling over, the Iranians turned to their members of Parliament, who in turn looked to Mohammad Mossadeq to do something about their predicament.¹⁷

By the time he had taken power as Prime Minister in 1951, he was already an elderly man at seventy years of age and had been a member of the Iranian Parliament, known as the Majlis, for many years. Mossadeq was a strong believer in the power of parliament and the checks and balances this placed over the Shah's control. In his eyes, the Shah was meant to reign over Iran, but not to have unlimited power and control. He also believed that the police and military were meant to serve the people, not the Shah. In fact, his goal was to limit the authority of the Shah, and to move the majority of power to the Majlis. He fought for constitutional democracy and stood for freedom of the press, something he knew would never be possible under the total control of the Shah.¹⁸ Mossadeq was intensely opposed to British Imperialism and was a prominent Iranian Nationalist with a proven track record. He was considered an incorruptible man by his contemporaries, known for being relentless in his aspirations, maintaining unwavering positions regardless of risk, for being truly stubborn in his efforts to improve his country, and for working towards Iranian prosperity and independence with a vision based on Iran first, all else second.

¹⁵ Stephen Kinzer, *All The Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle Eastern Terror* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003), 2.

¹⁶ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power: with a New Epilogue* (Free Press, 2009), 432-437.

¹⁷ Kinzer, *All The Shah's Men*, 2.

¹⁸ Wm. Roger Louis, "Britain and the Overthrow of the Mosaddeq Government," in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, eds. Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, 126-177 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 127.

Western-educated and with a deep understanding of Western politics, Mossadeq was a very Westernized individual, but strongly rejected the Western policies of imperialism and foreign intervention, especially in his beloved homeland.¹⁹ Much of Mossadeq's policy and the motivation behind his actions stemmed from the British and Russian occupation of Iran over Iranian Oil, not once but twice, in less than a fifty-year period. Sharing in the feelings of his fellow countrymen, Mossadeq was ready to end this pattern. In 1949 he began constructing a plan to nationalize Iran's oil industry and headed an alliance known as the National Front, which consisted of Majlis from most of the political parties within Iran, including a prominent member of the Ulama, known as Ayatollah Sayyed Abol Qasem Kashani. While constructing his plan for the nationalization of oil, Iranian anger toward the APOC gained strength and momentum. The British finally agreed to renegotiate the terms of their concession agreement to increase Iran's portion of the APOC profits from the 16 percent they were getting to about double that, but these actions proved to be too little and much too late.²⁰ ARAMCO, the American owned oil company working in the Persian Gulf, negotiated 50/50 concession deals with both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for their oil rights. This meant that ARAMCO would keep 50 percent of their profits and give 50 percent to each accordingly.²¹²² Mossadeq and the Majlis

¹⁹ Ali Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.

²⁰ Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, 38.

²¹ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 20.

²² Venezuela had also reached a 50/50 split deal with the United States in 1943 on the production of their oil. Much like Iran today, Venezuela is also suffering the effects of harsh US sanctions affecting their ability to export oil in an effort to remove President Nicolas Maduro and change the regime, just as they did with the 1953 Iranian coup. In an interview with Fox Business, US National Security Advisor John Bolton made the intentions of the US clear when he stated: "We're in conversation with major American companies now. I think we're trying to get to the same end result here. ... It will make a big difference to the United States economically if we could have American oil companies really invest in and produce the oil capabilities in Venezuela."

fought for a 50/50 agreement in Iran, but the British thought this to be ridiculous and much more than they were willing to offer. Mossadeq and the National Front would not sit by and allow this to go on. On April 30, 1951, the Majlis voted Mossadeq in as the new Prime Minister of Iran. It was only one day later, on May 1, 1951, that Prime Minister Mossadeq officially nationalized Iranian oil, seizing Britain's most profitable business in the world.²³

As expected, the British were outraged with this course of events and were determined to return to the way they were pre-Mossadeq. Britain openly and publicly rejected Iran's oil nationalization as completely illegal, as they believed that they had a valid contract with Iran for their oil, and had built, invested in and ran the oil field operations. The British first tried to fight Mossadeq at the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, but both attempts were unsuccessful. Britain proceeded to withdraw their advisors from Iran, froze Iranian funds from being converted in English banks, and issued harsh sanctions against the country.²⁴ The British then took things much further, and introduced gunboat diplomacy by sending warships into the Persian Gulf. They set up a blockade so that any Iranian oil that was shipped out would be stopped and confiscated as the possession of APOC and Britain. They also made an agreement with the other major powers of the oil world, stating that none of them would step in and enter an agreement with Iran to purchase, process, or ship their oil. Both APOC and ARAMCO agreed to increase their oil production two-fold in Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia in order to offset the missing oil from Iran. This had severe negative effects on Iran's economy by reducing their oil production from 241.4 million barrels in 1950 to 10.6 million barrels in 1952, and their oil income to almost nothing. The Soviet Union saw this as a possible opportunity to form an alliance with Mossadeq and the nation of Iran and offered their support for his

²³ Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, 39.

²⁴ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 47.

nationalist views.²⁵ Soviet support would prove a crucial component in the way the remainder of this story unfolds.

While both the United States and Britain were worried that the Iranian nationalization of oil could result in a weakened ability to control worldwide oil prices and would give Iran the power to hold onto its oil and control worldwide prices it was Britain who was far more concerned with turning back the hands of time than the United States.²⁶ The British knew that they would need US cooperation and backing against Iran to regain control over their oil. Unfortunately for the British, US President Harry Truman was more or less opposed to imperialism and the old way of doing things. Truman urged the British earlier on to come to a 50/50 deal with Iran, which was now too little, too late, but he himself did not like the idea of full nationalization of Iran's oil industry as he believed this would have disastrous effects for the US and Britain around the world concerning other peripheralized oil-producing nations. Though keen on having the British come to an agreement with Iran, Truman remained opposed to the use direct military force and the use of covert operations to bring down Premier Mossadeq.

Nevertheless, at this time the US government was focused on the Cold War and American society was experiencing the height of the Red Scare and McCarthyism. The main concern for the US was not so much Britain's plight over oil but was focused on Soviet influence in Iran and their potential for becoming a Communist country. Luckily for the British, Truman was coming to the end of his final term in office, and would soon be replaced by President Eisenhower. Britain rather brilliantly decided to play upon the fears of the United States and especially President Eisenhower, who was at the same time being influenced by the new Secretary of State, and anti-communist hardliner, John Foster Dulles. With the economic situation in Iran deteriorating, the US believed that Mossadeq could inadvertently allow Iran to slide into

²⁵ Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, 40-41.

²⁶ It is important to remember that the US has indigenous sources of oil but Great Britain has none.

the Communist camp and could be replaced by a leader of Iran's Communist Tudeh Party. Unlike the Americans, the British believed that if Mossadeq was removed there was a good chance that they could implement a pro-Western conservative government led by an Iranian monarch, but they would need the Americans help to accomplish this.²⁷ Britain then began implementing their scheme of using American panic and frenzy revolving around Communism against them. According to British Intelligence Agent C.M. Woodhouse:

I went to Washington with the permission of Anthony Eden, and I put it to the Americans that there was a very serious Communist threat against Iran. The Americans were not hard to convince. There was a general fear of Communism in the early 1950s which it was not hard to play on.²⁸

This approach was incredibly effective and helped move Eisenhower into an anti-Mossadeq position. Eisenhower then agreed to enter into a joint CIA-SIS operation under the codename TPAJAX to support the opposition movement in Iran and take out Mossadeq. The American and British led 1953 coup of the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran had officially begun on July 11, 1953.²⁹

The Role of the Ulama in Iranian Society and their Motivation for Participation in the Coup

Iran offers a long, rich, and complex history of religious development and spiritual teachings dating back to pre-Islamic

²⁷ Wm. Roger Louis, "Britain and the Overthrow," 154.

²⁸ William Cran and Daniel Yergin. "The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, & Power." YouTube Video, 44:06, July 8, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mM7O3rbgqxc&t=2761s.

