

The Political Psychology of Regime Change in Iran

Ryan Vetticad

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

In the study of the 20th century's most infamous case of regime change, the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, the role of political psychology played an increasingly vital role in how these revolutions panned out. In these instances, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had analyzed specific individuals, respectively being Iran's Mohammed Mossadegh, that were not adhering to policies in conjunction with American interests. As a result, the CIA led an immense role in the orchestration of the revolution and handpicked Iran's successor, Reza Shah Pahlavi. This essay works to perform a nuanced psychological analysis of these two individuals discussing the contested nature of why the CIA did not cooperate with Mossadegh, and why they picked Pahlavi to fill his place. Furthermore, it makes the invariable argument that while the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is not a terrorist organization as a whole, it's involvement in the revolution does constitute as a specific act of terrorism.

The topic of regime change is one of the more riveting subjects in the study of politics and international relations, especially when that change in government resulted from the interference of an outside or foreign agency. But a more latent aspect to note in the discussion of regime change is how specific individuals contribute to the development of the rise and fall of these governments, which requires the nuance of Political Psychology - a complex academic discipline, falling both under the branches of social psychology and political science. The interdisciplinary nature of the field is dedicated to understanding politics, politicians, and overall political behavior from a psychological perspective, and an important aspect of this process is the acquisition and study of distinct psychological profiles.

In the study of the 20th century's most infamous case of regime change, the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, the role of political psychology played an increasingly vital role in how these revolutions panned out. In these instances, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had analyzed specific individuals, respectively being Iran's Mohammed Mossadegh, that were not adhering to policies in conjunction with American interests. As a result, the CIA led an immense role in the orchestration of the revolution and handpicked Iran's successor, Reza Shah Pahlavi. This essay works to perform a nuanced psychological analysis of these two individuals discussing the contested nature of why the CIA did not cooperate with Mossadegh, and why they picked Pahlavi to fill his place. Furthermore, it makes the invariable argument that while the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is not a terrorist organization as a whole, it's involvement in the revolution does constitute as a specific act of terrorism.

Before delving into these psychological profiles, however, this essay requires a definition of terrorism. In the scope of political science and international relations the word *Terrorism*, is one of the (if not *the*) most loosely defined terms of the discipline. There are various ways and avenues that one can take in defining the theory, but there exist three that are most relevant in this discussion of political psychology and regime change. The first being Professor Bruce Hoffman's definition, tenured professor of international relations at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. In his book "Inside Terrorism" he defines the concept as "the deliberate creation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in pursuit of political change" (Hoffman, 1998). Essentially meaning that it is artificial violence created for the purpose of political altercation. The second definition is one that exists from standard international relations theory in which it's defined as politically motivated attacks against non-combatants by an individual or group. The key difference from Hoffman's definition being the inclusion of non-combatants in the scope of its meaning. The last definition is how professor Nicholas Grossman, assistant professor of political science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign defines it being "targeted, violent disruption of normalcy by a relatively weak actor for political purposes" (Grossman, 2020). The important aspect being that the action is committed by a *relatively* weak actor. All three of these definitions provide an overly similar view of the concept but differ in the addition of one key attribute, i.e. fear, non-combatants, and relative power. Nonetheless, each provides a clear course in which one could attribute the CIA's actions in both Iran and Guatemala to fitting at least one, if not all, of these forms of terrorism.

Now with the understanding of the contested nature that exists in the definition of terrorism one can move on to the psychological profiles of these leaders. In the case of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh, born June 16, 1882 and raised in a prominent Persian family in the capital of Tehran. In 1909, Mossadegh traveled to Paris where he studied law at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris, or more commonly known as Sciences Po, one of the finest

universities of political science and law in all of Europe. After completing his studies in France, Mossadegh then traveled to Switzerland to study a doctorate en Droit (Doctorate of Laws) at the University of Neuchâtel, where after completing his studies in the June of 1913 became the first Iranian in history to receive a PhD in Law from a European university. Following his studies he returned to Iran where he began a long and arduous career in Iranian Politics.

