

SECRETS OF HISTORY

The C.I.A. in Iran

The New York Times
ON THE WEB

THE ROOTS

Britain Fights Oil Nationalism

The coup had its roots in a British showdown with Iran, restive under decades of near-colonial British domination.

The prize was Iran's oil fields. Britain occupied Iran in World War II to protect a supply route to its ally, the Soviet Union, and to prevent the oil from falling into the hands of the Nazis — ousting the shah's father, whom it regarded as unmanageable. It retained control over Iran's oil after the war through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

In 1951, Iran's Parliament voted to nationalize the oil industry, and legislators backing the law elected its leading advocate, Dr. Mossadegh, as prime minister.

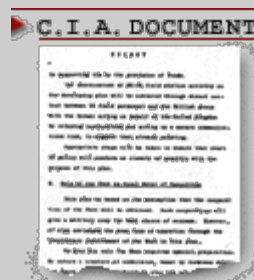
Britain responded with threats and sanctions.

Dr. Mossadegh, a European-educated lawyer then in his early 70's, prone to tears and outbursts, refused to back down. In meetings in November and December 1952, the secret history says, British intelligence officials startled their American counterparts with a plan for a joint operation to oust the nettlesome prime minister.

The Americans, who "had not intended to discuss this question at all," agreed to study it, the secret history says. It had attractions. Anti-Communism had risen to a fever pitch in Washington, and officials were worried that Iran might fall under the sway of the Soviet Union, a historical presence there.

In March 1953, an unexpected development pushed the plot forward: the C.I.A.'s Tehran station reported that an Iranian general had approached the American Embassy about supporting an army-led coup.

The newly inaugurated Eisenhower administration was intrigued. The coalition that elected Dr. Mossadegh was splintering, and the Iranian Communist Party, the



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- ▶ [INTRODUCTION](#)
- ▶ [I: THE ROOTS](#)
- ▶ [II: THE PRESSURE](#)
- ▶ [III: THE COUP](#)
- ▶ [IV: THE SUCCESS](#)
- ▶ [V: THE PREMIER](#)
- ▶ [VI: THE MEDIA](#)
- ▶ [VII: THE SPY](#)
- ▶ [TIMELINES](#)
- ▶ [THE U.S. & IRAN](#)
- ▶ [THE COUP PERIOD](#)
- ▶ [?](#)
- ▶ [ARTICLES](#)
- ▶ [PAGE ONES](#)
- ▶ [PHOTOS](#)
- ▶ [DISCUSS](#)
- ▶ [ASK THE TIMES](#)
- ▶ [THE C.I.A.'S ROLE](#)

Tudeh, had become active.

Allen W. Dulles, the director of central intelligence, approved \$1 million on April 4 to be used "in any way that would bring about the fall of Mossadegh," the history says.

"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."

Within days agency officials identified a high-ranking officer, Gen. Fazlollah Zahedi, as the man to spearhead a coup. Their plan called for the shah to play a leading role.

"A shah-General Zahedi combination, supported by C.I.A. local assets and financial backing, would have a good chance of overthrowing Mossadegh," officials wrote, "particularly if this combination should be able to get the largest mobs in the streets and if a sizable portion of the Tehran garrison refused to carry out Mossadegh's orders."

But according to the history, planners had doubts about whether the shah could carry out such a bold operation.

His family had seized Iran's throne just 32 years earlier, when his powerful father led a coup of his own. But the young shah, agency officials wrote, was "by nature a creature of indecision, beset by formless doubts and fears," often at odds with his family, including Princess Ashraf, his "forceful and scheming twin sister."

Also, the shah had what the C.I.A. termed a "pathological fear" of British intrigues, a potential obstacle to a joint operation.

In May 1953 the agency sent Dr. Wilber to Cyprus to meet Norman Darbyshire, chief of the Iran branch of British intelligence, to make initial coup plans.

Assuaging the fears of the shah was high on their agenda; a document from the meeting said he was to be persuaded that the United States and Britain "consider the oil question secondary."

The conversation at the meeting turned to a touchy subject, the identity of key agents inside Iran. The British said they had recruited two brothers named Rashidian. The Americans, the secret history discloses, did not trust the British and lied about the identity of their best "assets" inside Iran.

C.I.A. officials were divided over whether the plan drawn up in Cyprus could work. The Tehran station warned headquarters that the "the shah would not act decisively against Mossadegh." And it said General Zahedi, the man picked to lead the coup, "appeared lacking in drive, energy and concrete plans."

Despite the doubts, the agency's Tehran station began disseminating "gray propaganda," passing out anti-Mossadegh cartoons in the streets and planting

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