

# U.S. Perceptions of the Communist Threat in Iran during the Mossadegh Era

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## Introduction

Most accounts of the coup backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) against Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh in August 1953 argue that U.S. policymakers undertook this fateful action at least partly because they feared Iran's Communist Tudeh Party might soon seize power and turn the country into a Soviet client state. The Soviet Union had demonstrated its interest in Iran during the 1945–1946 Azerbaijan crisis, when it fomented powerful separatist movements in northwestern Iran. The Tudeh had become quite powerful by this time and supported the Soviet-backed movements. The subsequent collapse of these movements weakened the Tudeh, but it remained the strongest party in Iran and a firm ally of the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. As Mossadegh's coalition began to fragment in late 1952, many U.S. officials believed he would become increasingly dependent on the Tudeh, enabling it eventually to seize power. In the tense Cold War climate that prevailed at the time, this outcome was unacceptable to U.S. policymakers and led them to undertake the coup.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This argument is made especially in the CIA's three in-house histories of the coup: Donald N. Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952–August 1953* (Langley, VA: CIA, March 1954); *The Battle for Iran* (Langley, VA: CIA, n.d.); and Scott A. Koch, "Zendeabad, Shah!": *The Central Intelligence Agency and the Fall of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, August 1953* (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, June 1998). Redacted versions of these documents are available at the National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/>. See also the memoirs of key participants, including Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); "Oral History Interview with Loy W. Henderson," in Harry S. Truman Library (HSTL), <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/henderson.htm>; and Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 111–113. For a different explanation, see Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: New Press, 2013). The best account of how the coup occurred is Ali Rahnama, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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Although much has been written about the 1953 coup in Iran, little effort has been made to study how U.S. policymakers perceived the evolving Communist threat in Iran during this period. What did U.S. policymakers know about Soviet and Tudeh capabilities and intentions? Was Tudeh membership growing? Was the Tudeh plotting to seize power? If so, how? Was Mossadegh becoming dependent on the Tudeh? Most importantly, if the Tudeh threat was so dire, why did the Truman administration reject a British suggestion in November 1952 that the U.S. and British governments jointly overthrow Mossadegh, whereas the Eisenhower administration embraced that same idea just a few months later? Did U.S. policymakers have compelling evidence that the Communist threat had increased substantially?

This article addresses these questions. It is based mainly on reports and analyses of Soviet and Tudeh activity in Iran produced by U.S. officials during the Mossadegh era. Most of this material consists of telegrams or longer dispatches written by the U.S. ambassador to Iran or by political officers or other specialists at the U.S. embassy who were closely monitoring conditions in Iran. These items generally were sent to the U.S. State Department's Iran desk and sometimes circulated further, becoming the primary source of information on Iran for analysts and policymakers in various U.S. government bodies. The article also relies heavily on studies written by intelligence analysts in Washington, especially National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), which were usually written by CIA specialists working closely with their counterparts in the State and Defense Departments. These NIEs reflected the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community and thus were very influential. Finally, the article uses National Security Council (NSC) policy papers, which provided authoritative analyses of particular topics and analysis-based guidance for U.S. policymakers. By examining the documents used by U.S. policymakers to understand conditions in Iran, we can gain useful insight into how they perceived the evolving Communist threat there and why they decided to overthrow Mossadegh.

The article begins with an examination of how U.S. officials viewed Soviet and Tudeh activities in Iran in the years prior to Mossadegh's appointment as prime minister in April 1951. It then examines U.S. perceptions of the Communist threat first during the early part of Mossadegh's tenure, when his popularity and broad coalition seemed to provide an effective barrier to Communist ambitions, and then during the latter part, when U.S. officials believed the fragmentation of his coalition was creating opportunities the Tudeh could exploit. The article concludes by evaluating what these findings mean for our understanding of why the United States undertook the 1953 coup. The main

conclusion is that although the Tudeh was a formidable organization seeking power through subversive means, its power was not growing substantially, and it did not pose an immediate threat in early 1953, when U.S. officials decided to overthrow Mossadegh. Thus, if the coup against Mossadegh was intended to prevent a Communist takeover, it was premature at best.

## **The Communist Threat in Iran, 1945–1949**

British and Soviet forces jointly invaded Iran in 1941 and occupied the country for the remainder of World War II, joined later by U.S. forces. U.S. diplomats and intelligence officers monitored Soviet and Tudeh activity in Iran during the war. As the war drew to a close, U.S. officials became increasingly concerned that Soviet forces would remain in Iran after hostilities ended, despite promises to the contrary. They also noted the rapid growth of the Tudeh, both in the northern, Soviet occupation zone and elsewhere in the country. The party was legal at this time and operated openly.<sup>2</sup>

The first detailed U.S. analysis of the Tudeh was written in August 1945 by a U.S. military attaché. This report sketched the party's history since its founding in 1941. It then gave a detailed overview of the party's organization, including its Secretariat and Central Committee; its provincial, regional, and local branches; its eight-man parliamentary bloc; its affiliated labor federation and unions; its youth organization; its network of national and regional newspapers; and the conditions and obligations of party membership. The report estimated that the party had 69,000 members—with some 15,000 in the Tehran area, 30,000 in Azerbaijan Province, and 15,000 elsewhere in the Soviet zone—and that an additional 90,000 non-members had joined Tudeh labor unions, which participated in rallies and other party activities. The report gave an overview of the party's position on various issues, which it characterized as “mildly socialistic” and “not communistic” but still “slavishly follow[ing] the Soviet lead.”<sup>3</sup>

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2. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 217, “Current Political Situation,” 28 February 1945, in U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (NARA), Record Group (RG) 84, UD2738, Box 7.

3. MA Tehran, “The Tudeh Political Party, Report R-89-45,” 27 August 1945, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 7. For good academic studies of the Tudeh, see Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); and Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), chs. 6–8.

Soviet occupation forces remained in Iran after World War II, fostering Azeri and Kurdish separatist movements in Azerbaijan in an apparent bid to create buffer states between the Soviet Union and Iran. The Soviet authorities finally withdrew their forces in May 1946, under strong U.S. pressure and following Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam's promise of an oil concession, but the separatist movements remained in control of Azerbaijan. U.S. officials monitored these movements and acquired extensive evidence of Soviet support for them. The Tudeh, which soon backed these movements, also rapidly built up its presence in Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran, organizing large strikes there in mid-1946 among workers in the British-controlled oil industry, leading to what the U.S. consul in Basra called a "bloodless war" between the Soviet Union and the British. In response, British officials encouraged Arab tribes in Khuzestan to attack the Tudeh. The powerful Qashqai tribe staged an uprising in September to protest what it considered Qavam's appeasement of the Soviet Union, compounding the turmoil that had engulfed the country.<sup>4</sup>

U.S. officials were alarmed by these events and by Soviet aggression toward neighboring Turkey and other countries during this period. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), in consultation with the State Department and other U.S. agencies, produced a study in July 1946 that concluded the Soviet government sought world domination and therefore was rapidly building up its armed forces, deepening its control over the countries it occupied, and seeking to establish client states elsewhere near the USSR's borders, including in Iran, Turkey, and Greece. The Soviet Union would likely try to seize control of most of Eurasia when its military buildup was complete. The JCS then produced a study of Iran in October 1946 that concluded the country was "of major strategic interest" to the United States because its oil resources and the resources of nearby countries would be useful in wartime and because its location would be well suited to conducting delaying operations and

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4. Tabriz Consulate Dispatch 250, "Organization and Membership of 'Democratic Party' of Azerbaijan," 19 February 1946, in RG 59, Central Decimal File (CDF), Box 7234, 891.00/2-1946; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 262, "Political Developments among the Azerbaijani Kurds in 1946," 15 January 1947, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 11; "Evidence of Soviet Interference in Iran," 27 May 1946, in NARA, RG 59, A1-1433, Box 41; Department of State, Office of Research and Intelligence, "The Tudeh and Associated Parties in Iran, Report 3523.5," 1 April 1946, in NARA, RG 59, M1221 (microfiche); Basra Consulate Dispatch 36, "Disturbances in Khuzestan," 17 July 1946, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 9; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 1266, 23 September 1946, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7234, 891.00/9-2346. See also Department of State, Office of Intelligence Research, "Soviet Interference in the Internal Affairs of Iran from 29 January 1942 to 13 December 1946, Report 4304," 20 February 1948, in NARA, RG 59, M1221. For a good overview of the Azerbaijan crisis, see Louise L'Estrange Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

counteroffensive air operations against a Soviet invasion.<sup>5</sup> These views guided U.S. strategic planning for Iran for the next several years.

The Azeri and Kurdish separatist movements had little popular support and soon collapsed, enabling the Iranian army to reoccupy Azerbaijan in December 1946. U.S. officials carefully monitored events there in the following years, but the separatist movements did not reemerge. Conditions also stabilized in southern Iran. The Azerbaijan crisis of 1945–1946 was a key milestone in the emergence of the Cold War and left U.S. officials deeply suspicious of Soviet and Tudeh intentions toward Iran.

The events of 1946 weakened the Tudeh. The three Tudeh members of Qavam's cabinet resigned in October 1946, reducing the party's influence. Following a declaration of martial law, the government arrested several Tudeh leaders in December and closed the Tehran headquarters of the Tudeh and its labor federation, which had been growing rapidly. It also suppressed numerous Tudeh-backed strikes, arrested hundreds of strikers and labor leaders, and had many others dismissed. Qavam also established a new ministry of labor and labor syndicate, initiated labor reforms, and took other steps that reduced the influence of pro-Tudeh unions. These actions left the Tudeh labor federation "in a state of disintegration and ineffectiveness," according to the U.S. embassy's labor attaché. In response to these measures, the Tudeh boycotted the 1947 parliamentary elections, further reducing its influence. By the summer of 1947, the party had largely gone underground, wracked by considerable internal tension. An influential faction led by Khalil Maleki left the Tudeh in January 1948, mainly over the party's close ties with the Soviet Union. U.S. embassy officials initially expressed optimism about the split but soon lamented that Maleki's faction had failed to establish itself.<sup>6</sup>

Following the collapse of the Azeri and Kurdish movements, and especially after Iran's parliament rejected the proposed oil concession in October 1947, the Soviet Union conducted what the U.S. embassy called a "war of

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5. James F. Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. 1, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1945–1947* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1996), pp. 48–50, 56–57; and U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Historical Division, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Development of U.S. Policy toward Iran 1946–1978*, 31 March 1980, p. 15 (provided by the OSD/JS Office of Freedom of Information).

6. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 153, "Monthly Labor Report," 26 December 1946, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 13; George V. Allen, "Mission to Iran" (unpub. ms.), in HSTL, George V. Allen Papers, Box 1, chs. 7–8; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 63, "Annual Labor Report (September 1947–September 1948)," 1 October 1948, in NARA, RG 84, UD2737, Box 120; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 16, "Transmittal of Memorandum of Conversation with Labor Undersecretary Regarding the Recent Split in the Iran Tudeh Party," 19 January 1948, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7235, 891.00/1-1948; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 25, "History of Iran-Tudeh Socialist Society," 29 January 1948, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7235, 891.00/1-2948.

nerves” against Iran. Radio Moscow and a clandestine radio station broadcasting from Soviet territory harshly attacked the Iranian government and the United States. Soviet operatives intrigued among Kurdish, Turkoman, and Qashqai tribes. The Soviet embassy denounced the small U.S. military aid mission in Iran and threatened military intervention under the terms of a 1921 Iran-Soviet treaty. These actions prompted U.S. Ambassador John Wiley to recommend that a complaint be lodged in the United Nations (UN) Security Council, though the State Department decided against this. In October 1948, Soviet troops attacked an Iranian border post and briefly crossed into Iranian territory. Additional border tensions flared in the following weeks, and Soviet aircraft repeatedly flew into Iranian airspace. The Soviet Union harbored key leaders and armed supporters of the Azeri and Kurdish separatist movements. Soviet forces maintained large troop concentrations near the Iranian border. U.S. intelligence officials thought an invasion was unlikely, but Ambassador Wiley expressed concern that Soviet troops might invade north-eastern Iran, where conditions were more favorable.

In April 1948, the CIA produced a detailed study of Soviet policy toward Iran. The study claimed that Moscow’s objective was to dominate Iran by expanding Soviet influence there and undermining the government’s authority. The CIA explained that Soviet efforts in pursuit of this objective were being overseen by the Soviet embassy and nine Soviet consulates, which employed the largest foreign diplomatic staff in Iran and included personnel from all Soviet intelligence agencies. Numerous other Soviet agencies operated in Iran at the time and contributed to this effort, including commercial, financial, social, cultural, and propaganda units. These agencies together employed some 1,000 Soviet citizens, and some of the 4,000 additional Soviet citizens living in Iran assisted them. These Soviet forces worked through various Iranian groups and organizations, including the Tudeh; the pro-Tudeh labor federation and unions; remnants of the Azeri and Kurdish separatist movements; the Iran Party, which the report described as the only Communist front organization still operating in Iran; a few Kurdish and other tribal groups; some Iranian Christians; a few members of the previous (Qajar) royal family; and many intellectuals and students. The Soviet Union also hosted a large number of Iranian émigrés and 6,000–8,000 armed Kurdish tribesmen just across the border, providing espionage training to some at a facility in Baku. Despite the size of this apparatus, the report concluded that Soviet officials had achieved little and were not especially popular in Iran.<sup>7</sup>

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7. CIA, “Soviet Activities in Iran,” 7 April 1948, Appendix L of Central Intelligence Group, “Iran, SR-6,” 1 August 1947, in HSTL, President’s Secretary’s Files, Box 219.

The April 1948 report also discussed the activities of the Tudeh Party, as did several studies produced by the Tehran embassy during this period. The CIA report stated that Tudeh membership had peaked at 70,000 in 1945 but fell sharply after the Azeri and Kurdish separatist movements collapsed. The party then grew substantially after the summer of 1947, especially among oil workers in Khuzestan. The embassy believed the Tudeh's resurgence was aimed partly at contesting the 1949 parliamentary elections. Although pro-Tudeh labor unions had fewer members than non-Tudeh unions, their organization, discipline, and leadership were superior. Tudeh members and sympathizers were employed in key positions in Iran's strategically important railroad system. Tudeh and Soviet operatives were working to recruit members of the Iranian armed forces, which had numerous pro-Soviet officers. The Tudeh also was increasing its covert activities. In August 1948, Tudeh leaders brazenly presented twelve demands to Prime Minister Abdolhossein Hazhir, including demands that martial law be lifted, all political prisoners be released, and U.S. military advisers be expelled from Iran.<sup>8</sup>

In February 1949, an assailant with possible ties both to the Tudeh and to Islamist groups tried unsuccessfully to assassinate Iran's monarch, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The Iranian government charged that the assassination attempt was part of a broader Tudeh plot to seize power, though U.S. embassy officials saw no credible evidence of this. The government reinstated martial law, outlawed the Tudeh and its labor federation, arrested some 500 Tudeh members and many non-members, and closed more than 60 newspapers. It then prosecuted and convicted fourteen Tudeh leaders, though many others avoided arrest and went into hiding. These actions thwarted the Tudeh's plans to contest the parliamentary elections. U.S. sources inside the Tudeh reported that the party had been prepared for such a crackdown, with a special committee ready to oversee its operations underground. Within two months, the party had resumed publishing its newspapers and other activities, leading U.S. analysts to worry that the Tudeh would become stronger underground.<sup>9</sup>

In the months after the attempted assassination of the Shah, Iran-Soviet relations remained tense. The Soviet Union closed its consulates in Iran and demanded that Iran close its consulate in Baku. Additional border incidents

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8. *Ibid.*, pp. II-2, II-7, II-8; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 63; Tehran Embassy Telegram 360, 8 April 1948, in *FRUS*, 1948, Vol. V, Pt. 1, p. 134; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 936, 10 August 1948, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7236, 891.00/8-1048.

9. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 42, "The Attempt on the Life of the Shah," 11 February 1949, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7237, 891.001/2-1149; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 93, "The Tudeh Party under Martial Law," 27 March 1949, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 22.

occurred, with Soviet troops killing several Iranian soldiers in May 1949, seizing eleven in August, and killing two more in November. The Soviet government refused to repay debt to Iran incurred during World War II and attacked the Shah with harsh propaganda. As Tudeh agitation increased, Ambassador Wiley told Secretary of State Dean Acheson in March 1949 that there was a one-in-three chance that Soviet forces would seize Azerbaijan by the end of the year. Acheson replied that the State Department shared Wiley's concern but believed the Soviet Union would not risk general war over Iran.<sup>10</sup>

The CIA produced another major study of the Tudeh in July 1949, in conjunction with the other branches of the nascent U.S. intelligence community. This study concluded that the Tudeh remained considerably weaker than during the Azerbaijan crisis, with its membership down from 69,000 in 1945 to some 25,000 in early 1949. Sixty percent of its members were factory or railway workers; half lived in the Tehran area; 500 were army personnel; another 500 were professionals, intellectuals, or students; and only 100–500 were “hard core . . . fanatic Communists.” The Tudeh was, however, the only party in Iran that enjoyed real popular support. It followed the Leninist principle of democratic centralism and was organized as “a hierarchy on the Soviet model.” A “self-perpetuating” mix of Marxist intellectuals and “professional Soviet agents” dominated the party's top bodies and exercised tight control. They coordinated closely with the Soviet embassy and other Soviet offices in Iran. Tudeh members were organized into cells, with some connected through intermediate organizations. The pro-Tudeh labor federation had a similar, parallel organizational structure. The Tudeh also had secret police units, courts, a prison, an espionage organization, and “strong-arm squads.” “Unmistakably under Soviet influence” and heavily dependent on Soviet support, the party seemed committed to “tactics of upheaval,” using its strength in the oil-fields, railway system, and factories to intimidate the government and assist Soviet personnel with strikes, demonstrations, riots, and sabotage. Although the report concluded the Tudeh was unlikely to attain power through peaceful

10. Tehran Embassy Airgram A-113, 1 April 1949, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7236, 891.00/4-149; Tehran Embassy Airgram A-118, 8 April 1949, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7236, 891.00/4-849; Tabriz Consulate Airgram A-34, 25 May 1949, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7236, 891.00/5-2549; Tehran Embassy Telegram 301330Z, 30 September 1949, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7237, 891.00 (W)/9-3049; Tehran Embassy Airgram A-321, 11 November 1949, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7237, 891.00/11-1149; Tehran Embassy Telegram 1490, 14 November 1949, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7237, 891.00/11-1449; Wiley to Acheson, 29 March 1949, in *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. 6, pp. 496–497; Acheson to Wiley, 16 May 1949, in *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. 6, pp. 519–522; and “Items Relating to Greece, Turkey, and Iran . . .,” n.d. (apparently November 1949), in NARA, RG 84, UD2740, Box 1. On Soviet propaganda in Iran, see especially Tehran Embassy Dispatch 20, “Questionnaire on Soviet Propaganda,” 10 January 1950, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 33.

means any time soon, it also warned that the Tudeh could establish “a quisling government under the protection of Soviet arms” that would later expel its moderate members and reveal its true Communist character.<sup>11</sup>

Also in July 1949, the NSC produced its first major policy paper on Iran, NSC 54. This paper declared that Iran was “a continuing objective in the Soviet program of expansion.” Domination over Iran would give the Soviet Union bases from which to subvert or attack neighboring countries, control or threaten vital Middle Eastern oil supplies, and “undermine the will of all Middle Eastern countries to resist Soviet aggression.” NSC 54 stated that a Soviet invasion of Iran was unlikely, though Soviet subversion would continue. It also stated that the Tudeh was not presently capable of seizing power and that the primary objectives of U.S. policy toward Iran were to prevent it from falling under Soviet domination and to strengthen its pro-Western orientation. To achieve these objectives, NSC 54 called for continued U.S. diplomatic support for Iran, a continuation of the limited U.S. military aid programs, limited economic assistance, and efforts to encourage social and economic reform.<sup>12</sup>

## **“The Iranian Crisis,” 1950–1951**

U.S. concern about conditions in Iran grew in late 1949 and early 1950. An end-of-year report by the Tehran embassy warned of the country’s “deplorable economic situation,” the government’s “ineffectiveness, confusion, corruption, and even semi-anarchy,” and the “great disillusionment” among Iranians. The embassy reported in February 1950 that the Tudeh had completed its reorganization since moving underground and was expanding its activities, secretly publishing two new newspapers, books, and other material. Embassy analysts estimated that 80–90 percent of Iranian workers would join a Tudeh union if one could operate openly. In June, the embassy reported that Soviet officials had been intensifying their propaganda attacks on Iran and were spending \$2–2.5 million per year to finance Tudeh activity and

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11. CIA, “The Tudeh Party: Vehicle of Communism in Iran (ORE 23-49),” 18 July 1949, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0000258385>. On the Tudeh’s leadership and organization, see also Department of State, Office of Libraries and Intelligence Acquisition, “Leaders and Members of the Tudeh Party and Certain Other Iranians Engaged in Pro-Soviet Activity,” Report 4940, 21 August 1950, in NARA, RG 59, M1221; and CIA, “Underground Organization of the Tudeh Party,” 21 December 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R009600420001-3.pdf>.

