

January 2014

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### Recommended Citation

Ponce, Alex (2014) "Iranian Receptivity to CIA Propaganda in 1953," *History in the Making*: Vol. 7 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol7/iss1/10>

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## Iranian Receptivity to CIA Propaganda in 1953

By Alex Ponce

*Abstract: In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), together with the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), organized a coup to overthrow the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq (1882-1967). While much has been written about the coup, little attention has been given to the U.S. propaganda that preceded the operation. From 1950 to 1953, the U.S. launched a series of propaganda campaigns in Iran. Drawing from U.S.-Iranian correspondences, memoirs, journal articles, and secondary sources, this paper seeks to shed light on the U.S. and CIA perceptions of Iranian receptivity to propaganda from 1950 to 1953. What did CIA officials like Kermit Roosevelt and Donald Wilber learn from this coup and why did they consider it a success? What were Henry F. Grady's perceptions of the effects these propaganda tactics would create and why were they ignored or silenced? Going beyond our understanding of the coup and the reasons for why it was carried out, this research will deepen and enrich our knowledge of U.S. interventionist policies and the blowback that can come as a result of those policies.*

### Part 1 – Introduction and Historical Context

In 1948, the Iranian parliament rejected a Russian oil concession in northern Iran.<sup>1</sup> The National Front, the party to which Mohammad Mosaddeq belonged, and representatives who sympathized with the British were worried about Russian influence in Iran and they were the major opponents of the concession.<sup>2</sup> Not to be outdone, the representatives who sympathized with Russia's effort for an oil concession called for a bill to terminate the 1933 oil contract between Britain and Iran. While the proposal was immediately rejected by British sympathizers, Mossadeq and the National Front only opposed the bill at first.<sup>3</sup> In 1949, however, Mossadeq and the nationalists would reintroduce the proposal after they opposed the Supplemental Oil agreement, which was to increase royalties from oil to Iran from 17 to 24

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<sup>1</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran," *Science and Society* 65, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

percent.<sup>4</sup> Mossadeq and the nationalists were not content with the proposal, especially because it did not address what they considered to be the country's most important grievances. This momentum sparked the effort to nationalize Iran's oil.

After the assassination of Prime Minister Ali Razmara on March 7, 1951, the push for nationalization was underway. In fact, the *Majlis* passed a bill the next day authorizing the nationalization of Iran's oil. Mohammad Mosaddeq was elected prime minister in April and in May he declared all AIOC assets nationalized, cancelling the company's oil concession.<sup>5</sup> To enforce the new law, the *Majlis* sent deputies to Abadan, where the largest AIOC refinery was located, marking the beginning of the dispute.<sup>6</sup>

Since the beginning of the oil dispute, there were always two very different perspectives on the issue. On one side, the Iranians articulated their political right to control their country's assets and based it on their desire for national independence from foreign influence.<sup>7</sup> The British, however, viewed Iran's effort to nationalize their oil as a breach of contract, calling out Iran on disrespect for the AIOC and Britain's controlling stock of the company.<sup>8</sup> What Mossadeq and the nationalists were concerned about was not so much the royalties, or lack thereof, that they were receiving from the AIOC, but rather the control over the oil industry process, everything from extraction to distribution.<sup>9</sup> The British, in turn, saw the nationalist desire for control as a direct threat to their position as a world power.<sup>10</sup> In their effort to maintain control of Iran's oil, Britain arranged for a Western boycott, which delivered a devastating blow to Iran's economy.<sup>11</sup>

In the midst of this dispute, the United States (under the Truman administration) stepped in as mediator between Britain and Iran. Mary Ann Heiss, a U.S. foreign relations scholar, would argue that the role that Orientalism played in US-Iranian relations was more important than U.S. intervention in the dispute. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 266.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Heiss, "Real Men Don't Wear Pajamas: Anglo-American Cultural Perceptions of Mohammad Mossadeq and the Iranian Oil Nationalization Dispute," in *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World Since 1945*, ed. Peter L. Hahn and Mary Ann Heiss (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Abrahamian.

