

# Does Trump Want to Redo the 1953 CIA Coup in Iran?

Historian and author Ervand Abrahamian of Baruch College analyzes the recently revealed files on the CIA's role in the 1953 Iran coup, as Trump officials and allies float the possibility of regime change in Tehran

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**Aaron Maté:** *It's The Real News. I'm Aaron Maté.*

*Trump administration officials and right wing allies are openly talking about regime change in Iran. A series of news reports say White House officials want to oust the government in Tehran. The CIA recently established a new mission center specifically aimed at Iran, and the US military has increasingly targeted Iran-backed forces inside Syria. The most stark words came recently from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Earlier this month, he was asked if regime change is the goal.*

**Rex Tillerson:** Our policy towards Iran is to push back on this hegemony, contain their ability to develop obviously nuclear weapons, and to work toward support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government. Those elements are there, certainly as we know.

**Aaron Maté:** The timing of Tillerson's statement was striking. The next day, the State Department quietly released documents on the CIA's role in the overthrow of Iran's democratic government in 1953. The US and Britain targeted Iranian **Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh** after he nationalized his country's oil. The coup has shaped Iran's modern history and remains all the more relevant today.

I'm joined now by one of the top historians of modern Iran. **Ervand Abrahamian** is the distinguished professor of Iranian and Middle Eastern history and politics at Baruch College and the author of *The Coup: 1953, The CIA and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations*. Professor, welcome.

**E. Abrahamian:** Good morning.

**Aaron Maté:** Thank you for joining me. You've gone through these new documents now. Can you lay out for us what they contain and also provide us with the context for what happened with this coup in 1953?

**E. Abrahamian:** First, about the documents. The State Department has a policy of releasing its documents 30 years after event. The documents for the Mosaddegh period,

which is '51, '53 were delayed and delayed. Once they were published, they were so skimpy that there were long periods where there was a crisis in Iran, there was no correspondence between the embassy in Tehran and DC, which was very strange obviously. The American Historical Association kicked up such a fuss that the State Department agreed to bring out the new edition, and this is what has come out recently, what they call a retrospective for 1951, '54 period.

Some people expected that there would be much more on the actual coup of August '53. I really didn't expect much new on that because in the year 2000 a CIA document, an autopsy on the coup was leaked to The New York Times, and that was 150-page, very detailed document on how the US pulled off the coup in '53. So there wasn't really much new to discover. Maybe some details about individuals, the actual operation on the ground. But one really couldn't expect much more from that, more than what was called the Wilber Document. The new batch, which is 1,000 pages, some 375 documents, really doesn't tell us much more about the coup.

But it is actually very valuable for a number of reasons for knowing what was going on between '51 and '53. The main striking thing, and I think this is why these documents were not released before, is how far not just the CIA but the State Department's deeply involved in Iranian politics from '51 on. It wasn't just a question of basically negotiating and dealing with the oil crisis and being a go-between between Iran and UK. The State Department, the CIA was actually very much involved in elections and choosing prime ministers and doing everything they could to undermine Mosaddegh even long before the coup. But what these documents show is, in fact, the US was really up to its neck with the nitty-gritty of Iranian internal politics.

**Aaron Maté:** Can you talk about why they were so involved and specifically why they wanted to target Mosaddegh?

**E. Abrahamian:** The main issue was that Mosaddegh nationalized the British oil company. This is often just seen as just a crisis between Iran and Britain. In fact, it had repercussions on United States because if Iran had succeeded with nationalization of oil, it was clear cut that this would have repercussions, direct threat to United States oil interests, not just in the Middle East, throughout the world. Other countries would then try to nationalize their oil, and that would be a major setback for United States. So from the very beginning, the US was very much interested in preventing real nationalization. They accepted the concept of nationalization. They were willing to pay lip service to nationalization so long as actually the oil industry was not controlled in Iran by the Iranians. That was very consistent throughout the Truman, Eisenhower administration, and it was very similar to the British position.

Actually, what these documents confirm, again, in the diplomatic dispatches is how far United States was interested in making sure that real nationalization does not take place. So even Eisenhower, who was very reluctant to get too involved into nitty-gritty of politics, he kept distance from this, whenever he's in a National Security Council meeting, this is just before the coup, he stresses that international agreements are sacred and they should not be permitted to be violated. Of course, for him, Iran nationalizing its oil was a violation of the sanctity of international agreements. This is very consistent ... This was actually pretty much well-known, although many historians like to deny it. What these documents do confirm is actually that American position was that Iran should not get away with successful nationalization.

**Aaron Maté:** Yeah, what you're saying there about how historians have interpreted US motives is very important. I just spoke recently to **Malcolm Byrne** for The Real News about these documents. He's at the National Security Archive. He's very critical of the coup and has done a lot of work to get these documents released. But he seemed to ascribe the US motive to this Cold War mentality of wanting to stop Russia from getting access to Iran's oil. Even if the internal documents used the Cold War language, it's quite possible that that would just be the rhetorical advice to mask their real concern, which is stopping local countries from having control over their own oil like Iran.

