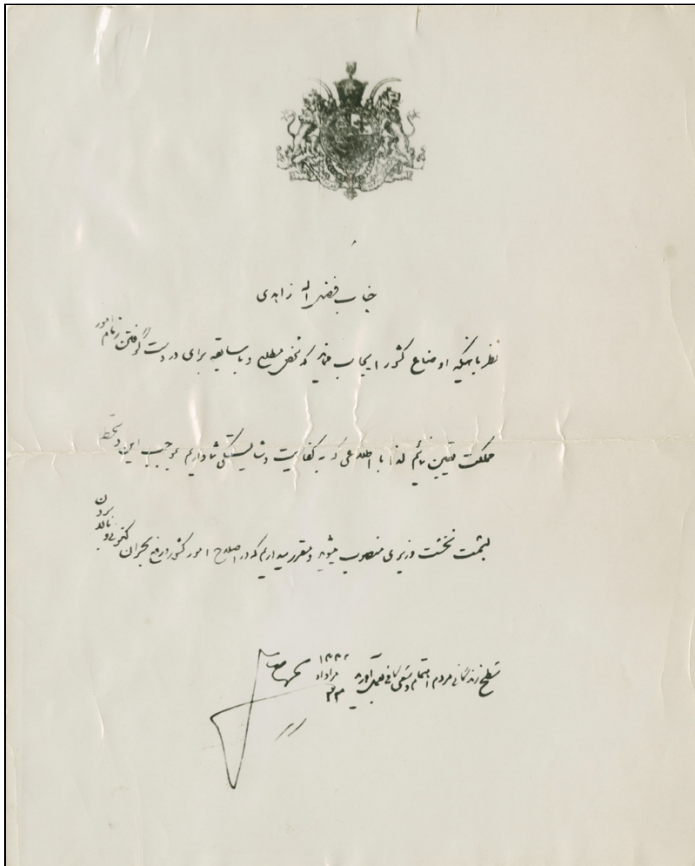


The National Security Archive

[home](#) | [about](#) | [documents](#) | [news](#) | [publications](#) | [FOIA](#) | [research](#) | [internships](#) | [search](#) | [donate](#) | [mailing_list](#)



The Shah's order (known as a *firman*) naming Zahedi the new prime minister. Coup operatives made copies of the document and circulated it around Tehran to help regenerate momentum following the collapse of the original plan. (National Security Archive collections)

CIA Confirms Role in 1953 Iran Coup

Documents Provide New Details on Mosaddeq Overthrow and Its Aftermath

National Security Archive Calls for Release of Remaining Classified Record

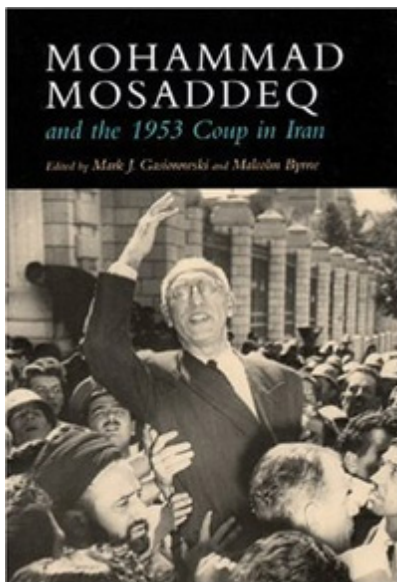
National Security Archive
Electronic Briefing Book No. 435

Posted – August 19, 2013

Edited by Malcolm Byrne

For more information contact:
Malcolm Byrne 202/994-7043 or
mbyrne@gwu.edu

Related Links



[Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953](#)

- [Decades of Delay](#)
- [Questioning CIA Rationales](#)

Have the British Been Meddling with the FRUS Retrospective Volume on 1953?

Foreign Office Worried over Very Embarrassing Revelations, Documents Show

The United Kingdom sought to expunge "very embarrassing" information about its role in the 1953 coup in Iran from the official U.S. history of the period, British documents confirm. The Foreign Office feared that a planned State Department publication would undermine U.K. standing in Iran, according to declassified records posted on the National Security Archive's Web site today.

The British censorship attempt happened in 1978, but London's concerns may play a role even today in holding up the State Department's long-awaited history - even though U.S. law required its publication years ago.

The declassified documents, from the Foreign Office (Foreign and Commonwealth Office since 1968), shed light on a protracted controversy over crucial gaps in the State Department's authoritative *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series. The blank spots on Iran involve the CIA- and MI6-backed plot to overthrow the country's prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. Six decades after his ouster, some signs point to the CIA as the culprit for refusing to allow basic details about the event to be incorporated into the FRUS compilation. [\[1\]](#)

Recently, the CIA has declassified a number of records relating to the 1953 coup, including a version of an internal history that specifically states the agency planned and helped implement the

Coup in Iran

By Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, Syracuse University Press, May 1, 2004

Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953

Coup in Iran

June 22, 2004

The Secret CIA History of the Iran Coup, 1953

November 29, 2000

CIA Secrecy Claims Are "Facially Incredible," Says Lawsuit

August 2, 2000

The 1953 Coup 60 Years On: A Symposium

July 24, 2013



Kermit Roosevelt, chief of CIA's Near East operations division, and on-the-ground manager of the U.S.-U.K. coup plan.

coup. (The National Security Archive obtained the documents through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act.) This suggests that ongoing CIA inflexibility over the FRUS volume is not so much a function of the agency's worries about its own role being exposed as a function of its desire to protect lingering British sensitivities about 1953 - especially regarding the activities of U.K. intelligence services. There is also evidence that State Department officials have been just as anxious to shield British interests over the years.

Regardless of the reasons for this continued secrecy, an unfortunate consequence of withholding these materials is to guarantee that American (and world) public understanding of this pivotal episode will remain distorted. Another effect is to keep the issue alive in the political arena, where it is regularly exploited by circles in Iran opposed to constructive ties with the United States.

Background on FRUS and the Mosaddeq Period

By statute, the FRUS series is required to present "a thorough, accurate, and reliable documentary record" of American foreign policy.^[2] That law came about partly as a consequence of the failure of the original volume covering the Mosaddeq period (published in 1989) to mention the U.S. role in his overthrow. The reaction of the scholarly community and interested public was outrage. Prominent historian Bruce Kuniholm, a former member of State's Policy Planning Staff, called the volume "a fraud."^[3]

The full story of the scandal has been detailed elsewhere,^[4] but most observers blamed the omission on the intelligence community (IC) for refusing to open its relevant files. In fact, the IC was not alone. Senior Department officials joined in opposing requests for access to particular classified records by the Historical Advisory Committee (HAC), the group of independent scholars charged with advising the Department's own Office of the Historian.^[5] The head of the HAC, Warren Cohen, resigned in protest in 1990 citing his inability to ensure the integrity of the FRUS series. Congress became involved and, in a display of bipartisanship that would be stunning today (Democratic Senator Daniel P. Moynihan getting Republican Jesse Helms to collaborate), lawmakers passed a bill to prevent similar historical distortions. As Cohen and others pointed out, while Moscow was disgorging its scandalous Cold War secrets, Washington was taking a distinctly Soviet approach to its own history.^[6]

By 1998, State's historians and the HAC had decided to produce a "retrospective" volume on the Iran coup that would help to correct the record. They planned other volumes to cover additional previously airbrushed covert activities (in Guatemala, the Congo, etc.). It was a promising step, yet 15 years later, while a couple of publications have materialized, several others have not - including the Iran volume.^[7]

Institutional Delays

A review of the available minutes of [HAC meetings](#) makes it apparent that over the past decade multiple policy, bureaucratic, and logistical hurdles have interfered with progress. Some of these are routine, even inevitable - from the complications of multi-agency coordination to frequent personnel changes. Others are more specific to the realm of intelligence, notably a deep-seated uneasiness in parts of the CIA over the notion of unveiling putative secrets.