<sup>11</sup> Mark J Gasiorowski, *Mohammad Mossadeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

Western perception of the people and culture of the Orient, heavily infused with notions of Western superiority of lifestyle and culture.<sup>12</sup> Heiss argues that this Orientalist view played a heavy hand in the eventual orchestration of the coup, stating that, “the end result of orientalizing Mossadeq was an increasingly rigid Anglo-American position on the oil crisis that eschewed compromise or concessions and ultimately saw removing him from office as the only acceptable course of action.”<sup>13</sup> As a note on the topic, Orientalism is often assumed to be based on prejudice or racism and that the Orientalism that Heiss refers to did not necessarily come from racial prejudice. While it is tempting to assume racism on behalf of the United States and Great Britain, Ervand Abrahamian explains that the pervasiveness of this Orientalist perception came not as a result of prejudice, but “because of the clash of economic interests between imperialism and nationalism.”<sup>14</sup>

After numerous attempts to negotiate a settlement between Britain and Iran, the United States under the Eisenhower administration opted to use covert action. The 1953 coup, under the supervision of Allen W. Dulles (1893-1969), would become the first covert operation by the CIA. As part of the effort to carry out the coup, propaganda projects were actively used to set the stage. These tactics were carried out with the intent to influence politics and society in a way that would create hostility toward the nationalists and, more specifically, Mohammad Mossadeq.

## **Part 2 – The Content and Purpose of Propaganda**

When considering U.S. propaganda abroad, it is important to remember that the history changed significantly in 1948. During the First and Second World Wars, there were already limited international information exchange services being carried out as war measures.<sup>15</sup> In times of peace, however, the United States had generally opposed government propaganda and information services, both domestic and foreign. Burton Paulu, who wrote extensively on the Smith-Mundt Act (1948), a law that dealt specifically with dissemination of propaganda abroad, gave several reasons for the delay in government broadcasting: (1) the U.S. had no incentive to promote propaganda, (2) the U.S. was not politically isolated like Russia, (3) there was no U.S. system of colonies to bind together, and (4) the privately owned radio broadcasters were opposed to

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<sup>12</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> Heiss.

<sup>14</sup> Abrahamian.

<sup>15</sup> Burton Paulu, “The Smith-Mundt Act: A Legislative History,” *Journalism Quarterly* (1953).

government broadcasting out of fear that they would not be able to compete.<sup>16</sup> When anti-American propaganda from Germany and Italy in the 1930s was being disseminated, however, the U.S. reluctantly and gradually began to respond.<sup>17</sup>

After World War II and during the Cold War, propaganda became entrenched in an anti-Soviet and anti-communist agenda. More importantly, it became a critical component of U.S. foreign policy. Pitting Western powers against the Soviet Union and its allies, U.S. foreign policy became much more about containment and isolation. As Richard W. Cottam noted in his work, the geographic location of Iran, being that it shared a border with the Soviet Union and was essentially a gateway into other Middle Eastern countries, was of primary concern for the United States.<sup>18</sup> As learned in the previous section, Iran was also an important source of oil for the West.

Due to anti-communism becoming the dominant structure of U.S. foreign policy, the need to strategically spread Western ideas was addressed in Congress. In 1947, Senator H. Alexander Smith (1880-1966) and Representative Karl Mundt (1900-1974) presented a study of the ideological state of Europe and the Middle East. The study concluded that the United States was losing what they called the “battle of ideas.” In response to this crisis, congress approved a counter-communist, propaganda program called the U.S.I.E., formally known as the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948.<sup>19</sup> For the first time in history, the new law authorized the use of U.S. propaganda activity abroad and gave the State Department permission to conduct cultural and informational exchange programs on a long term basis.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the legislation did not permit the program to use propaganda in the United States.<sup>21</sup>

The USIE program made its way to Iran in the 1950s through a short term ambassador named Henry F. Grady. A close friend of George McGhee, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern, South Asian and African affairs, Henry F. Grady had previous experience with propaganda projects in Greece and was sent by Secretary of State Dean Acheson to direct the USIE program in Iran.<sup>22</sup> Grady was a staunch anti-communist, anti-imperialist, and firm supporter of Iranian nationalism. His vision for

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran: Updated through 1978* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, c.1979)

<sup>19</sup> United States Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, Pub. L. No. 402, § 2 (1948).