²⁹ CIA Clandestine Service History, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952-August 1953," by Donald Wilber (March 1954): 18.

times, some of whose ideas have continued into and influenced Islam today. From Zoroastrianism to Manichaeism, much of Iran's religious background and conditioning is based upon a dualistic struggle between the forces of good and evil, represented by a good deity and an evil power, where good is meant to be victorious. This theme of righteous warfare between good and evil, or justice and oppression, along with the exaltation of martyr figures, are found in pre-Islamic religions and have held their place in society well into the modern Islamic period. It took a number of social revolts at the beginning of the Islamic period in the seventh century to combine these pre-Islamic ideas with Islamic beliefs.³⁰ These fundamental beliefs are so infused within Iranian society because they mirror the daily struggle of injustice and inequality faced by the middle and lower classes of Iran throughout much of their history and provide much of the motivation necessary to give one's life for a cause.

However, it was not until the arrival of the Prophet Mohammad in early seventh century Arabia that politics and religion became intertwined, with a number of his revelations being political or legal in form. It was around this time, during the second half of the seventh century that Islam spread to Persia, but it would not be until the sixteenth century that Shia Islam would become the official state religion.³¹ Within Iranian society Ulama members have the responsibility to handle matters concerning Islamic law and education, providing them with further social control, but more importantly greater reliance on them by Iran's citizens. This reliance on religion and the Ulama by the Iranian population for spiritual, economic, and social guidance and prosperity has placed enormous power into the hands of Iran's elite religious clerics. They are looked to as force of good against the evil oppressors, whomever they may be at the time. This,

³⁰ Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 2-7.

The revolts were often carried out by the descendants of Ali or by men who lead revolts in his name, against the Umayyad caliphs.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5-9.

especially because they are Shiites, is why it is so shocking to find out that a number of these religious elites, who their people trusted and relied on so heavily to act in their best interests, worked hand in hand with the CIA, in exchange for bribes of money and political positions of power, to overthrow Iran's Prime Minister who was dedicated to bettering the lives of his people.

Shia Islam

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D., the Islamic community split into two groups based on who they believed to be the next valid leader. One group chose Muhammad's close friend Abu Bakr and the line of Caliphs that followed. This community became known as Sunni Muslims. The other group believed that the line of succession should have passed to Muhammad's descendant, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, this group became known as the Shi'ite Ali (partisans of Ali) later shortened to Shia Muslims. After Ali's death his firstborn son Hasan resigned from his position of authority, and Ali's second son Hosain claimed this leadership role, but was soon thereafter massacred by armed forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid in 680 A.D at Karbala, Iraq. One of Hosain's sons survived the massacre and was able to continue on the line of Imams, which is the honorific title given to this line of descendants of Mohammad.³² The son of the eleventh Imam following this line of descendants one day suddenly disappeared and went into occultation. The followers of this line are known as "Twelvers" and believe that the twelfth Imam will one day reappear similar to the Judeo-Christian messiah.³³ Following the occultation of the twelfth Imam, it is

³² Ibid., 6-7.

³³ Ibid., 7-8. A split occurred with the sons of the Sixth Imam, Ja'far as-Sadeq, where one group of Shi'is followed one of his son's name Isma'il, and this group became known as the "Seveners." The other group decided to follow another of Ja'far's sons and believed that the infant son of the Eleventh Imam on this line of succession, who had disappeared, went into was is called

believed that there is no infallible interpreter or leader until his return when he is to come back and bring with him perfection and perfect justice.³⁴ There was a strong belief within the Islamic community of Iran that the Imams held far greater knowledge and power than did any government or political ruler, leading to the belief that members of the Ulama, in the absence of the twelfth Imam, are far more qualified to interpret the will of the Imam than any political ruler can ever be, giving religious rulers great political influence and control.³⁵ The disappearance of the twelfth Imam allowed the community to be quiescent generally as they would accept and support royal, local, political, and military rule until his coveted return.

From the time of Mohammad there were three primary sources where Muslims could find answers to the everyday problems pertaining to social, political, and legal life. The first and most authoritative option was the Quran itself, which is understood as the word of God, which came down through the Prophet Mohammad himself. The second source is known as the *hadith*, which are the recorded words and practices of Mohammad throughout his life. The third option was to listen to the consensus of the leading Islamic scholars and jurists. These three sources covered many of life's issues, but there were many parts of modern life that were not necessarily covered in the Quran or the *hadith*. Without a living Imam to provide infallible instruction to the people, how were they meant to handle many of life's most important issues while staying true to their faith? How were they to interpret these divinely inspired sources, the Quran and *hadith*? This problem led to the creation of a specialty within Islamic scholarship, *mujtahids* (members of the Ulama trained to interpret the Quran and *hadith*), who are scholars and theologians who possess high levels of intelligence and have dedicated their lives to religious training and study, making them the most qualified to

“occultation” in the ninth century, leaving not another Imam, but rather four interpreters of his will.

³⁴ Ibid., 8.

³⁵ Ibid., 9.

provide judgments on a wide range of topics.³⁶ Originally there was quite a strong alliance between the *mujtahids* and the political leaders, but this would not last due to the increasing wealth and power of the Ulama.

Within the Muslim world there is a process where a person, upon death, can leave their property or can offer it as a charitable donation to the “church”, in what is known as a *vaqf*, or an inalienable endowment that cannot be taken or taxed by the government. Charitable *vaqfs*, usually in the form of land, are given to help fund and run schools, hospitals, mosques, and any other institution, which are run by the Ulama.³⁷ Even the private *vaqfs* that are given must go through the Ulama, who are paid through the *vaqf* revenues. As the government cannot ever seize these contributions, the wealth and power in the hands of the ulama grew greater along with their spiritual and legal duties and responsibilities. This placed the Ulama in a position where they could potentially challenge the authority of the government and had the backing to do so.³⁸ On top of the *vaqfs* the Ulama also controlled religious taxes and performed community services for a fee like weddings, that did not have to go through the government. These funds were meant to go strictly to helping the poor and running the welfare institutions but in reality increased the wealth of the religious classes dramatically.³⁹ With this wealth and new independence from the Iranian government, the power of the *mujtahids* grew even further as they gave the people interpretations of religious law in response to the problems of modern life that were so desperately needed.⁴⁰ The Ulama almost effectively made the Shahs and Iranian leadership unnecessary in the lives of the regular everyday people in Iran, as they received most of what they needed both physically and spiritually from their religious leaders.

³⁶ Ibid., 10.

³⁷ Ibid., 16.

³⁸ It is important to note that the traditional Twelver Shiite tradition historically valued supporting the monarchy as opposed to anarchy.

³⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

The power and influence held by the Ulama within Iranian society had been set in stone from this point on.

Development of the Coup

Arguably the most important religious figure, who was very politically involved during the 1940s-50s, and a part of Mossadeq's National Front, was the fervently anti-British Ayatollah Sayyed Abol Qasem Kashani. Kashani was the speaker of the Majlis and at first a close colleague of Mossadeq's.⁴¹ He maintained a growing influence with the Iranian people, especially after the oil crisis, and was known to have ties to a terrorist fundamentalist group by the name of the Feda'iyan-e Islam.⁴² Kashani had a long history of what was considered subversive behavior by the British and well as the Pahlavi regime. He took part in the 1920 Shi'a Revolt against the British as a young man, was arrested by the British for having links to the Germans in 1944-45 and was arrested once again in 1946 for organizing protests in opposition to the rigging of the fifteenth Majlis elections. In 1949, Kashani was arrested after his photographer shot Mohammad Reza Shah, injuring but not killing him, and was later exiled to Beirut. Kashani was not allowed back into Iran until June of 1950 after he won a seat in the sixteenth Majlis. Even though he was in exile for some time, Kashani still maintained his connections and influence over the Tehran bazaar.⁴³⁴⁴

⁴¹ Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, 43-44.

