

the Yemeni Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), positioning the Yemeni south within British India's system of princely states.

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.–Iranian Relations* (New York: New Press, 2012). Pp. 304. \$26.95 cloth.

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Sixty years after the coup d'état that changed the course of Iranian history, it is remarkable how little consensus exists about fundamental aspects of the episode. What were the motivations of the United States and Britain in ousting Muhammad Mosaddeq? What was the relative importance of Iranian and foreign actors? How much responsibility does Mosaddeq bear for his own predicament?

The latest book on the subject, by historian Ervand Abrahamian, takes on some of these basic questions. Unlike the trend in other recent accounts, he does not question the assertion that the Americans and the British, and more particularly their intelligence as well as diplomatic services, played a central role in the course of events. In fact, he takes aim at the two allies with both barrels, charging not only that they spearheaded the August 1953 operation, but also that they did so out of crass imperial self-interest rather than larger geopolitical concerns. He reproaches contemporaneous U.S. and British officials and subsequent historians alike for misconstruing the root causes of the crisis and for blaming the victims instead of the villains.

Abrahamian's aim is to challenge the "conventional wisdom" about the events of 1951–53 in two broad areas. One relates to the oil negotiations, which broke down in early 1953, paving the way for the U.S. and British decision to oust Mosaddeq. Abrahamian disagrees with three commonly held assumptions on this subject: that the British acted in good faith, that the United States was an honest broker, and that the talks failed only because of Mossadeq's "intransigence" (p. 2). The other area concerns the motives for the coup. Abrahamian rejects the view that it was about protecting Iran from communism. Instead, he argues that it was entirely about the control of oil—a byproduct not of the Cold War but of the "conflict between imperialism and nationalism" (pp. 3–4).

Abrahamian attacks the subject with conviction and even a certain degree of indignation, laying out example after example of the shameful attitudes of British and U.S. officials toward Iranians, and Mosaddeq in particular. Although this is not news, the sheer quantity of the evidence is jarring.

The bulk of the book recounts the history and politics of oil in Iran, from the discovery of petroleum in 1908 through the nationalization period and the multilateral negotiations that followed—all vital context for the main event. The coup itself is covered in less space than the previous two parts on oil and the negotiations, though this does not represent a problem. Abrahamian's treatment of all three areas is engaging and informative, and the coup section is one of the best available summaries of the subject.

Abrahamian makes a strong case for some of his main arguments. It is hard to disagree with the assertion that the British were hell-bent on retaining their hugely important assets in Iran. His most compelling point is that a negotiated deal was impossible because the British were never going to allow genuine control of the oil industry to pass to Iran, and Mosaddeq was equally determined to fight for that right. It was a classic "economic clash between

resurgent nationalism and old-fashioned imperialism” (p. 105). Although the author does not acknowledge it, there were a few more reasonable voices at the Foreign Office, such as Deputy Undersecretary of State Roger Makins (who became ambassador to the United States in early 1953) and First Secretary in the Economic Relations Department Peter Ramsbotham. Nevertheless, the British objective became to ram through an agreement that left meaningful control in British hands.

The book also rightly (to a point) charges the United States with being less than neutral in the negotiations. By the end at least, Washington had sided squarely with London, in part because many in the United States saw Mosaddeq as stubborn and erratic to the point of being mentally unstable. (The author dismisses this as an insincere rationale.) Abrahamian also accurately points out that the Americans were fearful of how the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s nationalization would affect Western commercial holdings around the world. In fact, U.S. diplomats have historically promoted commercial and trade opportunities for American business as a matter of routine (as have most governments).

The book does have its shortcomings. In his keenness to advocate his case against the “conventional wisdom” cited above, the author tends to overemphasize supportive evidence and gloss over material that points to more complex explanations. For example, there are solid indications that the Truman administration did try to play the honest broker during earlier stages of the crisis, as Mary Ann Heiss has shown (see, e.g., her chapter in *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, edited by Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2004], pp. 178–200). And while senior U.S. officials came to believe that Mosaddeq was intransigent, many criticized the British for the same thing. Dean Acheson once grumbled that the Churchill government was “depressingly out of touch with the world of 1951,” prepared “to follow the AIOC meekly into disaster,” and determined “not . . . to yield an inch” (Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987], p. 511).