<sup>20</sup> Paulu.

<sup>21</sup> United States Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 86-87.

the USIE in Iran was not only to fend off the influence of the Soviet Union but to assist in the social and economic improvement of Iran.

Much like Richard Cottam, Ambassador Grady understood the importance of the strategic location of Iran and the value of its national resource. In his memoirs he states that:

Iran is on the periphery of Russia and is important not only because of its strategic location but also because it has extraordinarily valuable natural resources... Iran is the corridor through which the Soviets could move into the Middle East, to Africa, to Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union needs the great oil resources of this area to achieve its ambitions of world domination. Iran is therefore strategic in both a geographic and raw material sense.<sup>23</sup>

Based on this assessment, we can conclude that two of Grady's main concerns were securing the borders and oil fields of Iran and preventing Soviet encroachment. In order to accomplish this, Grady proposed that the propaganda tactics that were to be used in Iran needed to be concentrated in areas where Iranians were most susceptible. For Grady, the most susceptible places were ones with the poorest economic conditions, and therefore it should not come as surprise that he would target both urban and rural populations where economic conditions were in that state.<sup>24</sup>

Assisted by Edward C. Wells, another state department official, Grady put together a plan in Tehran and delivered it to the Department of State.<sup>25</sup> In a correspondence to the Department of State in July of 1950, Grady listed his objectives for the program:

Objective: To ensure that Iranians are informed about and understand U.S. policy, particularly with regard to the following:

- a.) Extending the effectiveness of U.S. support for Iran's security and the assurance that "Iran does not stand alone."
- b.) Providing monetary aid to Iran.

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<sup>23</sup> Henry F. Grady, *The Memoirs of Ambassador Henry F. Grady: From the Great War to the Cold War* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 159.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Henry F. Grady and Edward C. Wells, *Proposed New Program for USIE, Iran* (Washington D.C.: 1950), Document 6, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20006.pdf>

- c.) Firmness toward USSR and determination to prevent further encroachment on free nations.
- d.) U.S. is anti-imperialist, has no colonial aspirations, and determined that each nation has the right to work out its destiny.
- e.) The free world is an interrelated whole with mutual interests.<sup>26</sup>

We can see in this plan that Grady put heavy emphasis on building an amicable relationship between the U.S. and Iran. In order to achieve this goal, Grady suggested that Iranians need to be informed about U.S. policy and convince them that it holds Iran's best interest. By "best interest," Grady was referring to the security of the country from the USSR and the financial assistance for economic autonomy. Further into the correspondence, Grady lists the methods by which each objective would be met, including the introduction of U.S. material into Iran's educational system, the promotion and use of U.S. materials, motion pictures, exhibits, pamphlets, radio programming, branch offices at consulates, establishing libraries, and the training of Iranians to maintain all these programs.<sup>27</sup>

Without belaboring the agenda that Grady set out, we can understand his intentions with the information at hand. As time passed, Grady sent more correspondences to Washington to update the State Department on what he perceived to be a successful campaign. In an October 1950 correspondence to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, evidence can be found of Grady's perception of Iranian receptivity of U.S. propaganda. According to the correspondence, the Iranian Propaganda department, which the USIE used to operate discreetly, was taking an "increasingly anti-communist pro-American line; the impression created among general public is simply that American aid is here; mullahs in two mosques publically sermonizing against communists, which have been repeated by Iran radio; more anti-communist newspapers are starting up; and the 'chins up Iran' campaign is standing by to be released by press, radio, and posters."<sup>28</sup> As we can see from Grady's assessment, his perception of Iranian receptivity to the covert actions of the USIE is a positive one, reinforced by the increase in anti-communist and pro-American activity. Even with regard to monetary aid, Grady is convinced that the general impression by the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Henry F. Grady, *U.S.-Iranian Joint Propaganda Efforts* (Washington D.C.: 1950), Document 10, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20010.pdf>

public is that America is here to help. This notion of success will be revisited when the propaganda campaigns move in a different direction.

