



64 Years Later, CIA Details Long-Hidden Role in Iran Coup

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Aaron Maté: It's The Real News, I'm Aaron Mate. In 1953, the U.S. and Britain overthrew Iran's democratic government. The reason was oil. Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh had nationalized the country's oil industry, angering Britain and the oil company that today is known as BP. The British partnered with the CIA to out Mosaddegh and install the Shah, who ruled until his overthrow in the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The 1953 coup shaped modern Iranian history, but it's not very well known here in the U.S. The CIA didn't acknowledge its role until 2013 and the U.S. government has refused to release the full internal documents that show what it did. Well, that has just changed. The State Department has just released hundreds of pages of documents, not all of them, that provide new details on the CIA's role in the Iran coup of 1953. And to discuss these documents, I spoke today with someone who's been waiting to read them for a long time.

Malcolm Byrne is Deputy Director at the non-governmental National Security Archive based at George Washington University. He runs the Archive's Iran-U.S. relations project. Malcolm, welcome.

Malcom Byrne: Thank you very much.

Aaron Maté: Thanks for joining us. Before we get into what these new documents say, I'm wondering if you could set the scene for us in a historical context, talking about what happened in the 1953 coup that the CIA took part in.

Malcom Byrne: Well, it's a really fascinating historical episode, but it's one with a lot of current political resonance for Iranians, that is. Most Americans have never heard of the coup and it's ancient history for us, but for the Iranians, the situation started in the early 1950s. In 1951, they nationalized their oil industry and this was done by their Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.

This was an event that really sent shock waves in the British Empire, which relied on their oil facilities in Iran for a lot of income and they reacted violently. The United States, who they called upon to help them in this because we were allies, but the Truman administration was really not anxious to get involved in anything military or even a covert coup, because they were trying to get

the British and the French and others to cut back on their colonial attitude. This is after the war, it's supposed to be the 20th century, we are in a different world.

So the Americans came across, at first, as kind of heroes, supporters of Iran and this builds on a number of years of history of helping to get the Russians out of the country and so on. But then, in 1953, when President Eisenhower came into office, an entirely different attitude took hold. The U.S., along with British Intelligence, we're talking about the CIA now, and British Intelligence got together and worked out a plan to overthrow the same Prime Minister Mossadegh because they couldn't see any other way out of the crisis, which they believed the Americans feared, above all, might lead to some sort of Soviet intervention or Soviet-backed coup inside the country. So that's how the coup came about.

Aaron Maté: And Mossadegh, he was elected democratically, right?

Malcom Byrne: Yeah. You know, it's a cloudy, sort of murky story, because a lot of years have gone by and this is such an emotional history and whenever you have that combination you've got to be really careful how you define your terms, what sources you use, who you believe, and so on. But generally speaking, this was a country that had elections. There were a lot of times when they were clearly rigged, but the general consensus is that Mossadegh had originally been elected democratically.

Aaron Maté: His move to nationalize the oil industry in 1951 had wide support, if I'm not mistaken?

Malcom Byrne: Inside Iran, definitely. Not by the British, the British were fit to be tied and the Iranians had to take the case to the International Court to try to adjudicate it.

Aaron Maté: What happened there?

Malcom Byrne: They won, so the British were pushed back and that's part of what led them to think in terms of a coup d'etat or a military strike of some kind.

Aaron Maté: Okay, so the British enlist the U.S. for this operation and the CIA gets involved. The codename is "Operation Ajax." What happens there?

Malcom Byrne: Well, it takes a long time to plan this thing. The British had come originally, during the Truman period, to try to propose this but the Truman people said, "No, we're not really interested. You'd better wait until the next group comes in," because the main interaction was just after the election and Eisenhower had just been elected.

It even took a little bit of time for Eisenhower to come around, but by springtime, '53, a couple months after he'd taken office, he and his top advisors had pretty much come to the conclusion that they wanted to move in. They were afraid, above all, of Soviet intervention or Soviet advantage of some kind. The British mainly wanted their oil, wanted the revenues from it and so on, but they had a meeting of the minds in terms of their agreement to get rid of Mossadegh.

