

Across Asia and Africa, decolonization movements budded beneath the imperial yoke as the West shuddered from the Second World War. The nationalist cry for justice rang through regions either directly or indirectly ruled by Britain and France. Although many former colonies were nominally independent by the 1950s, these often remained subject to Western influence, ambition, and exploitation. Nationalist leaders employed various strategies to challenge imperialism, including rebellions and terrorism. However, Mosaddeq and Nasser approached the goal of sovereignty from an intellectual standpoint, claiming the fundamental right to their own resources, namely Iranian oil and the Egyptian Suez Canal. Disproportionately important regions, Iran and Egypt were the Persian and Arab pillars of the Middle East, both home to large populations and coveted assets. The rise of nationalism in opposition to colonial domination impelled regime changes; while Mosaddeq followed an ultimately detrimental open-party policy, Nasser enacted a military coup to assert his lasting control over Egypt. Through nationalization of essential economic resources, Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and President Gamal Abdel Nasser sought political independence for Iran and Egypt from Western imperial authority.

In Iran and Egypt, political transformation worked against British rule. Elected as Prime Minister, Mosaddeq only temporarily shrugged off colonial bonds through his advocacy of democratic principles antithetical to imperialist practice. Though a popular beacon of patriotism across the Middle East, he led a government that proved tragically idealistic in the cutthroat context of Iranian politics. Right and Left conspired both against each other and his regime. In his speech delivered in 1951 in the Baharestan Square of Tehran, Mosaddeq juxtaposed himself, a democratic leader and “vigilant fighter” against imperialism, with the British behemoth, labelled as a “cruel usurper” guilty of “exploitation.”¹ He demonized the UK, which supposedly embraced “Western” standards including justice, democracy, and freedom. Here, Iran was not portrayed as a backward, oppressive, and religiously fanatical nation often imagined, but rather one that ensured its people’s liberty and welfare. Authoritarianism, whether thinly disguised as constitutional monarchy under Reza Shah or abusive foreign economic control, was not a viable political option in Mosaddeq’s eyes. Arguably drawing upon social contract theory, he emphasized his fair election and therefore, the legitimacy of his rule, promising that his

¹ Text of the Speech given by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in Baharestan, Tehran, 27 September 1951 in MH2002 Coursebook, pp. 166-7.

government would not act “contrary to [the people’s] welfare.”² M. Reza Ghods quotes Iskandari in reference to Reza Shah, writing that “...the right of choosing the nation’s leader belongs only to the nation.”³ Mosaddeq used this principle to validate himself as Prime Minister and head of the National Front – he was elected, therefore he possessed the right to rule. Homa Katouzian affirms that he and his followers “believed in the system of parliamentary democracy,” but that Mosaddeq’s naïveté (at least in part) led to his downfall.⁴ His government proved dangerously lax in suppressing riots, managing the press, and regulating political factions that were actively undermining his cause. The country was not ready for such a democratic, open-party regime because conservatives were determined to regain control over Iran.⁵ Despite Mosaddeq’s popularity, they pitted themselves against the Prime Minister and successfully plotted with the British and Americans to overthrow him in August 1953. His desire to see a “center in which opinions could be expressed freely” could not be fulfilled in a partisan state that accepted authoritarian methods of government.⁶ Although Mosaddeq’s democratic idealism ultimately failed in the face of his domestic opponents and Western imperial forces, his pursuit of justice endured, inspiring Nasser’s triumph against British colonial influence in Egypt.

Pursuing political independence for Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser grasped power in a completely different way than Mosaddeq. More realistic than his Iranian counterpart, Nasser understood that he would have to be heavy-handed to gain lasting control; a lax democracy would only lead to a vulnerable government. As Lior Sternfeld observes, Mosaddeq’s failure “enabled the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Egyptian governments to learn from the Iranian leader’s mistakes and implement necessary precautions.”⁷ Hence, Nasser affected a military coup in 1952 through the Free Officers association, established in 1949. He believed in the necessity of a well-disciplined and loyal army to back his actions. Built upon meritocratic principles, it united middle-class young men who were deeply frustrated with the monarchy.⁸ Merely a vessel of colonial influence, the current government at Cairo did not act in Egypt’s

² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³ M. Reza Ghods, ‘Iranian Nationalism and Reza Shah’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 27:1 (January 1991), p. 42.