It was briefly mentioned earlier that radio broadcasts were one method of transmitting U.S. propaganda, but little explanation has been offered as to why radio propaganda was more important than other forms of dissemination. Unlike newspapers and other print materials, Iranian radio stations could reach a broader spectrum of society.<sup>29</sup> A 1951 study of Iranian males concluded that there was a prevalent ideological division in newspaper choices, meaning right-leaning men would not read left-leaning newspapers and vice versa.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the use of print materials to propagandize Iranians was limited in its effects on an audience that was already committed to an ideology. In comparison to newspapers, radio broadcasting produced more effective results. As Mervyn Roberts would suggest, “physically controlling the stations in Iran was of greater importance to the overthrow of Mossadeq than the CIA propaganda program leading up to the coup, as station control disseminated messages farther.”<sup>31</sup>

After the collapse of negotiations and the approval of the coup, CIA director Allen W. Dulles approved a one-million dollar budget for the Tehran Station, which could use the money in any way that would contribute to the fall of Mosaddeq.<sup>32</sup> Often the radio programs that ran through Radio Tehran broadcasted messages that labeled Mosaddeq as a sympathizer of the Tudeh party, an enemy of Islam, and a fomenter of separatism.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the anti-Mosaddeq messages, the station at times also ran pro-shah messages. Regardless of the stations’ approach, there was one consistency that seemed to resonate with all Iranians, Iranian nationalism. Any reference to Iran’s glorious secular past or anti-colonial stance was perceived by the CIA as much more receptive to the Iranian people.<sup>34</sup> Even the competing radio stations that supported Mosaddeq attempted to sway public opinion by appealing to this notion.<sup>35</sup> When carefully and strategically disseminated to the public, the CIA learned that anti-imperial and pro-Iranian messages could garner far more support than any other talking point they pushed on the radio.

What is important to remember when assessing the success of this radio propaganda is that it did not operate inside of a vacuum. The CIA review after the coup, which was written by Dr. Donald Wilber, stresses the idea that the covert propaganda tactics used did not directly

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<sup>29</sup> Mervyn Roberts. "Analysis of Radio Propaganda in the 1953 Iran Coup." *Iranian Studies* 45 (2012): 759-777.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 759

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 761.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 762.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 777.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

lead to the success of the coup.<sup>36</sup> There were times when the CIA was limited in their ability to insert propaganda in Iranian media and there were times when the CIA's efforts backfired. Wilber makes reference to a post-operation, CIA study in *Newsweek* magazine, which described the overall effort of the CIA as a "relatively ineffectual venture" and that there was room for "improvement of capabilities."<sup>37</sup> In the end, the effectiveness of propaganda was a matter of trial and error on behalf of CIA operatives, who had to learn the complex media culture in order to mobilize and direct latent passions at critical moments.<sup>38</sup> Often what factored into success were the actions of Mosaddeq and the Tudeh combined with controlled radio broadcasting, which swayed public opinion to oppose Mossadeq in the end.<sup>39</sup>

### **Part 3 – Comparing Perceptions Before and After 1953**

After the nationalization of oil in 1951, Henry F. Grady was replaced as Ambassador to Iran by Loy Henderson. The decision to replace him came partially as a result of the bad relationship that Grady developed with Dean Acheson. Also, Grady was increasingly outspoken about the United States' dealings with Britain on Iran. The coming of Henderson and the dismissal of Grady foreshadows a very significant shift in the direction of foreign policy in Iran and consequently the propaganda used for its implementation.

