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ROUNDTABLE: MOSSADEQ'S OUSTER AT 70: LEGACIES AND MEMORIES

Global Reflections on Mohammad Mosaddeq

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The seventieth anniversary of the 1953 coup that toppled the government of Mohammad Mossadeq in Iran provides the opportunity to assess not only the history of Iran during Mossadeq's premiership and the consequential oil crisis, but also to examine Mossadeq's legacy, the oil nationalization, and the conflict between Iran and the West. Mosaddeq's personality and distinct profile, which continued to haunt the West for decades even after his death, contributed to the mythical place this affair has occupied in the Iranian national memory, but now, seven decades later, how do we use that period as a lens through which to examine other chapters in Iran's history? What can we make of the scholarship and sources about Iran before 1951 or after 1953? What is the impact of this affair on the collective memory of Iranians in and outside Iran as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century?

If until recently the popular perception of Mosaddeq was nearly a consensus, we started seeing that crack over the past decade. Mosaddeq and his struggle were claimed by every political force in Iran. For the royalists, he was a monarchist, patriot, and Iranian nationalist. For the revolutionaries, he served as a rebel against the Pahlavi dictatorship, a martyr of the movement for democratization. The religious forces had a harder time accepting or embracing him because of his unrelenting secularism. Frequently, the masses marching in Iran during the 1979 revolution held his image next to Khomeini's. However, they still hailed his memory when they needed the public's approval. In the past decade, we have seen an essential transformation in the memory of Mosaddeq. Until a decade ago, there was no actual difference between the monarchists and the nonmonarchists, with both seeing Mosaddeq as a national hero. Now, however, it is increasingly evident that in the Iranian diaspora, mainly in the US, polarization has finally broken his mythical standing. The way one now sees Mosaddeq is deeply connected to one's interpretation of Iranian history, the revolution, and the Islamic Republic. The monarchists, supporters of the crown prince, Reza Pahlavi, now see Mosaddeq as the first serious threat to the Pahlavi monarchy and the breaking of Pahlavi's authority, and a precursor to the Islamic Republic. In this context, this roundtable seeks to imagine new ways to study that period.

In 2000, Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, officially admitted to the American role in the coup for the first time.[1] Nine years later, President Obama acknowledged as much in his Cairo speech.[2] This speech gave much-needed clarity regarding the coup, helped foster a new public debate, and entrenched it as a pivotal moment in the history of US–Iran

[1] Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, "Remarks before the American–Iranian Council," US Department of State, 17 March 2000, https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/2000/000317.html.

[2] "Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 4 June 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09.

relations, the Cold War, and, of course, Iran's quest for democracy and sovereignty. Myriad books and articles (and documentary films, podcasts, and even a peek into this story in the Hollywood blockbuster *Argo*) have covered those angles in the past quarter century, to the point that the fundamentals have been established, recognized, and accepted. The US and Britain sabotaged Iran's plans to assert rightful control of its natural resources, and by doing so derailed the democratic political process and cemented the shah's dictatorship for another twenty-five years. A closer examination was given to the religiopolitical forces and the actions of the Tudeh, Iran's communist party.[3] The biggest historiographical battle also could be described as a tug-of-war between the camp of credible mainstream historians and revisionists, the CIA, and other operators who tried to shift the blame from the US and Britain to local actors.[4] The framework, however, has been maintained. In that case, what are the challenges and opportunities for scholars who study Iran engaging with the 1951–53 period today?

Tweaking and paraphrasing Theda Skocpol,[5] Mosaddeq and the 1951–53 period did indeed serve as an extraordinary moment that suddenly made almost anything possible. This roundtable is dedicated to the examination of the legacy beyond the coup and the place it occupies in broader historical contexts. The participants offer glimpses of new directions in research, offer original perspectives on studying the 1953 coup, and as well use it as a lens to study global, Middle Eastern, and Iranian history. Seventy years after the coup and a quarter of a century after this affair became better known as a crucial chapter in the history of Iran, the Middle East, and the US, one can trace changes in the cultural and political significance of Mosaddeq, on the one hand, and the potential for greater inquiries on the other.