⁴ Homa Katouzian, ‘Mosaddeq’s Government in Iranian History: Arbitrary Rule, Democracy, and the 1953 Coup’, in Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse, 2015), p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ Mossadegh’s Speech, p. 167.

⁷ Lior Sternfeld, ‘Iran days in Egypt: Mosaddeq’s Visit to Cairo in 1951’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 43:1 (2016), p. 19.

⁸ Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 102.

interest – national defense was not taken seriously, demonstrated by consistently poor military training and defective arms.⁹ By gathering a passionate and capable group of patriotic men, Nasser ensured a fighting force behind his government. He called together those of working-class backgrounds, legitimizing his leadership through massive popular support. In overthrowing King Farouk, he applied military tactics and thus orchestrated a successful coup when he secured key points of the country's infrastructure, particularly Egyptian radio. By 1954, *Sawt al-Arab*, "the Voice of the Arabs," was renowned across the Middle East, acting as an instrument to popularize Nasser's nationalist policies and to spread anti-colonial sentiment.¹⁰ Nasser himself was highly active in stimulating the Egyptian people's nationalism, garnering their support, and maintaining it. Unlike Mosaddeq, he did not allow democratic idealism to thwart his judgment. With the Free Officers as a political core, Nasser utilized the press to promote his government among his own people and their Arab brothers.

The nationalization of key economic resources in Iran and Egypt challenged Western imperial and post-imperial ambitions. By nationalizing oil, Mosaddeq attempted to establish economic sovereignty and thus ensure political independence from Britain. Although Iran was nominally independent at the time, the UK government under Labor Party Prime Minister Clement Attlee retained indirect influence over the country through British shares in the AIOC (Anglo-Iranian Oil Company). Mosaddeq recalled Britain's role in establishing a "dictatorial government" in Iran after the First World War, referring to Reza Shah's regime, a stark contrast to his own democratic administration.¹¹ England had vied with Russia for imperial domination of Persia, eventually financing the shah, his cabinet, and military once the Russians were consumed by revolution.¹² Thus, the memory of tyranny openly supported by a foreign power was tangible. Iran's massive supply of oil subjected it to the merciless ambition of the West, regardless of the government at Tehran. Mosaddeq understood that ousting Britain completely from Iran required domestic control over the nation's natural resources. Katouzian affirms that Mosaddeq's motive behind oil nationalization was political rather than purely economic – it

⁹ Reem Abou El-Fadl, 'Early pan-Arabism in Egypt's July revolution: the Free Officers' political formation and policy-making, 1946-54', *Nations and Nationalism*, 21:2 (2015), p. 293.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Michael P. Zirinsky, 'Imperial Power and Dictatorship: Britain and the Rise of Reza Shah, 1921-1926', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24:4 (November 1992), p. 640.

served as a means of achieving a higher goal.¹³ Upon winning economic independence, Mosaddeq believed he could also attain political sovereignty and institute a just, democratic government that put the health, education, and general welfare of the Iranian people first. Mosaddeq had a vision of a truly democratic Iran defined by freedom, an Iran home to a citizenry that loved its autonomy and valued its detachment from “the Great Powers.” Refusing to exercise force, he aimed to “recover our [Iranian] legal rights, i.e., the profits of our oil resources” in a conciliatory manner, which demonstrates his adherence to peaceful negotiations and democratic ideals. Mosaddeq spoke at the UN Security Council to defend Iran’s interests, arguing that the oil *in* Iran was the oil *of* Iran. Failure to reach a settlement with either the UK or US resulted in an oil boycott, subsequent economic collapse, re-instatement of Reza Shah, and the division of the AIOC amongst the British, Americans, French, and Dutch. Katouzian blames Mosaddeq’s idealism and lenience, but the British-American dynamic combined with Eisenhower’s obsessive Cold War mentality were also at fault.¹⁴ Nationalization of oil did not emerge from a socialist dream, but an anti-colonial mindset. Due to such an unfortunate confluence of factors, Iran ended up with not one, but two imperial masters, namely Britain and the US, upon Mosaddeq’s fall. Despite his defeat, Mosaddeq’s nationalist vision encouraged other Middle Eastern leaders. Ofer Israeli notes that “Mossadeghism,” the act of challenging British (and other Western) ambitions, lived on – Mosaddeq “introduced the possibility of regional political and economic independence.”¹⁵ He dared to oppose Iran’s imperial overlord by nationalizing a vital economic resource, which showed that challenging foreign authority *could* occur.

