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Turkish foreign policy during the Iranian oil crisis, 1951–1953

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Abstract

This article analyzes Turkish foreign policy during the Iranian oil crisis of 1951–1953 and argues that Turkey shaped its policy based on Cold War politics. While Turkey cared less for Iran's nationalization of oil, it was more concerned about the political implications of the crisis. At the beginning of the crisis, Turkey was focused on guaranteeing its own NATO membership. After joining NATO in 1952, the country assumed a more active role in the crisis. As the coalition behind Premier Dr Mohammad Mosaddegh dissolved, Turkey became more concerned about both the internal situation in Iran and the broader Middle Eastern context following the July 21, 1952 events in Iran and the 1952 Egyptian coup. The strongest opposition to Mosaddegh came from Ayatollah Abul Qassim Kashani who was both an important religious figure and the speaker of the Majlis. Turkey was concerned about Kashani's politics of a "third bloc" and supported Mosaddegh's pro-American position. Keeping Mosaddegh in power was in line with Turkey's general Middle Eastern policy which aimed at forming a Western-oriented regional defense organization. This article will analyze the shaping of Turkish foreign policy towards the Iranian oil crisis within the context of this regional rivalry.

Keywords: Iranian oil crisis; Adnan Menderes; Mohammad Mosaddegh; Ayatollah Abul Qassim Kashani; Cold War

Introduction

Turkey's reaction to the Iranian oil crisis, which started with the nationalization of Iranian oil in 1951 and ended with Premier Dr Mohammad Mosaddegh's overthrow in 1953 by a joint British–American coup (Operation Ajax), has often been ignored in the literature. Turkey's bilateral relations with Iran in the 1950s was generally on good terms due to the rising tensions of the Cold War when both countries aligned themselves with the Western bloc. The period between 1951 and 1953 is an exception to this, and Turkish–Iranian relations during Mosaddegh's premiership are considered as a period of crisis because Turkey supported Britain's opposition to the nationalization of oil. This article aims to nuance this narrative. While it does not refute the fact that Turkey's actions were in line with British policies, it questions

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whether this constituted a “crisis” because Turkey continued its dialogue with Mosaddegh. To illustrate the complexities of Turkey’s nuanced relationship with Iran and Britain, this article will analyze how Turkey’s response to the Iranian crisis evolved during those two years. Given that the historiography of the Mosaddegh era is still in its “infancy” (Randjbar-Daemi 2017, 293–294), this article aims to contribute to our knowledge on this period by focusing on Turkish–Iranian relations.

Mosaddegh’s desire to nationalize Iranian oil dates to 1933 when he played an important role in reaching an agreement with Britain which provided Iran with advantages (Blake 2009, 64). In 1944, when the United States (US), British, and Soviet governments tried to gain new concessions, Mosaddegh was again influential in passing a law which took away the government’s powers to negotiate with foreigners without parliament approval. This was called the policy of “Negative Equilibrium” which ended Iran’s almost century-long policy of playing the Russians/Soviets against Western powers. Mosaddegh believed that playing Russia against Britain ultimately harmed Iran’s interests since both the Russians and the British were opposed to Iran’s sovereignty over its natural resources (Behravesht 2012, 393, 395). In line with this policy, in 1947, Mosaddegh prevented an oil concession agreement with the Soviets (Blake 2009, 62, 64). This was one of the main reasons behind the lack of Soviet Union support to Mosaddegh during the oil crisis. Later, in 1949–1950, Mosaddegh played a decisive role when the Parliament refused to give new concessions to Britain (Kinzer 2003, 76). Finally in 1951, the Parliament passed the nationalization bill which Mosaddegh put into effect upon assuming the premiership soon after (Gasiorowski 2019b, 198).

Tudeh, the communist party of Iran, and the National Front were the main advocates of the nationalization of Iranian oil. Tudeh was formed in 1941 to resist the British occupation of Iran during World War II and was estimated to have 300,000 sympathizers by the early 1950s (Etges 2011, 501). The National Front was a loose coalition of political parties which considered official independence of Iran as not sufficient and aimed to achieve “full” independence and sovereignty in practice. Mosaddegh was this coalition’s *de facto* leader, and the movement was supported mostly by the middle classes (Mokhtari 2008, 457). However, conservative religious figures and leftists also supported the movement with the aim of democratizing Iran and nationalizing its oil resources (Blake 2009, 65).

Turkey was initially involved in the Iranian oil crisis as an observer and followed the Western bloc’s policies. Over time, it assumed a more active role as Turkey’s ambassador in Tehran forged strong ties with high-ranking Iranian politicians. Eventually, as tensions rose among different Iranian factions, Turkey adopted a position which was more supportive of Mosaddegh; however, at the same time, Turkey was critical of Mosaddegh’s “authoritarian” tendencies. This article argues that Cold War politics played a role in this gradual change. Turkish diplomats considered Mosaddegh as pro-American whereas his main rivals were either communist or pro-third way. Therefore, even though Turkey opposed Mosaddegh’s nationalization policy, Turkish politicians were also afraid of his replacement by other leaders whose policies were not in line with Turkey’s. Turkey aimed for a Western-oriented defense organization in the region and, therefore, keeping Mosaddegh in power supported Turkey’s broader Middle Eastern policy.

To place Turkey's policy on the Iranian oil crisis within the context of regional rivalry in the Middle East, this article draws on the recently declassified documents of the Turkish Diplomatic Archives (TDA), which illustrate the complex relationship between Turkey and Iran during these two years. The article also aims to rethink other international actors' policies during the crisis, although the focus will be on Turkey. The article is divided into seven sections. The first section provides a brief overview of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy in the 1950s. The second section details the meeting held in February 1952 between Turkish Premier Adnan Menderes and the US ambassador to Turkey, George McGhee. The third section evaluates the changes in Turkey's policy in the second half of 1952. The fourth section conveys Turkish diplomatic efforts when its representatives were more actively involved in the crisis. The fifth section deals with the meeting held between Mosaddegh and Ali Türkgedli, the Turkish ambassador to Tehran, in September 1952. The sixth section reveals Turkish concerns about the fragmentation in Iranian politics and the seventh section displays that Turkey favored Mosaddegh against other alternatives. The article concludes with a discussion of what the information in the archival material reveals about Turkey's stand on the crisis.

