

[Sign in](#)[Contribute](#) →[News](#) [Opinion](#) [Sport](#) [Culture](#) [Lifestyle](#)[World](#) ▶ [Europe](#) [US](#) [Americas](#) [Asia](#) [Australia](#) **[Middle East](#)** [Africa](#) [Inequality](#)**The Observer**

## MI6, the coup in Iran that changed the Middle East, and the cover-up

Documentary reveals evidence confirming a British spy's role in restoring the Shah in 1953 - and how the Observer exposed the plot

**Vanessa Thorpe**

Sun 2 Aug 2020 07:13 BST



2,650

**T**

he hidden role of a British secret service officer who led the coup that permanently altered the Middle East is to be revealed in detail for the first time since an *Observer* news story exposed the plot in 1985.

The report, headlined “How MI6 and CIA joined forces to plot [Iran](#) coup”, appeared in the 26 May edition. It exposed the fact that an MI6 man, later named as Norman Darbyshire, had run a covert and violent operation to reinstate the Shah of [Iran](#) as ruler of the country in 1953. Yet just a few days after the newspaper came out, all fresh evidence of this British operation and of Darbyshire’s identity disappeared from public debate.

“We still do not know who leaked this to the *Observer* originally, or why,” said filmmaker Taghi Amirani this weekend, ahead of the release of his documentary, *Coup 53*. “We only know that any record of the interview with Darbyshire quickly disappeared and no one followed up the story. It smacks of a complete cover-up of British involvement to this day.”

The background to the 1953 coup d’état has long been the cause of international suspicion and conjecture. Prime Minister Winston Churchill opposed the rule of the country’s first democratic leader, Mohammad Mossadegh, largely because it threatened Britain’s interests in Iran’s oil industry. Working with the [CIA](#), who also hoped to see the Shah Reza Pahlavi back on the throne, it is now clear that MI6 did much more than agitate for Mossadegh to be overthrown.

In June, documents found in a Washington archive showed how [Queen Elizabeth II’s name](#) was mistakenly used to persuade the Shah to stay in Iran prior to the coup. *Coup 53* now makes a clear case that the British were orchestrating an uprising, going as far as kidnapping, torturing and paying for protesters to go out on to the streets of Tehran.

*Coup 53*, released on 19 August, the 67th anniversary of the coup, follows the investigations of Anglo-Iranian director Amirani. Working with Walter Murch, the acclaimed editor of films such as *The Conversation*, *Apocalypse Now* and *The English Patient*, Amirani delves into the archives and interviews many of those involved.



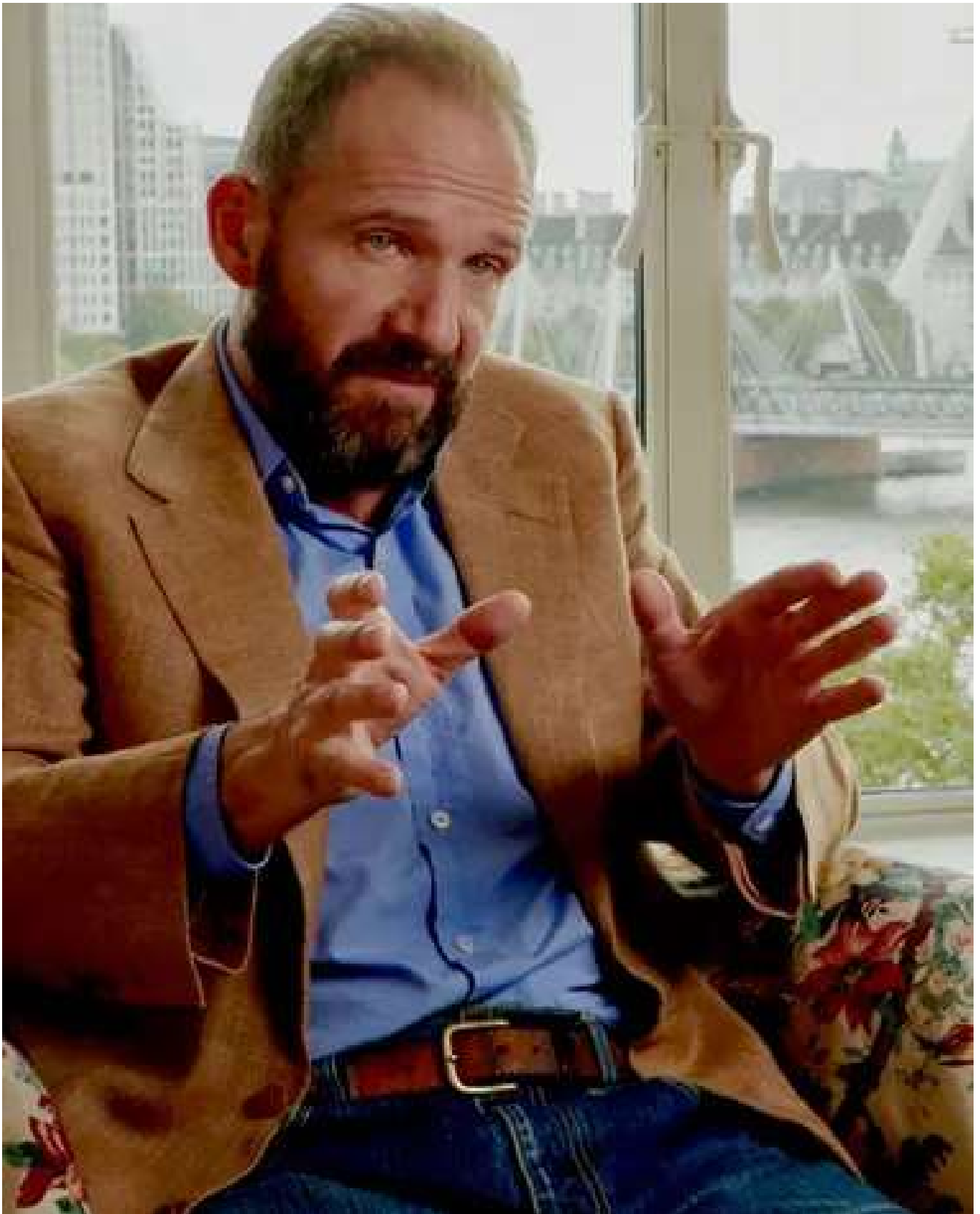
▲ The Observer's revelations in 1985.  
Photograph: The Observer

