



Figure 7: New Towns in Israel (Spiegel, Erika. *New Towns in Israel: Urban and Regional Planning and Development*. Frederick A. Praeger, NY, 1967.)

# Why did the United States Overthrow the Prime Minister of Iran in 1953?

## A Review Essay on the Historiography of the Archetypical Intervention in the Third World During the Cold War

**Sener Akturk**

*University of California, Berkeley*

*Abstract: This review essay looks at the causes of the covert U.S. intervention in Iran in 1953, which overthrew the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Musaddiq, and turned Iran into a de facto autocracy. The argument of the essay is that, as opposed to economic interests or strategic considerations, it was American perceptions of Musaddiq and of the Iranian people in general that determined the course of U.S. foreign policy towards Iran.*

### **Introduction**

Since the end of the Second World War, world politics has been characterized not by wars among great powers, but by numerous interventions by the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Swiftly leaving behind the calamities of warfare among great powers, the international system took on the characteristics of Brobdingnags waging war on Lilliputians in Jonathan Swift's famous fantasy novel *Gulliver's Travels*. Since the end of the Cold War as well, the military conflicts that involve great powers have been between great powers and small powers.

The particular great power-small power confrontation that I focus on in this essay is in many ways the archetype of the way in which the United States intervened in the affairs of weak Third World states during the Cold War. Musaddiq's nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company

(AIOC) in 1951 was followed by a worldwide embargo on Iranian oil and attempts to militarily overthrow his democratically empowered government, spearheaded by the United States, with the assistance of Great Britain. The coup that overthrew him in 1953, planned in great detail by CIA operatives, was hailed as such a great success that the United States meticulously reproduced it in different parts of the Third World.<sup>1</sup> Despite the cheerfulness with which the United States reproduced this action plan, many scholars of the Middle East are unwavering in their belief that Musaddiq's overthrow was the turning point in the history of the region regarding perceptions of the United States. It is only after the overthrow of Musaddiq that the Middle Eastern masses started turning to anti-Americanism in growing numbers. Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal a few years after Musaddiq's nationalization of AIOC, and the popularity he commanded after the failed British-French-Israeli assault to overthrow his government, testify to a recurring pattern of Middle Eastern politics established with the overthrow of Musaddiq. More than half a century after the first U.S.-initiated coup of its type, a critical evaluation of the reasons offered by different scholars for the U.S. decision to overthrow the Iranian government in 1953 is past due.

### **Soviet Threat, Oil and the Perceptions of Musaddiq: Evaluating the Driving Forces Behind US Foreign Policy Towards Iran**

There are many different accounts of Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq's<sup>2</sup> term in office in Iran (1950-53) and of the reasons behind the US foreign policy towards Iran during the Musaddiq Era. Here, the scope will be limited to reviewing different historiographies of the period with special emphasis on the reasons behind the U.S. decision to overthrow him. By reviewing articles and books by James Bill, Nikki Keddie, Mark Gasiorowski, Susan Siavoshi, Sam Falle, Richard Herrman, Muriel Atkin, Mary Ann Heiss, Peter Hahn, William Dorman and Mansour Farhang, which provide both a representative array of different explanations while also including some of the most influential and well-known works on this topic, it is hoped that a better understanding of the US foreign policy-making process at the time will be attained.

The reasons for US foreign policy under three broadly defined categories will be compared: Strategic considerations, such as the Soviet threat; economic interests, such as oil revenues; and the ideational factors, such as

the U.S. perceptions of Musaddiq and of the Iranian people. The works of the chosen authors provide ample examples of each category.

In this historiographic review, it is argued that ideational factors such as cultural perceptions, as opposed to economic interests or strategic considerations, played a substantial, and even the decisive role in determining the US foreign policy response that was ultimately adopted (i.e. coup against Musaddiq). First, I demonstrate that the arguments centered on crude economic interests are false in historical perspective because a revision of the original AIOC agreement was made immediately after the coup, encompassing most of Musaddiq's demands. Second, in addressing the real challenge to the perceptions thesis, the emphasis on the Soviet threat, which so much permeates the historiography and scholarly literature dealing with the reasons behind the U.S. response to Musaddiq's policies, will be countered. As such, the CIA-organized covert action, on the one hand undermining Musaddiq and the National Front, and exaggerating the Tudeh Party<sup>3</sup> on the other, will be pointed out. The purpose and the end result of the CIA campaign was to "construct" a potential "communist threat" capable of taking over Iran that is far removed from the actual capabilities of Tudeh and of the political circumstances in Iran.

The relationship between the United States and Iran in 1953 is one of asymmetric confrontation and a good example of great power-small power relations. It is a case where the status of the two parties involved was unambiguous: The United States was—as it still is—not just a great power, but the greatest power in the international system, whereas Iran was a Third World state and a small power vis-à-vis the United States. The gap between the two countries' material capabilities was enormous.<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the theoretical framework I have developed elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> where I argued that ideational factors would be much more important in influencing great power decision-making vis-à-vis small powers as opposed to Great Power-Great Power conflicts where objective military-economic interests might indeed be the decisive factors,<sup>6</sup> one would expect ideational factors such as culture, religion, race, gender, and perceptions, to be unusually influential on the foreign policy-making of the United States towards Iran.

