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Introduction by Christopher R. W. Dietrich, Fordham University

“What’s Behind an Acronym? From APOC to AIOC to NIOC to BP”

In *The Struggle for Iran*, David Painter and Gregory Brew analyze the complex set of affairs that eventually led to the August 1953 coup against the government of Mohammad Mosaddeq, with a sharp causal focus on the interplay of Cold War logic and oil control. The reviews that follow mostly praise the authors for deploying that episode to raise crucial questions about how we think about economic diplomacy, the shared worlds of the Cold War and the rise of economic self-determination in the Global South, and the causes and consequences of US and British diplomacy in Iran and the greater Middle East.

Three of the reviews, by Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, Heidi Elizabeth Lane, Jonathan Ng, offer positive assessments. The review by Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicuttt does not, charging the authors with echoing the “conventional wisdom” about the coup and the role of economic interests in US decisionmaking in the early Cold War.

It is worth considering the nature of this conventional wisdom. Let’s start with a timeline that historians of US foreign relations will recognize as the starting point for interpretations that emphasize different variables from the cultural to the intellectual to the political-economic.¹ A British corporation called the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), in which the British government owned a 51 percent controlling share after 1914, operated freely in Iran in return for a 16 percent share of its net profits. At the same time that Great Britain became the dominant foreign power in the Middle East, the terms for oil exploitation changed slightly. In 1933, following the threat of the cancellation of the APOC concession and stillborn mediation at The Hague, the size of APOC’s concession decreased and Iranian national revenues increased in return for an extension of the concession to 1993. The company’s name was changed to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), and its high levels of production became crucial to the Allied victory in World War II, a victory in which Iran itself was jointly occupied by the Soviet Union and the British Empire. Iranian leaders began to compare the mammoth wealth of AIOC with their own poverty in the aftermath of war, and they returned to the arguments for a 50/50 profit split that had been popular in the early 1930s. Organizing around that issue and then calling for nationalization, Mosaddeq and other nationalists formed the National Front bloc in 1949. In March 1951, led by the National Front, the Iranian parliament voted for Nine-Point Nationalization Law and supportive oil workers went on strike. Following the assassination of the anti-nationalist prime minister Haj Ali Razmara, Mosaddeq was elected prime minister in April. Complex negotiations and diplomacy ensued, and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) fought for its validity, even as the British government undermined its likelihood for success—especially by blacklisting nationalized Iranian oil on the global market. Then, on August 19, 1953, an Anglo-

¹ For a recent survey of the scholarly literature, see Victor McFarland, “Oil and US Foreign Relations,” in Christopher R. W. Dietrich ed., *A Companion to U.S. Foreign Relations, Colonial Era to the Present*, volume 2, *The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 942-960.

American intervention deposed Mosaddeq and returned Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to the throne. Iranian oil flowed once again, and the AIOC changed its name to British Petroleum (BP). In the next year, BP accepted seven other companies into a group that is commonly called the Iran Consortium.²

This well-known but bare-boned narrative eschews an evaluation of the relative weight of different causal factors, the balance of which are especially critical when considering the diplomatic twists and turns that occurred in the critical two years between nationalization and the coup. Here we can turn to the reviews. Lane writes shrewdly that the authors present those two years within a greater context in which “the ouster of...Mosaddeq [is] a feature, rather than a bug, of international power politics that prevailed during the Cold War.” That thesis points to the power of decisions made in Washington and London, even while it works to understand the views of Iranian actors. In walking that common tightrope of international history, Lane notes, Painter and Brew use their masterful control of dense detail to avoid the pitfall of more dramatic interpretations that might place the onus of the coup on the “unusual personality of Mosaddeq or the devious machinations of covert operatives.” Ng agrees, noting that *The Struggle for Iran* places the period from 1951 to 1953 within the context of the “ongoing conflict between foreign imperialism and Persian nationalism.”

When it comes to the overlapping national and international contexts in general, the reviewers give Painter and Brew high marks. Ng appreciates how they write about tension among US leaders in 1951, including President Harry Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who, in Ng’s words, excoriated the “nineteenth-century colonial exploiter” attitude of the British at the same time as they opposed nationalization. Even before the coup, he writes, US policy thus struggled to “camouflage” or “dress up” the possibility of a return to British oil control through “lip service” to Iranian sovereignty. Likewise, Kashani-Sabet lauds the authors for placing AIOC and its crown jewel, the Abadan refinery complex, within the massive buildout of the global oil industry from the 1930s to the 1950s. And although she questions their assertion that Mosaddeq exaggerated the economic downfall caused by the British-led boycott, she recognizes the authors’ expert treatment of what the CIA called the “street politics” of Iranian nationalist and labor movements. Lane praises *The Struggle for Iran* because the authors “broaden, rather than narrow, the explanatory aperture” when they note the ability of British leaders in government and industry to protect their interests.

The reviewers also comment positively on the authors’ expert understanding of Anglo-American diplomacy. Here it is useful to focus on a moment, the July 1952 uprising, that does not often feature in shorter histories but is critical to Brew and Painter’s telling. That moment must have felt promising for Iranian nationalists: popular protest against Mosaddeq’s removal as prime minister dovetailed with an International Court of Justice ruling in Iran’s favor. Unintended consequences proved, however, to be more important than intended outcomes. For Painter and Brew, the consequences had as much to do with

² Those companies were Gulf Oil, Royal Dutch-Shell, Compagnie Française des Pétroles (later Total), Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon), Standard Oil of California (Chevron), Standard Oil of New York (Mobil), and Texaco. Along with British Petroleum and minus the French company, they were later dubbed the Seven Sisters.

perception as reality. In particular, the CIA discerned a rise in the power of the Communist Tudeh Party and a steep decline in the popularity of Reza Shah. For the United States, this narrowed the potential outcomes of the confrontation. The alternatives were “either reaching a settlement with Mosaddeq, a gradual breakdown of the oil boycott, or continued deadlock with an increasing trend to the left and a great risk of communist takeover” (103). Among US decision-makers, arguments that Iran and the greater region’s oil resources could be forever lost to Communism became more persuasive than before. That chapter and the following one, in which the debates leading to the coup are discussed in great detail, are masterful portrayals of the multiple perspectives in both the US and British camps.

Of particular importance is the British perspective, especially when it comes to the prized political-economic place of Iranian oil for British power and, more importantly for US leaders, the postwar recovery of the West. Ultimately, Painter and Brew conclude, the British won the new Eisenhower administration over to the argument that Mosaddeq’s ouster would help preserve the stability of the global oil industry. As Lane rightly notes, this means that neither British nor US decision-makers really took Iranian sovereignty seriously when it came to control over oil. As Ng writes, the British even backtracked on the US proposal for a compensation settlement that drew inspiration from the British Coal Act—criticizing their own law as “badly drafted.”

Ng makes one other crucial point. The decisive and immediate outcome of the nationalization crisis—the 1953 coup—often leaves the impression that the thorny diplomatic attempts at potential alternative solutions over the previous two years were doomed from the outset. Was British and, ultimately, US diplomacy geared toward stalling while the oil boycott slowly broke the will of the Mosaddeq government, as Winston Churchill implied? While historians collectively and rightly distrust any sense of inevitability in the past, Churchill did predict that a negotiating impasse would convince the Eisenhower administration to support the plans for a coup, which it did beginning in April 1953. It is fascinating to see the momentum build for that decision in Brew and Painter’s detailed and precise telling, because it is an example of how a moment that was contingent on many different factors seemed to become inevitable in real time. That said, *The Struggle for Iran* makes clear that the ultimate decision came only after a long struggle indeed.

In some ways, the consequences of the August 1953 coup are just as important to understand as its causes. As Kashani-Sabet and Ng write, Mosaddeq’s specter haunted Reza Shah and informed the growing distance between the people of Iran and their head of state, who was both a critical Cold War ally of the United States and a ruler who was increasingly dogged by accusations of autocracy. This gap, marked by the illegality of dissent and the bitter memories of foreign government and corporate machinations, ultimately led to the earth-shattering Islamic Revolution of 1979. As Lane writes, and as a forthcoming anniversary roundtable in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* reminds us,³ the coup, the return of AIOC-

³ “Roundtable: Mossadeq’s Ouster at 70—Legacies and Memories,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 56: 2 (forthcoming).

controlled production through BP and the Iran Consortium continues to shape US-Iranian relations and especially Iranian distrust of the international system today.

Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's provocative critique emphasizes that notion of distrust. He finds an incompatibility in what he considers the overinflated narratives about the Soviet threat among British and certain US actors with "the ulterior motive" of protecting oil company interests. He also emphasizes the ideologies of oil control and oil scarcity. His review makes for vivid reading. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt holds that the authors have fallen into a trap set by the "traditional literature" on the Cold War national security and international political economy. In essence, that trap consists of mistakenly aligning corporate interests with national ones. In their response, Painter and Brew counter that their point is not that there was a contradiction between Cold War security arguments and economic interests, or that they blindly accept that private firms served a larger national interest. They argue that the confluence of the Cold War security and economic arguments points to the shared beliefs held by the most influential power brokers: "that combatting communism and opposing nationalization were both key components" of US national-security thought and were primary motivators behind the decision for the coup. Moreover, they hold that they are more critical of the British and U.S. decision-makers than Wolfe-Hunnicuttt allows.

