

# *Coup 53* recounts the role of British intelligence in overthrowing Mosaddegh government in Iran

By Jean Shaoul  
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*Coup 53* is an engrossing documentary about British and American skulduggery in Iran in the 1950s, which was aimed at protecting their lucrative oil and geostrategic interests in the region and preventing the Soviet Union from gaining influence.

Co-written, produced and directed by Iranian-born Taghi Amirani, the documentary is co-written and edited by Walter Murch, renowned for his work on such films as *The Godfather*, *The Conversation*, *Julia*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The English Patient* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

*Coup 53* recounts the role of MI6, Britain's international spy agency, in the 1953 Anglo-American coup that ousted Iran's nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and ushered in 26 years of a murderous dictatorship under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. For decades, the Shah, along with Israel and Saudi Arabia, policed the working class and the oppressed in the oil-rich region in the service of US imperialism.

While it is well known that America was the leading force behind the coup that removed Mosaddegh—a leading proponent of nationalizing the oil industry—and restored the Shah, the extent of Britain's role is less fully understood.

In a virtual question-and-answer session following his film's premier, Amirani explained that he wanted to “tell the truth and clear the air” about Britain's role. “It was the most critical experience with regard to relations with West in the history of Iran” and remains a persistent irritant in Tehran-London relations.

*Coup 53* provides a devastating picture of Britain's colonial arrogance, racism and blatant disregard for basic democratic rights and norms as it sought to preserve its most valuable overseas asset.

The film focuses on the role of Norman Darbyshire, a MI6 operative, making use of the transcript of an interview he gave to researchers for Granada TV's 14-part series *End of Empire*, of which the events surrounding the coup formed one episode screened in 1985. Aged about 30 at the time of the coup, Darbyshire (who died in 1993) was a fluent Farsi speaker and had served with the Special Operations Executive in Iran during World War II before joining MI6. The actor Ralph Fiennes speaks his words.

The Granada film, while revealing MI6's role, did not film or show the interview with Darbyshire or the interview with his CIA counterpart, Stephen Meade. *Coup 53*'s makers believe this was the result of MI6 pressure and censorship since key parts of the

transcripts were missing. Amirani eventually obtained the transcript from the British Film Institute's archive where the *End of Empire*'s research papers were stored. It is now available online

The work involved was immense, expanding from the expected six months to four years, in part because of lack of funding, as no official organizations would touch the film. Murch had to edit 532 hours, “more than double what I handled on *Apocalypse Now*,” down to two hours.

Amirani's film and Darbyshire's evidence demonstrate the degree to which bribery, planting propaganda pieces in newspapers, incitement, assassinations and coups were and remain Britain's modus operandi.

However, while the film provides details of the coup, it is less clear about the economic context, the Cold War and the political line of the various political movements in Iran.

By 1950, Britain was under pressure from Iran to emulate the 50/50 profit sharing deal Aramco, the US oil company, had signed with the Saudi government. The rapacious 1933 Agreement had created a cash cow for Britain's oil company—the largely state-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), now known as BP—with the UK government receiving about £116 million (£4.2 billion in today's terms) in the years 1948–50. Iran saw little benefit from its oil, which fed into mass popular opposition to Britain's decades-long imperialist domination of the country.

As the film details, despite Britain's extensive payouts to ensure a sympathetic Majlis (Parliament) that would agree a minor amendment to the 1933 agreement, and to newspapers to discredit its opponents, Mohammad Mosaddegh's National Front, which was opposed to the deal, won several seats in the 1950 elections.

Mosaddegh had the support of the Tudeh Party (“Party of the Masses of Iran”), the successor to the Communist Party of Persia and Iran's first mass political party. Tudeh had tens of thousands of members, led the Central Council of Federated Trade Unions (CCFTU), with more than 275,000 members, and had strong influence, including in the British-occupied south and Abadan, the centre of AIOC's operations. Despite being banned by the Shah in 1949, it was a powerful political force, shaking Iran's political elite by leading a general strike in Khuzistan and sympathy strikes in other cities.

The Tudeh Party followed the Stalinist line of the two-stage

revolution—that Iran as a semi-colonial and economically backward country was not yet ripe for a socialist revolution and therefore the working class could not fight for political power. It never put forward an independent perspective for the Iranian working class, but tied the latter to the coattails of Mosaddegh and the national bourgeoisie, which opposed popular demands for land reform and the abolition of the monarchy.