So they put together a plan, jointly, to get the approval of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Eisenhower, and that's in July of 1953, and then by the middle of August, the coup gets underway.

Aaron Maté: Okay, and so these new documents that have come out from the CIA, close to 1,000 pages, reveal some new details of the CIA's involvement. Can you lay out for us the major disclosures that you've seen so far?

Malcom Byrne: Sure. I haven't gotten through the whole volume yet, but it's fascinating. I want to say that it may be more interesting for historians than for people who are just coming to the issue for the first time because it fills in a lot of details, it gives you a lot of different perspectives, American perspectives, but different agency perspectives. The CIA versus the State Department versus the White House and so on. It fleshes out the story a lot.

If I could take just one second, it's important to figure out and understand how we came to know what we know about the coup up to this point, up to last week when the volume was put out. The very first story about the coup came out just a year afterwards, in 1954, in a magazine called "The Saturday Evening Post," so clearly somebody at the CIA decided that they were going to leak this story and they put a lot of detail into that article.

But officially, the CIA and the British refused to discuss it, refused to acknowledge their role for decades. In the late 1970s, the leader of the coup on the ground in Iran, a guy with a familiar name, Kermit Roosevelt, he was a relative of two presidents and he was in...

Aaron Maté: He was the son of Theodore Roosevelt, right?

Malcom Byrne: He was grandson of Theodore and a cousin of Franklin. A sort of an adventurer and someone who thought about all this as "The Great Game", which was the old expression that they used to use. He was put in charge of this operation and a couple of decades later, he decided he wanted to write about it, and so he did publish a book and there's an interesting story about how that got past CIA censors but it made it out and it also gave a lot of detail about what was happening.

The problem is, as with any memoir, it's all about the author, so it's come under some criticism for being not exactly balanced. It puts Kermit in center stage. At other times, other people have written books who were involved, some British agents for instance, who [inaudible 00:08:49] some ideas there. But it's all bits and pieces.

Then in the year 2000, the New York Times got a leak of an internal document, a 200 page CIA history, still classified, that they wrote a giant article about, I think two articles, this being a relatively early age with the internet, they did a great thing. They posted the document on the web. They took out some names and things like that, which was fine, but there the document was. In fact, we have it on our website now, at the National Security archive.

That produced a ton of information about the specifics of the coup. Who did what, what time of day on August 18th so-and-so met with so-and-so, that kind of thing. We also have interviews from some of the operative. I've done some of those interviews and my colleague, Mark Gasiorowski at Tulane University, is the leader on this. So from all of these different vantage points, we've gotten bits and pieces.

Then, in 1989, the State Department put out a volume of documents just like the one that came out last week, with one huge problem. It did not say one word about CIA or British involvement in the coup. It just portrayed it as, "Gee whiz, there's this spontaneous uprising that has happened in favor of the Shah. Isn't it amazing?!" That caused outrage in the historical community and it led to resignations of people involved because it was just a whitewash of the history.

Aaron Maté: And those portions were redacted?

Malcom Byrne: Just left out entirely.

Aaron Maté: Just omitted? Okay.

Malcom Byrne: As if it had never happened. You get a report from the ambassador the day of the coup going, "Amazing events are happening, unfolding before our eyes on the streets of Tehran, spontaneous support for the Shah." Just nonsense. So the Department, to their credit, decided that they would produce a new volume that would correct that historical falsehood and it took a long time. It's been over 25 years, but they finally came out with it last week.

This is a long way to get to this point but we now have, in 1,000 more pages which is a lot of material, a lot more perspective on different parts of the CIA, what they were thinking and doing, how they reacted, parts of the State Department, plus their reporting on other people's reactions and so on. So it's a Rashomon Effect, where you now get a lot of perspective that was not available before. There is still some material that hasn't been released, but there's a lot of great stuff here for people to mix and match and compare notes with what we've known before.