⁴² Keddie and Richard, *Roots of Revolution*, 129. Founded in 1945, the Feda'iyan-e Islam were a small group of young, extremist, fundamentalist terrorists who assassinated those they believed to be enemies of Islam.

⁴³ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 30.

⁴⁴ Keddie and Richard, *Roots of Revolution*, 30. The bazaaris, who are the merchant class, are a very prominent and influential group within Iran. The wealth and international ties of the elite bazaaris, who conducted cross-border trading, and the power of the guilds representing the local artisan shopkeepers gave the bazaaris a great deal of weight in Iranian society. Many of the bazaaris and members of the Ulama even came from the same families. With religious observance being extremely important within the bazaar class much of the

While playing the role of religious leader on the outside, the controversial cleric was not opposed to breaking his assumed moral code when it came to maintaining his power or increasing his bank account. After Ahmad Qavam failed to take control of the Majlis, Mossadeq's political influence was stronger than ever. Using this power and popularity, Mossadeq moved to limit his former supporter, Kashani, and his ability to intervene in his plans. Kashani, as well as his close allies and influential members of the National Front, Baqa'I and Makki, began to see their political influence slip away.⁴⁵ These three men, along with a few of their allies came together and created a parliamentary group whose aim was to limit Mossadeq's authority. In January of 1953, Mossadeq asked parliament to increase his legislative powers for another year, which would allow him to issue reforms immediately without going through parliament. Kashani took this opportunity to fight Mossadeq within parliament, stating that this was opposed by Iran's Constitution. This did not work out the way Kashani had planned as the people of Iran went on strike in support of Mossadeq, chanting "Mossadeq or death" bringing business to a standstill. The Majlis listened to their constituents and voted in favor of Mossadeq almost unanimously. This was an embarrassing defeat for Kashani and his allies. Additionally, the very next day Mossadeq replaced one of Kashani's closest allies, Chief of Police Colonel Kamal, which was another major blow to Kashani's political stature.⁴⁶ Kashani began to realize that fighting Mossadeq politically or legally was almost impossible, but this did not deter him. Ayatollah Kashani had been embarrassed and could feel his power slipping through his grasp. This was enough to motivate

Ulama's income was paid by the guilds in exchange for religious services and duties.

⁴⁵ Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup D'Etat Against Mosaddeq," in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, eds. Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, 227-260 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 243. Mozzafar Baqa'I was a member of the National Front and Hossein Makki was the National Front leader and a close ally of Kashani.

⁴⁶ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 30.

Kashani and his men to partake in subversive and covert operations aimed at the removal of Mohammad Mossadeq, in order to reinstate the level of power he so desperately yearned for. It was at this point that Kashani and his followers allied with General Zahedi, the Shah, and the US/British alliance.⁴⁷

Traditionally in Iran the Ulama were supporters of the monarchy, so while Kashani may have been the most prominent and aggressive cleric involved in Mossadeq's ousting, he was not the only one. Another major player in Iran's religious circle who took part in overthrowing Iran's Prime Minister was Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Behbahani. A son of one of the two leading religious figures in Iran's constitutional movement, the pro-British Behbahani became personally close to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi during the Shah's rise to power. In fact, the two became so close that Behbahani came to be the Shah's religious protector and a very close ally early on. Even though Behbahani's position as Ayatollah ostensibly meant he stood for religious piety and incorruptibility, he seemingly had no issue accepting funds directly from the Shah to continue promoting his authority. The Ayatollah was known to have "the reputation of being quite unscrupulous and corrupt, ready to sell his influence on the bazaars to the highest bidder."⁴⁸ As the situation between the Shah and Prime Minister Mossadeq began to erode, Behbahani took an active role in rallying support for the Shah and promoting opposition to Mossadeq through the creation and utilization of powerful street demonstrations.⁴⁹ While Behbahani's close relationship with the Shah and the power he could offer may have been enough to impel him to rally Southern Tehran into action, the payments he received from the CIA assured it. Behbahani also had the support of fellow clerics such as his son-in-law Ayatollah Bahaeddin Nouri and Seyyed Jalaeddin Firouzabadi.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran*, 30-32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

The final critical member of the Ulama with CIA ties was also a close friend and ally of Ayatollah Behbahani, the powerful preacher by the name of Sheikh Mohammad Taqi Falsafi. Falsafi held strong influence with the traditional classes within Iran. A longstanding opponent of both Mossadeq and Kashani, Falsafi would eventually ally himself with Kashani based on their shared anti-Mossadeq views. He was staunchly anti-Communist and used the pulpit to spread anti-Mossadeq propaganda, which suggested that Mossadeq was paving the way for the Tudeh Party to take power and implement Communism in Iran. Why was it though that Falsafi was so adamantly anti-Mossadeq and what motivated him to sway the masses towards the Prime Minister's overthrow? This was largely due to Mossadeq's strong stance in favor of nationalism, and in Falsafi's eyes this diminished the religiosity of the Iranian population. Falsafi was also angered by Mossadeq's beliefs regarding free press, since this allowed for the Communist Tudeh Party to publish openly.⁵¹ Finally, much like his friend Ayatollah Behbahani, Falsafi's moral obligation as a member of the Ulama did not carry enough weight to deter him from accepting bribes and corruption. In his book *Unseating Mossadeq: The Configuration and Role of Domestic Forces*, Fakhreddin Azimi describes how, "Falsafi generally had a reputation for willingness to adjust his fluctuating political allegiances for tangible gains."⁵² This became clear when Falsafi began accepting CIA money in return for using his political and religious influence to mobilize the masses against Mohammad Mossadeq and to destabilize the National Front.⁵³

⁵¹ Publication by the Communist Party were particularly alarming to members of the ulama due to the party's emphasis on a secular society.

⁵² Fakhreddin Azimi, "Unseating Mosaddeq: The Configuration and Role of Domestic Forces," in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, eds. Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, 27-101 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 68.

⁵³ Gasiorowski, "The CIA's TPBEDAMN Operation," 14.

US Government and CIA Activities within Iran

Claud H. Corrigan, member of the CIA's History Staff provides the CIA's most blatant admission of guilt to date in his detailed history of the 1953 coup in Iran titled *The Battle for Iran* where he states:

“The point that the majority of these accounts miss is a key one: the military coup that overthrew Mosadeq and his National Front cabinet was carried out under CIA direction as an act of U.S. foreign policy, conceived and approved at the highest levels of government. It was not an aggressively simplistic solution, clandestinely arrived at but was instead an official admission by both the United States and United Kingdom that normal, rational methods of international communication and commerce had failed. TPAJAX was entered into as a last resort.”⁵⁴

Kermit Roosevelt, head of the CIA's Near East and Africa Division and grandson of US President Theodore Roosevelt, was selected by President Eisenhower, CIA Director Dulles, as well as the British MI6 and given complete authority to command and carry out the overthrow and removal of Mossadeq in Tehran by any means necessary. Along with the British, and other US operatives, Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA used a plethora of techniques to influence Iran's bureaucrats, clerics, merchants, workers, criminals, religious community, and the remainder of the masses, in an effort to shift their views regarding Mossadeq, in as negative a way as possible, in order to undermine the massive amount of power he held in Iran at the time. Long before Roosevelt and the CIA had arrived in Iran, the British had been building a large network of inside agents, including key figures

⁵⁴ CIA Clandestine Service History, “The Battle for Iran,” by Claud H. Corrigan, undated (c. mid-1970s): 26.

such as the powerful Rashidian Brothers, prominent businessmen and pro-British loyalists, who they could rely on for key intelligence information, to disseminate propaganda, and to help influence and mobilize the masses when needed.⁵⁵ However, once the British had been ousted by Mossadeq in October 1952, they were forced to share the identities of their inside agents with the US and had to rely on the Americans to carry out the groundwork while Britain assisted behind the scenes. The CIA built some of their own relationships once in Iran but most of the key players that the CIA would utilize in the removal of Mossadeq were apart of Britain's vast network of insiders. Many of the covert techniques and dealings that were used by the CIA can be found throughout Claud Corrigan's *Battle for Iran*, CIA Historian and head coup propagandist Dr. Donald Wilber's *Clandestine Service History: Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran – November 1952-August 1953*, CIA History Staff member Scott A Koch's "Zendeabad, Shah!": *The Central Intelligence Agency and the Fall of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, August 1953*, along with the newly declassified top-secret CIA documents and British Memorandums from the *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, Volume X*, titled *Persia: Political Review of the Recent Crisis*, "September 2, 1953" which lie at the heart of this core analysis.