One of the main concerns that the U.S. had about the nationalization of oil was the opportunity it might give the Soviet Union to exert influence on Iran's distribution. If they could not get Iran to come to an agreement with Britain it would threaten "the free flow of Iranian oil into the economy of the free world," as President Truman would say.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the U.S. did not want to appear to be completely partial to the British side on this issue. As Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote to the U.S. embassy in Tehran, "while in general the U.S. does not favor nationalization, U.S. recognizes the right of sovereign states to nationalize provided prompt payment for just

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<sup>36</sup> Donald Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952-August 1953* (Washington D.C., March 1954), 85, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB28/#documents>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>38</sup> Mervyn, 777

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> "President Truman to Prime Minister Attlee (No 25)," in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954 vol X Iran 1951-1954* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 60.

compensation is made.”<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the Secretary of State did not want to make this policy public because there was genuine concern that other nations might want to nationalize their oil as well. These circumstances subsequently put the U.S. in a difficult situation for next two years, resulting in the eventual siding with British policy.

If anyone could see the dangerous consequences that would result from siding with the British on this oil issue it was Henry Grady. In a letter to the State Department Grady wrote “it is my strong conviction that British policy has been and is one that may lead to disaster in this country [Iran]. If we decide to let them call all the plays, we will absorb a large part of the present deep antagonism toward the British.”<sup>42</sup> Grady considered British policy to be imperialist, using economic pressure in an effort to maintain control, and if the U.S. sided with Britain it would essentially support the same practices. Out of disillusion and frustration, he resigned from his post in September 1951 and left Iran.

Since the U.S. and Britain were getting nowhere close to reaching a settlement with Iran, talks of overthrowing Mossadeq and reinstating the shah increased. In an effort to accomplish that goal, a continuation and modification of the propaganda tactics that were already in place went into effect. As we will see in the subsequent paragraphs, the shah will become a much more important component, more discrepancy will be used, and the target audiences of propaganda will change.

In a November 21, 1951, correspondence between Loy Henderson and Dean Acheson, Henderson addresses the need to shield Iranian press and public from criticism of U.S. press regarding Iranian attitude in the oil dispute.<sup>43</sup> Instead, he suggests that Voice of America (VOA), a U.S. run international radio show, transmit U.S. press and public criticism of Prime Minister Mossadeq’s oil policy.<sup>44</sup> He argues that this would be wiser because it would “convey the idea that the U.S. is generally sympathetic with Iranian aspirations for full economic and political independence but inclined to think that Iranians have allowed themselves to be swept by emotions into a position which puts them in

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<sup>41</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Embassy in Egypt (No. 10),” in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954 vol. X Iran 1951-1954* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 27.

<sup>42</sup> “The Ambassador in Iran (Grady) to the Department of State (No. 77),” in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954 vol. X Iran 1951-1954* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 149.

<sup>43</sup> Loy Henderson and Dean Acheson, *Iranian Oil Policy* (Washington D.C.: 1951) Document 41, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20041.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

light unfair to themselves and renders it extremely difficult for their American friends to aid them without appearing to approve of their somewhat rash actions and rather unreasoning attitude.”<sup>45</sup> Henderson then went on to say that the Iranians would also be assured that the U.S. understands the “Iranian position for urging Britain to also show more flexibility.”<sup>46</sup> The most important part of the correspondence is in the last sentence, however, where Henderson makes mention of the Shah saying “we deem it equally helpful for VOA programs, whenever appropriate, to indicate the desires of people in the U.S. to help Iranian people in every possible way and to make a friendly reference to the Shah as their progressive leader.”

