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III. COVERT ACTION

A. The Genesis of TPAJAX

The many chroniclers of Central Intelligence Agency misdeeds, whether in their books, magazine articles, or newspaper columns, have long placed the August 1953 coup that overthrew Premier Mosadeq near the top of their list of infamous Agency acts. Complete secrecy about the operation that was known under the cryptonym of TPAJAX has been impossible to enforce under existing laws, and enough talkative people, including many Iranians, were privy to segments of the operation to make it relatively easy for journalists to reconstruct the coup in varied but generally inaccurate accounts.¹⁷ The point that the majority of these accounts miss is a key one: the military coup that overthrew Mosadeq and his National Front cabinet was carried out under CIA direction as an act of U.S. foreign policy, conceived and approved at the highest levels of government. It was not an aggressively simplistic solution, clandestinely arrived at, but was instead an official admission

that normal, rational methods of international communication and commerce had failed. TPAJAX was entered into as a last resort.

The target of this policy of desperation, Mohammad Mosadeq, was neither a madman nor an emotional bundle of senility as he was so often pictured in the foreign press; however, he had become so committed to the ideals of nationalism that he did things that could not have conceivably helped his people even in the best and most altruistic of worlds. In refusing to bargain--except on his own uncompromising terms--with the

¹⁷ A number of these are included in Appendix C.

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Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, he was in fact defying the professional politicians of the British government. These leaders believed, with good reason, that cheap oil for Britain and high profits for the company were vital to their national interests. There had been little in their experience to make them respect Iranians, whom company managers and Foreign Office representatives saw as inefficient, corrupt, and self-serving. That the British misjudged their adversaries badly is obvious; they were convinced that when Iran felt the financial pinch, its resolve would crumble, and an agreement could be worked out to the satisfaction of both sides.

In fact, of course, the loss of oil revenue did not bring the Iranians to their knees; it merely forced them to take the risky steps that increasingly endangered their country's future. It was the potential of those risks to leave Iran open to Soviet aggression--at a time when the Cold War was at its height and when the United States was involved in an undeclared war in Korea against forces supported by the U.S.S.R. and China--that compelled the United States in planning and executing TPAJAX.

How real were the risks in what Mosadeq was doing? Had the British sent in the paratroops and warships, as they were to do a few years later against the Egyptians at Suez, it was almost certain that the Soviet Union

¹⁸ In his article in the 5 January 1952 Saturday Evening Post, entitled "What went Wrong in Iran?"

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would have occupied the northern portion of Iran by invoking the Soviet-Iranian Treaty of Friendship of 1921. It was also quite probable that the Soviet army would have moved south to drive British forces out on behalf of their Iranian "allies." Then not only would Iran's oil have been irretrievably lost to the West, but the defense chain around the Soviet Union which was part of U.S. foreign policy would have been breached. The Soviets would have ^{had} the opportunity to achieve the ancient Russian dream of a port on the Persian Gulf and to drive a wedge between Turkey and India. Under such circumstances, the danger of a third world war seemed very real. When it became apparent that many elements in Iran did not approve of Mosadeq's continuing gamble or the direction in which he was pushing their country, the execution of a U.S.-assisted coup d'etat seemed a more desirable risk than letting matters run their unpredictable course. Mosadeq was already openly threatening to turn to other sources for economic help--the Soviets--if Britain did not meet his demands or if the United States did not come forth with massive aid to replace his lost oil revenue. Peacefully or in war, the Soviet Union appeared to be the only potential beneficiary of Mosadeq's policies.

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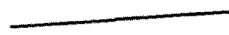
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The fact that this decision and the staff work preceding it were very closely held in Washington is borne out by a memorandum of 10 June 1953 from the Office of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Affairs (GTI) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs recommending policies more supportive of Mosadeq. It reasoned that since conditions ^{in Iran} were deteriorating almost to the point of no return and since an attempt to remove Mosadeq would risk a civil war and would, even if successful, alienate the Iranian people, we should increase our financial and technical assistance to Iran in the hope that Mosadeq would be able to muddle through. The desk officers' position paper recognized that increased U.S. aid would, of course, frustrate British policy, which was to undermine Mosadeq's position. By late June, however, State was aware of the planned operation, and a further position paper that stipulated certain conditions to be met by the British was prepared on 25 June, as described in the discussion of planning, below.