Turkey's Middle Eastern policy in the 1950s

In the first decade of the Cold War, Turkey followed an active Middle Eastern policy (Bağcı 2004, 171). The aim was to establish friendly relations with the Arab states. It was expected that good relations would create a suitable context for a Western-oriented alliance in the region (Sönmezoğlu 2006, 97). However, at the same time Turkey did not refrain from clashing with its Western allies. Turkey's priority was to secure membership in a pact composed of only Western states, with a secondary goal of promoting a regional alliance in the Middle East. The result of this was Turkey's unwavering commitment to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The US did not initially support Turkey's NATO membership. Instead, it recommended that Turkey establish an alliance with Greece and Iran only (TDA, January 6, 1951). In response, Turkey explained that it would join such an alliance only if the US would be a member as well; otherwise, such an alliance would only increase Turkey's military burden (TDA, January 12, 1951). It was only when Dwight Eisenhower, who at that time was a decorated general and would be elected President of the US two years later, convinced President Truman of Turkey's importance for US strategic interests in Europe that the American position changed. In March 1951, as the Iranian crisis was beginning to unfold, the US started to support Turkey's NATO membership (Hale 2013, 84–86). The instability in Iran meant that the US needed Turkey as an ally to secure its interests in the region.

Turkey's desire to join NATO was also a point of contention for Britain who opposed Turkey's membership even after the US began to support it (Barlas et al. 2020, 643, 649). Britain preferred Turkey's membership in a regional Middle Eastern alliance rather than in NATO. However, Egypt's refusal to join a Middle East defense organization in October 1951 forced Britain to comply with Turkish demands (Bağcı 2014, 45–46). Consequently, only after Britain lifted its NATO veto in late 1951 did Turkey actively engage in organizing a regional pact which would ultimately result in the Bagdad Pact in 1955 (Uslu 2016, 89).

This was not the end of the disagreements between Turkey and its Western allies. Similar disagreements arose on different occasions. Turkey's demand to expand the Bagdad Pact to other Arab states was opposed by both the US and Israel. Likewise, Turkey followed a balanced policy towards Britain during the Suez crisis (Kösebalaban 2011, 77, 80). There were also disagreements between Turkey and its allies during the 1957 Syrian crisis and the 1958 Iraqi coup (Sever 1998, 81–84). As such, Turkey's policy towards Iran during the oil crisis may be taken as another example of the clashing interests among Western allies because Turkish, British, and US interests did not always overlap with each other, especially at the beginning of the crisis.

Turkish–Iranian relations during the oil crisis have not been adequately studied by scholars. In one of the few discussions on the topic, Akdevelioğlu and Kürkçüoğlu (2012, 650) argue that Turkey's main fear was the possibility that Mosaddegh's government would turn into a puppet of the Soviet Union. They also argue that Turkey fully supported Britain during the crisis. Likewise, Çetinsaya (2004, 211–212) concludes that Turkey viewed Mosaddegh's government as a Soviet plot; however, he also highlights Turkey's intention to play a mediatory role during the crisis. However, diplomatic records reveal that Turkey viewed Mosaddegh as pro-American rather than pro-Soviet and that Turkey wanted him to stay in power as a buffer against communism. Archival records also show that Turkey was critical of British policies even though it officially supported Britain rather than Iran during the crisis.

This article will contribute to the existing literature in two ways. First, it will fill the vacuum in scholarship about Turkish foreign policy regarding the oil crisis. Second, the article will place the changes in Turkey's position within the broader context of its Middle Eastern policy. The main argument is that since Turkey considered Mosaddegh as pro-American, it did not see him as a threat to Turkey's general regional policy aimed at forming a Western-oriented alliance. Turkey followed a more active role in the Iranian crisis from mid-1952 onwards. This coincided with another important policy change in the wider Middle Eastern context, the Egyptian coup on July 23, 1952. As the regional rivalry between Turkey and Egypt intensified after this incident, Turkey, by then a NATO member, was in a more secure position to play a more active role in the Iranian crisis as well as the efforts to establish a Western-oriented alliance in the region, despite opposition from Egypt.

Meeting between Turkish Premier Menderes and the US Ambassador McGhee

On February 9, 1952, Turkish Premier Menderes and Foreign Minister Fuat Köprülü met with the recently appointed US ambassador to Ankara, George McGhee. The Iranian oil crisis was on the agenda of the meeting along with the events in Egypt, Yugoslavia, and Korea (TDA, February 9, 1952). In the recently held elections in Iran, Tudeh suffered a blowback and did not win any seats due to the National Front's political manipulation (Gasiorowski 2019b, 202). The elections were at the top of the agenda of the meeting and McGhee was interested in learning how Menderes and Köprülü evaluated the election results. Köprülü replied with the following: "Communists failed and will fail because both Mosaddegh and Kashani are against communism" (TDA, February 9, 1952). Ayatollah Abul Qassim Kashani was a popular religious figure who supported the nationalization of oil (Israeli 2013a, 251). However, according to Köprülü, Mosaddegh owed his success to a single "event," meaning the

nationalization of Iranian oil, which meant that if the crisis came to an end, he would lose his support and the National Front would “dissolve on its own” (TDA, February 9, 1952). As such, in the first year of the crisis, Turkey’s position on Mosaddegh was ambivalent. While Mosaddegh was useful as a temporary buffer against communism, Turkey did not expect him to be effective in Iranian politics in the long run.

As a second issue, McGhee brought up the economic problems in Iran. He was worried that Iran would declare bankruptcy, which would then result in social turmoil. For his part, Köprülü was concerned that Tudeh could take advantage of this situation to come to power. If this were the case, the Soviet Union would help Tudeh by supporting certain tribes. Responding to Köprülü, McGhee proceeded with the dilemma that the US was facing: if the Americans sent financial aid to Iran to prevent economic meltdown and a possible Tudeh government, they would run the risk of upsetting the British. Besides, American public opinion was also against Mosaddegh. However, leaving Iran on its own would be risky because “Mosaddegh [was] quite capable of destroying Iran.” Köprülü agreed with McGhee, but he added that there was “hope” because both Mosaddegh and Kashani were anti-communists. Therefore, the allies “should advise them to be moderate, explain the risks of the policy they follow . . . but also advise the British to be more lenient” (TDA, February 9, 1952). In other words, Köprülü once again emphasized Mosaddegh’s anti-communism, while also implying that Britain should soften its attitude during the negotiations.