The main focus and foundation of my analysis will rely on Dr. Donald Wilber's *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran* which provides a contemporary first-hand account of the actions that were taken by the CIA, including its alliance with the ulama, the details regarding how many of those actions were carried out, as well as context for the thinking that motivated them. While Wilber's work provides an abundance of important information regarding the 1953 coup in Iran, it must be understood that a good portion of the original text is still redacted, therefore we do not

⁵⁵Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran*, 64-78. The Rashidian Brothers consisted of Saifollah, Qodratollah, and Asadollah Rashidian. These three powerful and wealthy Iranian businessmen had a long history of being Pro-British loyalists and would prove to be a key part in the carrying out of the coup.

have all the details and certain aspects must be logically pieced together from information gathered from other primary documents and the many works of past scholars specializing in this field. Corrigan's *Battle for Iran* and Koch's *Zenbedad Shah!* will share the important role of helping to fill in any gaps found within Wilber's work, as well as to help confirm or deny the details Wilber offers.

Once the US government and the CIA had come to the conclusion that they would commit completely to Mossadeq's removal by any means necessary, CIA Director Allen Dulles approved a \$1,000,000 budget on April 4, 1953 "which could be used by the Tehran Station in any way that would bring about the fall of Mossadeq."⁵⁶ According to Wilber, one of the very first aims of the CIA and ways in which they chose to allocate this money was to steadily intensify their anti-Mossadeq and pro-Shah propaganda.⁵⁷ They wanted to saturate the country as quickly and effectively as possible through a multi-layered approach by targeting the population religiously, politically, economically and socially. "In Iran, CIA and SIS propaganda assets were to conduct an increasingly intensified propaganda effort through press, handbills, and the Tehran clergy in a campaign designed to weaken the Mossadeq government in any way possible."⁵⁸ The United States government then went on to have some of their high-ranking officials make public statements that made clear that American economic aid would not be given to Iran as long as Mossadeq was in power. This was done with the goal to diminish any confidence the people of Iran had in Mossadeq and to eliminate the idea that he was on good terms with the US and had the country's support.⁵⁹⁶⁰

⁵⁶ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., vi-vii.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., vii.

⁶⁰ PressTV, "Trump tells Venezuela military to back Guaido or 'lose everything," YouTube Video, 12:21, February 19, 2019. Accessed April 04, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARTn0F8zzOs&feature=youtu.be>.

Wilber's report continues on to explain how the CIA played a crucial role in choosing who was to replace Mossadeq once he was out of the way. General Fazlollah Zahedi, who had previously been a member of Mossadeq's cabinet, was seen as the best choice to step in as Iran's new Prime Minister. This was due to Zahedi being the only reputable figure in Iran who had consistently spoken out in opposition to Mossadeq and at the same time had a large enough following to permit his new upcoming position as prime minister.⁶¹ While supporting Zahedi had its faults, such as his a pro-German stance during WWII, he had a solid record as a leader and combat officer, was staunchly devoted to the Shah, and he had an "aggressive desire to change the course of his country's destiny."⁶² The CIA went on to approach Zahedi personally and explain their goal of implementing him as the new prime minister along with orders that he was to name a new military secretariat, at which point the CIA would provide a "detailed staff plan of action."⁶³ While the CIA had chosen the man they wished to place as Iran's new Prime Minister, they also knew that this would not be possible without the cooperation of the Shah. The Shah's support would provide two requisite actions that were necessary to carry out a smooth transition between Mossadeq and Zahedi: the first was to ensure the backing of the Tehran military garrisons, and the second was to provide for the legal succession of Zahedi as Prime Minister.⁶⁴ The only glaring issue with this plan of action was that the Shah of Iran was an indecisive, timid, and fearful man who was deathly scared of the repercussions of a failed coup attempt that he was complicit in.

These tactics are remarkably similar to the regime change efforts by the United States in Venezuela in 2019. The U.S. continues to utilize economic warfare through the use of sanctions, along with the threat of direct military intervention, in order to oust the democratically elected President Nicolas Maduro and to replace him with a more U.S. friendly leader in Juan Guaido.

⁶¹ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," vii.

⁶² CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 32.

⁶³ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," vii.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

It was no secret to the CIA or US government that the Shah would not be so easily persuaded to go along with the coup due to this specific set of character traits. Therefore, the CIA took it upon themselves to call on the Shah's much more confident and aggressive twin sister, Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, for some assistance in coercing her brother to fall in line with the joint US-British plans. The Princess was brought in reluctantly from Europe back to Tehran to push the Shah towards the removal of Mossadeq as prime minister and to make clear that she had been communicating with the US and the British who had requested her support on this matter. The Central Intelligence officials also decided to try to persuade the Shah into participation by setting up a visit from General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, who the Shah knew personally and had grown to like and respect. It was Schwarzkopf's job to explain the upcoming plans of the CIA and to guide the Shah towards signing three *firman*s (royal decrees), which would provide the needed legal basis for the new change in government.⁶⁵

⁶⁶ The first *firman* was meant to dismiss Mossadeq from office, the second was to appoint General Zahedi as his successor, and the third to call for the Army to stay loyal to the Shah. Through their agents in the Tehran military, the CIA made as certain as possible, the support of the Army for the Shah and for the acceptance of General Zahedi as prime minister.⁶⁷ However, Corrigan's history shows that Kermit Roosevelt lowered the number of *firman*s to be signed by the Shah from three to two. The first to dismiss Mossadeq from his position as Prime Minister and the second would name Zahedi as his successor. The information in the paragraph following this section has been completely redacted.⁶⁸

Claud Corrigan provides what looks to be two pages of a roughly handwritten, hard to read outline of the plans for the coup

⁶⁵ Ibid., viii.

⁶⁶ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 45-46. Schwarzkopf's role here is also confirmed in some detail in Claud Corrigan's *The Battle for Iran*.

⁶⁷ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," viii.

⁶⁸ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 54.

following page 25 in his CIA history titled *The Battle for Iran*. While there is no mention made by Corrigan explaining exactly what these pages are, the nature of these pages becomes quite clear after reading them through. The pages are numbered and lettered in common outline form and touch on most of the major players that participated in the coup. It begins with an "Introduction" followed by a section titled "Operational Plan." The first subtopic is titled "Preliminary Support" and is followed by "Role of the Shah." This shows that from the very beginning the CIA was fully aware that the coup would not be possible without the cooperation of the Shah as he would be the linchpin of the entire operation that would help carry public opinion and sway the masses. The "Role of the Shah" passage is followed by three subtopics titled "First Stage, Second Stage, Third Stage," showing that the CIA planned for a steadily increasing effort to persuade the Shah into joining the plans. This may relate to the fact that US/British Intelligence knew the Shah to be a timid and very indecisive man who would need some rather strong coaxing. Section "C" is titled "Arrangement with Zahedi" making clear that they knew he was their choice for replacement from the very beginning. The following Section "D" has the title of "Organ to Mount Overthrow" followed by "Organ to Mount Coup" which openly suggest Zahedi was the man who the operation would rely on to take power once Mossadeq was gone.