B. The Planning Phase

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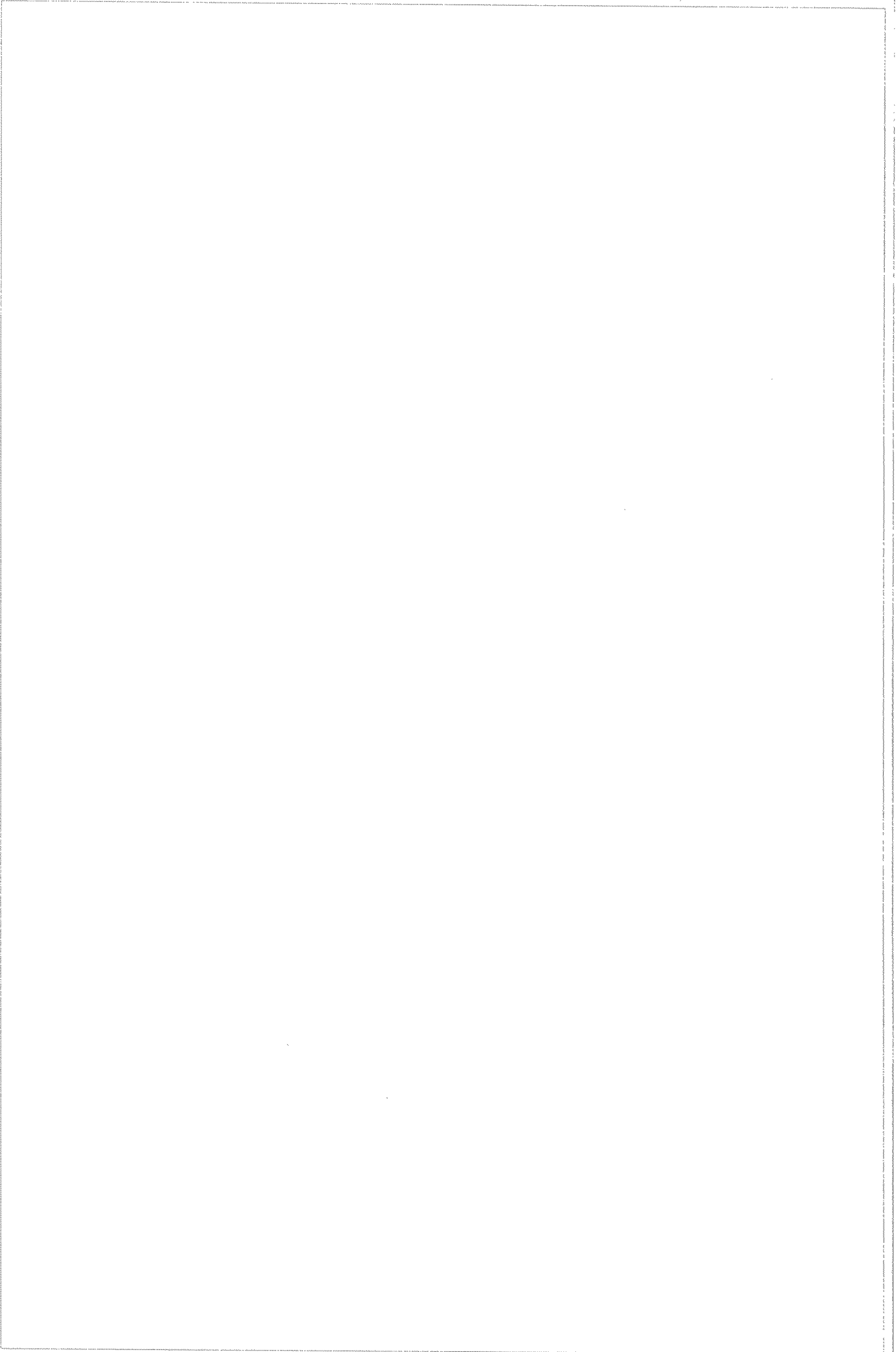