12. NSC, “Report of the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Iran, NSC 54,” 21 July 1949, in *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. VI, pp. 545–551.

the clandestine Radio Azerbaijan, which was calling for revolution. A State Department official traveled to Iran in March and reported that conditions there were “dangerous and explosive.” The U.S. Army chief of staff warned that Iran might become a “second China.” Ambassador Wiley wrote that “we must write Iran off or take effective action” to prevent it from falling into Soviet hands. These concerns culminated in an April 1950 report by Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee to Secretary Acheson, titled “The Iranian Crisis.” This report recommended that the small U.S. aid programs in Iran be expanded and that Ambassador Wiley be replaced with Henry Grady, then serving as U.S. ambassador to Greece, where he oversaw a large reconstruction program intended to prevent a Communist takeover. Acheson soon implemented these recommendations. The CIA also increased its presence in Iran during this period.<sup>13</sup>

Under these conditions, U.S. officials welcomed the appointment of General Ali Razmara as prime minister in June 1950. U.S. embassy personnel had worked closely with Razmara and considered him perhaps the only person capable of leading Iran out of the crisis. They saw him as the leader of a younger generation of “progressive” reformers who could wrest power from the “old guard” and carry out the reforms needed to revitalize Iran’s society and economy, thereby averting a Communist takeover.<sup>14</sup>

Also in June 1950, Soviet-backed North Korean forces suddenly invaded South Korea. U.S. officials were deeply alarmed and in the following weeks undertook a series of studies to assess the prospects for Soviet aggression elsewhere, focusing especially on countries bordering the Soviet Union, including Iran. They concluded that the Soviet Union probably did not want a general war but that this was not a certainty and general war nevertheless might emerge as a result of Soviet or U.S. miscalculation. A Soviet invasion of Iran was possible, though not probable. The Soviet Army had 290,000 troops based in the Caucasus and eight divisions east of the Caspian. Iran’s armed forces could only slow a Soviet invasion and try to hold out in the

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13. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 27, “Iran at the End of 1949,” 23 January 1950, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4106, 788.00/1-2350; Tehran Embassy Telegram 341, 27 February 1950, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 34; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 309, “Communist Trade Union Strength,” 26 May 1950, in NARA, RG 84, UD2737, Box 133; Tehran Embassy Telegram 1206, 27 June 1950, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 33; Rountree to Jernegan, 23 March 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. V, pp. 491–499; McGhee to Acheson, “The Iranian Crisis,” 25 April 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. V, pp. 521–526; and Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The CIA’s TPBEDAMN Operation and the 1953 Coup in Iran,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Fall 2013), pp. 3–32.

14. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 39, “Recent Political Events in Iran,” 15 July 1950, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4106, 788.00/7-1550; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 1168, 21 June 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. V, pp. 560–562.

Zagros Mountains of southwestern Iran until help arrived. However, neither the United States nor any other country could provide more than limited air support and perhaps token ground support, though Britain might try to defend or destroy Iran's oil facilities. The JCS's Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) estimated that Soviet forces could overrun Iran in 45–50 days. U.S. officials believed a Soviet invasion of Iran would “immediately raise the question of a third world war.” They were also concerned that the Soviet government might increase its subversive activity in Iran, perhaps encouraging the Tudeh to seize power or fomenting guerrilla activity in Azerbaijan. But they believed Iran's security forces were capable of containing Soviet subversion.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese troops entered the Korean War in October 1950, further alarming U.S. officials. A November 1950 NIE concluded that “a grave danger of general war exists” and would continue through 1954, after which a Western military buildup would make general war less likely. This NIE stated that the Soviet Union's main interest in Iran was to prevent it from being used as a base for Western military operations against vital oil facilities around Baku, though Moscow also wanted to deny Iranian oil to the West if war emerged. Although Soviet leaders would likely continue their efforts to intimidate and subvert Iran, they probably would not invade unless they were willing to risk general war, the probability of which the NIE's authors could not assess.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these fears, the Soviet Union actually reduced its hostility toward Iran during this period, releasing the Iranian military personnel Soviet forces had seized, signing a bilateral trade agreement, and agreeing to negotiate over a border dispute and Soviet debt to Iran. The embassy and the State Department dismissed these overtures as a ploy to wean Iran away from the West. Razmara reciprocated by closing a U.S. radio relay station, allowing pro-government newspapers to adopt an anti-American tone, and easing repression of the Tudeh. These actions disappointed U.S. officials.<sup>17</sup>

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15. NSC, “Note by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on the Position and Actions of the United States with Respect to Possible Further Soviet Moves in the Light of the Korean Situation, NSC 73/4,” 25 August 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 375–389; McGhee to Acheson, 7 July 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. V, pp. 564–566, McGhee to Matthews, 22 August 1950, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4106; and JIC, “Intelligence Estimate of the Situation in Iran, JIC 522/20,” 15 November 1950, in NARA, RG 218, UD5, Box 57.

16. CIA, “Soviet Capabilities and Intentions, NIE-3,” 15 November 1950, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86B00269R000300040009-5.pdf>.

17. State Department Telegram 305, 17 August 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. V, p. 583; Moscow Embassy Telegram 702, 14 September 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. V, pp. 588–589; State Department Telegram 873, 20 November 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. V, pp. 615–616; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 679, “The Position of the Soviets in Iran,” 23 February 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 1–14.

Before Razmara took office, a major dispute had emerged over a 1933 agreement under which the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) was producing and marketing Iran's oil. Most Iranian political factions favored renegotiation of this agreement, and many demanded outright nationalization of the oil industry. A coalition known as the National Front, headed by a prominent member of parliament, Mohammed Mossadegh, had emerged as the leading advocate of nationalization. U.S. embassy analysts believed Iran needed a substantial increase in oil revenue to finance the reforms Razmara had proposed and thus prevent a Communist takeover. Consequently, they were critical of the AIOC and the British government for resisting Iranian demands, seeing them as overly focused on the company's profits and insufficiently concerned about the Communist threat. Embassy officials also criticized the National Front, however, recognizing that it was democratic but describing it as "demagogic," "non-constructive," and potentially willing to align with the Tudeh. They described Mossadegh as "fanatically nationalistic" but acknowledged that he was widely respected and had played a key role in blocking the Soviet oil concession in 1947.<sup>18</sup>

The oil dispute became increasingly bitter and came to dominate Iranian politics during this period. Razmara was forced to withdraw legislation proposing modest revisions in the agreement in December 1950. The AIOC then refused to make significant additional concessions, increasing pressure for nationalization. Razmara, who opposed nationalization, was assassinated by a radical Islamist in March 1951.

The assassination was a setback for U.S. efforts to combat Communist influence in Iran. U.S. analysts undertook several new studies in the following weeks. A CIA Special Estimate concluded that Iran had become more unstable, though its security forces were still capable of maintaining order. However, British recalcitrance or other unpredictable developments could increase unrest, perhaps leading to a Tudeh coup attempt or even a Soviet invasion. Kermit Roosevelt, the head of CIA operations in the Middle East, criticized the study as too complacent and argued that British recalcitrance was not to blame and that the Tudeh might already be capable of seizing

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18. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 212, "Iran at the End of Summer, 1950," 25 September 1950, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4106, 788.00/9-2550; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 311, "Evaluation of the Political Importance of the National Front," 27 May 1950, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4106, 788.00/5-2750. On the oil dispute, see Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992); and Mary Ann Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood: The United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

power. CIA Deputy Director Allen Dulles agreed with Roosevelt and stated that Iran might be “lost to the West” within twelve months. An NIE in early April warned that poor socioeconomic conditions and the ruling elite’s opposition to reform made Iran vulnerable to Soviet subversion, though the Tudeh had not yet effectively penetrated the armed forces or obtained the matériel necessary for a coup. If present trends continued, Soviet subversion would make Iran “a second Czechoslovakia.” The NIE also stated that a satisfactory resolution of the oil dispute was a prerequisite to improving Iran’s relations with the West.<sup>19</sup>

Also in this period, the NSC completed a new policy paper on Iran, NSC 107, reiterating the main points made in NSC 54, including the idea that a Soviet invasion was unlikely. However, if the Soviet Union did invade, U.S. military commitments in Korea and elsewhere meant that Britain would be responsible for supporting Iran militarily. NSC 107 directed that the United States should continue or expand its aid programs in Iran, press Britain to resolve the oil dispute, prepare to undertake “special political operations” (i.e., covert operations) to counter the Communist threat, and, in conjunction with Britain, prepare to support a pro-Western rump government in the event of a Communist seizure of power.<sup>20</sup>

Unrest grew sharply in Iran after Razmara’s assassination, fueled by the passions surrounding the oil dispute. Nationalists, Islamists, and Tudeh front organizations staged large demonstrations. The Tudeh criticized a 15 March vote by parliament to nationalize oil facilities throughout the country, which would preclude a Soviet oil concession in the north. Oil workers began a general strike on 22 March that lasted until late April, instigated partly by Tudeh agitators. Eight Iranians and three British employees of the AIOC were killed in mid-April. U.S. officials were deeply concerned that Britain might invade Khuzestan to protect British citizens, creating a pretext for Soviet intervention under the 1921 treaty. They warned British officials about this and asked them not to foment tribal unrest or try to impose a pro-British prime minister. Labor unrest also flared in Isfahan, where police killed several demon-

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19. CIA, “The Current Crisis in Iran, SE-3,” 16 March 1951, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0000008881>; Kermit Roosevelt, “Comments on NIE Paper (The Current Crisis in Iran),” 15 March 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R01012A000200050010-5.pdf>; Dulles to Smith, 28 March 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 46–47; and CIA, “Iran’s Position in the East-West Conflict, NIE-6,” 5 April 1951, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0000010478>.

20. NSC, “Report of the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Iran, NSC 54.”

strators. U.S. embassy officials were alarmed about the Tudeh's role in this unrest. McGhee told Acheson the situation was "explosive," the CIA called it "extremely critical," and an NIE written in this period declared Iran the Mideast country most vulnerable to Soviet aggression.<sup>21</sup>

On 26 April, the Iranian parliament's oil committee, led by Mossadegh, approved a plan to nationalize the oil industry. This prompted Razmara's successor, Hossein Ala, to resign. Parliament then nominated Mossadegh to become prime minister and unanimously approved the nationalization bill. The Shah reluctantly signed both measures in the following days.

### **Mossadegh's First Government, May 1951–July 1952**

The initial U.S. reaction to Mossadegh's appointment was mixed. A dispatch from the Tehran embassy declared he was popular and perhaps the only Iranian capable of resolving the oil dispute without being accused of treason. The dispatch lauded his proposed reforms, seeing them as necessary to reduce unrest and counter the appeal of Communism, and it argued that U.S. support for Mossadegh might help him resolve the oil dispute and avoid coming under the domination of "radical leftist elements" in the National Front. Ambassador Grady largely shared this assessment, though he believed Mossadegh was naive about the oil dispute. However, the embassy's chief political officer wrote that Mossadegh was a "dramatic demagogue . . . without particular wisdom or background for government" and doubted his popularity. The CIA station chief in Tehran stated that the new prime minister seemed favorable to the United States and recommended supporting him as a bulwark against the Tudeh. The State Department, however, worried that Mossadegh's neutralist tendencies might lead him to cancel the U.S. military aid program, cut the army's budget, and legalize the Tudeh, concerns later echoed by a CIA Special Estimate that called Mossadegh "an impractical visionary and a poor administrator," though also "an astute politician [who] has strong popular support."

21. Tehran Embassy Airgram 863, "Review of Communist Activity in Iran during March and April 1951," 4 May 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/5-451; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 835, "The Strike in the AIOC Oil Concession Area," 17 May 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 5498, 888.062/5-1751; McGhee to Acheson, "United States Action in Relation to the Iranian Crisis," 17 April 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4107, 788.00/4-1751; CIA, "Implications of the Iranian Situation," 18 April 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00937A000100010040-6.pdf>; and CIA, "Key Problems Affecting U.S. Efforts to Strengthen the Near East, NIE-26," 25 April 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R01012A000600030001-0.pdf>.

