
1953, Iran: Kermit Replaced Mossadegh with the Shah

By Jim Huck, American college teacher of political science, history and international relations for 30 years.

In 2000, details the 1953 coup in Iran were released by James Reisen in the *New York Times* (April 16). The classified document obtained by the *Times* was the first detailed account of the coup. The secret history, written in 1954, was provided to the *Times* by its author, Donald Wilber, one of the coup's leading CIA planners.

Plans to overthrow Iran's democratically-elected Prime Minister Mossadegh originated with the British in 1952. The ISS, the British secret police, initially planned the operation code-named TP-Ajax. The U.S. rushed to Britain's side, showing an interest in maintaining the West's control over Iranian oil. In May 1953, the CIA sent Wilber to Cyprus to meet Norman Darbyshire, chief of the Iran branch of British intelligence.

The CIA ran into several roadblocks. First, Darbyshire said that Iranian oil should be a secondary issue. The CIA did not trust the British, thinking they lied about the importance of Iranian oil. Second, the CIA station in Teheran reported that "the Shah would not act decisively against Mossadegh." Third, the CIA and ISS handpicked General Fazollah Zehedi to lead the coup, but then the agency was told that he "appeared lacking in drive, energy and concrete plans."

In early June, CIA and ISS officials met again to fine-tune plans for the coup. The CIA picked Kermit Roosevelt of the CIA's Near East and Africa division to direct it.

In March 1953, the CIA's Teheran station reported that an Iranian general had approached the U.S. embassy about supporting an army-led coup. It reported that support for Mossadegh was crumbling and that the influence of Iran's Communist Party (Tudeh), was increasing. Tudeh called for elections and urged Mossadegh to form a coalition government which would assure a position for Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi.

As a result, the CIA stepped up its timetable. CIA Director Allen

Dulles approved \$1 million on April 4. Wilber's account said that the funds could be used "in any way that would bring about the fall of Mossadegh." It continued: "The aim was to bring to power a government which would reach an equitable oil settlement, enabling Iran to become economically sound and financially solvent, and which would vigorously prosecute the dangerously strong Communist Party." It also read: "A Shah-General Zahedi combination, supported by CIA local assets and financial backing, would have a good chance of overthrowing Mossadegh particularly if this combination should be able to get the largest mobs in the streets and if a sizable portion of the Teheran garrison refused to carry out Mossadegh's orders."

Even though the CIA knew from the start that the Shah was reluctant to participate in the coup, the agency still continued to lobby him. He refused to sign CIA-written, royal decrees to change the government. Then, the CIA arranged for the Shah's twin sister, Princess Ashraf Pahlevi, and General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the father of the Desert Storm commander, to act as intermediaries to try to convince the Shah to support the coup. In late July, Asadollah Rashidian of the ISS asked the Shah to record anti-Mossadegh remarks that later would be broadcast at prearranged times on the BBC's Persian-language program. But the Shah refused to make remarks in support of the covert operation.

On July 11, Eisenhower approved the covert operation. CIA and ISS officers visited Princess Ashraf on the French Riviera and persuaded her to return to Iran to tell her brother to follow the plans. When the unpopular princess returned, Mossadegh supporters protested against her. The Shah was furious and refused at first to see her.

In early August, the CIA stepped up pressure against Mossadegh by stirring up anti-communist sentiment within the country's Islamic community. The agency's Teheran station worked directly with royalist military officers to recruit Iranians to demonstrate in Teheran. They posed as members of the Communist Party to direct havoc against the Mossadegh government.

Protesters harassed religious leaders, and in one instance the CIA staged the bombing of a Muslim cleric's home [and blamed it on communists]. The CIA planted "grey propaganda" – anti-Mossadegh articles and cartoons in newspapers. The CIA gave one leading newspaper owner \$45,000 to publish propaganda.

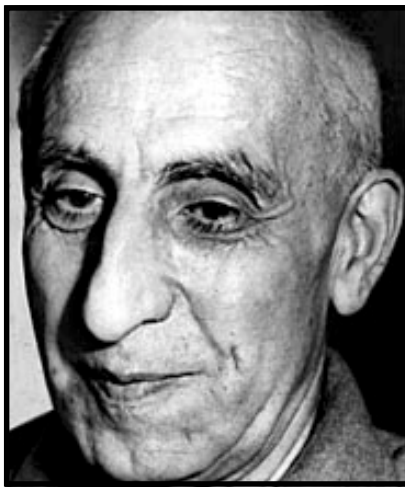
On August 1, the Shah met with Schwarzkopf and again refused to sign the CIA-written decrees authorizing the dismissal of Mossadegh and the appointment of Zahedi. The Shah was relentless pressured by Roosevelt and Rashidian at subsequent meetings.

When Mossadegh learned of the CIA plot, he moved to consolidate power by calling for a national referendum to dissolve Parliament. On August 4, he won 99.9% of the vote. Because of the prime minister's enormous popularity, the CIA thought that the Shah would immediately sign the decrees to eliminate Mossadegh. But he still refused to budge. On August 10, the Shah agreed to see Zahedi and a few army officers involved in the plot. Finally, on August 13, he signed the decrees. Word that he would support an army-led coup spread rapidly among army officers backing Zahedi.