### **Economic Interests Driving US Foreign Policy?**

The argument that economic interests were driving foreign policy deci-

sions toward Iran could easily be defended with regards to the British response to Iranian oil nationalization. Hence, some scholars make the mistake of erroneously transferring the reasons driving British foreign policy to the place of those causal factors in US foreign policy. James Bill, for example, asserts that in the realm of economic interests there was very little, if any, difference between the British and American policies. "There is little doubt that America and Britain shared the same overall goals in Iran in the 1940s" (Bill 1988: 42). Both were striving to gain a share or a monopoly if possible, of the oil resources in Iran. Since the crude pursuit of economic interests as such usually leads to competition among great powers, the fierce American-British competition over oil concessions seemingly counts as evidence in favor of the "economic interests" thesis.

American oil companies' entry into the Iranian oil market infuriated the British, who maintained a monopoly over Iranian oil. After Standard Oil (1920-1), Sinclair Oil (1923), Seaboard Oil (1937), and Standard-Vacuum Oil (1940) rushed to Iran, the British foreign secretary Lord Curzon "warned [the Iranian foreign minister] very strongly against any attempt to introduce the Standard Oil Company in Persia, assuring him that this would mean a competition which would be a source of certain trouble...and which the British Government would not be expected to regard with any favor" (Bill 1988: 27). As the correspondence between Churchill and Roosevelt demonstrates, Britain was attempting to formalize spheres of influence (Saudi Arabia to the US; Iran to Britain) and to avoid competition with the United States, a competition that Britain knew it would lose (Bill 1988: 28). The United States, on the other hand, was expanding its influence and presiding over the decline of British hegemony.

Once depicted in such terms, US decision to overthrow Musaddiq may seem to be driven by economic interests. Bill claims that, "in exchange for American support in overthrowing the Musaddiq government, the British grudgingly permitted US companies a 40% interest in Iranian oil" (Bill 1988: 80).

Although emphasizing the economic aspect more than necessary, Bill recognizes the importance of strategic considerations and the importance of perceptions in influencing US policy towards Iran. While enumerating the four reasons why the U.S. "changed its policy from one of diplomacy...to one of intervention", he mentions the "preoccupation with the communist challenge" as one of the "two immediate causes" (Bill 1988: 79).

Moreover, Bill amply refers to the prominence of perceptions in the contemporary discussions of Musaddiq's policies and of the appropriate policy to deal with him.

Musaddiq...was designated as *Time* magazine's Man of the Year and was presented throughout as enigmatic, irascible and even insane...*Time* presented the old man as fanatical and chided the West for lacking the 'moral muscle' to deal with him (Bill 1988: 96).

While discussing the personalities of the actual CIA operatives who participated in Operation Ajax, the name given to the coup that overthrew Musaddiq, he points out that:

[t]hey tended to be white, Anglo-Saxon patricians from old families with old money...inherited traditional British attitudes toward the colored races of the world—not the pukka sahib arrogance of the Indian Raj, but the mixed fascination and condescension of men like T.E. Lawrence... (Bill 1988: 87-88)

Emphasizing "the aura of Britain's special knowledge of Iran" (Bill 1988: 84) in pulling America to the British position, Bill admits that "distorted perceptions dominated the thinking of each side," albeit identifying these misperception-ridden two sides as U.K. and Iran, instead of U.S. and Iran (Bill 1988: 64). Despite the plethora of evidence he gives about the public's obsession with Musaddiq's personality and the misguided U.S. perceptions of him and of the Iranians, Bill maintains that "much of the literature has *mistakenly* focused on his physical characteristics [emphasis added]," implying that the *real* reasons for US stance lay elsewhere, in his opinion, in Persian oil (Bill 1988: 54).

Overall, Bill's assessment of the conditions surrounding US foreign policy against Musaddiq seems to privilege economic interests over strategic considerations or perceptions. Although his references to distorted perceptions are more prominent than his enunciation of the Soviet threat, relying on his finding fault in the media's focus on Musaddiq's characteristics, we may infer that he does not consider perceptions as a serious factor in foreign policy-making, but rather as a 'spice' in his narrative.

If perceptions at least appear in Bill's historiography, they do not even figure as 'spice' in Keddie's narrative of the Musaddiq Era. Unrivaled in her meticulous analysis of the class structure of the Musaddiq movement, her approach is nonetheless flawed by the very reason of its success: She

pays almost no attention to ideational factors such as perceptions probably because she considers them as “super-structural” phenomena, ultimately rising from the “basic” economic developments, as Marxist approaches maintain. Even when she does appreciate these factors, as in the case with Shi’ism, she subordinates them to material factors. Hence, the assessment of the impact of cultural perceptions on US foreign policy-making falls outside of her purview.

According to Keddie, although concentrated around oil concessions, the economic aspect of the US approach to Iran cannot be reduced to oil resources. Maintenance of colonial patterns of trade and of a colonial economic structure, whereby Iran served as a source of raw materials and as a market for manufactured products,<sup>7</sup> were also common components of U.S. interests in Iran. The curious recommendations of American economic advisors in Iran provide exemplary cases:

[t]he American engineering firm Morrison-Knudson made a survey and suggested a development program in August 1947. They put heavy emphasis on agricultural technology and little on industry. Raw cotton and wool production were to increase, but no new plants were planned to process them. Some Iranians, who felt that Iran’s role as supplier of raw materials to the West and buyer of expensive finished goods was to be perpetuated, criticized the report (Keddie 1981:130).