In reference to his specific leadership style and overall psychological profile, Mossadegh can be described as an overall fighter of Iranian interests, holding the nation close at heart and known to sacrifice his livelihood and wellbeing in its defense - "If I sit silently, I have sinned" (Mossadegh, 1950). A journal article from the University of Chicago Press entitled "...The Case of Mohammed Mossadegh" works to further support and expand on Moassadegh's role as a prominent leader of the Iranian state. The article describes how there were two main hazards during Mossadegh's time as Prime Minister, the first being the lack of clear definitions of political power between himself and the Shah, i.e. whether or not the Shah acted as a national symbol separate from politics or that he wielded actual power. And the second being the lack of a strong national party movement, with various factions, interest groups, and shifting personas that dominated the parliamentary atmosphere creating an overall sense of great internal instability. Nonetheless, the study reaches the conclusion that despite these pitfalls "That he was able to survive [in this political climate] is a tribute to his political safacity and organizing ability. Indeed his rule was something of a tour de force in Iranian politics." (Efimenco, 1955).

In contrast Reza Shah Pahlavi, could be seen in an almost completely different light. Pahlavi, born October 26, 1919 was raised in royalty, being the son of Reza Khan, the first Shah in the Pahlavi dynasty. Khan was a dominating figure who showed little compassion for Pahlavi, and raised him in an demanding and austere environment. In Abbas Milani's (director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University) novel *The Shah*, he describes it as "growing up under his shadow, Mohammad Reza was a deeply scarred and insecure boy who lacked self-confidence" (Milani, 2011). The only real form of compassion and love that the prince grew up with came in the form of his mother and sisters, and even then that was only for the first 6 years of his life before his father took him away to be given a more masculine education. Noted Political Psychologist, Marvin Zonis, at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, stated in his psychobiography *Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah*, that the overall result of his upbringing between a loving and compassionate mother, and an overbearing martinet father created "a young man of low self-esteem who masked his lack of self-confidence, his indecisiveness, his passivity, his dependency and his shyness with masculine bravado, impulsiveness, and arrogance" (Zonis, 1991). This further led to an internal struggle of great contradictions within the crown prince as he would later be described as "both gentle and cruel, withdrawn and active, dependent and assertive, weak and powerful" (Zonis, 1991).

The transition of power that then occurred between these two individuals, came in the context of Operation Ajax. Mohammed Mossadegh was a member of the National Front party which favored more socialist policies, the greatest of which was the plan to nationalize Iran's oil industry. At the time British and American oil companies held an increasingly large share of the Iranian oil market, Anglo-Persian oil being one of the largest - whose shares were more than 50% owned by Britain, and Mossadegh wanted to take back control of these resources. This fell far from conjunction with American and British interests and in turn, Ajax was soon executed in the August of 1953, essentially the CIA organized mass street riots and protests along with political subterfuge that forced Mossadegh from power. The result being the disposition of

Mossadegh and his government, and the strengthening and continued establishment of Shah Pahlavi's rule. Mossadegh possessed specific characteristics, tenacity, nationalism, political and intellectual efficacy, that made the CIA know that he would never be one to align with American interests. So instead of seeking to reason with Mossadegh they sought to simply overthrow him with an individual with characteristics that aligned with American goals and one they could easily control, Pahlavi being the obvious choice. Pahlavi had grown up in a complicated household, and lacked any real sense of compassion and sympathy that led him to being easily persuaded to join the American cause.

Keeping these psych traits in mind, one has to look at what had actually occurred during the CIA's involvement in the revolution. Essentially what Operation Ajax had done was create an overwhelming sense of fear and hysteria, with the immense threat of actual violence in order to mediate a shift of political power, which constitutes as a near perfect example of Professor Hoffman's definition of terrorism. The first half of his definition "The deliberate creation or exploitation of fear through violence or threat of violence", coincides with how the CIA organized mass protests that forced Mossadegh's resignation. Ervand Abrahamian - a leading scholar and historian of modern day Iran - explains in his book titled *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the roots of modern U.S. - Iranian Relations*, how the CIA hired two of the largest and most feared gang leaders of the South Tehran ghetto, "Icy Ramadan" and Shaban Jafari (also known as "Brainless Shaban") to mobilize mass protests against Mossadegh. And the second half of his definition "in the pursuit of Political Change", furthermore can only work to be attributed how these protests were vital in securing Reza Shah Pahlavi's path to the throne. Overall, it becomes increasingly clear that from Hoffman's definition of terrorism that the CIA's involvement in the Iranian coup simply constitute's as an act of terrorism.