In this short piece, I want to propose approaches the 1953 coup may provide to the study of historical and contemporary phenomena. Mosaddeq came to the fore at a crucial moment in the formation of the awakening world (that is, the decolonized world that would become the Third World). Iran's experience, at the time, at the UN Security Council and the International Court at the Hague and in the way the crisis was covered around the world, helped create a shared experience, a point of reference for the global struggle. As I have shown in the past, Mosaddeq's struggle prompted demands in many places in the Global South for nationalization and asserting control over natural resources. But more than that, the pride of a Middle Eastern leader who successfully (albeit only temporarily) stood up to the empires in the age of decolonization was enough to inspire many willful revolutionaries. Such experiences inspired and facilitated practical discussions in the public conversation in Egypt before the 1952 Free Officers' coup and those later held by Gamal `Abd al-Nasser in Egypt, Jawaharlal Nehru in India, and more.[6]

[3] See the early studies that opened the public discussion: James Bill and William Roger Louis, eds., *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism, and Oil* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988); Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004); and Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.–Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013). Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2003) turned the coup into a feature of public discourse. The first analytical essay after the release of the declassified documents in 2017 was by Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi and Siavush Randjbar-Daemi: "Musaddiq's Spectre: On the Recent Declassification of US Documents," Jadaliyya, 17 July 2017, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34442. Last, see Ervand Abrahamian's most recent assessment of the affair: *Oil Crisis in Iran: From Nationalism to Coup d'Etat* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[4] See two recent examples: Darioush Bayandor, *The Shah, the Islamic Revolution and the United States* (Nyon, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and Ray Takeyh, *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

[5] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: CambridgeUniversity Press, 1979), 171.

[6] Lior Sternfeld, "Iran Days in Egypt: Mosaddeq's Visit to Cairo in 1951," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2015.1060151.

In that context, we know that Mosaddeq's image comprised far more than a "leftist" or a "Middle Eastern" cause. Mossadeq was adored by the Israeli right in 1951–52 as a postcolonial leader. The right wing in Israel, which was still very much committed to the anticolonial struggle, continued to view Britain as the primary foe. Mossadeq's policies encouraged them to envision a truly postcolonial Middle East in which Mossadeq, his likes, and Israel (under different leadership) could help develop an independent and secular region.[7] In the same years, there were similar debates in Mexico, Venezuela, and Guatemala. What connections can we draw between those theaters of struggle and confrontation? Additionally, almost exactly a year after Mosaddeq was overthrown, the US used the same blueprint as Operation TPAJAX to overthrow Guatemala's Jacobo Árbenz. This is a topic that can shed light on the formational moments of Global South solidarity and collective memory. It is possible, if so, to complicate the often-simplified concepts of political left and right to mean the same thing, regardless of place and historical context.

What can a period of political openness do to societies struggling with tensions between freedoms and state security? We can examine Mosaddeq's Iran on a continuum of popular governments interacting with their constituents and trying to push the boundaries of political rights and freedoms of press or speech. The discourse regarding Iran's right to be free and independent (in the context of oil) gave an opening to women fighting for suffrage using the same language and justification. Could the broad consensus about Iran's rights legitimize domestic goals of expanding political freedoms? One can imagine that Iran's many religious and ethnic minorities used the same recently acquired vocabulary to advocate for their own rights within the political community of the Iranian nation.

Building on scholarship on the role of the press and media in the coup, we can examine further the role of foreign interference in media outlets in the non-Western world in creating chaos or mobilizing people; we can analyze propaganda broadcast around the world; we can engage critically with projects such as BBC Global Service or the Voice of America; and we can examine the changing role of the printed press in semiliterate societies, and the differences between urban and rural communities, among others. Mosaddeq's crisis can serve as a lens through which we study power balance in international institutions such as the UN and The Hague, studying the discourse of sanctions and embargo, and neocolonialism and imperialism.