In the Fall of 2001, an ominous development for the HO gave a sense of where much of the power lay in its relationship with the CIA. According to notes of a public HAC meeting in October 2001, the CIA, on instructions from the Director of Central Intelligence, decided unilaterally "that there could be no new business" regarding FRUS until the two sides signed an MOU. Agency officials said the document would address legitimate IC concerns; HAC members worried it would mainly boost CIA control over the series. The agency specifically held up action on four volumes to make its point, while HAC historians countered that the volumes were being "held hostage" and the HO was being forced to work "under the threat of 'blackmail'."^[8]

The CIA held firm and an agreement emerged in May 2002 that, at least from available information, appears to bend over backwards to give the IC extraordinary safeguards without offering much reassurance about key HO interests. For instance, the MOU states that the CIA must "meet HO's statutory requirement" - hardly something that seems necessary to spell out. At the same time, it allows the CIA to review materials not once, but again even after a manuscript has passed through formal declassification, and once more after it is otherwise in final form and ready for printing. In the context of the disputed Iran volume, HAC members worried about the "random" nature of these provisions which gave the agency "a second bite at the apple."^[9] The implication is that the CIA will feel little obligation to help meet the HO's legal requirement if it believes its own "equities" are at stake. (This of course may still affect the Iran volume, currently scheduled for 2014 publication.)

Is It the British?

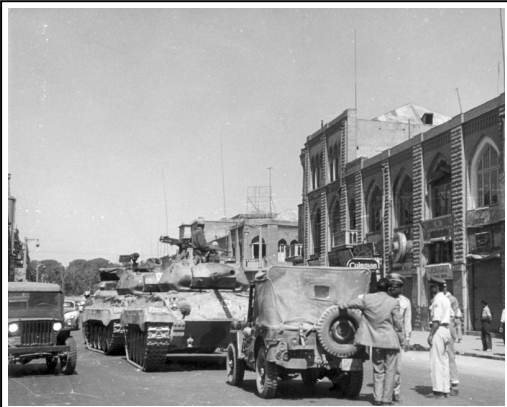
As mentioned, the CIA has begun to release documentation in recent years making explicit its connection to the Mosaddeq overthrow. Even earlier, by 2002, the State Department and CIA jointly began compiling an Iran retrospective volume. These are not signs of a fundamental institutional unwillingness to publish American materials on the coup (although parts of the CIA continued to resist the notion). The HO even tried at least twice previously to organize a joint project with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office on Iran, but the idea evidently went nowhere.^[10]

In 2004, two years later, the State Department's designated historian finished compiling the volume. According to that historian, he included a number of records obtained from research at the then-Public Record Office in London. Among his findings was "material that documents the British role." He added that he had also located State Department records "that illustrate the British role."^[11] By no later than June 2006, the Iran volume had entered the declassification queue. At the June 2006 HAC session, CIA representatives said "they believed the committee would be satisfied with the [declassification] reviews."

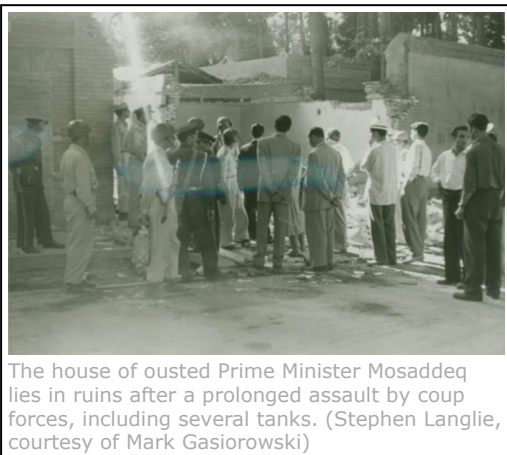
Up to that point, the agency's signals seemed generally positive about the prospects of making public previously closed materials. But in the six years since, no Iran volume has emerged. Even State's committee of historians apparently has never gotten a satisfactory explanation as to why.^[12]



Donald N. Wilber, an archeologist and authority on ancient Persia, served as lead U.S. planner of TPAJAX (along with British SIS officer Norman Darbyshire). He wrote the first CIA history of the operation (Document 1).



Tanks guard a downtown thoroughfare in Tehran during the coup. (National Security Archive collections)



The house of ousted Prime Minister Mosaddeq lies in ruins after a prolonged assault by coup forces, including several tanks. (Stephen Langlie, courtesy of Mark Gasiorowski)

When the IC withholds records, "sources and methods" are often the excuse. The CIA is loath to release anything it believes would reveal how the agency conducts its activities. (For many years, the CIA kept secret the fact that it used balloons to drop leaflets over Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and would not confirm or deny whether it compiled biographical sketches of Communist leaders.) On the other hand, clandestine operations have been named in more than 20 other FRUS publications.^[13] One of these was the retrospective volume on PBSUCCESS, the controversial overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. Furthermore, the agency has released troubling materials such as assassination manuals that demonstrate how to murder political opponents using anything from "edge weapons" to "bare hands." In 2007, in response to a 15-year-old National Security Archive FOIA request, the CIA finally released its file of "family jewels" detailing an assortment of infamous activities, from planning to poison foreign leaders to conducting illegal surveillance on American journalists.

If the agency felt it could part with such high-profile sources and methods information, along with deeply embarrassing revelations about itself, why not in the Iran case? Perhaps the British are just saying no, and their American counterparts are quietly going along.

State Department Early Warning - 1978

The FCO documents in this posting ([Documents 22-35](#)) strongly support this conclusion. They tell a fascinating story of transatlantic cooperation and diplomatic concern at a turbulent time. It was a State Department official who first alerted the FCO to plans by the Department's historians to publish an official account of the 1953 coup period. The Department's Iran expert warned that the records could have "possibly damaging consequences" not only for London but for the Shah of Iran, who was fighting for survival as he had 25 years earlier ([Document 22](#)). Two days later, FCO officials began to pass the message up the line that "very embarrassing things about the British" were likely to be in the upcoming FRUS compilation ([Document 23](#)). FCO officials reported that officers on both the Iran and Britain desks at State were prepared to help keep those materials out of the public domain, at least for the time being ([Document 33](#)). Almost 35 years later, those records are still inaccessible.

The British government's apparent unwillingness to acknowledge what the world already knows is difficult for most outsiders to understand. It becomes positively baffling when senior public figures who are fully aware of the history have already acknowledged London's role. In 2009, former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw publicly remarked on Britain's part in toppling Mosaddeq, which he categorized as one of many outside "interferences" in Iranian affairs in the last century.^[14] Yet, present indications are that the U.K. government is not prepared to release either its own files or evidently to approve the opening of American records that might help bring some degree of closure to this protracted historic - and historiographical - episode.

(Jump to the [British documents](#))

NOTES

[1] A recent article drawing attention to the controversy is Stephen R. Weissman, "Why is U.S. Withholding Old Documents on Covert Ops in Congo, Iran?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 25, 2011. (<http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2011/0325/Why-is-US-withholding-old-documents-on-covert-ops-in-Congo-Iran>)

[2] Section 198, Public Law 102-138.

[3] Bruce Kuniholm, "Foreign Relations, Public Relations, Accountability, and Understanding," American Historical Association, *Perspectives*, May-June 1990.

