

The Mossadegh-Myth

The Mossadegh-Myth: A coup that never happened

Some stories have been told so often that nobody asks anymore whether they are true.

The story of the CIA coup against Mohammad Mossadegh is one of them. It goes roughly like this: In August 1953, the CIA and MI6, acting on behalf of American and British interests, overthrew Iran's democratically elected prime minister.

They installed the Shah as a puppet. In doing so, they destroyed Iran's democratic future and laid the groundwork for the Islamic Revolution of 1979, for anti-Americanism, for the mullahs, for everything that has gone wrong since.

Over the past few decades, this narrative has hardened into a Western dogma. It appears in school textbooks, in mainstream American journalism, and in the memoirs of those who shaped U.S. policy. The New York Times, CNN, and the BBC (well well well) have canonized it as the original sin of Western Middle East policy.

Hollywood took up the same script: Ben Affleck's *Argo* (2012), winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture, opens with a three-minute animated prologue walking the audience through 1953 as the inciting cause of everything that followed.

According to screenwriter Chris Terrio, members of Congress later cited that prologue as the source of what they knew about Iranian history when they voted on the 2015 nuclear deal.

Even Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the CENTCOM commander who ordered the strike on Qassem Soleimani, opens *The Melting Point* (2024) with a nod to 1953.

Here in Germany, the chorus is no quieter: Olaf Scholz recently declared that the entire Iranian dilemma traces back to the British and American overthrow of Iran's democratic government, without which Iran would today be "a very successful Western country."

Richard David Precht repeats the same line on Markus Lanz and his podcast. Natalie Amiri and other so-called "Iran-Experts" points to 1953 in ARD interviews as the key date without which Iran cannot be understood. Ines Schwerdtner of Die Linke drew the same line in the Bundestag.

Even the German "Federal Agency for Civic Education" calls 1953 Iran's "primal catastrophe." The only problem is: the story isn't true. Not partially untrue. It isn't a matter of "needing nuance." It simply isn't true.

What Mossadegh Was Not

Let's start with the label that carries the whole thing: "democratically elected."

Mossadegh was not elected by the people. The Iranian Constitution of 1906 made no provision for the direct election of the head of government. Article 46 of the Supplementary Fundamental Laws expressly assigned the appointment and dismissal of the prime minister to the Shah.

(1) Mossadegh came into office in 1951 because the Shah appointed him, following a non-binding expression of preference by parliament, in the expectation that the 69-year-old aristocrat would gracefully decline.

To the Shah's surprise, he accepted.

This is the precise process that the myth sells as a "democratic election."

Anyone who calls Mossadegh democratically elected would, to be consistent, have to apply the same label to every minister or ambassador confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Nobody does.

Mossadegh was no man of the people.

He was a Qajar prince, a descendant of the dynasty that had ruled Iran into a state of chronic weakness for more than a century.

Under the Qajars, Iran was not a sovereign state but an object of plunder.

In 1907, the Russians and British divided the country contractually into spheres of influence; the economy had been sold off through foreign concessions; the hinterland disintegrated into the hands of local tribal chiefs and warlords; and the central government in Tehran often controlled little more than its own capital.

It was precisely this disintegration that produced the Constitutional Revolution of 1906.

And it was precisely those constitutionalists who, two decades later, together with Reza Khan, the future Reza Shah Pahlavi, finally toppled the Qajar dynasty in 1925.

The Pahlavis, in other words, did not come to power against Iran's constitutional movement but with it, as a response to the failure of the very aristocracy from which Mossadegh hailed.

His title Mossadegh ol-Saltaneh, "the one belonging to the monarch," was no nickname but a noble designation from that very order which had been overthrown.

And his coalition, the National Front, was not a democratic movement but a loose alliance of feudal landowners, religious conservatives, and bazaar merchants, held together above all by two demands: the nationalization of oil and the rejection of the modernization policies through which the Pahlavis were attempting to wind down the Qajar legacy of illiteracy, tribal rule, and foreign penetration.

Anyone who declares Mossadegh the hero of Iranian democracy overlooks the irony: the man who fought the Pahlavis was a representative of precisely that old order whose removal had created the precondition for Iran ever to become a modern state at all.

What Mossadegh Did

But surely he was at least a democrat in spirit, right? A man who protected the constitution, respected parliament, preserved the institutions?

No.

In 1952, Mossadegh halted the parliamentary elections for the 17th Majles at the very moment when the number of deputies already elected was just sufficient to make parliament quorate.

The remaining elections in the rural provinces, where conservative forces threatened to win majorities, never took place.

The parliament with which he governed was thus a parliament he had tailored himself.