Aaron Maté: Okay, and so one of the things we've known before is that Kermit Roosevelt, who you mentioned, that he ignored orders to abort the coup, because apparently it wasn't going well. But these new documents give detail on exactly how he went about being insubordinate and proceeding with the coup anyway.

Malcom Byrne: Right. Again, we knew some of this before. I did an interview with a guy who was one of the operatives, it was in fact his first posting overseas with the CIA, so he was a 20-something kid getting his feet wet for the first time, and he tells a story of being in the room with Kermit when this cable came in from CIA headquarters saying, "Drop everything. This has gone to hell in a hand basket, get your troops together and get out of town."

According to this witness, Roosevelt crumpled up the cable, threw it in a trashcan and said, "We never saw that," and off they went to try to recoup what had been a disaster up to that point. In this new volume, what we have is the actual cable that was sent, that says pretty much the same thing. "Based on reporting we're getting, this is going nowhere fast and it's going to be a real problem, so you guys should get out of there."

We also have some after action minutes of meetings where Roosevelt is now meeting with all of his superiors, with the ones who said, "You got to wrap this up," and he's now got to explain himself and say, "Why did I make that call on my own?" It's a damn good thing it worked out.

Aaron Maté: Roosevelt proceeds with a plan that involves rented crowds of people, right?

Malcom Byrne: Right.

Aaron Maté: Can you explain that?

Malcom Byrne: Yes. This is a big aspect of Iranian politics. Anybody who's been around the last 30 years or so will be familiar with televised scenes of huge crowds in Iran, whether it's when the Ayatollah Khomeini returns to the country after exile or things of that sort, and crowds are a key element going back decades in Iranian politics. Things are just generally unstable enough that if you get enough people out there, you can really change things around. So that was always a key part of the plan. There were several aspects to it, but one of the keys was, "Get these crowds out there any

way you can and make it look like the Shah has everybody's support and we hope we'll carry the day."

Aaron Maté: And the Shah is who the U.S. installed until he was forced out in 1979. In terms of the consequences of this ... First of all, is it safe to say that actually, if this was about oil, then Western goals failed because the nationalist sentiment of Mosaddegh was so strong that in the end, even with the Shah in power, the Western oil companies, like British Petroleum especially, were forced to still share the oil profits with Iran?

Malcom Byrne: Yes. I think if you get a little more specific, if you're talking just about the British, I think they got the short end of the stick, not that I'm sad about that but they came into this with this conception of privilege and ownership that belongs in that era of colonialism and neo-colonialism. They just had no qualms about demanding their rights and minimizing and vilifying and diminishing the role, the capabilities and every other aspect of the Iranians, who they resented like hell for taking 'their' resource.

The Americans, I think, had a different attitude and there is disagreement about this. There are others who think that this was all about oil. I think it depends on how you define priority with oil. Was oil considered a commercial commodity that private companies were going to make a lot of money off of? Or was it more important as a strategic component of the calculation of the Cold War?

My view, based on all the documents that I've read, is that the people like Truman and even Eisenhower, they really were more interested in the strategic component because for them, job one was to keep the Russians out. If the Russians got access to the oil, that would be a really terrible thing because we're still talking about not being that many years out of World War II and Western Europe is still rebuilding, Japan is still rebuilding, and they need natural resources, they need oil. If they don't get access to it, then that could lead to really serious political problems and leave an opening for the Russians politically, propaganda-wise and ideologically, and their proxies to come in and gain some real input.

So I believe that it's from that point of view that the American side was worried about oil. Were the American companies concerned about commercial sides? Of course they were, and it's very hard sometimes to separate the commercial and the political in U.S. foreign policy. But in this case, I think that the policy makers wanted to make sure that the Russians didn't get it. That was what their concern was.

Aaron Maté: Yeah, and I'm sure it wasn't just about the Russians. The fact is, if you control oil or you control access to oil, then that gives you huge leverage over geopolitics around the globe.

Malcom Byrne: Absolutely.

Aaron Maté: So let's end then with the implications today. We should point out that this was not a widely-trumpeted release. Announcing the release of these documents, which has been a big deal for a long time, was announced very quietly. It was appended to a release about 16 other releases, if I'm not mistaken.