Collectively, these reviews remind us that current events in Iran—from "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests to nuclear diplomacy—make such debates about the past all the more important. "The coup cannot simply be bracketed off as a brief episode in Iran's modern history," Kashani-Sabet writes. In their epilogue on "contested memories," Painter and Brew provide an excellent introduction to many of those questions.

I hope the readers of H-Diplo enjoy this exchange as much as I have.

Contributors:

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Gregory Brew is a historian of modern Iran, US-Iran relations, and international oil. His other books include *Petroleum and Progress in Iran: Oil, Development, and the Cold War*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2022. He is currently an analyst at Eurasia Group covering energy and Iran.

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Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet is Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. Her latest book, *Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800–1988* (Cambridge, 2023), considers US-Iran relations through the lens of diplomatic and cultural history, paying special attention to race, gender, and social relations. Her other books include: *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, 1999); *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran* (Oxford, 2011); and a novel, *Martyrdom Street* (Syracuse, 2010).

Heidi E. Lane is Professor of Strategy and Policy and Director of the Greater Middle East Research Study Group at the Naval War College. She is co-editor of *Building Rule of Law in the Arab World: Tunisia, Egypt and Beyond* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016) and is completing a book about regional counterterrorism policies and practices in the Middle East. She specializes in Comparative Politics and International Relations of the Middle East, with a focus on security sector development, ethnic and religious nationalism, and rule of law in transitioning societies.

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“The Struggle for Iran: A Battle that Persists”

In 1953 the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh[.... T]he coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development. And it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs.

— Madeleine Albright (2000)¹

Last fall, the world witnessed extraordinary uprisings that put women at the forefront of Iranian politics. Not since the revolution of 1979 have Iranians engaged in such sustained demonstrations, which for a fleeting moment appeared to unite protestors of different backgrounds inside and outside the country. A new generation of young Iranians who never witnessed the successes or excesses of the shah's rule have now questioned the foundations of the 1979 revolution, which put an end to the Pahlavi regime. The “Woman, Life, Freedom” protestors have not only demanded a new socio-political framework for Iran, but they have also forced a reassessment of modern Iranian history.

Nearly seventy years ago, the coup that ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq from his post diverted the course of Iranian politics. An Anglo-American intervention on 28 Mordad 1332, corresponding to 19 August 1953, put Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi back on the Iranian throne. The chastened shah quickly adapted to the realities of the second phase of his reign, which grew autocratic and illiberal. He created his secret police, SAVAK, with US and Israeli support, and used it not only to prevent anarchy in the country, but also to imprison and torture political writers and dissidents. The shah's rule was marred by the Anglo-American coup of 1953, but it also suffered from his personal foibles and political shortcomings. At the same time, however, the monarch enabled women's suffrage, literacy, and land reform—social projects with progressive objectives that have complicated facile judgments of the king's time in office.

It is against this complex backdrop that David Painter and Gregory Brew's enlightening book, *The Struggle for Iran: Oil, Autocracy, and the Cold War, 1951–1954*, brings new insights to the tortured international diplomacy that brought the shah back to the throne. Although this work focuses closely on the Mosaddeq crisis, the authors recognize that the coup cannot simply be bracketed off as a brief episode in Iran's modern history. As they write, “[t]he ramifications of [the American and British] intervention are still felt seventy years later, reflected in the bitterness affecting Iran's relations with the West and the complicated

¹Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, “Remarks before the American-Iranian Council, 17 March 2000, Washington, D.C. As released by the Office of the Spokesman U.S. Department of State,” US Department of State Archive, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/2000/000317.html>.

legacy of Mohammed Mosaddeq, Iran's first and last nationalist prime minister dedicated to ruling according to the 1906 constitution" (21).

For Iranians, the coup persists as an indelible event and a turning point in their lives. Little good, if any, came of it. For Mosaddeq and his supporters, the coup drove them out of productive involvement in Iranian politics. The National Front lost its political influence and could never rebuild effectively. The former prime minister, banished from public life, remained under house arrest until his death in 1967. The shah, though back in power, lacked credibility or clout. Throughout the remainder of his reign the ghost of Mosaddeq haunted him, making it impossible for the shah to gain legitimacy.²

A seasoned politician, Mosaddeq commanded respect in a way that the shah did not. He had witnessed the birth of Iranian constitutionalism, which he tried to reinvigorate during his brief tenure in office. Western-educated but with a refined grasp of Persian, Mosaddeq spoke with conviction and sophistication. Though privileged, Mosaddeq nonetheless gave voice to the plight of oil workers and struggling Iranians in a way that the shah never managed to do.³ In response, the king grew autocratic. Even when the shah pursued significant social reforms, they appeared to come from a sense of *noblesse oblige*, or diplomatic necessity, rather than from personal belief. The distance between the shah and his people widened and opened the way for the emergence of new leaders, among whom Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would become the most prominent. Four decades after the cataclysmic Islamic Revolution of 1979, this book invites us to reexamine the crucial years that changed the nature of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule and the future of Iranian society.

Painter and Brew recreate the intricate diplomatic negotiations that laid the stage for what became the coup. The writers situate the Mosaddeq debacle as part of the emerging crises in the Global South which defined the Cold War era. The sources used for this study still leave many unanswered questions, especially from the Iranian perspective, which others such as Homa Katouzian and Ali Rahnema have tried to address.⁴ As Painter and Brew aptly note, the available archives contain "an unusual combination of too many and too few primary sources" (2). While repositories in the United Kingdom and the United States hold voluminous documents on aspects of this diplomacy and the oil crisis, the intelligence records remain out of reach. Persian and Soviet material both require impressive linguistic skills and access. Despite these pitfalls, Painter and Brew have managed to enrich our understanding of the coup through their scrupulous reading of the available literature.

² James F Goode, *The United States and Iran: In the Shadow of Musaddiq* (St. Martin's Press, 1997); and Ali Gheissari and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ For background on Mosaddeq, see Farhad Diba, *Mohammad Mossadegh: Political Biography* (Croom Helm, 1986). and for the shah, see Abbas Milani, *The Shah*, First edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴ Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2009) and Ali Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Their study begins with a brief chapter on the origins and development of Iran's petroleum industry. In 1901, William Knox D'Arcy, a British subject, received a concession from Mozaffar al-Din Shah to search for oil in Iran. In May 1908, when oil was struck at Masjed-e Solayman in Khuzestan province, the British formed a corporation, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), to manage Iran's burgeoning oil industry. APOC quickly developed an independent life and operated with few limits on its authority. The entity built pipelines "where it wanted" and did not pay taxes to the Iranian government. According to the authors, "[t]he company determined production levels and could drill wherever it wished within the concession area" (11). In return, APOC agreed to pay 16% of net profits, which it calculated in secret, to the Iranian government.

Compared with the United States and Russia, Britain was a relative newcomer to the petroleum market. At the dawn of the twentieth century oil had emerged as a crucial energy source for transportation industries. In 1913, the British navy, on the advice of First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, determined to convert its fuel to oil from coal. A year later, in 1914, Britain bought most of the shares in APOC to maintain access and oversight of a commodity it needed but did not possess within its borders.⁵ After the war, Britain not only achieved a dominant military position in the Middle East, which guided its postwar negotiations, but it benefited from the ballooning profits of APOC.

For its part, Iran overcame the turmoil of the Great War by ending Qajar rule in 1925 and inaugurating a new dynasty. While Britain desired a strong government in Tehran, it also recognized Iran's unique position as the only Middle Eastern country at the time with a functional petroleum industry. Unsurprisingly, it did not want to expand Iran's clout and presence in an ethnically divided Middle East that likely contained other oil reserves.⁶ During the interwar period, although Iran tried to improve the terms of its contract with APOC, it failed to achieve a 50/50 arrangement. In 1933, the new contract reduced the concession area and increased revenues to Iran, but the concession was extended to last until 1993. A new clause also forbade the unilateral cancellation of the contract. (14). During World War II, Iran supported the Allied war efforts by providing passage of supplies to the Soviet Union through its territory. The Anglo Iranian Oil Company (renamed in 1933) raised production to meet the increased war demand.

In 1949, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who had ascended the throne during World War II, visited America for the first time. While the young king received a warm welcome abroad, the trip was largely ceremonial. Upon his return, he faced a country in turmoil, a crisis that was focused on oil nationalization. By then, the international oil companies, in which both the US and Great Britain had a major stake, outlined a new economic order. In the decades since its creation, the AIOC had grown into a lucrative firm, but its rank-and-file employees, which included many Iranians, had not benefited from its enormous

⁵ Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath* (Syracuse University Press, 1992).

⁶ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton University Press, 1999), chapter 5. Also, Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Pandering in the Persian Gulf: Arabia, Iran, and Anglo-American Relations, 1900–1971," in Matthew K. Shannon, ed., *American-Iranian Dialogues: From Constitution to White Revolution, c. 1890s–1960s* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 73–94.

wealth. This disparity intensified anti-British sentiment in Iran, which had many causes. In the meantime, domestic politics grew turbulent. A group of politicians led by Mosaddeq formed the National Front bloc in 1949, as the oil nationalization issue dominated local debates. As negotiations continued over how best to address Iran's demands, word arrived that Saudi Arabia and Aramco had struck a 50/50 deal, which had proved elusive for Iran. In the spring of 1951, the Majles or parliament took matters into its own hands and approved the nationalization demand. A strike by oil workers followed the vote.⁷

Britain had many reasons to resist nationalization, mainly economic ones. In 1951, as the authors point out, "Abadan was Britain's most valuable overseas possession," but Iranian oil revenues also remained crucial to the West's economic recovery. (39) The stability of Iran's government focused on the shah and remained crucial in American thinking. Against British objections, Mosaddeq nonetheless became prime minister and pushed for the takeover of AIOC assets as the company eventually changed its name to the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC).