McGhee then provided an overview of failed American efforts to convince the British to reach an agreement with Iran. When the Arab American Oil Company (ARAMCO) agreed to share 50 percent of its profits with Saudi Arabia in 1950, McGhee, who was then US assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, had advised the British to do the same in Iran unless they wanted to face nationalization; however, “they did not believe” him. It was only in March 1951, two days before Iranian Premier General Ali Razmara was assassinated, that Britain accepted the 50 percent deal; however, Razmara was killed before he could publicly announce the deal. Even after Razmara’s assassination, the British thought that Iran’s attempt to nationalize oil was only a “flash in the pan.” At this point in the meeting, Köprülü and Menderes could not help but laugh at the ambassador’s disclosures. McGhee concluded that the British understood the gravity of the situation only after British politician Richard Stokes traveled to Iran following the Iranian Parliament’s passing of the nationalization law, but by then “it was too late” (TDA, February 9, 1952).

In short, when McGhee was assistant secretary of state, he had tried to convince Britain to accept Premier Razmara’s offer, but to no avail (Mokhtari 2008, 467). After Mosaddegh came to power, there were two more unsuccessful US attempts to mediate between Britain and Iran (Ghasimi 2011, 443). The US also objected to British plans for a military operation to take control of the oil facilities in Abadan in southern Iran (Moaddel 1989, 5–6, 10). Given this history, by the time Menderes, Köprülü, and McGhee met, the US was already frustrated with British policies, which is why McGhee did not refrain from complaining about them.

Previously, McGhee had met with Mosaddegh a total of twenty-five times in the US when Mosaddegh was there to present Iran’s case before the United Nations Security Council between October 8 and November 18, 1951 (Israeli 2013a, 251). McGhee’s proposal to Mosaddegh was like the ARAMCO agreement, but both Britain and Iran had rejected his plan (Etges 2011, 499). Therefore, since the beginning of the crisis,

McGhee knew that it would be impossible to come to terms with Mosaddegh because he insisted on full nationalization instead of a 50 percent agreement. The ambassador compared the Iranian case with its counterparts in Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, where the US had recently secured such agreements. These arrangements provided the oil market with stability, which would be jeopardized if Iran got a higher share in the deal. Thus, the ambassador asked Menderes and Köprülü “what is more important? Iran or the maintenance of this stability?” (TDA, February 9, 1952).

There is a tendency in the literature to differentiate British economic concerns from US political anxieties during the crisis. According to this, Britain was afraid of losing its oil profit and therefore viewed the problem from an economic perspective whereas the US was concerned about the political consequences of the crisis and feared a communist overthrow in Iran (Behravesht 2012, 394). The Americans believed that Iran needed its oil revenue for economic reforms which were necessary to prevent a potential communist revolution. On the contrary, the British did not think that their intimidation policy would lead to a communist takeover because Iran’s agricultural infrastructure would save it from economic collapse. Consequently, Britain’s attrition policy clashed with US efforts to reach a quick resolution to the crisis (Marsh 2003, 6, 8–9).

Given these differences, the US prioritized Iran’s needs over those of the British (Beck 2006, 539). It was only in late 1952, after they were certain that the British could no longer monopolize the Iranian oil market, that the Americans started to follow a pro-British policy (Gürakar 2019, 292–293). McGhee’s above-mentioned statements confirm this conclusion and indicate that the US wanted to preserve its economic and political interests simultaneously without sacrificing one over the other. McGhee’s questioning of “what is more important? Iran or the maintenance of this stability?” confirms that the US did not necessarily see this as only a political crisis.

Consequently, McGhee brought up American economic aid to Iran several times during his conversation with Menderes and Köprülü. He explained that the US could provide Iran with the necessary financial aid, which was not a lot in the first place. However, given the above-mentioned dilemma that the Americans faced, McGhee was concerned about both the necessity and the timing of this financial aid: “Will it be useful? Is it necessary? And is it necessary to do it now?” Menderes replied that if the Americans decided to help Iran, they should also find a way to resolve the oil crisis. He also argued that financial aid should be a “collective” effort and that the British should “make sacrifices” (TDA, February 9, 1952). This shows that, like Köprülü, Menderes had reservations about British policy.

Menderes also thought that Mosaddegh was bluffing when he claimed that in the absence of aid, his government would fall, anarchy would follow, and Tudeh would come to power. Instead, for Menderes, the actual question was how long it would take for such a critical situation to emerge in Iran after Mosaddegh’s fall. If enough time passed between these two events, it would make more sense to send Iran aid after Mosaddegh’s fall. Therefore, Menderes believed that the US should wait before sending aid to Iran so that Mosaddegh would face the dire consequences of his own actions (TDA, February 9, 1952).

The final point raised by McGhee during the meeting was the role of the Soviet Union: “Do you think that the Russians will intervene? Will they retaliate if we intervene? Would you support an intervention, if necessary?” Köprülü replied that he

expected social turmoil in Iran immediately after Mosaddegh's fall. In that case, communists would seize power from within, without a need for the Soviets to directly intervene. If this happened, even if Turkey intervened, it would be hard to overcome counterforces because they would be reinforced by infiltrations across the Russian-Iranian border where tribes, who spoke the same language and had similar national and religious identities, lived. Therefore, Köprülü believed that a war in Iran might turn out to be even more complicated than the one in Korea (TDA, February 9, 1952).

Köprülü's statements were in line with American expectations. The US did not think that the Soviet Union would invade Iran; the Soviets' main goal was to control Iran through Tudeh (Gasiorowski 2019b, 217–218). Americans also agreed with the comparison to the Korean War. Alan Kirk, the US ambassador to Moscow, thought that "a new and more dangerous Korea may emerge in Iran" (Zubok 2020, 33). Americans also agreed that sending troops to Iran would be difficult. The US would only regard the Soviet invasion as *casus belli* and they could not send troops until the next year (Marsh 2003, 10) because a significant proportion of their troops was deployed to Korea (Gasiorowski 2019b, 197).

