

ROUNDTABLE: MOSSADEQ'S OUSTER AT 70 – LEGACIES AND MEMORIES

Refracted: Mohammad Mosaddeq and Iranian National Identity

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A long history of political power struggles has shaped Iranian national identity. Each successive regime has sought to take control of Iranian political currents to reach its own objectives, and in the process has influenced Iranian identity in important ways. Few political figures in Iranian history have been as significant as Mohammad Mosaddeq in the shaping of Iranian identity, which he represents in ways that other political figures have failed to capture. His power to shape Iran's relationship with Western powers and his ability to project the image of Iran onto the world stage have enabled the endurance of his significance in the Iranian national psyche, which continues to show itself with his symbolic appearance in a range of political activities, including student rallies and public demonstrations.¹

As a political ideology, serving the interests of particular political forces, nationalism must continuously be constructed and reconstructed in ways appropriate to those vying for power, including internal and external actors.² Examining the use of Mosaddeq's image during the Pahlavi and post-Revolutionary periods sheds light on the ways political and historical figures are used by the ruling elite to serve their political purposes, and how this in turn shapes political culture and international relations.

Constructions of Mosaddeq for Public Consumption in the Pahlavi Period

At the time of the oil nationalization crisis in 1952, Mosaddeq was at his zenith of public popularity.³ In the immediate aftermath of the coup in August 1953, a concerted campaign on the part of the state was necessary to move public perceptions against him and legitimate the shah's return to power at the successful conclusion of the coup. Mosaddeq's association with democracy and independence remained strong among the Iranian public, and the public use of his name for political purposes remained taboo due to the heavy-handed response of Iran's secret police and intelligence service, SAVAK. After the coup, the political environment

¹ Ali Ansari, "Continuous Regime Change from Within," *Washington Quarterly* 26 (2003): 53–67; Robert Dreyfuss, "Iran's Green Wave," *The Nation*, 27 July 2009, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/irans-green-wave>. The struggle over the disputed June 2009 presidential election in Iran saw the social network site Twitter emerge as a tool used by the opposition to organize and mobilize. Mosaddeq's name appeared in numerous and interesting ways, which supports the argument that he remains salient in Iranians' minds, both in positive and negative ways, and that there are factions of Iranians who still feel the need to malign him. The very presence of the negative statements and distortions indicates recognition of his continued importance.

² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Montserrat Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2007).

³ Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup d'Etat in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (1987): 261–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800056737>.

in Iran became more stifled than ever. Public dissent was not tolerated, and the use of Mosaddeq's name and image became a symbolic act of resistance against the monarchy.

Even after Mosaddeq's death, the threat his movement posed to the monarchy did not subside. Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–79) attempted to render Mosaddeq a “nonperson” after the coup.⁴ The shah and SAVAK banned demonstrations on the anniversary of the coup d'état. After Mosaddeq's death in March 1967, the shah did not allow Mosaddeq's family even a small funeral, which Mosaddeq had requested in his will. He reportedly said of Mosaddeq, “His death, as his life, shall be in Ahmadabad,” a small village outside of Tehran.⁵ He was buried under the dining room floor of his home. Demonstrations on the anniversary of his death were forbidden by the shah. Those who attempted to take up Mosaddeq's cause after the coup were unable to publicly execute their struggles.

