



COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953

COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953. The appointment of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq (q.v.) as prime minister of Persia on 9 Ordībehešt 1330 Š./29 April 1951 and the nationalization two days later of Persia's British-owned oil industry initiated a period of tense confrontation between the Persian and British governments. It lasted until the overthrow of Moṣaddeq in the coup d'état of 28 Mordād 1332 Š./19 August 1953, which was "conceived by MI6 [the British Intelligence Service] and delivered by CIA" (Wright, p. 259).

Moṣaddeq was the popular leader of the National front (Jabha-ye mellī), a coalition of political parties and prominent individuals formed in 1328 Š./1949 with the primary goals of nationalizing the oil industry and democratizing the Persian political system (Cottam, chaps. 13, 15; Zabih, *passim*; Diba, *passim*; Bill and Louis, *passim*; Moṣaddeq, pp. 177-298). Soon after Moṣaddeq's appointment, the British began a protracted effort to have him removed from power, imposing economic sanctions on Persia, conducting military maneuvers in the region, and undertaking a variety of covert political activities. The most important of the covert activities were an extensive effort in the summer of 1330 Š./1951 to replace him with Sayyed Žiā'-al-Dīn Ṭabāṭabā'ī; a similar effort a year later to replace him with Aḥmad Qawām (Qawām-al-Salṭana), culminating in a pro-Moṣaddeq uprising on 30 Tīr 1331 Š./21 July 1952; and finally efforts begun almost immediately after the uprising to install retired general Fażl-Allāh Zāhedī as prime minister. Although none of these efforts succeeded, they did weaken Moṣaddeq considerably (Gasiorowski, pp. 262-66).



In the aftermath of the July 1952 uprising some of the leaders of the National front, specifically Ayatollah Sayyed Abu'l-Qāsem Kāšānī, Moẓaffar Baqā'ī, and Ḥosayn Makki, became disenchanted with Moṣaddeq over such matters as his new cabinet appointments and his request that the Majles grant him emergency powers. As a result, these men aligned themselves with Zāhedī, who had joined the brothers Sayf-Allāh and Asad-Allāh Rašīdīān, well-known British agents, in agitating against Moṣaddeq (personal interviews; cf. Woodhouse, chaps 8-9). During the following year Zāhedī worked closely with these and various other prominent figures in a series of efforts to overthrow Moṣaddeq. The first such effort came to an abrupt end on 21 Mehr 1331 Š./13 October 1952, with the arrest of the Rašīdīāns and other Zāhedī supporters. Moṣaddeq broke off diplomatic relations with Great Britain, claiming that Zāhedī had been backed by the British embassy (*The New York Times*, 13 October 1952, p. 4, 16 October, p. 6; “Annual Report on Persian Army for 1952,” Foreign Office [FO] 371/98638, 9 December 1952). In February 1953 Zāhedī, Kāšānī, and others fomented a series of incidents that provoked serious unrest in Tehran and almost brought down Moṣaddeq's government. Several weeks later Zāhedī, Baqā'ī, Kāšānī's son, and several of their collaborators were implicated in the kidnapping and murder of Moṣaddeq's police chief, General Maḥmūd Afšārṭūs, an assault apparently backed by the British and designed to trigger a coup against Moṣaddeq. Throughout this period Zāhedī and his allies also worked to undermine Moṣaddeq's support in the Majles (parliament) and armed forces, within the National front, and among the Persian people generally (Azimi, pp. 306-26; Kātūzīān, 1990, chaps. 12-13).

Under the administration of Harry S. Truman the United States had made relatively even-handed efforts to resolve the dispute between Persia and Great Britain, believing that continued unrest in Persia would benefit the Soviet Union. In order to combat Soviet influence, the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) carried out certain covert political operations in Persia during this period. Although these operations were directed against the Soviet Union and the pro-Soviet Tudeh party, they did have the effect of creating friction among the leaders of the National front and undermining its popular support. Following the break in diplomatic relations, Christopher Montague Woodhouse of M.I.-6 went to Washington, D.C. to solicit American support for the effort to overthrow Moṣaddeq. He was told that the Truman administration would not participate in such an effort but that the administration of the newly elected Dwight D. Eisenhower probably would (Woodhouse, chaps. 8, 9). On 3 February 1953, only two weeks after Eisenhower's inauguration, top American



and British officials met in Washington to discuss the British proposal. It was agreed to develop and implement a plan, code-named AJAX, to overthrow Moṣaddeq and install Zāhedī as prime minister. AJAX was to be carried out by the C.I.A. under the direction of Kermit Roosevelt. The British were to help plan AJAX and to make the services of the Rašīdīān brothers and other intelligence agents available to Roosevelt's team. Final approval was received at a State Department meeting on 25 June (Roosevelt, pp. 120-24).

Roosevelt traveled to Persia several times in late 1331 and early 1332 Š. /1953 to meet with Zāhedī, who was working diligently against Moṣaddeq. He made contact with the Rašīdīāns and with two Persian journalists code-named Nerren and Cilley, who were employed by the C.I.A.; the editors of General Ḥosayn Ferdūst's memoirs have mistakenly identified these two men as Amīr Asad-Allāh 'Alam and Šāpūr Reporter (*Mo'assasa-ye moṭāla'āt*, II, pp. 180-81, 184; personal interviews). Donald Wilber, a C.I.A. contract employee who specialized in Persia, traveled to Nicosia, in Cyprus, in mid-May to work with an expert from M.I.-6 in preparing a detailed plan for AJAX (Wilber, chap. 14). Two other C.I.A. officers went to Persia in the summer of 1953 to help implement it. Following several unsuccessful attempts to obtain the shah's support, Roosevelt finally won him over in early August (personal interviews; Roosevelt, pp. 147-57).

