



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

TAKEYH: The story of 1953 coup touches all the erogenous onus of America left. And just that's why—

DUBOWITZ: Welcome to *The Iran Breakdown*. Let's break it down. So whether you're a seasoned Iran watcher, or just starting to explore the topic, understanding the Islamic Republic requires going back to the events that led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

And to do that, we need to revisit a critical year in 1953, the year a coup overthrew Iran's Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. If you think you already know the story, you don't. On this episode, I'm joined by Ray Takeyh. He's a renowned Iran scholar. He's the author of *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty*. His research has challenged, clarified, and reshaped the traditional narrative surrounding these pivotal events.

Ray's work isn't just essential for understanding U.S.-Iran relations, it's a guide for policymakers seeking to grasp the reality of an Iranian people who continue to defy this repressive regime in Tehran. By the end of this episode, you'll understand why.

Ray is the Hasib J. Sabbagh Senior Fellow for Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, specializing in Iran-U.S. Foreign Policy in the modern Middle East. I'm Mark Dubowitz, and this is the Iran Breakdown. So, let's break it down.

TAKEYH: Let's do it.

DUBOWITZ: Great. Ray, welcome to the Iran Breakdown.

TAKEYH: Thank you.

DUBOWITZ: Thanks so much for coming on the show.

TAKEYH: Thanks for having me.

DUBOWITZ: So Ray, I was recently reading your book, *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty*. So really, a great book, detailed explanation of what really happened, how the Shah went down, what led to the Islamic Revolution, and the mess we're in today with the Islamic Republic.

What really fascinated me about the book, and your writings around the book, is this 1953 coup in Iran, and the prevailing conventional wisdom around it, which you really have challenged, which I found really fascinating. So you challenged this long-standing belief that the CIA and MI6 orchestrated the 1953 coup in Iran. And I want to talk about this series of events, but perhaps in order to position this discussion, what happened in '53? Who was Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh? And then we can talk about the coup and the mythology around it.

TAKEYH: Dr. Mosaddegh is really associated with the oil nationalization crisis. People always focus on the 1953 coup, but the crisis was from 1950 to 1953. He was appointed Prime Minister by the Shah because he was a long-standing member of the aristocratic class, and he had long commitment to nationalization of Iranian oil and reclaiming it from the British AIOC company.

DUBOWITZ: So this is the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company?

TAKEYH: Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which is, I think today, called the British—

DUBOWITZ: Petroleum.

TAKEYH: ... Petroleum.



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DUBOWITZ: BP, right.

TAKEYH: British Petroleum. And it is undoubtedly true that the British arrangement was exploitative. I think the British government, which was the majority stock owner in the Iranian oil fields, was getting more in tax revenue from AIOC than Iran was getting revenue from its own oil production.

So the exploitative nature of the British presence was beyond doubt. And everybody was interested in nationalization of the Iranian oil, the Shah, the Prime Minister. So he was brought in, essentially, to forge ahead with the nationalization.

So everybody had agreed that the arrangement between Iran and the British government should be rearranged. That's true also about the U.S. government. So that began the process of nationalization of oil. And the issue was no longer whether Iran would reclaim this oil. The real dispute became, what is the degree of British compensation for a contract that was abrogated once the British installations became nationalized, taken over by the Iranian?

DUBOWITZ: Right. Ray, what I want to do also is, before we get into the details of this arrangement over oil, and then the series of events that led to the overthrow of Mossadegh, could you just zoom out, and just sort of situate. It's 1953, it's sort of the height of the Cold War.

TAKEYH: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: Right? Eisenhower's President.

TAKEYH: Becomes President at the tail end of the nationalization crisis. For most of it, it is Harry Truman. Yes.

DUBOWITZ: So it's Truman leading to Eisenhower.

TAKEYH: Leading to Eisenhower.

DUBOWITZ: And talk a little bit about the American view of Iran at the time, because I think it's important for our listeners to understand, ultimately, what led to the decision for the CIA to get involved, and MI6. What is the state of play vis-a-vis Iran and the Cold War at the time?

TAKEYH: Iran is essential part of the American Cold War strategy, particularly when the Cold War moves beyond Europe to what was called the Great Colonial Realm, when you have the independence movement.

So Iran is also, the oil is very important for reconstruction and rehabilitation of Europe, as part of the Marshall Plan. So it is both as energy sources, its location on the periphery of the Soviet Union, and its general importance of the Middle East, were appreciated by the American Cold War planners.

And I will say, that the United States and Iran actually had very good relationships. And one of the things that is often not talked about by many is the benevolent role that the United States has played in Iran. In 1946, the Soviet Union wanted to take over large chunks of Iran, in the Azerbaijan province. And what stopped it was the United States.

So Iran's territorial integrity in the aftermath of the Second World War was insured by the United States. It was the only time during the Cold War where Joseph Stalin removed troops from a place he had already had his combat forces.

DUBOWITZ: But it's early 1950s. Again, intense competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States, I guess, has secured the European continent to some extent, but a battle over, as you say, the periphery. And at the time, Truman into Eisenhower, is there deep concern about communist influence in Iran? Or are they feeling pretty secure that-



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

TAKEYH: There's concern about communist influence in Iran. There's a war taking place in Korea at the time. So there's the Iranian oil, to some extent, is important for British naval forces. Britain was a large participant in the Korean War.

Then within Iran, there's a well-organized communist party called the Tudeh Party, the People's Party. And its ideology was particularly appealing to student groups, the young intelligentsia that was coming, to the— also, it was very effective in organizing labor protests and workers. So this is what communist parties do.

So there was a well-organized communist party at that time, that was a source of concern for the United States. And it was probably at that time out, maybe with the exception of the Iraqi Communist Party, the most capable communist party in the Middle East.

DUBOWITZ: So you've got intense competition with the Soviet Union. You've got a strong communist party inside Iran. You've got a dispute between the UK and Iran over oil. And then you've got this Iranian figure, Mohammed Mosaddegh.

TAKEYH: That's right.

DUBOWITZ: So who is Mossadegh? Where does he come from? And why does he become an important player?

TAKEYH: Mossadegh was a long member of the Iranian aristocratic class. He actually had a doctorate in law from a university in Switzerland. He was viewed as one of the more important figures in that aristocratic class. He had held a number of ministerial positions. He was a nationalist and a patriot without doubt.