From the outset, Britain tried to thwart nationalization and to undermine Mosaddeq. Referring to a statement made by Sir Peter Ramsbotham, employed in the British Foreign Office at the time, the authors compellingly show that "British officials feared the loss of Iranian oil revenues would be a greater blow to the empire than Indian independence" (7). Tied to this was the fear that successful nationalization in Iran would create a snowball effect, jeopardizing British and Western economic interests in Suez and elsewhere. The authors also succeed in showing how AIOC and the global oil industry had vastly expanded, and in this respect their analysis complements the notable contribution of Katayoun Shafiee on the sociotechnical aspects of Iranian oil development.⁸

Through this shuttle diplomacy, we learn that Mosaddeq was not an accidental leader of Iran's oil nationalization. He presented his views with purpose and flair, and his dramatic displays of emotion were ostensibly staged to good effect. Other important takeaways from this work include the recognition that the Soviet threat to Iran was often exaggerated and that the United States played an active role in the coup. These interesting details provide depth about Mosaddeq's character and enhance the existing historiography of the coup.

The analysis brings to light the limitations of the World Bank and its vice president, Robert L. Garner, in providing an interim solution. However, the authors' assessment, based on US sources, that Mosaddeq was overstating the economic impact of the oil boycott requires further scrutiny (86-87). In the 1950s, as the Point VI program (*barnameh-e asl-e chabar*) demonstrated, while Iran was largely an agricultural country at the time, it lacked efficient means of production.⁹ This reality, compounded by the government's other

⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and the Roots of the Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New Press, 2013).

⁸ Katayoun Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil: An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran* (The MIT Press, 2018).

⁹ Gwen H. Haws, ed., *Iran and Utah State University: Half a Century of Friendship and a Decade of Contracts* (Utah State University, 1963).

main source of revenue—oil—being held in temporary suspension, undoubtedly generated broad economic hardships throughout the country.

This book highlights the differences in mindset between the leaders of Britain and the United States at various stages. The US remained cautious at first, mindful of sensitivities on both sides of the dispute.

As the thinking moved toward planning a coup, the CIA appeared to have an inadequate, even naive, understanding of Iranian “street” politics. As the authors write, “the events of July 1952 apparently led the CIA to conclude that control of ‘the street’ was the key to power in Iran” (102). The “street” had many actors, accessed not only by the shah’s supporters or the Tudeh party, but also by Ayatollah Kashani and Mozaffar Baqa’i, who was the head of the Toilers Party. The final American effort to put forth a “package proposal” (125) failed, as domestic tensions between the various factions erupted. Mosaddeq’s popularity waned as Ayatollah Kashani and Baqa’i rallied their supporters. In the end, geopolitics superseded humanitarian concerns that the inequitable practices of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company had badly hurt the Iranian populace.

On 19 August 1953 a coup financed by Great Britain and the United States removed Mosaddeq and the National Front from power. From the outset Britain had worked against the prime minister and refused to concede to reasonable terms that could have brought the oil nationalization crisis to an end. Recognizing this impasse, the US focused on resuming production, but the authors argue that it too was perhaps unrealistic in expecting Mosaddeq to accept lopsided terms (149-151). The details surrounding the coup show the extensive access of the US and Britain to individuals in Iran’s army and government—a troubling matter in itself. After the coup, the Pahlavi state arrested several Tudeh and National Front members. Iran’s hard-won parliament—the Majles—withered as an institution of political change and opposition but continued to deliberate international events and domestic policy.

From its inception the coup has compelled historians to ponder “what if.” While US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged the resentment that Iranians still harbor about America’s intervention, her recognition cannot alter history. The story of Mosaddeq’s downfall will be told and retold as additional documents surface and new generations revisit these events. For now, this perceptive book gives fresh meaning to these persistent Iranian struggles and realities.

The Struggle for Iran, by David Painter and Gregory Brew, is a dense re-examination of one of most highly contested periods in Iranian history during the Cold War. It is a meaty read in seven dense chapters, not including a framing introduction and a concluding chapter addressing existing historiography. The chapters cover a lot of ground. While the first one revisits the basic historical context of Iran's relationship with both the US and the British from the beginning of the twentieth century through the Second World War, subsequent chapters jump straight into the thick description of the crisis from 1951–1953. These latter chapters follow the details of the almost innumerable proposals, negotiations, and back-room deals that resulted in the removal of a democratically elected Iranian prime minister who was weak, unpopular, and who refused to capitulate to international pressure. Painter and Brew provide deep, though not conclusive, source evidence that supports and augments previously published work on the same subject.²

Painter and Brew advance an ambitious and interesting argument. The authors contend that the Iranian oil crisis is best understood as only one episode in a much larger set of processes that ultimately “shaped the postwar world” (1). They view the complex dynamics that surrounded the ouster of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq as a feature, rather than a bug, of international power politics which prevailed during the Cold War. The “struggle for Iran,” they argue, set the conditions and preferences for other instances of foreign domination over the Global South for decades to come. They write:

This crisis should also be analyzed in the context of movements against European colonialism and domination, including the political struggle in Iran against foreign influence and authoritarian rule; efforts by the United States, Great Britain, and the major international oil companies to maintain control of the oil resources of the Global South; and the decline of Great Britain as an imperial power in the postwar Middle East (5).

Despite the book's broad central thesis, Painter and Brew spend much of the book exploring what might seem to be minor details that emerge from their sources. In doing so, the authors offer a much more complex picture of the political dynamics that prevailed during this critical period. The individual chapters of the book flesh out the details of internal deliberations between British and American officials as well as well-known Iranian actors such as Prime Minister Haj Ali Razmara, Ayatollah Abolqassem Kashani, and of course, Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, and the young shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The chapters include lesser-known personalities, such as journalist and politician Hossein Makki, who unwittingly helped enable the ouster of Mosaddeq (160–161). Painter and Brew's portrayal of the progression

¹ The views expressed here are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the views, policies, or positions of the US Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, or the US Naval War College.

² For those interested in the broader debates surrounding this period, the foundational work of Mark Gasiorowski beginning in the 1980s, as well as the more recent edited volume by Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, are necessary starting points. Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2004).

of these negotiations with the British in the earlier stages of the crisis offer important insights to include the fact that Mosaddeq's energies were so focused on these negotiations that he sacrificed his own political popularity on the domestic front and thus gave away important political capital to his detractors, including Makki, who was ultimately manipulated by British and American officials (59).

However important the Iranian actors were, the chapters nonetheless support the conclusion that the most consequential decisions were made without the input or consent of those for whom the political and economic consequences were greatest. This departs from previous sources on the period that fault the unusual personality of Mosaddeq or the devious machinations of covert operatives.³ Painter and Brew rely heavily on Foreign Relations of the United States sources, the newest of which was released in 2017. The chapters trace the path of negotiations between the Iranians and the British over the parameters of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's control of Iranian oil revenues and exports. For example, chapter 2, which is appropriately titled "Crisis in Iran," details the reactions of British and American oil industry personnel and government officials to Mosaddeq's threat to nationalize Iran's oil industry. While Mosaddeq insisted on strict adherence to the Iranian "Nine-Point Nationalization Law," which was passed in May 1951, as a point of departure between AOIC and American and British officials, other avenues to resolving the dispute were explored through international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Court of Justice.

Painter and Brew provide new and critical details that explain why neither of these two avenues yielded a resolution. In the case of the World Bank, the official who was responsible for negotiating, World Bank vice-president Robert Gardner, was a former executive for General Foods and sought advice from the British on how to deal with Mosaddeq (82). Painter and Brew point out that "the World Bank was a commercial organization approaching a problem that was essentially political" (82). These seemingly small insights enrich a story that has been told many times and introduce new variables that are crucial to better understanding the multiple avenues that both Western powers took to advance or forestall Iranian narratives and political aims. Indeed, as the authors argue in more than one instance, "from the US point of view, a satisfactory oil settlement was the single most important element in stabilizing Iran" (183).

The primary conclusions of the book are straightforward. The authors argue that "the British feared that if Iran's nationalization succeeded, other British assets, most notably the Suez Canal, would be threatened and Britain's 'paramount objective' was retaining control of Iranian oil in British hands" (39). Moreover, for the British, as well as for the Americans, "Mosaddeq's nationalization constituted a threat to the stability of the postwar petroleum order" (39). The question that the authors grapple with is how these objectives were achieved and the nature of the broader implications that arose from this consequential episode in modern Iranian history during the Cold War.

³ Fariborz Mokhtari, "Iran's 1953 Coup Revisited: Internal Dynamics versus External Intrigue," *Middle East Journal* 62:3 (Summer 2008): 457-488, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3751/62.3.15>.