Given the risks of a military response to the crisis, Köprülü once again emphasized the option to send moderate financial aid to Iran. However, McGhee believed that the British would refuse to contribute to a collective effort that Menderes had proposed earlier. He also believed that Britain would oppose any American aid. The meeting concluded with plans to meet again given the urgency of the situation. In the meantime, Köprülü would gather intelligence on Iranian statesmen who were against Mosaddegh. Since many Iranians were against communism, the allies could rally tribal leaders and encourage them to side with the West in the event of a communist revolution (TDA, February 9, 1952). Köprülü's suggestion was in line with the American policy on the issue. The US was already engaged in such talks with the Qashqai tribe in south-central Iran since August 1951. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited a tribal guerilla force to resist a possible Soviet invasion or Tudeh's seizure of power (Gasiorowski 2019a, 170).

Finally, Menderes reminded McGhee of Turkey's crucial role in the Middle East and asked for American aid to strengthen the Turkish army, especially along the eastern border. McGhee promised to raise the issue in the following year's budget negotiations (TDA, February 9, 1952). Menderes was trying to benefit from the situation by strengthening Turkey's military. It is also clear, however, that Turkey was not fond of Mosaddegh and his policies. Köprülü was eager to see Mosaddegh's downfall once the oil crisis was resolved. Menderes, for his part, was eager to see Mosaddegh suffer from the economic ramifications of his political decisions. As the premier wished, shortly after McGhee's visit to Menderes, in February 1952, the US announced that it could not give the 120 million dollars that Mossaddegh requested (Israeli 2013b, 148).

Despite their dislike for Mosaddegh's policies, Menderes and Köprülü also valued him as a buffer against communism and did not want to sever ties with him. Moreover, Turkish resentment over Britain's rejection of its NATO membership was still on their minds and, therefore, Turkey expected the British to be sacrificing in their negotiations with Iran. In general, Turkey followed a passive policy at this early stage of the crisis and preferred to wait and see before adopting a more active role. Concerns about a communist takeover, while not likely, played a role in Turkey's

position, even though Turkey did not expect a direct intervention by the Soviet Union. Menderes and Köprülü knew that there was no serious impetus for communism from within Iran unless political turmoil, which would follow Mosaddegh's fall, helped Tudeh to come to power. Therefore, keeping Mosaddegh in power seemed the most reasonable option.

Changes in Turkish foreign policy

The day of July 21, 1952, was a critical turning point in the Iranian oil crisis. In July 1952, Mosaddegh asked the Parliament to give him the power to issue decrees. He also wanted to reduce Mohammad Reza Shah's authority on the Iranian military (Mokhtari 2008, 472). When the Shah refused to increase the premier's executive powers, Mosaddegh resigned in mid-July (Etges 2011, 501). A few days later, on July 21, demonstrations were held to support Mosaddegh. Tudeh played a decisive role in the protests which then forced the Parliament to reinstate Mosaddegh (Gasiorowski 2019a, 177). Finally, in late July–early August, the Parliament and the Senate approved Mosaddegh's extraordinary powers (Mokhtari 2008, 473–474).

In the meantime, there was a major development in the broader Middle Eastern context. The coup in Egypt on July 23, 1952 changed the balance of power in the region to the disadvantage of Western interests. Turkey was already dissatisfied with Egyptian foreign policy even before the change in administration. During their meeting with McGhee, Menderes and Köprülü had expressed that Egypt's attitude was not friendly and that the situation in Egypt was critical because of the Suez issue (TDA, February 9, 1952). Egypt also supported Iran during the oil crisis when it voted against British demands in the International Court of Justice (TDA, July 16, 1951). Moreover, Egypt had escalated tensions with Turkey by promoting anti-Turkish publications in Egyptian media (Sever 1997, 95). After the Egyptian coup, bilateral relations deteriorated even more as Turkey advised Egypt to come to terms with Britain concerning the Suez Canal because Egypt was no match for British economically or militarily (Dikerdem 2024, 81–82).

Both the Egyptian coup and the July 21, 1952 events in Iran triggered important changes in Turkish foreign policy. After this date, Turkey was more concerned about both Mosaddegh and Tudeh. Turkish authorities worried that the former adopted “dictatorial” tendencies while the latter gained power as an underground movement. Therefore, in the last year of the crisis, specifically after August 1952, Turkey adopted a more active role in the crisis. In any case, however, Turkey still preferred Mosaddegh to remain in power as a buffer against communism.

This period coincided with the growing divide between Mosaddegh and Kashani, who was by then the speaker of parliament. Even though Kashani supported Mosaddegh during the July 21, 1952 events, he became one of his main opponents soon after. In January 1953, he fiercely rejected Mosaddegh's request to extend his extraordinary powers for one more year (Siavoshani 2011, 15). The detailed records in the Turkish archives between August 1952 and January 1953 present a clear picture of Turkey's perspective on the Mosaddegh–Kashani–Tudeh triad. Given the Shah's impotence, Turkey continued its support for Mosaddegh over both Kashani and Tudeh, even though it was getting more concerned about his “authoritarian” tendencies. Thus, in the broader Middle Eastern context, while Turkey was about to

diverge from Egypt after the 1952 coup, Turkish foreign policymakers refrained from alienating Mosaddegh whom they preferred over alternatives like Kashani who was in favor of third-way politics like his counterparts in Egypt. In the end, Turkey's Iranian policy was once again in line with its broader policy of establishing a Western-oriented regional alliance in the Middle East.

Turkey's role in negotiations

On August 2, 1952, the British *chargé d'affaires* visited Ali Türkgeldi, Turkish ambassador to Tehran, to inform him about the negotiations. The *chargé d'affaires* explained the British position when he stated that "it's not a matter of oil anymore, it's a matter of whether Iran will become communist or not." The *chargé d'affaires* was wondering if financial aid would prevent regime change in Iran (TDA, August 2, 1952). His statement was in line with Britain's policy of highlighting the communist threat instead of British economic interests. The British hoped that the emphasis on communism would increase Britain's chances of convincing their allies to intervene in their favor (Etges 2011, 500–501). Türkgeldi's response was vague: "it's hard to predict things at this point." His vague comment showed that the Turkish view on Britain had not changed; Turkey still did not trust the British. In the rest of his dispatch, Türkgeldi also noted Tudeh's increasing power in Iran, despite no clear interference from the Soviet Union (TDA, August 2, 1952).