The CIA report further warned that the Tudeh and the Soviet Union could easily exploit the situation.<sup>22</sup>

U.S. analysts undertook several more-detailed assessments in June and July. The embassy produced an analysis of Tudeh activity in the wake of Mossadegh's appointment, concluding that the party had not been able to influence the new government or exploit the oil crisis. Although Mossadegh had released some Tudeh leaders from prison and allowed Tudeh front organizations to hold rallies that drew 10,000–20,000 participants, he had had other Tudeh members arrested, refused to legalize the party, and rejected other Tudeh demands. The Tudeh opposed the main elements of Mossadegh's program, including his oil nationalization plan, which precluded a Soviet oil concession. This embassy study also applauded the establishment of the staunchly anti-Communist Toilers Party and Pan-Iranist Party, which supported Mossadegh.<sup>23</sup>

In Washington, a State Department study argued that a breakdown of the current oil negotiations and an AIOC decision to halt oil production would create "an extremely grave situation" that might push Iran toward the Soviet Union and facilitate a Tudeh coup. The CIA warned that Iran might come under Communist domination within a few months. The NSC undertook a reassessment of the policy guidelines provided in NSC 107. A new policy paper, NSC 107/2, reiterated Iran's strategic importance and declared "the loss of Iran to the free world is a distinct possibility." Britain remained responsible for supporting Iran militarily in the event of a Soviet invasion, though this decision should be kept under review, the paper stated. However, the United States should oppose British military intervention in Iran under other circumstances, except for temporary operations undertaken solely to evacuate endangered British citizens. NSC 107/2 also stated that the United States should expand its aid programs in Iran, encourage reform, continue its efforts to settle the oil dispute, undertake covert operations to counter the Communist threat, and continue preparations, in conjunction with Britain, to support a pro-Western rump government in the event of a Communist takeover. Furthermore, the United States should support the Shah "as the only present

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22. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 899, "Estimate of the Political Strength of the Mosaddeq Government," 4 May 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 80–85; Henry Grady, "What Went Wrong in Iran?" *The Saturday Evening Post*, 5 January 1952, pp. 19–23; Tehran CIA Station Telegram 39208, 6 May 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 85–87; State Department Telegram 2067, 10 May 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 50–51; and CIA, "Current Developments in Iran, SE-6," 22 May 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 91–96.

23. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1056, "Review of Communist Activity in Iran during May 1951," 7 June 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/6-751.

source of continuity of leadership” in Iran. President Harry S. Truman approved NSC 107/2 on 28 June.<sup>24</sup>

During the summer and fall of 1951, U.S. officials realized that the situation was not as dire as these analyses had suggested. Negotiations over the oil dispute continued throughout this period, keeping open the possibility that the dispute would end and Iran’s economic and political problems therefore would ease. Britain began a blockade of Iranian oil exports and other punitive measures in the summer of 1951, and most international oil companies supported the blockade. These measures sharply reduced Iran’s export earnings and government revenue, but the shortfalls were made up partly with increased non-oil exports, restrictions on non-essential imports, bartering, and foreign exchange and gold reserves. Britain’s actions therefore did not severely damage Iran’s economy in this period. Britain threatened to invade Khuzestan throughout the summer of 1951 but finally decided against this in late September, due mainly to U.S. opposition. British officials worked tirelessly to undermine Mossadegh and persuade the shah to dismiss him, but these efforts were unsuccessful. Mossadegh remained quite popular at the end of the year, due mainly to his strong stance on the oil dispute.<sup>25</sup>

The Tudeh suffered setbacks during this period. In July, the Toilers Party brutally attacked demonstrations organized by a Tudeh front organization to protest a visit by U.S. envoy Averell Harriman, killing several Tudeh supporters and injuring hundreds. The police did little to stop the attacks. The Toilers and other anti-Communist groups thereafter remained a potent source of opposition to the Tudeh, regularly attacking its rallies and vandalizing its facilities. The CIA supported some of these attacks and carried out “black” operations in which provocateurs posing as Tudeh members fomented unrest, sometimes creating an exaggerated impression of Tudeh activity. In August, the CIA reported that the government had become “markedly” more hostile toward the Tudeh, though Mossadegh was reluctant to use force against it. Tudeh newspapers regularly criticized him, especially over signs of compromise with Britain. The Tehran embassy reported that Tudeh activity remained limited in the fall of 1951 as a result of the vigilance of the security forces,

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24. Unattributed memorandum, “United States Position in Iranian Oil Controversy,” 12 June 1951, in NARA, RG 59, A1-1433, Box 45; CIA, “Iranian Developments,” 6 July 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A000100020054-2.pdf>; and NSC, “Report of the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Iran, NSC 54.

25. U.S. Department of State, Office of Intelligence Research, “Current Outlook in Iran, NIE-46,” 25 September 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R01012A001400010006-8.pdf>; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 989, “Annual Economic Report for 1951,” 8 March 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 5490, 888.00/3-852; and Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle*, chs. 10, 15.

attacks by anti-Communist groups, and the popularity of the oil nationalization movement.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these setbacks, the Tudeh remained powerful. In October, the embassy estimated that the party had as many as 35,000 members, with considerable organizing capacity and some influence in the army and police. In November, the U.S. State Department's Office of Intelligence Research (OIR) concluded that Tudeh influence was growing. A September 1951 CIA Special Estimate, reflecting the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community, reiterated that a collapse of the oil negotiations might trigger a Tudeh coup, though a Soviet invasion remained unlikely. However, the CIA's Office of National Estimates (ONE) stated there was no evidence of Tudeh preparations for paramilitary activity. An October 1951 JCS memorandum, designated NSC 117, warned that dire consequences would ensue if Iran fell under Soviet domination and concluded that Iran's Western orientation "transcend[s] in importance the desirability of supporting British oil interests" there.<sup>27</sup>

In late 1951 the Tudeh began to prepare for parliamentary elections, which were to begin in December and continue for many months. CIA sources inside the Tudeh reported that the party and its front organizations had developed an elaborate apparatus to contest the elections and had instructed their members to focus exclusively on this task. U.S. analysts worried that Tudeh-affiliated candidates might win as many as twenty of the 136 seats in parliament. The State Department believed the Tudeh was pursuing a united-front strategy, hoping to win enough seats to join a coalition government and then gradually take over, as had happened in Czechoslovakia in

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26. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 396, "Background and Aftermath of July 15 Riot," 20 September 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4108, 788.00/9-2051; Gasiorowski, "The CIA's TPBEDAMN Operation"; CIA, "Change in Attitude of the Iranian Government toward the Tudeh Party," 13 August 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R008300590012-7.pdf>; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 388, "Communist Propaganda vis-à-vis the Mosaddeq Government," 20 September 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/9-2051; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 430, "Communist Activities, September 1951," 26 September 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/9-2651; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 562, "Recent Tudeh Party Activities," 26 October 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/10-2651; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 753, "Communist Activity in Iran, December 15-28," 28 December 1951, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/12-2851.

27. Tehran Embassy Telegram 1478, 22 October 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, pp. 236-240; OIR, "Increasing Communist Threat in Iran, Intelligence Report 5716," 23 November 1951, in NARA, RG 59, 448, Box 4; CIA, "Probable Developments in the World Situation through Mid-1953, SE-13," 24 September 1951, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0000119697>; ONE, "The Tudeh Problem in U.S. Intelligence," n.d., in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, pp. 165-168; and NSC, "The Anglo-Iranian Problem, NSC 117," 17 October 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, pp. 220-222.

February 1948. However, by February 1952 the National Front's "unexpected forcefulness" in manipulating the elections had begun to harm Tudeh candidates, who failed to win a single seat. The Tudeh's hope of seizing power in this manner thus was thwarted. The National Front, meanwhile, did well in the elections, demonstrating its continuing popularity and ensuring that Mossadegh would remain prime minister.<sup>28</sup>

With the election outcome fairly clear, the CIA completed a new NIE in early February. This study concluded that Mossadegh and the National Front remained popular and would likely stay in power for some time. The conservative opposition was weak and divided, and the Shah was unwilling to replace Mossadegh as long as he remained popular. Tudeh influence had grown considerably under Mossadegh, especially among students, workers, and civil servants. The Tudeh had established secret networks in the education and justice ministries, but it had not significantly penetrated the armed forces or security-related ministries and had not created armed paramilitary units. It had established several new front organizations, and Communist labor activity was growing rapidly. However, another CIA analysis concluded that the security forces were still capable of preventing a Tudeh coup. The NIE also stated that Britain's economic blockade had not yet had noticeable effects but would increasingly undermine Iran's economy after the summer of 1952. This would cause growing unrest, divisions within the National Front, declining central government authority, and increased support for the Tudeh, forcing Mossadegh or a successor to use authoritarian measures. The NIE argued that, although a Tudeh coup was not imminent, the possibility of one would grow if the government did not adopt authoritarian measures. U.S. State Department officials worried that the oil crisis might eventually lead Mossadegh to sell oil to the Soviet Union or seek Soviet assistance.<sup>29</sup>

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28. CIA, "Organization of the Tudeh Party for Elections," 9 January 1952, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R010000020013-8.pdf>; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 68, "Recent Communist Activity in Iran"; State Department Telegram 1523, 25 January 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/1-2552; Tehran Embassy Telegram 2943, 5 February 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/2-552; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 928, "Communist Activities in Iran February 5-15, 1952," 18 February 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/2-1852; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 990, "Communist Activities in Iran February 15-March 5, 1952," 10 March 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/3-1052. On the united-front strategy, see Thomas T. Hammond, "The History of Communist Takeovers," in Thomas T. Hammond, ed., *The Anatomy of Communist Takeovers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 1-45.

29. CIA, "Probable Developments in Iran in 1952 in the Absence of an Oil Settlement, NIE-46," 4 February 1952, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0000010477>; CIA, "Tudeh Front Organizations," 11 February 1952, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R010200130006-2.pdf>; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1203, "Annual Labor Report—1951," 10 May 1952, in

In subsequent months, the Tehran embassy learned that the Tudeh had, in fact, significantly penetrated the armed forces. In March, the embassy reported that the air force had discovered a Tudeh cell within its ranks, arresting 24 servicemen. The embassy also learned that the security forces had found arms and dynamite hidden in the homes of Tudeh members in Khuzestan. In June, the embassy reported that the army had identified 260 Tudeh members among its officers and was purging them.<sup>30</sup>

Mossadegh was beset by opposition throughout the spring of 1952. The Tudeh continued to agitate, holding frequent rallies and producing a steady stream of propaganda attacking the oil negotiations and the West. Pan-Iranists attacked a Tudeh rally in late March, killing five and leading the government to declare martial law. The U.S. embassy reported that Iran's fiscal and trade problems were growing and that the number of beggars in Tehran had increased noticeably, though the economy was not yet on the verge of collapse. Mossadegh's conservative opponents, backed by Britain, worked tirelessly against him, trying to build opposition in parliament and persuade the shah to dismiss him. Britain's main candidate to replace Mossadegh was now the venerable Ahmad Qavam, who had little popular support. Conservatives in parliament managed to elect a staunch Mossadegh opponent as speaker but were unable to muster the votes necessary to oust Mossadegh. Faced with strong parliamentary opposition, Mossadegh demanded plenary powers in early July. He asked the Shah to expand the powers of the minister of war, a position he had recently assumed. When the Shah objected, Mossadegh abruptly resigned.<sup>31</sup>

## The July 1952 Protests and Their Aftermath

Parliament nominated Qavam to succeed Mossadegh, and the shah quickly confirmed him. Qavam then announced he would seek an oil agreement with Britain and asked the shah for permission to dissolve parliament. The

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NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 5497, 888.06/5-1052; CIA, "The Tudeh Party," 7 February 1952, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R010400350001-1.pdf>; and State Department Telegram 1624, 7 February 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. X, pp. 346–347. The anti-Communist SOMKA Party also emerged during this period. See Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1169, "The National Socialist Party of Iran," 3 May 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4108, 788.00/5-352.

30. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 990; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1310, "Certain Communist Activities, April–June 1952," 10 June 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4114, 788.001/6-1052.

31. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 203, "Political Trends between March, 1952 and the Fall of the First Mosaddeq Government," 15 September 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4109, 788.00/9-1552.

National Front organized protests in response. Massive rallies and a general strike occurred in Tehran and other cities on 20–21 July, demonstrating the National Front's continuing popularity. The Tudeh called for a united front and organized large, disciplined crowds that joined National Front protesters. The U.S. embassy reported that there was a "tacit understanding" but not a formal working arrangement between the National Front and the Tudeh in staging these protests, though it later cautioned that the Tudeh's role should not be overestimated. The security forces opened fire on the crowds, killing at least 69 people and injuring hundreds. Qavam quickly resigned, and parliament reinstated Mossadegh. These events were a bitter defeat for Mossadegh's conservative opponents and their British backers and a major victory for both Mossadegh and the Tudeh.<sup>32</sup>

Mossadegh capitalized on his victory by retaining the war ministry and persuading parliament to grant him plenary powers. The conservative speaker of parliament resigned and was replaced by Ayatollah Abolqassem Kashani, an Islamist demagogue and National Front leader who had played a key role in organizing the protests. However, Kashani and other prominent figures soon quarreled with Mossadegh over his plenary powers and cabinet choices and the continuation of martial law, creating tension that grew in the following months. The Tudeh demanded legalization and called for a united front, but the National Front rejected these demands. The Tudeh then staged a series of strikes and repeatedly clashed with anti-Communist groups after martial law was suspended in mid-August, leading Mossadegh to reinstate it. Fanned by Tudeh propaganda, anti-American sentiment grew in this period over suspicions that the United States had backed Qavam and was siding with Britain in the oil dispute. The Soviet Union kept a low profile, content to see its Western adversaries foundering.<sup>33</sup>

The Tehran embassy sent a series of alarming reports to Washington about these events. The Tudeh, the embassy reported, had gained considerable prestige for its role in the protests and was trying to capitalize on this; it continued to seek a united front but also was trying to lure away National Front supporters. The embassy noted that Mossadegh's new ministers of

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32. Tehran Embassy Telegram 448, 29 July 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 29; Tehran Embassy Telegram 353, 23 July 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 29; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 126, "The Political Forces Bearing on the Recent Iranian Crisis," 14 August 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 29.

33. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 514, "Political Trends from Mosadeq's Return to Power to the Effective Break in Relations with Great Britain," 3 January 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 53; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 374, 24 July 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 29; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 126.

justice and health had close ties to the Tudeh and the Soviet Union, facilitating Tudeh penetration of these ministries. U.S. Ambassador Loy Henderson argued that the National Front now was the only force capable of challenging the Tudeh, so the United States should strengthen Mossadegh's government by giving it economic aid and trying again to resolve the oil dispute. The State Department was deeply alarmed by these reports, warning that "the loss of Iran to the free world is a distinct possibility" and supporting Henderson's recommendations. President Truman soon approved a small aid package and a new oil initiative.<sup>34</sup>

Tension grew among National Front leaders during this period. In early August, the embassy warned that Kashani was trying to gain control over the National Front and might establish an alliance with the Tudeh. In late September, it reported that many opportunists were gravitating toward Kashani and warned that a Kashani-led government would be hostile toward the West and might tolerate the Tudeh. The embassy also reported rumors that Kashani had reached various agreements with the Tudeh. The pro-Mossadegh Third Force broke away from the Toilers Party, whose leader, Mozaffar Baqai, now began to oppose Mossadegh. More ominously, a retired general, Fazlollah Zahedi, aligned himself with Kashani and other National Front dissidents and began plotting with the British. Tudeh newspapers published dire warnings of a coup plot in September. The Mossadegh government retaliated in mid-October by issuing arrest warrants for several Zahedi associates and breaking diplomatic relations with Britain. Zahedi avoided arrest only through parliamentary immunity.<sup>35</sup>

These events led U.S. analysts to undertake several new studies. A CIA Special Estimate, reflecting the consensus of the U.S. intelligence community, concluded in mid-October that Mossadegh probably would survive in

34. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 178, "Recent Tudeh Party Public Policies," 4 September 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2737, Box 129; Tehran Embassy Telegram 636, 12 August 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 315–316; Tehran Embassy Telegram 861, 26 August 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4109, 788.00/8-2652; Tehran Embassy Telegram 416, 27 July 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 29; Tehran Embassy Telegram 514, 3 August 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 310–314; "Progress Report Dated 29 July 1952 on NSC 107/2 . . .," 29 July 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4109, 788.00/7-2952; and Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, 31 July 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, p. 428.

35. Tehran Embassy Telegram 624, 11 August 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 28; Tehran Embassy Telegram 1282, 26 September 1952, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 28; Tehran Embassy Telegram 1309, 28 September 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 357–358; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1049, "The Workers Parties of Iran," 5 June 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 55; Tehran Embassy Telegram 1246, 23 September 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4109, 788.00/9-2352; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 1515, 13 October 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4109, 788.00/10-1352.

office for at least six more months. The British blockade had not yet seriously damaged Iran's economy, though the government's finances were precarious. The Tudeh had grown stronger but "almost certainly" remained incapable of seizing power. Instead, Kashani represented the greatest immediate threat to Mossadegh, though he was weaker and therefore probably would not try to oust Mossadegh. The CIA study stated that Kashani was wary of the Tudeh and probably would not seek its help, though the Tudeh probably would assist him if his supporters clashed with Mossadegh's. The study then argued that a Kashani-led government would be worse for Western interests than the current government, perhaps eventually enabling the Tudeh to seize power. A military coup was unlikely because Mossadegh had purged officers who opposed him and because none of the people now plotting against him—presumably including Zahedi—had the prestige or influence necessary to gain the army's support. Iran's armed forces seemed capable of coping with any domestic disturbance. The Shah was weak and had become "a useful tool for Mosaddeq."<sup>36</sup>

The Tehran embassy produced a detailed study of the Tudeh in late October, examining its organizational structure, auxiliaries, front organizations, propaganda apparatus, leadership, membership, and tactics. This study estimated that the Tudeh had 6,000–8,000 members in the Tehran area and 15,000–20,000 nationwide, with two to three times that many "sympathizers and fellow travelers." This estimate was somewhat smaller than the 25,000 reported in the July 1949 CIA study and much smaller than the embassy's October 1951 estimate of up to 35,000. The Tudeh had "highly penetrated" the education ministry and had infiltrated several other ministries. The secret Tudeh network in the army now comprised an estimated 162 junior officers and 260 non-commissioned officers, with an additional 111 Tudeh members in air force training schools. The military was purging these Tudeh personnel, but the party presumably was replacing them. In addition, the embassy's labor attaché reported that pro-Tudeh union strength was growing. The embassy believed the party wanted to avoid or delay using force in its effort to seize power, continuing with its united-front strategy. A subsequent study by the embassy detailed the Tudeh's new campaign against the United States and the Iranian government's recent crackdown on the party, including the temporary closure of all Tudeh newspapers.<sup>37</sup>

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36. CIA, "Prospects for Survival of Mosaddeq Regime in Iran, SE-33," 14 October 1952, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0000010612>.

37. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 301, "Transmitting Study of the Tudeh Party Today," 20 October 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4109, 788.00/10-2052; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 228, "Recent Developments in the Iranian Labor Movement," 22 September 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 5497,

The CIA produced another NIE on Iran in mid-November that echoed the conclusions of the recent Special Estimate but extended them through the end of 1953, concluding that Mossadegh or another National Front leader would likely remain in power until then. Kashani remained Mossadegh's strongest opponent and most likely successor but probably would not try to oust him. Mossadegh or a successor would increasingly have to use force to remain in power. The Tudeh would likely grow in strength but remain too weak to seize power in 1953. The Soviet Union was unlikely to use military force against Iran. Mossadegh almost certainly wanted to maintain U.S. support. Iran's security forces were capable of maintaining order and would likely remain loyal to the incumbent government. The economy still had not been severely affected by the British blockade. The government's finances remained precarious, but it still had ways to cover the budget deficit. Inflation probably would grow, but economic conditions were not likely to bring down the government in 1953. The oil dispute would likely remain unresolved, but Iran might be able to sell substantial quantities of oil, despite the British blockade, if the United States did not object. If Iran could not sell much oil, its economic and political problems probably would grow after 1953, perhaps producing a breakdown of authority and spurring the Tudeh to seize power. Ambassador Henderson called this NIE "admirable" but added that the situation remained dangerous. He recommended increased U.S. aid to Iran. The counselor at the Tehran embassy questioned the NIE's conclusion that a National Front government probably would last through 1953.<sup>38</sup>

The NSC at around this same time produced a new policy paper on Iran, NSC 136/1, which was approved by President Truman on 20 November. Citing the new NIE, NSC 136/1 stated that "communist forces will probably not gain control of the Iranian government during 1953." Nevertheless, there were "very great elements of instability" in Iran and, if present trends continued, "Iran could be effectively lost to the free world." Consequently, "the major United States policy objective with respect to Iran [was] to prevent the country from coming under communist control." To achieve this objective, NSC 136/1 called for the continuation or expansion of U.S. aid to Iran,

888.06/9-2252; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 343, "Recent Tudeh Party Activities," 1 November 1952, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4109, 788.00/11-152.