As *Coup 53* explains, Britain refused to consider any proposals for profit sharing amid growing demands for AIOC's nationalization, until a leading cleric issued a *fatwa* against government officials who had given away the country's assets. But this minor shift in policy was too late. In the tumult that followed the assassination of the pro-British prime minister, Haj Ali Razmara, Mosaddegh issued a call for AIOC's nationalization that was to lead to his own ascendancy to power.

Britain only abandoned plans to launch a military invasion to seize AIOC's oil refinery in Abadan when faced with opposition from the Truman administration in the US, which feared this would jeopardise American oil interests in Saudi Arabia and play into the hands of the Soviet Union.

The film relates how in June 1951, following Iran's seizure of AIOC's main office near Abadan, Britain began blockading the port city, preventing oil tankers from leaving the refinery, leading to the shutdown of the oil industry and immense economic dislocation and hardship. In October, the Mosaddegh government expelled AIOC's Abadan staff from Iran.

Facing similar opposition to its interests in Egypt and the Suez Canal, the incoming Conservative government under Winston Churchill began to consider the military operation against the Mosaddegh government in Iran that is the subject of *Coup 53*.

Darbyshire insisted that MI6 wanted to get rid of Mosaddegh because it believed that even if his government, which included a member of the Tudeh Party, signed an agreement favourable to the British, it would ultimately come under Soviet influence. He said, "Eventually they [the US and Britain] would have been forced to have considered getting rid of him to prevent a Russian takeover. I am convinced that was on the cards."

But while Mosaddegh used Tudeh support to pressure the Shah and the British, this bourgeois politician from a large landowning family was acutely aware of the potential threat from the left.

Darbyshire described an early attempt in 1952 to oust Mosaddegh, explaining, "My brief was very simple. Go out there, don't inform the ambassador, and use the intelligence service for any money you might need to secure the overthrow of Mosaddegh by legal or quasi-legal means." He had to abandon his plans and decamp to Cyprus when Mosaddegh got wind of the plot and expelled Britain's diplomats and officials in October 1952.

The US only became interested in a coup following Egypt's CIA-backed Free Officer coup in 1952. President Dwight Eisenhower appointed John Foster Dulles as his secretary of state in 1953. Dulles, a keen advocate of "push back" against the Soviet Union and the Communist parties around the world, initially took a dim view of Britain's colonial arrogance that played into the hands of the nationalists and Stalinists.

However, the increasing turmoil within Iran convinced the US that whichever anti-British faction won, Washington would face

an ever more intransigent regime and the growing influence of the Tudeh Party whose demonstration on July 21, as Darbyshire said, "was far larger than the nationalist." He began working with the CIA team under Kermit "Kim" Roosevelt Jr. (the grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt) in May 1953, with the coup signed off by both governments in July.

After a false start that led to the Shah fleeing to Rome and crowds of protesters under the Tudeh Party's leadership taking to the streets in opposition to the attempted coup, Mosaddegh called in the pro-Shah army, which turned on Mosaddegh, arrested him and installed General Fazlollah Zahedi as prime minister on August 19.

The coup consolidated the power of the Shah, ushering in one of the cruelest regimes on the face of the earth. Mosaddegh was put on trial and kept under house arrest until his death in 1967. Members of the Tudeh party and other oppositionists suffered terrible persecution for their support of the deposed premier, the man who had set the army on them. Many were executed.

For Britain, it was a hollow victory as AIOC was forced to join a new consortium with five American companies, leaving it with only a 40 percent stake, less than the 50/50 deal that might have averted the conflict. But that did not stop Britain from attempting other coups and assassinations, including several attempts to assassinate Egyptian President Nasser, the 1956 invasion of Egypt to seize the Suez Canal, overthrow Nasser and install a more pliant regime and an abortive attempt to overthrow the Syrian government in 1957.

The Iranian coup became the blueprint for a succession of CIA plots, some with MI6 support, to foment coups and destabilize governments around the world during the Cold War, while the boycott of Iran's oil became the template for modern-day sanctions.

The Iranian events, including the role of Mosaddegh and the Tudeh Party, confirmed that the only viable basis for opposing imperialism is the revolutionary mobilization of the workers and toilers of Iran and the Middle East, based on an appeal to their democratic and social strivings and orientated to the working class in the US and the other imperialist centres.

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