Nasser followed a comparable economic policy in order to eject Britain and assert Egyptian sovereignty. In his 1956 speech at Alexandria, Nasser pinpointed the Frenchman De Lesseps (the code word to begin the takeover of the Suez Canal) as initiating Egypt’s problems with Britain and dramatically asked his audience whether “...economic domination and control [will] be the cause of the destruction of our political independence and freedom.”¹⁶ Similarly to Mosaddeq, he knew that by controlling his nation’s economic resources, i.e., the Suez Canal, he

¹³ Katouzian, ‘Mosaddeq’s Government’, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Ofer Israeli, ‘Twilight of Colonialism: Mossadegh and the Suez Crisis’, *Middle East Policy*, 20:1 (2013), p. 149.

¹⁶ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York, 2009), p. 299; Gamal Abdel Nasser: The Alexandria Speech in MH2002 Coursebook, p. 170.

may challenge imperial dominance and establish domestic freedom. A pillar of British foreign policy, the Suez Canal was yet another source of profit that the UK did not want to lose. Nasser successfully nationalized it, calling it an “Egyptian Canal” and urging further industrialization and competition with the West.¹⁷ He thus retrieved the anti-colonial torch of “Mossadeghism” and carried it much further than his Iranian nationalist predecessor. This is partially because he acted on his concept of Egyptian nationalism within a broader pan-Arabism – a front united by ethnic identity versus a common colonial foe. His success in Egypt catapulted him to an international reputation as an anti-imperial leader in the eyes of “many Arabs, Africans, and other people of the decolonized world.”¹⁸ Another dimension to Nasser’s Realpolitik lies in how he took advantage of the dynamic power-play among Britain, America, and France. Mosaddeq not only failed to make an agreement with the UK, but also misunderstood how Eisenhower perceived him. The American President’s world view dominated by fear of the Soviets led him to ignore intelligence information and misjudge Mosaddeq as a Communist sympathizer, a military and economic threat. Thus, in Iran, Eisenhower precipitated the nationalists’ downfall, while in Egypt, he facilitated their success by intervening in the 1956 Suez Crisis. Threatening the British with expulsion from NATO and devaluation of the pound sterling, the US ejected them from the Canal zone and cemented Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez. Nasser twisted the outcome into a public relations triumph, achieving full sovereignty over Egyptian territory and resources. Interestingly, Nasser showed greater openness to the USSR as a potential ally than Mosaddeq, yet Eisenhower helped his position. Nasser’s movement benefited from the delicate relationship among the Great Powers and Eisenhower’s sense of betrayal when the British invaded without informing the Americans of such a significant military operation on colonial soil.¹⁹ In defying imperial ambitions through nationalizing the Suez Canal, a crucial economic resource, Nasser adopted essentially the same approach as Mosaddeq in order to win political independence, but was able to navigate foreign relations more wisely and with greater luck so that the British completely withdrew from Egypt.

Nationalist sentiment, regime changes, and economic sovereignty enabled Iran and Egypt to resist imperialism. Mosaddeq and Nasser used the core economic policy of nationalization to

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁸ Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives*, p. 82.

¹⁹ Rogan, *The Arabs*, p. 302.

defy Western powers. The former's failure resulted from his democratic idealism and political lenience, while the latter's success hinged on his realistic understanding of Egypt and international power-play. The struggle against colonialism must be seen within the context of the Cold War; the two leaders walked a tightrope strung between the Great Powers on a global stage ridden with mutual suspicion and escalating tensions. Owed to combined domestic and foreign opposition, Mosaddeq's fall in 1953 taught Nasser to be pragmatic, wary, and focused in policy. It was not democracy but nationalism that mattered most in Nasser's eyes. Mosaddeq lit the torch of anti-colonialism in the Middle East, and Nasser carried it to his homeland and fed its nationalist flame for the rest of the Arab world.

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