

All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Stephen Kinzer. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2003. 258 pages.

Reviewed by David S. Robarge

At an NSC meeting in early 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower said "it was a matter of great distress to him that we seemed unable to get some of these down-trodden countries to like us instead of hating us."¹ The problem has likewise distressed all administrations since, and is emerging as the core conundrum of American policy in Iraq. In *All the Shah's Men*, Stephen Kinzer of the *New York Times* suggests that the explanation may lie next door in Iran, where the CIA carried out its first successful regime-change operation over half a century ago. The target was not an oppressive Soviet puppet but a democratically elected government whose populist ideology and nationalist fervor threatened Western economic and geopolitical interests. The CIA's covert intervention—codenamed TPAJAX—preserved the Shah's power and protected Western control of a hugely lucrative oil infrastructure. It also transformed a turbulent constitutional monarchy into an absolutist kingship and induced a succession of unintended consequences at least as far ahead as the Islamic revolution of 1979—and, Kinzer argues in his breezily written, well-researched popular history, perhaps to today.

British colonialism faced its last stand in 1951 when the Iranian parliament nationalized the sprawling Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) after London

refused to modify the firm's exploitative concession. "[B]y a series of insensate actions," the British replied with prideful stubbornness, "the Iranian Government is causing a great enterprise, the proper functioning of which is of immense benefit not only to the United Kingdom and Iran but to the whole free world, to grind to a stop. Unless this is promptly checked, the whole of the free world will be much poorer and weaker, including the deluded Iranian people themselves."² Of that attitude, Dean Acheson, the secretary of state at the time, later wrote: "Never had so few lost so much so stupidly and so fast."³ But the two sides were talking past each other. The Iranian prime minister, Mohammed Mossadeq, was "a visionary, a utopian, [and] a millenarian" who hated the British, writes Kinzer. "You do not know how crafty they are," Mossadeq told an American envoy sent to broker the impasse. "You do not know how evil they are. You do not know how they sully everything they touch."⁴

The Truman administration resisted the efforts of some British arch-colonialists to use gunboat diplomacy, but elections in the United Kingdom and the United States in 1951 and 1952 tipped the scales decisively toward intervention. After the loss of India, Britain's new prime minister, Winston Churchill, was committed to stopping his country's empire from unraveling further. Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, were dedicated to rolling back communism and defending democratic governments threatened by Moscow's machinations. In Iran's case, with diplomacy having failed and a military incursion infeasible (the Korean War was underway), they decided to take care of "that madman Mossadeq"⁵ through a covert action under the supervision of the secretary of state's brother, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles.⁶ (Oddly, considering the current scholarly consensus that Eisenhower was in masterful control of his administration, Kinzer depicts him as beguiled by a moralistic John Foster and a cynical Allen.) Directing the operation was the CIA's charming and resourceful man in Tehran, Kermit Roosevelt, an OSS veteran, Arabist, chief of Middle East operations, and inheritor of some of his grandfather Theodore's love of adventure.

The CIA's immediate target was Mossadeq, whom the Shah had picked to run the government just before the parliament voted to nationalize the AIOC. A royal-blooded eccentric given to melodrama and hypochondria, Mossadeq often wept during speeches, had fits and swoons, and conducted affairs of state from bed wearing wool pajamas. During his visit to the United States in October 1951, *Newsweek* labeled him the "Fainting Fanatic" but also observed that, although most Westerners at first dismissed him as "feeble, senile, and probably a lunatic," many came to

regard him as "an immensely shrewd old man with an iron will and a flair for self-dramatization."⁷ *Time* recognized his impact on world events by naming him its "Man of the Year" in 1951.

Mossadeq is Kinzer's paladin—in contrast to the schemers he finds in the White House and Whitehall—but the author does subject him to sharp criticism. He points out, for example, that Mossadeq's ideology blinded him to opportunities to benefit both himself and the Iranian people: "The single-mindedness with which he pursued his campaign against [the AIOC] made it impossible for him to compromise when he could and should have."⁸ In addition, Mossadeq failed at a basic test of statecraft—trying to understand other leaders' perspectives on the world. By ignoring the anticommunist basis of US policy, he wrenched the dispute with the AIOC out of its Cold War context and saw it only from his parochial nationalist viewpoint. Lastly, Mossadeq's naïvete about communist tactics led him to ignore the Tudeh Party's efforts to penetrate and control Iranian institutions. He seemed almost blithely unaware that pro-Soviet communists had taken advantage of democratic systems to seize power in parts of Eastern Europe. By not reining in Iran's communists, he fell on Washington's enemies list. Kinzer throws this fair-minded assessment off kilter, however, with a superfluous epilogue about his pilgrimage to Mossadeq's hometown. Intended to be evocative, the chapter sounds maudlin and contributes little to either an understanding of the coup or Kinzer's speculations about its relevance today.