Only months later, Overseas Consultants, Inc. (OCI) prepared another report, emphasizing technical improvements in agriculture, communications and transport and ignoring the potential benefits of land reform (Keddie 1981: 131). “Regarding industry, OCI noted that plants were inefficient, overstaffed, over-centralized and technically backward... The government was told to get rid of industry” (Keddie 1981: 131). Iranian planners asserted that “the main dispute centered on Iran’s desire to industrialize much faster than OCI recommended” (Keddie 1981: 132).

Accordingly, during Musaddiq’s term in office, the government began four large textile mills, several dry-fruit processing plants, a cement factory, and sugar refining plants (Keddie 1981: 136). Mentioning of the Soviet threat is *relatively* absent from Keddie’s account in comparison with most other historiographies, while the role of perceptions is *absolutely* absent.

### **Strategic Considerations Driving US Foreign Policy?**

Mark Gasiorowski’s work is representative of most of the scholarly lit-

erature on the issue in its emphasis of the Soviet threat as the decisive factor behind the eventual American response to Musaddiq. In his “U.S. Foreign Policy toward Iran during the Mussadiq Era,” Gasiorowski maintains that his article “focuses particularly on the strategic considerations that led U.S. officials to change from a policy of supporting Mussadiq to one of opposing and eventually overthrowing him,” hence explicitly singling out strategic considerations as the causal factor leading to the American response (Gasiorowski 1996: 52). He claims the U.S. attitude change towards Musaddiq to be but one manifestation of the change in the global strategy that the U.S. was following to contain the Soviet Union. Whereas U.S. policymakers were “pursuing a strategy of “strongpoint defense” in their efforts to contain Soviet expansionism” during the late 1940s,<sup>8</sup> with the adoption of the April 1950 document known as NSC-68, US strategy shifted to one of perimeter or peripheral defense. While the former strategy emphasized strengthening US positions in key advanced industrialized regions such as Western Europe and Japan, the latter emphasized enhancing U.S. influence in all the countries surrounding the Soviet Union, including Third World countries such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

Gasiorowski makes clear that the prospects for the world oil market were not decisive. “U.S. officials began to implement a plan to ease the effect of the British oil blockade *on the world oil market*, [emphasis added]” (Gasiorowski 1996: 55) implying that first, the oil blockade did not have much of an impact on the U.S. oil market but rather on the world oil market, and second, even the adverse effects on the world market were successfully offset by the U.S. plan.<sup>10</sup> Gasiorowski clearly demonstrates the relative absence of economic concerns in the formulation of the US response while focusing on the strategic factors leading to the operation.

In this context, strategic considerations refer to an immediate Soviet threat and the likelihood of a Soviet takeover through the Tudeh party. Fear of Tudeh’s strengthening was exaggerated and one is surprised to see that Gasiorowski, despite documenting the level at which fear of Tudeh was artificially created by the CIA, still believes the fear of Soviet takeover to be the major factor leading to the Operation Ajax.

Roosevelt and his CIA team began to work in loose coordination with Zahedi. They used the BEDAMN network to launch an extensive propaganda barrage against Mussadiq and organize antigovernment...demonstrations, *adding considerably to the turmoil* that was engulfing Tehran...On August 17 Nerren and Cilley used \$50,000 given to them by Roosevelt’s



team to hire a large crowd that marched into central Tehran shouting Tudeh slogans, carrying signs denouncing the shah, tearing down statues of the shah and his father... This crowd played the role of an agent provocateur: It generated *fear of a Tudeh takeover*... [Italics mine] (Gasiorowski 1996: 60-61)

A close study of the US covert operations in Iran clearly demonstrates that the *fear of a Tudeh takeover was created* by the CIA. Hence, the *Soviet threat itself*, which depended on the possibility of a Tudeh takeover, *was a construction of the CIA*. The US response, if it really relied on strategic concerns as Gasiorowski claims, depended on a cyclical argument: First, US created turmoil in Iran through the CIA's covert operations, and then, justified Zahedi's coup –which again, was organized by the CIA- with reference to the very turmoil it created. The US weakened Musaddiq and gave the impression of a growing Tudeh, and then intervened on the basis of Musaddiq's weakening and his inability to contain the Soviet threat that was manifest through the rise of Tudeh activism.

Despite joint US-UK efforts to weaken his government, Musaddiq indeed demonstrated a capacity for leadership and a survival instinct when he successfully prevented both Ahmad Qavam's attempt to sustain a government that wanted to resume negotiations with the British, and the first of Fazlollah Zahedi's plots to overthrow him. Despite almost unlimited British and later US support, both Qavam and Zahedi failed to overthrow him because of the political power and control that Musaddiq demonstrated throughout his turmoil-ridden term. The CIA tried to detach Ayatollah Kashani of the Mojahidin-e Islam group from Musaddiq's National Front, gave money to Mohammad Taqi to build a clerical alternative, and also gave money to Muzaffar Baqai, the leader of the Toilers' Party, to break with Musaddiq, while also creating the impression of a growing Tudeh. Only after the CIA actively broke the political and social coalition constituting Musaddiq's National Front, was it possible for Zahedi's second CIA-supported coup attempt to succeed.

Gasiorowski further maintains that "Tudeh was not a serious threat to the Mosaddeq government" because "it was severely handicapped by its close association with the Soviet Union," in a country of heightened nationalist feelings (Gasiorowski 1996: 62). Aware of the shortcomings of his argument about the Soviet threat as the precursor of the US intervention, Gasiorowski recognizes the role of perceptions in US policy-making when he writes that "...the more stridently anti-Communist views of...for-

eign policy advisers and the changing *perceptions of Mussadiq* among some holdovers from the Truman administration together *led the United States...to overthrow him* [emphasis added]" (Gasiorowski 1996: 63). Unfortunately, Gasiorowski does not carry his argument as such to its logical conclusion, which would be to emphasize perceptions as the primary cause of US response.

