



Iran

UK should finally acknowledge role in 1953 Iran coup, says David Owen

Former foreign secretary says doing so would benefit both reform movement in country and Britain's credibility

'Written out': the British spy who planned the Iranian coup

Julian Borger in Washington

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The UK should finally acknowledge its leading role in the 1953 coup that toppled [Iran's](#) last democratically elected leader, for the sake of Britain's credibility and the Iranian reform movement, a former foreign secretary has said.

The US formally admitted its role 10 years ago with the declassification of a large volume of intelligence documents, which made clear that the ousting of the elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosadegh, 70 years ago this week **was a joint CIA-MI6 endeavour**. The formal UK government position is to refuse to comment on an intelligence matter.

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The original plot, codenamed Operation Boot, was drafted by MI6 after Mosadegh became prime minister and the dominant British oil company in [Iran](#) was nationalised. Harry Truman's administration did not want anything to do with it, seeing Mosadegh as a bulwark against communism,

but Winston Churchill was able to persuade his successor, Dwight Eisenhower. In the spring of 1953, the CIA began joint planning with MI6 and the operation was renamed Ajax.

On the 70th anniversary of the coup on Tuesday, David Owen, who was foreign secretary from 1977 to 1979, told the Guardian: “There are good reasons for acknowledging the UK’s role with the US in 1953 in overthrowing democratic developments. By admitting that we were wrong to do so and damaged the steps that were developing towards a democratic Iran, we make reforms now a little more likely.”

During Lord Owen’s tenure at the Foreign Office, the ailing shah’s regime fell in the [Islamic Revolution](#), which many historians view as a delayed consequence of the death of Iranian democracy in August 1953.

“I warned in a very public way on TV in the autumn of 1978 that the coming rule of the mullahs would be far worse than the rule of the shah in terms of human rights and personal happiness,” Owen said. “Sadly, that has been proven to be correct.

“I made it clear to the Shah that his form of rule had to make way for democratic reforms, but I wish I had known of his serious illness and could have pressed him much earlier in 1978 to stay in Switzerland for medical treatment and let a more democratic government emerge in Iran,” he added.

“Today, [women’s powerful arguments for reform](#) in Iran are being heard and respected because they are true to a political spirit that has a long history in Iran. The British government today would help their cause and make it more likely to succeed and not be brushed aside if we admitted past errors in 1953, as I have admitted errors I made from 1977 to 79.”

A new film, [Coup 53](#), traces the history of the coup, focusing on a young British spy who played a pivotal role, Norman Darbyshire. Despite receiving rave reviews, director Taghi Amirani and veteran Hollywood editor Walter Murch have not been able to find a distributor, a fact they attribute to the continuing cloak of official UK secrecy.

“We have had the most bizarre and sinister attempts at suppressing both the contents of the film and its chances of getting distribution in many twisted incidents worthy of [John] le Carré,” Amirani said.

Richard Norton-Taylor, the author of [The State of Secrecy](#), a book about UK intelligence and the media, said: “It is sad, absurd and, indeed, counterproductive for the British government to continue to hide behind its age-old mantra of ‘neither confirm nor deny’ and still refuse to admit MI6’s leading role in Mosadegh’s overthrow when so much, including official CIA documents, has been revealed about it for so many years.”

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