Operation AJAX; Roots of a Tree Grown in Distrust

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“The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms.”

–US President Harry Truman, 12 March 1947
President Truman made the above statement during his famous speech seeking congress to increase aid to Greece and Turkey whose economy would soon fail forcing their government to turn to communism for continued survival. Truman’s speech quickly formed the basis of US policy towards communism and those that threatened democracy (US History. 2012). This policy laid the groundwork of US international policy for decades to come. And just a few short years later President Eisenhower authorized the CIA, in conjunction with MI6, to carry out Operation AJAX (Ruehsen.1993). At the very heart of the operation sat an elected Prime Minister, newfound Iranian national pride, a power wary Shah, and a plot to overthrow democracy.

Operation AJAX was a false flag operation intended to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq in favor of a monarchy that was extremely friendly to the US. The operation was considered a success when compared to its objective but, when compared to US policy and interests it was a horrible failure. Operation AJAX is arguably the focal point of almost half a century of soured Iranian-US relations.

The Operation

In late 1952 representatives of MI6 and the CIA met to discuss future warfare and involvement in Iran. During the two month discourse MI6 mentioned their interest and the possibility of overthrowing Iran’s Prime Minister Mossadeq. The CIA surprised by the suggestion and completely unprepared for such a topic agreed to study the situation further before committing to such an action (Wilbur.1954).

Even though the CIA played a very small roll supporting General Batista’s 1952 coup it was not, and had not been, in the business of overthrowing governments (Lewis.1960). In fact
the CIA had never attempted to overthrow a government before; this would be a first for the clandestine agency (Iran Chamber Society.2001). The first communication for approval of such an operation came from then Under Secretary of State General Walter Smith. General Smith stated that the US could no longer approve of the Iranian government and its continued influence by the National Frontist party. The General cited a trend of overwhelming recklessness and destructive attitudes by the Iranian government, all inspired by Mossadeq (Wilbur.1954). A complex plan involving protests, propaganda, exiled leaders and Royalist military members was dispatched for immediate implementation. The operation dubbed TP-AJAX, AJAX for short, was intended to oust Mossadeq, reduce the influence of the National Frontists, and bring the Shah back to the forefront of political power in Iran.

Despite several failures and close calls the operation commenced on 15 August 1953, barely nine months after MI6 first approached the CIA with its desire. Execution of the operation was intended to last approximately 18 hours, but ended up lasting a full 72 hours coming close to failure numerous times.

The first twelve hours went completely wrong. On the morning of the 16th agents were scrambling to salvage the operation by all means possible. Key components of the military portion of the operation had not come to fruition and as a result numerous members of Mossadeq’s cabinet were not arrested, as had been the plan. This gave Mossadeq ample opportunity to fortify security around governmental buildings including his own residence (Wilbur.1964).

Case officers quickly circulated documents and fabricated interviews that claimed the previous night’s events were actually an attempt by Mossadeq to overthrow Iran’s increasingly
Democratic government in an attempt to place himself at the head of a new communist government (Gasiorowski.2004). The plan created enough confusion that when the Shah’s newly appointed Prime Minister, Gen. Zahedi, made a speech denouncing Mossadeq and accepting the Shah’s appointment no one noticed that the first few seconds of music that played in the background were the US National anthem! This of course was an accident that was quickly corrected by agents working behind the scenes relaying the speech via a pirate radio broadcast across Iran (Wilbur.1964).

Despite these setbacks the operation was a success. The Shah was in power, Mossadeq was tried and sentenced to life in prison, later commuted to house arrest, and the US now had, arguably, a puppet Monarchy at its disposal leading Iran. For all intents and purposes Operation AJAX was considered a resounding success by all involved in the planning and execution of the operation.

Even though the primary goal of Operation AJAX was realized, dispose Mossadeq and install an US friendly leader – the Shah. It would only take an objective eye to note that the operation was a complete failure in accordance with standing US policy as dictated by the Truman doctrine (Jones.1989). Operation AJAX also failed in securing popular long term US relations and other interests within Iran.

**His Imperial Majesty**

As the dust settled the irrevocable harm went undetected by key players behind the coup. Over three hundred Iranian Nationalists were killed in front of Mossadeq’s home defending not only him, but democracy (LaTulippe.2005). It’s a wonder if they ever knew or realized that the leaders of the free world and purveyors of democracy were actually behind the entire affair.
What followed was a long and oppressive reign of forced modernization and censorship under the Shah Pahlavi. The US was no longer hidden behind the cloak and dagger veil of the CIA. President after president hosted the Shah in the US and brokered Oil deals and weapons sales that predominantly benefited the US economy (Zonis.1991). All the while the working class of Iran suffered in poverty attempting to make ends meet.