[4] In addition to the Kuniholm and Weissman items cited above, see also Stephen R. Weissman, "Censoring American Diplomatic History," American Historical Association, *Perspectives on History*, September 2011.

[5] Joshua Botts, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "A Burden for the Department?": To The 1991 FRUS Statute," February 6, 2012, <http://history.state.gov/frus150/research/to-the-1991-frus-statute>.

[6] Editorial, "History Bleached at State," *The New York Times*, May 16, 1990.

[7] Retrospective compilations on Guatemala (2003) and the intelligence community (2007) during the 1950s have appeared; collections on the Congo and Chile are among those that have not.

[8] HAC minutes, October 15-16, 2001, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/october-2001>.

[9] HAC minutes, July 22-23, 2002, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/july-2002>; and December 14-15, 2009, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/december-2009>.

[10] HAC minutes, July 22-23, 2002, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/july-2002>.

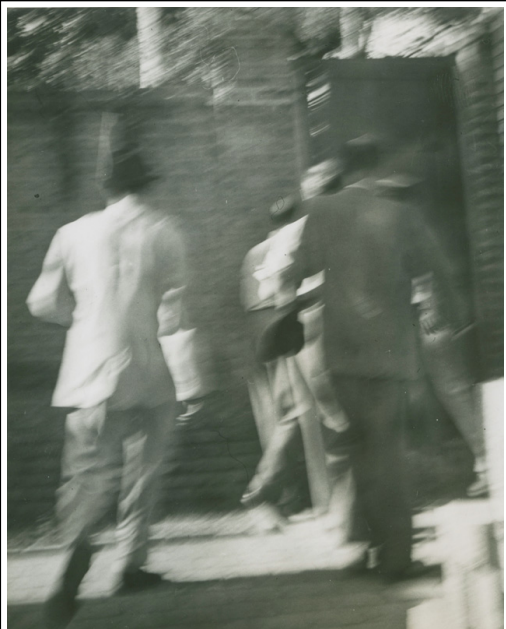
[11] HAC minutes, March 6-7, 2006, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/march-2006>.

[12] See HAC minutes for July 12-13, 2004, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/july-2004>; September 20-21, 2004, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/september-2004>; September 8-9, 2008, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/september-2008>; for example.

[13] Comments of then-FRUS series editor Edward Keefer at the February 26-27, 2007, HAC meeting, <http://history.state.gov/about/hac/february-2007>.

[14] Quoted in Souren Melikian, "Show Ignores Essential Questions about Iranian King's Role," *The International Herald Tribune*, February 21, 2009.

Do Allied Demands for Secrecy Undercut the U.S. Public Interest?



General Zahedi (right) emerging from a safehouse on the afternoon of August 19. By this time, the coup's outcome has been determined. (National Security Archive collections)



Zahedi (center, wearing white shirt) atop a tank on his way to the Radio Transmission Station to address the nation. (National Security Archive collections)



After the overthrow, an uneasy alliance obtained between the Shah (right) and his new prime minister. (www.iichs.org)

The delays in publication of the Iran FRUS volume raise broader questions about U.S. government justifications for withholding records after so much time has elapsed. When it comes to foreign government information (known as FGI) U.S. agencies deny access for sometimes decades after the events they cover - six decades in the Iran case, and counting. Consulting with allies before declassifying documents is a long-standing practice, though what exactly that entails is not well understood. The intelligence community regularly invokes FGI and "foreign relations" as reasons to deny requests through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). In response to a 1999 National Security Archive FOIA lawsuit, the CIA used both rationales in declining to release all but a single sentence from the 200-page internal history of the 1953 coup written by [Donald Wilber](#).^[1]

Although agencies often cite legal grounds for keeping information on relations with other governments classified, there is good reason to challenge the appropriateness of relying exclusively on those determinations. The following questions raise additional considerations. They make particular reference to the Iran 1953 case:

- **Does disclosure of information about other governments always critically impair intelligence relationships?**

The CIA routinely argues that divulging FGI will weaken cooperation with other intelligence agencies or make it harder to recruit agents. But a spy organization as sophisticated as MI6 understands that secrets are perpetually vulnerable to disclosure through official inquiries, leaks to the media, or nowadays WikiLeaks, especially given the free-for-all of the American political scene. Although the agency's argument sounds plausible, it is extremely unlikely that allied intelligence entities could afford to cut back meaningfully or over the long haul on cooperation and information-sharing with the United States. (See March 2013 Senate testimony by then-CENTCOM Commander James Mattis extolling the increased appetite of regional allies to share intelligence with the U.S.^[2]) Furthermore, the force of the argument diminishes when the information being withheld is six decades old, and has been repeatedly confirmed in public through knowledgeable sources.

- **Even if CIA concerns are legitimate, should these factors always be paramount?**

The U.S. military does not have final authority in matters of war and peace; the Constitution grants that power to civilian leaders. In the same way, the intelligence community does not, and should not, have the last word on whether withholding or releasing certain information serves a higher national interest. This notion is already embodied in our legal system and in the creation of entities such as the Interagency Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP) at the National Archives and Records Administration. But the system continues to exhibit an ingrained tendency to accept uncritically whatever the intelligence community asserts (to grant "great deference," as courts put it), when there may be countervailing factors worth considering, such as the effects on broader U.S. policy or standing (see below).

- **What happens when the desire to honor foreign government sensitivities risks undermining other U.S. policies or priorities?**

Protecting allied interests is in principle a reasonable policy. But there are sometimes undesirable consequences that should be considered. The most obvious result of the current standoff over the FRUS series is that it has prevented the State Department's Office of the Historian from fulfilling its legal obligation. This also damages the credibility of the U.S. government, and the CIA itself, on matters of accountability and transparency, both at home and abroad. Finally, there is the intangible cost of keeping the public in the dark about key aspects of the past and about the performance of its government. (When former CIA Director James Woolsey found out in 1997 that agency officials had destroyed most of the files on the coup in the early 1960s, he called it "a terrible breach of faith with the American people and their ability to understand their own history."^[3])

- **Can protecting sensitivities about clandestine activities be justified in perpetuity?**

Is it reasonable to argue that a 60-year-old covert action remains as sensitive as it was at the time of execution, especially when it is as widely acknowledged as the Iran coup? Other than specific imperatives such as protecting agent identities (something no-one is arguing against here), logic suggests that the justification for withholding basic facts about significant historical events degrades over time. Furthermore, as alluded to above, when an agency insists unreasonably on keeping information concealed it undermines the legitimacy of the entire secrecy system.

- **What exactly is the "foreign government information" being withheld?**

Do the CIA's criteria for protecting other governments cover only documents originated by that government, or something more? Do they broadly include *information* about that government? Do they also cover U.S. documents, as the British records imply? What is the mechanism for ensuring that these criteria are both appropriate and properly applied?

- **What are the British afraid of?**

Other than the general principle of wanting to keep their own intelligence operations under wraps, MI6 and the FCO presumably are worried that reconfirming old truths will give anti-Westerners in today's Islamic Republic fresh ammunition to use against British interests. This is a questionable assumption. Iranian bookstores have carried Persian translations of the unexpurgated 200-page Donald Wilber history for over a decade, along with pirated versions of every other published Western document or account. It is unlikely in the extreme that there are new facts in the materials still locked in American or British vaults that would even mildly surprise readers in the Islamic Republic. There is also no evidence that Iranian officials are impressed by the distinction between leaked and officially declassified history.