Newspaper articles from Tehran before and after the coup reveal insights into the language of nationalism in Iran and how Mosaddeq was symbolically deployed for this purpose. On 31 March 1953, at the height of the economic crisis brought on by the international reaction to the nationalization of the oil industry, the newspaper *Apadana* printed a front-page article proclaiming that the only way to finally bring a bruised and bloodied enemy to its knees was to stand firm with Mosaddeq's administration. One week later, on April 7, the same newspaper printed a picture of Mosaddeq conducting business from his bed, captioned “Mosaddeq, the defeater of colonialism.” In spite of the fact that poor economic conditions were precipitated by the nationalization of the oil industry led by Mosaddeq, there is no evidence the Iranian public blamed him for the crisis. Media reports praised Mosaddeq for standing up against the juggernaut of Western imperialism.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a new type of nationalism in Iran. Groups were formed that would come together in an umbrella organization known as *Etefak-e Nirouha-ye Melli-Mazhabi* (The Alliance of Nationalist-Religious Forces). The rising tide of dissent and protest against the shah took the shape of numerous groups that would compete to earn the right to define Iranian identity. Religious groups such as the *Fadayan-e Eslam* (Devotees of Islam) and other followers of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89) believed in a state governed by religious principles. Those supporters of Mosaddeq who had survived the shah's purges advocated for a secular state run as a constitutional democracy, without the authoritarian rule of a king. These various types of nationalism grew in a global context of movements for national self-determination and independence from colonial influence, which ultimately contributed to the momentum of antiroyal sentiment in Iranian society.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution, clashes between the revolutionary left and the religious right became part of a larger protracted and bloody battle. Those who came to power gained a special privilege: they seized the opportunity to shape national consciousness to suit their objectives. To that end, the use of Mosaddeq as a political symbol was seized upon yet again, but with different language and framing. This time, he was rebranded as a godless man who did a disservice to Iran by promoting secular nationalism, although some attributed to him the dignity of good intentions. Now secular nationalist democratic elements were framed as enemies of Islam, and Iranian national identity was reconstituted with a distinctly Muslim character.

This shift served dual purposes for the clergy: it helped legitimate their own objectives in the public eye, while also marginalizing their competitors. The religious right looked to Ayatollah Khomeini for guidance on issues related to Islam and the proper position on nationalism. While attempting to play on and negotiate Iranian nationalist sentiments, Khomeini also denounced nationalism as a secular institution that was un-Islamic in its essential nature. According to Khomeini, followers of Mosaddeq were not to be trusted, and Mosaddeq himself was a *kāfar*, an unbeliever. Khomeini and his following saw

⁴ Farhad Diba, *Mohammad Mossaddegh: A Political Biography* (Dover, NH: Croom Helm, 1986), x.

⁵ Sazemane Javanane Mobarez, “Asadollah Badamchian va Coup d'Etat-ye 28 Mordad,” *Azadi Quarterly Review* (2009): 229.

Ayatollah Abol Qasim Kashani (1882–1969) as the righteous authority on Iranian political identity, and many attempted to paint him as the true victim of the coup d'état. The revisionist narrative that emerged from the religious right went as far as having Kashani's son, Mahmoud Kashani, proclaim that Mosaddeq himself cooperated with the British in his own removal from power.⁶ Later, when the day the oil industry was nationalized was designated a national holiday, the revolutionary government would not allow Mosaddeq to be accorded appropriate credit. Ayatollah Kashani was called the father of the nationalization movement and to this day holds this symbolic position for the Iranian religious right. This refusal on the part of the clerics to acknowledge Mosaddeq's role in oil nationalization reflects not only their ideological stance with respect to Mosaddeq but also the tension between competing strategies of minimizing Mosaddeq's importance and popularity on the one hand and strategically deploying him as a symbol of anti-imperialism on the other. Kashani is elevated by the regime to displace Mosaddeq as the political leader of the oil nationalization movement that ultimately led to his ouster.

In a radio speech delivered on June 20, 1981, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that Mosaddeq had disrespected Islam with his secular movement. More directly, he proclaimed that Mosaddeq had been "slapped in the face by Islam" on August 19, 1953, the date of the coup d'état, and that were he not removed from power before long he would have slapped Islam in the face. This tone typified the language Khomeini used to convey his distaste for un-Islamic solutions to Iranian problems. The speech also has become something of a mold in which supporters of the current regime attempt to fit.⁷

Others did not utilize this strategy. Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic (r. February 1980–June 1981), supported Mosaddeq's movement and identified himself publicly as someone who carried Mosaddeq's message and movement into the new era. Indeed, even from exile he continues to maintain that there are four national heroes in modern Iranian history: Amir Kabir, Gha'em Magham Farahani, Mohammad Mosaddeq, and Bani-Sadr himself.⁸ As Khomeini gained a more significant following, Bani-Sadr argues, he consolidated his power and grew increasingly hostile toward democratic governance. In this vein, he turned against Bani-Sadr and forced him to flee the country. Bani-Sadr has argued elsewhere that it was his commitment to democratic principles that earned him Khomeini's wrath following the revolution.⁹

Those like Bani-Sadr and Mehdi Bazargan, Iran's first prime minister following the revolution (February to November 1979), believed that tracing their ideological lineage back to Mosaddeq would arouse those who had supported him twenty-six years earlier but were unable to show their support under the shah's dictatorial rule. They believed they would derive their power from evoking and arousing powerful nationalist currents that ran through all segments of society, irrespective of religious entrenchment. To some extent, they were correct. However, they were ultimately unsuccessful, which suggests an inaccurate assessment of the forces competing for supremacy in determining and reshaping Iranian identity.