Not only was the Shah vain and cowardly he had lavish taste and spent enormous amounts of money that rightfully belonged to the Iranian people. A principal example of the lavish life style was in the Shah’s celebration of the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of the Iranian Monarchy. The event featured breast of peacock and took place in a tent city spanning 160 acres cost over $100 million in 1971 dollars. All the while the populace of the nearby villages was struggling in poverty (Streusand.2011)

Outside of irresponsible economic decisions political oppression ran rampant. The principal organization behind the oppression was the infamous Ministry of Security known as the SAVAK. The product of another joint effort with the CIA the SAVAK strove to eliminate threats to the Shah through questionable tactics and policy. The SAVAK scoured Iran for his reign imprisoning thousands of political prisoners and subjected them to various torture techniques and summarily executed those seen as major threats to the monarch (Pike.2000). Amnesty International reported that by 1978 as many as 2,500 people were currently being held by the SAVAK, the number didn’t include those who had been released or killed. The number would only grow exponentially as protests and dissent ran deeper, eventually culminating in the overthrow of the Shah for an even more repressive regime (Pike.2000).
Fifty-nine Years Later

Most US citizens don’t realize that the core of distrust of the US and the 1979 revolution that disposed the Shah all have significant ties to operation AJAX (LaTulippe.2005). To test this claim one hundred deployed US military members of various ages and ranks were asked, on an informal basis for the purposes of this paper, to name a major event contributing to the fragile relationship the US shares with Iran. Only one of the people polled cited operation AJAX as a factor.

By far the more recent events of the revolution, the failed operation EAGLE CLAW, nuclear threat, hatred towards Israel and violations of human rights were the most common reply. All of these events rest on the forefront of American minds while operation AJAX still evokes anger from most Iranians (LaTulippe.2005).

Prime Minister Mossadeq was the closest the Iranian people have ever come to having a true democracy. Mossadeq was not only a symbol of Iranian pride he was the first leader in decades, if not at least a century that the people honestly respected and gave their loyalty as a true leader of the people (LaTulippe.2005). Sadly AJAX didn’t just kill Iran’s fledgling democracy before it could rule; it silenced the pride of a people and a nation.

At the time America was seen as an ally by the Iranian people. Mossadeq visited the US on numerous occasions and even visited the tomb of the unknown, laying a wreath in honor of our fallen soldiers (Truman Library.1951). Just a year later Iranian troops loyal to Mossadeq would die at the hands of an American sponsored plot. It’s no wonder that Mossadeq and the rest of Iran felt betrayed by the US.
Today Iran is comprised mostly of a population too young to remember Operation Ajax, the rule of the Shah or even the revolution of 1979. Seventy-five percent of the country is under 30 (CIA.2012). The staggering percentage of youth in Iran is due to the Iran Iraq war that claimed an entire generation of youth in a horrible slaughter of WWII style trench warfare, landmines, and chemical weapons.

Iranians as a whole however, do not have the shortsightedness of their American counterparts. Given even the young age of Iranians today they are all taught about Operation Ajax in school. Amongst many Iranians the coup is still thought of as a feat of American might, this is both a blessing and a curse. A recently declassified CIA report notes that the average Iranian believes that Americans are omnipotent, given their ability to dispose Mossadeq, they must have not only placed the Ayatollah in power but, work to help him keep an oppressive grip on Iran (Koch.1998). This view must only be increasing in intensity as the Ayatollah sweeps Iran giving speeches calling his supporters to vote for an increasingly conservative government. The recent parliamentary elections have greatly favored the Ayatollah and his political agenda.

The only ones in Iran today that were alive to witness Operation AJAX, the rule of the Shah, and the subsequent 1979 revolution are those that are currently in power. These were the planners and the participants that overtook the embassy and held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days (Houghton.2001). As the Ayatollah gained power during the revolution rumors and fears began to circulate throughout Iran that the Shah and CIA were plotting to remove the Mullah and his dissenters. It is believed, in a few circles, that the taking of the embassy was a preemptive plan by the Ayatollah to, in his mind, not to suffer the same fate that Mossadeq had suffered in 1953 (LaTulippe.2005).
**Constant Reminders**

This fear of continued American plotting can be seen at the heart of recent high profile media stories that parade alleged US spies to the public and tell of failed attempts to detract the current Iranian national or political machine from its current Islamic course.

On 13 July 2010 Shahram Amiri emerged at the Pakistani embassy in the US after disappearing during a religious pilgrimage Saudi Arabia over a year earlier. The story he and the Iranian media sell as the truth, articulates that he was kidnapped at gun point on the way to a Mosque by the CIA in a plot to shake up Iran and its nuclear program. The CIA, offering very little press on the matter, contends he came to the US as a defector receiving a five million dollar pay out and was never a prisoner in the US (Spencer.2010). Before emerging at the embassy several videos were posted online by Shahram. One claimed he was being tortured and held against his will under armed guards and the other alleges that he was here under his own will happily studying at a university. Shahram returned to Iran a few days later promising to make public the details of his entire ordeal and has since failed to do so.