The contributors to this roundtable explore the infinite number of paths in Mosaddeq's story that can still inspire critical scholarship. Their essays put Mosaddeq, his legacy, and the coup in the context of questions regarding memory, media, gender, transnational studies, the global Cold War, and more.

Fariba Amini, an independent journalist and the daughter of Nosratollah Amini, who was the mayor of Tehran and Mosaddeq's personal attorney, writes about the place of Mosaddeq in the public and personal spheres as she is finalizing a documentary film about him made at his estate at Ahmadabad, fifty miles west of Tehran, the place in which he was confined until his death in 1967. This reflection allows us to appreciate the place Mosaddeq holds at the intersection of the public and personal and his relevance to every political debate seventy years after his overthrow and fifty-five years after his death. Amini explores the distance between the rundown estate and an exhibition held just recently in Tehran dealing with contemporary perceptions of Mosaddeq.

Christopher Dietrich presents a prequel, some three decades prior to Mosaddeq's tenure as prime minister. Dietrich recalls the first time Mosaddeq engaged with the issue of oil and concessions. In the early 1920s, he thought that the entrance of an American player could balance the weight of the British and Soviet interests. We can trace the source of Mosaddeq's belief that, in general, America was a positive force, something that is seen in

[7] Lior B. Sternfeld, *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), ch. 3.

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much of the scholarship on his encounters with Truman, Eisenhower, and other American diplomats.

Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet suggests intersections during the Mosaddeq moment between the push toward nationalization of oil and the struggle for women's suffrage and civil rights. This story reveals wider options and opportunities within the discourse of national liberation and political participation. Moreover, as Kashani-Sabet argues, the coup against Mosaddeq halted the process for another decade, until a new political moment emerged that allowed this particular women's movement to achieve its goals.

The coup also showed the significance of Tehran Radio in public and political life. Whoever controlled the radio controlled the narrative and the imagined and real political rule. In his piece, Siavush Randjbar-Daemi brings to the fore the broadcasts of Radio Tehran in the crucial hours of August 1953 and shows the significance of the sequence of announcements on political developments. Randjbar-Daemi allows us to think about radio and mass media more broadly as a means to drive political force in Iran and beyond. When comparing the Radio Tehran broadcasts with BBC in this case, one also might consider Voice of America or Radio Cairo, or the military radio in Rwanda, Vietnam, Israel, or elsewhere in the context of political change.

The question of whether it was oil or communism that eventually pushed the US into action remains crucially at the core of this historical inquiry. Gregory Brew's intervention delves into the US archives, many records only recently declassified, to examine the different calculations of the two involved American administrations for an understanding that it was not only oil or only communism, but that both factors were taken with utmost seriousness as threats to interests of the United States. Arash Azizi examines the period as a "Cold War from below." Azizi notes how international connections between the Tudeh and other communist parties in the Middle East led to embracing of the Iranian struggle. Abadan, for example, experienced some of the same challenges as Iraqi Kirkuk in the mid- to late 1940s and early 1950s, and lessons drawn from Abadan were taken back to Iraq, contributing to regional and global solidarity that extended to Israel/Palestine and beyond.

Sahar Razavi outlines the way the memory of Mosaddeq memory has evolved over the years, from the postcoup period through the early revolutionary and postrevolutionary stages. She examines the discourse among politicians and agents of memory, family members of participants or ideological successors. We can see that Mosaddeq was of instrumental use for every political movement in Iran. Similarly, Liora Hendelman-Baavur examines the utilization of Mosaddeq in recent debates in Iran, as part of the nuclear negotiations and the present struggles and confrontations with the West. Hendelman-Baavur shows how contemporary events use and reshape the memories of Mosaddeq and his struggle and legacy.

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