

CIA Confirms Role in 1953 Iran Coup. Declassified Documents; Historical Model of Regime Change?

Documents Provide New Details on Mosaddeq Overthrow and Its Aftermath

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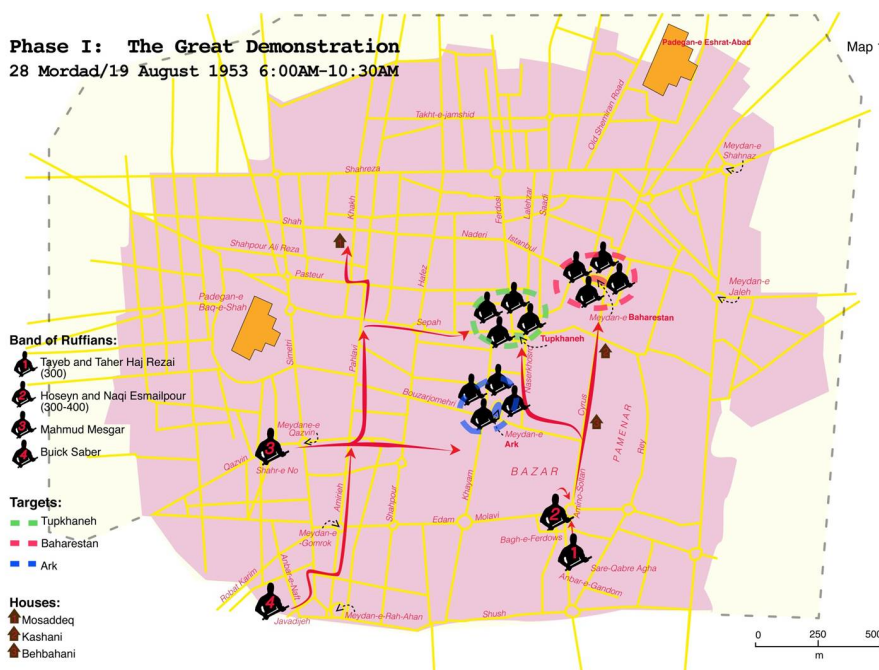
Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

Marking the sixtieth anniversary of the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, the National Security Archive is today [2013] 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.

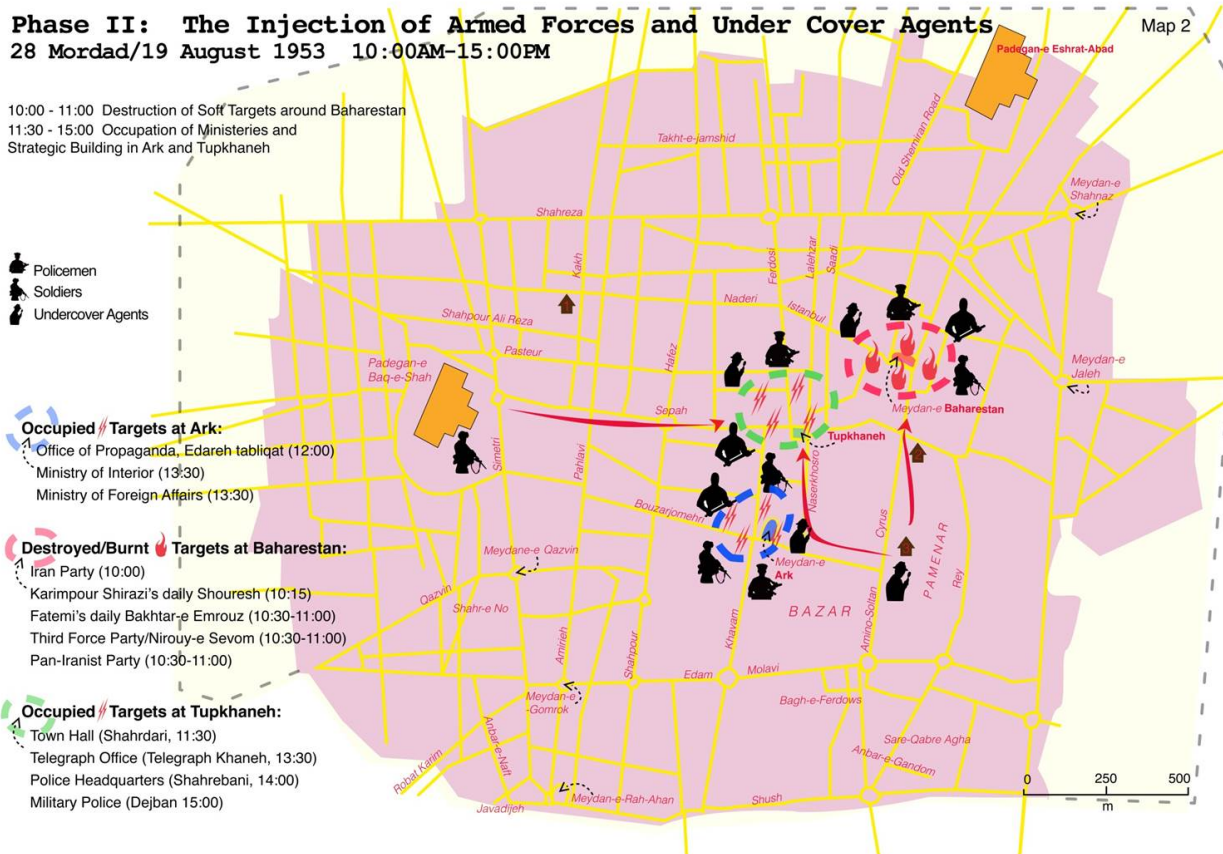
The explicit reference to the CIA's role appears in a copy of an internal history, *The Battle for Iran*, dating from the mid-1970s. The agency released a heavily excised version of the account in 1981 in response to an ACLU lawsuit, but it blacked out all references to TPAJAX, the code name for the 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.



