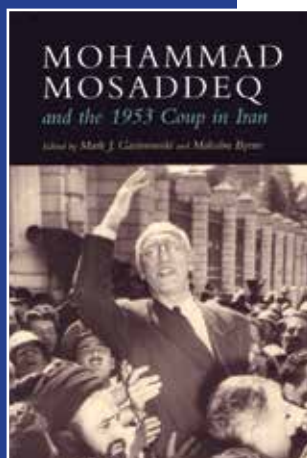
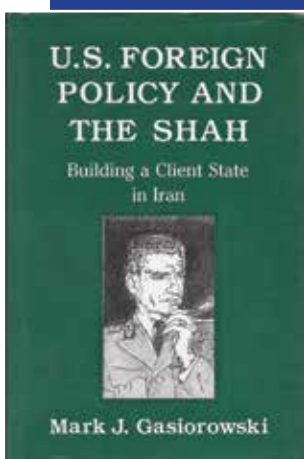


Mark Gasiorowski

The 1953 coup was harmful to the US in the long run



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Mosaddeq was tried in military court after the coup.

■ ■ You once told me that the British had serious issues with Mosaddeq even before he became prime minister. Could you please elaborate?

I do not remember the details of this, though I am sure it is correct. This is probably covered in Roger Louis's work, e.g., his article in the Gasiorowski and Byrne book.

■ ■ Some scholars argue that the US and the British intended the Operation Ajax to serve as a lesson to other Third World countries who might have developed ideas about controlling the flow of their raw materials. Do you agree with this assertion? If so, how well was the message received? Was it any effective at all?

This is probably true, at least to some extent. But it is not the sort of thing that could be easily documented. Probably the biggest concern along these lines was Egypt, where there was a lot of pressure to nationalize the British-controlled Suez Canal. Certainly some or most British officials were concerned about how Iran's actions might affect this. Again, Roger Louis may have addressed this. Nasser only came to power in mid-1952 and did not begin his shift toward non-alignment right away, so I do not think US officials were too concerned about this. Their main concern was the possibility of a communist takeover in Iran.

■ ■ Do you find the notion of "informal empire" analytically useful? If so, to what extent do you think that Operation Ajax turned Iran into a part of the US informal empire after WWII?

"Informal empire" is too vague to be very useful, I think. I have described the US relationship with Iran after 1953 as a patron-client relationship, which is similar but more specific.

■ ■ In discussing the context of the Operation Ajax, Bernard Porter, author of 'The Lion's Share: A History of British Imperialism' (6th edition, Routledge, 2020), told me that "the 1950s really were a shocking time for declining imperial powers desperate to hold on to their world dominance." In retrospect, how "desperate" was the British move?

Yes, the British certainly seem to have been acting in Iran partly out of concern about how Mosaddeq's actions might affect their dominance elsewhere. But, again, Roger Louis is much better on this.

■ ■ In discussing Operation Ajax in 'Imperialism and the Developing World' (Oxford University Press, 2020), Atul Kohli argues that this case shows "how a short-term American victory turned pyrrhic over a longer time frame." To what extent do you agree with his assessment?

I assume he is saying that, while the coup was beneficial to the US in the short and medium term (for 25 years or so), it has been very harmful to the US in the longer term (since the Islamic revolution). Yes, I agree with this. But, of course, the coup was not the only reason Iran turned against the US after 1978.

■ ■ During the Second World War, the British established a rather robust espionage network in Iran which was largely dismantled after the war, and their peacetime intelligence roles were delegated to the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). In their subversive efforts which served as a prelude to overthrowing Mosaddeq, how much did the US rely on the remnants of the original British espionage network?

I assume you are talking about the Rashidian network. It is impossible to say how much the US relied on the Rashidians in carrying out the coup. Although the Rashidians certainly were helpful, the CIA's TPBEDAMN network, which I have written about, also was very helpful. There is no way to assess the relative importance of these two networks, especially with Roosevelt and all of the other key actors now having passed away.

■ ■ A contrarian might argue that the US toppled Mosaddeq, ultimately gave up on Shah at least in the latest phases of 1979 revolution, and has had serious problems with the Islamic Republic since its inception. Is there something specifically Iranian with which the US can't get along?

Not at all. The US got along quite well with Iran before 1978, except with Mosaddeq and the Iranian left. I think the US and Iran have many common interests and even many cultural similarities, though of course also differences. In my view the obstacles, on both sides, are political rather than instrumental or cultural.