Most correspondences prior to this one by Henderson made little mention, if any, of the Shah, much less as a “progressive leader.” What begins to be seen in 1952 is a more repeated mention of the Shah. For example, in an April 28, 1952, correspondence between Edward C. Wells and Ambassador Henderson, Wells outlined a new propaganda plan for Iran. It was still based on much of the same objectives that were in place two years earlier, (e.g. anti-communism, anti-Soviet) but their priorities had changed in regards to who this propaganda was targeting. In his letter to Henderson, Wells stated that the target audience for U.S. direct anti-communist propaganda are:

1. The Shah, Royal Court, and wealthy landowners.
2. University professors and students, secondary school teachers and students, professional men, including government employees.
3. Leaders of public opinion amongst illiterate masses, Mullahs, village headmen, tribal chiefs, etc.
4. Labor leaders and army officers.<sup>47</sup>

Wells argued that this “conservative group [the Shah, his court, and landowners] is vitally interested in preserving Iran’s integrity, which if they could be stirred to more positive action would represent the strongest possible rallying point for all anti-communist elements. By reason of the strength of their position, they should be able to orient the country toward our direction.”<sup>48</sup> Wells then listed the secondary target groups, such as students and laborers, making mention of their higher susceptibility to Soviet influence while claiming that they represented the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Edward C. Wells, *IIA: Country Plan* (Washington D.C.: 1952), Document 60, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20060.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

“public opinion molders.”<sup>49</sup> It is ironic that Wells would say that these groups are at most risk of being influenced by communism and still argue that if the Shah, his court, and the wealthy elite “could be stirred to more positive action would represent the strongest possible rallying point for all anti-communist elements.”<sup>50</sup> The point that being made here is that, for whatever reason, a greater deal of importance was being placed on the Shah, especially when it came to who the USIE thought would be most receptive to U.S. propaganda.

When the U.S. and Britain finally decided to replace Mosaddeq with General Fazullah Zahedi, a massive propaganda campaign was organized to create and enhance public hostility towards Mosaddeq and the government by manufacturing the belief that Mosaddeq was sympathetic to communism. Putting aside the military success or failure of the coup, the CIA thought the worst result that the propaganda campaign could produce was instability for Mosaddeq. As per Wilber’s post-operation report, even if the operation failed, the dissemination of propaganda would at least make the “the position of Mosaddeq increasingly vulnerable and unsteady.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, we can conclude that the purpose of propaganda just prior to the coup was ultimately to create instability.

The themes of the propaganda were very similar to the ones used when Grady was still ambassador. The difference, however, was that one of the main themes of this campaign was convincing the public that Mosaddeq was a communist and that he had close ties with the Tudeh.<sup>52</sup> Following in line with this theme was spreading the idea that he was dealing directly with the Soviets and that he was planning on surrendering the Northern provinces to the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup> In addition to this false accusation, Mosaddeq was blamed for any downturn in the economy.<sup>54</sup> One new line of slant that was added to the collection, however, was that Mosaddeq “had become the unwitting victim of his unscrupulous personally ambitious advisors.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, he was becoming corrupt and dictatorial.

To fuel anti-Mosaddeq sentiment, the CIA also targeted religious leaders. Using false information, also known as black propaganda, attempts to rally their support were carried out spontaneously. For example, CIA agents would send fake statements from the Tudeh threatening religious leaders with severe punishment if the party learned

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Wilber.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

of any opposition to Mosaddeq.<sup>56</sup> Some agents even wanted to carry out terrorist attacks on a massive scale. In fact, details in the original plan included that, “on the appointed day, staged attacks will be made against respected religious leaders in Tehran.”<sup>57</sup> The attacks would then be supplemented with “U.S. station fabricated documents which prove and record in detail a secret agreement between Mosaddeq and the Tudeh, with the latter promising to use all their force in support of Mossadeq and against the religious leaders, the army, and the police”.<sup>58</sup> These plans reveal the CIA’s perception of religious leaders, which was that by continuously tying Mosaddeq to the Tudeh and instilling fear in these leaders, they could rally religious Iranians to the cause. By promoting divisions, the CIA made considerable strides in loosening Mosaddeq’s support base, especially the religious nationalists who were once on his side.