The document moves on to include Zahedi's military secretariat position followed by his duties and the "Actions on Coup Day". The outline continues by listing the influential sectors of Tehran, laying out all the different groups who would need to be included in the plan for a successful coup to take place. These groups include "press and publicity," "the Majlis," "Political Elements," "Bazaar Merchants" and most importantly for this study "Religious Leaders." The documents end with a "Final Action" section and lastly a section titled "Estimate of Chances." While this document is only a barebones outline, it does help to confirm the actions taken by the CIA during the coup, as the outline aligns almost perfectly with all of the sectors of society that we now know the CIA worked to influence in order to oust Prime

Minister Mossadeq.⁶⁹ Corrigan later refers to the assumptions that the plan was based upon: that Zahedi was the best option for coup leader, the Shah must be a part of the plan (against his will if necessary), that the Army would follow the Shah, a legal or quasi-legal basis must be found for the coup, that public opinion must be negatively aroused against Mossadeq, (next sentence excised), and finally that the new government must be protected from the Communist Tudeh Party.⁷⁰ These assumptions provide context and direct insight into the CIA's thinking process and planning procedures concerning the coup operation.

It was not until the beginning of July 1, 1953 that the Director of the MI6, the British Foreign Secretary, and the British Prime Minister signed off on the official operation plans for the coup.⁷¹ Then, finally on July 11, 1953 the Director of the CIA, the Secretary of State, and President Eisenhower approved the final plans which was an action based on National Security Council Report 136/1 "U.S. Policy Regarding the Present Situation in Iran."⁷² Prior to this official authorization however, the Tehran station was continuing its covert activities and gained authorization to spend one million rials per week, which at the time was at a rate of 1 US dollar for every 90 rials (\$90,000 USD), in order to purchase the support and cooperation of the members of the Majlis. Around this same time one of the two main groups within the CIA, who were working together but on different areas on the project of the coup, put together an exhaustive military plan, which was given to Zahedi and his military secretariat, providing them a detailed roadmap for action.⁷³ In fact, the CIA was so well prepared that they had three separate plans of actions depending on the different scenarios that could potentially play out.⁷⁴ The second group within the CIA, which was headed by Dr. Donald Wilber

⁶⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁷¹ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 19.

⁷² CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 31.

⁷³ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 19.

⁷⁴ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 37-38.

(the author of this document), was given the responsibility of carrying out the psychological warfare portion of the plan.⁷⁵

To further degrade the level of respect and trust the people of Iran felt towards Mossadeq, the US government orchestrated a series of three publications and speeches that were meant to diminish his public standing. The first of this series of publications, released July 9, 1953, was a copy of President Eisenhower's letter written to Dr. Mossadeq on June 29, 1953 which made it explicit that increased economic aid for Iran would not be provided to help with the loss of Iran's oil sales due to British blockades. The second publication came from the Secretary of State's press conference on July 28, 1953, where the US stated that the growth and toleration of the activities of Iran's Communist Tudeh Party made it almost impossible for any further US aid or assistance.⁷⁶ This was intended negatively affect US public opinion regarding Mossadeq as well as to shape international views of the situation. Finally, President Eisenhower gave a speech in Seattle at the Governor's convention where he stated that, "the United States would not sit by and see Asian countries fall behind the Iron Curtain."⁷⁷ This speech would prove to have a significant effect on the situation in Iran. The CIA, in cooperation with the Department of State, created and published several articles in major American newspapers and magazines, which they knew would be reproduced in Iran. The reproduction of these scripted articles would carry heavy influence over the opinions of Iran's population and would help to slightly loosen the grip Mohammad Mossadeq held over his people.

The CIA knew that outside propaganda, press publications, royal decrees, and pressure on the Shah would not be nearly enough to carry their plans to fruition. Knowing this, they turned to their human assets present in Iran, and more specifically the assets that the British had built strong relationships with over the years, who held powerful influence over many large sectors or Iranian

⁷⁵ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

society. The CIA and the SIS had many contacts and inside agents within Iran. Due to their willingness to oppose the power of Mossadeq in any way they could, even at their own expense and while risking their own lives, there were perhaps none who were as important throughout Iranian society as the three Rashidyan brothers.⁷⁸ Saifollah, Qodratollah, and Asadollah had amassed a huge family fortune through shipping, real estate, banking, among numerous other business ventures including owning and operating cinemas.⁷⁹ The Rashidyan family had strong contacts in many areas including: the Majlis (parliament), armed forces, the press, the Ulama, politicians, street gangs, as well as other influential figures in Iran.⁸⁰ Under the British, the brothers had been receiving a monthly payment of ten thousand British pounds in order to influence the bazaar merchants as well as to have anti-Mossadeq articles regularly published in the newspapers.⁸¹ The actions of the aforementioned Rashidyan brothers proved to be highly effective in creating a negative image of, and building popular support against, Mossadeq through bribery of other influential figures as well as through their financing of protesters to carry out violent street demonstrations. The CIA also utilized the Rashidyan brother's connections with the press to begin releasing "grey propaganda," which attacked Mossadeq but would not credit the source or identify the sponsor of the information. Wilber does mention that the CIA had two of their own principal Iranian agents, whose information was to be shared with the British, but the names of these two agents have been redacted from Wilber's account.⁸²

Wilber recounts that by mid-July 1953 a large number of anti-Mossadeq articles had been written by or at least outlined by his group. They had also provided constant guidance to the CIA

⁷⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁹ Louis, "Britain and the Overthrow of the Mossadeq Government," 138.

⁸⁰ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 7.

⁸¹ Louis, "Britain and the Overthrow of the Mossadeq Government," 138.

⁸² CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 8.

Art Group so that they could create a considerable number of anti-Mossadeq cartoons and broadsheets.⁸³



Illustration titled, "Mossadeq, the Thief."⁸⁴

The goal here was to focus on building the size and potency of anti-Mossadeq forces, instead of merely countering those who supported him.⁸⁵ The CIA Art Group was also commissioned to draw a wall poster that portrayed Zahedi being presented to the people of Iran by the Shah. The propaganda began to stack up very rather quickly and was then taken to Iran, where on July 22, 1953 it was distributed to CIA and SIS agents to be used throughout all

⁸³ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁴ Leslie Illingworth, "Mossadeq, the Thief," Cartoon. Daily Mail. October 4, 1951. Source: <http://www.cartoons.ac.uk/>

⁸⁵ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 36.

the avenues of the press which the CIA had control over.⁸⁶ It is now known that the CIA held influence over four-fifths of the newspapers in Tehran of which they were able to make very effective use of in many different ways.⁸⁷ The Tehran Station claimed that about 20 local newspapers “were now in violent opposition to Mossadeq.”⁸⁸ Wilber goes on to explain that the CIA’s propaganda efforts took another turn as the anti-Mossadeq campaign had already gained traction and was now building steam. Instead of strictly releasing articles and cartoons that attacked Mossadeq, they made a push to disseminate articles and cartoons that supported and positively portrayed the Shah. The CIA provided a personal loan of \$45,000 to the owner of a newspaper, whose name and newspaper title have been redacted, in hopes that this would make him more conformable to their efforts. Asadollah Rashidian was given the propaganda which had been prepared by CIA agents, who then passed the articles along to his press connections, and by the end of the month the new campaign was up and running.⁸⁹

After being pressured so strongly by his own sister and after several personal meetings with Kermit Roosevelt, the pressure had become so forceful that it was easier for the Shah to sign the royal *firmans*, which he did on August 15, 1953, than it would have for him to refuse.⁹⁰ The coup was planned for the very next day. However, the information contained in the plans had been leaked to Mossadeq, who began to prepare. When the Shah’s bodyguard arrived to arrest Mossadeq, he was outnumbered and overpowered by military forces that were loyal to the prime minister and the coup failed. Knowing that this was a possibility, the CIA had arranged a protected hiding place for General Zahedi. The Shah had also decided to leave Iran for Baghdad, as he thought he would not survive if he stayed in the country. With the

⁸⁶ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 20.

⁸⁷ Kinzer, *All The Shah's Men*, 6.