38. CIA, "Probable Developments in Iran through 1953, NIE-75," 13 November 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, pp. 407-416; NSC, "De-briefing of Ambassador Henderson," 11 December 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, pp. 426-429; and Mattison to Richards, 18 December 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Iran, 1951-1954, pp. 429-431. Another NIE stated that the Soviet Union's strongest political warfare capabilities in the Mideast at this time were in Iran. See CIA, "Soviet Bloc Capabilities through Mid-1954, NIE-64 (PART I)/1," 15 December 1952, p. 6, in NARA, RG 59, 1373, Box 3.

encouragement of reform, further efforts to settle the oil dispute, and continued covert operations, as well as preparations to support a non-Communist rump government in the event of a Communist seizure of power. NSC 136/1, unlike its predecessor, did not mention British responsibility for supporting Iran militarily in the event of a Soviet invasion, though it also did not state that this was a U.S. responsibility. Nor did it call for U.S. efforts to support the Shah.<sup>39</sup>

U.S. analysts produced several additional documents in early January 1953, providing up-to-date analyses for the incoming Eisenhower administration. The State Department's OIR produced a detailed survey of the Tudeh which estimated that the Party had 8,000 members in Tehran and 20,000–35,000 nationwide. These figures were higher than those given in the embassy's October 1952 study but similar to those in the July 1949 CIA study and the embassy's October 1951 estimate, implying that Tudeh membership had not grown in recent years. The OIR study reported estimates of as many as 2,210 Tudeh members in the armed forces, though it did not indicate how many were officers or what positions they held and did not express particular alarm about this. There was no indication that the Tudeh had a paramilitary organization or substantial weapons and ammunition. Consequently, although the Tudeh could mobilize large crowds for rallies and demonstrations, it was not capable of seizing power forcibly. Rather, it would aim to seize power through constitutional means. But only 6 of the 80 current members of parliament had Communist connections, and no more than 10 of Iran's top 200 state officials were "potentially sympathetic" to Communism, and not a single one was a Tudeh member. The Tudeh's main competitor was the National Front, whose ability to come to power was inversely proportional to the government's success in carrying out socioeconomic and political reforms. The National Front had been encouraging the Pan-Iranists and other anti-Communist groups to attack the Tudeh, and the police were collaborating with these groups.<sup>40</sup>

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39. NSC, "United States Policy Regarding the Present Situation in Iran, NSC 136/1," 20 November 1952, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB126/iran521120.pdf>. For an overview of U.S. preparations in the ensuing months for a possible Communist seizure of power, see NSC, "First Progress Report on Paragraph 5-a of NSC 136/1 'U.S. Policy Regarding the Present Situation in Iran,'" 20 March 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 498–505.

40. OIR, "Communism in the Free World: Capabilities of the Communist Party, Iran, IR-6165.12," January 1953, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86b00269r000800080001-4>. Neither this report nor any of the others cited here mention major divisions within the Tudeh, as discussed in Maziar Behrooz, "The 1953 Coup in Iran and the Legacy of the Tudeh," in Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), p. 181.

The CIA updated its November 1952 NIE in early January. The new study reiterated all of its predecessor's major conclusions: the National Front was likely to remain in power through 1953; the Tudeh would likely remain too weak to seize power in 1953; the Soviet Union was unlikely to intervene directly; the oil dispute would probably continue, but Iran might be able to sell substantial amounts of oil if the United States did not object; and economic and political problems would probably grow if Iran could not sell much oil, perhaps triggering a Tudeh takeover after 1953. An OIR analysis drew essentially the same conclusions. A CIA memorandum from late February reiterated that Mossadegh was likely to remain in power through 1953 and stated that the updated NIE did not need to be revised further. A study by the Tehran embassy in mid-January declared that Iran's economy was doing reasonably well, mainly because of central bank loans and an excellent harvest. The government was implementing much-needed reforms. However, inflation was growing and would likely increase further without an oil settlement. Finally, the CIA produced another NIE in mid-January concluding that Iran was the only Middle Eastern country in which the local Communist Party had much chance of seizing power, the only such country that felt immediately threatened by the Soviet Union, and the only one in which a breakdown of authority might soon occur.<sup>41</sup>

## The Eisenhower Era

The U.S. decision to overthrow Mossadegh occurred over a period of roughly nine months. The Truman administration rejected a British suggestion in November 1952 that the two countries jointly carry out a coup, overruling those in the administration who favored such a step. Support for a coup grew considerably in Washington after Dwight Eisenhower took office in January 1953. Both John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles, who became secretary of state and CIA director, respectively, in the Eisenhower administration, favored a coup and discussed the idea before Eisenhower's inauguration, as did other U.S. officials. U.S. and British policymakers met in mid-February 1953 and

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41. CIA, *Probable Developments in Iran through 1953*, NIE-75/1, 9 January 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 432–441; Department of State, OIR, *Iran's Political and Economic Prospects through 1953*, No. 6126, 9 January 1953, in NARA, RG 59, M1221; CIA, "Developments in Iran," 27 February 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 459–460; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 555, "Quarterly Economic and Financial Review, Iran, Fourth Quarter, 1952," 17 January 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDE, Box 5490, 888.00/1-1753; and CIA, *Conditions and Trends in the Middle East Affecting U.S. Security*, NIE-73, 15 January 1953, [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000119704.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000119704.pdf).

affirmed their interest in a coup. At an NSC meeting on 4 March, President Eisenhower speculated about breaking with Britain and granting a large loan to Iran, implying that he did not yet favor a coup. However, the NSC, with Eisenhower presiding, decided a week later not to break with Britain or offer a loan to Iran, suggesting that Eisenhower had turned against Mossadegh after conferring with key aides.

In any case, sometime in March the CIA was authorized to begin planning a coup. The agency sent \$1 million to its station chief in Teheran on 4 April to “bring about the fall of Mossadegh.” Eisenhower gave final approval for the coup on 11 July, though it could have been stopped at any time before it actually occurred on 19 August. Thus, even though the U.S. decision to overthrow Mossadegh occurred in a series of steps from late 1952 through mid-August 1953, the most crucial steps seem to have been taken in March 1953. Consequently, U.S. perceptions of the Communist threat in Iran at this time are especially important for our understanding of the origins of the coup.<sup>42</sup>

In January 1953, Mossadegh asked parliament to renew his plenary powers. Although parliament voted overwhelmingly to do so, the move angered Kashani and other prominent figures and spurred further defections from the National Front. Additional disputes then emerged, culminating in a series of demands by Mossadegh in late February to reduce the Shah’s powers. To pressure Mossadegh, the Shah threatened to leave the country. Kashani, Zahedi, and other opponents of Mossadegh organized raucous demonstrations on 28 February that sharply criticized the prime minister and implored the Shah to remain in Iran. Tudeh demonstrators demanded that the Shah be hanged and clashed with anti-Communist groups. Mossadegh declared that Ambassador Henderson was behind the Shah’s threat to leave the country and was interfering in Iran’s affairs. The Shah remained in Iran, and the dispute gradually abated, but deep divisions now clearly existed between Mossadegh and his opponents.<sup>43</sup>

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42. Malcolm Byrne and Mark J. Gasiorowski, “1953 Iran Coup: New U.S. Documents Confirm British Approached U.S. in Late 1952 about Ousting Mossadegh,” 8 August 2017, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/iran/2017-08-08/1953-iran-coup-new-us-documents-confirm-british-approached-us-late>; and Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’État against Mosaddeq,” in Gasiorowski and Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup*, pp. 227–232. For a good account of the broader motivations of the Eisenhower administration, see Malcolm Byrne, “The Road to Intervention: Factors Influencing U.S. Policy toward Iran, 1945–1953,” in Gasiorowski and Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup*, pp. 71–89.

43. Fakhreddin Azimi, *Iran: The Crisis of Democracy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989), pp. 311–319; Tehran Embassy Telegram 3476, 1 March 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 53; and Tehran Embassy telegram 3502, 2 March 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/3-253.

U.S. officials were alarmed by these events. Even before the crisis peaked, the Tehran embassy reported that Mossadegh's coalition was disintegrating, his mental stability was declining, and his government might soon collapse. Henderson described the situation as "exceedingly grave" and said the monarchy was in "grave danger." On 2 March, the embassy reported that Tudeh leaders were trying to align their party with Mossadegh and were again calling for a united front. Mossadegh rebuffed these demands, and the security forces dispersed Tudeh demonstrations while allowing pro-Mossadegh demonstrations to proceed. Nevertheless, the State Department told the embassy it believed Mossadegh could no longer disassociate himself from the Tudeh and that the possibility of a Communist takeover had "greatly increased." Henderson replied that he agreed with this appraisal, emphasizing that although there was no evidence yet that Mossadegh was colluding with the Tudeh, he was capable of doing so if necessary to retain power. On 6 March, the embassy reported that Mossadegh was purging disloyal officers from the armed forces, reducing the possibility of a coup. Henderson stated that the Shah probably would oppose a coup and that an unsuccessful coup might bring down the current dynasty and strengthen anti-Western forces.<sup>44</sup>

The CIA produced a series of estimates of the situation in early March. The first, dated 1 March, stated that the Tudeh was working to increase tension "in every possible way" and that a Communist takeover was becoming increasingly likely. The second, dated 3 March, stressed the dire consequences of a Communist takeover. Another estimate that same day stated that the Tudeh was not yet ready to seize power and was seeking a united front with pro-Mossadegh forces; it also stated that Mossadegh remained "the chief barrier to communist control" in Iran. An estimate a week later stated that Mossadegh had rebuffed the Tudeh and had given no indication that he would collaborate with it, though a Communist seizure of power remained possible. This estimate also affirmed that Mossadegh was continuing to purge the officer corps and that a coup attempt was unlikely to succeed.<sup>45</sup>

44. Tehran Embassy Telegram 3306, 20 February 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 446–448; Tehran Embassy Telegram 3341, 23 February 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/2-2353; Tehran Embassy Telegram 3397, 26 February 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 458–459; Tehran Embassy Telegram 3495, 2 March 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/3-253; State Department Telegram 2266, 2 March 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 691–692; Tehran Embassy Telegram 3543, 4 March 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/3-453; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 3576, 6 March 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 701–702.

45. CIA, "The Iranian Situation," 1 March 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 689–691; CIA, "Consequences of a Communist Take-Over in Iran," 3 March 1953, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000100070010-4.pdf>; CIA, "The Iranian

At the NSC meeting on 4 March, CIA Director Dulles gave a briefing that echoed the milder points in these reports and estimates. He stated that Mossadegh was becoming increasingly authoritarian—a shift that weakened his opponents and undermined the Shah’s power—but that he would likely remain in power in the immediate future. Dulles’s greatest concern was that if Mossadegh was assassinated or otherwise left office, a political vacuum would ensue in which “Communists might easily take over.” Secretary of State Dulles maintained there was “no serious obstacle to the loss of Iran to the free world if the Soviets were really determined to take it,” though he did not think this was imminent. He stated that Mossadegh might remain in power for another year or two, though he believed the Soviet Union ultimately would gain control of Iran. Much of the remaining discussion focused on how the United States might prop up Mossadegh’s government with a loan or by helping Iran resume oil exports. At the NSC meeting on 11 March, the Communist threat to Iran seems not to have been discussed. Rather, the meeting focused on Mossadegh’s rejection of the latest oil proposal and on how increased U.S. aid to Iran would affect U.S. relations with Britain. It thus seems clear that although the meeting on 11 March marked a substantial shift away from the previous U.S. posture of supporting Mossadegh, this shift did not occur as a result of new information about the Communist threat in Iran.<sup>46</sup>

Following the unrest of late February, and especially during the Persian new year holidays in late March, conditions in Iran were fairly calm. Mossadegh allowed the Tudeh to hold a rally on 9 March to mourn the death four days earlier of the long-time Soviet leader Iosif Stalin. The rally drew several thousand participants. In a comprehensive analysis of political conditions in Iran on the eve of the Persian new year, the U.S. embassy reported there was “little evidence that in recent months the Tudeh had gained in popular strength,” though it was continuing to infiltrate the government and benefitting from the concentration of power in Mossadegh’s hands. The report also

Situation,” 3 March 1953, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R00100070006-9.pdf>; and CIA, “The Situation in Iran,” 10 March 1953, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000100080016-7.pdf>.

