

Book Reviews

The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations

Ervand Abrahamian

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In his most recent work, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U. S.-Iranian Relations*, Ervand Abrahamian (Distinguished Professor of Iranian and Middle Eastern History, Baruch College of the City University, New York) recounts a definitive moment of modern Iranian history that overshadows Iranian-American relations to this day. Drawing on a remarkable variety of sources – accessible Iranian official documents, the Foreign Office and State Department files, memoirs and biographies, newspaper articles published during the crisis, recent Persian-language books published in Iran, a CIA report leaked in 2000 known as “the Wilber document,” and two contemporary oral history projects (the Iranian Oral History Project at Harvard University and the Iranian Left history project in Berlin) – the author provides a detailed and thorough account of the 1953 coup.

Challenging the dominant consensus among academicians and political analysts that the coup transpired because of the Cold War rivalries between the West and the Soviet Union, he locates it within the paradigms of the clash between an old imperialism and a burgeoning nationalism. He then traces its origins to Iran’s struggle to nationalize its oil industry and the Anglo-American alliance against this effort.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, “Oil Nationalization,” narrates the history of Iran’s oil industry and various encounters between the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and the Iranians. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), an English company founded in 1908 following the discovery of a large oil field in Masjed Soleiman in southern Iran, was renamed AIOC in 1935. AIOC gradually turned into a vital British asset and provided its treasury with more than £24 million a year in taxes and £92 million in foreign exchange in the first decades of the twentieth century (p. 11).

However, the company treated its Iranian workers unfairly by relegating them to labor and reserving all management positions for British employees. It also failed to provide decent housing and offered no social insurance and no minimum wage for contract laborers (p. 23).

The establishment of the British Empire's military bases in southern Iran during the 1820s, the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 (which assigned northern Iran to Russia and southern Iran to Britain), and the Allied Forces' 1941 invasion and occupation of Iran inspired a great deal of anti-British sentiment. As a result of AIOC's poor treatment of its Iranian workers and the dominant anti-British sentiment, two massive general strikes occurred in the Iranian oil fields during July 1946 and April 1951. The latter, which at its height involved more than 50,000 oil industry workers, called for nationalizing the oil industry and providing the workers with better wages and living conditions. It ended on April 25, on the same day that Mohammad Mossadeq (1882-1967) submitted a detailed oil nationalization bill to Parliament and AIOC promised to provide its workers with better housing, raise the minimum wage, and pay them for the strike period (pp. 69-71).

On April 27, 1951, Parliament offered Mossadeq – an experienced member of Parliament and the head of the influential National Front – the premiership. He accepted it on the condition that his nationalization bill be immediately passed into law. Consequently, on April 29 Parliament voted for his bill and agreed to replace AIOC with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) (p. 75).

In chapter 2, "Anglo-Iranian Negotiations," Abrahamian discusses the British-Iranian oil dispute as well as the American role in it. He believes that the United States entered not as an "honest broker," which American diplomats claimed, but as "a party with much at stake" (p. 82). In fact, London and Washington, along with the oil companies, feared that nationalization would not only threaten their domination of the international oil market, but also set an undesirable example for other oil-producing countries (p. 88). Therefore, in May 1952 Britain submitted a formal complaint to the Court of International Justice claiming that Iran had violated international law by trying to nationalize its oil industry (p. 108). At the same time, Washington and London sent special delegations to Tehran to negotiate directly with Mossadeq; however, no agreement could be reached as long as the Iranian side demanded "control" over the oil industry (p. 113). In July the World Court ruled that the case was not within its jurisdiction because it was not a dispute between two sovereign states.

Shortly thereafter, AIOC shut down operations in Iran and sent its British, Pakistani, and Indian workers out of the country. Britain also pressured west-

ern European countries not to send workers to Iran, froze Iranian assets in London (£25 million), warned oil companies against doing business with Iran, and threatened to “impound any tanker leaving Iranian ports with stolen petroleum” (p. 111). The British also started negotiations with Mohammad Reza Shah (1919-80) to topple Mossadeq. Suspecting such activities, Mossadeq demanded the right to select his own war minister, but the shah, who treated the military “as his personal possession,” refused (p. 137). As a result, on July 16, 1952, Mossadeq resigned on the grounds that the shah was not abiding by the nation’s will. Parliament immediately replaced him with Ahmad Qavam (1876-1955), a pro-British politician (p. 138). Due to his pro-British policies, his severe censure of Mossadeq, the support of Ayatollah Kashani (1882-1962) – a prominent figure of the National Front – for Mossadeq, as well as the mass protests of the bazaar guilds and the Tudeh Party’s full backing of Mossadeq for the first time, Qavam was forced to resign (p. 139). In this way, on July 22 Parliament not only offered the premiership back to Mossadeq, but also granted him the portfolio for the war ministry (p. 141).

In chapter 3, “The Coup,” Abrahamian depicts the 1953 coup in detail. With Mossadeq’s triumphant return to power in mid-1952, Britain and the United States started formulating a joint plan to oust him by a military coup (p. 150). Churchill and Eisenhower signed off on “AJAX” on July 11, 1952 (p. 171). The coup was planned for August 15, but some members of the military notified Mossadeq in time to counter it. Therefore it failed, and he ordered the arrest of those involved. Yet Washington and London had many loyal followers in the Iranian military and tried a second time. During an August 18 meeting, American ambassador Loy Henderson convinced Mossadeq that both parties were truly repentant for what had happened and had had nothing to do with the coup. However, on August 19 a group of hoodlums from southern Tehran’s poor areas were incited to march toward Mossadeq’s residence; they were soon joined by pro-shah army commanders. Despite some struggle between his guards and the opposition, Mossadeq as well as almost all of his cabinet, who were in his residence at the time, were arrested.

In chapter 4, “Legacy,” Abrahamian navigates the coup’s aftermath and how it has influenced American-Iranian relations. After the coup the Anglo-American media and academicians, played by the CIA and MI6, depicted it as a people’s revolt by accusing Mossadeq of dictatorial rule, which had supposedly encouraged Iranians to topple him. Control over the Iranian oil industry was given to a consortium of American, British, and French companies (p. 209), and the shah’s regime cracked down on the National Front and the

Tudeh Party. Both of these policies effectively opened the field for the Islamist movement that eventually led to the 1979 revolution (p. 216). In addition, as a result of the gained experience by the 1953 coup, the CIA carried out similar coups in Guatemala, Indonesia, and Chile, hence making the international community suspect its involvement whenever governments were overthrown by their military from the 1950s onward (p. 205).

Abrahamian holds that the main results of the coup were the denationalization of the oil industry, the destruction of the secular opposition, and the fatal delegitimization of the monarchy (p. 206). But its key effect was on the Iranians' "collective memory." It made "politically conscious citizens" believe that "real power" lay in the "hidden hands" of foreign powers (p. 220). Even the November 1979 incident, when college students broke into the American embassy compound, was approved of by Ayatollah Khomeini on the grounds that the CIA was plotting to repeat the 1953 coup. Furthermore, it has been brought to the table during the recent nuclear standoff between the United States and Iran. Referring to 1951-53, the Islamic Republic argues that there is a parallel between a nation's right to enrich uranium and to nationalize its own natural resources (p. 225).

In conclusion, due to its scrupulous and extended analyses the book is a thorough and authoritative account of the 1953 coup, which was a critical event of Middle Eastern and world history.

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