

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST REFINERY AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR: Khuzestan, Oil and Security

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This paper is part of an ongoing project on the social history of the city of Abadan, which until the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 was Iran's primary oil city and home to the World's largest oil refinery.

In 1908, after the discovery of huge oil fields in Khuzestan, south-western Iran, the Anglo-Iranian, formerly Anglo-Persian, Oil Company (henceforth the Company) established its monopoly drilling concessions. Following its completion in 1912, the Abadan refinery complex delivered an increasing volume of oil and petrochemical products to meet British demand. The oil complex in Khuzestan developed into one of the biggest industries in the Middle East, employing thousands of workers from across the world. It also became home to a labour movement that was able to orchestrate decisive industrial action in 1929 and 1946.

My previous research has centred on public violence and spatial politics as expressions of labour relations and ethnic inequality.¹ In particular, I have done research on: 1) the 1942 Bahmashir riots in Abadan, during which Indian workers and soldiers clashed with Iranian workers and the unemployed; and 2) the 1946 strike in Abadan, during which Arab tribes clashed with mainly non-Arab labour activists from the communist Tudeh Party. In this paper, however, I will explore the understudied topic of labour discontent and security politics in World War II Abadan. I am particularly interested in the extent to which Company demands and measures for increased security to protect its human and material assets in Khuzestan were in fact pretexts for increased control with the labour force.

Security was a constant theme in the history of relations between the Company and the central Iranian authorities. The subtheme, however, was the dubious nature of Company authority in Khuzestan. Despite its legal status as a privately owned enterprise within the Concession – the areas of oil extraction, refining and export inside Khuzestan – the Company tended to govern, as it were, in a quasi-colonial manner. In this paper, I will focus on how the War shaped Company/staff relations. I believe that this period is crucial to understanding how a post-WWII labour movement was able to emerge in 1946 after seventeen years of suppression, and eventually play a key role in the nationalisation of Iranian oil; and to understand why the Company sought, based on its wartime experiences, to change its policies and strategies in the period leading up to the 1951 nationalisation.

Company security desiderata became markedly different and more complex after 1925. This was the year when the Iranian central government established itself in Khuzestan, and when Reza Shah abolished the traditional authorities of the Bakhtiyari khans and the

Arab tribes under Sheikh Khaz'al. The tribesmen under these British-backed khans and sheikhs had until then functioned as Company mercenaries. The shift in Khuzestan's situation from a semi-autonomous tribal territory to a frontier province of a modern centralized nation-state profoundly impacted on Company operations and management/labour-relations.

Historical records speak volumes about Company security concerns. There are numerous appeals from local Company officials and British diplomats worried about the safety of assets and personnel; and their dissatisfaction with the numbers, skills and integrity of local Iranian police and gendarmerie in Khuzestan. A continuous scuffle took place between the Company and the Iranian state: the former demanding more and better policing, the latter seeking to relegate such expenses to the Company. The archives also contain ample evidence of direct British interference in the selection and dismissal of key officers throughout Khuzestan, of extralegal Company-run policing and of Company calls for British government assistance – especially during crises such as the well-documented 1929 general strike in Abadan refinery.²

What the archives today obviously contain less of is documentation of the comprehensive Company-run intelligence service. This service included a network of informants active in the refinery, in workshop and in workers' clubs throughout Khuzestan – even in areas not officially within the Company sphere of operation.³ Indeed, it is generally known that the Company had few qualms in utilizing a broad range of measures to control and discipline the expansive labour body. As scholars such as Stephanie Cronin have pointed out, the "intimidation of the workforce in the interest of political and industrial discipline was notorious".⁴

These coercive measures and political interferences testify to the breadth and profundity of Company, and in extension, British, power in Iranian domestic affairs.

The War comes to Abadan

On 25th August 1941, Allied Forces invaded Iran. The primary objective was to establish a vital supply corridor to aid the Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany, and to secure the significant oil interests in Khuzestan. Iran could offer little resistance against Britain in Abadan. Yet the city did witness a burst of kinetic action, including the sinking of two Iranian navy vessels and a chaotic invasion by Indian battalions. As Reza Shah fell in Tehran, the oil complex was partly converted to meet wartime demands. After inventive expansions at the Pazanun gas field, Abadan could by 1942 deliver much-needed aviation fuel for US bombing raids against Tokyo.