But among members of his class, Mossadegh was one of the few of that stature who had never become Prime Minister. There was a reason for that. His introduction to power, I think, appealed to his more authoritarian aspects of his personality, particularly as the crisis deepened.

Mossadegh was a head of something called the National Front Party, which was actually more of a coalition than a political party. It had different political parties coming together. And the National Front Party had a program that was beyond oil nationalization. It was essentially modernization of education, it was healthcare, so it had a sort of a social welfare, European socialist style program as well that was aspect of his agenda.

But nationalization of oil was by far the most important issue, at that time in Iran, and at that time in the political circles. And I said, everybody agreed that it should be done.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, so that's Mosaddegh. And we'll get to Mossadegh in a lot more detail. But I guess the most important political figure of the time is the Shah. Can you say a little bit about—

TAKEYH: The Shah at that time was fairly young. He might've been in his twenties. He was often very insecure at that time in his power. And you have to remember, at that time, Iran was a country of institutions. The parliament, the cabinet, the prime minister, the nobility, the clergy, the military, the land-owning class, they all had their own independent power. So the role of the monarchy was essentially trying to negotiate among this class. The institution of monarchy was respected by all, but it wasn't the dominant institution in the country. Iran had real institutions, real—

DUBOWITZ: But he was more than a constitutional monarch. I mean, he—

TAKEYH: He was more of a constitutional monarch, he has powers. But at that time, he was still trying to negotiate his way with the opposition, with other politicians, as opposed to impose his will, as he would be later on. He wasn't as much of a despotic figure at that time. He grew into that position by the late '50s, early '60s.

DUBOWITZ: So how does Mossadegh become the Iranian Prime Minister?



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

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TAKEYH: Mossadegh becomes Iran's Prime Minister because the Shah appointed him to that position. He had a legal authority to do so. Mossadegh was a head of what was called the Oil National Committee in the parliament. And once the nationalization became the main issue, he was viewed as a natural person to actually implement it. That was a mistake, that was wrong, because he had a propensity to never compromise, even in the— he was very obdurate, very stubborn in his way.

But given the fact that he had made nationalization his most important political issue, and he had support within the parliament, the Shah conceded to his appointment.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. Because, there's a myth that Mossadegh was actually democratically elected. That is the case? Not the case?

TAKEYH: Well, he was a member of the parliament, and the parliament was notionally elected in a sort of a manipulated election. We're talking about a country with 90-95% illiteracy. We're talking about a country that's ruled by aristocracy. So he was a member of aristocratic class, who was a parliamentarian. And he had been a cabinet official before, in various previous prime minister-ship. But there was no national elections, as we understand them with the democratic franchise.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So Mossadegh is Prime Minister.

TAKEYH: Appointed—

DUBOWITZ: Appointed by the Shah.

TAKEYH: By the Shah, and a royal decree.

DUBOWITZ: Right. And comes into office obsessed with nationalizing Iran's oil resources—

TAKEYH: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: ... which, according to the prevailing view, and I think it sounds like you agree with, it had been exploited by the British for many years—

TAKEYH: Very much so. Very much so.

DUBOWITZ: ... to the disadvantage of the Iranian states.

TAKEYH: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: So there's a series now of negotiations between Iran and the UK, with some American involvement. Tell us a little bit about that.

TAKEYH: The American involvement, you can ask yourself, okay, this is a dispute between the Iranian national government and a private British firm, that has some ownership in the stocks by the British government, why is the United States involvement in this?

DUBOWITZ: Good question. Why, Ray?

TAKEYH: Because Dr. Mossadegh invited American participation. He wrote a letter to Harry Truman, and said, "Second World War, you have always been supportive of Iran. You were friends with both Iran and Britain. We ask for you to mediate this dispute."



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

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The United States became involved in the Iranian nationalization crisis at Iran's invitation. By the way, not necessarily one thing that the British wanted, but that's how United States becomes involved. And the first envoy to send, maybe the first envoy to Iran ever, was one of the Democratic Party, one of America's foremost diplomats, Averell Harriman, who had previously been, during the war, both ambassador to Britain and the Soviet Union. Before that, he had been the Governor of New York, and of course, the Harriman wealth was behind him. He becomes the first of the American envoys to go in and try to broker this arrangement between the two sides.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So there's no resolution of this conflict. You go from Truman now to Eisenhower.

TAKEYH: Well, before we jump into that, I would say, the United States made numerous proposals, most of them advantageous to Iran. From the very beginning, the United States position was, the British government has to accept nationalization, and then we have to figure out some kind of a profit sharing arrangement to compensate the British.

That position was very much opposed by the British. The British were very antagonistic and displeased about the neutral role that the United States was playing in this. The British Prime Minister at some point during this process becomes Winston Churchill. And so the British argument was that the United States is unfairly treating us, at the time when the British soldiers are fighting and dying in the Korean Peninsula.

So despite the British contributions to Atlantic Alliance, to the NATO Alliance, to the Korean War, the United States took a neutral position between the two and tried to be an honest broker. That's not an easy decision

At the time when the British troop deployment is necessary for forestalling the Chinese and North Korean attack against South Korea.

DUBOWITZ: So at this point, it's really British recalcitrance that's preventing any kind of deal.

TAKEYH: Both sides. Mosaddegh recalcitrance and the British, both sides. So every time, of course, it's like the nuclear negotiations: United States meets the impasse, it comes up with more proposals. The number of proposals that were offered were bewildering, and they tend to be very much about oil. This would bore the audience because it's economic history, but the United States tried every which way possible to get a negotiated agreement. And I think if Dr. Mosaddegh had signed up to some, they would have imposed it on the British.

DUBOWITZ: Interesting, so I think this becomes important later in the story. But so Mosaddegh is getting used to the fact that, every time he says no or the British say no, the Americans are coming back with another proposal.

TAKEYH: Correct, a more advantageous proposal to Iran.

DUBOWITZ: To Iran, right?

TAKEYH: Correct, yes.

DUBOWITZ: So I mean, he's becoming habituated to this kind of process.

TAKEYH: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: The more he holds out, the more concessions he gets.