This map shows the disposition of bands of "ruffians," paid to demonstrate by coup organizers, early on August 19, 1953. The bands gathered in the bazaar and other sections of southern Tehran, then moved north through the capital. Thug leaders' names appear at left, along with the estimated size of their groups, and their targets. (Courtesy of Ali Rahnama, author of the forthcoming *Thugs, Turn-coats, Soldiers, Spooks: Anatomy of Overthrowing Mosaddeq in Four Days.*)

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.



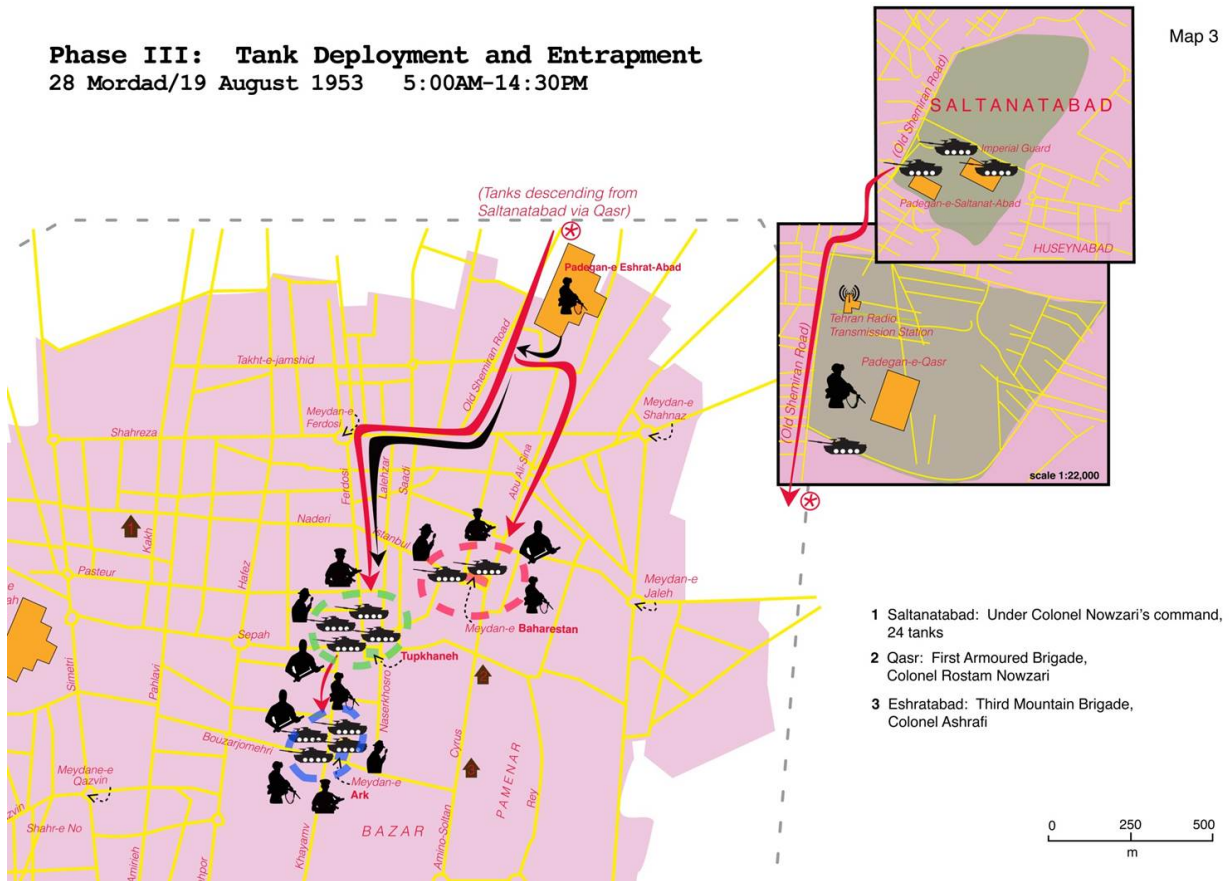
Pro-Shah police, military units and undercover agents became engaged in the coup starting mid-morning August 19. (Courtesy of Ali Rahnama, author of the forthcoming *Thugs, Turn-coats, Soldiers, Spooks: Anatomy of Overthrowing Mosaddeq in Four Days.*)