By then the C.I.A. team had already begun to implement AJAX. It initiated a propaganda campaign against Moṣaddeq; it included planting articles in the Persian press, circulating leaflets and rumors, and possibly even financing six new anti-Moṣaddeq newspapers that suddenly appeared in Tehran. Leaders of the pan-Iranist (the pro-shah faction), Ārīā, and Sūmkā parties were paid to stage demonstrations against Moṣaddeq and to create public disorder. Majles deputies were also persuaded to act against Moṣaddeq. Nerren and Cilley, who had performed similar services for the C.I.A. against the Soviets and the Tudeh party, were particularly helpful, and so probably were the Rašīdīāns, who had used such tactics against Moṣaddeq on behalf of the British (personal interviews; minute by Bowker, 19 August 1953, FO 371/104570; Lapping, pp. 215-21). Kāšānī and Baqā'ī, apparently working independently of Roosevelt's team, simultaneously increased their activities against Moṣaddeq (Azimi, p. 330). Both Roosevelt's team and Zāhedī's group made extensive efforts to persuade high-ranking military officers and other prominent Persians to participate in or otherwise support a coup. The C.I.A. officers drafted two *farmāns* (royal decrees) for the dismissal of Moṣaddeq and the appointment of Zāhedī



in his place, which the shah signed. The first of these *farmāns* was delivered to Moṣaddeq on the night of 24 Mordād 1332 Š./15 August 1953 by Colonel Ne'mat-Allāh Naṣīrī, commander of the shah's imperial guard and later director of the internal-security force SAVAK. There were apparently also plans to arrest Moṣaddeq's foreign minister and military chief of staff (Zāhedī; Najātī, pp. 377-82; Kātūzīān, 1990, pp. 188-89).

By that time rumors about the plot had begun to circulate in Tehran. Moṣaddeq received detailed information about it from Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Āštīānī, from the Tudeh party, and, according to some reports, even from Kāšānī, though the latter report seems doubtful (Kātūzīān, 1990, p. 189, citing *Nīrū-ye sevvom*, 23 Mordād 1332 Š./14 August 1953; Hamadānī, pp. 29-34; Kīānūrī, pp. 34-36; Gorūh-i az havādārān, pp. 185-87). When Naṣīrī arrived at Moṣaddeq's home he was promptly arrested, which completely disrupted the original plan. Army and police units loyal to Moṣaddeq then set up roadblocks throughout the city, began a massive hunt for Zāhedī, and arrested many of his supporters (Najātī, pp. 382-91). The general took refuge in a C.I.A. safe house, where he remained until Moṣaddeq was finally overthrown (personal interviews). The shah fled the country, first to Baghdad and then to Rome.

Following the collapse of the original plan, Roosevelt and his team began to improvise a new strategy for overthrowing Moṣaddeq. After first making contingency plans to evacuate himself, Zāhedī, and several of their confederates in the American military attaché's airplane, they distributed copies of the two *farmāns* throughout Tehran and took other steps to publicize the shah's dismissal of Moṣaddeq, for example, arranging for two American journalists to interview Zāhedī and making contact with prominent Persians. At the same time they attempted to rally military officers to Zāhedī's cause, though they met with only partial success. Through Nerren, Cilley, and the Rašīdīāns they hired large crowds to pose as members of the Tudeh party; on 17 and 18 August these crowds staged demonstrations throughout Tehran, provoking widespread fear that a Tudeh takeover was imminent and leading even many genuine Tudeh members to join them. In response both Moṣaddeq and the Tudeh party asked their supporters to remain off the streets, and Moṣaddeq ordered police and army units to restore order (personal interviews; Najātī, pp. 363-76; Azimi, p. 331; Kātūzīān, 1981, pp. 105-06).

On the morning of 19 August a crowd wielding clubs, apparently hired by Kāšānī and Sayyed Moḥammad Behbahānī and paid by the C.I.A., began to gather at Meydān-e Amīn-al-Solṭān in southern Tehran (Najātī, pp. 404, 407,



410). From there it marched to the central *bāzār* and the offices of Radio Tehran, where it was joined by a number of police and army units and citizens who had been alarmed at the “Tudeh” marches of the preceding days or had become disillusioned with Moṣaddeq. Facing no opposition from National front or genuine Tudeh supporters, this crowd attacked government buildings and the offices of pro-Moṣaddeq organizations. Meanwhile, several key military officers in Tehran and provincial towns defected, greatly strengthening the pro-Zāhedī forces (Najātī, pp. 402-03, 412-15, 473-84). An army unit seized Radio Tehran and broadcast reports that Moṣaddeq’s government had fallen. A tank unit commanded by General Hedāyat-Allāh Gīlānšāh retrieved Zāhedī from the C.I.A. safe house and attacked Moṣaddeq’s home, where a long battle ensued. The prime minister and several of his colleagues fled to a neighbor’s house but surrendered to Zāhedī’s forces the next day. Moṣaddeq was convicted of treason several months later and sentenced to three years in prison, after which he remained under house arrest until he died in 1346 Š./1967. Several of his close associates were also sentenced, and his foreign minister, Dr. Ḥosayn Fāṭemī, was executed by the Zāhedī government (personal interviews; Najātī, pp. 397-429; Kātūzīān, 1990, pp. 191-94, 208).

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Cf addenda