TAKEYH: That's the British complaint as well.

DUBOWITZ: Okay.

TAKEYH: Correctly so.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

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DUBOWITZ: All right, so next stage of the story. Take us from, you've got Truman and Harriman trying to negotiate a deal with Mosaddegh and the Iranians. No success. There's an American election, there's a new U.S. President who comes in, evaluates Iran policy, and now you have Eisenhower. I guess he's— Secretary of State?

TAKEYH: Secretary of State would be John Foster Dulles.

DUBOWITZ: John Foster Dulles. And CIA director at the time?

TAKEYH: Allen Dulles.

DUBOWITZ: Allen Dulles is John Foster Dulles brother?

TAKEYH: Correct. That's right, that's right.

DUBOWITZ: So three main individuals who are going to feature later in this story. What's the view of the Eisenhower administration? Continuity from Truman, or do they have a real break from that policy?

TAKEYH: First of all, we have to backtrack a little bit. There is an embargo imposed on the Iranian oil. So Iran is unable to sell its oil at this point, so there is economic distress within the country that's provoking political divisions against Dr. Mosaddegh. His coalition is beginning to fray and so forth, so he has domestic political problems because of his inability to resolve the oil issue and generate revenue. And the embargo at that time was very effective because you had the seven sisters in terms of oil companies, and most of the tanker fleet was controlled by the United States and Britain. One of the contributions that the United States makes to this debate as far as the British is concerned, it accepts the fact that the embargo has to continue because in absence of resolving the oil issue, the oil that's coming out of Iran is viewed as contraband.

DUBOWITZ: Now at this point, I mean, the British are obviously very upset with the Iranians, I think upset with the Americans. Are the British at this point trying to persuade the Americans to support regime change and bring down Mosaddegh?

TAKEYH: The British's first proposal was to actually have some kind of a military strike and maybe even take over the oil fields. That was rejected in no uncertain terms by Truman, so that ends very quickly. That's under Prime Minister Attlee's term before Churchill comes in. So the idea of using military force against Iran is rejected by the Americans, and the British concede to that.

Their British next position would be that you cannot deal with Mosaddegh, and there has to be a change of regime. That is their position basically throughout the Truman presidency. Harry Truman rejects that position as well because he says, "We've got to try to negotiate." And Mosaddegh represents forces of post-colonial nationalism, and it's important to try to come to terms with that force within Iran and within the larger, what we used to call Third World, now they call it the Global South.

So the Americans appreciated post-colonial nationalism as a force in global politics and appreciated that British imperialism was a waning feature that had to essentially be sunsetted. And Britain has to come to terms with the new forces as well, which the British in some cases were, but there was that lingering imperial. And also, remember that the Abadan oil refinery facilities are not just the largest oil facilities in the world at that time, but also Britain's largest overseas asset.

DUBOWITZ: These are Abadan refineries in Iran?

TAKEYH: That's right.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

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DUBOWITZ: Okay. All right, so Eisenhower administration comes in. What happens next?

TAKEYH: Eisenhower is even more eager for a deal with Mosaddegh, and he essentially says, I think there's a quote in the book, "I'd just like to give this guy 15 million bucks to stabilize his economy while we try to negotiate with him as well." And the Eisenhower administration has its own proposal, which of course Mosaddegh also rejects. And at this point, there's a lot of concern that the Mosaddegh government could actually collapse, and the beneficiary of that collapse would be the Communist Party because there was some degree of flirtation between Mosaddegh and the Soviet Union. I wouldn't say it was that serious. And the Soviets were even more ham-fisted in their assessment of the Iranian situation than anybody else was in terms of—

DUBOWITZ: So Stalin dies, right, in '53?

TAKEYH: Stalin dies in March 1953, and that's important. That's important, actually most chronicles of the coup don't mention that, because it sort of affects everybody's views in a way that's disadvantageous to Dr. Mosaddegh because Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, was actually interested in waging the Cold War more so on the periphery of Europe. So he was actually trying to bring the Soviet Communist influence to Asia, Africa, Latin America, as you see with the crisis in the sixties with Cuba, and the Middle East. So he was actually more focused on the Global South than Stalin. Stalin at the end of the day was a psychopath. Well, he was a psychopath that was kind of focused on continental Europe, but his successors are more expansive in their Cold War vision and Cold War competition with the United States.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So Khrushchev wants to go global, but he hands the Iran file to [Vyacheslav] Molotov, right?

TAKEYH: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: The foreign minister.

TAKEYH: And the most unimaginative human being on planet Earth.

DUBOWITZ: Well, say a little bit about Molotov and the Iran file because I mean, from my readings of your book and other things, it seems that the paranoia about communism taking over Iran is exaggerated.

TAKEYH: It is exaggerated.

DUBOWITZ: Because as you say, you've got the Soviets now under Khrushchev, who's got expansionist ideas, but he hands the file to Molotov, who really is incompetent in running the file and, at the end of the day, doesn't really exploit the opportunity inside Iran. Though Mosaddegh is taking advantage of the situation to threaten the Americans and British that if they don't do a deal, he's going to do a deal with the Soviets.

TAKEYH: He does talk to the Soviets about using a Soviet tanker. The Soviets have some tankers to export his oil. The position of the, I guess it was still NKVD [The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs] at that time, the predecessor to KGB [Committee for State Security], was Mosaddegh was a bourgeoisie capitalist that was trying to kick the British out in order to bring the Americans in. That position becomes revised by the Politburo in 1957. Well, that's four years after the coup. They finally revised that position to recognize Mosaddegh as actually a nationalist figure, not as a bourgeoisie capitalist. By that time, of course, Mosaddegh was languishing in exile. So if the Americans had access to the KGB files, that would scratch their heads.

