

was a humiliating period for Iran. The country was occupied by Soviet and British forces as the two fought during the final years of World War II. Iran paid for its earlier neutrality by suffering all of the hardships other nations at war were suffering—food shortages, black market racketeering, troops marching through their streets—but this was a war that Iran had not chosen to fight.

The young Mohammed Reza Pahlavi had little choice but to build alliances with many of the groups his father had alienated. The tribal leaders, now armed and strengthened by British and Russian forces, were threatening to collapse the central government. Mohammed Reza turned to the religious leaders. He agreed to allow pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia—a journey all able-bodied Muslims must make, but that had been prohibited during the reign of his father. He agreed to enforce the restrictions on the consumption of food and drink during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting observed by devout Muslims. Once more, women could be seen in the streets garbed in the chador.

To survive politically, Mohammed Reza was forced to cooperate with the Allied forces occupying his nation. It was an almost impossible burden: He had followed behind the dominant rule of his father, had come to power only due to foreign intervention and the exile of his father, had been forced to battle rebel tribes and contend with a newly powerful (thanks to the Soviet occupiers) Communist party whose members were agitating protests against his reign, and had attempted to build an alliance with a highly suspicious religious leadership.

As if all of this was not daunting enough, the young shah would soon face a new challenge—a dynamic Iranian politician named Mohammed Mossadeq. And it all began with a dispute over the Iranian asset Britain clung to the most tightly—oil.

ANGLO-IRANIAN OIL COMPANY

Oil had played a critical role in British-Iranian relations for decades, ever since the discovery of oil in southwest Khuzestan

in 1908. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) was formed thanks to a generous grant from the Qajar shah, who had provided his British friends with a 51 percent ownership in the company for 60 years. By World War I, when the importance of oil to British warships became clear, Britain had overseen the construction of an oil refinery at Abadan, in Khuzestan, that would become one of the largest in the world.

Reza Shah had done his best to break Britain's control of Iran's most significant export, but the deal had never been satisfactorily resolved in the matter of fair pricing—until 1951, that is. For decades, Iranians had complained about AIOC's questionable accounting practices, particularly bookkeeping that no Iranian was allowed to audit to determine whether or not a fair share was being paid. For decades they had complained about the unfairness of Great Britain benefiting much more significantly than Iran from Iran's own resource. For decades they had suffered under the simple injustice of drinking fountains in the Iranian oil fields that bore the sign "NOT FOR IRANIANS." But it was not until Mohammed Mossadeq arrived on the scene that the balance of power began to shift.

In 1951, Mossadeq was 69 years old and a wealthy member of the Iranian parliament. He had been opposed to the creation of the Pahlavi dynasty under Reza Shah, and he had an even more unfavorable impression of the young shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Mossadeq soon began to issue calls for the nationalization of the AIOC, and he was joined by a coalition of other politicians and—more importantly—by Ayatollah Kashani, an Islamic cleric who was fiercely opposed to the British presence in Iran and to the more liberal policies of the Pahlavi rule. The ayatollah had successfully begun to meld religion with politics, and he had gathered a large following. He would set the stage for a subsequent ayatollah—Ayatollah Khomeini—to build a revolution based on the explosive combination of religion and politics, but in 1951 he was more closely focused on oil.

With the support of these forces, Mossadeq was able to lead a movement in Parliament that, on March 15, 1951, called for the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. On April 29, the action would prompt Mossadeq to be elected as prime minister.

Suddenly, the most powerful man in Iran was not the shah but was instead the prime minister. Iranians admired the way in which Mossadeq had stood up to the British occupiers. But his dramatic gesture, and his subsequent ordering of all British AIOC employees out of the country, would have serious consequences. Iranians had not been trained in how to manage an oil company. They did not have the expertise to operate the refinery or the wells. And as the Iranians confronted the reality of trying to learn to run the AIOC on their own, the British launched a boycott of Iranian oil on the foreign market.

Lacking oil revenue, the Iranian economy went into a tailspin. Government employees, policemen, and teachers received IOUs rather than their paychecks. Mossadeq seemed powerful within Iran, but to foreign governments who were worried about the stability of their investments in Iran, he was viewed with alarm.

As his power began to falter, Mossadeq ordered the shah's mother and sister to leave Iran, perhaps fearing these powerful women more than the young ruler. Mossadeq next turned to the United States, seeking assistance and support in exchange for a promise to keep the Communist influence from spreading into Iran. But the United States, deeply suspicious of Mossadeq, instead determined to quietly work behind the scenes to restore power to the shah.

It was a confusing time in Iran. The prime minister had assumed absolute control over most of Iranian life, dismissing the Senate and the Supreme Court, cutting back the powers of the shah, and imposing martial law. The shah seemed paralyzed.

Finally, in August 1953, the shah sent out a messenger to arrest Mossadeq, but instead Mossadeq arrested the messenger.

The prime minister made it clear that he had no intention of bowing to the authority of the shah. A small group of army officers attempted to seize Mossadeq but failed.