The same zeal for advancing the overall argument occasionally skews the accuracy of the account. For one thing, the author has a tendency to describe U.S. views—about the advisability of a coup, for example—as if they were universally held and remained static throughout the crisis. In fact, significant differences existed, and attitudes (even those of U.S. Ambassador Loy Henderson) hardened only as conditions in Iran appeared to worsen. The biggest shift came with the advent of President Eisenhower, although there is no recognition in the text of such a divide between administrations.

In addition, errors intermittently creep in: Donald Wilber—one of the chief coup planners for the CIA, and the author of a 1954 internal agency history of the event—does not write that in November 1952 the State Department asked the intelligence services to plan for a coup (a significant point since that was still the Truman period) (p. 171); the origins of the Azerbaijan crisis, according to recent Russian and Azeri scholarship, involved much more than Western bids for oil concessions; and passages by two historians that are held up for criticism are depicted incorrectly (pp. 2–3, 105–6).

In terms of sources, the picture is mixed. The author has very good command of the available British records, including those from British Petroleum’s archives. He is also fully conversant with Iranian materials. As for American documents, other than the leaked Wilber history, he appears to have relied most heavily on the relevant State Department *Foreign Relations of the United States* volume, published in 1989, without making much use of the plentiful holdings at the National Archives and presidential libraries.

Finally, Abrahamian’s other main contention—that the U.S.’s aim was to protect American commercial assets elsewhere rather than to keep Iran out of the Soviet camp—is unduly one-sided. The oil crisis occurred at a tense stage of the Cold War, which overshadowed every aspect of U.S. foreign policy, and colored domestic politics as well. Senior decision

makers believed (rightly or wrongly) that Iran, having the dubious status of a “vital” U.S. interest, was vulnerable to Soviet aggression. In that environment, the country’s petroleum assets were valued not simply as a commercial commodity but more importantly as a strategic resource crucial for rebuilding Western economies and for fighting a possible war with the Soviet Union. Reasonable consideration of this fact would have produced a more well-rounded picture of a complex episode—one that is otherwise described very effectively in this account.

BENOÎT CHALLAND, *Palestinian Civil Society: Foreign Donors and the Power to Promote and Exclude* (London: Routledge, 2009). Pp. 288. \$148.00 cloth, \$49.95 paper.

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The evolution of Palestinian civil society has been the focus of several rich and informative studies over the past decade or two, by Rema Hammami, Jamil Hilal, Salim Tamari, Amaney Jamal, Manal Jamal, Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, Sara Roy, and others. Not surprisingly, scholars have highlighted the powerful impact that both international donors and local political actors have had on the process. Benoît Challand’s *Palestinian Civil Society* is a further contribution to this literature—and a very valuable one it is too.

Challand begins his examination of the topic by exploring the potentially problematic nature of “civil society” as a concept, both empirically and theoretically. He also stresses the diversity of Palestinian associational life. This is a useful corrective to the common tendency among both scholars and policymakers to focus on the sorts of formal nongovernmental organizations most associated with donor support, while underexamining the activities of Islamist charities, trade unions, local community self-help groups, and other groups. He also discusses the potential biases and historical/cultural specificities embedded in many definitions of civil society, and hence the dangers posed by an uncritical use of the term. Ultimately he proposes an understanding of the concept that emphasizes relative autonomy from the state as a central defining characteristic. While this certainly serves his purposes in the book, it is not an especially marked departure from previous studies. Part of the challenge here is to avoid the temptation to reify civil society as a concrete “thing” with natural and evident boundaries, and instead to recognize that “civil society” is an artificial, socially and analytically constructed category, the utility of which depends on whether it helps us to understand broader social and political processes.

The main section of the book moves on to discuss the ways in which donor funding and priorities have shaped and reshaped the evolution of civil society in Palestine from the 1990s to the present. As donor resources became increasingly important to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Challand suggests, many of the latter became increasingly disconnected from their supposed local constituencies. This is a convincing argument, and echoes similar findings by others.

The author’s research is based in part on a rich array of interviews with donors and NGOs. Unlike many studies, this one is sensitive to variations within the donor community, both between different donors and over time. It would have been useful, however, if it had also made use of the quite extensive data on Palestinian public opinion, including polling by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre, Fafo, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in