Türkgeldi was also concerned about the Senate's approval of Mosaddegh's extended powers. Former premier Ahmad Metin Defteri, who was Mosaddegh's son-in-law, was also against the law. When Türkgeldi met with Defteri on August 14, 1952, they agreed that the extension of Mosaddegh's powers was unconstitutional (TDA, August 15, 1952). The next day, Türkgeldi reiterated his concerns about communism in his communique to Ankara. A major controversy in Iranian politics at the time was the confiscation of Ahmad Qavam's property. Qavam had assumed the premiership for a few days between Mosaddegh's resignation and reinstatement. After the July 21, 1952 events, the Parliament proposed to confiscate Qavam's property (Mokhtari 2008, 474). Türkgeldi concluded that if the Senate passed this law, it "would mean that communism had arrived in Iran" (TDA, August 15, 1952).

Türkgeldi then met with Deputy Premier Bagher Kazemi and former premier Hossein Ala on August 18, 1952. Ala asked Turkey to mediate with Britain and the US on behalf of Iran, adding that only a peaceful resolution to the crisis would prevent Tudeh's rise to power. In the meantime, Mosaddegh was struggling with his health and would resign after the crisis ended. In response, Türkgeldi explained that Turkey was already mediating in Iran's favor and that Mosaddegh was the only person capable of governing Iran and preventing communism. Türkgeldi also criticized the confiscation of Qavam's property without due process. Pleased with Türkgeldi's position, Ala confirmed that the Senate had not yet approved the confiscation of Qavam's property (TDA, August 19, 1952). Finally, on October 17, 1952, the Senate voted down the law (Mokhtari 2008, 474).

Türkgeldi's comments to Deputy Premier Kazemi were similar when he explained that Turkey was advising Britain and the US to send financial aid to Iran. He likewise reiterated that Turkey supported Mosaddegh's government. "This is exactly what we expect from you" was Kazemi's response as he offered his gratitude. Türkgeldi then

asked Loy Handerson, the US ambassador to Tehran, if they intended to send financial aid to Iran. The ambassador explained that they would do so only if the British approved it (TDA, August 19, 1952).

On August 29, 1952, Feridun Cemal Erkin, Turkey's ambassador to Washington, sent a communiqué to Ankara about a recent meeting between Iran, Britain, and the US. The US was concerned about Mosaddegh's fall and any subsequent chaos that might follow. When the US State Department failed to convince the British Foreign Office to restart negotiations, President Truman had directly asked Premier Churchill to compromise. Finally, on August 27, Truman and Churchill presented Mosaddegh a joint memorandum which allowed Iran to export its oil reserves in Abadan. In return, Iran would accept going to arbitration to settle the issue of compensation that Iran would pay to Britain. Mosaddegh immediately rejected the memorandum because he considered arbitration unacceptable (TDA, August 29, 1952).

According to Ambassador Erkin, at this point the US preferred the stalemate to continue because if the crisis were over, a coalition of landowners, communists, merchants, the court, the army, and the clergy could possibly depose Mosaddegh (TDA, August 29, 1952). It is in this context that Ala's above-mentioned statements about Mosaddegh's health and possible resignation become relevant. The US was not ready for a post-Mosaddegh Iran, especially after the July 21, 1952 events. Therefore, the longer the stalemate lasted, the likelihood of better options to replace Mosaddegh would be higher.

After Mosaddegh's rejection of the Truman–Churchill joint memorandum, Britain asked Turkey to meet with him (TDA, September 6, 1952). Ambassador Türkgeldi first met with the Iranian foreign minister. Turkey believed that the joint memorandum was reasonable because it confirmed the nationalization of Iranian oil. Therefore, Iran should continue negotiations because only Mosaddegh, who had the support of both the Parliament and the Senate, could end the crisis. The Iranian foreign minister reiterated that arbitration was not an option, but he confirmed that negotiations would continue and agreed that only Mosaddegh, who had the public's support, could solve the crisis (TDA, September 15, 1952).

Mosaddegh later agreed to arbitration but persisted in his request for 49 million pounds from Britain as compensation for the economic harm caused by the crisis. However, Mosaddegh's insistence on severing diplomatic relations with Britain, if this offer were rejected, caused tension. On September 18, 1952, the British chargé d'affaires complained to Türkgeldi that even though Mosaddegh had promised the Shah and former premier Ala not to sever diplomatic ties, he had later included it as an option when he had the drafted version of his response read in the Parliament. Consequently, Britain rejected the proposal (TDA, September 19, 1952). The ups and downs of the negotiation process were not surprising as Mosaddegh had a reputation for frequently changing his mind after consulting with his advisers (Katouzian 2024, 432).

At this point, the Iranian oil crisis also began to directly affect bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran. The real issue seemed to be Cold War politics, not the oil crisis. After Mosaddegh's response to Britain was read in the Parliament, Deputy Speaker of Parliament Kazavi made the following statement: "If Truman wants Iran to be like Turkey, we won't accept being a buffer against Russia. Iran cannot be a tool of imperialist policies." Even though Turkey did not take Kazavi seriously as an

individual, the fact that these comments were made in his capacity as the deputy speaker of parliament was a matter of concern. Since these comments jeopardized Turkey's involvement in the dispute on behalf of Iran, former premier Ala once more asked Turkey to tell the British and the Americans not to stop negotiations because of Mosaddegh's extravagant demands. Ambassador Türkgeldi replied that Turkey would do so only if Iran did not mention severing ties with Britain in its official response to the joint memorandum and did not impose a deadline (TDA, September 19, 1952).