⁸⁸ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 32.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

help of a secret CIA arranged press conference and through covert CIA printing facilities, on August 17, 1953 General Zahedi announced to the people of Iran that he was now their legal prime minister and that Mossadeq had tried to carry out an illegal coup against him. Agents of the CIA began sending out large numbers of photographs of the *firmons* stating that Mossadeq had been dismissed from his position and that Zahedi was now prime minister.⁹¹



Mohammad Reza Shah (right) shaking hands with General Zahedi (left).⁹²

This propaganda worked precisely as it was intended and very seriously affected the views of the Iranian people. Iranian citizens were angered and shocked at what they were hearing and at the fact that the Shah had been forced to flee the country and was

⁹¹ Ibid., xi.

⁹² Sadegh Abbasi, "1953 Coup: Replacing an Elected Govt with a 'Fascist' Dictatorship," Khamenei.ir., August 19, 2017. Accessed March 27, 2019. <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2159/1953-coup-Replacing-an-elected-govt-with-a-Fascist-dictatorship>. Mohammad Reza Shah (right) General Zahedi (left) shaking hands at Iran's imperial palace a few days after the CIA-backed coup, 1953.

exiled to Italy for some time.⁹³ Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA did not believe that the coup was lost, so they contacted the Shah and encouraged him to make public statements that would encourage the Army and the Iranian population to accept Zahedi as their new prime minister.⁹⁴

After the first coup attempt, which was shut down by Mossadeq's supporters including the Communist Tudeh Party, and after Mossadeq himself received leaked information about it, the CIA's Tehran station had to reexamine their plans before moving on with the second attempt.⁹⁵ The CIA no longer saw the operation as a military coup, but rather as a political action to help move the Iranian military away from Mossadeq's now illegal government and place them behind Zahedi and the Shah. Roosevelt, with the Shah's signed *firmands*, knew that he had two very powerful pieces of paper in hand and knew that if he could publicize and disseminate this information quickly that Mossadeq would not be able to hold on to his power for long.⁹⁶ They also knew that they would need a much larger support group from the local military units, local tribal leaders, and the religious community if they intended to be successful this time. The CIA sent an Iranian Colonel (name excised) to meet with Colonel (name excised), who was the commanding officer of a local garrison, in hopes of persuading him to declare his support for the Shah. Zahedi, along with another CIA agent were sent to meet a Brigadier General, again whose name is not provided, to request his support for the Shah as well. Following these requests for support, the CIA once again stepped up its propaganda efforts by sending guidance to the stations in Karachi, New Delhi, Cairo, Damascus, Istanbul, and

⁹³ Jon Gambrell, "Shah of Iran Modernized His Nation but Vacillated in Crisis," AP NEWS, January 17, 2019, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/c037d5af8b3b4be6ae47f125d847d0f0>.

⁹⁴ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," xi.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

⁹⁶ CIA, "Zendeabad, Shah!: The Central Intelligence Agency and the Fall of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, August 1953," by Scott A. Koch, June 1998 (Reviewed for declassification in November 2017): 55.

Beirut, stating that General Zahedi's government is now the only legal one in Iran.⁹⁷ Corrigan tells us that the CIA had their plan of action for the second attempt already arranged. The idea was to recruit a group of officers in key positions that would enable them to take over army headquarters, Radio Tehran, the homes of Mossadeq and his associates, police headquarters, the telephone exchange, the Majlis building, along with a handful of other key locations and the arrests of prominent pro-Mossadeq figures in the military, government, and the press.⁹⁸ The Tehran Station received news from Kermanshah on August 18, 1953 that would greatly help their cause. Colonel Abbas Farzanegan had returned with news that Colonel Bakhtiar had agreed to march on Tehran to support the Shah and oppose Mossadeq.⁹⁹ With these important posts locked down and key figures in on the plot, the coup was sure to be a success. Roosevelt, the CIA, and Zahedi now felt that they were prepared with enough support to come back and carry out a successful coup against Mossadeq.

Strong signs of reemerging support for the Shah in Tehran spurred along by the CIA propaganda had now become obvious.¹⁰⁰ According to Wilber, a pro-Shah demonstration originated in the bazaar area of Tehran on August 19, 1953, "partially spontaneously revealing the fundamental prestige of the Shah..."¹⁰¹ While a pro-Shah demonstration did break out, whether it was spontaneous and due to the "fundamental prestige of the Shah" is unlikely as many pro-Shah and anti-Mossadeq demonstrations were created and led by CIA operatives, religious clerics, political parties, and through a handful of other influential groups or leaders who were being paid for and/or were paying others for their participation. Wilber does go on to mention that certain assets from the CIA's station in Tehran contributed to the start of the pro-Shah demonstrations, which seems to be in keeping with what is known regarding paid

⁹⁷ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 57-58.

⁹⁸ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 37.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁰¹ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," xii.

demonstrations. The CIA ordered their sub-agents to gather their paid followers and begin taking over key locations. Their first stop was to set fire to the offices of the *Bakhtar-i-Emruz*, a leading newspaper which was anti-Shah and strongly pro-Mossadeq. They moved on to ransack the offices of the leading Tudeh newspapers as well. The Rashidian brothers were then told to call for their followers to take over Radio Tehran, which they later did successfully. Members of the Iranian *Zuhrkhaneh* (*House of Strength* a traditional Persio-Islamic gym), including acrobats, weightlifters, and wrestlers were at the head of the masses. They had specifically chosen Shaban Bimohk (the Brainless) Jaffari, Iran's most famous athlete to lead the crowd, which created an absolute frenzy. The people of Iran idolized the athletes of the *Zuhrkhaneh* in a similar manner to the American idolization of football, baseball, and basketball players. Therefore, this was a very effective move on behalf of the CIA and the Rashidian brothers to play on Iranian popular culture to promote their participation in the coup.¹⁰² Then a leading Colonel, whose name has been redacted, took control of a tank, along with members of the disbanded Imperial Guard, took over trucks and began driving through the streets and came together at Sepah Square in Tehran.¹⁰³

The demonstrators soon came face to face with the Army units in Tehran whose job it was to disperse them. The soldiers began firing hundreds of warning shots over the crowds.¹⁰⁴ The troops finally realized they could not quell the crowds and refused to fire on their people and so joined the pro-Shah demonstrations making it clear that the Shah's supporters had taken over Tehran. This set the stage for the CIA's original course of action for carrying out the coup. The crowds then took over the press and propaganda offices, along with the central telegraph office. CIA operatives used control over the telegraph offices to send telegrams to the provinces to call for the people to stand up in support of the

¹⁰² CIA, "Zendebad, Shah!" 63.

¹⁰³ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 66-67.

¹⁰⁴ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 66-67.

Shah.¹⁰⁵ Radio Tehran was now the main target as this was the fastest and most far-reaching way to spread the news that the Shah's troops were now in Tehran and to convince the people of Iran to support Zahedi's government.¹⁰⁶ Understanding their control over the situation, the CIA station then prompted Zahedi to come out of hiding and continue with the CIA's original plans with the Shah's signed *firman*s in hand. Zahedi was picked up by a tank and driven to Radio Tehran headquarters to broadcast a reading of the Shah's *firman*s and to declare that the government was now his.¹⁰⁷ Zahedi, with CIA asset assistance, then took over the offices of the General Staff, they seized Mossadeq's home, searched then trashed the place, and finally they arrested all of the pro-Mossadeq politicians and officers.¹⁰⁸ It was now official, as of August 19, 1953 that General Fazlollah Zahedi was the new Prime Minister of Iran.

Upon hearing that the coup was successful the Shah remarked, "I knew my people loved me."¹⁰⁹ Dr. Wilber explains that the Shah soon returned to Iran where he received a warm and popular reception from the Iranian people. It seems that the Shah was moved emotionally by this response and the fact that his people and the Army had stood up to Dr. Mossadeq and had revolted against the Communist Tudeh Party. According to Wilber, this was the first time in the Shah's life that he felt that he had the total support of Iran's population as well as the Army.¹¹⁰ While the Shah was basking in his newfound glory and success, he was well aware of the fact that none of this would have been possible without the help of Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA. According to Roosevelt, the Shah proclaimed that "'I owe my throne to God, my people, my army and to you!" By 'you' he (the Shah) meant me

¹⁰⁵ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 72-73.