46. NSC, “Memorandum of Discussion at the 135th Meeting of the National Security Council,” 4 March 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 474–483; and NSC, “Memorandum of Discussion at the 136th Meeting of the National Security Council,” 11 March 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 489–493. The Soviet leader Iosif Stalin died on 5 March, though this was not discussed at the 11 March NSC meeting and does not seem to have had much impact on U.S. policy toward Iran. U.S. analysts expected little immediate change in Soviet policy toward Iran and the Middle East. See CIA, “Probable Consequences of the Death of Stalin and of the Elevation of Malenkov to Leadership in the USSR, SE-39,” 12 March 1953, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79S01011A001000010007-1.pdf>.

detailed the recent emergence of deep fissures in the National Front, broad opposition to Mossadegh, anti-American sentiment, and lawlessness. Another embassy report stated that Iran's economy remained fairly buoyant because of increased non-oil exports, import substitution, and indications that the next harvest would be good. Unemployment was falling and inflation remained low, though the embassy expected the latter to increase. Labor unrest remained limited. Iran sold an oil shipment to an Italian company in March 1953, despite a British legal challenge, raising hopes that it might resume at least limited oil exports.<sup>47</sup>

In early April, the CIA learned that Tudeh leaders had instructed party members to protect Mossadegh in the event of a coup, and the embassy reported that the Tudeh again was seeking a united front with pro-Mossadegh forces. But when the Tudeh tried to stage a demonstration on 14 April, Mossadegh banned it and had the police suppress it. Only small crowds turned out; one protester was killed. Two days later, the government allowed the Tudeh to join a rally it was organizing. Tudeh supporters constituted at least half of the "thousands" of participants and clashed with anti-Communist groups. Tudeh-led mobs also attacked U.S. aid offices in Shiraz on 15 and 16 April. In late April, the Tudeh warned that Zahedi and others were plotting a coup with the United States and Britain and again called for a united front. Also in late April, the embassy reported that the army had set up a commission to study Tudeh penetration of the armed forces. This commission estimated that there were 1,600 Tudeh members in the armed forces and said that Tudeh leaders hoped to have a strong military network in place within five years. The commission recommended that Tudeh-affiliated military personnel be court-martialed. In early May, the Mossadegh government fired more than 100 leftist teachers and dismissed a magistrate who had dropped charges against 23 Tudeh members implicated in the 1949 assassination attempt against the Shah. On 22 May, Tudeh crowds attacked U.S. aid offices in Kermanshah.<sup>48</sup>

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47. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 873, "Iranian Political Trends from the Departure of the British Embassy in 1952 to the End of the Iranian Year, March 20, 1953," 24 April 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 53; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 847, "Quarterly Economic and Financial Review, Iran, First Quarter, 1953," 17 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 7244, 888.00/4-1753; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 855, "Strikes and Labor Disturbances in Iran since January 1, 1953," 20 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 5498, 888.062/4-2053.

48. CIA, "Background Information for Political Prospects in Iran," n.d. (apparently late July 1953), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000100280018-3.pdf>; Tehran Embassy Telegram 3943, 8 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/4-853; Tehran Embassy Telegram 4017, 14 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/4-1453; Tehran Embassy Telegram 4118, 21 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/4-2153; Tehran Embassy Telegram 4050, 16 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/4-1653;

Tudeh activity increased substantially in late June and July. On 19 June, Mossadegh's supporters held a rally in Tehran to protest the opposition Mossadegh was encountering in the parliament, which had become deeply polarized. The U.S. embassy reported that pro-Mossadegh demonstrators numbered around 3,000 but were joined by some 12,000 Tudeh demonstrators, who chanted anti-American slogans. On 21 July, Mossadegh's government organized a rally with 20,000–25,000 participants to commemorate the uprising against Qavam a year earlier. Later the same day, Tudeh front organizations held a separate, government-approved rally that drew a crowd of more than 40,000 and again featured anti-American slogans. U.S. embassy analysts declared it the largest Tudeh rally since the party had been outlawed in 1949 and said the Tudeh considered it a "show of strength." In addition, the Soviet Union made a series of friendly gestures toward Iran during this period, offering to settle outstanding border disputes and resolve other disagreements. A CIA report on these initiatives concluded that Mossadegh was aware of the Soviet threat to Iran and would probably try to maintain a neutral posture. On 15 July, the Soviet embassy warned that the United States was organizing a coup against Mossadegh.<sup>49</sup>

With parliament paralyzed, Mossadegh decided to hold a referendum in which voters would decide whether to close the current parliament and elect a new one. On 27 July, he declared that "foreigners" and their agents were using parliament to undermine the nationalist movement. The first round of voting for the referendum was held in Tehran on 3 August. Kashani and other opposition figures called for a boycott. The Tudeh mobilized its supporters in favor of the referendum. The constitution made no provision for closing parliament in this manner, and the voting procedures were blatantly irregular. Election authorities distributed ballots beforehand to government employees and to various political organizations, including a Tudeh front organization, which

Tehran Embassy Telegram 4110, 20 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/4-2053; Tehran Embassy Telegram 4223, 27 April 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/4-2753; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1013, "Estimate Tudeh Strength and Activities," 19 May 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 56; and Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1062, "Anti-TCI Disturbances," 9 June 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/6-953.

49. Tehran Embassy Telegram 4699, 19 June 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 53; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 1120, "The Demonstrations of June 19 in Tehran," 26 June 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4110, 788.00/6-2653; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 56, "Review of July 21 Demonstrations," 24 July 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4111, 788.00/7-2453; CIA, "Moscow's Changing Attitude toward Iran," 1 July 1953, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00890A000100060004-6.pdf>; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 109, 16 July 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4111, 788.00/7-1653. The CIA reported that pro-government demonstrators on 21 July numbered only 10,000–20,000 and Tudeh demonstrators numbered 50,000–100,000. See CIA, "Background Information for Political Prospects in Iran."

was allowed to help voters complete their ballots. As expected, over 99 percent of the vote favored the dissolution of parliament. On 13 August, Tudeh newspapers again warned of a U.S.-backed coup plot against Mossadegh.<sup>50</sup>

This rapid series of events alarmed U.S. officials. After the Tudeh rally on 21 July, the U.S. embassy warned that Mossadegh was becoming increasingly dependent on the Tudeh. At a press conference on 28 July, Secretary of State Dulles declared that the “growing activities of the illegal communist party in Iran and toleration of those activities by the Iranian Government have caused our Government great concern.” CIA briefing notes prepared for an NSC meeting on 6 August highlighted the recent Tudeh rally and the Tudeh’s role in the referendum. The CIA warned that the Tudeh had become Mossadegh’s main source of strength, that Tudeh members might receive cabinet positions in Mossadegh’s next government, that Mossadegh seemed to be drawing closer to the Soviet Union and preparing for “an anti-American campaign,” and that Mossadegh’s actions “would advance the Tudeh toward its goal of winning control of the Iranian government.” An embassy analysis on 12 August made similar points.<sup>51</sup>

However, other U.S. analyses of the situation at this time were less alarming. The U.S. economic attaché in Teheran reported in July that, although Iran’s fiscal situation and exchange rate continued to deteriorate, the Mossadegh government still had options for financing the deficit, inflation remained under control, and non-oil exports had grown substantially. A CIA memorandum from late July or early August gave Tudeh membership estimates similar to those produced earlier in the year, with 20,000–35,000 party members nationwide and 1,600 in the armed forces. However, in late August, a comprehensive estimate by the U.S. embassy put Tudeh membership at only 15,000–22,000. An analysis on 10 August by the embassy’s senior military attachés stated that more than 99 percent of Iranian military officers were loyal to the Shah and would comply with his orders, implying that the armed forces

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50. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 70, “Political Events July 25–31, 1953,” 31 July 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4111, 788.00/7-3153; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 85, “Iranian Political Events August 1–7, 1953,” 7 August 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4111, 788.00/8-753; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 100, “Roundup of Current Communist Activities in Iran,” 13 August 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2737, Box 137; and Tehran Embassy Telegram 337, 16 August 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, p. 664. The CIA was making extensive efforts to turn members of parliament against Mosaddeq by this time. See Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’État against Mosaddeq,” p. 244.

51. Tehran Embassy Telegram 163, 25 July 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, p. 738; State Department Telegram 205, 28 July 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 4111, 788.00/7-2853; CIA, “Briefing Notes for the National Security Council,” 5 August 1953, in CIA Electronic Reading Room (<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000100290001-0.pdf>); and Tehran Embassy Telegram 300, 12 August 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 742–744.

were still a formidable obstacle to Communist control. Also on 10 August, the Middle East specialist on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff stated that Mossadegh was firmly in control of the political situation and that neither the Tudeh nor Mossadegh's conservative opponents were strong enough to seize power. He recommended a new initiative to resolve the oil dispute.<sup>52</sup>

The most comprehensive analysis was a draft NIE completed on 12 August and meant to update the January 1953 NIE. The draft NIE declared that instability and uncertainty had grown in Iran since January. Mossadegh faced strong opposition from various quarters and had been weakened by the recent, tougher U.S. posture toward his regime. The Tudeh had become "an important source of support" for Mossadegh, notably in the recent demonstrations and referendum. However, it was still "a numerically small party." Its infiltration of the security forces remained limited, and there was no indication it was capable of carrying out a coup or even that it wanted to do so. The party was "not yet prepared to make a direct bid for power." Mossadegh "unquestionably" recognized the threat posed by the Tudeh, though he might "play along with [it] for the time being," as Qavam had in 1946. He could be expected to retain firm control over the security forces, resist Tudeh efforts to infiltrate government ministries, and prevent Tudeh demonstrations from getting out of hand. The Soviet Union recently had made overtures toward Mossadegh, but it was "extremely unlikely" he would allow large-scale Soviet penetration of Iran or break with the United States. He was pursuing the traditional Iranian approach of balancing the great powers against one another. He remained popular, and an economic crisis was not imminent. The draft NIE reiterated its predecessors' conclusions that Mossadegh was likely to remain in power and that the Tudeh was unlikely to seize power at least through 1953. In the longer term, the Tudeh was most likely to come to power through elections, though not those expected in the coming months, or as a result of continuing economic and political deterioration.<sup>53</sup>

A few days after this draft NIE appeared, on the night of 15–16 August, an Iranian military unit tried to arrest Mossadegh, in the first step of the CIA

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52. Tehran Embassy Dispatch 46, "Quarterly Economic and Financial Review, Iran, Second Quarter, 1953," 18 July 1953, in NARA, RG 59, CDF, Box 5490, 888.00/7-1853; CIA, "Background Information for Political Prospects in Iran"; Tehran Embassy Dispatch 132, "Estimate of Tudeh Party Numerical Strength," 31 August 1953, in NARA, RG 84, UD2738, Box 56; OARMA, "Control of Armed Forces of Iran, M-175," 10 August 1953, in NARA, RG 84, U.S.2738, Box 53; and U.S. Department of State, Policy Planning Staff, "Proposed Course of Action with Respect to Iran," 10 August 1953, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB126/iran530810.pdf>.