“We knew nothing of the Darbyshire mystery, or of the mystery about that mystery, when we started making this film,” said Murch. “None of this was on our radar. Taghi discovered things as we went along. The thriller element was not part of our template, which was to look back at unseen interviews. This was the most material I have ever had to work with - 532 hours - more than double what I handled on *Apocalypse Now*.”

The turning point was when Amirani found key evidence in abandoned research carried out for a landmark Granada documentary series of the mid-1980s, *End of Empire*: a cut-up transcript, presumed to be intended for inclusion in an episode about Iran, of an interview with Darbyshire, who spoke candidly.

“My brief was very simple,” says Darbyshire. “Go out there, don’t inform the ambassador, and use the intelligence service for any money you might need to secure the overthrow of Mossadegh by legal or quasi-legal means.” The **MI6** officer goes on to explain he spent “vast sums of money, well over a million-and-a-half pounds”, adding, “I was personally giving orders and directing the street uprising.”

Yet the explosive interview was never broadcast. In Amirani’s film, the part of Darbyshire is played by Ralph Fiennes, who delivers lines from the unused Granada material. The 1985 *Observer* article by reporter Nigel Hawkes was published just before the Iranian episode was shown by Channel 4.



▲ Ralph Fiennes as Norman Darbyshire in *Coup 53*. Photograph: Chris Morphet

But when the programme went out, Darbyshire and his testimony were absent. A TV review a week later by *Observer* critic Julian Barnes made no mention of this part of the story. Amirani, Murch and the intelligence experts they have consulted now conclude the government stepped in after a private screening, preventing the producers from using the Darbyshire interview. The *Coup 53* film-makers suggest newspapers, including the *Observer*, edited at the time by Donald Treford, would

also have been told to go no further with the story, using a state provision known as a D Notice.

Darbyshire worked closely with a CIA counterpart, Stephen Meade, whose interview for the *End of Empire* documentary was also not broadcast. He describes his British colleague as “a very competent individual who spoke Farsi fluently as well as French”.

Perhaps the most shocking evidence in *Coup 53* concerns British guilt in the kidnapping and eventual “accidental” killing of the Iranian police chief Mahmoud Afshartous. This incident deliberately provoked the unrest that led to the arrest and imprisonment of Mossadegh in August.

In the “lost footage”, Darbyshire claims he made “the correct psychological reading of the Persian mob character”, but that he understood that they “had the feeling they were being screwed, and rightly so, from 1920 onwards”.

Darbyshire died in 1993, and former Granada researcher Alison Rooper, who worked on *End of Empire*, together with her producer/director Mark Anderson, are unclear on details around the interview but tell Amirani they believe it was not on camera. “He never agreed to be filmed,” says Rooper.

The shah, who had been living in exile in Italy, flew back to Iran, then governed by CIA- and MI6-approved General Fazlollah Zahedi. In America, the coup was known as Operation Ajax, while in Britain it was Operation Boots. The shah ruled the country until the Islamic revolution of 1979.

“This coup shaped not only western relations with Iran for 60 years, but changed the Middle East. Imagine if there had been a democracy there,” said Amirani.