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]

Phase III: Tank Deployment and Entrapment
 28 Mordad/19 August 1953 5:00AM-14:30PM

Map 3



Tanks played a critical role on August 19, with pro-Shah forces gaining control of some 24 of them from the military during the course of the day. (Courtesy of Ali Rahnema, author of the forthcoming *Thugs, Turn-coats, Soldiers, Spooks: Anatomy of Overthrowing Mosaddeq in Four Days.*)

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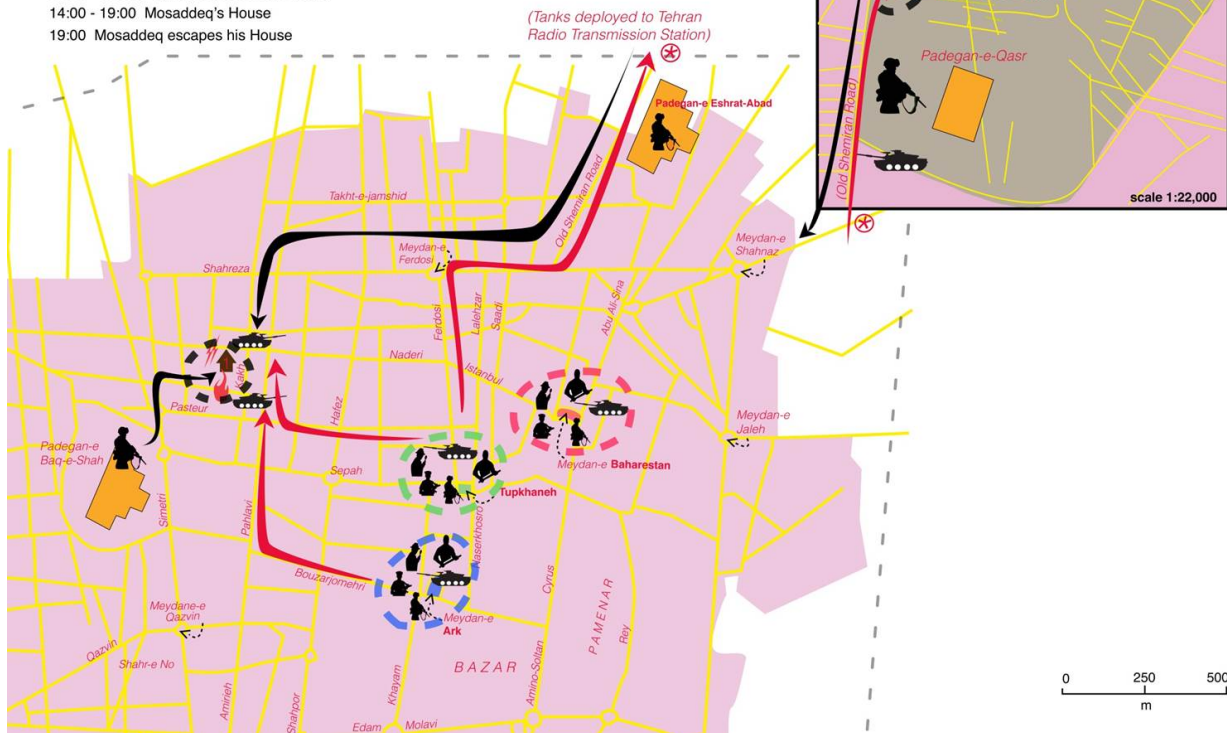
A clear sign that their pledge would not be honored in practice came after the National Security Archive [filed a lawsuit](#) in 1999 for a well-known internal CIA narrative about the coup. One of the operation's planners, Donald N. Wilber, prepared the account less than a year later. The CIA agreed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

Phase IV: Attaining the Targets
28 Mordad/19 August 1953 14:00-19:00

Map 4

14:00 - 16:00 Tehran Radio Transmission Station
 16:00 - 17:00 Zahedi Addresses the nation
 14:00 - 19:00 Mosaddeq's House
 19:00 Mosaddeq escapes his House



Anti-Mosaddeq armed forces converged on his house (left side of map) beginning around 4:00 pm, eventually forcing him to escape over a garden wall before his house was destroyed. By then, Zahedi had already addressed the nation from the Radio Transmission Station. (Courtesy of Ali Rahnama, author of the forthcoming *Thugs, Turn-coats, Soldiers, Spooks: Anatomy of Overthrowing Mosaddeq in Four Days.*)

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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 3 a & b: 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, “Zendeabad, 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, “Zendeabad, 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 Farsi 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>.

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