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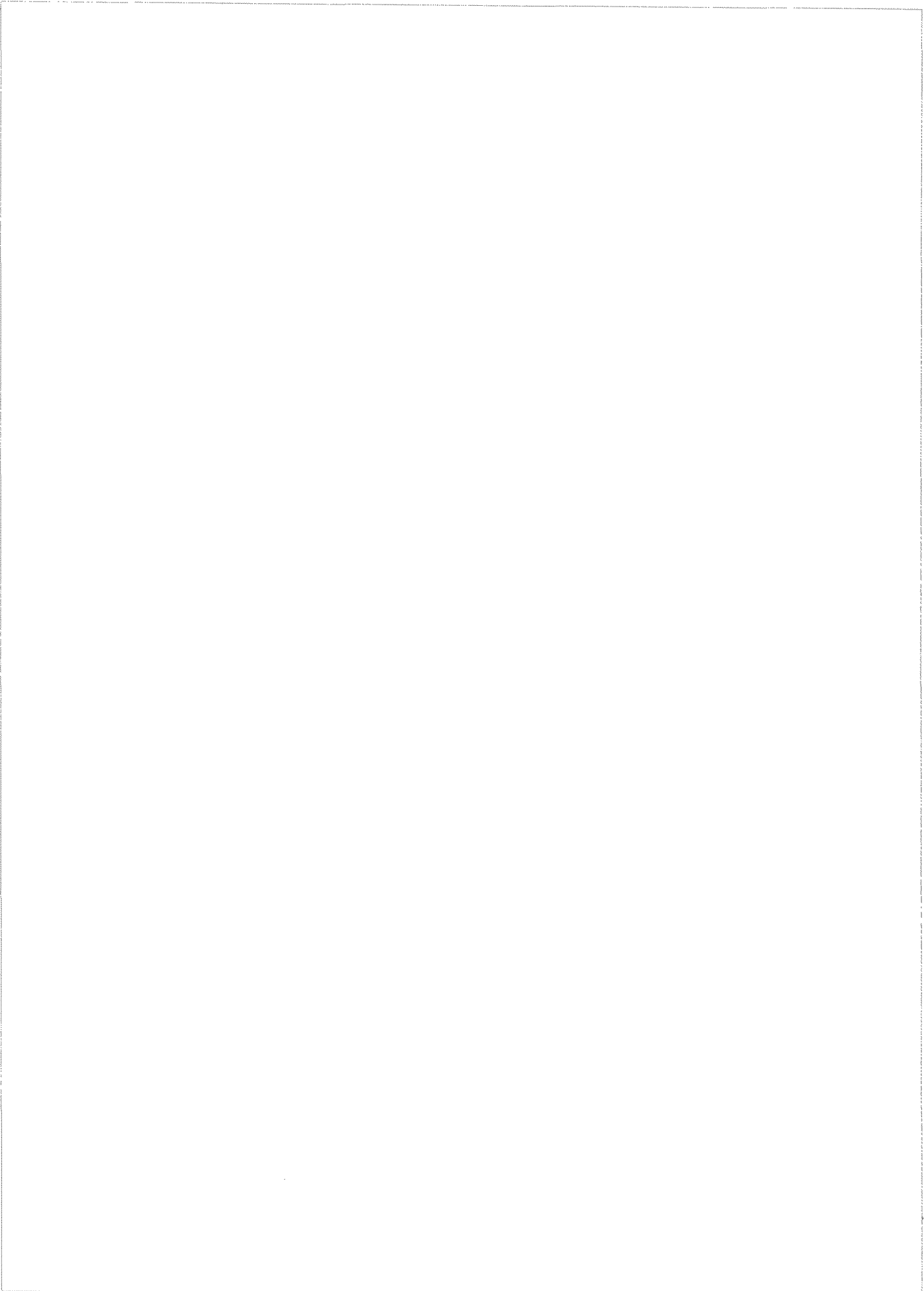
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