- This article was amended on 2 and 15 August 2020 because an earlier version said that Stephen Meade appeared in *End of Empire*; in fact his interview was not broadcast. It also said the role of the British agent who led the coup in Iran has been revealed for the first time since the 1985 Observer news story. To clarify: while the 1985 story did not identify Norman Darbyshire, he was named in a New York Times piece in 2000 and quoted on the coup in Stephen Dorril’s book, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations*, published the same year. The article was also amended because the original stated *Coup 53*’s conclusion that government stepped in to prevent inclusion of the agent’s testimony in *End of Empire* as fact when it referred to the Granada material as “censored”. This claim is rejected by makers of *End of Empire*. It was further amended on 17 November 2020 to remove an assertion that the 1985 Observer story was “suppressed” and to better reflect comments made by Alison Rooper and Mark Anderson in *Coup 53*.



- [Letter of response](#) to this article from Alison Rooper and Mark Anderson.

## You've read **6 articles** ...

... since January this year. And you're not alone; millions have turned to the Guardian for vital, independent, quality journalism throughout a turbulent and challenging 2020. Readers in 180 countries around the world, including Portugal, now support us financially. Will you join them?

We believe everyone deserves access to information that's grounded in science and truth, and analysis rooted in authority and integrity. That's why we made a different choice: to keep our reporting open for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. This means more people can be better informed, united, and inspired to take meaningful action.

In these perilous times, a truth-seeking global news organisation like the Guardian is essential. We have no shareholders or billionaire owner, meaning our journalism is free from commercial and political influence - this makes us different. When it's never been more important, our independence allows us to investigate fearlessly, and challenge those in power.

In this unprecedented year of intersecting crises, we have done just that, with revealing journalism that had real-world impact: the inept handling of the Covid-19 crisis, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the tumultuous US election.

We have enhanced our reputation for urgent, powerful reporting on the climate emergency, and moved to practice what we preach, rejecting advertising from fossil fuel companies, divesting from oil and gas companies and setting a course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Your funding powers our journalism, it protects our independence, and ensures we can remain open for all. You can support us through these challenging economic times and enable real-world impact.

Every contribution, however big or small, makes a real difference for our future.  
**Support the Guardian from as little as €1 - it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support the Guardian →

Remind me in January

VISA



Topics

**Iran / The Observer**

Middle East and North Africa / MI6 / CIA / Documentary / features



Subscribe →



### Read The Guardian in print

Find clarity by subscribing to The Guardian's essential news magazine, with 6 issues for €6. Home delivery available wherever you are.



### Take time to understand the week

Once a week, take a moment to pause, reflect and consider. In The Guardian Weekly we select the high from our newspapers to bring you a deeper, more

## Related stories



### Release of lauded Iranian documentary halted amid dispute with TV film-makers

1 Nov 2020



### There's a chance for change in the Middle East and Britain has a role to play

*Alistair Burt*

12 Jan 2020



### Boris Johnson warned: focus on Iran crisis or risk war

20 Jul 2019



### Revealed: Trump team hired spy firm for 'dirty ops' on Iran arms deal

5 May 2018

398

### Iran nuclear deal talks persist as Trump looks poised to kill it

1 Apr 2018

### How Gaza clashes could ignite flashpoints all over the Middle East

*Simon Tisdall*

31 Mar 2018

### Boris Johnson begins Iran talks over Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe

9 Dec 2017

### Iran reveals why Briton is in prison for sedition

26 Jun 2016

## Most popular

Across The Guardian		In World News	
1	The Bee Gees' Barry Gibb: 'There's fame and there's ultra-fame - it can destroy you'		
2	US election results 2020: Joe Biden defeats Donald Trump to win presidency		
3	Georgia runoff debate: senator Kelly Loeffler refuses three times to accept Biden victory		
4	Scottie Pippen: 'I told Michael Jordan I wasn't too pleased with The Last Dance'		
5	Saturday Night Live: Jason Bateman gets a monkey off his back		
6	WW1 trench fever identified in former homeless man in Canada		
7	Biden mulls options in case Republicans try to block cabinet picks		
8	Rudy Giuliani has coronavirus, Donald Trump says		
9	'Remarkable': South Australian surfer with serious shark bite injuries swims to shore and walks 300m		
10	First Thing: Trump team hits turbulence as Giuliani admitted to hospital		
<b>Most commented</b>			
Premier League: 10 talking points from this weekend's action			
			
<b>Most shared</b>			
The Bee Gees' Barry Gibb: 'There's fame and there's ultra-fame - it can destroy you'			
			



Advertisement



**World** ▶ Europe US Americas Asia Australia **Middle East** Africa Inequality

**News** Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle

**Sign up for the Guardian Today email**

All the day's headlines and highlights from the Guardian, direct to you every morning

Email address

**Sign up**

Contact us

Complaints & corrections

SecureDrop

Work for us

Privacy settings

Privacy policy

Cookie policy

Terms & conditions

Help

Advertise with us

All topics

All writers

Digital newspaper archive

Facebook

Twitter

Newsletters

**Support The Guardian**

Search UK jobs

Available for everyone, funded by readers

Contribute →    Subscribe →

Back to top ^

© 2020 Guardian News & Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved. (modern)