There was indeed a general perception of a Communist threat at the time in the United States, also known as McCarthyism in domestic politics, but the very CIA operatives in Iran must have known that the Communist threat in Iran was small in reality, such that they deliberately set out to create and project a greater sense of the Communist threat in order to prepare the ground for the military coup against Musaddiq. It is possible that the general U.S. public or those without insider knowledge of CIA's operations would have indeed perceived the threat of an imminent Communist takeover in Iran. In all likelihood however, the CIA and the State Department knew this threat was notreal, but was an exaggeration by CIA's own actions and propaganda.

### **Ideas and Perceptions Driving US Foreign Policy?**

Sussan Siavoshi, summarizing the British perceptions of Iran and of Musaddiq, asserts that:

British policymakers...were rational, fair-minded and cautious. Contrast this with the British image of Iranians as generally irrational and emotional, only a half-civilized lot with a national character described as self-doubting and strange. The entire nationalization movement was reduced to the malicious intention of xenophobic rabble-rousing leaders consisting of both atheistic Communists and fanatical religious leaders who used an 'obscure sense of popular discontent' and directed it against the generous and civilizing mission of the British oil company...Some of these views...were later supported by the Americans as well (Siavoshi 1996).

Siavoshi later gives examples of the common references to Musaddiq in the US media, noting that popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* "characterized him as inconsistent, unreasonable, and irrational and warned against the red threat" (Siavoshi 1996: 69). Siavoshi puts the perceptions thesis and the Soviet threat thesis side by side, without assigning an order of precedence among them and asserts that these two factors

determined the U.S. decision.<sup>11</sup>

Yet she transfers most of the responsibility for the American misperception of Musaddiq to the British, when she claims that the “British succeeded in portraying Iranian nationalism as a force incapable or unwilling to resist Communist domination in Iran” (Siavoshi 1996: 70). However, in view of mounting evidence pointing to the anti-communist character of the National Front, and in spite of the strenuous CIA effort to weaken Musaddiq, which failed over and over because of his proven political prowess, it is naïve at best to believe that the U.S. policy-makers would be “persuaded” by British propaganda that the Soviet Union would take over Iran. Historical evidence suggests that the U.S. was aware of the anti-communist character and political power of Musaddiq’s National Front.

Sir Sam Falle, who was a British diplomat in Iran at the time, asserts however It is questionable, to say the least, whether Musaddiq was capable of running Iran...There was a sort of mob rule. To this day, I remain utterly convinced that the Communist threat was too great to ignore...would have produced knee-jerk reactions that could have led to global catastrophe (Falle 1996: 86-87).

Falle grounds his account of the events on the threat of Soviet takeover. Falle himself rejected proposals to cooperate with Musaddiq, “believing that his remaining in power would lead to a Communist takeover” (Falle 1996: 85).

Instead of documenting Tudeh’s electoral support and Musaddiq’s lack of popular support, or any other tangible evidence of a communist strengthening, Falle relies on his unsubstantiated observations. He rather quotes the accounts of people who he thinks are eligible to make authoritative judgments, such as the British charge d’affaires, Middleton:

The chief question now facing us is whether Musaddiq’s government or any other (short of a military dictatorship) can avoid the “kiss of death” which is the well-known consequence of flirting with communists (Falle 1996: 84).

According to this line of reasoning, which may be called the “kiss of death” thesis, one would think that De Gaulle’s coalition government with the French Communist Party after the Second World War would inevitably lead to a Soviet takeover of France, a result that can only be avoided by overthrowing the French government. The case for Italy would not be much different either. These rather ironic conclusions, however, lead one

to the question of cultural bias among the American and British policy-makers.

Sam Falle's account indeed provides ample examples of cultural bias. Referring to the Iranian electorate as the "mob" and to the Iranian democracy as the "mob rule", Falle asserts that Musaddiq "was a brilliant demagogue"<sup>12</sup> instead of describing him as the brilliant politician of a fledgling constitutional democracy that was Iran in the 1950s. Citing the fact that Falle was called "Red Sam" in the British Foreign Service for his belief in "liberal causes, resurgent nationalism, and the like" (Falle 1996: 87), Falle nonetheless does not see the contradiction between his self-identified liberalism and his advocacy of Reza Shah's monarchical rule as the road to freedom and prosperity:

It seems highly probable that [if] Mussadiq would never have come to power...Iran would have become prosperous some five years earlier, and the poverty, misery, and political instability of the Mussadiq years would have been avoided. The shah's throne would not have been threatened...some of the oil wealth would have gone toward development and even filtered down to the people years earlier (Falle 1996: 85).

According to "Red Sam", then, juxtaposed to the "poverty, misery and instability" of the Musaddiq Era, the prosperity, happiness and the dictatorial stability (!) of the following 25 years (1953-78) under Reza Shah is ultimately preferable. Falle's authoritative witness, "an enlightened liberal of the caliber of George Middleton...was in no doubt that the lovable old man had to go" (Falle 1996: 87).