On March 5, 1979, Khomeini responded to demonstrations marking the twelfth anniversary of Mosaddeq's death by calling him merely "*yek mosht oktokhoo*" (a handful of bones).¹⁰ This is widely considered the turning point in Khomeini's public position on Mosaddeq.¹¹ Tens of thousands of people had gathered to make the 60-mile trek on foot to

⁶ Mahmood Kashani, "Bazgoshayi-e Parvandehe-ye 28 Mordad: Dar Goft va Goo ba Doktor Mahmood Kashani," *Iranian Students News Agency*, 21 November 2003, <http://www.iranian.com/Opinion/2003/November/Kashani/Images/1.gif>.

⁷ Manouchehr Mohammadi, *Mosaddeq in the Passage of Time* [in Farsi], 2009, unpublished manuscript; Kashani, "Reopening of the File."

⁸ Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, interview by author, Paris, 2009.

⁹ Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, *My Turn to Speak* (Sterling, VA: Potomac Books, 1991).

¹⁰ John Kipner, "Many Iran Factions Hold Unity Rally," *New York Times*, 6 March 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/03/06/archives/many-iran-factions-hold-unity-rally-gunfire-heard-amid-applause.html>.

¹¹ Bani-Sadr, interview by author.

Ahmadabad. Khomeini told Iran in a public address that there was no need to glorify Mosaddeq, and that the habit of putting together a meeting for *har tikeh ostokhoon* (every piece of bone) and attending it against Islam was not tolerable. Just two weeks later, on 19 May 1979, Khomeini told the Iranian public, “Whosoever is not on the path of Islam is our enemy,” in an attempt to show that Mosaddeq’s movement was a threat to Islam.¹²

This type of language was used in an attempt to appeal to Iranian religious sentiment and reconstruct nationalist consciousness with religious, rather than secular, content. In fact, Khomeini needed nationalism to gain public support for the Islamic Republic. This cause was later furthered when the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) began, fueling nationalism to the benefit of Khomeini’s consolidation of power. To achieve this, the regime reshaped Mosaddeq’s legacy to put it in direct competition with Islam. This move worked in his favor. He understood that the suppression of religious rivals by the shah had created a need for religious-nationalist, anti-imperialist leadership.

In the now-shuttered reformist newspaper *Neshat* (Vivacity), in an effort to “explain” why the Islamic Republic was “against” Mosaddeq, the prominent intellectual, novelist, and satirist Seyyed Ebrahim Nabavi (1958–) wrote that Mosaddeq was a “nationalist communist liberal personality who was a spy and was the reason Sheykh Fazlollah Nouri was executed.”¹³ Nouri was a cleric who opposed constitutionalism in Iran in the early 20th century and was executed for his efforts to agitate Iranians against the constitutionalist government. In Iran, he is currently exalted by the regime as a hero and martyr who was executed “for his *defense of Islam against democracy* and representative government.”¹⁴ Again, Mosaddeq and his ideals are pitted in direct opposition to Islam. It has been crucial for the regime to construct Islam and democracy as mutually exclusive to maintain their power in a nation whose citizenry throughout modern history has consistently contained vocal opposition groups.

Since the revolution, Mosaddeq’s political and personal histories have been routinely and systematically distorted. After Khomeini changed his position from reserved respect for Mosaddeq as an anti-imperialist to vociferous opposition to him as a “non-Muslim,” supporters of the regime worked quickly to align themselves with his ideology. Mahmoud Kashani, son of Ayatollah Kashani, has been a chief instrument of these distortions. He has argued since the early 2000s that Mosaddeq himself was supported by the British and was an orchestrator of the coup d’état which removed him from power.¹⁵ The rationale for this argument is not immediately obvious. When further probed, it becomes clear that the dominant faction in the current regime wishes to paint Mosaddeq not only as an agent of the British, but as an unquestioning servant whose desire for personal power was exceeded only by his servitude and obedience to his British masters. The argument, again, is not borne out by historical and documentary evidence, whether from Iranian sources or otherwise. Further, some within the inner machine of Iranian politics assert that the shah was willing to keep Mosaddeq in a lesser position before the coup, but the British would not allow it.¹⁶

