Introduction

In the collective memory and social psychology of Iranians, where individuals stand on 28 Mordad 1332 (19 August 1953) goes beyond politics. On 28 Mordad Mosaddeq was overthrown and Fazlollah Zahedi, basing his claim on a disputed edict from Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, announced himself the rightful Prime Minister of Iran. For many Iranians, the significance of the day itself has become much more symbolically important than the mere mourning of another lost opportunity in Iran's perilous and painful quest for democracy and self-determination. The events of 28 Mordad have come to stand for a reflective moment of assessing Mosaddeq's 28-month government, his domestic and international policies, his strengths and weaknesses, his friends and enemies. The date and the event invariably conjure up ethical issues of right and wrong, just and unjust, chivalry and treachery, loyalty to and betrayal of Iran and Iranians. The forceful removal of Mosaddeq on 28 Mordad – through what was popularly believed at the time and is today factually known to have been the active participation of foreign powers seeking to further their financial and political interests – has permanently marked the viewing, reading and analysis of this event.

Four months after the overthrow of Mosaddeq, a British diplomatic source in Tehran reported to Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the UK, that "There is a considerable body of opinion here which holds that Dr. Mussadiq and other extreme nationalists still enjoy a greater measure of popular support than the present regime".[1] Even six months after Mosaddeq's overthrow, the assessment of British sources in Iran on Mosaddeq's popular support did not alter. Eden was again informed that there "seems little doubt" that Mosaddeq continues to enjoy "much latent support" through the country; "the majority of the people still favour Dr. Mussadiq" and the Zahedi government "lacks any popular following".[2]

[1] FO 416/106, 31 December 1953.
[2] FO 416/107, 7 January 1954; FO 416/107, 12 February 1954.

However, Eden was reminded that "it is clearly in our interest, as well as in Persia's, that the present regime should continue".[3] If, in the assessment of Mosaddeq's chief adversaries, some six months after his overthrow the so-called rebellious Prime Minister continued to be more popular with the people than the government which replaced it, then it would be difficult to argue that those who brought about his downfall constituted the majority.

The events of 28 Mordad interrupted Iran's attempt to assert its right of self-determination over its polity and economy as well as over its future. It split the country into a defeated self-righteous majority and a victorious self-conscious and somewhat guilt-ridden minority. On one side stood a proud majority who believed that Mosaddeq did embody the democratic, nationalist and anti-imperialist aspirations of the Iranians and that he had succumbed with honour and dignity. His overthrow convinced many generations of his supporters of his righteousness, patriotism and valour. On the other side stood a minority, lacking popular following, whose numbers the Shah needed to inflate and whose morale he buttressed by addressing them as "my people". Their self-interest, preservation of status, loyalty, conviction, or ideological devotion to Britain and the US had motivated them to throw in their lot with the Anglo-American plan to remove Mosaddeq. To achieve this end they were obliged to acquiesce in the political and military leadership as well as in the financial largesse of the British and Americans both before and after Mosaddeq's overthrow. However, this group of collaborators – the petty-mercenary thugs, the middle-ranking but politically influential theologians, the suave Saville Row-suited intermediaries, politicians, parliamentarians, courtiers, the ambitious and fiery journalists, soldiers and officers – all wished to wear the mask of the true patriot. They needed to convince themselves – and, more importantly, others – that they had accepted and collaborated with foreign powers at some point in the process of overthrowing Mosaddeq, only to dispel the greater danger of Communism by ridding Iran of its "mentally unstable" Prime Minister and re-instating the Shah, the symbol of "national unity".[4] The political, clerical and military leaders of the overthrow project and not necessarily the perpetrators knew only too well how the British and American administrations were pulling the main strings that had led to 28 Mordad. A significant majority of them tried to either hide their connections with foreigners or to put a nationalist "spin" on these in order to assuage their feeling of guilt. Reconciling claims to patriotism with acts of servility and subordination to the British and American administrations was a difficult act, but one which the Iranian participants and beneficiaries of 28 Mordad thought they could perform.

[3] FO 416/107, 7 January 1954.
[4] FO 371/98602, 28 July 1952; Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), *Iran*, 1952–1954, vol. x, p. 754.

