

ROUNDTABLE: MOSSADEQ'S OUSTER AT 70 – LEGACIES AND MEMORIES

Communism, Cold War, and the 1953 Coup

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Even as it passed its seventieth anniversary, the 1953 coup in Iran has remained a hotly debated political topic. This is true in the public spheres of Iran, which saw its last democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, overthrown in the coup, and in those of the United States and the United Kingdom, which helped stage the ouster.¹ There also has been an attempt at historical revisionism about the coup, usually by overemphasizing the domestic factors that led to the coup and placing less importance on the role of the CIA or questioning Mossadeq's democratic credentials. This revisionism has been robustly rebutted by the scholarly community, which has held to a general consensus on the basic narrative of the coup: that it overthrew a popular leader and that it took place with significant interventions from London and Washington.² The release of the final batch of US documents related to the coup in 2017 (following many years of undue delay) also bolstered evidence for this consensus.³ But, although most public debates about the coup center on questions such as the constitutional process of Mosaddeq's dismissal or the relative weight given to domestic and international actors behind the coup, there is another historiographical question that has been subject to widely divergent perspectives in the field: the relationship of the coup to the Cold War. In other words, can the 1953 coup be considered a Cold War confrontation, or is this a misleading frame of reference? Both sides of this argument have often focused on the motivations of coup plotters (mostly those in Washington, DC, and London) and whether they are more readily explained by a genuine fear of the communist movement in Iran or whether this was a rhetorical smoke-screen, masking the neocolonial drive for the control of Iran's resources. This tension is not limited to scholarship on Iran. Even as new global histories of the Cold War have grown in recent years, some have cautioned against the use of this framework for understanding politics in the Global South. Jeremi Suri, for instance, speaks of a "group of scholars" who have

¹ For some recent examples, see Peter Theroux, "Remembering a CIA Coup in Iran That Never Was," *Tablet Magazine*, 5 March 2023; Julian Borger, "UK Should Finally Acknowledge Role in 1953 Iran Coup, Says David Owen," *The Guardian*, 15 August 2023; Darioush Bayandor, "28 Mordad 32: Koodeta, Qiam-e Melli ya Hadesse-yi Digar?" *BBC Persian*, 19 August 2023.

² For a major revisionist attempt, see Darioush Bayandor, *Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mossadeq Revisited* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). For rebuttals, see Fakhreddin Azimi, "The Overthrow of the Government of Mossadeq Reconsidered" *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2012): 693–712; Mark Gasiorowski, "The Causes of Iran's 1953 Coup: A Critique of Darioush Bayandor's *Iran and the CIA*," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2012): 669–78; Fakhreddin Azimi, "Rejoinder to Mr Darioush Bayandor," *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2013): 477–80.

³ For the newly published documents, see *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Iran 1951–54*, 2nd ed., ed. James C. Van Hook (Washington, DC: United States Government Publishing Office, 2017). For a scholarly account based on new documents (alongside other sources), see Ervand Abrahamian, *Oil Crisis in Iran: From Nationalism to Coup d'Etat* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Also see Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi and Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, "Musaddiq's Spectre: On the Recent Declassification of US Documents," *Jadaliyya*, 17 July 2017.

“questioned the very utility of the Cold War as an analytical concept” by pointing to “the ways in which this geopolitical term privileges state actors in the United States and Europe and neglects local forces of change, many of which had little apparent connection to the basic issues and personalities of the Cold War.”⁴ In his analysis of the global place of Algeria’s drive for independence, Matthew Connelly suggests “taking off the Cold War lens,” arguing that such a lens did less to shape the views of historical actors (such as the Eisenhower administration) than “those of the historians who have studied them.”⁵

I instead build on another trend in recent scholarship that seeks to intersect Cold War history with that of Global South’s opposition to imperialism and neocolonialism as I argue against a binary understanding of the 1953 coup.⁶ In simpler words, I argue that the coup is understandable both as a Cold War confrontation, that is, that of global communism versus its opponents, and as Iran’s quest for sovereignty against Western imperialism. I also aim to broaden the lens, both temporally and geographically, to show how the Cold War framework helps us better understand the processes that preceded and followed the coup, as well as the wide range of international actors that were arrayed on both sides of the coup.

State of the Field

Among pioneering historians of the coup, Mark J. Gasiorowski did much to set it within the contours of Cold War dynamics. Gasiorowski showed how, already in 1950, the growth of the communist Tudeh Party of Iran led to escalating concerns in Washington and, therefore, a direct increase in staff of the CIA and the American embassy in Tehran.⁷ Gasiorowski’s work also has done much to link the 1953 coup to prior operations that the CIA ran in its anticommunist campaign in Iran.⁸ But another leading historian of the coup, Ervand Abrahamian, takes on Gasiorowski’s stance and questions “the conventional wisdom that places the coup squarely and solidly within the context of the Cold War.” Abrahamian’s narrative, in his own words, “by contrast [tries] to locate the coup firmly inside the conflict between imperialism and nationalism, between First and Third Worlds, between North and South.”⁹ In rejecting the Cold War framework, Abrahamian makes many valid historical points: that the primary motive of the West for staging the coup was preventing Iranian national control of its petro-resources; that Mosaddeq was primarily opposed by the UK and US because of his genuine drive for Iranian self-determination, regardless of Cold War dynamics; and that, according to Anglo-American intelligence estimates, the Tudeh at no point had any actual chance of coming to power in Iran.