One of the greatest contributions of the book is its vast array of primary and secondary sources. While the authors lament the lack of declassified British sources, they mine dense declassified records from FRUS, the memoirs of key individuals, and previously untapped primary and secondary sources in Persian to make their case (2-4). Painter and Brew's deep familiarity with the larger primary and secondary source material cannot be overstated. The sources add increased fidelity to many of the ongoing debates that emanate from this literature. One curious omission from the bibliography and reference notes is the well-known book on this topic written by Stephen Kinzer. Unlike Painter and Brew, Kinzer highlights the covert activities of the CIA and MI6.⁴ Mark Gasiorowski, whose foundational work is included in the bibliography, focused more on the US side of the story with the objective of addressing a key question in his chapter titled, "Why did Mosaddeq fall?"⁵ while Maziar Behrooz's conclusions conform squarely with the view taken by others that it was fear of the Iranian Tudeh Party, and not the oil issue, that finally tipped the balance.⁶

Painter and Brew broaden, rather than narrow, the explanatory aperture. *The Struggle for Iran* adds many more *dramatis personae* to a complex story that has been narrowly depicted in some work as a simple ill-advised foreign policy gambit on the part of the Eisenhower administration. In the concluding chapter, which is entitled "History and Contested Memories," the authors address the extent to which US and British records either obscured or overstated certain facts surrounding the period and underplayed the role of oil interests in US policy decision making. They thoroughly flay the official conclusion in these early sources that "the crisis was driven by security concerns and had little or nothing to do with protecting the interests of the US and British oil companies; that the United States acted as an 'honest broker' between Iran and Great Britain during negotiations to resolve the nationalization dispute" (206). For those who are unfamiliar with the topic, it might be useful to read this concluding chapter before proceeding with the rest of the book.

Brew and Painter assert that one of the key lessons of the crisis is that "the British drew the lesson that they could rely on US acquiescence and assistance in removing rulers in countries traditionally under their influence" (203). The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and the British government, it seems, were far more aligned in their mutual interests than were the United States and American oil industry professionals. The implication that arises is that the international companies that dominated the oil industry, such as the "Seven Sisters," had more in common with one another than with their national governments. In the case

⁴ Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (John Wiley and Sons, 2003). Despite the catchy title and allusion to both the Global War on Terror that was underway at the time of publication and to Bernstein and Woodward's classic, *All the President's Men*, both the first and second editions of Kinzer's well-received book did a great deal to educate a broad audience about the relevance of this period in US-Iranian history.

⁵ Mark Gasiorowski, "Why did Mosaddeq Fall?" in Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2004): 261-277.

⁶ Maziar Behrooz, "The 1953 Coup in Iran and the Legacy of the Tudeh," in Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2004): 102-125. This work also appears in the bibliography.

of the British, the particular conditions that prevailed in Iran allowed for an aligning of national and industry objectives in ways that gave British leaders a greater ability to shape the outcome in their favor.

Unsurprisingly for a book with such a broad scope and deep sourcing, the authors raise more questions than they answer. If the coup against Mosaddeq was more about the long-term control and stability of the oil industry, one is left wondering how important it is that it took place during the Cold War and whether its timing was merely incidental to the story. Why did the British government feel the need to go to the International Court of Justice to counter Iran's move to nationalization? Was it because it secretly distrusted US mediation and advice or was it gambling that the ICJ would prove easier ground to achieve their ultimate objectives? Such a question might appeal to interdisciplinary scholars who study how international organizations affect domestic or regional political outcomes.⁷ How did the removal of Mosaddeq from official politics in Iran qualitatively contribute to anti-Communist policies or the weakening of electoral socialism in the Global South?

While this question is beyond the scope of this book, the authors would have done well to consider how and in what ways the removal of Mosaddeq might have changed the relationship between the British government and other regional oil producing countries like Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. In chapter 7, they include a brief discussion about how oil reserves in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait created an oil surplus, but pay less attention to how the removal of Mosaddeq, the manipulation of Iranian domestic politics, and Western cooperation on control of the industry may have affected decision making amongst other regional oil producers. One audience for this book is that of current and future practitioners and policymakers. The larger lessons that emerge from Painter and Brew's exhaustive study urge reconsideration of the formative experiences that still resonate within the hybrid regime in today's Iran. Though the generation of Iranians that remember the Mosaddeq era is passing on, Iranian distrust of the rules-based international system still shapes Iranian decision making in fundamental ways.

The main arguments of the book do not cohere evenly within the chapters, but this does not take away from the richness of the material. To the contrary, sometimes the authors include so much rich source material that it lacks context. For example, in chapter 5 ("The Final Attempt") readers are introduced to an organization called the "Psychology Strategy Board" (PSB) that was headed by an American, Ray Allen. Given the debate between scholars about the extent to which decisions and personalities associated with the

⁷ In the substantial International Relations literature on this topic, the impact of international organizations is debatable. Some argue that international organizations offer agency to weaker states and even advance democracy, while others, more in the realist tradition, have argued that states seek to intentionally advance their own interests through utilization of international organizations. For a broad range within this literature, see Jon Pevehouse, *Democracy from Above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2011); Christina L. Davis and Julia C Morse, "Protecting Trade by Legalizing Political Disputes: Why Countries Bring Cases to the International Court of Justice," *International Studies Quarterly* 62:4 (2018): 709-722, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy022>.

Truman administration (such as the “special advisor role of Averell Harriman) subsequently carried over to the Eisenhower administration and possibly influenced the outcome for Iran, a deeper discussion about the role of the PSB would have been welcome (118).⁸ So too would the inclusion of a small glossary or addendum that details the origin and potential importance of the PSB, which may be unfamiliar to readers.

Though the authors lament that there are still sources, both British and American, that have yet to be declassified, it seems hard to imagine that the release of further sources will dramatically change the overall picture. It is now up to a small community of dedicated scholars to continue to mine these smaller variables and examine how they might contribute to Painter and Brew’s larger thesis about the impact of foreign intervention in the Global South. The paternalism exhibited by both the US and Great Britain during this brief period of history in Iran is irrefutable. Painter and Brew’s research affirms that none of the Western power brokers viewed the sovereign claims of Iran as serious or even legitimate, particularly when held up against their own interests in the future profit that came with control over oil resources. In this respect, whether in the context of the early Cold War or within today’s Great Power Competition, little has changed. Mosaddeq and his supporters, as well as even the inexperienced shah, clung to the legalistic letter of their own agreements and sought to make their arguments to international organizations like the UN. Their rigid and legalistic negotiation style carries on today within some of Iran’s most important institutions, particularly those that include the nuclear portfolio.⁹

Painter explains in the introduction that he began initial research on the topic in the 1990s, and then set it “aside in 2003, awaiting what I erroneously believed to be the imminent declassification of crucial documents” (x). Two decades later, the final manuscript that he and Brew have put together has proven to be well worth the wait. Painter’s humble admission and thanks to his younger colleague Brew is worth commending. The scholarly contributions that Painter has made in other areas of Cold War history (as well as his long and dedicated mentorship to many younger historians) was already evident in his excellent monograph on the international history of the Cold War.¹⁰ Brew, for his part, has established himself with solid scholarship and this book does much to further that momentum.¹¹ For those who read the book and are impressed by the vast array of new sources and deep research, it is also important to remember that all academicians, even the most successful ones, have at least one manuscript that languishes in a desk drawer

⁸ For an overview of the PSB, its establishment, and main activities, see Harry S. Truman Papers Staff Member and Office Files: Psychological Strategy Board Files | Harry S. Truman (trumanlibrary.gov); <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/harry-s-truman-papers-staff-member-and-office-files-psychological-strategy>.

⁹ Daniel H. Joyner, *Iran’s Nuclear Program and International Law: From Confrontation to Accord* (Oxford University Press, 2016.) See also, William Burr, “A Brief History of U.S.-Iranian Nuclear Negotiations,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 65:1(2009): 21-34, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2968/065001004>.

¹⁰ David S. Painter, *The Cold War: An International History* (Routledge, 1999.)

¹¹ Gregory Brew, *Petroleum and Progress in Iran: Oil, Development, and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2022.) In this excellent book, Brew follows the story of Iranian oil through the early 1960s and the Kennedy Administration.

far longer than expected, and that it is the cooperative endeavor and ongoing dialogue between colleagues that moves knowledge forward.

The Struggle for Iran will be most valuable for readers who have an appreciable background on the subject. It provides an excellent departure point for more and deeper exploration of the consequential and ill-fated Mosaddeq era in Iran. It challenges its readers to entertain new debates within the field of international history and provides a substantive springboard for further work on this unresolved period in Iranian history.

On 19 August 1953, a pack of Sherman tanks lumbered toward the Tehran residence of Iran's Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq as a violent mob laid siege to the premises. That day, CIA agent Kermit Roosevelt was ecstatic, reporting that the "overthrow of Mossadeq [sic] appears on [the] verge of success," while the US embassy approvingly noted truckloads of soldiers and protesters patrolling the capital (171). As the operation reached its climax, disloyal officers and hired demonstrators ransacked the offices of political opponents, seized the local radio station, and crushed pockets of resistance. While the mob converged on the prime minister's house, Mosaddeq's supporters repelled successive waves of attackers in a blistering shootout.¹ Finally, the arrival of the tanks compelled him and his cabinet to flee across the rooftop as his home dissolved into rubble.

The coup was the culmination of a longer "struggle for Iran" that David Painter and Gregory Brew brilliantly evoke in their eponymous book. Combining American and British archival work—including recently declassified documents—with Farsi sources, they demonstrate that the nationalization of Iranian oil opened a critical new chapter in international history. Riding the crest of a popular movement, Mosaddeq put Iran at the vanguard of the Global South's struggle for self-determination and resource sovereignty. Fearing a chain reaction of nationalizations across the Third World, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and Western leaders plotted to frustrate Iranian ambitions—leaving a history that continues to haunt the present.