The events of 28 Mordad ushered in a psycho-political conundrum. Loyalty to the Shah, who was supposed to symbolize the national sovereignty, integrity and independence of Iran, came to be associated with betrayal of those very same principles. The Shah did not seem capable of ridding himself of his sense of obligation to foreign powers. The monarch was back in power but acted as though he had no legitimacy or popular support. Four months after the overthrow, Dennis Wright, the interim chargé d'affaires in Iran, wrote to Anthony Eden that "the Shah was thinking of dismissing [Hoseyn] Ala but would not wish to do so if this might be taken by us as an anti-British move".[5] Even though immediately after the overthrow of Mosaddeq the Shah publicly claimed that 28 Mordad proved that his people loved him, he sincerely believed that he owed his position to his "Western friends" rather than to "his people", and that he therefore needed to obtain their approval to change his Minister of Court. After ousting Mosaddeq, the Shah's dilemma was that he continued to derive his legitimacy and authority not from the Iranian people but from foreign powers, which, having put him on the throne, had assured him that he did not owe them anything.

On 17 March 1954 – some seven months after the ousting of Mosaddeq – Anthony Eden reported that through the intermediary of his ambassador, the Shah had asked him "the direct question as to what were our [British] desires for Persia's future".[6] By asking the British what their desires for Iran's future were, the Shah was again acknowledging British dominance and his own position of subordination. The Shah's servility towards the British betrayed his claim that "the people have shown their trust in me and it rests upon me to prove that their trust was merited".[7]

MOSADDEQ'S OVERTHROW ACCORDING TO THE SHAH

One way to present a summary of who played what kind of a role in the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq on Wednesday 19 August (28 Mordad) is to review the exchanges between Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and two key American figures after General Zahedi took power and the Shah returned to Iran. The Shah's conversations with Kermit Roosevelt and Loy Henderson provide a telling account of the Shah's perception of who returned him to power. Furthermore, it clarifies each side's assessment of its own role and contribution, as well as that of the other in the events leading to Mosaddeq's overthrow. With certain nuances, one could argue that the Shah's private perception of who had brought about the events was not different from that of the Iranian people. It even accorded with the perception of the foreigners who had intervened in Iranian affairs.

Kermit (Kim) Roosevelt was the enigmatic and somewhat bombastic chief of the combined Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Secret Intelligence

[5] FO 416/106, 23 December 1953. [6] FO 416/107, 17 March 1954. [7] FRUS, vol. x, p. 763.

Service (SIS) TPAJAX operation in Tehran. Kim was the grandson of US President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt's mission in Tehran was to fine-tune the plan and execute the ousting of Mosaddeq. Loy Henderson was the discreet American Ambassador to Iran. He was a career diplomat who had entered the State Department in 1922, gradually climbed the ladder of success, served in Moscow between 1934 and 1938, and developed a deeply ingrained suspicion of Soviet foreign policy designs. By the time Henderson was appointed Ambassador to Iran, he had already served as Ambassador to Iraq and India as well as having been head of the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau; he was therefore a seasoned emissary whose diplomatic responsibility was to assure Mosaddeq's government as well as the international community that the US had no interest in intervening in the domestic affairs of any country. Both Kim Roosevelt and Loy Henderson were in Tehran during 28 Mordad.

The conversations between these two American high officials and the Shah tell the general story of the major actors in the 28 Mordad overthrow, even though they never discussed the details of who did what, on whose orders, when or how. It would be too naive to expect a conversation on the details of a covert operation when both sides were in an elated and festive mood, gloating over their victory; mutual compliments and niceties seemed more appropriate for the occasion. Yet the exchanges leave hardly any ambiguity that, at the time, the Shah did believe the Americans to have played a determining role in bringing him back to power; inter alia, this would imply that in his mind they were instrumental in overthrowing Mosaddeq. The Shah's own position in private at the time flies in the face of the public and official discourse of his supporters that 28 Mordad and the fall of Mosaddeq resulted from a "spontaneous" movement of Iranians (if spontaneous is understood as an unpremeditated, unmanaged and unplanned popular and endogenous surge of political energy).