Turkish ambassador's visit to Mosaddegh

On September 21, 1952, Ambassador Türkgeldi visited Mosaddegh in his house, where he lay sick in bed (TDA, September 22, 1952). Mosaddegh frequently received foreign representatives in his nightwear and expressed his emotions freely, including crying in public (Wynn 2012, 103). He suffered from a chronic nervous illness for most of his life (Katouzian 2024, 435) and his public behavior was considered unusual by Western policymakers and media. Kermit Roosevelt, CIA chief of the Near East Division and the "brain" behind Operation Ajax, described him as "ill-tempered" and "erratic" (Wilford 2016, 935). What Western statesmen failed to acknowledge was that Mosaddegh used his emotions to win the hearts and minds of the Iranian people (Scepanovic 2018, 355) for whom his behavior was a sign of his sincerity (Sternfeld 2016, 20).

During his visit, Türkgeldi made it clear that Turkey wanted Iran to be fully independent and Mosaddegh to remain in power. Further, he explained that Turkey was pleased that Mosaddegh's speeches in the Parliament did not target the US directly. The premier responded by explaining that he paid special attention not to offend the Americans. The ambassador advised Mosaddegh that they should not call off negotiations and that they should not threaten or offend the British in their official response to the joint memorandum. In response, Mosaddegh repeated that he expected Britain to pay 49 million pounds because he needed this to pay salaries. If poverty continued to affect Iranian citizens, communism would no longer remain as an "exported" threat but become a domestic one. Moreover, a communist revolution could have a domino effect and spill over into Pakistan, India, and Iraq (TDA, September 22, 1952). It was clear that Mosaddegh was trying to appeal to Turkey's effort to create an anti-communist bloc in the Middle East that would include Iraq and Pakistan.

Mosaddegh's comments also were representative of his policy of balancing British economic interests with US political fears by underlining the domino effect that a possible communist revolution could have. Mosaddegh tried to convince the Americans that Britain collaborated with the Soviet Union to divide Iran into spheres of influence and excluded the US from these negotiations (Ruehsen 1993, 472). American perceptions of communism in Iran, however, were based on meticulous calculations. US intelligence reports confirmed that the number of Tudeh members in the Iranian army ranged from 260 to 2,210 between 1949 and 1953 (Gasirowski 2019b, 218); however, the US did not expect a Soviet intervention in Iran. Thus, the US agreed with Mosaddegh that the communist threat in Iran was internal and not external. Whether this internal threat was a "real" threat, however, was unclear to the Americans. In October 1952, the CIA concluded that Tudeh was incapable of seizing power in Iran. In November 1952 and January 1953, US intelligence officials once

again overruled the possibility of a Soviet invasion (Gasiorowski 2019a, 178). Even in March 1953, when Eisenhower ordered the CIA to plan a coup against Mosaddegh (Gasiorowski 2013, 4), CIA specialists did not consider a communist takeover likely, and the US Embassy in Tehran reported that Tudeh had failed to gain popular support in recent months (Kim 2006, 207).

However, the US was also keenly aware of the fact that support for communism could be engendered by poverty. Previously Henry Byroade, US assistant secretary of state for Middle Eastern affairs, had shared concerns with Turgut Menemencioğlu, deputy permanent representative of Turkey at the United Nations, about the fact that there was no middle class in Iran where a handful of extremely wealthy families lived alongside millions of poor people. According to Byroade, the absence of a middle class would lead to unstable governments where two forms of extremists, namely communists and bigoted clergymen, would work side by side to depose any moderate government. As the Qavam incident had recently shown, it was unclear who could replace Mosaddegh if his government were overthrown. When Menemencioğlu asked Byroade whether the US would help Mosaddegh to remain in power, he replied with the following: “By sending aid, the US will offend a segment of Iranian society and another if it doesn’t. In any case, hostility against the US will rise” (TDA, August 12, 1952).

As such, the US was caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, it was concerned about how poverty was presenting communism as a desirable outcome to Iranian citizens. On the other hand, it was worried that US aid to Iran would increase anti-imperialist hostility. As Turkish ambassador to Washington, Erkin explained earlier, the US “did not know what to do” and instead “wanted the stalemate to continue.” Sending economic aid to Iran might increase anti-American sentiment, which in turn could accelerate the end of Mosaddegh’s regime rather than prolonging it. Therefore, the US preferred to wait and see.

The aftermath of Mosaddegh’s response to the joint memorandum

In his official response to the joint memorandum, Mosaddegh accepted arbitration on the condition that Britain agreed to pay the 49 million pounds in advance. Iran’s offer would remain valid for ten days. Even though this was not an official ultimatum, what would happen after ten days was unclear. The Iranian press reported that Mosaddegh was trying not to completely sever ties with Britain according to Turkey’s request (TDA, September 27, 1952). However, Britain refused to comply and did not pay the 49 million pounds (TDA, October 17, 1952).

Rising tensions between Iran and Britain had a similar effect on Turkish–Iranian relations. The main dispute was not the oil crisis but, again, Cold War tensions. The visit by a NATO commission to Turkey’s eastern border was not welcomed in Iran where there was media speculation about a Turkish invasion of Azerbaijan. In response to such speculations, Türkgeldi submitted a diplomatic notice to Iran’s new Foreign Minister Hossein Fatemi. Fatemi explained that they were working on new legislation to prevent the circulation of fake news. He asked Turkey to reciprocate by discouraging the publication of similar fake news in Turkish newspapers. For example, *Vatan* had been adopting news from the American press which claimed that, given his familial connections to the Qajar dynasty, Mosaddegh was working with

Iran's ambassador in Washington to replace the Shah with a US-based member of the Qajar family (TDA, October 22, 1952).

Finally, on October 22, 1952, Iran submitted an official notice to Britain severing all diplomatic relations (TDA, October 23, 1952). At this point, Türkgeldi believed that Mosaddegh was trying to distract the public because his demands were not met by Britain. The arrest of General Hossein Hejazi (an influential figure in the army) and the Rashidian brothers (three sons of a prominent merchant family, Assadollah, Saifullah, and Qodratollah Rashidian), who were accused of trying to overthrow Mosaddegh, were examples of his efforts to distract the public (TDA, October 24, 1952). The Rashidian brothers were agents recruited by Britain and later collaborated with the CIA in Operation Ajax (Ruehsen 1993, 474, 476). They manipulated the content of approximately twenty newspapers for anti-Mosaddegh propaganda (Louis 2004, 140) and received a monthly stipend from Britain (Gasiorowski 2004, 235). They continued to be influential in Iran during the rest of Mohammad Reza Shah's reign until the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979 (Mohammadi et al. 2022).

