

THE CIA AND IRAN: WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

On 16 April 2000, the New York Times published a story on what was presented as a "secret report" by a CIA operative concerning the events of August 1953 in Iran. The following article is written in the interest of historical truth and attempts to put those fateful events in Iran into prospect perspective.

At that time that the future of relations between Iran and the United States is, once again, debated in public, it is important both sides steer clear of myth is that have fostered so much misunderstanding between them.

One such myth has been woven around the claim by a few CIA operatives that they hatched a plot to get rid of Prime Minister Dr. Muhammad Mossadeq in August 1953 and (propelled my father, the late General Fazollah Zahedi into power with the Shah's blessings). That claim, first made in the early 1960's and never corroborated by any hard evidence, has over the years found a niche in the historical folklore of both nations. In a recent feature the New York Times gave the claim fresh publicity, relaunching the debate over what actually happened in Iran in those remote days of the Cold War.

Victory, of course, has a thousand fathers while defeat is an orphan. Had

the August 1953 efforts to remove Mossadeq from office failed, there would have been no CIA "heroes" claiming the credit.

There is a mass of evidence, including US and Iranian official documents and testimonies by people who played a role in the events that give the lie to the CIA operatives' claim. Briefly, what happened in August 1953 was as follows: the Iranian political establishment was divided between supporters and opponents of Mossadeq. Mossadeq's opponents looked to the Shah for a rallying point. My father who had served as Interior Minister in Mossadeq's Cabinet has broken with him and established himself as the leader of the anti-Mossadeq faction.

The Shah was thus under pressure from many powerful circles and personalities inside Iran to dismiss Mossadeq and name my father as the new prime minister. Mossadeq recognized my father as his chief adversary at the time and did all he could to break him.

Mossadeq had been abandoned by many of his former colleagues, among them such personalities as Hussein Makki and Muzzafar Baqal, and opposed by parties that had provided the backbone of his support in 1951.

The most prominent members of the Shiite clerical establishment, including the Ayatollahs Borujerdi, Hakim, Shahrestani and Kashani were solidly opposed to Mossadeq and wanted the Shah to remove him. They were all in contact with my father and supported him in their struggle against Mossadeq.

A leading member of the Majlis (parliament) Hassan Haeri-Zadeh, who had been one of Mossadeq's strongest supporters until then, even cabled the United Nations' secretary general to appeal for help against Mossadeq's increasingly despotic rule.

The Shah had already clashed with Mossadeq's in 1952 and forced the "doctor" to resign as prime minister. At that time, however, the politics of the street had turned against the Shah and he had been obliged to reinstate Mossadeq. In August 1953 the tide had turned against Mossadeq who had further undermined his own position by disbanding the parliament elected under his own stewardship.

The rest is history, as the saying goes. Or is it?

It is quite possible that the CIA and its British counterpart were engaged in the usual dirty tricks campaign in Tehran. Tehran had become one of the hottest theatres of the Cold War with



GENERAL ZAHEDI



MOHAMMAD MOSSADEQ



SHAH OF IRAN

the Soviet Union enjoying a strong presence through a mass Communist Party (the Tudeh), several front organizations and at least four daily newspapers.

The Communists had also infiltrated the armed forces and the police, recruiting over 700 officers and NCOs.

What is certain is that Mussadeq's fall was not due to any dirty tricks that the CIA might have played. Nor did the CIA have the kind of access its operatives claim to have had to the key figures of the revolt against Mussadeq including my father. The only time my father visited the US embassy in Tehran was a function in honor of Averell Harriman on 4th of July 1951, and in his capacity as interior minister. Harriman had come to Tehran with a mission from President Harry Truman to persuade Mussadeq to find a way out of the crisis over the

nationalization of Iranian oil. (Cf. Vernon Walters "Silent Missions").

My father never had any meetings with any CIA agents. One operative has claimed that he spoke to my father in German, ostensibly during secret meetings. The fact is that the only foreign languages my father ever spoke were Russian and Turkish, not German or English.

Iranian history remembers my father as a true patriot who wore the wounds he had won in battle like so many badges of honor. Fazollah Zahedi had fought for virtually every inch of what he regarded as the sacred land of Iran, against a Bolshevik-sponsored regime along the Caspian coast to a British sponsored secessionist movement in the oil rich province of Khuzestan. During the Second World War had become a war prisoner of the British and sent into captivity and exile in Palestine, then

under British mandate. Fazollah Zahedi was always big enough to fight his own fights, backed by his one loyal friends. To try and portray such a giant of Iran's contemporary history into a bit player in a scenario fit for "Mission Impossible" requires degree of cynicism that only frustrated egomaniacs might master.