The Shah returned to Iran on Saturday 22 August, three days after Mosaddeq's overthrow. Kermit Roosevelt met with him immediately after midnight on Sunday 23 August. Since 2 August Roosevelt had been meeting with the Shah secretly, at around midnight, in a car parked on the Royal Palace grounds. According to Western secret service sources, Kermit Roosevelt was the mastermind and coordinator of the 28 Mordad events – and the Shah knew this. Woodhouse, the head of MI6 in Tehran until the end of October 1952, goes so far as to say that without Roosevelt's "presence to direct events" during 28 Mordad, the overthrow of Mosaddeq would have been doubtful.[8]

The post-overthrow meeting between the two men obviously took place under very different circumstances. The two were no longer secret conspirators forced to meet clandestinely in the dark, but were victorious allies meeting inside the Royal Palace. Yet strangely, the time and manner of

[8] C. M. Woodhouse, *Something Ventured* (London: Granada, 1982), p. 130.

their meetings gave the impression that each man, for his own particular reason, was uneasy, if not almost embarrassed, about being seen with the other. On this particularly happy but circumspect occasion, the Shah told Roosevelt: "I owe my throne to God, my people, my army – and to you".[9] When later that day, on the evening of 23 August, at the Shah's request, Ambassador Henderson met him "privately and without publicity", the Shah greeted him warmly and "expressed deep appreciation of the friendship which the US had shown him and Iran during the period".[10] The Shah wept as Henderson read Eisenhower's message to him and asked the ambassador to "tell the President how grateful he was for the interest which the President and the Government of US had shown in Iran". The Shah added that "he would always feel deeply indebted for this proof of genuine friendship" and went on to present his view of the factors that had brought about the "miracle of saving Iran" on 28 Mordad.[11] The miracle, he said, was "due to the friendship of the West, to the patriotism of the Iranian people and to the intermediation of God".[12]

Between the very early hours of 23 August, when the Shah met with Roosevelt, and 6:00 p.m. in the afternoon, when he met with Henderson, almost all of the determining factors which in his mind had contributed to the "miracle" of 28 Mordad and needed to be credited were the same. The Shah did not refer to the role of his army in his meeting with Henderson, probably placing its contribution under the rubric of the "Iranian people". Furthermore, in his meeting with Roosevelt, the Shah owed his throne first to God; yet in his early evening meeting with Henderson he owed it first to "the friendship of the West". What is of importance to this study is that according to both accounts – that of Roosevelt (the show-off spymaster) as well as that of Henderson (the tight-lipped diplomat) – "the friendship of the West" is not only specifically acknowledged but is also singled out by the Shah as a significant explanatory factor for the "success" of what happened on 28 Mordad. Had the Shah even specifically thanked the CIA and SIS for their services during the clandestine operation, Henderson would not have reported this verbatim in his dispatch. Instead, in his tactful and prudent diplomatic manner, he would have cloaked such explicit references by the Shah in the allegory of "the friendship of the West".

In order to grasp the full importance of these conversations, the Shah–Roosevelt meeting of 23 August needs to be revisited from another angle. Roosevelt's response to the Shah, who had wholeheartedly thanked him for reinstating him on the throne, was as important as the Shah's statement. Roosevelt's response demonstrated the assessment and appraisal of the top foreign intelligence officer on the scene. Roosevelt repeated to the Shah what he had already said on the evening of 28 Mordad to General Zahedi, to his

[9] K. Roosevelt, *Countercoup* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 199.
[10] FRUS, vol. x, p. 762. [11] FRUS, vol. x, p. 762. [12] FRUS, vol. x, p. 762.

collaborators, and to his cabinet who were celebrating their victory at the Officers' Club in Tehran. In a professional and seemingly cordial manner, Roosevelt returned the Shah's statement of gratitude by saying: "Iran owes me – us, the Americans and the British who sent me – absolutely nothing. Brief thanks would be received gratefully, but there is no debt, no obligation. We did what we have done to help in our common interest. The outcome is full repayment".[13] The American and British administrations had sent him to do a job – the overthrow of Mosaddeq – which he believed to be in the common interest of the West and the Shah; the result – the removal of Mosaddeq – was sufficient reward for his efforts. The Shah's response to Kim Roosevelt's blunt comment was: "We understand. We thank you and will always be grateful. And we will be additionally grateful for your statement that there is no obligation. We accept and understand this fully".[14] Nevertheless, as a token of his personal appreciation and recognition of Roosevelt's efforts, the Shah offered him a large, flat golden cigarette case. To Roosevelt, it was "a souvenir of our recent adventure".[15]