¹⁰⁶ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 68.

¹⁰⁷ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 72-73.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁰⁹ Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981).

¹¹⁰ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," xiii.

and the two countries—Great Britain and the United States—I was representing. We were all heroes.”¹¹¹ With all of this done, the CIA’s work was not yet complete. In order to help Zahedi succeed and continue to pay his staff until the United States government could provide large-scale aid, the CIA covertly provided Zahedi with \$5,000,000 within two days of his supposition of power.¹¹² Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA had successfully organized, orchestrated, and carried out the first overthrow of a government using covert operations in the CIA’s history, which would drastically change the course of Iran’s and the world’s history forever.¹¹³ Moreover, As Claud Corrigan so casually puts it regarding the state of Iran after the coup: “A successful TPAJAX left behind a good deal of debris to clean up, plus not a few complications.”¹¹⁴

The Role of the CIA and Iran’s Ulama

While understanding the CIA’s actions and level of involvement in the 1953 coup in Iran is crucial to understanding US, British, and Iranian history, as well as current US-Iranian relations, this is a history that has been very thoroughly examined and studied by many of the top scholars in this field. What has not been detailed to a sufficient extent is the of the role of Iran’s religious clerics in the coup and their relationships and interactions with the CIA, and the effect that their cooperation had on the coup’s final outcome. This will offer a much more nuanced understanding of the 1953 coup in Iran and will also provide additional context from which to view the events that occurred. The plans carried out here will also shed light on the inner workings and guidelines that can be used to carry out a coup in almost any society, but more importantly will expose

¹¹¹ Roosevelt, *Countercoup*.

¹¹² CIA, “Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran,” xiii.

¹¹³ The United States would repeat this process over time, one prominent example being in Guatemala the following year.

¹¹⁴ CIA, “The Battle for Iran,” 71.

the role played by Iran's own religious leaders in ousting their democratically elected prime minister.

While the many different groups who worked in cooperation with the CIA or under the influence of their subagents played key roles in the 1953 coup, and without a doubt facilitated its outcome, there was no single group who had a more crucial role than the Ulama. I argue that there was no single group who had the potential to play such a key role in these events as did Iran's religious elite. This is because no other sector of Iran's society could possibly hold the power and influence over the masses like the country's clerics. Relied upon as spiritual leaders and interpreters the Quran and *hadith*, as well serving as custodians of most of Iran's social welfare systems, it is no wonder that the influence of the Iranian clerics was far greater than any other group involved. Having studied Iran's history thoroughly and having had years of experience within Iran's culture, and MI6 held a deep understanding of the Ulama's role in Iranian society, which they relayed to their CIA counterparts thus playing upon the weaknesses and cultural norms within Iran and placed an enormous amount of focus on gaining the cooperation of some of Iran's highest-level clerics.

Dr. Donald Wilber's account shows that from the start the CIA knew they wanted to target Iran's Ulama. Wilber states that the funds provided by the CIA were meant to carry out an "increasingly intensified propaganda effort" through use of the local media, the passing out of pamphlets, and through the "Tehran Clergy" in an effort to diminish the power of the Mossadeq's government.¹¹⁵ Corrigan's history also provides evidence that the Ulama were a CIA target from the beginning with the handwritten coup outline/plan he provided that lists "Religious Leaders."¹¹⁶ There were many instances where members of the Ulama were used or participated in actions geared towards swaying the thoughts of Iran's public. The first to be examined is an instance

¹¹⁵ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," vii.

¹¹⁶ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 25-26.

offered by Dr. Wilber which suggests that when Dr. Mossadeq dissolved the Majlis, which they considered a clear abuse of the constitution in order to gain single-handed control, this gave the CIA an issue over which they could attack Mossadeq. The Tehran Station of the CIA reported that their agents made numerous efforts to project the illegality of the dissolution of the Majlis both before and after it took place. Wilber comments that every declaration made by religious clerics during this time strongly stressed this idea. While he does not explicitly say that these religious leaders were acting in line with CIA guidelines, it is understood that many of the religious clerics were under CIA influence and were following their themes. So, while this particular instance may be mere coincidence, it is likely not.¹¹⁷

Prior to the first coup attempt, the CIA set out to discredit the people's belief in Mossadeq. Their first goal was to create divisions within the National Front Party by targeting the popular Ayatollah Kashani. The CIA began spreading propaganda that attacked Kashani directly in order to create problems between himself and Mossadeq. For examples, they issued a cartoon in Iranian newspapers during the fall of 1952 implying that Mossadeq was sexually molesting Kashani. The propaganda did indeed help to create a gap between the two as Kashani began to turn on Mossadeq by the fall of 1952, and had broken ties with him in early 1953.¹¹⁸ This was a major blow for Mossadeq because the group that Kashani led, known as the Warriors of Islam, included the bazaar merchants along with many of the leading clerics and support from these two groups together has been vital to Iranian governments throughout history.¹¹⁹ This quote from the memoirs of Prince Manucher Farmanfarmaian, sixth son of one of the most prominent politicians of his time the Qajar Prince Abdol-Hossein

¹¹⁷ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 32.

¹¹⁸ Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup D'Etat Against Mosaddeq," 243-244. Information comes from interviews with K. Roosevelt and interviews with CIA operatives who were involved in the coup. Some information comes from endnotes discussing the interviews

¹¹⁹ CIA, "Zendeabad, Shah!" 7.

Farmanfarma, paints a picture of the powerful relationship between the two and illustrates their influence: “It (the bazaar) was a world unto itself, impregnable to the army, which could not easily enter its labyrinthine alleys. The leaders of the bazaar were weighty men, often tightly allied with the mollahs, and they could start riots or shut down the bazaar to instant political effect.”¹²⁰

Due to this split, Kashani and his followers began voting against Mossadeq in parliament and created a deadlock on many cases, limiting Mossadeq’s power for a time. The CIA also wanted to gain the cooperation of another leader outside of the National Front and began giving money indirectly to Ulama member Mohammad Taqi Falsafi, and likely to other leading clerics as well. Although the CIA was not able to make direct contact with Kashani, they were able to fund him indirectly. Around this time it is also likely that the Tehran Station provided money to the leading cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Behbahani, who played a monumental role in the coup.¹²¹ Behbahani’s role started well before the street demonstrations as he supposedly wrote and sent out “black” letters, under the pretense that they had been sent by members of the Tudeh Party, to other clergy members threatening to hang them in the streets.¹²² This was intended to build popular support amongst the religious community against Mossadeq and the Tudeh party.

In the weeks leading up to the first coup attempt the CIA had their Iranian agents make “black” phone calls to many clerical leaders throughout Tehran, which were incredibly threatening in nature, in the name of the Tudeh Party. They also conducted a “sham bombing” at one of the mullah’s personal homes, which was followed up by sending a “stink bomb” into a Tehran mosque. The CIA were likely responsible for attacks that took place on other mosques as well but there are no official records to support this. The aim here was to continue to try to turn the religious

¹²⁰ Manucher Farmanfarmaian and Roxane Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil: Memoirs of a Persian Prince* (New York: Random House, 1997), 36.