Sabotage or even a full-scale Axis attack on Abadan, were among the primary security concerns. It was feared that pro-German agents in Iran would disrupt the vital flow of energy from Khuzestan. Early wartime correspondence shows that diplomats and Company managers were alarmed by the lack of discipline and authority among Iranian police and gendarmerie. On several occasions, the British demanded that Iranian authorities impose tougher sentences on what they saw no longer as petty crimes but serious acts of sabotage. This included the theft of telephone wire, railway sleepers and pipeline support throughout the oil fields.⁵

Throughout 1941 and 1942, attacks on Company personnel in rural Khuzestan by armed robbers increased. Areas inside and adjoining the oil fields saw severe clashes between tribesmen and British-Indian soldiers. In early December 1942, a secret memorandum in the Company enumerated, among the major causes of instability, the removal of the Shah, the release from prison of unruly tribal leaders, the widespread availability of arms and ammunition, as well as the countrywide shortage of food supplies. "Since the entry into Iran of Allied Forces," the memorandum warned, "there has been a gradual and progressive deterioration of security throughout the country".⁶

In the period 1939-41, Company investment and employment in Khuzestan dropped drastically. This was primarily due to wartime disruptions and the strategic shift towards short haul oil tanking. The work force in Khuzestan fell from 51,000 in 1939 to 26,000 in just two years. As had been usual practice since the Company's establishment – and indeed a major source of labour force agony⁷ – workers were simply dismissed from one day to the other, left with no income to endure already appalling living conditions. Company cutbacks coincided with a severe famine raging in Iran, exacerbated by the diversion of foodstuffs from northern Iran to the Soviet frontlines.

From across the country, Iranians flocked to cities in Khuzestan. Abadan particularly received many of these internal refugees who mostly ended up amongst the masses of unemployed already crowding the city outskirts. The 1940s saw several outbreaks of typhus and smallpox in Abadan's shantytowns, where most of the native labour lived. An investigation in 1943-44 showed that "malnutrition was very common" in Abadan.⁸ Certain areas of the city, such as Ahmadabad, already in a miserable state before the 1940s, were engulfed in overcrowding, with thousands living with unsanitary conditions and high rates of crime.

Wartime disruptions, frontline volunteering and the diversion of skilled labour to other industries in Iran and around the world meant that the Company increasingly had to rely on a heterogeneous labour force. According to BP's historian Bamberg, this loss of manpower forced the Company to

"...cast its recruiting net widely, taking in a miscellany of recruits, including not only Iranians but also Czechs, Poles, Palestinians, personnel on loan from the armed forces, Burmah Oil Company employees who had been evacuated from Burma and the wives and daughters of British staff of the Company".⁹

The labour force also contained many Indian convicts working off their debt. To the Company, this heterogeneous labour force constituted a potential threat. Company officials asked for Britain to send plainclothes criminal investigation officers "familiar with methods of internal security employed in other large industrial organisations and port areas", so that the Company's "system of maintaining a check on labour and crews" could be overhauled.¹⁰ Indeed, as Bamberg notes, wartime disruptions left the Company "with a workforce that was less settled than before the war and more prone to the labour disturbances which later affected the Company".¹¹

When it came to the British subjects employed, it appeared that inaction was a more pressing concern to the Company than industrial action. With Abadan known for its cruelly

hot summers, humid climate and taxing work environment, and now also plagued by food scarcity, it was feared that hundreds of British skilled workers would simply leave Abadan. Thus, in November 1941, the UK government instituted an Order-in-Council, which prevented British (including Indian) subjects from leaving jobs that were now considered “Essential Undertakings” for the war effort, including the oil complex in Khuzestan. As a result, anyone refusing to work would be charged with disobedience and imprisoned. The Order-in-Council severely restricted the free movement of labourers.