Several coup participants gather. Front row, from left: Ardeshir Zahedi (the prime minister's son, later ambassador to Washington), Abbas Farzanegan, Fazlollah Zahedi, Nader Batmanghelich, Hedayatollah Guilanshah. Nematollah Nassiri, who attempted to serve Mosaddeq with a firman from the Shah, is directly behind the prime minister. (www.iichs.org)

Join the NSARCHIVE
Electronic Mailing List

SHARE

Furthermore, Iranian reactions, particularly in 2000 to President Bill Clinton's and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's public acknowledgements of the U.S. role in the 1953 coup, were generally positive.^[4] Why should the response be different for Britain? Hard-liners who want to torpedo relations with London will never lack for pretexts - artificial or real. Withholding pseudo-secrets about the 1950s will hardly discourage them.

• **Has the CIA or any other U.S. agency ever challenged the British position?**

Presumably the National Clandestine Service (NCS), the agency's operational side and by most accounts the main obstacle to releasing the documents, would simply accept MI6 requests without quarrel. It is a priority for them to cooperate with allied agencies. But if the British are blocking the way, have other U.S. government components with different institutional priorities questioned the validity or impact of the British demands? Assuming there is a process to allow for this, has it been used? In either case, will the interested public ever hear what happened?

It is worth recalling an infamous U.S. Supreme Court case-that-never-was. In 1999, the Court agreed to hear a case involving the classification of information on "foreign relations" grounds. The British government had asked the State Department to keep in confidence a letter relating to the extradition of two British subjects. Their attorney requested the letter under the FOIA but was turned down, the underlying rationale being to prevent "foreign relations harm." The subsequent lawsuit went all the way to the highest court before it was discovered that a British official had already turned over a similar letter to the attorney. The court took the extremely unusual course of canceling oral arguments. If nothing else, the case highlighted how subjective - and costly - a proposition withholding foreign government information can be.^[5]

• **What are the implications of failing to resolve the Iran dilemma for the State Department's statutory obligations to the public?**

Publication of the FRUS retrospective volume on Iran is said to be imminent (by the first half of 2014). If its appearance continues to be delayed (the manuscript was completed in 2003 and first entered the declassification queue nine years ago), or if it fails to account appropriately for the British role, how will that affect the standing of this invaluable series? What will be the impact on subsequent attempts by State's Office of the Historian to present reliable accounts of other sensitive foreign operations?

• **If this standoff cannot be resolved at the agency level, at what point should the Congress or the President step in?**

How would Congress respond to the relegation of the FRUS statute to virtual irrelevance? What role has the so-called High-Level Panel, including representatives from State, CIA and the National Security Council staff, played so far? For the Obama administration, the episode to date is a blemish on its aspirations for open government and rational classification practices, but one that is well within White House powers to remove.

NOTES

[1] See HAC minutes, February 25-26, 2008, (<http://history.state.gov/about/hac/february-2008>); see also "Declaration of William H. McNair..." August 13, 1999, in National Security Archive v. Central Intelligence Agency, Civil No. 99-1160. (<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/ciacase/EXA.pdf>).

[2] Quoted in Steven Aftergood, *Secrecy News*, March 10, 2013.

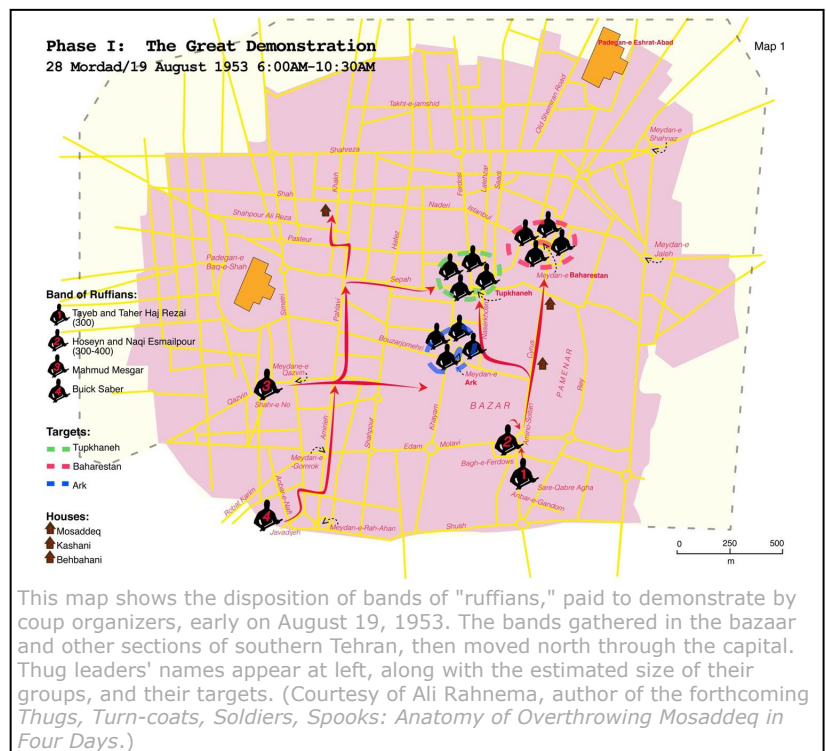
[3] Tim Weiner, "C.I.A. Destroyed Files on 1953 Iran Coup," *The New York Times*, May 29, 1997.

[4] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's negative public response emphasized other issues, notably Albright's comment that Iran was ruled by a handful of unelected individuals.

[5] See U.S. Justice Department, Office of Information Policy, *FOIA Update*, Vol. XX, No. 1, (undated), http://www.justice.gov/oip/foia_updates/Vol_XX_1/page1.htm.

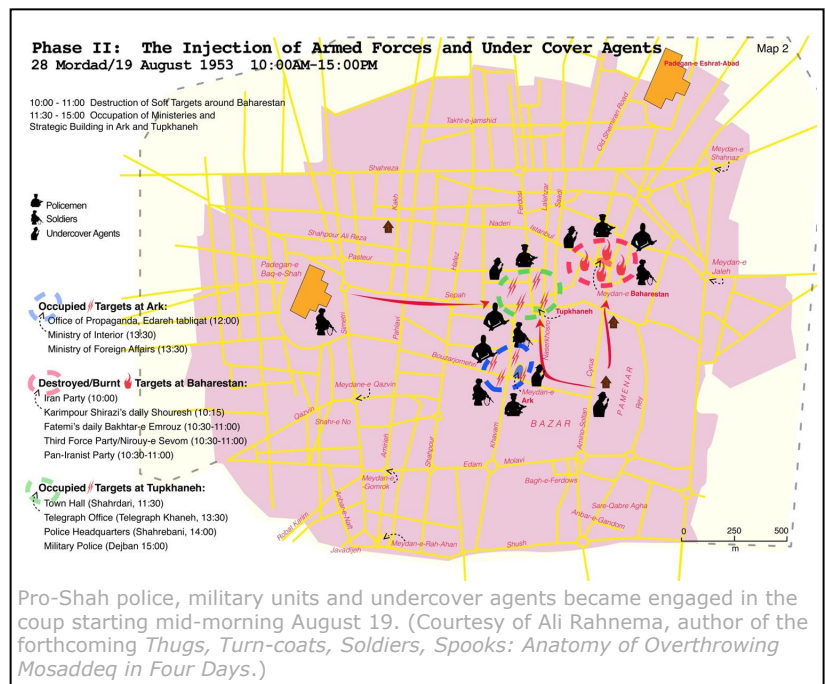
Washington, D.C., August 19, 2013 – Marking the sixtieth anniversary of the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, the National Security Archive is today posting recently declassified CIA documents on the United States' role in the controversial operation. American and British involvement in Mosaddeq's ouster has long been public knowledge, but today's posting includes what is believed to be the CIA's first formal acknowledgement that the agency helped to plan and execute the coup.