DUBOWITZ: So the KGB thinks that Mosaddegh is an American agent, and the Americans and British think that he's potentially flirting with the Soviets and might become a Soviet agent.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

TAKEYH: The Americans didn't think Mosaddegh was a communist. That's a line that the British used to actuate Americans. They didn't think so. However, what they fear that Mosaddegh, as his coalition of secular, liberal, or traditional forces erodes, he would rely on the Communist Party, maybe the Tudeh Party, and bring them into government in some ministerial portfolios. And this is not as crazy as a scheme because this is how most of the Communist parties came to power in Eastern Europe. First they became part of the coalition in Czechoslovakia, in Poland, in Hungary, and then they took over. So the concern that the Americans had was not that Mosaddegh was a Communist, but that he will start to rely excessively on Communists as he has little support left in other sectors of society, and eventually he may fall into that sort of absorption by Communist Party, as had happened to other non-Communist forces in various places in Eastern Europe. And particularly here is the Czechoslovakia coup of 1948, which is very much on the minds of the Americans at that time.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, so into this context, you have a character, one of these real characters that unfortunately, probably, they don't exist anymore in the CIA. But at the time, Kermit Roosevelt appears, and he is the grandson of Teddy Roosevelt.

TAKEYH: Correct.

DUBOWITZ: And a distant cousin of Franklin Roosevelt working in the CIA. I guess, he gets appointed to head their Middle East desk, of note, doesn't speak Farsi.

TAKEYH: He had, in various previous iterations, had been a kind of reporter that had traveled to the Middle East. He actually had written an book about petroleum in Middle East, which was very anti-British. I think he had jumped the reporting for, as I believe was Saturday Evening Post. So he had traveled around the region as a correspondent, and so he had some familiarity with the region. He had been to Iran before, but he'd spoke no Persian, and he didn't have that much of an in-depth understanding of the country at that time.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So you have a situation where there's at least a certain level of paranoia about Mosaddegh and the Soviets. You have an oil crisis that is continuing without resolution.

TAKEYH: Correct, and the economic crisis that's continuing.

DUBOWITZ: An economic crisis, right, because of the oil embargo.

TAKEYH: That's right.

DUBOWITZ: And Mosaddegh is growing more and more intransigent.

TAKEYH: And authoritarian.

DUBOWITZ: And authoritarian.

TAKEYH: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: Talk a little bit about, and this is where you want to get to the coup and what becomes conventional narrative that existed today, talk a little bit about CIA, about MI6, Roosevelt, Allen Dulles. What's going on in terms of covert action and perceptions inside the country?

TAKEYH: Well, the United States doesn't have really that kind of assets in the country. The British probably have more assets, but by this time the British have broken relations with Iran and their embassy has closed, and therefore the intelligence unit has also left the country. I think they moved to Malta or somewhere to that effect.

DUBOWITZ: So they're handing all the assets to the CIA station in Tehran?

Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

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TAKEYH: Correct. And the ambassador at that time, Loy Henderson, was probably a very important figure because he was a really hands-on, powerful ambassador. The CIA actually, in assessment of the British agents and assets that were handed to it, was very unimpressed by what they got. They said, "Wow, this is all you got?" So there wasn't much to work with as far as the CIA station was concerned.

And Roosevelt, remember, sort of operates in parallel to that CIA station. So there's a station, and I should note, and I forget the gentleman's name, and history should not forget his name, the station chief of the CIA in Iran opposed the coup because he said that it would instigate eventually as an opposition to the United States if this narrative takes hold. But Roosevelt shows up, I think it's July 1953, and as I said in the book, if his description of the coup is to believe, and he wrote a book later on published called Countercoup, which can only be viewed as a work of fiction. But even if his descriptions of the coup can be— it was kind of a leisurely gentleman's coup.

DUBOWITZ: By the way, Eisenhower called that book that he wrote, "a dime-store novel".

TAKEYH: "A dime-store novel." When he was finally briefed on this, he goes, "Geez, this is unbelievable." Eisenhower knew something about intelligence operations because he was a Supreme Allied Commander during the war and after the war, and of course there's a lot of intelligence activities involved. So he knew something about how the intelligence universe works, and he was very much interested in using the CIA as an instrument of American power during the Cold War. Eisenhower altogether would have, I think by my account, about three or four coups in the Middle East. Three or four operations like that in the Middle East: Operation Ajax in Iran, and one in Egypt, and one in Syria. And they all failed, so the record of American intelligence intrigue in the Middle East during the Eisenhower era is, shall we say, not a good one.

DUBOWITZ: But Ray, let's talk about the coup because again, conventional wisdom is it was a resounding success, at least in terms of bringing down Mosaddegh. And of course we Americans have been expiating our guilt over it ever since, and for listeners who watched the movie Argo, certainly Barack Obama mentioned this when he was president.

TAKEYH: Madeleine Albright mentioned it, Bill Clinton mentioned it, yes.

DUBOWITZ: Right. We've been apologizing to the Islamic Republic of Iran for decades.

TAKEYH: It is the most famous Cold War intelligence operation ever because it has found its way to colonize our popular culture. There's one thing Americans seem to know about the coup— about Iran is, in 1953, we overthrew a democratically elected government, and that established the Islamic Revolution in 1979. So the intervening 25 years sort of never happened. Forget what did happen or didn't happen in 1953, and we're going to talk about that, but there's a quarter of century that they skip and go straight to '79.

DUBOWITZ: Right. So we overthrew a democratically elected—

TAKEYH: Yes.

DUBOWITZ: ... prime minister, a social democrat committed to improving the welfare inside Iran who wanted his oil reserves back from those imperialist British. And in doing so, we kept the Shah in power. The Shah became increasingly authoritarian, increasingly brutal, his intelligence services, SAVAK, increasingly repressive. And really this set the stage for the Islamic Revolution, where Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamists in partnership with leftist groups, with communist groups, with groups who opposed the authoritarian rule of the Shah, came together, overthrew the Shah, and took over and established the Islamic Republic. And as bad as the Islamic Republic is, say those who followed the conventional wisdom, the original sin was '53 and was CIA-MI6 coup that led to the downfall of Mosaddegh.

TAKEYH: Yeah.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

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DUBOWITZ: Okay. So you have challenged that. Tell us a little bit about first, before we get into the narrative, how did you research this? I mean, how did you find out what actually went down, given the fact that there've been so many books written on this, so many historical versions, including Kermit Roosevelt's dime-store novel? How did you start to uncover the facts?

TAKEYH: Well, you kind of start out by a very basic proposition. Can an American land in Iran and in a month overthrow a government in a fairly sophisticated political culture? You kind of start with that, and you say, "Well, I'm thinking there's more to this story."