(2) In the summer of 1953, he then dissolved this incomplete parliament as well, by means of a popular referendum, an instrument that the Iranian constitution neither recognized nor provided for.

The right to dissolve parliament, under Article 48, lay exclusively with the king.

Mossadegh circumvented this by appealing directly to the "will of the people."

The vote on August 3, 1953, was not held by secret ballot: yes and no votes were cast in spatially separate polling stations, and every voter had to make publicly visible how he was voting.

The official result: two million yes-votes against 1,207 no-votes.

Even Mossadegh's niece Sattareh Farmanfarmaian described in her memoirs her stunned disbelief at this act.

(3)

In parallel, he had the Majles grant him emergency powers that gave him the right to govern by decree, initially for six months and then extended by another year.

He stripped the Supreme Court of its powers. He took over the Ministry of Defense personally, cut its budget by fifteen percent, dismissed 136 officers, and appointed his own nephew as deputy.

And, this is the episode systematically missing from the Western Mossadegh hagiography, he betrayed the Iranian women's movement.

His cousin Mehrangeez Dowlatshahi had mobilized women's organizations across the country, in the expectation that Mossadegh would introduce women's suffrage.

Initial reform drafts contained the relevant clause. When Ayatollah Kashani protested, Mossadegh struck it.

The women who had supported him weren't even informed.

It was Mohammad Reza Shah who, ten years later, would push through women's suffrage, against the resistance of the very clergy to whom Mossadegh had yielded.

(4)

What the CIA Did (and Didn't Do)

Now to the actual heart of the matter: did the CIA overthrow Mossadegh?

The honest answer is: no. But not because the CIA didn't try. It's because the attempt failed. Operation TPAJAX was set in motion on August 15, 1953.

Colonel Nassiri, commander of the imperial guard, brought Mossadegh the dismissal decree signed by the Shah.

Mossadegh, forewarned by Tudeh contacts within the army, had Nassiri arrested. The Shah fled the country.

The operation collapsed.

This is not the claim of some fringe figures. It is precisely what the Wilber document itself states, the CIA's internal report, declassified in 2013, that has since been reflexively cited as proof of the coup narrative.

The report meticulously chronicles its own failure.

The CIA station cabled Washington that the operation had to be abandoned and that they should "make peace with Mossadegh." Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief of staff, delivered the bad news to the president.

(5)

What followed on August 19, the day Mossadegh actually was overthrown, is so contested precisely because to this day no one can seriously document who coordinated the events.

The CIA's own 2017 study ("Zendabad, Shah!"), the State Department records, and the investigations of the National Security Archive are unanimous on this point: it cannot be determined who directed the demonstrations and mob actions of that day.

(6)

What can be established is the following:

The CIA had lost operational control of events as of August 13. Its own station noted: "CIA cut out of military preparations by Batmanqelij and Zahedi."

General Zahedi acted from his hiding place through his own military network, a network he had built up long before any Kermit Roosevelt set foot in Iran.

The grand ayatollahs Borujerdi and Behbehani mobilized the streets. Ayatollah Kashani, humiliated by Mossadegh, supplied the religious legitimation.

The Tudeh Party tore down statues of the Shah, alarming the clergy, who feared a communist takeover. The bazaar shut down.

The military marched.

What Kermit Roosevelt actually did after August 16 was this: he had the royal decrees distributed to the press.

Nothing more is seriously documented.

His 1979 book *Countercoup*, on which much of the coup narrative rests, is self-mythologization: he even invented messages from Eisenhower in it that were never sent.

The paradoxical situation of historiography: those who distrust the CIA believe, of all people, a CIA man, and believe his every word.

The CIA itself, after editorial intervention, internally described the book as "essentially a work of fiction."

(7)

That money flowed is undisputed. That this money steered the events of August 19 is a claim unsupported by any document. The CIA has admitted to its failed operation. It has not admitted, and cannot admit, that it directed the successful removal. Because it did not.

What Happened with the Oil

The economic argument with which the coup thesis is typically rounded out also doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

The usual narrative is that the West overthrew Mossadegh in order to return nationalized Iranian oil to private, Anglo-American hands.

In fact, the opposite happened.

The nationalization of the Iranian oil industry was not reversed after 1953. The National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), founded in 1951 under Mossadegh, remained the owner of the reserves, the facilities, and the refinery at Abadan. What changed was the form of utilization.

In 1954, the Zahedi government signed what came to be known as the Consortium Agreement, which transferred operational extraction and distribution for 25 years to an international consortium in which the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, renamed British Petroleum in December 1954, held only 40 percent; another 40 percent went, at eight percent each, to five American companies, 14 percent to Royal Dutch Shell, and six percent to the French Compagnie Française des Pétroles.