Malcom Byrne: Exactly, right.

Aaron Maté: If you could talk about the significance of this coming out now, in the context of a Trump administration that has been very confrontational towards Iran, recently Rex Tillerson talked about how the Trump administration supports a peaceful transition of government inside Iran,

effectively soft regime change. How especially documents like these might be received in Iran today, which has been heavily influenced by this history, and the memories of that coup over 60 years ago still loom large.

Malcom Byrne: Right. There are no solid facts here, alternative or otherwise, that can confirm this but just from the way this has played out, there clearly seems to be some sort of a political or policy component to it. As you said, for decades this stuff has been kept secret and usually it's been for reasons of spycraft. The CIA doesn't want its secrets about sources and methods to come out, doesn't matter if this thing happened 60 years ago. The British are even worse on this subject.

More recently, specifically since the 2015 Iran nuclear deal that was signed with the P5+1 countries, the State Department under Obama and Kerry has been very reluctant to do anything to stir the political waters in Iran and they specifically have said in the context of meetings of State Department historians there that are public sessions that they don't want to do anything that might create problems or give the hardliners in Iran the opportunity to make mischief.

Now, all of a sudden, you have a change of regime in the United States and, according to information that I have, within about a two-month period a decision gets made by the Rex Tillerson State Department to release this stuff. You can't help but come to the reaction that this attitude is something like, "Well, if Kerry's State Department wanted it this way, we're gonna do it the other way." They've given plenty of indication that they, "they" being the Trump administration and Tillerson as well, that they don't put much stock in this nuclear deal at all, so it's not hard to imagine that they would not shed tears if something like this came out and caused problems for it.

My first reaction and sense is that it's not going to cause big problems and I hope it doesn't, frankly. They've got other things in Iran that they are focusing on right now, but it's hard to imagine that something like this wasn't at play.

Aaron Maté: You know Malcolm, I'm going to say one thing about the issue of Obama and Kerry and their view on this. I take your point about them not wanting to stir the pot, but could it also be said that they could've taken the opportunity to apologize for overthrowing a country's sovereign government? Obama and the CIA did acknowledge it when Obama was President, but he had the opportunity to apologize and he made a conscious decision not to.

Malcom Byrne: Well, it's not surprising, and maybe it's in retrospect that I say that, but Clinton mentioned it, Madeleine Albright, the Secretary of State, came close to apologizing, as close as she could, Obama, like you say, had made specific mention of it. The problem that they're facing, and I'm not saying I advocate the stand that they took, but I believe that what they were looking at was a hostile domestic set of opponents and one of the things that is like the proverbial red flag in front of a bull is for a Democratic President or Secretary of State to apologize for anything that the United States did. Republicans would've made mincemeat out of them for doing that. That's my sense, is that they didn't want to open themselves up to that kind of attack that would just destroy what they were trying to achieve in the first place.

Aaron Maté: I understand, but it still raises questions about what could have been done earlier on, but certainly...

Malcom Byrne: I'm with you on that, on all kinds of fronts. When you look at these documents just from the classification standpoint, I defy you to find anything in them that would justify their being withheld for so long. This is my own personal opinion on the policy front, I don't see a problem in acknowledging what you did and getting it out of the way and saying, "Look, that was a different time and place and that's what the attitudes of these people were. It's not my attitude, but we have to

understand and accept it and we understand it's caused real problems. It's good to get the mists out of the way so you have a clear ascent on both sides, but let's get this over with and move on to something more positive and fruitful."

Aaron Maté: Well Malcolm, on that note of contrition I want to apologize to you for keeping you way longer than we agreed to and I appreciate your extra time on this. Malcolm Byrne, Deputy Director at the non-governmental National Security Archive, based at George Washington University. He runs the Archive's Iran-U.S. relations project. Malcolm, thank you!

Malcom Byrne: It's been a pleasure, thank you.

Aaron Maté: And thank you for joining us on The Real News.

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