DUBOWITZ: Right, right. This isn't a 10-part series on Netflix where it all happens one season.

TAKEYH: I'm thinking there's got to be more. And then so you go through the archival record that gradually becomes released in the last 20 years, but particularly one of the most important releases of the archival record was during Secretary [Rex] Tillerson's term. There was

TAKEYH: ... about thousands of pages of documents, which were primarily intelligence documents, CIA station, national intelligence assessments, which at that time were done fairly rapidly. They were supposed to have been released, but John Kerry prevented that.

DUBOWITZ: John Kerry, when he was Secretary of State under Barack Obama.

TAKEYH: When he was Secretary of State, he prevented that because he thought it would jeopardize the negotiations with Iran—

DUBOWITZ: The nuclear negotiations—

TAKEYH: That led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

DUBOWITZ: Right. In 2015, right.

TAKEYH: He stopped that actually, if he had released that, it would absolve the United States of his complicity. But John Kerry being John Kerry, which means a very low IQ individual who's best known for good hair and historical illiteracy, couldn't go that deep.

So once he stopped that and the Tillerson record— but honestly, you didn't even need the Tillerson records to understand how it happened. Because if you look at Iran at that time, what you see, and it's actually glaringly obvious, all the key actors began to be against Mosaddegh for their own reason. The merchant class, which was very powerful at that time, was against him because of their economic problems. The clerical class that was always opposed to Mosaddegh and was very close to the monarchy as an institution, and even the Shah as a person, was worried about his secular bend and also the communist flirtation that he was doing. And the military, which at that time still was capable of making independent decision as opposed to later in 1970s, was also concerned about national disorder.

So all these three groups and the larger aristocratic class of landowners and others, concern about economic decline and the larger public that actually believed in the cause of nationalization, but did not believe that it should continue to suffer and they understood that reason why the crisis was lingering was because of Mosaddegh's stubbornness. So the Iranians themselves had come to the conclusion that the prime minister who had some early stature was ill-serving them, particularly as Mosaddegh becomes very despotic. He dissolves the parliament, he rigs the election, he begins to harass his political opponents. The National Front, which was a liberal coalition, begins to fray. He's increasingly isolated. So there is a national internal coalition coming against Mosaddegh at that time evolving against his ruinous rule. Unfortunately, he ruined this because he was a person of genuine patriotism.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

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DUBOWITZ: So there's strong domestic opposition to the Prime Minister—

TAKEYH: Yes, yes.

DUBOWITZ: ... culminating in large street protests. And I guess the sort of conventional view of this is those large protests were actually organized, financed, supported instigated by Kermit Roosevelt, CIA, MI6. Do you challenge that narrative?

TAKEYH: Well, there are actually two coups. The first one takes place on August 15. So what is the coup? What are we talking about here? And here's the American contribution. The Americans tell the Shah that you should dismiss your prime minister because he's becoming part of the problem. And Shah, who was a fairly lackluster and weak figure at that time, and that weakness will never leave his genetic makeup, he couldn't do it. And so there was an American pressure on him to issue what was called a firman, a royal decree to dismiss his prime minister, which he had the authority to do. And finally on August 15, he issues that decree and goes to his summer palace, and that decree is sent to him by an officer, at that time, Colonel Nassiri, he later becomes General Nassiri, head of the SAVAK, and executed by the Islamic Republic. On the way to delivering this message of dismissal—

DUBOWITZ: To Mosaddegh?

TAKEYH: To Prime Minister Mosaddegh, who mostly worked out of his house wearing pajamas, which I can actually sympathize with. Mosaddegh was tipped off by the members of the Tudeh Party because the Tudeh Party had infiltrated the military and had a lot of officers on their payroll. So he actually arrests Nassiri and ignores the fact that he has been dismissed. The Shah, of course, being the Shah flees to Baghdad and later Rome.

But this is an important point, Mosaddegh doesn't disclose the fact that he's been dismissed. At that time when the royal decree is issued, according to the existing Constitution, and Mosaddegh never denied a constitution, he was not an anti-monarchist actually. At that time, his premiership is rendered illegal. Actually, Mosaddegh's continuation in that role is unconstitutional and illegal after August 15. But then he essentially tries to figure out what to do, whether he has a referendum, whether this, whether that, and there's a second coup on August 19th.

Everybody kind of agrees on what happens on August 15th. The dispute becomes what happens between August 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th. That's where the historical dispute is, and that's why the 2017 declassification of records was very important. Because at that time, when the war gets back to Eisenhower and the Americans, they say, "Okay, we're done." And the key figure for Eisenhower at this point in government is actually not the Dulles brothers, is a general called Walter Bedell Smith. Walter Smith, General Smith had been Eisenhower's chief of staff during the war, and he was Truman's CIA director. Eisenhower initially did not really trust the Dulles brothers. He thought John Foster Dulles was too dogmatic in his anti-communism and he was being pushed on him by the Taft forces, we don't have to get into that. And actually Alan Dulles, who was a deputy director of CIA, so in terms of just the bureaucratic chart, Eisenhower doesn't trust John Foster Dulles so he sends Walter Smith to be Dulles's deputy, to keep an eye on him.

So at that time, the deputy in CIA is Alan Dulles, but Eisenhower doesn't promote Dulles for a couple of months because he said, "I'm not sure he's... whatever". So it was Walter Bedell Smith that told him, "Look, this situation is falling apart and you really have to do something here." And he was a key figure in getting the Americans to essentially cooperate with a coup. But anyways, going back, so on August 15–16, the reason why I bring up Walter Smith is because there's a memo, I wish I had the text in front of me. He writes a memo to Eisenhower saying that, "The coup is over, it's failed. We've got to now—" I think the phrase was, "Cozy up to Mosaddegh." That's going to be our policy. If you're going to salvage anything, we got to cozy up to him. And at that time, America being America, Alan Dulles was on vacation. The fact that there's a turmoil and coup doesn't stop him from actually continuing—



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: On his summer vacation.