Aside from the false niceties, the pretentious humility peppered with professionalism, Roosevelt encapsulated 28 Mordad in a nutshell. For him, a job was a job. The American and British administrations had sent their spooks and cash to boot out Mosaddeq. Through the efforts of their Iranian networks the foreign secret services concluded their task efficiently. The Shah was back on his throne. General Zahedi, who was favoured by the British and Americans and eventually by the Shah to replace Mosaddeq, was safely installed as the Prime Minister. Mosaddeq, along with most of his ministers, close collaborators and loyal top military brass, was arrested. As Roosevelt had plainly put it, the common interest of the Shah, the British and the Americans was well served.

Perhaps even more important was that an example was made of the "maverick" Mosaddeq, who had had the audacity to reclaim the wealth of his own country and break the monopoly of the "Seven Sisters". For a while, the world was made safer for the powers-to-be. A third-world nationalist leader, who had attained power peacefully and legally, was purged and his defiance towards old colonialism and new imperialism was successfully passed off as yet another Communist bid for power. The menace of Communism, which had come to encompass anything posing a threat to US and UK interests, was thereby contained, and Mosaddeq's "erratic" policies and "chaotic" rule were replaced with the Shah's "Western-friendly" and predictable reign of "law and order".

The secret of the foreign intervention that led to the fall of Mosaddeq – which came to be publicly known through Roosevelt, Woodhouse, the State Department, the Foreign Office, Wilber and other sources some 27 years after the events – had been widely whispered among Iranians and foreigners ever

[13] Roosevelt, p. 201. [14] Roosevelt, p. 201. [15] Roosevelt, p. 201.

since the evening of 19 August 1953 (28 Mordad 1332). In a dispatch to the Department of State only two days after the overthrow of Mosaddeq, Ambassador Henderson lamented that "unfortunately the impression was becoming rather widespread" that the American Embassy or the US government had "contributed with funds and technical assistance to the overthrow of Mosaddeq and the establishment of the Zahedi Government".[16] Concerned about the consternation that belief in a US-backed intervention could provoke and the damage it could cause the stature and image of US foreign policy, Henderson tried to contain the situation and manage it swiftly and intelligently. In 1953, the impression of ethical conduct in US foreign policy was still of great concern to US diplomats; furthermore, the overthrow of Mosaddeq through foreign intervention had to be sanitized and legitimized nationally and internationally, for the sake of both the Shah and his Western friends. Henderson therefore sought to erase any traces of foreign intervention by giving all of the credit to the Iranians involved in the overthrow.

Henderson advised the Department of State to launch a campaign stressing the "spontaneity" of the anti-Mosaddeq and pro-Zahedi movement.[17] Once the overthrow was seen as the outcome of a "spontaneous" and therefore "domestic popular" movement, then the suspicion of foreign intervention would dissipate. Henderson advised the spokesman for the Department of State to "stress in [a] factual way [the] *spontaneity* of [the] movement in Iran in favour of [the] new government".[18] Henderson wrote that he sincerely hoped that ways would be found so that the American and international public would "understand that [the] victory of [the] Shah was [the] result [of the] will [of the] Iranian people".[19] He reiterated that he needed this type of a campaign launched and propagated through private and public channels for its usefulness back in Iran. Henderson was intelligent enough to understand the incipient perceptions of the role of the US in the overthrow of Mosaddeq and was correctly worried about its long-term implications. Whereas the Shah labelled 28 Mordad "a miracle" composed of three elements that included his Western friends, Henderson wished to present it to the world as a spontaneous movement. Each man was addressing his own audience and using concepts that he believed would not require further explanations. The purpose served by calling 28 Mordad a "miracle" was the same as calling it a "spontaneous" revolution. Even though both men knew that they could not come clean, the Shah, Zahedi and his associates seem to have been more forthright than Henderson.