However, when analyzing standard international relations theory and its definition of terrorism, the argument can be made that the CIA orchestration of the coup d'etat is far from an instance of terrorism. The rationale being that standard IR theory defines the term as a politically motivated attack against *non-combatants*. Mossadegh and his supporters were inevitably always involved in this process, so it could be argued that perhaps they were always combatants. The fault in this logic however, is that combatants are defined as military personnel who hold the capability to defend themselves and non-combatants referring to civilians who do not possess that ability. Over the course of the 5 day coup, a primary source New York Times article from 1953 documents how more than 300 civilians were killed over the course of the fighting (New York Times, 1953). These were Royalists who had supported Reza Shah Pahlavi and took to the streets and killed supporters of Mossadegh but also civilians they encountered as well. Although it technically was not the CIA who had committed these murders, they had provided immense support to the people who had. For does there exist a prominent difference between the man who provides the gun and tells them who to kill, and the person who actually pulls the trigger? It cannot be left to a technicality for the CIA to retain political autonomy for these actions, and the truth of the matter is that even in the scope of standard international relations theory that the CIA's involvement in 1953 Iran does constitute as terrorism.

The last definition to explore is Professor Nicholas Grossman's, in that terrorism is the targeted and violent disruption of normalcy by a *relatively* weak actor. Even with the added nuance of the emphasis falling on the word relative, it is clear that CIA's involvement in Iran can be attributed to terrorism. By no means was the CIA stronger than Mossadegh's rule in Iran. One has to understand that the agency was not sending military troops to subjugate Mossadegh's rule

but rather crafting an air of political hysteria and fear, and this agency was working against the entirety of the Iranian government. In the scope of the word *relative* it's obvious that the CIA was relatively weak when compared to the government of Iran. It can be likened to comparing apples to oranges, it is one agency of a government versus a government in its entirety, inevitably it would be considered as the weaker actor. In light of this revelation, it can then be easily seen how Grossman's definition too fits with this situation, and the fact remains that CIA involvement in the 1953 coup d'etat constitutes as an act of terrorism.

This is not an argument that the Central Intelligence Agency as a whole can be designated as a terrorist organization, but rather in the scope of the definitions that this course provides that its involvement in the Iranian revolution can be called as an instance of terrorism. When analyzing the complexity of the psychological profiles of both Mohammed Mossedgh and Reza Shah Pahlavi, along with the dynamic interplay they share with the three most prominent definitions of terrorism. It is clear that the Central Intelligence Agencies role in the Iranian revolution of 1953, can be attributed and defined as an act of terrorism.

References

The New York Times, The New York Times,

archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/082053iran-army.html.

“1. Defining Terrorism.” *Inside Terrorism*, 2017, pp. 1–44., doi:10.7312/hoff17476-003.

Abrahamian, Ervand. *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations*.

The New Press, 2015.

Efimenco, N. Marbury. “An Experiment with Civilian Dictatorship in Iran; The Case of

Mohammed Mossadegh.” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1955, pp. 390–406.,

doi:10.1017/s0022381600091076.

Hoffman, Bruce. “Inside Terrorism.” 2017, doi:10.7312/hoff17476.

John, Peter St, and Bruce Hoffman. “Inside Terrorism.” *International Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1,

1999, p. 159., doi:10.2307/40203468.

Milani, Abbas. *The Shah*. St. Martin's Press, 2012.

Zonis, Marvin. *Majestic Failure: the Fall of the Shah*. University of Chicago Press, 1991.