TAKEYH: ... to go on a summer vacation. And guess where he goes to summer vacation? Rome. And guess where Shah goes to summer vacation after he flees Baghdad and goes to, Rome. They're actually at the same hotel. And the crisis for the CIA is not to get the Shah back to Iran, but to get Alan Dulles out of that hotel room because they want to cozy up to Mosaddegh. Basically, they're trying to get Alan Dulles not to go to the same hotel, and they walk in around the same time and Alan Dulles said, "Oh, your Majesty, please go ahead." So the CIA's dilemma between 15, 16, 17 is get Alan out of there. But Alan Dulles is not about to disrupt his vacation because that's not what you do in 1953.

DUBOWITZ: The '50s were such a great era.

TAKEYH: They were a great era. So then the CIA essentially decides this operation over, we're done.

DUBOWITZ: It's failed.

TAKEYH: It's failed. We're done. And they say to Kermit Roosevelt, "Get out." Kermit Roosevelt tells them, "Well, I think there's still enough ferment here that things could change." The General Zahedi and Iranians have their own plans. The military has its own plans. The clergy is very much allied with the military, the merchant class. There's enough here to suggest that the Prime Minister Mosaddegh's power grab may not work. The one contribution and the only contribution that Kermit Roosevelt makes at this time is actually getting the Shah's decree, dismissing Mosaddegh and distributing it to international press. I believe it was UPI [United Press International] and Kennett Love of the New York Times. And they publish it, and that's published back in Iran.

So then the public becomes recognized that the Prime Minister has actually been dismissed. And then you see the Iranians themselves essentially taking command of the situation. I don't believe, and this is, again, a point of dispute, that Kermit Roosevelt had much connections and those three days with General Zahedi, who was essentially the military ring leader. We are too preoccupied with crowds on the street, this is the old-fashioned military coup. They go in, there are crowds in the streets, of this I am sure. The CIA hand out some money to some crowds probably, but they were mostly instigated by the clergy. The clergy were the ones who came.

DUBOWITZ: Right. I mean, the CIA from what I read also in your book is articles are being published in Iranian press against Mosaddegh, but it's basically anti-Mosaddegh press anyway. So the difference is quite insignificant.

TAKEYH: If you talk about the press, first of all, articles in newspapers in a country of 97% illiteracy.

DUBOWITZ: Right, irrelevant. Well, or less relevant than the radio.

TAKEYH: Than the radio. But there was also a pro-Mosaddegh press. Mosaddegh controls the national communications, he controls Radio Tehran. So he controls actually the official communication. He doesn't control all the newspapers. But it begins to infiltrate in critical sectors that Mosaddegh has actually been dismissed and Zahedi has actually been appointed to the position of the Prime Minister. So that gets out.

Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

Now, then there are crowds in the streets, and here the communists overplay their hand, they talk about the Republic of Iran and that scares the hell out of the clergy when they start talking about secular. And they start talking about People's Republic of Iran, which everybody knows means a communist government. So the clergy get very agitated by this and very concerned. And they get into the act in a more measurable... The only people that could mobilize crowds in the streets were the clergy. More so than I think other royalist elements. Was there some CIA money handed out? Probably. But I'm not sure if that was determinative. And actually, the person who called in the military to repress the crowds was Mosaddegh. And of course he called on what was at the end of the day, a royalist military. And they come in, they take over the radio station, they do this, there are very few casualties actually.

Mosaddegh initially flees from his house, he takes refuge in somebody else's house, but being too much of an establishmentarian to be on the run, he turns himself to the officer's club to General Zahedi where he's treated with respect and because of his long service to the country. The trial of Mosaddegh for which there are records, the trials records that are available. The punishment for what Mosaddegh did was actually death penalty because it was essentially disloyalty and betrayal and so on, but it's deemed given his long service to the country, he would have a few prison years, and then he would retreat into his country estate where he remained in exile.

DUBOWITZ: Effectively under house arrest, he could see relatives but not leave his estate.

TAKEYH: You can see relatives.

DUBOWITZ: So thus ends the—

TAKEYH: The end of the Mosaddegh era.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, the end of the Mosaddegh era. I guess the question is, and then I want to jump to the last part of the conversation about what this all means is, from what I hear, Ray, is the American role is greatly exaggerated in terms of putting people on the streets, any kind of—

TAKEYH: Marshaling the military—

DUBOWITZ: Marshaling the military—

TAKEYH: ... recruiting the officers.

DUBOWITZ: Right, any kind of sort of information operation, influence operation, quite marginal, but that there was an important role that the Americans played is convincing the Shah to issue that decree to ultimately dismiss Mosaddegh. And the question I have for you is, without that American influence and that American pressure, hard to say counterfactual history, but do you think the Shah inevitably would've issued that decree?

TAKEYH: I'm not sure, because when the Americans pressed the Shah to issue that decree, what the Iranian classes wanted to know in some way is whether Americans supported them without material involvement because they had their own resources and capabilities. So the fact that the United States was for the monarchy and against Dr. Mosaddegh probably had a psychological reinforcing element, certainly for the Shah.

DUBOWITZ: Right. But the interesting element here that I'm learning from you is, I mean, there was strong public and elite support for getting rid of Mosaddegh. In a sense—

TAKEYH: That's right, that's right.

DUBOWITZ: ... America's intervention, whether it was decisive or insignificant, was actually in support of the majority of Iranians—



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

TAKEYH: That's correct.

DUBOWITZ: ... who wanted to end Mosaddegh rule.

TAKEYH: At that time at that time... Well, and also the institution of monarchy was still a respected and revered institution. It had 2,500 years of history, and the clergy were very much vetted in the monarchy. They had a good relationship with the monarchy, it was a traditional institution that they understood and they dealt with. So, the relationship among the aristocratic class was actually quite harmonious. Mosaddegh was a disruptive element of that and the Iranian aristocratic elite and the population at large came together and dispensed with a prime minister that they thought was ruinous for the country.

DUBOWITZ: So, America's role, again, the mythology is the CIA working with MI6 to promote imperialist interests in oil, brought down the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.

TAKEYH: This was never about oil for the Americans, it was about communism.

DUBOWITZ: About communism

TAKEYH: And disorder.

DUBOWITZ: Right. But your challenge-

TAKEYH: It was about oil for the British.

DUBOWITZ: But your challenge to the conventional wisdom, one, is if you look at the historical record, the American role has been greatly exaggerated.