The explicit reference to the CIA's role appears in a copy of an internal history, *The Battle for Iran*, dating from the mid-1970s. The agency released a heavily excised version of the account in 1981 in response to an ACLU lawsuit, but it blacked out all references to TPAJAX, the code name for the U.S.-led operation. Those references appear in the latest release. Additional CIA materials posted today include working files from Kermit Roosevelt, the senior CIA officer on the ground in Iran during the coup. They provide new specifics as well as insights into the intelligence agency's actions before and after the operation.



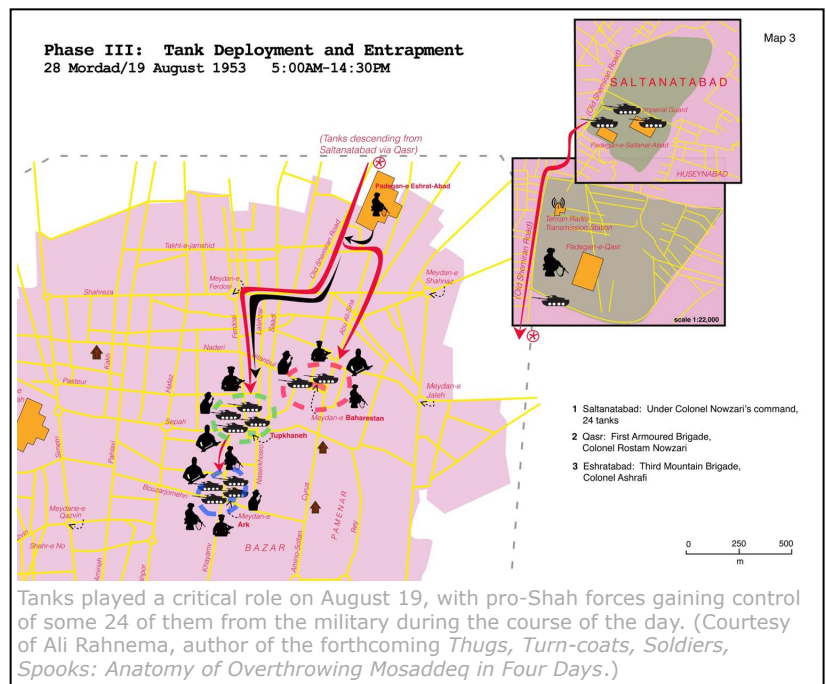
The 1953 coup remains a topic of global interest because so much about it is still under intense debate. Even fundamental questions — who hatched the plot, who ultimately carried it out, who supported it inside Iran, and how did it succeed — are in dispute.^[1]

The issue is more than academic. Political partisans on all sides, including the Iranian government, regularly invoke the coup to argue whether Iran or foreign powers are primarily responsible for the country's historical trajectory, whether the United States can be trusted to respect Iran's sovereignty, or whether Washington needs to apologize for its prior interference before better relations can occur.



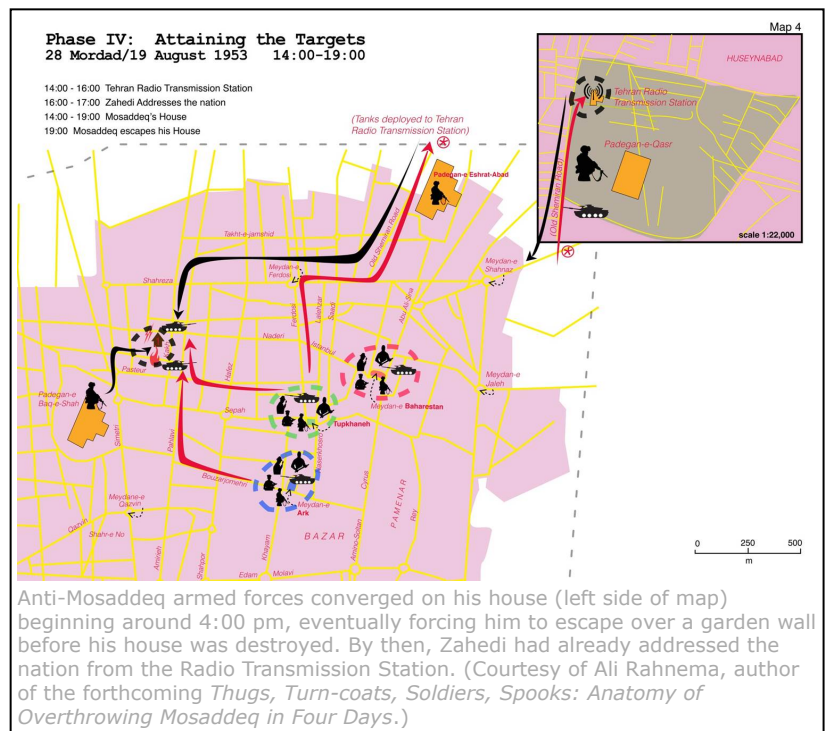
Also, the public release of these materials is noteworthy because CIA documents about 1953 are rare. First of all, agency officials have stated that most of the records on the coup were either lost or destroyed in the early 1960s, allegedly because the record-holders' "safes were too full." [2]

Regarding public access to any remaining files (reportedly about one cubic foot of material), the intelligence community's standard procedure for decades has been to assert a blanket denial. This is in spite of commitments made two decades ago by three separate CIA directors. Robert M. Gates, R. James Woolsey, and John M. Deutch each vowed to open up agency historical files on a number of Cold War-era covert operations, including Iran, as a sign of the CIA's purported new policy of openness after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. [3]



A clear sign that their pledge would not be honored in practice came after the National Security Archive [filed a lawsuit](#) in 1999 for a well-known internal CIA narrative about the coup. One of the operation's planners, Donald N. Wilber, prepared the account less than a year later. The CIA agreed to release just a single sentence out of the 200-page report.

Despite the appearance of countless published accounts about the operation over the years - including Kermit Roosevelt's own detailed memoir, and the subsequent leak to *The New York Times* of the 200-page CIA narrative history[4] — intelligence agencies typically refused to budge. They have insisted on making a distinction between publicly available information on U.S. activities from non-government sources and official acknowledgement of those activities, even several decades after the fact.



While the National Security Archive applauds the CIA's decision to make these materials available, today's posting shows clearly that these materials could have been safely declassified many years ago without risk of damage to the national security. (See sidebar, "Why is the Coup Still a Secret?")

Archive Deputy Director Malcolm Byrne called for the U.S. intelligence community to make fully available the remaining records on the coup period. "There is no longer good reason to keep secrets about such a critical episode in our recent past. The basic facts are widely known to every school child in Iran. Suppressing the details only distorts the history, and feeds into myth-making on all sides."

To supplement the recent CIA release, the National Security Archive is including two other, previously available internal accounts of the coup. One is the narrative referred to above: a 1954 Clandestine Services History prepared by Donald N. Wilber, one of the operation's chief architects, which *The New York Times* obtained by a leak and first posted on its site in April 2000.

The other item is a heavily excised 1998 piece — "*Zendebad, Shah!*" — by an in-house CIA historian. (The Archive has asked the CIA to re-review the document's excessive deletions for future release.)

The posting also features an earlier declassification of *The Battle for Iran* for purposes of comparison with the latest

release. The earlier version includes portions that were withheld in the later release. As often happens, government classification officials had quite different — sometimes seemingly arbitrary — views about what could and could not be safely made public.