In a slightly more moderate articulation of the Islamic Republic’s position, Manouchehr Mohammadi, professor of law at the Foreign Ministry College’s School of International Relations in Tehran, argues that Mosaddeq was neither a national hero nor entirely a traitor. He suggests that Mosaddeq was an opportunist and a British agent, but that he may have had genuine feelings of nationalism upon which he did not act due to his ties to Britain. Mohammadi insists that Mosaddeq is not an issue in Iran today, that he has no traction as a symbolic figure, and that he has no symbolic place in Iran’s future. When asked why, then, some senior officials in the administration have publicly mentioned Mosaddeq in recent years, Mohammadi responded that leaders in high positions such as Ali Larijani,

¹² “Vijeh-ye Mosaddeq,” *Azadi Quarterly Review* (2001): 215 and 217.

¹³ As quoted in *ibid.*, 224.

¹⁴ Afshin Molavi, *Persian Pilgrimages* (New York: Norton, 2002), 193, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Kashani, “Bazgoshayi-e Parvande.”

¹⁶ Bani-Sadr, interview by author.

then the nuclear negotiator and formerly the speaker of the parliament, may mention Mosaddeq in a fleeting moment but this does not constitute a substantive change in the official position or popular opinion of the Islamic Republic regarding Mosaddeq.¹⁷ Mohammadi's position, although not as radical as other revisionists of the regime, also does not reflect historical and documentary evidence available from that period.

Mohammadi also suggests that Mosaddeq's wealth was so great as to warrant a fundamental distrust of his intentions. Coupled with the accusation that the majority of Mosaddeq's relatives were secretly British agents and members of an elite secret society, a picture begins to cohere that Mosaddeq is not to be counted as a "real" Iranian.¹⁸ His wealth and his alleged familial ties to Britain distanced him, argues Mohammadi, from the fabric of ordinary Iranian life. This interpretation neatly fits the objectives of the current regime. It is easy to see how Mosaddeq's opposition to Reza Shah and the Qajar dynasty before him, in spite of Mosaddeq's own familial ties to the Qajar court, can be interpreted as his unshakable and intense loyalty to Iran even in the face of risk to his own power. It is for this very reason that acts of historical revisionism like Mohammadi's and Kashani's are necessary. They are possible because of the passage of time since Mosaddeq's death, which allows for greater distortions of his history. The distancing of "ordinary" Iranians from Mosaddeq is a strategy that has been employed by the Islamic Republic and is unlike the strategies utilized by Mohammad Reza Shah prior to the revolution.

Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, former chairman of the parliament and father-in-law of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's son, Mojtaba Khamenei, publicly described Mosaddeq's role in Iranian politics prior to the coup d'état in terms that were at odds with the official position of Khamenei and the Islamic Republic. Haddad-Adel echoed the anti-Western position previously articulated by the clerical regime, but went further by asserting that the coup d'état overthrew the "nationalist government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq who was [the] architect of [the nationalization of the] Iranian oil industry."¹⁹ This is a surprising change from the very public crediting of Ayatollah Kashani for the nationalization of the oil industry, and sheds a much more positive light on Mosaddeq than is typical of the clerical regime. The stated purpose of this description was to encourage young Iranians to know their history, so that they would not believe unwarranted allegations against Iran. The rallying of Iranian youth in a nationalist direction is imperative for the regime to succeed in its current ambitions. The statement also reflects the degree to which different elements of the politico-religious establishment in Iran interpret Mosaddeq's symbolic meaning according to their particular interests.

Imperialist and anti-imperialist currents ran deep in the struggle between Mosaddeq and the shah. For this reason the use of Mosaddeq's legacy for political purposes evokes powerful sentiments for Iranians. Iranians as a whole are very aware of the clandestine operations the United States has conducted within Iran. Iranian political culture includes awareness of domestic and regional political history. The Ahmadinejad administration attempted to use this awareness to its advantage in the project to construct its nuclear activities as rights that the West denies Iranians in another attempt to exploit Iran's resources and power. To recalibrate the machine of nationalist sentiment in Iran, it has become necessary for the Iranian leadership to reinforce the image of the current regime as a victim of Western aggression alongside Mosaddeq.