TAKEYH: Well, and the flip side of that is to get the Iranians to take agency and responsibility for their history.

DUBOWITZ: Right. Well, and that really is, I mean, to the second point, which is whatever American role there it was in support of the majority of Iranians at all levels who believe that Mosaddegh was bringing the country to ruin.

TAKEYH: That's correct. Yeah, that's... The evidence at hand as we have it, I think is indisputable in that respect. Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: So, let's talk a little bit about what '53 means for today's Iran. I mean, we've obviously seen a large Iranian protest movement since 2009 in the Green Revolution. We saw economic protests that were transformed into political protests in 2017, continuing to '18, '19, '20, '21. And then we saw the Woman Life Freedom Protests of-

TAKEYH: 2022, yeah.

DUBOWITZ: ... 2022. And these protests continue. I mean, FDD, we have a protest tracker every week. We track these protests and there are dozens of protests still in Iran with brave Iranians on the streets yelling, "Death to the dictator." What lessons do you draw from '53 for today? Specifically, and I want to ask you, specifically with a question of toppling the Islamic Republic and Khamenei's regime today. What are the lessons with respect to domestic actors, external actors, anything we can really learn that would help us bring down a true brutal dictator Ali Khamenei and his Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

TAKEYH: Well, there are two. First of all, I think economic pressure in 1953, deprived Mosaddegh of an ability to sustain his patronage network, and that eroded his ability, his governing capability once people realize how dysfunctional the regime was. And that's the role that the United States and Britain played in 1952, '53. The problem is when most people focus on 1953, they don't look at the full nationalization crisis. The full nationalization crisis was about application of very successful economic sanctions policy on Iran, which undermined the regime.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

Both the Mosaddegh regime and the Islamic Republic have one thing in common. They offer their people slogans. In Mosaddegh's case, it was a very powerful slogan, nationalism. But when nationalism collides with your livelihood, people actually chose their livelihood. And the Islamic Republic offers a segment of public that still stays with it. Now, whatever that is, I can't tell. I think it's diminishing by the day. Revolutionary values and Islamist redemption. You can't eat Islamic redemption. So, economic pressures were indispensable to weakening the Mosaddegh government and establishing a context where his internal challenges could succeed in toppling him. And I think that's one of the lessons.

DUBOWITZ: So, lesson one is external economic pressure.

TAKEYH: Correct.

DUBOWITZ: Undermining not only the economic foundation of the country, but the legitimacy of the regime.

TAKEYH: Well, the second is the United States began to express in no uncertain terms, at least to the members of the elite and others, that it opposed continuation of Mosaddegh's time and power. And that had, as I mentioned, a psychologically fortifying role for those who were opposed to him. It didn't instigate opposition to him, but I think in some way fortified it and solidified it. So it sort of an American declaration that we oppose the current regime and we do see a better future for Iran. I think that can actually go a long way in conjunction with economic penalties, a clear delineation of moral principle, which I have to say we actually haven't seen.

DUBOWITZ: Right. From any president.

TAKEYH: Or state legislatures or any-

DUBOWITZ: Right. So it's the declaratory power of saying that we want to see the end of this regime. We want to see a free Iran-

TAKEYH: Correct.

DUBOWITZ: ... and putting ourselves squarely behind the Iranian people against this clerical dictatorship.

TAKEYH: That's correct. In conjunction with other things, it's intangible. You say, well, it's not palpable, it's just a declaration. But that in '53, and I believe today, will have a salutary effect in not inspiring the population against the regime because it's inspired, but in some way psychologically empowering it.

DUBOWITZ: Right. And Soviet dissidents say this. I mean, Natan Sharansky talks about this when he was in a gulag in Siberia and Ronald Reagan came out and called for the end of the Soviet Union.

TAKEYH: If you think about the rhetoric that we have employed in this country, I would say for the past 10 years, we explicitly say the opposite.

DUBOWITZ: Right [crosstalk].

TAKEYH: We think it's the point of high moral achievement to say we are not seeking and we don't believe in displacement of a clerical tyranny that tortures its citizens and tries to undermine the region. I don't know why we think that's a good idea.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah, I mean, I guess the counter argument to that is we don't say that because we have always been, or from decades been, in pursuit of a nuclear deal, and we think that we can get a better nuclear deal that permanently cuts off Iran's pathways to nuclear weapons if we engage the Ayatollah and we create confidence building measures in the language of the U.S. State Department in order to get such a deal and that any declaration of regime change.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

TAKEYH: Well, any declaration that says-

DUBOWITZ: Would undermine that diplomatic process. That's sort of the counter argument.

TAKEYH: Well, a couple of points. First of all, I'm skeptical of the notion there's a diplomatic process that could yield to the kind of arms control agreement that you're talking about. I tend to be skeptical of that. I have not seen any evidence in, what are we now, 15 [years]? Well, nuclear diplomacy began in 2005 in some way, in 20 years, I have not seen evidence that we can essentially achieve the kind of a nuclear agreement that any president can or should accept. But I haven't seen that. Second of all, why do we think that saying that aspirations of the Iranian people are inappropriate and ill-advised a useful confidence building measure? Why do we say that?

So, we say that because, to some extent, we are affected by the 1953 historical misapprehension. Let me just say one thing. Ayatollah Khomeini who led the revolution in 1978, he actually despised Mosaddegh. He never talked about the 1953 crisis. He talked about it I think once, maybe twice. And once when he was asked about that, he said, "Well, you know what happened is during that time Ayatollah Kashani," who was a very popular anti-Mosaddegh Mullah, he said, "I went to Tehran to observe a demonstration that he was part of." Which is not true. He didn't go to Tehran. But anyway, he said when he was leading a procession, the national front people came and handed them a dog. And dog is of course in the Muslim imagination as sort of a sinful-

DUBOWITZ: Dirty, unclean.

TAKEYH: Dirty unclean. So essentially his only comment on the national front in '53 was that it was essentially disparaging the clergy. Second, it is the position of the Islamic Republic in 1979, it's position of Ayatollah Khomeini, that the reason why all previous revolts against the Shah failed, including the Mosaddegh government, was because they did not enjoy divine approbation. Third of all, it was the Islamic Republic that actually outlawed the National Front, Dr. Mosaddegh's party.