Read together, the three histories offer fascinating variations in perspective — from an agency operative to two in-house historians (the last being the most dispassionate). Unfortunately, they still leave wide gaps in the history, including on some fundamental questions which may never be satisfactorily answered — such as how to apportion responsibility for planning and carrying out the coup among all the Iranian and outside actors involved.

But all 21 of the CIA items posted today (in addition to 14 previously unpublished British documents — see Sidebar), reinforce the conclusion that the United States, and the CIA in particular, devoted extensive resources and high-level policy attention toward bringing about Mosaddeq's overthrow, and smoothing over the aftermath.

DOCUMENTS

CIA Records

CIA Internal Histories

Document 1 ([Cover Sheet](#), [Summary](#), [I](#), [II](#), [III](#), [IV](#), [V](#), [VI](#), [VII](#), [VIII](#), [IX](#), [X](#), [Appendix A](#), [Appendix B](#), [Appendix C](#), [Appendix D](#), [Appendix E](#)): CIA, Clandestine Services History, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran: November 1952 - August 1953*, Dr. Donald N. Wilber, March 1954

Source: *The New York Times*

Donald Wilber was a principal planner of the initial joint U.S.-U.K. coup attempt of August 1953. This 200-page account is one of the most valuable remaining records describing the event because Wilber wrote it within months of the overthrow and provided a great deal of detail. Like any historical document, it must be read with

care, taking into account the author's personal perspective, purpose in writing it, and audience. The CIA routinely prepared histories of important operations for use by future operatives. They were not intended to be made public.

Document 2: CIA, Summary, "Campaign to Install a Pro-Western Government in Iran," draft of internal history of the coup, undated

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

This heavily excised summary was almost certainly prepared in connection with Donald Wilber's Clandestine Services History (Document 1). By all indications written not long after the coup (1953-54), it includes several of the phrases Wilber used — "quasi-legal," and "war of nerves," for example. The text clearly gives the impression that the author attributes the coup's eventual success to a combination of external and internal developments. Beginning by listing a number of specific steps taken by the U.S. under the heading "CIA ACTION," the document notes at the end (in a handwritten edit): "These actions resulted in literal revolt of the population, [1+ lines excised]. The military and security forces joined the populace, Radio Tehran was taken over, and Mossadeq was forced to flee on 17 [sic] Aug 53."

Document 3A & Document 3B: CIA, History, *The Battle for Iran*, author's name excised, undated (c. mid-1970s) - (Two versions - declassified in 1981 and 2011)

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

This posting provides two separate releases of the same document, declassified 30 years apart (1981 and 2011). Each version contains portions excised in the other. Though no date is given, judging from citations in the footnotes *The Battle for Iran* was written in or after 1974. It is marked "Administrative - Working Paper" and contains a number of handwritten edits. The author was a member of the CIA's History Staff who acknowledges "the enthusiastic cooperation" of the agency's Directorate of Operations. The author provides confirmation that most of

the relevant files were destroyed in 1962; therefore the account relies on the relatively few remaining records as well as on public sources. The vast majority of the covert action portion (Section III) remains classified, although the most recent declassification of the document leaves in some brief, but important, passages. An unexpected feature of the document (Appendix C) is the inclusion of a series of lengthy excerpts of published accounts of the overthrow designed, apparently, to underscore how poorly the public understood the episode at the time.

Document 4: CIA, History, "*Zendebad, Shah!*": *The Central Intelligence Agency and the Fall of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, August 1953*, Scott A. Koch, June 1998

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

The most recent known internal history of the coup, "*Zendebad, Shah!*" was written by an in-house agency historian in 1998. It is heavily excised (but currently undergoing re-review by the CIA), with virtually all paragraphs marked Confidential or higher omitted from the public version. Still, it is a useful account written by someone without a stake in the events and drawing on an array of U.S. government and published sources not available to the earlier CIA authors.

CIA Records Immediately Before and After the Coup

Document 5: CIA, memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], July 14, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

Kermit Roosevelt conveys information about rapidly unfolding events in Tehran, including Mosaddeq's idea for a referendum on his remaining in office, the prospect of his closing the Majles, and most importantly the impact President Eisenhower's recent letter has had in turning society against the prime minister. The U.S. government publicized Eisenhower's undiplomatic letter turning down Mosaddeq's request for financial aid. The move was one of

the ways Washington hoped to weaken his political standing.

Document 6: CIA, memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], July 15, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

Responding to the resignation of Mosaddeq supporters from the Majles, Kermit Roosevelt fires off a plan to ensure that other Majles members keep the parliament functioning, the eventual goal being to engineer a no-confidence in Mosaddeq. The memo provides an interesting clue on the subject of whether CIA operatives ever bought votes in the Majles, about which other CIA sources are vague. Roosevelt urges that as many deputies as possible be "persuaded" to take *bast* in the parliament. "Recognize will be necessary expend money this purpose and determine precisely who does what." At the conclusion of the document he appears to tie this scheme into the previously elaborated — but clearly evolving — coup plan.

Document 7: CIA, memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], July 16, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

Roosevelt reports on developing plans involving Fazlollah Zahedi, the man who has been chosen to replace Mosaddeq. CIA sources, including the Wilber history, indicate that the military aspects of the plan were to be largely Zahedi's responsibility. This memo supports that (even though many details are excised), but also provides some insight into the differences in expectations between the Americans and Zahedi. With some skepticism ("Zahedi claims ..."), Roosevelt spells out a series of events Zahedi envisions that presumably would bring him to the premiership, albeit in a very round-about way. His thinking is clearly prompted by his declared unwillingness to commit "'political suicide' by extra-legal move."

Document 8: CIA, memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], July 17, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

The CIA's Tehran station reports on the recent resignations of independent and opposition Majles members. The idea, an opposition deputy tells the station, was to avert Mosaddeq's planned public referendum. The memo gives a bit of insight into the fluidity and uncertainty of developments with each faction undoubtedly elaborating their own strategies and tactics to a certain degree.

Document 9: CIA, note to Mr. [John] Waller, July 22, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

This brief note conveys much about both U.S. planning and hopes for Mosaddeq's overthrow. It is a request from Kermit Roosevelt to John Waller and Donald Wilber to make sure that a formal U.S. statement is ready in advance of "a 'successful' coup." (See Document 10)

Document 10: CIA, note forwarding proposed text of State Department release for after the coup, August 5, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

This draft text from the State Department appears to be a result of Roosevelt's request (Document 9) to have an official statement available for use after completion of the operation. The draft predates Mosaddeq's ouster by two weeks, but its language — crediting "the Iranian people, under the leadership of their Shah," for the coup — tracks precisely with the neutral wording used by both the State Department and Foreign Office in their official paperwork after the fact.

Document 11: CIA, Memo, "Proposed Commendation for Communications Personnel who have serviced the

TPAJAX Operation," Frank G. Wisner to The Acting Director of Central Intelligence, August 20, 1953**Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release**

Wisner recommends a special commendation for the work performed by the communications specialists who kept CIA headquarters in contact with operatives in Iran throughout the coup period. "I am sure that you are aware of the exceptionally heavy volume of traffic which this operation has necessitated," Wisner writes — an unintentionally poignant remark given how little of that documentation has survived.

Document 12: CIA, Memo, "Commendation," Frank G. Wisner to CNEA Division, August 26, 1953**Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release**

Wisner also requests a commendation for John Waller, the coup overseer at CIA headquarters, "for his work in TPAJAX." Waller's conduct "in no small measure, contributed to the successful result."

