

## **Chain reactions: U.S. and Britain got what they wanted in Iran in 1953, but where did it lead?**

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**UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES** The United States appears to be headed down the road to war with Iraq, a war that has 'regime change' as one of its goals. We've tried this before in the Middle East, which might well be thought of as the land of unintended consequences.

**AS THE U.S. AND BRITAIN** work to topple Saddam Hussein, a sense of déjà vu hangs in the air. Exactly 50 years ago, the U.S. and Britain set in motion a secret plan to overthrow the prime minister of Iran. The planners of Iraq 2003 would do well to learn the lessons of Iran 1953.

The 1953 operation was known as Ajax, and its target, Mohammed Mossadegh, had triggered utter panic among the British by nationalizing the country's oil reserves. This move posed a direct threat to British economic interests in Iran and threatened to set a precedent for the nationalization and confiscation of British interests around the world. The U.S. also was perturbed by Mossadegh's defiance of Western interests, though initially less so than Britain. Concerned about potential Soviet influence in Iran, worried about alienating the Iranian public and eager to secure access to Iranian oil, the U.S. was inclined toward negotiation. British pressure to replace Mossadegh, however, was intense, and after failed negotiations, the U.S. agreed to covert action.

Ajax was a resounding success for British and American intelligence.

Mossadegh was overthrown in August 1953, and a military officer named Fazlollah Zahedi was installed as a more sympathetic replacement. On Aug. 22, the Shah of Iran told the head of CIA operations in the Middle East that he owed his throne "to God, my people, my army--and to you." A consortium of Western oil companies took over the Iranian oil industry. The U.S. initiated a major assistance program to the shah that cemented his allegiance to the West and bolstered his royal dictatorship. Iran's position in the Western camp was assured indefinitely.

Or so we thought.

The law of unintended consequences cannot be ignored in the Middle East. In this case, the 1953 coup inaugurated a virulent anti-Americanism that took root in Iran and spread throughout the region. Mossadegh's

ouster created a fundamental rupture in U.S.-Iranian relations that culminated in the violence of the Iranian revolution 25 years later. The dire consequences of the revolution for U.S. policy in the region included the hostage crisis in the U.S. Embassy, increased funding for militants in the region, and the spread of anti- American sentiment and propaganda throughout the Middle East.

Similar events are about to occur: Western intervention in a sovereign nation and installation of a Western-oriented regime in the heart of the Middle East. Current U.S. objectives in Iraq differ only slightly from the objectives at play in 1953. In Iran, the U.S. was protecting the interests of a key ally, Britain, ensuring access to Middle Eastern oil, containing the Soviets and defending contracts held by powerful Western companies. In 2003, the U.S. is protecting its strategic interests, containing the threat of terrorism, and defending its political and economic hegemony in the region.

Although there are differences between the two cases (Mossadegh was a popular nationalist leader, the 1953 action was covert), the parallels are clear. Assume that the U.S. invades Iraq and installs a regime more favorable to Western interests, as it did in Iran in 1953. In the short term, this will bolster U.S. interests in the region, just as it did in 1953. Opponents will be cowed by impressive U.S. military might. The demise of the Hussein regime will be celebrated inside and outside Iraq.

In the long term, however, unilateral Western military intervention in the affairs of a sovereign state likely will lead to the same negative results as the coup of 1953. Though it would guarantee the presence of a U.S. ally in the Middle East in the short term, in the long term virulent opposition to the U.S. and its interests may be the result.

Is it in the interests of the U.S. to foster anti-Americanism in a volatile yet pivotal region such as the Middle East? The consequences of Operation Ajax suggest that it is not. The U.S. has a range of critical strategic and economic interests and alliances in the Middle East. Rather than jeopardizing them by attacking Iraq, the U.S. should befriend those who oppose Hussein in neighboring Arab countries and work with them to weaken his regime. Imagine the legitimacy that Iraq 2003 would enjoy were it supported by Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Is it in the interests of the U.S. to offer concrete evidence to radical Islamists who claim that the U.S. and its "crusader" allies seek to determine the fate of Muslims around the world? Militant Islamists and their

"clash of civilizations" mind-set must be opposed. Attacking Iraq, however, will lend legitimacy in the Middle East to Osama bin Laden's claims that religious animosity is the driving force behind international politics. This is the framework through which U.S. actions will be interpreted in the region. If the U.S. launches an attack on Iraq unsupported by its Arab neighbors, not to mention the Europeans, it will contribute to the realization of a world fractured along the lines bin Laden supports. We will unwittingly lend credence to a worldview we oppose.

Finally, given the last 100 years of history in the Middle East, is it really in U.S. domestic interests to occupy a foreign country for an indefinite period? Iran 1953 did not lead to an occupation, but everyone agrees that Iraq 2003 would require one. This system, whereby the West occupies and administers countries in the Middle East that it finds unfit to self-govern, has already been tried. It was called the mandate system, and it was plagued by notorious difficulties such as those encountered by the British in Mandatory Palestine and the French in Algeria.

Since the end of World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the nations of the Middle East have fought long and hard to achieve independence and end this very system. The 21st Century is certainly not the time to resuscitate it.

Operation Ajax marked a pivotal moment in the history of relations between the West and the Middle East. Today's decision-makers should not forget its consequences. The lessons of history support a moderate, multilateral and consultative approach to regime change in Iraq. This is an approach the U.S. can afford both diplomatically and economically. It is an approach Americans will not regret 50 years into the future. It is an approach that is cast aside at great risk.

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### **Illustration**

PHOTOS 3; Caption: PHOTO: Iranian soldiers guard the shah's palace Aug. 22, 1953, after the shah returned to the capital, Tehran, following the ouster of Mohammed Mossadegh as part of Operation Ajax. AP file photo by Jim Pringle. PHOTO: British pressure to replace Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran was intense, and the U.S. agreed to covert action. Hulton Getty Archive photo. PHOTO (color): Photo illustration by Bob Fila.

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