Providing a much needed perspective, Herrmann addresses "the Role of Iran in Soviet Perceptions and Policy" in his article of the same title (Herrmann 1990). In discussing the Soviet acquiescence to the overthrow of Musaddiq, after noting that the "Tudeh Party escalated the situation by fostering violent demonstrations in Tehran", he nonetheless claims that "although the Tudeh played a role in the events...it did not make a bid for power, and *there is no evidence* that Moscow was involved in any of the action [emphasis added]" (Herrmann 1990: 69).

Herrmann's statement about the absolute lack of any evidence about any Soviet involvement is the most direct confirmation of what one encounters, or rather, does *not* encounter in the historiographies of the period. At least as important is his broader insight into the American perceptions of Soviet strategy in general. He asserts that "Americans dismiss as naïve any interpretation of Soviet strategy that emphasizes defensive

motives” (Herrmann 1990: 65). He then demonstrates the defensive motives of the Soviet Union in its relations with Iran, such as preventing a possible attack from Iran to the Azerbaijani oil fields and Central Asia.

Muriel Atkin goes further in the same direction by challenging the underlying assumptions of the West about Soviet intentions in Iran, in his brilliantly titled article “Myths of Soviet-Iranian Relations” (Atkin 1990). Examining a *few* of the historical myths about Soviet-Iranian relations, Atkin divides these myths into two categories: “The first category is the conceptual myth, as manifested by the Testament of Peter the Great and the drive to warm-water ports. The second deals with inaccurate understandings of real events” (Atkin 1990: 101). Regarding Peter the Great’s Testament and the drive to warm-water ports, he notes that

One of the canards most resistant to the weight of evidence is the belief that there is a grand design for Russian expansion formulated in the Testament of Peter the Great and followed by all his successors, including the modern Soviet leadership...An even more popular legend about Russian intentions toward Iran deals with the quest for warm-water ports (Atkin 1990: 102).

According to Atkin, these beliefs persisted through time. Once expressed by Germany’s representative in St. Petersburg, when he “explained Russian expansion in Asia in terms not of conscious policy but rather of a force of nature drawn to warm-water ports and fertile southern lands”, these beliefs were easily invoked, for example, by the *Wall Street Journal* during the final days of Shah’s regime, when this newspaper “identified a “warm-water port on the Persian Gulf” as one of Russia’s long standing objectives in Iran.”<sup>13</sup>

“Myths of Soviet-Iranian Relations” also exposes a tradition of British misperception and overstatement of the Russian threat, a tendency that was encountered in Falle’s and Middleton’s statements earlier. Lord Curzon’s claims are also remarkable:

One of the authors long consulted on Anglo-Russian competition over Iran, Lord Curzon, argues differently...He claimed that Russia ‘yearns for an outlet upon the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.’ He offered no substantiation for this assertion... In general, Curzon’s depiction of the Russian menace is based on speculation, rumor... (Atkin 1990: 104).

Atkin concludes that “in fact, Russia’s rulers never looked at Iran in terms of a route toward warm-water ports” (Atkin 1990: 104). He further claims that “on the rare occasions when Russian officials contemplated

their country's prospects in the Gulf...an obsession with warm-water ports was conspicuous by its absence" (Atkin 1990: 104).

If Herrmann and Atkin's articles are superb in their dismantling of the unfounded assumptions and myths about the Soviet menace towards Iran, Mary Ann Heiss's "Real Men Don't Wear Pajamas" is as superb in its examination of the Anglo-American cultural perceptions of Musaddiq and the significant influence of these perceptions on the US response to the Iranian oil nationalization dispute. She claims that

over the course of the oil dispute, Anglo-American officials came to a common way of looking at Mossadeq that used many of his personal characteristics, habits, and negotiating tactics, as well as some of his policy positions themselves, to justify a view of him as unmanly and unfit for office. Because Anglo-American officials did not view Mossadeq as their equal, they found it easy to dismiss him as an unworthy adversary whose position did not matter...They buttressed claims of Western superiority over Iranian and other Middle Eastern peoples by perpetuating the idea that those peoples were weak and incapable (Heiss 2001: 181).

Using "gender—and to a lesser extent culture—as its organizing construct," Heiss "postulates that Anglo-American officials joined to formulate a gender-based view of Mossadeq that denigrated him for departing from what they considered to be acceptable Western norms and that worked against their stated goal of seeking a resolution to the vexing oil imbroglio" (Heiss 2001: 182). She maintains that "Anglo-American policy makers consistently employed what Edward Said has termed "Orientalism" when dealing with Mossadeq, whom they considered inferior, childlike, and feminine."<sup>14</sup>

Addressing the so-called feminine aspects of Musaddiq, which U.S. officials had difficulty dealing with, Heiss focuses on "Mossadeq's 'fragile' and 'emotional' temperament" (Heiss 2001: 184), manifest in the frequent public appearance of Musaddiq-in-tears. To the American officials, Musaddiq's tears were "signs of weakness and effeminacy that diminished Mossadeq's standing as a statesman and absolved them of the responsibility of dealing with him as an equal" (Heiss 2001: 184).

Unique to Heiss's account is her taking notice of the fact that the language of psychology and mental illness, which was usually reserved to describing females in the discourse of 1950s, was used to denigrate and dismiss Musaddiq:

The documentary record on the oil crisis is replete with references to Mossadeq as 'crazy,' 'sick,' 'mad,' 'hysterical,' 'neurotic,' 'demented,' 'peri-

odically unstable,' and 'not quite sane.' Because he was 'suspicious' and 'entirely impervious to reason,' the 'ordinary rules [of] logic' were useless when dealing with him (Heiss 2001: 186).