The relationship between the clerical leaders in Iran and the National Front is actually a very contested one. And they tend to be very disparaging of Mosaddegh because at the end of the day, he was the secular person and he wanted to kind of secularism, he bended toward secularism more so than religious orthodoxy and certainly more so than religious reaction. So, actually the clerical leaders tend to despise Mosaddegh and the National Front. It is their diplomats that use that as a means of extracting a declaratory statement by the United States representatives that is ill-advised and actually quite morally vacuous.

DUBOWITZ: Well, that's actually interesting, and I want to sort of end with this, because it's really fascinating to me this sort of development of the mythology around Mosaddegh and how Western diplomats and policymakers have swallowed entirely this narrative.

TAKEYH: By the way, the Western mythology, they don't say Mosaddegh was overthrown by CIA. They say he was overthrown because God didn't like him. "God liked us, we succeeded." God didn't like him. And as far as I know, I don't know much about CIA, but I don't think they can control God.

DUBOWITZ: Well, it's interesting because you talked about Iranian diplomats. It seems to me that the best practitioner of promoting this mythology has been Javad Zarif.

TAKEYH: And others. And others.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: So say a few words about that? I actually do recall, just sort of as a funny anecdote, when you were writing on this and you read a number of articles on this historical period, and I was tweeting them out. I obviously got an interesting reaction from a lot of Iranians, a lot of Iranian experts, some supporting you, others opposing you, but was actually Zarif who was most vociferous in responding.

TAKEYH: Right.

DUBOWITZ: And I have a sneaking suspicion, though I have never been able to validate, that one of the reasons that the Islamic Republic actually sanctioned me was because I was promoting your theory of the case with respect to '53. And I have enough suggested evidence to offer that publicly.

TAKEYH: To be fair, there are many reasons why the Islamic republic would seek to sanction you.

DUBOWITZ: If you're friends with Ray is one of them.

TAKEYH: Well, Reuel Gerecht. There's a lot of reasons.

DUBOWITZ: There are many reasons.

TAKEYH: But historical inerrancy may in fact have contributed to that.

DUBOWITZ: Let me end with this question because I think this is important. It's one of the reasons I wanted to have you on this podcast, right? Is you wrote an entire book on this. You wrote numerous articles and foreign affairs and other publications on your research. Why have you been unable to still counter this mythology, this narrative? I don't mean to ask you that question about why have you been unsuccessful because-

TAKEYH: Because I have been unsuccessful.

DUBOWITZ: Because you have been unsuccessful. Because you should have written more, you should have been out more. That's not the thrust of my question. The thrust of my question is why do Westerners want to hold onto this myth? What is it about this myth that is so important to us?

TAKEYH: The myth is important to the academic left, which has controlled the universities and the textbooks and the historical reconstruction because it allows them to indict the United States for aborting a democratic practice among third board-

DUBOWITZ: People.

TAKEYH: People. So for the academic left, it has everything right? It has nefarious imperialist, it has British oil men, it has sneaky CIA agents. It's like the ultimate intellectual pornography.

DUBOWITZ: It's just missing the Jews. I mean, if it had the Jews, that'd be a perfect story.

TAKEYH: It's the ultimate intellectual pornography for them. So that's for the left. And for the American diplomatic class, diplomatic establishment, who tends to absorb that sort of a leftist jargon and leftist treaties is a way of appealing to the Islamic Republic as a means of, as you said, facilitating negotiations. They tend to believe a proper way of negotiating with what you always call the heart and men of Iran, is to begin with an apology about a historical event that they don't care about. They don't celebrate, they don't acknowledge, and in fact, they denigrate.

DUBOWITZ: "They" being the Islamic Republic.

TAKEYH: Correct.



Iran Before the Revolution

March 19, 2025

Featuring Ray Takeyh

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Right.

TAKEYH: So it's the merger of the diplomatic class and the academic left. And then you bring in Hollywood producers into this, which are also liberal, enter their political disposition. So you got this kind of a triad, and in middle of this glamor party comes and nobody named Ray Takeyh saying, wait a minute, we actually have documents about this. So, it disrupts the glamor party.

DUBOWITZ: Right.

TAKEYH: I do.

DUBOWITZ: And then you've got Kermit Roosevelt's dime store novel-

TAKEYH: But to be fair-

DUBOWITZ: ... against Ray Takeyh's academic treatise.

TAKEYH: Most historians tend to downplay that account of Roosevelt as exaggerated and so forth. But they nevertheless, as self-serving and all that, because you also cannot really credit a CIA agent. So, they have their own body of work that they point to. As I said, the story of 1953 coup touches all the erogenous zones of the American left. And just that's why it persists. As I said, in middle of this glamour party comes one person with a sort of a revisionist account, which as you have kindly mentioned, has been largely, if not entirely, ineffective in changing the narrative.

DUBOWITZ: Well Ray, I think a good place to end this discussion is on left-wing erogenous zones. So with that, thank you very much, fascinating conversation. We will continue to do our best to puncture the misapprehensions and myths of what happened in 1953, because it is incredibly consequential for what's happening in 2025. So Ray, thanks a lot.

TAKEYH: Sure.

DUBOWITZ: Look forward to having you back.

TAKEYH: Thank you. Thank you. Happy to be here.

DUBOWITZ: All right. So today we covered an important lesson, one that I'm always going to keep in mind when analyzing Iran, and one that will serve you well when you listen to The Iran Breakdown coming episodes.

And that is, not everything is as it seems and on everything you've been reading or been told is accurate. Like take '53. New evidence challenges this conventional narrative about this pivotal moment, one that ultimately set the stage for Ayatollah Khomeini's rise and the birth of the Islamic Republic. And this demands that we rethink not just the past, but I think also the future, especially how the US and our allies approach the current regime.

Ray Takeyh's research makes one thing clear that historically real political change in Iran has come from within Iran, but external players can play a supporting role. And that's a critical point I think for Western policymakers, and we should take it seriously. We'll explore exactly why and what it means for Iran's future. Later in the series, when we discuss the Women, Life, Freedom movement shaking the foundations of the Islamic Republic. I'm Mark Dubowitz, and this has been The Iran breakdown. Thanks for tuning in.