**E. Abrahamian:** Yes. I think Byrne has done heroic work getting these documents and other documents released, but I really disagree with his point of view. His idea is that the coup was a mistake, but the motivations were good, and the motivation was in the context of the Cold War. In the documents, you can find a lot of evidence for this because almost every national security document starts off with talking about the Soviet threat and the two-day threat, but I read this very much like some people start their pronouncement saying, "In the name of God, the Compassionate" and so on, and then you go onto the real business. So I think that was the discourse of the time. If you were going to legitimize anything, you put it in the context of the Cold War. I think **Allen Dulles** and Roosevelt, if they wanted to throw their grandmother under the bus, they would again resort to the Cold War.

But the problem is every so often when you really look at the negotiation positions, both by Britain and United States, the position there, and this is not in public, and when they come to discuss the oil issue with Mosaddegh, their argument was, "Yes, fine. We agree with nationalization. We're all in favor of nationalization. But you are not really capable of controlling and exploiting and refining oil, so we will do it for you. We'll do it in your name, and you can claim that it's nationalized, but we have to have really control over the industry."

For United States, this was very important because, as I said, if nationalization succeeded in Iran, it could actually threaten the American interests in the Gulf, in Iraq, in Indonesia, in Venezuela. This was always back of their mind. Again, every so often, if you look carefully, the devil's in the details, you find these statements in these documents all basically covered up with the Cold War and so on. But you have this statement that the sanctity of international agreements cannot be violated.

**Aaron Maté:** Just to clarify for people, Allen Dulles, who you mentioned, was the head of the CIA at the time. Let me ask you, the goal here was to stop nationalization of Iran's oil. Can you talk about the impact, though, that Mosaddegh's action had on the broader Middle East and the movement there that we saw, especially in the '70s, towards countries taking control of their own oil?

**E. Abrahamian:** Yes. Eventually, of course, the Middle East countries, even conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, nationalized their oil, but this was not until some 20 years later. By then, actually there was a shift in the world situation. In the mid-'70s, Western companies and Western states basically had no choice but to accept that. In 1951, '53, this was considered the end of the world, that the sky would fall if nationalization was successful. So if you read some of their internal documents, they're talking about like it's the end of the world as they know it if Mosaddegh succeeds in nationalizing.

**Aaron Maté:** Finally, Professor, as we wrap, I'm wondering if you can comment on the current context today. I noted earlier the timing could be coincidental of the State

Department releasing these documents on the 1953 coup just after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said those words that we played, that the US supports a transition of government inside Iran.

**E. Abrahamian:** I think it's pure coincidence. They were been under pressure to publish it. They've kept on delaying it. They were supposed to publish it four years ago. They said the British had some concern, and they had to remove any reference to the British involvement in the coup. Then they said they didn't want to publish it in the last years of Obama because that would jeopardize the nuclear discussions. I think that-

**Aaron Maté:** Fair enough. So timing aside, then, your thoughts on what we're seeing right now from the Trump administration with officials openly floating regime change.

**E. Abrahamian:** Again, it's hard to take anything that comes out of this administration seriously. Not just about Iran, elsewhere. But with Iran, they said they would basically renegotiate the nuclear deal, but once they came in, they realized that this is actually not something you can do. The agreement was between Iran and United Nations, not United States. So there's a lot of hot air, and frankly, they want to put pressure on Iran, but it's not the old days that US is capable of pulling off a coup. These documents actually prove that.



Tanks in the streets of Tehran, 1953 (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

In 1951, '53, the CIA actually was involved in literally ground street politics of Iran. They would hire thugs to go and beat up newspaper sellers and peaceful demonstrators. They had those thugs in their payroll. They could do that. They had newspaper journalists, editors, they had deputies they had put in actually in parliament. That's what these documents show, how US was involved actually in electoral politics in Iran.

Nowadays, it's a very different situation. People in Washington can huff and puff and all that they want, but Iran is not going to collapse. So it's a very different type of regime, and Iran just does not have that influence. What this type of huffing puffing then does is it actually strengthens the very right wing in Iran who are always talking about the US wants to come back and take over, and they use that as a camouflage to silence any criticism, any opposition. So it gives fuel to them, but it's not really a serious talk that will try to overthrow

the regime.

**Aaron Maté:** We'll leave it there. Ervand Abrahamian is a distinguished professor of Iranian and Middle Eastern history and politics at Baruch College and the author of *The Coup: 1953, The CIA and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations*. Professor, thank you.

**E. Abrahamian:** Thank you very much.

**Aaron Maté:** And thank you for joining us on The Real News.

*Ervand Abrahamian is the author of **The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations** (New Press).*

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