As mentioned previously, perhaps one of the most interesting developments at this point was the addition of a separate propaganda campaign that would invite the Shah to step up to the task. As Stephen Kinzer would remind us, the Shah was reluctant to comply with the U.S. and Britain. The Shah thought that unless they assured him that both governments would offer their complete support, he would not go through with the plan.<sup>59</sup> Dr. Wilber recounts in his report the frustration on behalf of the CIA in dealing with the Shah because of his “entrenched attitude of vacillation and indecision.”<sup>60</sup> Over time his personal defenses would fall and his compliance would be won. It can be argued that more than anything the Shah was forced to comply, especially when the U.S. and Britain threatened to do whatever necessary to prevent communist intrusion. To add to the threat, the U.S. and Britain also made it clear that if anything went wrong with the operation, he would face the repercussions and his dynasty would undoubtedly come to an end.

More importantly, this pressure on the Shah helps us understand why the propaganda campaign changed priorities in terms of its target audience. The Shah, the royal court, and the wealthy elite were targeted directly and indirectly to ensure not only that they would cooperate with the CIA and SIS, but to become convinced that the operation served their best interests. What this reveals is that the CIA and Britain perceived that the top tier of Iranian could be persuaded, whether it was by force or by threat.

After overthrowing of Mossadeq, the CIA and their Iranian collaborators were still entrusted to continue a propaganda campaign to

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<sup>56</sup> Wilber, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Kinzer.

<sup>60</sup> Wilber.

return stability and retain a friendly image for the West. In September of 1953, Edward C. Wells, who was still heavily involved, laid out new recommendations for the propaganda projects to come. Wells makes it a priority to say that “‘allaying Iranian distrust’ should not be overstressed.”<sup>61</sup> It seems that the embassy and the USIE did not want to overdue their efforts to regain Iranian trust. Otherwise, they would begin to look more suspicious of their involvement in the coup. Among the recommendations that Wells made to the new Secretary of State, he suggested that the media use themes that stress “coordination and cooperation of Shah and Zahedi, which would benefit Iran; the Shah and Zahedi’s progressive social programs; and the praising of the August 19 events.”<sup>62</sup>

Dr. Donald Wilber and Kermit Roosevelt shared similar views about the success of the operation, especially with regard to the propaganda. In the final chapter of his report, Wilber said of the work done with the press that,

In July and early August every segment of the press with which we or the U.K. had working relations went all out against Mosaddeq. As judged by the public reactions on the days following 16 August, there can be no doubt whatsoever that this campaign had reached a very large audience and had directly influenced their thinking in a most positive way. A separate analysis of this press operation should be made to serve as a basic guidance in mounting future campaigns.<sup>63</sup>

Based on this excerpt, we can argue that Wilber not only thought that the propaganda was successful but exemplary as well. The last sentence is especially significant. Prior to this operation, there was no discussion of adopting these tactics and using them in other circumstances. Although Wilber was not necessarily suggesting that there would be another coup in the near future, he knew that the propaganda plans used in this operation could be used as a guide. About year after TPAJAX, in 1954, the CIA would perform another coup in Guatemala, where propaganda played a very similar role.

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<sup>61</sup> Edward C. Wells, *Media Guidance Regarding Iran* (Washington D.C.: 1953), Document 108, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20108.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Wilber.

Kermit Roosevelt's view of success was based on what he called a correct assessment of the situation and the people they contracted for the job. In the final page of *Countercoup*, he says,

We were successful in this venture because our assessment of the situation in Iran *was* correct. We believed—and we were proven right—that if the people and the armed forces were shown that they must choose, that Mosaddeq was forcing them to choose, between their monarch and a revolutionary figure backed by the Soviet Union, they could, and would, make only one choice. With some help from us, but mostly because of Mosaddeq, the Tudeh and eventually the USSR itself, forced the choice upon them, the populace made a choice. And most convincingly. The people and the army came, overwhelmingly, to the support of the Shah. You can have no idea from here—you really had to be in Iran—of the heartfelt strength of that support.<sup>64</sup>