Two days later, the coup was underway. Mossadegh sent his chief of staff to the barracks of the Imperial Guard where he was arrested. Several Iranian officers who were recruited by the CIA acted on their own, took command of a pro-Shah rally in Tehran and seized the government.

Pro-Shah soldiers began arresting other senior officials. Mossadegh rallied some Army commanders to his side. When pro-Shah soldiers went to arrest Mossadegh, they instead were captured. The top officer working with Zahedi fled when he saw tanks and loyal soldiers at Army headquarters.

The CIA document said that on the next morning, Tehran radio announced that a coup against the government had failed. Mossadegh moved to strengthen his hold on the Army and key installations. The declassified CIA history of the coup states that CIA officials in Teheran "were flying blind" and that they had "no way of knowing what was happening." Roosevelt and



Mohammed Mossadegh



Mohammed Reza Pahlevi



Kermit Roosevelt

Zahedi agreed that the coup had not yet failed and that the public could be persuaded that Zahedi was the “lawful” prime minister. To accomplish this, they spread the news that the Shah had signed the two decrees.

The CIA station in Tehran sent a message to the Associated Press, saying “leaders of the plot are armed with two decrees of the Shah, one dismissing Mossadegh and the other appointing General Zahedi.” The CIA arranged for the decrees to be mentioned in Tehran papers. The CIA prepared a statement from Zahedi but could not find a printing press that was not watched by Mossadegh’s forces.

On August 16, the CIA suffered another blow when the Shah fled to Baghdad. Believing that the coup had failed, CIA headquarters cabled Tehran urging Roosevelt to leave immediately. Roosevelt refused to follow orders, insisting there was “a slight remaining chance of success,” if the Shah spoke on Baghdad radio and if Zahedi took an aggressive stand.

The CIA then began hearing reports that Iranian soldiers had broken up Tudeh. Mossadegh made a fatal error by dissolving Parliament. On August 17, the Shah announced from Baghdad that he had signed the decrees. Mossadegh recalled most of his troops stationed around the city, believing that the danger had passed.

That night the CIA arranged for Zahedi and other key agents and army officers to be smuggled into the embassy compound. They agreed to start a counterattack on August 19, sending a leading Tehran cleric to the holy city of Qum to call for a holy war against communism. Using travel papers forged by the CIA, key army of-

“I owe my throne to God, my people, my army - and to you!”
said the Shah to Kermit.

After leaving the CIA in 1958, Kermit worked for Gulf Oil for six years. He then led a Washington-based lobbying company for foreign governments and U.S. firms operating in the Middle East.

ficers went to outlying army posts to persuade commanders to join the coup.

However, the Shah let down the CIA again when he left Baghdad for Rome. Newspapers supporting Mossadegh reported that the Shah’s dynasty had come to an end.

At the same time, Tehran newspapers hit the streets with a story of the Shah’s decrees. An Iranian Army colonel involved in the plot suddenly appeared outside Parliament with a tank, while members of the disbanded Imperial Guard seized trucks and drove through the streets. Over 100,000 people took to the streets. The CIA document said, “There were pro-Shah truckloads of military personnel at all the main squares.” The crowds began to follow pro-Shah officers. Within an hour, the telegraph office fell, and telegrams were sent to the provinces urging a pro-Shah uprising. After a shootout, police headquarters and the Foreign Affairs Ministry fell. Army officers seized the radio station, and news of the coup’s success and the Shah’s decrees were announced.

An Army officer drove Zahedi

to the radio station where he spoke to the nation. Mossadegh and other government officials were arrested, and coup supporters were placed in command of all Army units. Mossadegh was sentenced to three years in prison. He ended up under house arrest at his estate in the walled village of Ahmadabad west of Teheran. Eventually, he grew crops, founded an elementary school and began a public health project. He died in 1967.

In 1958, Roosevelt left the CIA and went to work for Gulf Oil where he negotiated access to Iran’s oil fields. In 1960, he was named vice-president of Gulf Oil. As a reward for U.S. participation in Iran, Britain gave the U.S. 60% of its holdings in Iran. They were parceled out to Gulf Oil, Standard Oil of New Jersey, Standard Oil of California, Texas Oil and Socony-Mobil. Eight smaller U.S. corporations were also given drilling rights in Iran.

For 25 years, the U.S. portrayed the Shah as a democratic and humanitarian ally. The U.S. sold him billions of dollars of the most sophisticated weapons and purchased billions of dollars of his oil. He was portrayed as a modernizer of Iran, not as an autocratic and oppressive dictator. Until his overthrow in 1979, Iran remained one of America’s “twin pillars,” along with Saudi Arabia, in the Middle East.

Source: Excerpt, *Unleashing the CIA across the Globe*. <www.angelfire.com/ca3/jphuck/Book16Ch.10.html>

For more info., see: James Risen, “The CIA in Iran,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2000, and the CIA’s history of the coup by Donald Wilber <www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html>