Kinzer is at his journalistic best when—drawing on published sources, declassified documents, interviews, and a bootleg copy of a secret Agency history of the operation⁹—he reconstructs the day-to-day running of TPAJAX. The plan comprised propaganda, provocations, demonstrations, and bribery, and employed agents of influence, "false flag" operatives, dissident military leaders, and paid protestors. The measure of success seemed easy enough to gauge—"[a]ll that really mattered was that Tehran be in turmoil," writes Kinzer. The design, which looked good on paper, failed on its first try, however, and succeeded largely through happenstance and Roosevelt's nimble improvisations. No matter how meticulously scripted a covert action may be, the "fog of war" affects it as readily as military forces on a battlefield. Roosevelt may have known that already—he and his confreres chose as the project's unofficial anthem a song from the musical *Guys and Dolls*: "Luck Be a Lady Tonight."¹⁰

TPAJAX had its surreal and offbeat moments. Kinzer describes Roosevelt calmly lunching at a colleague's house in the embassy compound while "

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[o]utside, Tehran was in upheaval. Cheers and rhythmic chants echoed through the air, punctuated by the sound of gunfire and exploding mortar shells. Squads of soldiers and police surged past the embassy gate every few minutes. Yet Roosevelt's host and his wife were paragons of discretion, asking not a single question about what was happening." To set the right mood just before Washington's chosen coup leader, a senior army general named Fazlollah Zahedi, spoke to the nation on the radio, US officials decided to broadcast some military music. Someone found an appropriate-looking record in the embassy library and put on the first song; to everyone's embarrassment, it was "The Star-Spangled Banner." A less politically discordant tune was quickly played, and then Zahedi took the microphone to declare himself "the lawful prime minister by the Shah's order." Mossadeq was sentenced to prison and then lifetime internal exile.¹¹

The Shah—who reluctantly signed the decrees removing Mossadeq from office and installing Zahedi, thereby giving the coup a constitutional patina—had fled Iran during the crucial latter days of the operation. When he heard of the successful outcome from his refuge in Rome, he leapt to his feet and cried out, "I knew it! They love me!"¹² That serious misreading of his subjects' feeling toward him showed that he was out of touch already. Seated again on the Peacock Throne, the insecure and vain Shah forsook the opportunity to introduce constitutional reforms that had been on the Iranian people's minds for decades. Instead, he became a staunch pro-Western satrap with grandiose pretensions. He forced the country into the 20th century economically and socially but ruled like a pre-modern despot, leaving the mosques as the only outlet for dissent. Although the next 25 years of stability that he imposed brought the United States an intelligence payoff the price was dependence on local liaison for information about internal developments. The intelligence gap steadily widened, and Washington was caught by surprise when the Khomeini-inspired Islamist revolution occurred in February 1979.

That takeover, according to Kinzer, links the 51-year-old coup with recent and current terrorism.

With their devotion to radical Islam and their eagerness to embrace even the most horrific kinds of violence, Iran's revolutionary leaders became heroes to fanatics in many countries. Among those who were inspired by their example were Afghans who founded the Taliban, led it to power in Kabul, and gave Osama bin-Laden the base from which he launched devastating terror attacks. It is not far-fetched to draw a line from Operation Ajax through the Shah's repressive regime and the Islamic Revolution to the fireballs that engulfed the

This conclusion, however, requires too many historical jumps, exculpates several presidents who might have pressured the Shah to institute reforms, and overlooks conflicts between the Shia theocracy in Tehran and Sunni extremists in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Kinzer would have been better off making a less sweeping judgment: that TPAJAX got the CIA into the regime-change business for good—similar efforts would soon follow in Guatemala, Indonesia, and Cuba—but that the Agency has had little success at that enterprise, while bringing itself and the United States more political ill will, and breeding more untoward results, than any other of its activities.¹⁴ Most of the CIA's acknowledged efforts of this sort have shown that Washington has been more interested in strongman rule in the Middle East and elsewhere than in encouraging democracy. The result is a credibility problem that accompanied American troops into Iraq and continues to plague them as the United States prepares to hand over sovereignty to local authorities. *All the Shah's Men* helps clarify why, when many Iraqis heard President George Bush concede that "[s]ixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe,"¹⁵ they may have reacted with more than a little skepticism.

Footnotes

1. "Memorandum of Discussion at the 135th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, March 4, 1953," US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Volume X, Iran, 1951-1954* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1989), 699.
2. Kinzer, p. 121, quoting the British delegate to the UN Security Council, Gladwyn Jebb.
3. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 503.
4. Vernon A. Walters, *Silent Missions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 247.

5. John Foster Dulles, quoted in Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 8.
6. The British had a covert action against Mossadeq in train until he expelled all British diplomats (including undercover intelligence officers) in October 1952. As Kinzer describes, members of MI-6 collaborated with CIA officers in drawing up the TPAJAX operational plan.
7. Kinzer, 120.
8. *Ibid.*, 206-7.
9. Details of the Agency history were publicized in James Risen, "How a Plot Convulsed Iran in '53 (and '79)," *New York Times*, 16 April 2000, 1, 16-17. Lightly redacted versions of the history are posted on two Web sites: the *New York Times* at www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html; and the National Security Archive's at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB28/index.html.
10. Kinzer, 175, 211, 13.
11. *Ibid.*, 181, 183-84.
12. *Ibid.*, 184.
13. *Ibid.*, 203-4.
14. Such is the theme of Kinzer's previous venture (with Stephen Schlesinger) into covert action history, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, Anchor Books ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1990), wherein the authors ask, "Was Operation SUCCESS [in Guatemala] necessary and did it really advance US interests, in the long range and in the aggregate?" (xiii).
15. David E. Sanger, "Bush Asks Lands in Mideast to Try Democratic Ways," *New York Times*, 7 November 2003: A1.

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