Painter and Brew situate the struggle for Iran within an ongoing conflict between foreign imperialism and Persian nationalism. Since the nineteenth century European empires had extracted economic concessions from Iranians, and, by 1914, Great Britain controlled the country's oil (10-13). Western imperialism found symbolic expression in the Abadan refinery (23). While foreign staff enjoyed swimming pools and a cinema, the majority of Iranian workers lived in sweltering slums. The largest refinery complex in the world and a fixture in the imperial imaginary, Abadan was a leading source of British revenue, supplied the empire with oil, and fortified the value of the pound sterling through its exports. Any conflict over the AIOC's Iranian holdings, then, inevitably became a struggle over the empire and geopolitics of energy.

After World War II, Iran tried to improve its contract with the AIOC in order to secure funds for economic development (23-26). Yet British officials were intransigent, refusing to seriously revise the terms, even as the Truman administration warned that negotiations between American companies and Third World producers would soon make the concession obsolete. In December 1950, Aramco and Saudi Arabia announced a "fifty-fifty" profit-sharing agreement, discrediting the token reform that the AIOC was trying to ramrod through the Majles, Iran's legislative assembly (35). Still, company officials denied Prime Minister Ali Razmara's request for "a face-saving measure," instead drafting speeches that Razmara and his

¹ Ali Rahnama, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 228-234.

finance minister delivered in parliament to catcalls and jeers (34-36). In March 1951, Razmara was assassinated. One day later, the Majles unanimously approved a resolution supporting nationalization.

Building on work by Ervand Abrahamian and others, Painter and Brew gesture to the dialectic between a popular mobilization from below and reform from above.² That April, after a strike immobilized the oil industry, deputies passed Mosaddeq's nationalization bill and appointed him prime minister (38-39). Workers denounced the AIOC for cutting their benefits, while also demanding state control—suddenly making his bill not only popular but politically viable. In their admirably concise study, Painter and Brew necessarily neglect the grassroots dimension of the struggle for Iran, leaving readers with tantalizing questions and room for future research.

Nationalization elicited a fiercely negative reaction in the United States and Great Britain. For decades, historians have debated over the role of the Truman administration in the negotiations that followed between Mosaddeq and the AIOC. Stephen Kinzer, Barry Rubin, and others have suggested that American officials initially mediated in good faith, in order to prevent Iran from plunging into economic chaos and slipping into the socialist bloc.³ On the other hand, Abrahamian has forcefully argued that they never accepted the principle of nationalization, fearing that Mosaddeq's drive for self-determination would inspire resource nationalists across the Global South, and thus, fatally undermine Western hegemony over the energy industry.⁴

Painter and Brew demonstrate in definitive detail that Truman opposed nationalization. Ironically, the president complained that Chairman William Fraser of the AIOC behaved like a “typical nineteenth-century colonial exploiter,” while dealing “ineptly and disastrously” with Iran (43). Secretary of State Dean Acheson was even more scathing: “Never had so few lost so much so stupidly and so fast” (43). But ultimately, American leaders prioritized their strategic partnership with Great Britain and Western control of the energy sector.

In the fitful negotiations that followed, the State Department pressed Iranian leaders to make concessions, even as diplomats privately conceded that British demands were unreasonable. Behind closed doors, Western officials agreed that they would “pay lip service” to nationalization, disguising foreign mastery with the “façade” or “cloak” of local control.⁵ Refusing to respect Iranian sovereignty, Whitehall's

² Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (The New Press, 2015), 67-74; Neveen Abdelrehim, Josephine Maltby, and Steven Toms, “Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Control: The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, 1933-1951,” *Enterprise & Society* 12:4 (2011): 824-862, 835; Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 1985), 188-189.

³ Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (John Wiley and Sons, 2003), 3-4, 92; Barry Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 43-44.

⁴ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 3.

⁵ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 85, 91.

negotiators remained inflexible, confiding that they “dressed up” previous proposals with “sweetenings” (56). Even while leaning on Mosaddeq, the American diplomat Averell Harriman admitted that the US position was possibly “camouflage for the complete return of British control” (58).

On its face, negotiations foundered on the question of compensation, as the AIOC demanded payment not only for existing assets but future lost profits—a requirement that directors suspected Mosaddeq could not accept (117). Most accounts portray the prime minister as a stubborn eccentric, receiving diplomats in his pajamas, fainting during flights of rhetorical passion, or allegedly failing to understand the gravity of the crisis.⁶ By contrast, Painter and Brew illustrate that Mosaddeq was discerning and flexible, while confronting both foreign aggression and internal subversion. He seriously engaged multiple American proposals for a settlement—including a plan to use the British Coal Act as the basis for compensation (131-132). Remarkably, Britain then backtracked, claiming that its own law was “badly drafted” and “filled with ambiguity” (130).

In retrospect, the Anglo-American powers’ refusal to accept nationalization undermined talks from the outset. Painter and Brew’s study lends the impression that negotiations were ultimately a tactic meant to consolidate neocolonial mastery. “[B]y sitting still on the safety valve and showing no weariness we are gradually wearing them into submission,” Prime Minister Winston Churchill boasted (95). By early 1953, negotiations had clearly gridlocked. Playing for time, Churchill and his colleagues believed they could “bring the state [sic] Department along with us” and convinced the incoming president, Dwight Eisenhower, to pursue regime change, as the Iranian economy deteriorated and fears of a Communist power-grab mounted (137).

That spring, the correlation of political forces ominously shifted against Mosaddeq’s favor. Feeling eclipsed by the prime minister, former collaborators such as Ayatollah Abolqassem Kashani and Mozaffar Baqa’i openly maligned him, splintering his governing coalition. While it is a history of remarkable scope, *The Struggle for Iran* pays relatively less attention to the domestic confrontation. Most historians suggest that Kashani, Baqa’i, and other National Front defectors changed camps in order to bolster their own political influence.⁷ After the Majles began its latest session in May, a reinforced opposition attempted to make the country ungovernable—brazenly insulting and physically assaulting pro-Mosaddeq deputies.⁸

Using recently declassified documents, Painter and Brew suggest that Eisenhower began planning to remove Mosaddeq by April 1953 (151). They emphasize that Western leaders conceived and organized the

⁶ See, for example, Kinzer, *All the Shah’s Men*, 102-118; Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*, 58; Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (Simon and Schuster, 1991), 459-50. Yergin even suggests that Mosaddeq’s negotiating tactics were “bizarre,” while comparing Iranian strategy to a Lewis Carroll novel.

⁷ Fakhreddin Azimi, “Unseating Mosaddeq: The Configuration and Role of Domestic Forces,” in Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 55-64; Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 155-167.

⁸ Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran*, 285.

coup, offering the logistical and financial support that welded the fractious Iranian opposition together. Their research adds to a growing body of scholarship that outlines the stunning scope of American and British intervention.⁹ Even before the negotiations had sputtered, Western operatives had systematically manipulated the legislative branch and monarchy while turning the press and military against the government. For years, American and British agents enforced a suffocating oil embargo and funneled money to the opposition, buying off dozens of deputies in the Majles as they attempted to oust Mosaddeq by quasi-legal means.¹⁰ Indeed, the CIA funneled so much money into Iran that the value of the US dollar reportedly fell over 250 percent in Tehran following the coup.¹¹

Both powers also engineered a massive propaganda offensive. After nationalization, the British press attaché in Iran directed what he called “a steady supply of poison too venomous for the BBC” to the US.¹² Meanwhile, Western agents pumped disinformation through at least twenty Iranian newspapers, exploiting what CIA agent Donald Wilber called “a subsidized press” and “its venal...journalists.”¹³ Their fingerprints were all over the coup. The United States patiently drove a wedge between wavering officers and the prime minister, leveraging contacts through the US embassy and military mission. Intelligence agents even helped General Fazlollah Zahedi organize his military directorate while supplying it the blueprints for intervention.¹⁴ And finally, American officials strong-armed the shah into backing the coup, enlisting the support of the only figure who could unite the opposition forces and lend regime change an aura of legitimacy (172).

After a bungled military operation, the CIA and M16 mobilized their extensive network of assets on 19 August against strategic sites in Tehran. As previously noted, by late afternoon, the mob of soldiers and paid protesters converged on Mosaddeq’s house before reducing it to scorched rubble. So ended Iran’s audacious experiment in liberal democracy and self-determination. “While it is clear that the coup would not have succeeded without the active participation of Mosaddeq’s Iranian opposition, accounts that ignore or minimize the role of US and British covert operatives are not credible,” Painter and Brew stress (172). This point merits emphasis. For decades, historians have debated the degree of Anglo-American responsibility for the coup. While acknowledging Western meddling, scholars such as Darioush Bayandor and Ray Takeyh stress Iranian initiative—even suggesting that the CIA did not direct the 19 August

⁹ See, for example, Abrahamian, *The Coup*; Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran*; Kinzer, *All the Shah’s Men*; Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’État Against Mosaddeq,” in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, eds. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, 227-260; Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions*.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Heiss, “The International Boycott of Iranian Oil and the Anti-Mosaddeq Coup of 1953,” in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, 178-185; Mark J. Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coup d’État Against Mosaddeq,” 243-244.

¹¹ Rahnema, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran*, 268.

¹² Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 100-101.

¹³ Azimi, “Unseating Mosaddeq,” 98.

¹⁴ Azimi, “Unseating Mosaddeq,” 86.

operation.¹⁵ In large part, a lack of theoretical clarity accounts for the failure of historians to appreciate the essential role of Western actors. For intervention is not simply an *event* but a *process*.