Heiss claims that Musaddiq's emotionalism might have been intentional and employed to serve his political ends because the Iranian electorate, on whose support Musaddiq depended for his power and legitimacy, honored and applauded such emotionalism as a responsible and caring leader's expression of Iranian distress.<sup>15</sup>

While discussing U.S. officials' view of international politics and the role that Musaddiq performed in this system, Heiss makes an utterly ironic observation in noting that, from U.S. officials' point of view, Musaddiq "approached 'international politics from [an] emotional point of view' rather than from a 'rational' one" (Heiss 2001: 185). This observational comment is truly ironic because judging on the basis of the historiographies examined so far, it was the U.S. foreign policy-makers who approached international politics from an emotional-subjective point of view. It was the U.S. foreign policy-makers, who disregarded mounting evidence pointing to the lack of a credible Soviet threat in Iran, and acted upon their cultural predispositions and gendered biases in overthrowing Musaddiq, rather than solely attending to the objective conditions and adhering to a Realist calculus of power and balance of threat logic.<sup>16</sup>

Citing Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's derogatory comments pertaining to Musaddiq's alleged "madness", Heiss suggests that "Mossadeq's 'madness', it seemed, truly was grounds for the Anglo-American operation against him" (Heiss 2001: 187). Although she actually establishes the causal link between perceptions of Musaddiq and the adoption of the U.S. response, Heiss refrains from designating perceptions as *the* primary factor leading to the U.S. decision to overthrow the Iranian premier. As she reveals early in her essay, "although these Anglo-American conceptions and descriptions of Mossadeq were not the sole, or even the most important, factor influencing policy, they deserve scholarly consideration because they helped to shape the context within which officials formulated policy" (Heiss 2001: 181). As the historiographical review of the Musaddiq Era presented here has demonstrated, the actual situation was quite the opposite: It was the geographic proximity of Iran to the Soviet Union and the nationalization of AIOC that helped to shape the context within which officials formulated policy. However, within a context that is partially shaped by geographic and economic considerations, ideational fac-

tors determined the course of U.S. policy towards Iran. Despite her meticulous description of the prejudices against Musaddiq, Heiss nonetheless shies away from recognizing the fact that ideational factors were driving U.S. policy.<sup>17</sup> Her conclusion is rather mysterious and discouraging because despite all the evidence she enumerates, she still attributes the U.S. decision to overthrow Musaddiq to reasons beyond her purview.

William Dorman and Mansour Farhang examine the representations of Musaddiq in the U.S. press in their book *The U.S. Press and Iran: Foreign Policy and the Journalism of Deference*. They dismiss the Soviet threat as unfounded and the emphasis on the Soviet threat, so pervasive during Musaddiq's reign, as faulty at best:

The other central interpretive failure of the press in 1953 was to put the Communist threat in perspective...media during the last eight months of Mosaddeq's tenure seemed only too willing to share Washington's concern about the Communist role and the possibility of a Soviet takeover in Iran...By early March a *Newsweek* headline announced that the 'World's Eyes Are on Teheran; Moscow Holds Peace-War Key' (Dorman and Farhang 1987: 44-45).

They maintain that, "there is little evidence to support the contention that, had Mosaddeq prevailed in his struggle with the British and the United States, the Communists would have gained the upper hand [in Iran]" (Dorman and Farhang 1987: 45). In fact, there was *no* evidence.

Dorman and Farhang maintain that the Tudeh/communist threat was created by the CIA. Quoting a paper by Kenneth Love, "one of the two American journalists—the other was Don Schwind of the Associated Press—continuously in Tehran during Mosaddeq's final months", they note:

In his paper Love wrote of gangs of 'street toughs,' 'evidently' paid for with U.S. currency and directed by the CIA, who 'played an essential part in controlling the streets when a resort to violence became necessary for the royalist cause on 19 August.' ... Love ... reported four days after the coup that the value of the American dollar on the black market dropped drastically in favor of the rial (By 1960 he had concluded that the drop was caused by the flood of dollars used to hire the gangs of street thugs) (Dorman and Farhang 1987: 52).

Kenneth Love's on-the-spot observation, and Dorman and Farhang's statements demonstrate that the threat of a Soviet takeover was not real but constructed.



Dorman and Farhang also help to dismantle the myth of an oil crisis in a forceful way, and as such, they help to dismantle the thesis that relies on economic interests in explaining U.S. behavior. They assert that “actually, there was an oil glut at the time, and there is evidence that American companies were helped—not hurt—by the boycott of Iranian oil” (Dorman and Farhang 1987: 39-40).

Their conclusion is in many ways as impressive as their findings: “Journalists followed the lead of Washington and opted for simple themes that matched Western conceptions of Middle Eastern peoples and neatly fit within the context of the Cold War” (Dorman and Farhang 1987: 33). The U.S. media, “far from fulfilling the watchdog role assigned to it in democratic theory or popular imagination, is deferential rather than adversative in the foreign arena”, at least with regards to Iran during the Musaddiq Era (Dorman and Farhang 1987: 2).