Document 13: CIA, "Letter of Commendation [Excised]," author and recipient names excised, August 26, 1953**Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release**

Evidently after reflection, Frank Wisner concludes that there are troubling "security implications" involved in providing a letter of commendation for a covert operation.

Document 14: CIA, Memo, "Anti-Tudeh Activities of Zahedi Government," author's name excised, September 10, 1953**Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release**

A priority of the Zahedi government after the coup was to go after the Tudeh Party, which had been a mainstay of support for Mosaddeq, even if the relationship was mostly

one of mutual convenience. This is one of several memos reporting details on numbers of arrests, names of suspected Central Committee members, and planned fate of arrestees. The report claims with high specificity on Soviet assistance being provided to the Tudeh, including printing party newspapers at the embassy. Signs are reportedly mixed as to whether the party and pro-Mosaddeq elements will try to combine forces again.

Document 15: CIA, memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], September 21, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

Roosevelt reports on an intense period of political maneuvering at high levels in the Zahedi government. Intrigues, patronage (including a report that the government has been giving financial support to Ayatollah Behbehani, and that the latter's son is angling for a Cabinet post), and corruption are all dealt with in this memo.

Document 16: CIA, memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], September 24, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

A restless Zahedi is reported to be active on a number of fronts including trying to get a military tribunal to execute Mosaddeq and urging the Shah to fire several senior military officers including Chief of Staff Batmangelich. The Shah reportedly has not responded to Zahedi's previous five messages.

Document 17: CIA, Memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], October 2, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

According to this account, the Shah remained deeply worried about Mosaddeq's influence, even while incarcerated. Roosevelt reports the Shah is prepared to execute Mosaddeq (after a guilty verdict that is a foregone

conclusion) if his followers and the Tudeh take any threatening action.

Document 18: CIA, Memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], October 9, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

Iranian politics did not calm down entirely after the coup, as this memo indicates, reporting on "violent disagreements" between Zahedi and his own supporter, Hoseyn Makki, whom Zahedi threatened to shoot if he accosted any senators trying to attend a Senate session. Roosevelt also notes two recent payments from Zahedi to Ayatollah Behbehani. The source for these provocative reports is unknown, but presumably is named in the excised portion at the top of the memo.

Document 19: CIA, memo from Kermit Roosevelt to [Excised], October 20, 1953

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

Roosevelt notes a meeting between the new prime minister, Zahedi, and Ayatollah Kashani, a politically active cleric and once one of Mosaddeq's chief supporters. Kashani reportedly carps about some of his former National Front allies. Roosevelt concludes Zahedi wants "split" the front "by wooing Kashani away."

Document 20: CIA, Propaganda Commentary, "Our National Character," undated

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

This appears to be an example of CIA propaganda aimed at undermining Mosaddeq's public standing, presumably prepared during Summer 1953. Like other examples in this posting, the CIA provided no description when it released the document. It certainly fits the pattern of what Donald Wilber and others after him have described about the nature of the CIA's efforts to plant damaging innuendo in local Iranian media. In this case, the authors extol the

virtues of the Iranian character, particularly as admired by the outside world, then decry the descent into "hateful," "rough" and "rude" behavior Iranians have begun to exhibit "ever since the alliance between the dictator Mossadeq and the Tudeh Party."

Document 21: CIA, Propaganda Commentary, "Mossadeq's Spy Service," undated

Source: CIA Freedom of Information Act release

This propaganda piece accuses the prime minister of pretending to be "the savior of Iran" and alleges that he has instead built up a vast spying apparatus which he has trained on virtually every sector of society, from the army to newspapers to political and religious leaders. Stirring up images of his purported alliance with "murderous Qashqai Khans" and the Bolsheviks, the authors charge: "Is this the way you save Iran, Mossadeq? We know what you want to save. You want to save Mossadeq's dictatorship in Iran!"

British Records

Document 22 : FCO, Summary Record, "British-American Planning Talks, Washington," October 10-11, 1978

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) FCO 8/3216, File No. P 333/2, Folder, "Iran: Release of Confidential Records," 1 Jan - 31 Dec 1978 (hereafter: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216)

In October 1978, a delegation of British FCO officials traveled to Washington for two days of discussions and comparing of notes on the world situation with their State Department counterparts. The director of the Department's Policy Planning Staff, Anthony Lake (later to serve as President Bill Clinton's national security advisor), led the American side. Other participants were experts from various geographical and functional bureaus, including Henry Precht, the head of the Iran Desk.

Beginning in paragraph 22, Precht gives a dour summary of events in Iran: "the worst foreign policy disaster to hit

the West for many years." In a fascinating back-and-forth about the Shah, Precht warns it is "difficult to see how the Shah could survive." The British politely disagree, voicing confidence that the monarchy will survive. Even his State Department colleagues "showed surprise at the depth of Mr. Precht's gloom."

In the course of his presentation (paragraph 23), Precht notes almost in passing that the State Department is reviewing its records from 1952-1954 for eventual release. A British representative immediately comments that "if that were the case, he hoped HMG [Her Majesty's Government] would be consulted."

Document 23: FCO, Minute, B.L. Crowe to R.S. Gorham, "Anglo-American Planning Talks: Iran," October 12, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

This memo recounts Precht's dramatic presentation on Iran two days earlier (see previous document). "His was essentially a policy of despair," the author writes. When the British follow up with the Americans about Precht's outlook of gloom, they find that State Department and National Security Council (NSC) staff were just as bewildered by his remarks. One NSC staff member calls them "bullshit." Policy Planning Director Lake laments the various "indiscreet and sensitive things" the Americans said at the meeting, and asks the British to "be very careful" how they handle them.

"On a completely different subject," the minute continues, "Precht let out ... that he was having to go through the records of the 1952/53 Mossadeq period with a view to their release under the Freedom of Information Act [sic]. He said that if released, there would be some very embarrassing things about the British in them." (Much of this passage is underlined for emphasis.) The note goes on: "I made a strong pitch that we should be consulted," but the author adds, "I imagine that it is American documents about the British rather than documents on which HMG have any lien which are involved." (This is a point that may still be at issue today since the question of discussing American documents with foreign governments is very

different from negotiating over the use of foreign government records.)

Document 24: FCO, Letter, R.J. Carrick to B.L. Crowe, October 13, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

An FCO official reports that Precht recently approached another British diplomat to say that "he hoped we had not been too shocked" by his recent presentation. He says Precht acknowledged being "over-pessimistic" and that in any event he had not been offering anyone's view but his own.^[5] According to the British, NSC staff members put more stock in the assessments of the U.K. ambassador to Tehran, Sir Anthony Parsons, than in Precht's. The writer adds that U.S. Ambassador to Iran William Sullivan also shares Parsons' judgment, and concludes, without indicating a source, that even "Henry Precht has now accepted Sullivan's view!"

Document 25: FCO, Letter, R.S. Gorham to Mr. Cullimore, "Iran: The Ghotbi Pamphlet and the Mussadeq Period," October 17, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

This cover note (to Document 24) refers to Precht's revelation about the impending American publication of documents on the Mosaddeq period. The author suggests giving some consideration to the implications of this for "our own record of the time."

Document 26: FCO, Letter, B.L. Crowe to Sir A. Duff, "Anglo-American Planning Talks," October 19, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

FCO official Brian Crowe summarizes the October 10-11 joint U.S.-U.K. talks. The document is included here mainly for the sake of comprehensiveness, since it is part of the FCO folder on the FRUS matter. The writer repeats the remark from State's Anthony Lake that "some of the

comments" from the U.S. side on Iran (among other topics) were "highly sensitive" and should not be disclosed - even to other American officials.