A year earlier on 31 July 2009, three young Berkeley students were hiking in Iraq, arrested and accused of spying in Iran. The case dragged on for over two years resulting in the trio’s conviction of espionage and sentencing of eight years in prison. The Iranian judiciary claimed the trio was venturing to Iran with ‘suspicious objectives’ and would be tried appropriately (Healy.2009). Aljazeera later reported a source citing the hikers were convicted of spying for ‘The American Intelligence Agency’ (Aljazeera.2011). The source’s reference to ‘The American Intelligence Agency’ is a direct referral to the CIA. Despite Iran’s claim that the
trio was indeed spies and the later conviction, no evidence beyond the hiker’s nationality was ever presented.

A series of attacks inside of Iran spanning from July 2010 to January 2012 have claimed the lives of four people and wounded one (Murphy.2012). All the people targeted have been identified in the international media as scientists associated with Iran’s nuclear program in some way or form. Despite official condemnation for the killings Iran continues to implicate the CIA as being, at least in part, behind the killings (Aljazeera.2012). The sophisticated nature, surgical precision, and the fact that the killings directly benefit the US’s policy of a non-nuclear Iran all give a strong baking to the argument that the US, more specifically its clandestine specialists the CIA, was heavily involved.

**Today**

Iran, once an ally of the US was the victim of a covert CIA operation to overthrow its Prime minister in favor of an oppressive Shah. This single act has become the focal point of over half a century of sour relations between American and Iran. The soured relations and paranoia of meddling can be seen throughout history. Today is no exception; high tensions and fierce rhetoric are just as prevalent today as it was during the 1979 revolution.

The results of the most recent 2009 Iranian presidential election were widely disputed amongst the Iranian people and the international community. Many of the citizens united in a very similar fashion to the 1979 revolution. This movement was short lived as the government brutally put down the dubbed green-revolution. Even just recently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei toured the country warning of western plot brewing to influence parliamentary elections. He has told the country to be wary of Western influence hinting at the possibility of a subversive plot.
against not just Iran but, Islam itself (Worth.2012). The hopes were to unite the younger
generation, which were not alive to witness the revolution, with the ruling regime and try to push
the West, specifically the US, from influencing its citizens. Shortly after the elections the
candidates supported by the Ayatollah claimed victory. Later the Ayatollah thanked Iran for
thwarting the enemies of Iran and those that conspire against it. This was pointedly directed at
the US and its allies.

This younger generation holds the only possible key to freeing Iran from its dictators and
oppression. This generation blames the Ayatollah and his regime for creating a Republic based
on Islamic fascism with no opportunity for success in the emerging global economy. These
Iranians were just young children during the Iran-Iraq war and know the terror associated with
trench style warfare.

Even before the most recent round of international banter aimed at Iran’s nuclear
program this large demographic struggled to earn a living. The susceptibility of this generation to
external influence is extremely high. To them the west is an opportunity for prosperity and also
represents the freedom to choose their own path economically, socially, and religiously. Much
like Martin Luther’s famous stance against the Catholic Church the youth are Islamic, but want
to be able to worship their Islam without fear of jail or torture for not conforming to the
Ayatollah’s Islam.

As Reza Kahilli’s book, *A Time to Betray* shows there are a number of younger Iranians
are willing to work for the US. Kahilli was a CIA spy who worked inside Iran under the
codename Wally (Kahilli.2010). Perhaps the ruling regime is right to fear covert action from the
United States. Operation Ajax showed that the US is willing to take action against a friendly
administration; reason dictates that it would do the same more readily against an unfriendly regime.

The US’s successful use of covert operations to achieve its interests lends strong credibility to the threat and legitimate possibility for future operations. Iran has been on the receiving end of these operations before, most prominently was Operation Ajax. The operation dramatically altered the political direction of Iran in a coup worthy of a Hollywood script. The operation showed that the US would act to preserve its own interests at the expense of democracy and despite its own doctrine declaring to protect and promote freedom in the world.

Almost thirty years following the coup the US imposed and backed Shah was disposed in a coup inspired by the then Ayatollah Khomeini. Since that time relations between Iran and the US have been severely soured and strained. The leaders in Iran are fearful of another coup attempt or other event sponsored by the CIA to further undermine their power in Iran. Worse yet the young generations in Iran do not feel the US is their ally either even though it is for the exact opposite reason. The younger generation believes that the US somehow placed and keeps the Ayatollah in power. Both of these beliefs are founded in the failings of operation AJAX to legitimately support stated US international doctrine. The CIA exhibited tremendous might and capability in overthrowing Mossadeq, despite his public favor with the US president.

Operation AJAX may have been an immediate success when compared to its intended objective. In reality the operation was a complete failure of international policy. The US had just increased aid to Greece to thwart the threat of communism. At the same time the US proclaimed one of its major international roles was to support nations struggling to maintain a democracy. This all was overlooked when it came to approval of operation AJAX in Iran. The operation was
intended to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq in favor of a monarchy that was extremely friendly to the US. Operation AJAX is the originating focal point of almost half a century of soured Iranian-US relations.
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