In the conclusion of *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World Since 1945*, Hahn and Heiss comment on the overall character of the U.S. relationship with the Third World that is useful—theoretically and empirically—in evaluating the U.S. response to Musaddiq in comparative perspective. They observe “a tendency in the years immediately following World War II for U.S. officials and businessmen to mesh their own New Deal reformism with the nationalist impulses of Venezuelans” (Hahn and Heiss 2001: 271). Why did such “enmeshing of New Deal reformism with the nationalist impulses” not take place in Iran during the same period? They further observe that “rather than reflexively opposing socialism, and Soviet or Chinese communist power, aid officials in Taiwan promoted economic development models with statist controls.”<sup>18</sup> Why did the U.S. economic advisors in Iran, which were ample as we know, not recommend a course of state-led fast-track industrialization despite the expressed desire of the Iranians, as demonstrated in Nikki Keddie’s account? (Keddie 1981: 130) The paradox that these observations pose cannot be resolved without considering the cultural-perceptual biases of the U.S. policy-makers.

### **Conclusion: Perceptions, not Economic Interests or Strategic Considerations Explain the Intervention in Iran**

In conclusion, perceptions, as opposed to economic interests or strategic considerations played the most important role in determining the American response to Musaddiq. First, the arguments centered on eco-

conomic interest were demonstrated to be false, both because the U.S. companies actually benefited from the sanctions on Iranian oil, and also because a revision of the original AIOC agreement, encompassing most of Musaddiq's demands, was made after the coup. Second, in addressing the real challenge to the perceptions thesis, the emphasis on the Soviet threat, which so much permeates the historiography and scholarly literature dealing with the reasons behind the US response, was countered by evidence and witnesses challenging the very foundations of the Tudeh-Communist-Soviet threat. CIA's covert action, on the one hand undermining Musaddiq and the National Front, and giving a false impression of a strengthening Tudeh on the other, with the end result of "constructing" a potential "communist threat" capable of taking over Iran, was emphasized. Finally, drawing on the arguments of Siavoshi, Herrmann, Atkin, Heiss, Dorman and Farhang, and by pointing out the failures of Falle and using the evidence provided by Gasiorowski and Keddie, it was illustrated that the U.S. perceptions of Musaddiq and of the Iranian people in general determined the course of U.S. foreign policy towards Iran during the Musaddiq Era.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For example, the parallels between the overthrowing of Salvador Allende of Chile, twenty years after Musaddiq's overthrow, are striking.

<sup>2</sup> The exact spelling of the Iranian premier's name in English is itself a controversial subject, with Bill preferring Musaddiq and Gasiorowski, Siavoshi and Falle choosing Mussadiq, while Keddie, Herrman, Heiss and Gasiorowski –in his earlier writings- opting for Mossadeq. TIME and Newsweek used Mossadegh in 1952, whereas Halliday and Kemp were alone, among the authors examined, in using Mosaddeq and Mossadiq, respectively. I have adopted Bill's usage for I believe it to be more truthful to the phonetics of the original name in Persian.

<sup>3</sup> The pro-Soviet communist party of Iran.

<sup>4</sup> The GNP figures comparing the United States and Iran in 195-1953 are not available. However, even in 1968, 15 years after the coup against Musaddiq, there was an enormous demographic, economic, and military imbalance between the United States and Iran. According to the *World Bank Atlas 1968*, the first of its kind to be published, the US GNP was around \$800 billion, as opposed to the Iranian GNP of approximately \$8 billion. In other words, the American economy at the time was a hundred times larger than the Iranian economy. This hundred-fold imbalance is despite the fact that the Iranian economy has been growing at a much higher rate (5%) than the US economy (3.4%) for the period 1961-68, indicating that the Iranian economy was even smaller in relation to the US economy in the 1950s. More important for *Realpolitik* reasons, the US defense budget in 1962 was \$52 billion, as opposed to the Iranian defense budget of \$125 million same year, demonstrating that the US defense budget was 400 times larger than that of Iran (*The Military Balance 1962-63*, Institute for Strategic Studies, London). Such gap in material capabilities is indeed enormous by any measure, and hence, the relations between the United States and Iran are characterized, without a doubt, by a sharp asymmetry.

<sup>5</sup> Sener Akturk, "An Inquiry into the Nature of Asymmetric Conflict: The Influence of Ideational Factors on Great Power Policy-making vis-à-vis Small States and the Third World, with a Case Study of U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Iran during the Musaddiq Era (1950-1953)", unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Chicago, Committee on International Relations, Spring 2003 (Adviser: Salim Yaqub).

<sup>6</sup> For a theoretical expose of the military-economic underpinnings of foreign policy decision-making among Great Powers, refer to John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the colonial structure of the Middle Eastern political economy from the 19<sup>th</sup> century till the Great War, please refer to, Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914*, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, New

York 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.53:“This strategy called for a concentration of U.S. defense efforts in Western Europe and Japan”

<sup>9</sup> Mark Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1991. p.56: “...the State Department in April 1950 carried out a thorough review of U.S. policy toward Iran. As a result, the United States took a number of steps to enhance U.S. influence in Iran.”

<sup>10</sup> Gasiorowski 1996, p.55-56: “Under this plan U.S. oil companies were asked to provide oil to U.S. allies that had been adversely affected by the blockade. Some 46 million barrels of oil were delivered...in the first year. Although this effort was intended to help stabilize the world oil market, it also reinforced the oil blockade and...inadvertently helped to weaken the Iranian economy and undermine Mussadiq’s popular support.”

<sup>11</sup> Siavoshi 1996, p.70: “The memoirs of Kermit Roosevelt...point to the irrelevancy of sovereignty in Iran—let alone the legitimacy of a particular government—from the point of view of the policymakers in the United States. The ideologically determined belief in Iranian inability to determine their destiny, as well as the realpolitik concern about the possible advances of the ‘diabolical’ U.S. arch rival, the Soviet Union, were the two predispositions that set the parameters for U.S. debate over the wisdom of the coup.”

