

Iran and the Forgotten Anniversary

By Arnold Oliver | August 29, 2003

The talk of regime change in Iran that now fills the air in Washington is not new. Although very few Americans are aware of it, August of this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of a vital, yet little-known chapter in American foreign policy—a military coup against the elected leaders of Iran orchestrated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Before hostilities with Iran once again expand past the point of no return, we really ought to have the kind of informed, reasoned national debate that was so notably absent prior to the invasion of Iraq. In order to begin to do that, we will have to review the momentous events of 1953 and some of their far-reaching consequences.

For several years after the Second World War, the U.S. had a positive image with many Iranians. After helping to convince occupying Soviet forces to leave the country, and attempting to mediate an agreement between Iran and Great Britain, the American government was generally well regarded. But these good relations were not to last.

During the summer of 1953—in an eerie parallel to today's events—a major crisis developed between Tehran and Washington. At that time Iran was an emerging democracy with elected leaders. Led by the popular Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, it was embroiled in a conflict with the British over oil. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was owned by British interests and supported by the British government. In a grossly unequal colonial-style arrangement, the Iranians were not even allowed to examine the ledgers.

As the dispute with the British intensified, the Iranians finally became determined to nationalize their country's oil industry. The British responded by freezing Iranian assets, imposing a worldwide embargo on Iran's oil, and pulling their technicians out of the country. Oil output slowed to a trickle, Iran's economy went into a tailspin, and unrest grew. Britain's destabilization efforts were working.

Although the Truman government had been sympathetic to Iran, in 1953 the new Eisenhower administration accepted the British view that the Iranian regime had to go. On July 11th President Eisenhower secretly signed an order to overthrow Iran's young democracy. The die was cast.

On August 19th the U.S.-orchestrated military coup emerged triumphant, and the exiled monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was installed on the Peacock Throne. A secret history of this CIA operation, written in 1954 by agent and participant Donald Wilber and leaked to the press a few years ago, leaves no doubt as to the central role played by the United States.

Had the Shah been a benevolent ruler, the image of the U.S. in Iran might not have become so tarnished, but benevolent he was not. And to make matters worse—much worse—American and Israeli intelligence agents organized SAVAK, the Shah's personal secret security force. Before long, Iran developed into a full-blown police state complete with thousands of informers, censorship, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, and widespread torture and assassination. Of course, none of this was a secret to the Shah's many U.S. advisers.

According to the *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, many of SAVAK's 15,000 full-time agents were "trained in the United States and Israel where they learned 'scientific' methods to prevent unwanted deaths from 'brute force'." Electrified chairs fitted with metal masks were used "to muffle screams while amplifying them for the victim." Another historian called the Shah's methods of torture "horrendous," and "equal to the worst ever devised."



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Aiming to terrorize an entire population, SAVAK repression was both extreme and widespread. Few Iranian families were spared, and among the victims were family members of the Shiite clerics who would later overthrow the Shah's regime in 1979, and spark the seizure and hostage-taking crisis at the U.S. embassy.

An honest assessment of these events would lead to an understanding of why the United States government is loathed by so many Iranians. They are fully aware of American complicity with the Shah's twenty-five year reign of terror. The pundits who are now predicting that the Iranian people will welcome "liberation" by American arms (many of them said the same thing about Iraq) could hardly be more in error.

Iran has already suffered one horrific "regime change" at the hands of the West. Far from being threatened with another one, its people are morally and legally entitled to compensation as well as a formal apology. The U.S. trade embargo against Iran should be lifted as well. The issue of weapons of mass destruction can only be resolved in the context of recognizing that Iran has legitimate, real, and rational security concerns.

For its part, Iran also needs to make changes. Its government must show far more respect for the rights of dissidents and demonstrators. All political prisoners should be released. The internal security agents who recently murdered Canadian journalist Zahra Kazemi must face justice.

A judicious mix of honest atonement by both sides, along with other confidence-building measures, can lay the foundation for a new and mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries.

But above all, Americans need to acknowledge that the overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953 was a dark chapter in the history of the United States, and we must resolve that it not be repeated.

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