For some years after 28 Mordad, this day was commemorated as a special occasion during which state-sponsored festivities and demonstrations marked the so-called *popular uprising* (*qiyam-e melli*) of the people in favour of their beloved king. On this day an attempt was made to recreate the "great

[16] FRUS, vol. x, p. 759. [17] FRUS, vol. x, p. 759. [18] FRUS, vol. x, p. 760.
[19] FRUS, vol. x, p. 760.

demonstration" that ushered in the overthrow of Mosaddeq. Various government organizations and the latest state-propped political party of the day would "fill trucks and lorries with kids, construction workers and brick baking workers", dispatch them to the main streets of Tehran and – in the words of a mastermind of the events of 28 Mordad, Asadollah Rashidiyan – make a mockery of themselves.[20] For years, the official commemoration of 28 Mordad was devoutly observed. In 1959, Asadollah Rashidiyan explained that even though he had been invited to attend 27 different events on this day, he had refused them all as he had come to believe that "all those who made sacrifices during 28 Mordad were being wronged".[21] The events of 28 Mordad were supposed to symbolize the day on which Iranians proved their historical loyalty to the monarchy and renewed their oath of allegiance to the Shah.

In 1961 – or some eight years after the 28 Mordad events – in a book called *Mission for My Country*, the Shah presented the Iranian people with a revised and refined account of the participants of 28 Mordad, one more in line with Henderson's version than with his original view. The Shah still referred to this day as "the miracle of 28 Mordad". He wrote: "It is my firm belief that the toppling of Mosaddeq's government was the work of the ordinary people of my country in whose hearts blazed the Divine providence".[22] By this time the Shah had already side-lined some of the key "heroes" of 28 Mordad, notably General Zahedi. According to this version of the Shah's rendition of what happened on 28 Mordad, ordinary people of the streets acting as God's agents overthrew Mosaddeq: it was God's will that Mosaddeq was overthrown and the Shah returned. Within the framework of this historical narrative, all of the forces which cooperated to overthrow Mosaddeq were moved to do so by a power far beyond their control and for a good cause far beyond the comprehension of any mortal. Most importantly, all references to the involvement of his Western friends were omitted.

In February 1970, when the Shah was in the midst of heated negotiations over oil prices with the oil companies, and all the OPEC ministers (except that of Libya) had congregated in Tehran, the Ambassadors of the US and the UK began exerting pressure on the Shah to soften his position on oil price hikes.[23] Refusing to heed their messages and demands, the Shah angrily confided in 'Alam, his most trusted Minister of Court, that "These guys think they can for example spend one or two million dollars in Iran and stage a coup. The time for such things has passed".[24] Perhaps the Shah was thinking of what he

[20] Be Ravayat-e Asnad-e Savak, *Rashidiyanha*, vol. 1, (Tehran: Markaz-e Barrasiy-e Asnad-e Tarikhiy-e, 1389), p. 148.
[21] Rashidiyanha, vol. 1, p. 234.
[22] M. R. Pahlavi, *Ma'muriyat Baray-e Vatanam*, (Paris: 1366), p. 123.
[23] A. N. 'Alikhani, *Yaddashthay-e 'Alam*, vol. 2, (Bethesda: Iranbooks, 1993), pp. 156–158.
[24] 'Alikhani, vol. 2, p. 159.

knew "these guys" had done on 28 Mordad: staged a coup d'état. The Shah's justification of his position and his explanation to 'Alam concerning the state of Iran's army and its top brass reinforces the hypothesis that the Shah believed that his old Western friends could no longer intervene in the affairs of Iran as they had done in August 1953. Interestingly, 'Alam did not agree with the Shah that the "foreigners" could no longer intervene and candidly presented his counter-position.[25]