A coup is a clarifying crisis—a microcosm of the power relations that compose a political structure even as it implodes. Although it was Iranian forces who arrested Mosaddeq, American and British officials had manipulated the economic, political, and military correlation of forces for years: imposing an embargo, sabotaging negotiations, corrupting the Majles and press, and wielding the military against its own government. As Mosaddeq insisted, he confronted imperialism—which usually entails a division of labor between the metropole and indigenous collaborators. The coup was merely the culmination of this larger struggle.

In its wake, the Anglo-American powers helped General Zahedi and the shah impose a new authoritarian order, banishing Mosaddeq to his Ahmadabad residence, imprisoning colleagues, and brutally silencing dissent. The CIA reported that it was “very active” in selecting new deputies for the Majles, while confiding that the Zahedi administration was unpopular, incompetent, and dominated by the “old ruling class” (183-184). Incredibly, Painter and Brew reveal that post-coup oil negotiations were initially no more successful than under Mosaddeq. Exasperated, Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson at one point proposed ending talks and redirecting \$100 million in aid for Britain to Iran (190). In April 1954, Iran, Britain, and seven Western corporations agreed to form an oil consortium, granting 40 percent of the shares and over \$600 million in compensation to the AIOC (192-193). The agreement ensured that effective control over Iranian energy remained in foreign hands. As Abrahamian points out, Iran became the first oil producer in the Global South to begin nationalization and the last to finish the process, achieving resource sovereignty only after the 1979 revolution.¹⁶

Painter and Brew conclude by emphasizing the enduring consequences of Western imperialism. Masterfully combining the latest interpretative frameworks with their own research, they argue that the struggle for Iran was a drama of world-historical importance.¹⁷ The coup became a model for Cold War interventions, while frustrating one of the most influential movements for economic sovereignty at the height of decolonization. By the time of his fall, Mosaddeq was an electrifying symbol of Third World self-assertion. “Abadan,” Peter Ramsbotham of the Foreign Office later concluded, was “the real end of empire”—a devastating blow to the British Empire that inspired people across the Global South (7). Conversely, the pattern of covert intervention that Truman and Eisenhower pioneered in Iran became a defining feature of the Cold War, foreshadowing similar operations in Guatemala (1954), the Congo (1960), Cuba (1961),

¹⁵ Darioush Bayandor, *Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mosaddeq Revisited* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 118-146; Ray Takeyh, “What Really Happened in Iran: The CIA, the Ouster of Mosaddeq, and the Restoration of the Shah,” *Foreign Affairs* 93:4 (2012): 2-12. Takeyh strongly criticizes historians for emphasizing CIA involvement, claiming that its role was “ultimately insignificant.” He also argues that narratives that stress Western responsibility are “myths.”

¹⁶ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 211.

¹⁷ Abrahamian, *The Coup*; Rahnama, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran*; Fakhreddin Azimi, “The Overthrow of the Government of Mosaddeq Reconsidered,” *Iranian Studies* 45:5 (2012): 693-712.

Vietnam (1963), Brazil (1964), Indonesia (1965), Chile (1973), and elsewhere.¹⁸ As Painter and Brew insist, covert action against Mosaddeq was “not an aberration” but “typical of U.S. and Western policy” (9).

By bolstering the shah’s power, the West helped to consolidate an absolute monarchy that lacked legal channels for dissent, making revolution virtually the only mechanism for political change.¹⁹ When it arrived in the late 1970s, many revolutionaries invoked the memory of Mosaddeq, while evincing deep mistrust of the United States. That bitter legacy persists. Whether the issue has been US involvement in the Iran-Iraq War, support for Israel and Arab rivals, economic sanctions and nuclear energy, or the protests that ignited in September 2022 after Mahsa Amini allegedly died from police brutality, many Iranians still regard the United States with intense suspicion and an acute sense of historical injustice.²⁰ In many ways, Painter and Brew’s authoritative work on the nationalization crisis is a mirror of the present. The struggle for Iran continues.

¹⁸ For more scholarship about U.S. involvement in regime change, see Stephen Kinzer, *Overtbrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (Times Books, 2007); Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (Penguin Books, 2016); Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford University Press, 2010); Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Several classic works that examine this process include Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shab: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (Rutgers University Press, 1989); James Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (Yale University Press, 1988).

²⁰ See, for example, Ervand Abrahamian, “The Paranoid Style in Iranian Politics,” in *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 111–130; Patrick Smith, “Iran’s supreme leader breaks silence on Mahsa Amini, blaming U.S. and Israel for violent protests,” *NBC News*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/irans-supreme-leader-breaks-silence-mahsa-amini-blames-us-rcna50413>.

“On the Limits of ‘National Security’ as an Explanatory Vehicle”

David Painter and Gregory Brew have written what may be regarded as the “definitive account” of the 1951–1954 Anglo-Iranian oil crisis. The book employs an impressive array of US and British archival sources, a close reading of the extensive *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* volumes on the period, interviews with key players, and, significantly, Persian language periodicals and secondary sources. The authors have synthesized this massive collection of materials to produce a highly readable narrative on one of the most pivotal developments in the international history of the twentieth century. They argue that by taking an international approach, in which US, British, and Iranian perspectives are afforded equal weight, it is possible to arrive at a clearer understanding of the crisis in which an older narrative of Cold War bipolarity can be reconciled with a more recent account of the post-World War Two decolonization of Asia and Africa. In their formulation, control over the natural resources of Third World states such as Iran had a “significant impact on the global balance of power” (1).

In seeking to reconcile a metanarrative of East-West ideological and security conflict with a competing metanarrative of North-South economic conflict, the authors put forward what can be thought of as the latest iteration of the “post-revisionist synthesis” of Cold War history.¹ In this review, however, I will suggest that those two metanarratives are mutually incompatible and the effort to combine them produces an account riven by internal contradictions.

The logical tension I highlight is most clearly apparent when looking at how the book apprehends American policymakers’ sense of threat perception. The book advances two divergent theses on this score. On the one hand, it puts forward the traditional, or orthodox, thesis that American policymakers were sincerely concerned that the crisis in Iran could spiral out of control and allow the Communist Tudeh to seize power by force. The Tudeh would then align Iran with the Soviet Union. The “loss” of Iran and its oil to Communism, would in turn, have major strategic consequences: “US officials feared that if the Soviets gained control of Iran, they would threaten the security of the Persian Gulf and important US economic and security interests in the region.” What was at stake was nothing less than “Western control of the rest of the region’s oil” (6).

This narrative of the Soviet threat to Iran flows through one of the oldest and deepest grooves in the historiography of American diplomacy. As early as November 1954, CIA Director Allen Dulles was boasting in the *Saturday Evening Post* of CIA exploits in foiling the Reds’ plan to takeover in Iran.² The argument

¹ On Cold War post-revisionism and its limits, see Bruce Cumings, “‘Revising Postrevisionism,’ or, the Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 17:4 (1993), 539–569. See particularly Cumings’ critique of Melvyn P. Leffler’s concept of “national security” (561–63). See also Painter and Brew’s embrace of that concept at key points in the analysis: *The Struggle for Iran*, 5 n. 22, 31 n. 95, and 206–07.

² Richard and Gladys Harkness, “The Mysterious Doings of the CIA,” *Saturday Evening Post* 6 November 1954, 68.

cited above, detailing the Soviet threat to Iran and the world, is however immediately followed by a paragraph that begins by stating that American policymakers “tended to exaggerate the threat of a pro-Soviet government coming to power” (6). The two paragraphs seem to be in logical contradiction with one another. Was the American representation of the Soviet threat cynical or naive? Did policymakers sincerely believe that a Soviet takeover—with all those attendant consequences—was a realistic possibility, or did they engage in willful and systematic “threat inflation” to advance a preexisting or ulterior policy agenda?

This logical tension reoccurs throughout the book. On the following page the authors note: “At no point in during the crisis did US intelligence officials believe the Tudeh was capable of seizing power, though that did not stop senior policymakers from worrying that an internal crisis might occur and allow for a communist takeover” (7). Still later, as Eisenhower administration readied its plans for a coup, we learn that “[d]espite intelligence reports that concluded the Tudeh remained too weak to attempt a takeover of the government, actions by the coup planners and rhetoric from US leaders had manufactured a communist threat in order to justify an extreme response” (164). In this formulation, policymakers disregarded available evidence to “manufacture” a threat that did not truly exist. In a similar vein, we learn that, long after the fact, as the decision to overthrow Mossadeq became increasingly controversial, “no one worked harder” than Ambassador Loy Henderson to disseminate the false and self-serving narrative that a coup was necessary to forestall the imminent loss of Iran to Communism (204). Taken together these passages constitute an argument that American policymakers intentionally inflated the threat of Communist takeover so as to advance an ulterior motive.

The ulterior motive lurking beneath and behind the rhetoric of the Soviet threat is stated most explicitly in the book’s conclusion. There the authors put forward the argument that it is erroneous (a product of “myths and misperceptions”) to believe that “US policy throughout the crisis was driven by security concerns and had little to nothing to do with protecting the interests of U.S. and British oil companies” (206). The authors seek to reconcile the tension between the stated US objective of “containing communism” with the unstated objective of “combatting nationalization” by noting that “ideas about national security are not given, but rather are shaped by the structures of power and influence in the society they are meant to defend” (206). The argument here seems to be that the idea that the Iranian nationalization threatened US national security was mere affect—a product of the power and influence that the major oil companies wielded over American policymakers.