The suspension of the Senate was another example of Mosaddegh's attempts to distract the public away from his failed attempt to nationalize Iran's oil reserves. On October 23, 1952, the Parliament passed a law which reduced senators' terms of office from six years to two. Because two years had already passed since the last election, the Senate's meetings were terminated until the next election. Türkgeldi expected the Shah to approve the law because of his impotence, which would result in Mosaddegh's dictatorship (TDA, October 24, 1952).

On November 19, 1952, Türkgeldi reported to Ankara that the Soviet Union's policy on Iran had so far been neutral. The Soviet ambassador to Iran had been on leave for several months. He added that the Soviet Union would support Tudeh if Mosaddegh's policies led to social turmoil (TDA, November 19, 1952). Soviet policies at the time confirmed Türkgeldi's observation; the Soviets saw Mosaddegh as pro-American and therefore untrustworthy. Moreover, Stalin despised Mosaddegh's nationalist tendencies. The Soviet Union was also wary of sacrificing armistice in Korea for an uncertain outcome in Iran (Zubok 2020, 24, 44, 46).

In the meantime, the National Front was complaining that the Truman administration had failed to provide support for Iran, which they hoped the new Eisenhower administration would be willing to rectify. In a friendly gesture, Mosaddegh had recently allowed American military experts to remain in Iran without renewing their contracts whereas Kashani's aspiration was to establish a third bloc composed of Muslim countries only. Kashani planned to invite delegates of sixteen Muslim countries, including Turkey, India, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and all Arab states, to Tehran to discuss this. His main objective was Iran's neutrality in Cold War politics, which would allow them to export oil to countries in both blocs (TDA, November 19, 1952).

Finally, on November 24, 1952, Rifki Zorlu, Turkish ambassador to Beirut, met with Iran's ambassador to Lebanon. The Iranian ambassador argued that the oil crisis could not be resolved because the US did not want a treaty which would give Iran more than 50 percent of the oil profits. Therefore, Mosaddegh was making a mistake by trusting the Americans (TDA, November 24, 1952). Thus, Turkey was closely observing the growing fragmentation in Iranian politics. Ambassador Türkgeldi was aware of the disagreements between Mosaddegh and Kashani as evidenced by his statements

which labeled the former as pro-American and the latter as “third way.” In the meantime, Turkey’s ambassador to Lebanon reported that the Iranian embassy in Beirut did not approve of Mosaddegh’s policies. The coalition between the National Front and Tudeh was also dissolving because of Soviet support for Tudeh. Given this complicated climate, Turkey preferred to have Mosaddegh in power instead of a “non-aligned” Kashani or a Soviet-backed Tudeh. On December 10, 1952, Türkğeldi concluded that “unless the oil issue is resolved, the Iranian Parliament would not dare depose Mosaddegh despite all the criticisms against him” (TDA, December 10, 1952).

Turkey’s response to the Mosaddegh–Kashani rivalry

On December 26, 1952, US Ambassador Handerson, who had recently returned to Tehran from Washington after briefing the prospective secretary of state for the upcoming Eisenhower administration, shared an interesting anecdote with Ambassador Türkğeldi. Accordingly, Kashani, who was hospitalized for surgery, had sent Handerson the following message through a third party: “[Handerson] requested to talk to me, I can meet with him,” even though Handerson allegedly had not made such a request. Türkğeldi told Handerson that it would be inappropriate to visit Kashani without informing Mosaddegh (TDA, December 26, 1952).

On January 5, 1953, Handerson reported to Türkğeldi that Kashani wanted Ala to be the new premier. Since Ala was not expected to stay in power long, Kashani hoped to replace him soon after. In the meantime, Mosaddegh was not happy about Ala’s second visit to Kashani in the hospital. Moreover, Javad Bushehr, a former minister in Mosaddegh’s cabinet, had asked Handerson if he would like to meet Kashani. Once again Türkğeldi told Handerson that visiting Kashani would be inappropriate and that negotiations should continue with Premier Mosaddegh and Foreign Minister Fatemi only. Handerson agreed with Türkğeldi and clarified that he would only send Kashani flowers in the hospital (TDA, 534/37536/150802/38, January 5, 1953).

The same day, Türkğeldi directly contacted Ala to ask if what he heard was correct. Ala explained that “rumors that I want to be premier are spread by those who dislike me. I had to deny these.” Ala also brought up Mosaddegh’s concern about the former British chargé d’affaires’ visit to Iraq. In his dispatch to Ankara, Türkğeldi confirmed the premier’s anxiety about British actions in Iraq. Such concerns had recently prompted Mosaddegh to replace all the personnel at the Iranian embassy in Baghdad as well as the Iranian consulate in Basra. The Belgian ambassador to Iran also explained that Mosaddegh asked the Iranian consul in Basra to report to him daily about any potential military preparations along the Iran–Iraq border (TDA, 534/37536/150802/37, January 5, 1953).

At this point, Mosaddegh rightfully seems to have suspected that soon, agents like Kermit Roosevelt would enter Iranian territory through the Iraqi border to organize a coup against him (Etges 2011, 501). What is even more interesting is that these conversations took place at a time when there was a gradual shift in US policy from a desire to keep Mosaddegh in power to bringing him down through a coup. Why and exactly when the US decided to overthrow Mosaddegh’s regime is widely debated. Some argue that Eisenhower approved the coup in March 1953 when the US was certain that the coalition behind Mosaddegh was dissolving. Eisenhower’s preemptive policy was effective in this decision whereas Truman had focused on what the US

could do after a communist takeover in Iran (Gasiorowski 2019a, 179, 182). Others argue that the US State Department was against a coup whereas the CIA preferred it (Balaghi 2013, 86). Another explanation is Mosaddegh's refusal of the final British offer on March 10, 1953 (Mokhtari 2008, 478). This led the US to conclude that they had exhausted all policy options and, regardless of who the president was in 1953, it was clear that the US would overthrow Mosaddegh's regime (Marsh 2003, 2).