In an interview in his office in Tehran when he was a professor at the Foreign Ministry College's School of International Relations, Javad Zarif relayed a story emblematic of the contested nature of Mosaddeq's legacy.²⁰ Shortly after former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office in 2005, he and then speaker of the parliament `Ali Larijani came to New York City for an event for Iranian Americans at the New York Hilton. In his speech to the

¹⁷ Manouchehr Mohammadi, interview by author, Tehran, 2009.

¹⁸ Mohammadi, *Mosaddeq*, 3 and 4.

¹⁹ "Majlis Speaker," Mossadegh Project.

²⁰ Javad Zarif, interview by author, Tehran, 2009.

gathering, Larijani evoked Mosaddeq's name to draw a parallel between the conflict over oil of the 1950s and the current conflict over nuclear energy. Zarif clearly recalled the reaction of a heavily chadored woman in the audience. Her sartorial choices suggested she was religiously observant, which the audience presumed to mean that she may have been a regime supporter. Nevertheless, she supported neither the regime nor its take on Mohammad Mossadegh. She stood up during the question-and-answer session and angrily demanded to know how, when the regime could not even tolerate Mosaddeq's name on a street sign and has done everything in its power to suppress his name and the ideals for which he fought, they dared to use him now to support their political objectives. Larijani conceded that the regime had not done enough to honor Mossadegh, then politely moved on to the next question.

In nearly every major wave of protest since the coup d'état, Mosaddeq has been a prominent symbol of resistance against the government. He was an icon of the crowd in the anti-shah demonstrations of 1978–79. During the Green Movement of 2009, he was featured in slogans and photographs in the crowds. In the most recent uprising, known as Zan, Zendegi, Azadi (Woman, Life, Freedom), however, he was less visible in the crowds than in previous waves of protest. After decades of manipulation of his legacy by successive regimes, it is perhaps unsurprising that the youngest generation is less drawn to Mosaddeq as a symbol of resistance than previous generations. Nevertheless, in light of the frequency of his deployment as a symbol of protest post-1979, "Mosaddeq remains in the minds of many politicized Iranians as a symbol of their unattained political ideals and the image of their preferred leader."²¹

Mosaddeq's legacy is a highly contested battleground on which Iranian nationalism is constantly renegotiated and reconstructed for political purposes. As the shah before them, the Islamic regime sees Mosaddeq's secular democratic movement as a threat to its interests. Even religious nationalists were unable to bridge the chasm between the clerics and the constitutionalists in Iran. The "nuclear conflict" between Iran and the West has presented a new set of circumstances to the Islamic Republic, one which requires a recalculation of nationalism and national identity. The project at hand for the regime has called forth numerous references to Mosaddeq in an effort to situate Iran in a narrative much longer and slightly different in character than previously articulated, one that includes recent presidential administrations in the same line of victims of Western aggression as Mohammad Mosaddeq. Whereas "the Mosaddeq era is an example of a period in which control was exercised primarily by manipulating the symbol of nation," the contemporary period has seen control exercised primarily through the manipulation of Mosaddeq as a symbol for nationalism.²²

Conclusion

On the path to national independence, Mosaddeq's symbolic meaning has refracted through the lenses of successive Iranian regimes who have used it in various ways to achieve their own political objectives. Mosaddeq's opposition to the policies of Ahmad Shah Qajar (r. 1909–25) and then Reza Shah (r. 1925–41) carried through to those of Mohammad Reza Shah, and later to Ayatollah Khomeini through his supporters after his imprisonment, internal exile, and death. Through the passage of time, as he has filtered symbolically through each successive regime, Mosaddeq has been reflected and represented in ways that have shone light on central issues in Iranian politics. When it is in the regime's interest to generate nationalist sentiment for public support, his image is deployed in a positive light.²³ An

²¹ Ali Rahnama, "Overthrowing Mosaddeq in Iran: 28 Mordad/19 August 1953," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2012): 661–68.

²² Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979), 353.

²³ Zarif, interview by author.

examination of competing representations of Mosaddeq allows for greater insight into Iranian national identity and Iranian nationalism.

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