Early in the predawn hours of August 16, word reached the shah of the failed attempt by his army. He woke his wife and informed her that they would need to leave the country at once. Flying the small plane himself, the shah headed for the furthest point that the plane's limited fuel tank would allow—the airport in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. With only a small bag of clothes, the ruler of Iran next headed for Rome, where his own embassy refused to give him shelter.

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the ruler of Iran, found himself in exile—hounded by the press, seemingly unwanted by his people, forced to attempt to rebuild a coalition far from the palace that had been his home. He would return to power, but the lessons he learned in exile would forever change Iran's future.

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King of Kings

It was a subdued ruler who found himself seeking shelter in a Rome hotel. The shah and his wife, Soraya, had taken with them only what they could grab in haste. They had little money, few clothes, and apparently fewer friends. The paparazzi surrounded them, but it was more to chronicle their downfall than to provide them with any kind of a forum to launch a new public relations campaign. Nonetheless, the shah took advantage of each opportunity to stress his belief that what had happened in Iran was illegal, that he still retained the full constitutional authority, and that he was not abdicating but instead had left to avoid any kind of bloodshed.

International allies were somewhat uncertain as to the best response. Having fled his country in the middle of the night, the shah seemed weak. But Mossadeq had few friends in the global community—his behavior seemed unpredictable and his responses to events uncertain.

The U.S. government determined that the shah, even in his politically weak state, would prove a more reliable ally than Mossadeq, and should the Americans be able to help restore him to power, he would no doubt tilt Iran's policies—and its oil—toward American interests. To this end, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) paid a significant number of Iranian protesters to counter anti-American demonstrations with ones that supported the shah. Iranian soldiers soon joined the pro-shah demonstrations, and it quickly became clear in the streets of Tehran that the pro-shah forces were more numerous.

Ultimately, Mossadeq was ousted by supporters of the shah, and a prime minister friendlier to the shah, Zahedi, was named



A Communist newspaper kiosk is burned by pro-shah demonstrators in Tehran in August 1953 during a coup against Iranian prime minister Mohammed Mossadeq. The coup, engineered by the United States in support of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, reestablished Pahlavi's throne and ousted Mossadeq in favor of General Fazlollah Zahedi.

as his replacement. On August 19, 1953, the news reached the shah in Rome that his armed forces were once more in control. He quickly returned to his homeland equipped with the promise of American loans and convinced that his future security depended on American support. His time in exile had taught him that he could not, in the future, permit anyone to develop the kind of power that Mossadeq had—power that would challenge his authority.

What kind of Iran might have developed had the shah not been forced into exile in the early 1950s? It is certain that the fear he had experienced during his time in Rome—the experience of having no funds and few friends to rely upon, the recognition that his power could be snatched away by politically powerful enemies—forever altered the course of the Pahlavi dynasty. The shah would return to Iran determined to ensure that his experience in Rome never happened again. He would proceed to build a huge personal fortune, much of it hidden away outside of Iran in foreign banks. He would build a strong military presence, relying heavily on U.S. aid to transform Iran into a significant international power. And he would build a secret police, to be known as SAVAK (*Sazman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, a Farsi name meaning Organization of National Security and Information). SAVAK's founding mission was to eliminate any opposition to the shah. Instead, it would become a feared and dreaded symbol of all that was wrong with the Iranian monarchy, brutally torturing and executing those who were deemed to be unfriendly to the shah's regime.

America's involvement in ousting Mossadeq would also have a lasting legacy. Following the 1979 revolution in Iran, the new leaders began demanding that the United States apologize for its role in this clear manipulation of Iran's government. The demands would continue for more than two decades. Finally, on March 17, 2000, President Bill Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, gave a speech in Washington, D.C., acknowledging America's role in Mossadeq's overthrow.

"In 1953, the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq," she said. "The Eisenhower administration believed its actions were justified for strategic reasons, but the coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development. And it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs."

The speech was intended as a diplomatic "olive branch" to what was perceived in the United States as more moderate elements in the Iranian government. But the attempt failed. Ayatollah Khamenei swiftly responded in a speech before crowds in Meshed: "After half a century, or over 40 years, the Americans have now confessed that they staged the 28th Mordad [August 19, 1953] coup. They confessed that they supported the suppressive, dictatorial, and corrupt Pahlavi shah for 25 years. . . . What good does this admission—that you acted in that way then—do us now? . . . An admission years after the crime was committed, while they might be committing similar crimes now, will not do the Iranian nation any good."

RELIGION AND POLITICS

One of the lessons the shah had learned from the rapid rise of Mossadeq was the importance of religious leaders in shaping political thought. Because of this, he strengthened his relationships with the ayatollahs who had not already aligned themselves with Mossadeq. The shah would never be described as a religious man, but following his return, he took tentative steps to emphasize the importance of Shiite Muslim thought to Iran.

Over the next few years, the shah made very public visits to various sites important to Shiism. He made the hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims believe is one of the most important pillars of their faith. He agreed with the Muslim authorities' plans to include more religious teaching in public schools and to more tightly control the movies being shown in