<sup>12</sup> Falle 1996: 86-87 and 84. Examples are much more than I can cite within the constraints of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Atkin 1990, p.103. There are many examples of this kind: “To some, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was especially significant because it brought the Soviet Union ‘closer to achieving an objective that eluded czars for more than a century... [territorial advance] that eventually could yield Moscow direct access to warm-water ports’ on the coast of Iran. Quoted by Muriel Atkin from *Washington Post*, 30 Dec. 1979, A16.

<sup>14</sup> Heiss 2001, p.183: “...instead of measuring his behavior against prevailing Iranian norms and considering him within the context of the society of which he was a part.” Although a close reading of Said’s *Orientalism* with the intention of applying its framework to the case of American perceptions of Musaddiq and of the Iranian people might be very rewarding, I will defer this task within the constraints of this paper. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York 1978.

<sup>15</sup> Heiss 2001, p.188. Moreover, she cites evidence suggesting that this is the case. “The best example of the depth of Mossadeq’s theatrical talent came from a Majlis deputy who related the following personal experience. One day during an emotional speech on the floor of the Majlis, Mossadeq collapsed in a heap. Fearing that the elderly premier had suffered a heart attack, the deputy, who also happened to be a medical doctor, rushed to check Mossadeq’s pulse...He was quite surprised when it was strong and regular, and even more surprised, when the

prime minister opened one eye and winked at him, as if to say, 'My trick has worked. You were taken in, so were the others. I have won you over.'

<sup>16</sup> This one of my observations, however, calls for a theoretical inquiry into the theory of international relations with regards to Great Power-Small Power conflicts characterized by an asymmetry of power, an inquiry which I have undertaken in the first—theoretical—part of this article.

<sup>17</sup> To be sure, there were many other contexts surrounding the oil crisis besides gender and culture—the East-West Cold War, Anglo-American relations, and decolonization and the rise of Third World nationalism, to name only three—and each one of these contexts provided its own obstacles to an acceptable oil agreement. But in seeking a complete understanding of the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis...scholars should not discount the role of cultural perceptions. (Heiss 2001: 190)

<sup>18</sup> Hahn and Heiss 2001, p.271. Moreover, Taiwan, unlike Venezuela, and just like Iran, was situated in the Sino-Soviet periphery.

## References

- Atkin, Muriel. 1990. "Myths of Soviet-Iranian Relations," in Nikki R. Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski (ed.). *Neither east nor west: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bill, James. 1988. *The eagle and the lion: The tragedy of American-Iranian relations*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dorman, William A. and Mansour Farhang. 1987. *The U.S. press and Iran: Foreign policy and the journalism of deference*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Falle, Sir Sam. 1996. "The Musaddiq Era in Iran, 1951-1953: A Contemporary Diplomat's View," in David Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States: A historical and political reassessment*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Gasiorowski, Mark J. 1991. *U.S. foreign policy and the shah: Building a client state in Iran*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 1996. "U.S. Foreign Policy toward Iran during the Mussadiq Era," in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States: A historical and political reassessment*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Hahn, Peter L., and Mary Ann Heiss (eds.). 2001. *Empire and Revolution: The United*

*States and the Third World Since 1945*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Heiss, Mary Ann. 2001. "Real Men Don't Wear Pajamas: Anglo-American Cultural Perceptions of Mohammad Mossadeq and the Iranian Oil Nationalization Dispute," in Peter L. Hahn and Mary Ann Heiss (eds.), *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World Since 1945*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. p.178-194.

Hermann, Richard. 1990. "The Role of Iran in Soviet Perceptions and Policy, 1946-1988," in Nikkie R. Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski (ed.), *Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press. pp.63-99.

Keddie, Nikki R. 1981. *Roots of revolution: An interpretive history of modern Iran*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

## GUIDELINES FOR MANUSCRIPT CONTRIBUTIONS TO JAGNES

JAGNES is a print publication open to manuscripts on any aspect of ancient or modern Near Eastern Studies. Manuscripts (articles or book reviews) must be written and submitted by graduate students, from any university, domestic or abroad.

Our goal is to present cutting-edge research in the sub-disciplines of the field of Near Eastern Studies and related fields, typically formulated in the context of graduate seminars. If you are interested in submitting a manuscript or book review to JAGNES, please write or email the editorial board at the addresses below for further information. Following are the basic outlines for manuscript submissions. The complete guidelines, especially concerning transliteration of non-Latin character scripts, can be found on the JAGNES website, <http://www.jagnes.com>, and should be consulted prior to submission.

### STYLE

In order to accommodate articles from manifold sub-disciplines in Near Eastern Studies, JAGNES requests that, in referencing sources (in endnotes or in the bibliography), all articles follow the style generally set by each sub-discipline. We require that endnotes (not footnotes) be used, that a 150-word abstract accompany each article, and that all graphics and quotations include sources. All permissions for use of images should be made in advance by the author.

### RECEIPT AND EVALUATION OF MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscripts or book reviews submitted by mail or electronically to JAGNES will be acknowledged upon their receipt. All submissions should be sent as an email attachment in MS Word format, or on a CD/disk along with a hard copy. If your article uses non-standard programming or fonts, please send your font package along with your electronic submission. Please note whether you are using a PC or Mac, so that the document can be properly downloaded. All papers will be evaluated by the Editorial Board at the beginning of each semester (January and August), and will be given equal consideration. Papers chosen for publication will then go