The idea that oil companies manipulated American foreign policy to serve their own ends—and that they employ the rhetoric of “national security” to accomplish this—seems natural enough. But this insight appears to be contradicted on the very next page, where the power dynamics are seemingly reversed. There the authors explain that policymakers saw the major oil companies as “vehicles for the national interest” (207). The national interest, in this instance, was in maintaining US control over Iranian oil. Returning to the themes raised in the introduction, the authors explain:

Control of oil was a significant source of US power and influence, and US oil policy was integrally linked to Cold War strategic calculations. Control of oil helped the United States

contain the Soviet Union; end destructive political, economic, and military competition among core capitalist states, mitigate class conflict within the capitalist core by promoting economic growth; and retain access to the raw materials, markets, and labor of the periphery in an era of decolonization and national liberation (207).

The problem, or potential problem with this formulation, is that it seems to accept the idea that private oil companies were in fact “vehicles for the national interest,” and that their operations in Iran and beyond served to “contain the Soviet Union.” This is a problematic in that it naturalizes the effects of the very “structures of power and influence” that the authors have just called into question. It yields to the idea that the profit-making activities of private firms served some larger public interest and equates the concessionary rights of multinational corporations with something called “US control.”

The conflation of multinational corporate ownership with US control is particularly problematic because it is the central “myth” that Robert Vitalis seeks to deconstruct in his recent *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt U.S. Energy Policy*. According to Vitalis, “oilcraft” is a form of magical realism akin to witchcraft, in which notions of “oil-as-power” are taken as “unquestionably true” (6). Vitalis seeks to disrupt this “doctrinal verity” by posing the question, “what does control of oil mean, and more important, how does this hidden (and in some versions not so hidden) power operate?” For Vitalis, “bold claims” about what this supposed control affords “cannot be falsified but must be taken on faith.” Vitalis concludes from his own investigations “the idea of U.S. control is a mirage.”³ If Vitalis is correct, and major multinational oil corporations are not reducible to agents of the state, then the concessionary claims of multinational corporations cannot be viewed as a “source of US power.”⁴

More problematic than the unexamined assumption of “US control” is the notion that the concessionary claims of multinational corporations assured “access to oil.” Earlier in the book the authors note that the Iranian nationalization in no way threatened the access of US or other global consumers to Iranian oil. On the contrary, it was the British deployment of fourteen warships to blockade the Iranian coastline that denied Iran access to global markets (61). This issue of the British blocking Iranian access to world markets, in turn, goes straight to another conceptual issue that is neglected in the book: the ideology of oil scarcity. This is to say that much of the traditional literature, including Painter and Brew’s contribution, sets forth from the assumption that oil is scarce, that access is insecure, and that therefore extraordinary (extra-

³ Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 11-12.

⁴ Vitalis developed these arguments in detail in “Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf,” *Diplomatic History* 26:2 (2002), 195-97; *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 11-12. *America’s Kingdom* is listed in the bibliography of *The Struggle for Iran*, but Vitalis’s arguments about the relationship between states and firms are not taken up in either the text or the notes of the book. The analytical distinction between states and firms, and indeed the relative autonomy of the latter from the former was illustrated vividly (if perhaps apocryphally) by Exxon-Mobil CEO Lee Raymond when he explained to journalist Steve Coll: “I’m not a U.S. company and I don’t make decisions based on what’s good for the U.S.” See Coll, *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power* (Penguin, 2012), 71.

market, covert, military, etc.) measures are required to assure the smooth flow of oil from producers to consumers.⁵ But as Vitalis, Timothy Mitchell, and Roger Stern have argued at length, the problem bedeviling the major multinational oil companies in the 1950s was not oil scarcity or insecurity, but rather profit-killing superabundance and overproduction.⁶

The book's relative inattention to the ideology of oil scarcity is part of a broader minimizing of domestic American political and ideological factors in favor of an emphasis on Cold War national security strategy. For instance, there is no indication in *The Struggle for Iran* that American policymaking during the crisis transpired amidst the most acute phase of McCarthyism in which the "Communist threat to national security" was represented before the public in the most cynical of terms. (Neither McCarthy nor McCarthyism appear in the book). Likewise, there are vague intimations that key American policymakers did not believe that the Iranians were racially fit for self-government (8, 204), but American ideas about race are afforded no independent causal force—and this despite the massive outpouring of recent literature on precisely this point.⁷

In short, *The Struggle for Iran* codifies much of what once constituted the conventional wisdom regarding the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis, but does little to question or challenge the verities of that conventional wisdom.

⁵ Permutations of and variations on the oil scarcity theme are vast but ably summarized in Roger J. Stern, "Oil Scarcity Ideology in US Foreign Policy, 1908–97," *Security Studies* 25:2 (2016), 214–257.

⁶ In addition to Vitalis, *Oilcraft*; see Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011), esp. "Securing Scarcity," 142–45, and Stern, "Oil Scarcity Ideology in US Foreign Policy, 1908–97."

⁷ Painter and Brew cite George Kennan's views about Iran's supposed "political immaturity" in a July 1952 letter (8–9) but refrain from probing the depths of Kennan's racial sensibility. For fuller context on the letter see Clayton R. Koppes, "Solving for X: Kennan, Containment, and the Color Line," *Pacific Historical Review* 82:1 (2013), 112. For more general analysis of the causal force of American ideas about race, see Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude"; *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Cornell University Press, 2015); *Oilcraft*, chapter 2, "Raw Materialism." Brew reviewed *Oilcraft* and highlighted the way that "[f]ears of scarcity are closely tied to racialized views of the developing world," but this insight about racialized views is absent from *The Struggle for Iran*. See Brew review of *Oilcraft* in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54:1 (2002), 202–03.

Response by David S. Painter, Georgetown University, emeritus and Gregory Brew, Eurasia Group

We would like to thank Diane N. Labrosse and the late Thomas R. Maddux for organizing this roundtable, and we want to echo Diane's moving tributes to Tom.¹ We also want to thank the reviewers for taking the time to engage our book's arguments and evaluate its contributions, and Christopher R.W. Dietrich, who has written eloquently about the efforts of the oil producing countries of the Global South to gain full sovereignty over their main resource, for his introduction to the roundtable.²

The reviews by Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, Heidi Elizabeth Lane, and Jonathan Ng highlight the book's key arguments, praise its contributions, make many important observations, and pose interesting questions.

Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, who has published important studies of Iranian political development, places the crisis in the longer arc of the struggle of the efforts of the Iranian people to free their country from foreign domination.³ She also raised an interesting question about the economic impact of the British-led oil boycott, which she believed needed "further scrutiny." Our comment that Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq was overstating the boycott's impact was our assessment of the situation in early 1952 (87). Our intention was not to downplay the impact of the boycott, but rather to point out that at that time it was not as dire as Mosaddeq portrayed it. The challenges of analyzing Iran's economic condition in 1951–1953 included a lack of adequate data (something analysts at the time frequently bemoaned) and the tendency of interested parties to exaggerate or downplay factors in order to present self-serving arguments. Mosaddeq both tried to preserve Iran's economy from the boycott's impact, while highlighting its possible impact with the aim of convincing the US officials, who he (correctly) believed were more worried about Iran's internal economic state than the British, to provide Iran with economic assistance or at least to stop supporting the oil boycott. Mosaddeq hoped that the threat of losing Iran to communism due to an economic cataclysm would compel the United States to take action to help Iran, but fears about the political consequences of deteriorating economic and financial conditions could be used, and later were used, by Mosaddeq's opponents to justify his ouster.⁴

¹ See Diane Labrosse's postings on H-Net, 7 December 2023; <https://networks.h-net.org/group/discussions/20015978/note-profound-thanks-tom-maddux-his-retirement-h-diplo-january-2024>, and 5 January 2024; <https://networks.h-net.org/group/discussions/20018336/sad-news-about-tom-maddux>.

² Christopher R.W. Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Heroes to Hostages: America and Iran, 1800–1988* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Kashani-Sabet, "Pandering in the Persian Gulf: Arabia, Iran, and Anglo-American Relations, 1900–1971," in Matthew K. Shannon, ed., *American-Iranian Dialogues: From Constitution to White Revolution, c. 1890s–1960s* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 73–94.

⁴ Gregory Brew, "The Collapse Narrative: The United States, Mohammad Mossadegh, and the Coup Decision of 1953," *Texas National Security Review* 2:4 (2019): 38–59.

