

Operation Ajax: the American Ruination of Democratic Iran

As the wind blew fiercely through Washington, D.C., on the 20th of January, 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, reveling in the glory of his election, stood before the thousands bundled against the harsh winter, breaths away from commencing his first ever Inaugural Address to the nation. As citizens hailing from all across the country gazed up at the new president, Eisenhower's voice boomed throughout the capital, his message intended for distant nations across the vast seas.

“We Americans know and we observe the difference between world leadership and imperialism; between firmness and truculence; between a thoughtfully calculated goal and spasmodic reaction to the stimulus of emergencies” (Eisenhower).

The President continued, eyeing the sons and daughters of a nation born and bred by the scarred hands of democracy and the feather caress of freedom.

“Honoring the identity and the special heritage of each nation in the world, we shall never use our strength to try to impress upon another people our own cherished political and economic institutions” (Eisenhower).

Months later, as the Capitol glowed under the resting summer sun, the United States (US) staged a coup on the only popularly-elected leader Iran had ever seen, and arguably would ever see again.

Mohammad Mossadegh, who served as the Iranian prime minister from the brief years of 1951 to 1953, was “widely considered to be the closest thing Iran has ever had to a democratic leader” (Allen-Ebrahimian). However, despite Mossadegh's potent dedication towards the proliferation of democratic (and inherently American) values, his patriotic tendencies and control over Iran's expansive oil reserves led to the nationalization of oil in

1951, which simultaneously frightened and antagonized the Western World, particularly the US and Great Britain. Conspiring conjunctly with Great Britain, the US claimed to have staged the infamous ‘Operation Ajax’ to protect the Western economic interests regarding oil and prevent the disease of communism from infecting the Middle East through the implementation of “a government in Iran that would be preferred by the United States” (“Timeline of Iranian Coup”). Yet, the aftermath of Operation Ajax and the American-imposed Iranian regime would leave Iran in a political state far from America’s beloved democracy. Although the US was successful in its economic policy goals in Iran through the pursuit of oil, Operation Ajax was ultimately detrimental to Iran and was a contradiction of American diplomacy goals due to the implementation of authoritarianism, disregard of present democracy, and weakening of Iranian-American relations.

The very core of America’s essence is the concept of democracy: the right to choice and freedom, a proposition the nation has attempted to develop far beyond its borders. Yet, through the implementation of Operation Ajax, the United States endangered democracy in Iran through the prioritization of domestic and allied needs. Prior to the commencement of Operation Ajax, the political situation in Iran was favorable and untouched under the Truman office. In fact, the Mossadegh regime “championed democratic values and hoped to establish a democracy in Iran” (Allen-Ebrihiman). It was only following the nationalization of oil that the United States’ interest in the Iranian parliament began to pique, partially to the credit of Great Britain. Through Operation Ajax, the US not only endangered democracy overseas, but knowingly employed it as an excuse to overthrow Mossadegh in the interest of Western oil ownership. The US claimed that it “harbored strong fears about the spread of Communism” (Ruehsen 469), yet Eisenhower himself admitted the lack of actual concern over democracy in Iran when he wrote that he was “concerned primarily, and almost solely, in some scheme or plan that will permit that oil to keep flowing to the westward.” Furthermore, it wasn’t until

the British request that the US intervened with Iran, emphasizing the importance the US situated on its ally's needs, fully contradicting the concept of 'democracy first and foremost' that the US has always so publicly preached (Israeli 246). However, it can be argued that the US was pursuing economic foreign policy goals by overthrowing the Iranian government in the interest of American oil supply. By employing a more American-advantageous Iranian government, "the United States... would be able to work out plans for Iran's oil with little resistance" (Heing). Nevertheless, the economic aspect of America's foreign policy in Iran could not overpower the emphasis on democracy. The governmental effects of Operation Ajax were too severe, long-lasting, and detrimental to Iran and Iranian-American relations to fully justify the preference of economic policy goals regarding oil.

In this sense, post-Operation Ajax the newly-implemented Prime Minister Zahedi greatly diminished liberty of expression and overall democracy in Iran through the use of governmental suppression. Not only did Operation Ajax stoke tension between America, the Iranian government, and the Iranian citizens, but also resulted in the supposed 'favorable' leader, Zahedi "clash[ing] with his own supporters and allies in government" (Heing). Furthermore, once in power, Zahedi "put in place a rigid authoritarian regime that banned all forms of opposition" essentially reversing any spark of democracy in Iran (Zahrani 97). Given that Zahedi was the American chosen replacement for Mossadegh, it was under American order that Iran morphed from a democratic-like regime into a fully authoritarian and soon-to-be theocratic one. Thus, the American goal of the attainment of democracy in Iran was largely ineffective due to the authoritarian political change under Zahedi's rule. However, Zahedi also "got Iran's oil flowing again to world markets," which highlights the economic success of Operation Ajax.

The implications of Operation Ajax were pertinent far beyond Eisenhower's occupation of office. Operation Ajax was a significant contributing factor to the White

Revolution and the ensuing Islamic Revolution, which would establish tension between the US and Iran. Zahedi's rule and oppression of social revolt paved the way for authoritarianism to consume Iran for the following decades, causing the "rise of political Islam, leading to the 1979 revolution and the present continuing impasse in Iranian-U.S. relations" (Zahrani 93). Had the US not intervened with Iranian politics through Operation Ajax, "Iran now would be a mature democracy" (Zahrani 93). Moreover, Operation Ajax sparked hatred amongst the Iranian citizens, which would become palpable in Iranian-American relations come the 1970s. Following Operation Ajax was an era of "virulent anti-Americanism" that sparked a "destructive rivalry with Washington," emphasizing the consequential ruination of the relations between the two nations due to the Coup (Maloney).

Concludingly, while the US did succeed in its economic policy goals of maintaining oil flow into the Western world, diplomacy goals were largely unmet and even disregarded. Instead of staging a coup, the US should have pursued a different, less violent path that encouraged the continuation of democracy while simultaneously advancing economic aspirations. The Eisenhower office could have followed the example of the Truman office by not interfering with Iran, and instead could have commenced operations with Saudi Arabia, another world leading oil supplier, instead of being influenced by Great Britain to push for Iranian oil (Sergie). It must be recognized that there are various complications to each proposed alternative solution: the understanding of relations between Saudi Arabia and the US, its plausible effect on other American foreign relations, et cetera. Nonetheless, the United States largely disregarded the concept of peace promotion by forcing a coup, when additional discussions with the Iranian Shah could have led to the possible de-nationalization of oil while simultaneously retaining some notion of democracy. Although politically, the process would have taken much longer, it would serve as an example to the rest of the world that America was able to pursue its goals and attend to complications in a nonviolent manner

that is fair to all parties involved, and exhibits honesty, justice, and honor: all defining aspects of democracy.

Given the precarious state of the Middle East following the Arab Spring, the American intervention in Afghanistan, and the Saudi Arabian-Iranian Proxy War, moving forward the United States should employ forceful yet non-violent tactics, such as economic pressure, on nations in the Middle East so as not to tilt the precarious power and tension balance in the region while synchronously advancing American foreign policy.

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