Regardless of what the real reasons were, in January 1953 President Eisenhower asked his staff to develop a "new and imaginative approach" to deal with the oil crisis (Israeli 2013a, 256). In November 1952, Kermit Roosevelt had already promised the British that the new president would be "much more amenable" to a possible regime change in Iran (Ruehsen 1993, 474). Thus, just as American policy was evolving to a post-Mosaddegh Iran, one wonders whether Ambassador Handerson's repeated comments to Ambassador Türkgeldi about visiting Kashani in hospital were an attempt to tease out Turkey's perception of Kashani versus Mosaddegh. Türkgeldi's responses indicate that Turkey supported Mosaddegh against Kashani. The two leaders' positions on Cold War politics played a role in Turkey's decision. Mosaddegh was pro-American whereas Kashani leaned towards a neutral third way which Turkey consistently opposed in the 1950s. Ironically, Kashani would later support the joint American-British coup against Mosaddegh (Patnaik 2018, 222). However, unable to predict this development, Turkey communicated with American diplomats in Mosaddegh's favor in early 1953.

By the end of January 1953, Türkgeldi once again emphasized Mosaddegh's stronghold in Iranian politics. Recently, Mosaddegh had received a vote of confidence to extend his extraordinary powers for one more year, thereby defeating Kashani. Given these circumstances, Türkgeldi suggested that Turkey should not rush Iran to join the Western bloc, especially since Mosaddegh's opponents were strongly against establishing good relations with the West. Now that his opponents were isolated from the political scene, time would work in favor of the Western bloc (TDA, January 21, 1953). In short, Turkey still stood by Mosaddegh in late January 1953.

Conclusion

This article analyzed Turkish foreign policy during the 1951–1953 crisis generated by Iran's nationalization of oil. When the crisis started, Turkey's priority was joining NATO, accompanied by a second goal, collaborating with the British to form a regional defense organization in the Middle East. The crisis was an opportune moment for Turkey because the British decided not to veto Turkey's NATO membership while tensions with Iran were on the rise. A second regional crisis, the 1952 Egyptian coup, led Turkish policymakers to play a more active role in the Iranian crisis. They grew increasingly concerned about Iranian politicians who opposed Mosaddegh and who wanted Iran to follow a more independent policy in the Cold War like Egypt did.

During the crisis, while Turkey officially sided with Britain, its relations with Iran were not indicative of a major crisis. Turkey considered Mosaddegh's government more favorable to Turkish interests because it was a necessary barrier against communism. Even though Turkish politicians initially saw both Mosaddegh and Kashani as anti-communist figures, at the end of 1952, they started labeling Kashani as the spokesperson of a "third way." Since Turkey was against neutral politics in the

1950s, Kashani was disfavored by Turkey as early as 1953. As for the Shah, he was described as a weak and powerless figure, which meant that Turkey needed Mosaddegh to fill the vacuum in Iranian politics.

In short, Turkish policymakers viewed Mosaddegh as pro-American whereas they had concerns about his main rival Kashani's third-way approach. Given the fact that the existing archival documents from early 1953 mention this fact more than the communist threat in Iran and that Turkey was aware of the general anti-communist characteristics of the Iranian society, one might understand why Turkey supported Mosaddegh's premiership at this late stage of the crisis. While Turkey was more concerned about the communist threat in Iran in the first year of the crisis, gradually the emphasis shifted to the threat posed by a "third-way" approach as tensions between Mosaddegh and Kashani heightened in early 1953. Consequently, Mosaddegh was the best option against a communist or neutral Iran.

All of this coincided with changes in American perceptions of the crisis. Initially, the US also preferred Mosaddegh to remain in power. However, in late 1952, the US gradually adopted an anti-Mosaddegh position. Over time, US policymakers had become more concerned about their own imperialist image and the anti-American sentiments it generated. They were faced with a dilemma because whatever decision they made (to provide Iran with aid or to withhold it), their actions were bound to contribute to growing anti-American fervor. The only solution was to get rid of the government whose policies lied at the very root of this dilemma. Thus, as the coalition that supported Mosaddegh rapidly dissolved in early 1953, the US chose to align with the anti-Mosaddegh elites like Kashani.

An alternative explanation of the 1953 Iranian coup may be the changes in American military strategy in early 1953. Following the Egyptian coup in 1952, the US had accepted the futility of building a regional alliance in the region under Egypt's leadership. Instead, the Eisenhower administration developed the Northern Tier framework, which aimed to bring together the countries on the northern edges of the Middle East (Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan) within a regional pact (Sander 2016, 175–178). These countries were essential to contain the Soviet Union. However, in May 1953, Mosaddegh announced that Iran would not join a Middle East alliance and would rather collaborate with India where Jawaharlal Nehru supported a neutral policy (TDA, May 2, 1953). Mosaddegh's announcement clearly showed that his policies no longer suited American or Turkish interests. Therefore, even though archival records do not reveal much on Turkey's reaction to Operation Ajax, it is possible to deduce that by this date Turkey might have withdrawn its support from Mossadegh because he could no longer be trusted as pro-American.

Turkey's stand towards Britain was also distant during the crisis. Even though Turkey generally sided with Britain, the British were also expected to be sacrificing. Turkey also wanted Britain to provide financial aid to Iran. Moreover, Turkish diplomats did not disclose many details in their interactions with Britain while they were more willing to reveal information to their American counterparts. The Iranian oil crisis was only one aspect of the Cold War that Turkey was interested in. Turkey's main concern was about its own security. In this context, Britain's recent opposition to Turkey's NATO membership was still fresh in the minds of Turkish statesmen. Therefore, Turkey was not generally against Iran's nationalization of oil; its main

concern was about the impact the crisis would have on Cold War politics. Consequently, Turkey did not share Britain's economic concerns.

However, as the crisis approached its end in mid-1953, Turkey's position on Middle Eastern politics approached that of Britain. Turkey wanted to replace Egypt as the center of a regional alliance that the British wanted to create. Britain was sympathetic to the idea because its relations with Egypt were deteriorating due to the Suez issue and the 1952 coup (Armaoğlu 2017, 153–157). Consequently, Turkey's Middle Eastern policy was in line with both British and US interests as the Iranian crisis ended with a coup in August 1953. Disagreements between Western allies had subsided by this date.

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