Some of the more recent scholarship on the coup, although in agreement with Abrahamian on most of these points, nevertheless has seen some benefit in utilizing the Cold War scholarship and framework. David Painter and Gregory Brew, for instance, treat the “fight against foreign domination of the Global South [as] an integral part” of the broader Cold War dynamics. They argue against “single factor” understandings of the coup and affirm that it is both “necessary to recognize the importance of the Cold War to the origins, course, and outcome of the Iranian crisis” and also “critical to view the superpower struggle within the broader context of changes in the postwar political economy.” In fact, they go on to argue that the coup represented a crucial turning point in Cold War

⁴ Jeremi Suri, “The Cold War, Decolonization, and Global Social Awakenings: Historical Intersections,” *Cold War History* 6, no. 3 (2006): 353–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740600795519>.

⁵ Matthew Connelly, “Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North–South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence,” *American Historical Review* 105, no.3 (2000): 739–69, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/105.3.739>.

⁶ See Robert J. McMahon, ed., *The Cold War in the Third World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷ Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup D’etat in Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (1987): 267.

⁸ See Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The CIA’s TPBEDAMN Operation and the 1953 Coup in Iran,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 4 (2013): 4–24.

⁹ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and The Roots of Modern U.S.–Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 3–4.

history. In short, they see no contradiction in seeing the coup, and the lead-up to it, through lenses of both the Cold War and the postwar wave of decolonization.¹⁰

“Cold War from Below”

New histories of the Cold War have moved away from a hyperfocus on superpower decision-making by showing how regional actors were integral to the global Cold War. This shift is perhaps best visible in the work of eminent Cold War historian Odd Arne Westad. Although Westad has been a pioneer of highlighting the agency of Global South actors in his own work, in his 2005 one-volume study of the Cold War he seems to view this global conflict as primarily a struggle between two superpowers (as the subtitle *Third World Interventions* suggests).¹¹ But by the time he wrote his 2017 volume, he had clearly changed his narrative, and now was much more open to the Global South as not merely a site of “interventions” by superpowers but host to actors who played their own role in shaping the Cold War.¹² Such an approach also underlies the work of Lorenz Lüthi who, in a magisterial study, argues for studying the Cold War “horizontally,” that is, in the links between its many global actors and not just “vertically,” from the superpowers down.¹³

This shift has been marked in the work of Cold War historians on various regions, such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. They have highlighted the organic contributions of Global South actors to both sides of the Cold War.¹⁴ In the Middle East, much attention has been paid to how regional histories intersect with those of global decolonization, a contemporaneous but distinct dynamic.¹⁵ Jeffrey Byrne, for instance, has shown the process through which Algerian freedom fighters became “Cold Warriors.”¹⁶ In Byrne’s narrative, the “Cold War lens” is not just a cynical device that shapes the calculations of decision-makers in superpower capitals but a dynamic that helps shape the political identities of Algerian activists as they engage in their own global acts of coalition-making. In my own work, I have deployed what I term a “Cold War from below” approach to show how non-state actors such as the Tudeh were crucial to the makings of the global Cold War.¹⁷

Viewed through such a prism, the 1953 coup becomes legible as a Cold War confrontation. The global struggle between the communist movement and its opponents did much to set the stage for actors on both sides of the coup in the years leading up to it. As early as 1946, just when the wartime Grand Alliance between the communist movement and major capitalist powers was coming to an end, we can see the classical Cold War–style arraying of forces during the strikes by oil workers in Iran and Iraq.¹⁸ As workers in the oil fields of Abadan and Kirkuk

¹⁰ David S. Painter and Gregory Brew, *The Struggle for Iran: Oil, Autocracy and the Cold War, 1951–1954* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 1, 5, 7, 203. Painter and Brew, for instance, agree with Abrahamian’s assessment that the US never saw a real chance of Tudeh coming to power.

¹¹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹² Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

¹³ Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

¹⁴ For examples of this new historiography, see Reanata Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); and Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua, “Why Decolonization?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (2020): 137–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819001107>.

¹⁶ Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54, 66–67.

¹⁷ Arash Azizi, “Cold War from Below: A Social History of Communist Internationalism in the Middle East (1941–1983)” (PhD thesis, New York University, 2023).

