



## IRAN

**Oil Crisis in Iran: From Nationalism to Coup d'État**, by Ervand Abrahamian, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 195 pages. \$39.99.

*Reviewed by Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh*

On August 19, 1953, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) colluded with Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) to overthrow Iran's first democratically elected government led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. As it happened, US leaders did not suddenly decide to end Mosaddeq's tenure. In *Oil Crisis in Iran*, Ervand Abrahamian offers a meticulously detailed analysis of the 28-month run-up to that fateful event. Based on newly declassified US government documents, the author discusses how in 1951–53, the US relied on “instruments” of “fake news,” the “deep state,” and “electoral collusion” to destabilize and overthrow Mosaddeq; and having failed, it opted for a military coup (pp. 5, 23–24).

By critically examining new primary sources with the help of a variety of secondary sources, the author argues that the US systematically and without hesitation meddled in Iran's domestic affairs by

paying bribes, launching psychological warfare, instituting an economic embargo, and engaging in fear mongering. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to see how paced multilevel archival research supported by secondary source analysis bears fruit.

The story Abrahamian recounts begins shortly after Mosaddeq, working with the parliament, enacted the oil nationalization law that ended decades of British monopoly over the Iranian oil sector. The British would not have it. Two months later, they recommended “a joint Anglo-American approach,” including “a coup d'état” (p. 120), reasoning that inaction would run the risk that other weak states might nationalize their natural resources at the expense of British and American interests. Although the British have never admitted to their involvement in the coup, the Americans have revealed bits and pieces of the truth through either statements or declassifying documents.

*Oil Crisis in Iran* reads like a great spy novel. But what allows the author to lift the shroud of the mystery of the coup is the new edition of the US State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1952–1954: Vol. X, Iran, 1951–1954* (2017, first edition published in 1989). Although the 2017 edition is less redacted, “ten documents” and segments remain hidden (pp. 2–3, 23, 169–74). Other key CIA sources include Donald Wilber's “Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952–August 1953” (1954; released 2000); Scott Koch's “‘Zendebad Shah!': The Central Intelligence Agency and the Fall of the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, August 1953,” (1998, released in full 2008), and “The Battle for Iran,” (1970, released 2014) written by a “History Staff.” Most of these sources were used in the author's previous book, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (The New Press, 2015), and provide corroborative documentation that fits tightly with the current analysis based on the new edition of *FRUS*. More dated British Foreign Office documents and postmortem opinions after the coup and the 1979 revolution shed light on the coup instigators' evaluation of and reflection on their action (pp. 2–5, 187–88).

Persian-language sources, such as the daily *Ettela'at* and other primary and secondary sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, assist Abrahamian in piecing together events inside Iran from an Iranian perspective, making his analysis fresh and invaluable.

Abrahamian explains that it was Mosaddeq's incorruptibility and intense nationalism that led the Americans and British to resent him. Despite their knowledge of Mosaddeq as a "sincere, honest, and non-violent" leader, which they attributed to his being "loved by the people" (p. 8), his enemies demonstrated their frustration with him when he refused to accede to a "new" oil agreement that kept all control of oil business in British hands. It was at this point that their opinions of Mosaddeq shifted to disparaging references to him as "cunning, slippery, and completely unscrupulous," "irrational," and "paranoid" (pp. 18, 20). At the heart of their disdain for Mosaddeq was the threat he posed to their control of Iran's oil and their fear that ceding it to Iran might spark a global nationalization of natural resources (pp. 14–17, 48–53). That is why, Abrahamian demonstrates, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles led a group of American oil executives (p. 24) to push everyone, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower, to agree to his devious plans. Oddly enough, the CIA director at the time (Dulles's brother Allen) consistently objected to an open act of hostility towards Mosaddeq, preferring instead an approach focused on enabling elements within the royal court, including Mohammad Reza Shah, corrupt military generals, thugs and hoodlums, and clerics at the service of Iran's enemies to overthrow him (pp. 22–23).

Abrahamian challenges the dominant narrative that the coup was an unfortunate circumstance of the Cold War and questions highly regarded American historians such as Roger Louis and Mark Gasiorowski, Iranian historian Mohammad Movahhed, and officials such as Madeleine Albright and Barack Obama (pp. 48–49). All of them believed, or at least conveyed, the impression of their unquestionable understanding of the coup. Abrahamian questions this understanding of the reasons for

the coup by pointing to sources that do not reveal a fear of Communism (p. 63) but a fear of how Iranian "nationalization would have a domino effect spreading as far afield as Venezuela and Saudi Arabia" (pp. 48–52). Furthermore, Abrahamian argues, Iran's Communist movement, the Tudeh Party (from the Persian word for "the masses"), posed no danger. The author cites National Security Agency analyst Steven Koch, who wrote that the "Tudeh was not an 'imminent threat' — it was small . . . had no arms and paramilitary organizations" (pp. 63, 69–70) — an assessment with which the CIA concurred (pp. 63–64). Chapters 2 and 5 fully explain the author's argument in these regards.

One of the more significant, thought-provoking points is Abrahamian's allusion to historical studies on Iran: which of the two, Iranians' actions and their domestic politicking or the self-centered meddling of superpowers (in this case the US and the UK), should we consider as the main factors for the destruction of Mosaddeq's government? Based on that line of inquiry, one could perhaps ask the same question about many other historical events in Iran, more pertinently the 1979 revolution or the Iran-Iraq War. Although in the case of Mosaddeq, Abrahamian implies foreign meddling played a bigger part in the great scheme of Iranian history, it leaves one wanting to understand more about that delineation of where domestic responsibility fades and foreign pressure overpowers it.

Finally, one cannot help but draw a connection between the shah's encountering Mosaddeq in the early 1950s and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the late 1970s, as the author suggests. The shah loathed them both equally; he eliminated the former, though the latter eliminated him. It should be added that Mosaddeq's popularity was based on practicing Iranian rights of sovereignty by nationalizing its oil industry, and Khomeini's popularity was also based on the idea of national sovereignty, though he used Shi'i ideo-political tools. The 1978/79 revolutionary slogan of "*neh Sharqi, neh Gharbi, Jomhuri-ye Eslami*" ("Not Eastern, not Western, the Islamic Republic")

shouted rhythmically by millions demonstrated Khomeini's success. But what worked differently in 1979 was that, unlike 26 years earlier when they eliminated the shah's challenger, Americans refused or could not do the same to the timid shah, who could not survive without his army or American support (pp. 35–36) and abdicated by leaving Iran in the hands of his imperial generals after the latter's claim of neutrality in the revolution.

*Oil Crisis in Iran* provides a detailed chronology and an authoritative account of how, when, why, and who meddled in Iran's domestic affairs during what proved to have been a pivotal moment in the history of modern Iran and of US-Iranian relations.

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