(8)

Profits were split evenly between Iran and the consortium, the exact 50:50 formula that Mossadegh had spent years vainly trying to extract from the British and that, even in the event of a successful nationalization, he would never have achieved, because the country lacked both the tankers and the markets.

(9)

Under Mossadegh, the Abadan refinery, then the largest in the world, stood effectively idle; Iranian oil production collapsed from 242 million barrels in 1950 to 10.6 million barrels in 1952.

In the first year of nationalization, the only foreign sale achieved was a delivery of 300 barrels to an Italian freighter.

The state paid civil servants from the printing press, and tens of thousands of workers in Abadan lost their jobs.

(10)

After 1954, the oil flowed again, and revenues multiplied within a few years.

In 1973, Mohammad Reza Shah used the opportunity to replace the Consortium Agreement ahead of schedule, through negotiations in St. Moritz, with a new Sale and Purchase Agreement, returning full operational control to NIOC, this time in an orderly fashion, with functioning infrastructure and secured customers.

(11)

The nationalization for which Mossadegh is venerated as a martyr was thus completed not in spite of, but after, his overthrow.

Who Benefits from the Lie?

That leaves the uncomfortable question: why does this story persist so stubbornly? Because it offers too much to too many actors to disappear.

It serves the Western left, which after Vietnam needed a vocabulary of American guilt.

Iran became the canvas on which "imperialism" could be demonstrated beyond the Southeast Asian defeat.

Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men* (2003) even derived 9/11 from 1953, a chain of causation so absurd that it works only if no one asks any questions.

The CIA itself also profited massively from this narrative. The events surrounding 1953 were a complete success for both the West and Iran: communist influence was pushed back, looming chaos was averted, and in the following decades up to 1979, Iran experienced one of the most impressive economic developments in its history, from the modernization of infrastructure to educational and land reforms to a rapid industrial rise.

The CIA, then still a young agency hungry for prestige, wanted to claim these laurels for itself, even if strictly behind closed doors. It used the operation's outcome internally to consolidate its position as a central instrument of U.S. foreign policy, and it approved and edited Kermit Roosevelt's book *Countercoup*, which popularized the image of a triumphant coup.

(12)

It serves Western politicians who want to stage diplomacy and appeasement with Tehran as atonement for past guilt.

Madeleine Albright apologized in 2000. Barack Obama repeated the legend in Cairo in 2009 and in his memoirs. John Kerry negotiated the nuclear deal with diplomats who, schooled in the language of Western self-accusation, played the Mossadegh card routinely whenever the pressure at the negotiating table grew too great.

But no one benefits from it more than the regime in Tehran itself.

Ali Khamenei is dead. The system he embodied for decades lives on, for now, as of the time of this article, and with it the function the Mossadegh myth serves for that system.

As long as the world is talking about 1953, it isn't talking about 1979.

As long as the supposed CIA coup is being debated, the mass executions of 1988, in which thousands of political prisoners were murdered on Khomeini's orders, are not.

As long as Mohammad Reza Shah appears as an "American puppet," the Revolutionary Guards, who since 1979 have been financing terror in dozens of countries, don't have to explain themselves.

As long as the West accuses itself, the regime in Tehran doesn't have to face accusation.

The legend of the coup is the most important weapon of the Islamic Republic.

Not its missiles. Not its proxy militias. Not even its nuclear program.

But a story the West tells itself, and which the regime listens to, comfortably leaning back.

What This Means for Us

In January 2026, an estimated tens of thousands of Iranian demonstrators died under the gunfire of their own security forces. Eyewitnesses reported hundreds of corpses in the streets. The regime shut down the internet so that the world could not watch.

In that very moment, German politicians, talk-show intellectuals, and public broadcasting correspondents were declaring that the real key to understanding Iran lay in a 73-year-old event that, in truth, did not happen the way they retell it.

They did so in the conviction that they were saying something enlightened.

That is the real scandal. Not that the story is told incorrectly. But that it is told incorrectly at the very moment when the victims of this regime are dying in the streets, and that the lie covers, of all people, those who pulled the triggers.

Not merely that, but because every repetition of this lie is a slap in the face of those Iranians who, since 1979, have been tortured, hanged, and shot so that the regime can keep ruling.

The Iranian tragedy did not begin in 1953. It began in 1979.

And it will soon be over.

This is the english translation of my german article "Die Mossadegh-Lüge: Ein Putsch, der keiner war", published originally on 27th April 2026. It has been changed a little bit to adopt for an international audience.

Sources / Notes

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