Document 27: FCO, Letter, J.O. Kerr to B.L. Crowe, "Talks with the US Planners: Iran," October 24, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

This brief note shows that word is moving up the line in the FCO about the forthcoming FRUS volume on Iran. The writer conveys a request to have the U.K. embassy in Washington check the risks involved in the potential release of U.S. documents, and "when the State Department propose to raise them formally with us."

Document 28: FCO, letter, G.G.H. Walden to B.L. Crowe, "Anglo-American Planning Talks: Iran," November 10, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

Still more interest in the possible State Department release is reflected in this short note, now a month after the joint U.S.-U.K. talks. Here and elsewhere, the British notes erroneously report that the release will come under the Freedom of Information Act (or the Public Information Act, as given here); they are actually slated for inclusion in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series.

Document 29: FCO, R.S. Gorham cover note to Streams, "Iran: Release of Confidential Records," attaching draft letter to Washington, November 14, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

This note and draft are included primarily because they are part of the FCO file on this topic. However, the draft letter does contain some different wording from the final version (Document 31).

Document 30: U.S. Embassy London, Letter, Ronald I. Spiers to Sir Thomas Brimelow, March 24, 1975

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

Three years before Precht's revelation to his British counterparts, the U.K. sought general guidance from the State Department about how the U.S. would handle "classified information received from Her Majesty's Government." The month before, robust amendments to the U.S. Freedom of Information Act had gone into effect. This letter from the number two official in London at the time, Ronald Spiers, offers a detailed response. Britain's awareness of the new amendments and anxiousness about their implications (including the fairly abstruse question of how secret documents would be handled in court cases) show how sensitive an issue the British considered protection of their information to be. The U.S. Chargé is equally anxious to provide the necessary reassurances. (More than a decade later, Spiers would sharply oppose efforts by the State Department's Historical Advisory Committee to gain access to restricted documentation for the FRUS series.^[6])

Document 31: FCO, Letter, R.S. Gorham to R.J.S. Muir, "Iran: Release of Confidential Records," November 16, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

The British embassy in Washington is alerted to the possibility of documents being released on the 1952-54 period. The FCO clearly expects that, as apparently has been the case in the past, "there should be no difficulty for the Americans in first removing ... copies of any telegrams etc from us and US documents which record our views, even in the case of papers which are not strictly speaking 'official information furnished by a foreign government.'" (This raises important questions about how far U.S. officials typically go to accommodate allied sensibilities, including to the point of censoring U.S. documents.) "What is not clear," the letter continues, "is whether they could withhold American documents which referred to joint Anglo/US views about, say, the removal of Musaddiq in 1953."

Document 32: British Embassy in Washington, Letter, R.J.S. Muir to R.S. Gorham, "Iran" Release of Confidential Records," December 14, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

This follow-up to Gorham's earlier request (Document 31) is another reflection of U.K. skittishness about the pending document release. The embassy officer reports that he has spoken to Henry Precht "several times" about it, and that the British Desk at the State Department is also looking into the matter on London's behalf. The objective is to persuade the Department to agree to withhold not only British documents but American ones, too.

Document 33: British Embassy in Washington, Letter, R.J.S. Muir to R.S. Gorham, "Iran: Release of Confidential Records," December 22, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

The embassy updates the FCO on the status of the Iran records. Precht informs the embassy that he is prepared to "sit on the papers" to help postpone their publication. Precht's priority is the potential impact on current U.S. and U.K. policy toward Iran. Conversely, a historian at the State Department makes it clear that his office feels no obligation even to consult with the British about any non-U.K. documents being considered. The historian goes on to say "that he had in the past resisted requests from other governments for joint consultation and would resist very strongly any such request from us." But the same historian admits that the embassy might "be successful" if it approached the policy side of the Department directly.

The embassy letter ends with a "footnote" noting that State Department historians "have read the 1952-54 papers and find them a 'marvelous compilation.'"

Interestingly, a handwritten comment on the letter from another FCO official gives a different view about the likely consequences of the upcoming document publication: "As the revolution [in Iran] is upon us, the problem is no longer Anglo-American: the first revelations

will be from the Iranian side." In other words, the revolution will bring its own damaging results, and the revolutionaries will not need any further ammunition from the West.

Document 34: FCO, Cover Note, Cohen (?) to Lucas, circa December 22, 1978

Source: TNA: PRO FCO 8/3216

In a handwritten remark at the bottom of this cover note, an unidentified FCO official voices much less anxiety than some of his colleagues about the possible repercussions of the disclosure of documents on Iran. Referring to a passage in paragraph 3 of the attached letter (see previous document), the writer asks: "why should we be concerned about 'any other documents'?" The writer agrees with the cover note author's suggestion to "let this matter rest for a while," then continues: "I think we ought positively to seek the agreement of others interested to Y." ("Y" identifies the relevant passage on the cover note.)

Document 35: FCO, Meeting Record, "Iran: Policy Review," December 20, 1978

Source : British National Archives, FCO 8/3351, File No. NB P 011/1 (Part A), Title "Internal Political Situation in Iran"

British Foreign Secretary David Owen chairs this FCO meeting on the unfolding crisis in Iran. It offers a window into London's assessment of the revolution and British concerns for the future (including giving "highest priority to getting paid for our major outstanding debts"). The document also shows that not everyone at the FCO believed significant harm would necessarily come to British interests from the FRUS revelations. Although he is speaking about events in 1978, I.T.M. Lucas' comment could apply just as forcefully to the impact of disclosing London's actions in 1953: "[I]t was commonly known in [the Iranian] Government who the British were talking to, and there was nothing we could do to disabuse public opinion of its notions about the British role in Iran." (p. 2)

NOTES

[1] Just in the last several years, books in English, French and Persian by Ervand Abrahamian, Gholam-Reza Afkhami, Mohammad Amini, Christopher de Bellaigue, Darioush Bayandor, Mark Gasiorowski (and this author), Stephen Kinzer, Abbas Milani, Ali Rahnema, and others have focused on, or at least dealt in depth with, Mosaddeq and the coup. They contain sometimes wide differences of view about who was behind planning for the overthrow and how it finally played out. More accounts are on the way (including an important English-language volume on Iranian domestic politics by Ali Rahnema of the American University of Paris).

[2] Tim Weiner, "C.I.A. Destroyed Files on 1953 Iran Coup," *The New York Times*, May 29, 1997.

[3] Tim Weiner, "C.I.A.'s Openness Derided as a 'Snow Job'," *The New York Times*, May 20, 1997; Tim Weiner, *op. cit.*, May 29, 1997. (See also the link to the Archive's lawsuit, above.)

[4] Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979); *The New York Times*, April 16, 2000.

[5] Precht recalls that he was originally not slated to be at the meetings, which usually deputy assistant secretaries and above attended. But the Near East division representative for State was unavailable. "I was drafted," Precht said. Being forced to "sit through interminable and pointless talk" about extraneous topics "when my plate was already overflowing" on Iran contributed to a "sour mood," he remembered. (Henry Precht e-mail to author, June 2, 2011.)

[6] Joshua Botts, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "'A Burden for the Department?': To The 1991 *FRUS* Statute," February 6, 2012, <http://history.state.gov/frus150/research/to-the-1991-frus-statute>.

Contents of this website Copyright 1995-2017 National Security Archive. All rights reserved. [Terms and conditions](#) for use of materials found on this website.