¹²¹ Gasirowski, “The 1953 Coup D’Etat Against Mosaddeq.” 243-244.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 254.

leaders against Mossadeq, in order to make use of the incredible influence they held over the population.¹²³ Following the failure of the first coup attempt, the CIA made an attempt to reach out to the leading Shi'a cleric from Qom, Ayatollah Borujerdi, by sending a Tehran cleric (name excised) in an effort to persuade him to declare a holy war against the all communists in Iran with the pro-Shah newspapers ready and waiting to issue the story immediately. He was also asked to build a large demonstration based on the theme that it was now time for the army officers, soldiers and the people of Iran to rally behind both religion and the Shah.¹²⁴ While he never agreed to issue such a declaration this shows yet another effort by the CIA to include a leading cleric in the coup.¹²⁵ However, there is conclusive evidence that shows the CIA working directly with members of Tehran's Ulama regarding when to stage the coup. In *The Battle For Iran*, Claud Corrigan explains:

Roosevelt had hoped that it would be possible to emphasize the religious aspects of the demonstration to be held the 19th, but if this was to be done, the mullahs wanted to hold it on Friday, 21 August, which was a religious festival day. For a number of reasons, not the least of which was the widespread rumor that the arrested officers were to be hung on the 20th, the operation could not be held off the two extra days the religious leaders wanted.¹²⁶

The names of the clerics that Corrigan is referring to are not offered but may very well be included in the redacted portions that immediately precede and follow this passage. This quote once again confirms how seriously the CIA took the influence of the clerics, as they made sure to place emphasis on the religious aspect

¹²³ CIA, "Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran," 28-37.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹²⁵ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 65.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 62.

of these demonstrations knowing that this would inflame the crowds far more than any political protest ever could.

On the morning of August 19, 1953, two CIA officers delivered \$10,000 dollars to one of Kashani's men to pass along for Kashani to use as payment for protestors to create and participate in street demonstrations that were both anti-Mossadeq and pro-Shah in form.¹²⁷ Corrigan confirms that many of the street demonstrators on this day were those that Kashani was paying 200 tomans (about \$26.65) each for their participation.¹²⁸ While Kashani received large amounts of money from the CIA, the operatives claim that Behbahani was the leading figure behind the demonstrations and he himself had received large amounts of funds from the Tehran Station.¹²⁹ He had actually received so much money that the expression "Behbahani dollars" was even used many years after to refer to the money that was used to hire the street demonstrators.¹³⁰ During an interview one CIA member recalls how "so much American currency found its way into Tehran's black market during the coup that the exchange rate fell from over one hundred rials to the dollar to under fifty"¹³¹ Koch cements the fact that the Ulama were absolutely key in carrying out the powerful demonstrations which came together and finally toppled Mossadeq when he states:

[First line excised] the influence of the mullahs on the demonstration was clear. Holy men had galvanized many of the poor of South Tehran by hammering on the themes that the Soviet-backed Communists were taking over, the Shah was gone, and Mossadeq was to blame. The streets of Tehran,

¹²⁷ Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup D'Etat Against Mosaddeq," 338.

¹²⁸ CIA, "The Battle for Iran," 66.

¹²⁹ Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup D'Etat Against Mosaddeq," 338.

¹³⁰ Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran: Updated Through 1978* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979), 226.

¹³¹ Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup D'Etat Against Mosaddeq," 338.

which had belonged to the Tudeh 24 hours earlier, now belonged to a different crowd.¹³²

In March 2018 a British memorandum titled, “*Persia: Review of the Recent Crisis*,” was released which provided a detailed account of the events that occurred in Tehran between August 19th-21st. This key document provides the entire list of events that took place leading up to the powerful anti-Mossadeq and pro-Shah street demonstrations in Tehran and the taking over of Mossadeq’s personal residence the day of the coup. While this memorandum contains a host of completely relevant and vital information regarding the unfolding of the coup events, this is not what makes this document so crucial. What makes it so important is a section, which had been excised for security reasons until only recently, and it is this section that provides irrefutable evidence that places responsibility on members of the Tehran Ulama, specifically naming Ayatollah Behbahani, for receiving US funds for their complicity with the CIA in the 1953 coup. The recently released passage states:

According to reliable reports received on 10th August, the American Embassy had secretly handed over large sums of money to certain influential people, including AYATULLAH BIHBIHANI, the well-known ecclesiastic. Certain sources in close contact with General ZAHIDI stated that all plans had been laid for a military Coup d’Etat, and that the American Embassy was directing and encouraging them in order to overthrow the government.¹³³

The memorandum later names Behbahani specifically as being solely responsible for the street demonstrations the day of the coup

¹³² CIA, “Zendebad, Shah!” 63.

¹³³ British Foreign Office, “*Persia: Political Review of the Recent Crisis*,” September 2, 1953, Top Secret Report, 2.

by saying that: “only the commanders of regiments, the Chief of Police, and Ayatullah BIHBIHANI, who was responsible for organizing demonstrations, knew of the plan, and the Tudeh had therefore no chance of discovering the plot beforehand.”¹³⁴ This single document has confirmed what has long been assumed and pieced together by scholars: that certain members of Iran’s religious leadership, were without a doubt working hand in hand with the US Central Intelligence Agency to take out their democratically elected Prime Minister, in exchange for money and the possibility of positions of political power. It must be made clear however, that the complicity of the Ulama in the 1953 coup was not widespread and was limited to a few key members. The Iranian Ulama have a long history of anti-interventionist activity at multiple points throughout Iranian history. One prominent example was the actions taken by members of the Ulama in the successful protest and boycott of the creation of a British monopoly on Iranian tobacco in 1892 during the Tobacco Protest.¹³⁵

Conclusion

Iran’s religious clerics enjoy overwhelming power and influence over the majority of the Iranian population. This is the case for two reasons. The first being Islam is a politico-religious system that blends the realities of the secular world with the holy. The second reason is the traditional role of the religious community in Shia Islam who serve as interpreters of the Quran and *hadith* and perform essential services for the community. For many Iranian people, the word of their Ulama members is law and since there were a significant number of these religious elites who were involved in the coup, of which there may very well have been more than we have record of, their contributions towards the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁵ Michael Axworthy, "Iran: The Revolution That Shook the World," *America's Current Affairs & Politics Magazine*, February 13, 2019. Accessed April 05, 2019. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2019/02/iran-revolution-shook-world>.

outcome is immeasurable. I therefore conclude that the 1953 Coup D'état in Iran would not have been possible without the direct participation and complicity of Iran's religious leaders backed by the leadership, guidance, finances, and organizing abilities of the United States Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA needed the Ulama, just as much, if not more than the Ulama needed the CIA. Were it not for the "grey" and "black" propaganda of the CIA, financial bribes offered by them, the fake phone calls to the clerics by the Tehran station, the destruction of certain Mosques, and the creation of street demonstrations, all involving and motivating the Ulama to act, the outcome in Iran may well have been a very different one. Had the CIA not had the direct or indirect cooperation of the Ulama in Iran, Mossadeq may have stayed in power, the Shah may have never had the chance to become a dictator much to the detriment of Iran's people for 26 years. It is then conceivable that the 1979 fundamentalist Iranian Revolution, headed by Ayatollah Khomeini, would have never gained traction or been necessary in the first place.

Perhaps the most valuable information that is provided from studying the 1953 Iranian coup is the blueprint created by the CIA and MI6 that would be replicated time and again the world over. The CIA would go on to create a pattern of covert regime change in countries all around the world. Starting in Guatemala only one year later in 1954, the CIA began an operation known as PBSUCCESS where they successfully removed the democratically elected President Juan Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán and installed military leadership which led to the deaths of over 100,000 Guatemalan citizens.¹³⁶ The CIA then moved on to the Congo in 1961 where they facilitated the removal of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and the implementation of a pro-US leader.¹³⁷ Then again where the CIA took part in creating the conditions which

¹³⁶ ColdWarWarriors, "Arbenz & the CIA, Guatemala 1950's," YouTube Video, 7:24, February 24, 2009. Accessed April 07, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb7XaF1rs1E>.

¹³⁷ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIII, Congo, 1960–1968, Office of the Historian. [History.state.gov](http://history.state.gov). Retrieved April 7, 2019.

lead to the 1973 Chilean coup which removed President Salvador Allende and replaced him with the brutal dictator Augusto Pinochet.¹³⁸ Indeed, as of early 2019, all the signs and symptoms of US backed regime change are present yet once again in Venezuela. The US continues to use economic warfare through sanctions and by pressuring allies into not dealing with Venezuela in order to force their hand, seemingly, and once again, for an opportunity to control their most valuable resource: oil.

¹³⁸ CIA, "CIA Activities in Chile," June 19, 2013. Accessed April 7, 2019. <https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/chile/index.html#1>.

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History in the Making