Throughout the dramatic events that led to the fall of Mussadeq, I was at my father's side as one of his principal political aides. Had he been involved in any foreign intrigue I would have known, he was not.

Roy Henderson, the US ambassador to Tehran at the time, makes it abundantly clear in his dispatches to the State Department that Mussadeq was overthrown by a popular uprising which started from the poorest districts of the Iranian capital. Henderson's reports have been published in a book of more than 1000

pages, translated into Persian and published in Iran.

The Iranian public, therefore, has a more balanced view of the events than its American counterpart which is fed recycled claims by former CIA operatives. British and Soviet accounts at the time also make it clear that Mussadeq had fallen victim to his own hubris which antagonized his allies and forced the Iranian people into revolt.

More than 100 books, by Iranian and American scholars, give the lie to the CIA operatives' self congratulatory account.

Barry Rubin writes "It cannot be said that the United States overthrew Mussadeq and replaced him with the Shah... Overthrowing Mussadeq was like pushing an open door".

Gary Sick writes "The belief that the United States had single-handedly imposed a harsh tyrant on a reluctant populace became one of the central myths of the relationship, particularly as viewed from Iran.

Amir Taheri writes "What happened was not a successful conclusion of a (CIA) conspiracy but a genuine uprising provoked by economic hardship, political fear and religious prejudice.?"

Richard Helms, long time CIA director, told a BBC television program that the agency did not counter rumors of in Iran because the Iranian episode looked like a success. At the time, of course, agency needed some success, especially to counter fiascoes as the Bay of Pigs.

Even Donald Wilber, the CIA operative whose "secret report" has been given top billing by the NYT makes it clear that whatever he and his CIA colleagues were up to in Tehran at

the time simply failed.

Wilber writes: headquarters spent a day featured by depression and despair... The message sent to Tehran on the night of August 18 said that the operation has been tried and failed and that contrary operations against Mussadeq should be discontinued.

Mussadeq was overthrown on 19 August when hundreds of thousands of Tehranis poured into the streets to demand his departure and the return of the Shah. This was not a military coup d'etat since there was no change in the constitution or any of the structures of the Iranian state. Nor was the Shah's position as head of state affected. Under the constitution of 1906 the Shah had the power to name and dismiss prime ministers. He simply exercised that power by dismissing Mussadeq and nominating Zahedi in a perfectly legal and constitutional manner... Mussadeq tried to resist his dismissal but was swept by the masses.

The army played a supportive role in the anti-Mussadeq uprising and even then only after the people had taken the initiative. At the time my father was no longer on active service, having retired from the armed forces and engaged in political activities as a senator and leader of the anti-Mussadeq coalition. Mussadeq himself held the portfolio of Defense and enjoyed the support of many key officers of the armed forces, including the Chief of Staff appointed by himself.

Anyone who has studied the history of the turbulent years would also know that Mussadeq was the most pro-American senior politician Iran had produced. He was the darling of the Truman Administration which

raised the amount of aid to Iran, distributed through Point IV, from half a million dollars to 23 million dollars. On August 18, 1953, a day before Mussadeq fell, Henderson met Mussadeq and offered him an emergency loan of 10 million dollars on behalf of the Eisenhower Administration.

Mussadeq himself never blamed the Americans for his downfall. He was intelligent enough to know why his political career led into an impasse.

The anti-Mussadeq coalition did, of course, look to the United States, as the leader of the Free World, to counter any more than the Soviet might have, made at the time to intervene in what was a domestic Iranian power struggle. From a geostrategic point of view, therefore, the anti-Mussadeq coalition regarded itself as part of the Free World. But does that mean that all those who fought Communism and upheld the cause of liberty throughout the Cold War were manipulated by the CIA?

Three years ago the CIA announced that almost all of its documents pertaining to the August 1953 events in Iran had been destroyed in a fire. Was someone trying to cover up the CIA's most dramatic "success story"? Or did the documents burn because they should that the feel good ambiance created by the Iranian myth that had been fabricated by a few individuals with a lot of imagination and very little of scruples?

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