¹⁸ For an account of the alliance, see Carole K. Fink, *Cold War: An International History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), 28–48.

staged near-simultaneous strikes in the summer of 1946, they faced off a common enemy in the state-backed British company that operated the fields in both Iran and Iraq: the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.¹⁹ The strong communist presence in the labor movement was noted by the British from early on. According to the US diplomatic archives, the British “viewed the strike essentially as an attempt to advance Soviet interests and not primarily as a labor dispute.”²⁰

The British were not imagining things. Both Iranian and Iraqi trade unionists indeed benefited from the robust support of the communist-led World Federation of Trade Unions, best evident during the visit of its general secretary, French communist Louis Saillant, to Iran in July 1946.²¹

When the British attempted to use their connections with Iran’s Arab tribes to rouse the local population against the multiethnic strikers in Abadan, the Tudeh used its close links to the Iraqi Communist Party to counter this effort, including publication of agitational material in Arabic.²² Soviet diplomats, too, attempted to help the Iranian strikers. For instance, in June of 1946, local Soviet diplomats in southwestern Iran held meetings with Arab tribal leaders to convince them not to join the anti-Tudeh efforts.²³

By the time of Mosaddeq’s rise to power in 1951 and his coming confrontation with the Western powers, the political scene of Iran had been significantly reshaped by communist and anticommunist alliances of the Cold War. Whereas anticommunist actors such as Ayatollah Abdolqasem Kashani drew on the favorable view of the US embassy, Tudeh used its connections to international communism to benefit itself and the oil nationalization movement that it firmly supported, especially from 1952 onward. An example of the latter can be seen in the solidarity shown to Iranians in June 1952 by Palestinian poet Tawfiq Zayyad, a leading figure of the Communist Party of Israel (MAKI). In a passionate poem entitled “Abadan,” Zayyad wrote “Abadan! Do not be scared of their bullets’ roar . . . you are stronger than the crowds of their armies.”²⁴ A few months later, in October 1952, a delegation of Tudeh youth visited Nazareth, a Palestinian-majority city and a major base for MAKI. Zayyad recited the poem in their presence and sent his greetings to Iranian communists.²⁵

But possibilities for communist transnational ties were significantly cut short by the 1953 coup. The coup was a turning point for the fortunes of communism in the Middle East, and so for Cold War history. Tudeh, the strongest communist party in the region, with the organized support of tens of thousands of Iranians, had operated in relatively free conditions from its foundation in 1941 to its banning in 1949, and in semiclandestine conditions from then until 1953. But it then suffered a bloody repression, with its outlets closed and hundreds of its members arrested and many killed. Among those arrested were Iraqi communists living in Iran, some of whom were busy trying to help their Iranian comrades flee to Iraq, from where they could eventually find their way to the Soviet Union.²⁶

Melvyn P. Leffler, a prominent historian, once defined the Cold War as a “battle for the soul of [hu]mankind.”²⁷ Although Leffler often focused on the two superpowers, the title of

¹⁹ Arbella Bet-Shlimon perceptively notices the concurrence of two strikes. See Arbella Bet-Shlimon, *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 104.

²⁰ The Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Iran (Allen), 23 August 1946, 891.6363/8-2346: Telegram, US National Archives and Records Administration.

²¹ Markaze Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi, *Chap dar Iran: Reza Roosta be Revayat-e Asnad-e Savak* (Tehran: Markaz-e Barresi-ye Asnad-e Tarikhi, 2019).

²² “Protection of British Interests in South Persia,” Top Secret, From Minister of Defense to Prime Minister, PREM 8/613, The National Archives (UK).

²³ “British Consulate in Ahvaz to British Embassy in Tehran,” 22 June 1946, The National Archives (UK), FO 248/1468.

²⁴ Tamir Sorek, *The Optimist: A Social Biography of Tawfiq Zayyad* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 32. For a Persian translation of the poem, see Tawfiq Zayyad, “Abadan,” trans. ‘Ali Vaseqi, in *Badban, Jong-e Adabiyat-e Jonub 2* (1979).

²⁵ Sorek, *Optimist*, 32.

²⁶ Top Secret,” From British Embassy in Baghdad to the Levant Department in the Foreign Office, 7 October 1953, The National Archives (UK), FO 371/104668.

²⁷ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).

his work (*For the Soul of Mankind*) and the course of his narrative suggest that the Cold War was not just about the geopolitical interests of empires, but involved the pursuit of alternative modernities. Western control of the primary resources of Iran and other countries was certainly germane to this global struggle over the future of humanity. As the 1953 coup played out, Cold War solidarities and enmities helped animate many, if not all, actors on both sides.

Historians of global communism, the Cold War, and modern Iran should keep this in mind as they set their future research agendas. More work can be done, for instance, on the Korean War and how it was viewed in Iran by various actors, not least Mossadeq. How did Iranian and Korean actors' mutual perception of the crises in both their countries affect their conceptions and decision-making? How did Mossadeq's overthrow in 1953, and the fate of the Tudeh Party, helped solidify or shift the Cold War alliances that were taking shape around the world on both sides? These are only some of the helpful questions we can ask if we take a Cold War framework seriously in our understanding of 1953.