Heidi Elizabeth Lane, who also specializes in Middle East studies, highlights the role of British and Iranian as well as American actors, as do Kashani-Sabet and Ng.⁵ Lane asks how important it was that the coup took place during the Cold War. We want to emphasize that the coup not only took place during the Cold War, but during one of its most dangerous periods, that of the Korean War. Many US officials, including President Harry S Truman, initially believed that the attack on Korea would be followed by Soviet intervention in Iran. (6) The shutdown of Iranian exports in the summer of 1951 forced the United States and the major oil companies to reroute refined products in order to ensure adequate supplies oil for the Korean War effort. Moreover, while US efforts to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in 1951 and 1952 were heavily influenced by a desire to avoid another conflict while US military power was being built up, the willingness of the Eisenhower administration to take greater risks in 1953 was closely linked to the massive increase in the size and capabilities of US military forces.⁶

While noting that it would be “beyond the scope of the book,” Lane suggests that it would be fruitful to consider how and in what ways “the removal of Mosaddeq, the manipulation of Iranian domestic politics, and Western cooperation on control of the oil industry may have affected decision making amongst other regional oil producers,” including Iraq. We had hoped that the review of Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, who has studied US policy toward Iraq after the 1958 revolution, would compare what happened in Iran to what happened in Iraq, but it did not.⁷

Jonathan Ng, whose work focuses on US relations with Iran, notes the importance of the earnings from Iranian oil to British hopes of remaining a great power and points out that “any conflict over the [Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s] Iranian holdings, then, inevitably became a struggle over the empire and the geopolitics of energy.”⁸ Ng’s perceptive observation that “intervention is not simply an *event* but a *process*” (emphases in the original) is an important reminder that the coup that ousted Mosaddeq in August 1953 was the culmination of a longer and larger struggle for control of Iran, a point which Kashani-Sabet also emphasizes. An analysis of the episode in its entirety, including its background, the various phases of negotiations, the coup operation, and its immediate aftermath, supports Ng’s observation. Anglo-American intervention in Iran was a complex affair that played out over the course of several years and underwent a series of transformations. Reducing the US position at any point belies the complexity with

⁵ Eva Bellin and Heidi E. Lane, eds., *Building the Rule of Law in the Arab World: Tunisia, Egypt, and Beyond* (Lynne Rienner, 2016). Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut also acknowledges that our study strives to afford equal weight to US, British, and Iranian perspectives, but his review focuses on US policy.

⁶ Francis J. Gavin. “Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy in Iran, 1950–1953,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1:1 (1999): 56–89.

⁷ Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq* (Stanford University Press, 2021).

⁸ Jonathan Ng, “Exporting Imperialism: Arms, Iran, and the Military Industrial Complex, 1969–1979,” *Diplomatic History* 46:2 (2022): 320–348.; Steven G. Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East: Sterling and Postwar Imperialism, 1944–1971* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); John Kent, “British Policy and the Origins of the Cold War,” in *Origins of the Cold War: An International History*, 2nd, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and David S. Painter (Routledge, 2005), 155–166.

which American officials considered the issues at stake; their British counterparts, while much more single-minded, also possessed a variety of different perspectives.

In contrast to the other reviewers' favorable evaluation of our study, Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicuttt argues that our effort to include the struggle of the peoples and nations of the Global South against foreign domination as an integral part of the Cold War results in a study that is "riven by internal contradictions," and he concludes that it "codifies much of what was once constituted the conventional wisdom regarding the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis but does little to question or challenge that conventional wisdom."

Although Wolfe-Hunnicuttt charges our book with several sins, his critique focuses on two points. First, he argues that our study "can be thought of as the latest iteration of the 'post-revisionist synthesis of Cold War history.'" We presume that this is because we argue that national security concerns played an important role in US policy and cite Melvyn P. Leffler's work on national security.⁹ Although he notes that we argue that US policymakers were also opposed to nationalization, he does not discuss our argument that combatting communism and opposing nationalization were both key components in the conception of national security held by US policymakers.

US officials feared that if the Soviet Union gained control of Iran, it could threaten the security of the Persian Gulf, imperil important US economic interests in the region, and, at the minimum, complicate Western access to the region's oil, which was playing a key role in Western Europe's and Japan's economic recovery (39).¹⁰ Our study makes it clear that US leaders opposed nationalization, sided with the British over the terms for a settlement of the dispute, and decided to work actively for Mosaddeq's removal when they concluded that he would not accept foreign control of Iran's oil and that the continuation of the dispute was undermining Western influence in Iran, including the position of the pro-Western shah. While we recognize that fear of a Communist takeover of Iran was an important factor behind the US decision to work actively to remove Mosaddeq from power, ousting Mosaddeq was not to only way to prevent communist control. Providing Iran with economic and financial assistance and ending the British-led boycott of Iranian oil exports would also have alleviated the economic problems facing Iran and enabled a popular, anti-Communist government to remain in power. US leaders did not choose this option because

⁹ Wolfe-Hunnicuttt does not explain what this "post-revisionist synthesis," which he associates with Melvyn Leffler rather than its originator and main proponent, John Gaddis, entails. Although some scholars place Leffler's work in the post-revisionist "school," he views his work as "irreconcilable" with the "post-revisionist paradigm;" see his remarks in Leffler and Painter, eds., *Origins of the Cold War*, 15-16. For an extensive treatment of the various "schools" of Cold War history, at least as they stood two decades ago, see Steven Hurst, *Cold War US Foreign Policy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ David S. Painter, "The Marshall Plan and Oil," *Cold War History* 9:2 (2009): 159-175.

they feared that successful nationalization would undermine the postwar petroleum order that was based on control of the oil resources of the Global South by US as well as British multinational oil companies.¹¹

Second, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt criticizes our study's "relative inattention to the ideology of oil scarcity" and its critics, and asserts, without evidence, that our analysis "sets forth from the assumption that oil is scarce, that access is insecure, and therefore extraordinary (extra-market, covert, military, etc.) measures are required to assure the smooth flow of oil from producers to consumers."¹² He also implies that we do not recognize that the main problem the major oil companies faced in the 1950s was "profit-killing superabundance and overproduction."

This is incorrect on both counts. At no point do we argue or assume that oil was scarce; rather we point out that US policymakers *at this time* feared that access to Iranian oil and more broadly oil from the Persian Gulf could be threatened by communist control of Iran. Our study, as well as our earlier publications, clearly note the "problems of plenty" that plagued oil markets and the extensive efforts by both states and private companies to manage the supply and demand balance and avoid destabilizing price wars.¹³ Moreover, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's review ignores our extended discussion in chapter 7 of the formation following the coup of a multinational consortium dominated by the major international oil companies which was designed to manage the reintegration of Iranian oil into international markets without exacerbating oversupply and causing destabilizing price cuts.

Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's review also misconstrues our analysis of the relationship between the US government and the major oil companies. It argues that our reference to the major international oil companies as "vehicles for the national interest" in foreign oil indicates that we believe that this was the case and that it implies that we believe that the companies were agents of the government. On the contrary, our account shows that US policymakers accepted that they were dependent on the major oil companies, which

¹¹ On the postwar petroleum order, see Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), chapter 21; and David S. Painter, *Oil and the American Century: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Oil Policy, 1941–1954* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

¹² The main texts criticizing "oil scarcity ideology" are Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011); Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt US Energy Policy* (Stanford University Press, 2020); and Roger Stern, "Oil Scarcity Ideology in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1908–1997," *Security Studies* 25:2 (2016): 214–257.

¹³ Gregory Brew, *Petroleum and Progress in Iran: Oil, Development, and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Painter, *Oil and American Century*. For a sample of the vast scholarship on the topic, see Edith T. Penrose, *The Large International Firm in Developing Countries: The International Petroleum Industry* (George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1968); George W. Stocking, *Middle East Oil: A Study in Political and Economic Controversy* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1970); John Blair, *The Control of Oil* (Pantheon Books, 1976); Peter F. Cowey, *The Problems of Plenty: Energy Policy and International Politics* (University of California Press, 1985); Theodore H. Moran, "Managing an Oligopoly of Would-Be Sovereigns: The Dynamics of Joint Control and Self-Control in the International Oil Industry Past, Present, and Future," *International Organization* 41:4 (1987): 575–607; and Victor McFarland and Jeff D. Colgan, "Oil and Power: The Effectiveness of State Threats on Markets," *Review of International Political Economy* 30:2 (2023): 487–510.

possessed the financial, technical, and organizational capacity to find, transport, refine, and supply oil to markets, and that they worked consistently to ensure conditions where the companies could operate with security and make a profit. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's review also ignores the history of relations between the US government and the oil industry, in particular the defeat of efforts during World War II to carve out a greater role for public policy.¹⁴ Similarly, he sees our statement that "control of oil was a significant source of US power and influence" as an endorsement of this situation rather than a description of the consequences of controlling access to oil at this historical moment.

In addition, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt claims that our study minimizes domestic American political and ideological factors in favor of an emphasis on Cold War national security strategy and points out that we do not mention notorious anti-Communist demagogue, Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, or McCarthyism. As far as we could tell, Sen. McCarthy paid little or no attention to the crisis, probably because it involved a British rather than an American corporation. In addition, as we make clear, US policy under Truman as well as President Dwight D. Eisenhower was staunchly anti-Communist and opposed to nationalization.

Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's criticism that we do not treat American ideas about race as an independent causal factor not only conflates race with ethnicity but fails to offer any concrete example of how these deplorable attitudes, which we discuss (8-9), affected policy during the crisis. British ethnocentric arrogance was even more pronounced, but well-known Iranian scholar Ervand Abrahamian, whose 2012 book, *The Coup*, provides extensive examples of British prejudice, rejects the idea that cultural prejudices were a key factor driving British policy.¹⁵ Finally, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's statement that our study "codifies" conventional wisdom about the crisis discounts our criticisms of the conventional wisdom in the conclusion (206-12), which, according to Lane, "thoroughly flay" the conventional wisdom."

We appreciate the generous and perceptive reviews by Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, Heidi Elizabeth Lane, and Jonathan Ng. Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's review provided us an opportunity to amplify and clarify important aspects of our argument. In any event, we hope that this roundtable will be useful to readers as they reach their own conclusions about our book.

¹⁴ As discussed in detail in Painter, *Oil and the American Century*.

¹⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953 the CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations* (The New Press, 2013), 98-108.