As we can see in his statement, Roosevelt thought that the success of the coup was based on the fact that people wanted Mosaddeq out and the Shah back in. This idea stands in stark contrast to some of the most basic facts about Mosaddeq and his popularity. While it is true that Mosaddeq's support base was not always cohesive, there is evidence to suggest that he was still more popular than the Shah. Henry Grady once pointed out that, "Mosaddeq had the backing of 95 to 98 percent of the people of his country."<sup>65</sup> Granted, this was before the operation commenced, but it is difficult to suggest that this base entirely fell apart because of artificially created uprisings and propaganda. Roosevelt argued that because the coup was successful, however, his assessment (and the CIA's assessment) about the people's attitude toward Mosaddeq were correct. Further in the chapter, he went on to say, "if our analysis had been wrong, we'd have fallen flat on our faces. But it was right."<sup>66</sup> Just like Wilber, Roosevelt thought that, "if we, the CIA, are ever going to try something like this again, we must be absolutely sure that the people and army want what we want."<sup>67</sup> When he was offered the opportunity to lead the Guatemalan operation, however, he turned it down.

<sup>64</sup> Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: Struggle for the Control of Iran*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 210.

<sup>65</sup> Kinzer, 98.

<sup>66</sup> Roosevelt, 210

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

According to the State Department, there were three main propaganda problems that the U.S. faced after deposing the prime minister: (1) a charge that the U.S. had a hand in deposing Mosaddeq, (2) a charge that Zahedi was a U.S. puppet, and (3) the myth that Mosaddeq was the Iranian grand man.<sup>68</sup> To address these issues, the State Department made it their policy to deny their involvement in foreign domestic affairs. To prove their point, National Security Council 5428 (NSC 5428) was sent to all psychological programs in the Middle East, asking them to include the following in their agenda:

Convince local leaders and peoples that the age of Western Imperialism is over; and that Western positions are being willingly readjusted in an enlightened manner and with full respect for the national independence of sovereign equality of the Near Eastern states as rapidly as the interests of security allow.<sup>69</sup>

Contrary to what the policy states, the 1953 coup was still an act of imperialism, albeit a subtle one.

#### **Part 4 – Conclusion**

Since the beginning of the oil crisis, it was clear that securing Western control over Iran's oil supply was a top priority of both Great Britain and the United States. Subsequently, the decision to go forward with the coup was based on this premise, which runs contrary to the common knowledge that Cold War geopolitics was the main reason for overthrowing Mosaddeq. Although there is no reason to doubt that Cold War politics played some part in the decision, it was not the primary reason for interfering in Iran's internal politics. For this reason, the United States used propaganda to affect public opinion and stir up anti-Mosaddeq sentiment.

The United States and Great Britain got everything they wanted from the 1953 coup, including the denationalization of oil. Additionally, they kept the Shah as an ally, as compliant with their agenda in the region. The blowback of this operation, however, would come in the form of anti-American sentiment, boiling over in the 1979 revolution.

<sup>68</sup> Theodore C. Streibert, *Revitalized Propaganda Campaign for Iran; Attached to Transmittal Sheet* (Washington D.C.: 1953), Document 107, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20107.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> National Security Council. *United States Objectives and Policies with Respect to the Near East* (Washington D.C.: 1954), Document 127, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB78/propaganda%20127.pdf>

When the revolution came, the monarchy was toppled and the ties to Western interests were cut off. Essentially, the coup backfired over time, and greatly damaged Iranian trust in the United States.

While CIA officials like Wilber and Roosevelt saw immediate success and gain from the operation, Grady saw the long term consequences that coup would bring to Iran and the United States. He warned the coup would be “utter folly” and that it would push Iran into “a status of disintegration with all that implies.”<sup>70</sup> And although Grady was outspoken about the U.S. and Great Britain’s policy, his assessments were ultimately ignored, resulting in his reassignment. Richard Cottam, who was also a close observer of the coup and its aftermath, had a similar assessment to that of Grady. His post-1953 assessment of the coup was that “U.S. policy did change Iran’s history in a fundamental way...In helping eliminate a government that symbolized Iran’s search for national integrity and dignity, it helped deny the successor regime nationalist legitimacy.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Kinzer, 215.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

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