In his diaries, 'Alam, a long-standing confidant of the Shah, refers to the events of 28 Mordad (19 August) in two different ways. In August 1969, he refers to 28 Mordad as *qiyam-e melli*, a national insurrection or a popular uprising under the leadership (*ze'amat*) of General Zahedi.[26] In August 1973, after visiting the graves of "the martyrs of 28 Mordad" and General Zahedi, 'Alam bemoans the opportunism of his countrymen and writes: "It was surprising that at the grave of Zahedi, the founder (*baniy-e*) of the 28 Mordad coup d'état, there was not even a fly to be seen".[27] Was this a slip of the tongue on the part of the man closest to the Shah, or was it a conscious and intended informal acknowledgement of the facts 20 years after the event? Was 'Alam becoming bolder in putting his beliefs into his diary as time went by? Whatever the reason, 'Alam could not shake off the thought that 28 Mordad was a coup d'état, just as the Shah, at the peak of his power, could not free himself of the spectre of a foreign-masterminded coup, similar to that carried out in August 1953. The Shah was privy to the intricacies of the foreign-initiated coup in August 1953. Seventeen years after the overthrow of Mosaddeq, the Shah continued to worry that the foreigners who engineered the coup in his support in 1953 could just as easily carry out another coup against him. Their power to intervene in the domestic affairs of Iran haunted him for the rest of his life, obsessing him with a conspiracy theory which paralysed him whenever he felt politically insecure.

The debate over whether the overthrow of Mosaddeq on 28 Mordad was the outcome of a planned CIA–SIS coup d'état implemented with the assistance of Iranian collaborators and their networks, a miraculous "spontaneous" and therefore thoroughly home-spun uprising, or, better still, a national resurgence (*rastakhiz*) of the popular masses, is as old as the event itself. One could argue that those Western politicians and diplomats (such as Ambassador Henderson) who wished to present the overthrow as a function of the "spontaneity" of the Iranian people sought to absolve the aggressive interventionist foreign policy of their countries from the accusations of meddling in the affairs of other countries, of imperialism and of making a sham claim to democratic ideals when it was their own narrow economic and political interests that were being threatened. The Iranians who promote the "spontaneity" theory are generally of three broad types, with different shades somewhere between these categories. First, there are those who

[25] 'Alikhani, vol. 2, p. 159. [26] 'Alikhani, vol. 1, p. 247. [27] 'Alikhani, vol. 3, p. 131.

empathized ideologically and politically with the world outlook and/or interests of the collaborationists and their foreign patrons and subsequently welcomed foreign intervention, yet who were are too shy and embarrassed to say so out loud lest they be seen as traitors. Second, there are those who believed that the people had grown tired of the economic hardships and domestic political instability that prevailed during the premiership of Mosaddeq, and who subsequently rebelled against him impulsively on 28 Mordad. Third, there are those who were ideologically opposed to foreign intervention but were unable to account for the details of what happened between the first and second coups, and who concluded that, to their chagrin, the second coup must have been "spontaneous" (even though they did not refute the existence of an overall CIA–SIS design to overthrow Mosaddeq).

In an official and secret CIA document, "The Battle for Iran", which was written in the mid-1970s by a CIA History Staff member whose name was excised, it is stated that: "The military coup that overthrew Mosadeq and his National Front cabinet was carried out under CIA direction as an act of US foreign policy, conceived and approved at the highest level of government".[28] Elsewhere, the author refers to the 19 August 1953 event which removed Mosaddeq from power as "a U.S.-assisted coup d'état".[29] In the foreword to this document, the author explains that his/her research had the support of the CIA, and that to arrive at his findings he benefitted from "personal interviews with a number of active and retired Agency officers who participated in the action, on Central Reference Service personality files, and on a variety of open sources". The CIA History Staff member also informs his/her readers that "the great bulk of the correspondence and traffic dealing with the operation was destroyed in 1962".[30] Denis Wright, who returned to Iran in December 1953, provides a more complete picture of what actually happened that August. He recalls that before being dispatched he talked to "people in the Foreign office", "met people like Prof. Lambton" and was "told that the British had been involved with the CIA in the coup in August 1953".[31]

[28] National Security Archives, Co1384417, *The Battle for Iran*, p. 26. http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/docs/Doc%203a%20%283%29%20-%20CIA%20-%20Battle%20for%20Iran%20-%20Appendixes%20-%202013%20release.pdf.

[29] Ibid, p. 28; the underlining is in the original.

[30] Ibid, p. 28.

[31] Denis Wright, Iranian Oral History Collection, Harvard University, Transcript 1, p. 9.