53. CIA, "The Current Outlook in Iran," 12 August 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 656–662.

coup plan. Its members were quickly arrested by pro-Mossadegh personnel. Units loyal to Mossadegh then spread throughout Tehran, securing the city and arresting other plotters. Tehran was relatively quiet on 16 August, though small groups of Tudeh and National Front members held rallies. However, after Mossadegh confined the army to its barracks the following morning, large, raucous crowds emerged and began vandalizing shops, attacking mosques and the offices of anti-Communist parties, tearing down statues of the Shah and his father, and calling for an end to the monarchy and the establishment of a “democratic republic.” The Tudeh seems to have instigated much of this activity, although CIA-funded provocateurs also contributed. These activities continued on 18 August, making many Tehran residents and military personnel fearful. Mossadegh therefore banned further demonstrations and ordered the police to clear the streets. The Tudeh then ordered its members to withdraw. In the meantime, CIA officers and their Iranian collaborators arranged to have military units and civilian crowds spread through central Tehran and carry out a coup on 19 August, taking advantage of the turmoil and fear of the preceding days. Anti-Mossadegh units gradually subdued loyalist forces and seized control. Mossadegh surrendered the following day. The Tudeh made no real effort to stop these actions.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusions

What did officials in Washington know about Soviet and Tudeh capabilities and intentions? U.S. policymakers had a fairly good understanding of the capabilities the Soviet Union could bring to bear against Iran. They knew the USSR had thousands of Soviet and Iranian operatives in the country and that Soviet forces could easily overrun Iran if general war occurred. However, they were uncertain about Soviet intentions. During the Azerbaijan crisis, Soviet officials had demonstrated their interest in gaining control at least over northwestern Iran. U.S. intelligence analysts assumed this was still a Soviet objective, but they did not know how aggressively the Soviet Union would pursue it. Numerous U.S. analyses, however, concluded that Soviet forces were not likely to invade—a conclusion that seems to have grown firmer after the early months of the Korean War. Rather, the Soviet Union appeared to be

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54. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’État,” pp. 248–256; Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq*, pp. 44–64; and Behrooz, “The 1953 Coup in Iran and the Legacy of the Tudeh,” pp. 116–123.

seeking control over Iran primarily through subversion, roughly following the Czechoslovak model.<sup>55</sup>

U.S. officials believed the Tudeh Party was the main Soviet instrument of subversion in Iran. They made extensive efforts to understand the party's capabilities and intentions, producing numerous studies that detailed its leadership, organization, membership, doctrine, and subversive activities. These studies showed that the Tudeh was a powerful force, with an estimated 15,000–35,000 members and several times that many supporters. Tudeh members were well disciplined and were organized into secret cells. Beyond the party apparatus, the Tudeh controlled various labor unions, front organizations, and affiliates. The party also had a large propaganda arm, enabling it to inform and indoctrinate its members and supporters. The Tudeh could use these capabilities to mobilize crowds numbering in the tens of thousands, giving it a powerful presence in Iran's streets. However, party membership did not grow during the Mossadegh era and remained much smaller than in 1945–1946.

U.S. officials also were concerned about the Tudeh's efforts to infiltrate state and government bodies. They knew the Tudeh had infiltrated certain ministries, and they believed some members of Mossadegh's cabinet and some members of parliament had Communist sympathies. However, the January 1953 OIR study indicated that only a small fraction of top officials and members of parliament had Communist connections or sympathies.

Tudeh efforts to infiltrate the armed forces were a substantial concern for U.S. officials. They had known about these efforts for years, reporting estimates of 500 Tudeh members in the armed forces in July 1949, 260 in June 1952, 533 in October 1952, 2,210 in January 1953, and 1,600 in April and July 1953. However, Tudeh personnel generally were purged after being discovered, and Mossadegh removed many senior officers who opposed him, strengthening the armed forces' loyalty. U.S. officials thus did not express alarm about Tudeh infiltration of the armed forces, and they repeatedly stated that the party did not have armed paramilitary units and that Iran's armed forces were capable of preventing a coup. The CIA's most detailed history of the 1953 coup makes clear that the military units most vital to a coup—armored units and infantry units located in or near Tehran—were commanded either by Mossadegh loyalists or by officers who joined the CIA-backed coup. The history makes no mention of Tudeh-controlled units, in Tehran or elsewhere. Many Tudeh members took to Tehran's streets after the

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55. On Soviet policy toward Iran in this period, see Artemy M. Kalinovsky, "The Soviet Union and Mosaddeq: A Research Note," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2014), pp. 125–137.

first coup attempt on 15–16 August, but they were unarmed, unaccompanied by military units, and unable to exploit the situation. After some 450 Tudeh officers were arrested in 1954, U.S. officials learned that the main purposes of the Tudeh military organization had been to gather intelligence and expand its capabilities, with the eventual goal of seizing power. However, a January 1955 CIA study of the organization did not indicate that it had any ability to use military force, other than a limited effort to conduct sabotage and paramilitary training a few months after the coup. Most of the party's members were in non-combat positions, including police, gendarmerie, medical, and training units.<sup>56</sup>

U.S. officials thought the Tudeh was seeking power not by way of military force but through a united-front strategy of trying to infiltrate the state bureaucracy, parliament, and Mossadegh's governing coalition and gradually take over. However, the January 1953 OIR study concluded that the Tudeh had almost no influence among top officials and members of parliament, and the draft NIE of early August 1953 stated that the party was not likely to win many seats in the next parliamentary elections. The Tudeh never entered Mossadegh's coalition, and it had been illegal since early 1949. Although some U.S. analysts thought the pro-Mossadegh Iran Party was a source of Communist influence, other parties aligned with Mossadegh were strongly anti-Communist, including the Third Force and the Pan-Iranist Party.<sup>57</sup> Thus the Tudeh had made little progress in infiltrating state and government bodies by August 1953.

Was Mossadegh nevertheless becoming dependent on the Tudeh, as many U.S. officials believed? Mossadegh's governing coalition had fragmented by early 1953, mainly with the defections of Kashani, Baqai, and their allies. Kashani and Baqai had considerable influence in parliament, they could mobilize large street crowds, and they were loosely allied with Zahedi, who had been plotting against Mossadegh since the summer of 1952. The growing opposition in parliament by these and other members largely paralyzed that body, spurring Mossadegh to dissolve it in early August 1953. But the Tudeh had no significant influence in this parliament and was not expected to win many seats in the next election. So Mossadegh was not dependent on Tudeh support in parliament.

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56. Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadegh*, Appendix D; CIA, "The Officers' Organization of the Tudeh Party," January 1955, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-00915R000400030005-9.pdf>; and Behrooz, "The 1953 Coup in Iran and the Legacy of the Tudeh," p. 105.

57. Tehran Embassy Telegram 636, 12 August 1952.

Many U.S. officials believed Mossadegh was becoming dependent on the Tudeh for support in Iran's streets now that Kashani, Baqai, and the large crowds they could mobilize were no longer backing him. The Tudeh did organize large rallies in support of Mossadegh several times in early and mid-1953, notably on 21 July and 17–18 August. Although these rallies probably helped Mossadegh by intimidating his non-Communist opponents, they also likely hurt him by leading civilians and military personnel to fear a Communist takeover, especially on 17–18 August. Although Mossadegh allowed Tudeh rallies on some occasions, he banned or suppressed them on others, most notably on 18 August. He also had many Tudeh members arrested, refused to legalize the party, rejected its appeals for a united front, and demonstrated his independence from it in other ways. Even though Mossadegh tolerated the Tudeh in certain ways, he also frequently acted against it. He and his allies were still capable of organizing large crowds on their own, as shown on 21 July. Finally, U.S. analyses consistently stated that Iran's security forces were capable of maintaining order, implying that they could contain the Tudeh. Thus although Mossadegh's coalition had fragmented prior to the coup, there is little evidence that he was actually becoming dependent on Tudeh support.

Finally, did U.S. officials have evidence that the Communist threat had increased substantially between November 1952, when the Truman administration rejected a British suggestion to undertake a joint coup, and March 1953, when the Eisenhower administration authorized the CIA to begin planning a coup, or by 11 July, when Eisenhower gave final approval?

Mossadegh's coalition continued to fragment in early 1953, making him more vulnerable to Tudeh and Soviet pressure. U.S. estimates of the size of the Tudeh military organization grew sharply from October 1952 to January 1953. However, U.S. analysts were not alarmed by this, and U.S. estimates of Tudeh membership overall did not increase during this period. Moreover, the size, frequency, and peril of Tudeh rallies did not grow noticeably until 21 July, by which time the coup operation was already underway. The Tudeh did not undertake paramilitary operations or other aggressive initiatives during this period, and Soviet hostility toward Iran declined. Finally, Iran's economy remained fairly buoyant, despite the breakdown of oil negotiations in March 1953. The U.S. intelligence community did not revise the January 1953 NIE on Iran until the draft NIE of 12 August, and the NSC did not revise its November 1952 policy guidelines for Iran before the coup, as we would expect if major developments had occurred. The draft NIE spoke of gradual deterioration rather than an imminent Communist threat, and it stated that the main conditions that might enable the Tudeh to seize power in the coming months were the sudden death of Mossadegh or the emergence of

armed conflict between Mossadegh and his non-Communist opponents—developments the NIE’s authors considered unlikely, but that might well have occurred if the coup had played out differently.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, although U.S. officials believed the Tudeh was a powerful organization with hostile intentions, the intelligence available to them did not indicate that the party’s influence was growing substantially or that it posed an imminent threat to Mossadegh’s grip on power in the first half of 1953.

This conclusion has two important implications. First, it implies that the U.S. decision to undertake a coup against Mossadegh was not made on the basis of strong evidence that a Communist takeover might otherwise soon occur. An examination of precisely why U.S. officials decided to undertake a coup is beyond the scope of this article, but a key factor seems to have been the advent of the Eisenhower administration, with its strong views about the dangers of Communism and “neutralism,” its desire to build an anti-Soviet alliance in the “northern tier” of the Middle East, and perhaps its closer ties to the U.S. oil industry.<sup>59</sup> Second, this conclusion implies that the coup against Mossadegh was premature, at best, as an effort to forestall a Communist takeover. The evidence available to U.S. officials does not seem to have warranted such dramatic intervention in Iran’s internal affairs at that time.

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58. CIA, “The Current Outlook in Iran.” A CIA memorandum written shortly after the initial coup attempt of 15–16 August stated that its failure had greatly destabilized Iran and the ultimate beneficiary would likely be the Tudeh. See CIA, “The Iranian Situation,” 17 August 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, pp. 679–681.

59. For a different view, see Steve Marsh, “The United States, Iran and Operation ‘Ajax’: Inverting Interpretative Orthodoxy,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 2003), pp. 21–44. On the northern tier alliance, see Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa, *The Baghdad Pact: Anglo-American Defence Policies in the Middle East, 1950–1959* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), ch. 1.