In his BP panegyric ‘Adventures in Oil’, Henry Longhurst writes that instead of the insufficiently numbered and skilled Iranian police forces, “the real anti-sabotage work” had to be done by Company oil workers themselves. This, Longhurst claims, had the added benefit that “[w]iring, sandbagging, patrolling kept their muscles busy and their minds off the immediate future”.¹² Yet archives contain plenty of evidence that these efforts were not always carried out with patriotic fervour. Indeed, the added workload and worsening of Abadan’s overall situation generated discontent and low morale among workers. Abadan-London communication focused throughout 1941 and 1942 on how to entice employees to carry out civil defence duties and anti-raid precautionary drills; how to force employees to join ‘volunteer’ forces; whether the British government would be responsible for compensating workers who were injured while carrying out war-related work; and what to do with recalcitrant and malingering personnel. The Abadan manager concluded in late 1942 that “nothing short of compulsion” would “secure from employees full co-operation”.

The Militarisation of the Oil Complex

In answer to requests for cooperation from the British government, the Company lend its facilities to the military effort. Bamberg enlists some of the services rendered by the Company to the Allied Forces:

“the Company’s barges on the river Karun were used to transport railway engines, tanks and other vehicles destined for the Soviet Union; the capacity of the Abadan tin-making factory for the manufacture of petroleum containers was doubled between 1941 and 1944; and asphalt was supplied in large quantities for military roads and depots”.¹³

Abadan became one of the most important harbours in the effort to aid the Soviets, and its airport achieved international standing. After a lull, Abadan Refinery was by 1942 again expanding. In short, the Company facilitated numerous strategic military operations; however, it also in effect militarised its own operations, with profound impact on social reality in Khuzestan.

In the spring of 1941, war-related issues and anti-sabotage measures were discussed at a Company board meeting in London. It was decided that the Company could share with the Allied Forces any “open” intelligence gathered in the Concession. It was also decided that, as a precautionary measure, certain employees of the Company be educated in handling arms, and that uniforms be retained in Company stores in Abadan.¹⁴ Indeed, the extent to which the Company lent itself to military-related activities meant that the two could at times hardly be distinguished.

The official correspondence betrays this dubious nature of British/Company power in Khuzestan. In 1942, British diplomats in Ahvaz and Tehran exchanged views on the

situation, and particularly on the problem that “the local police force, raised by the Co. and clothed with the Co.’s special uniforms, was strictly speaking irregular and had no formal *raison d’être* and no executive power in theory.” A diplomat concluded that it “was true that it seemed to work out well in practice, but things might not always work so smoothly.”¹⁵

The blurring of civil and military lines eventually caused concern in the British military command in Baghdad. In July 1943, a high-ranking officer in the Indian Division complained to the Company managers in Khuzestan that their employees were often dressed in “full khaki”:

“Difficulty in obtaining the material to supplant the khaki is fully realised but it is hoped that you will do what you can in the interests of security to abolish the practice of your employees wearing 100% khaki – (i.e. disguised as soldiers).”¹⁶

However, the question was not only one of uniforms. The following month, the General Headquarters of the British forces in Persia and Iraq (henceforth PAIFORCE) addressed the Company in a rather harsh tone:

“It has been reported that the AIOC had been dealing direct [sic] with the Persian Military Governor on certain military matters which are properly the responsibility of the Comd 34 IND INF BDE. It is requested that all matters in which military interests, as opposed to purely OIL COMPANY interests, are involved will be referred to Comd 34 IND INF BDE. He is the responsible military commander for taking adequate steps to ensure the security of the AIOC installations. This is the normal military channel of communication, and short circuiting of it is apt to cause unexpected difficulties.”¹⁷

The officials’ denials aside, the archives are indeed brimful with examples of Company interference in matters properly outside its authority.

The issue of establishing authority was a key question in the period leading up to the December 1942 Bahmashir riots between Indians and Iranians in Abadan (mentioned in the beginning of this chapter). Company officials at all levels discussed how this power could be projected in a more comprehensive manner throughout the areas of obvious interest to both the Company and a British state under wartime exigencies. On the one hand, the British military command in Baghdad raised in December 1942 a question that had been lingering in correspondence between Company officials, diplomats and military officers for some time: that of making Khuzestan ‘a special military zone’ under martial law.¹⁸

The argument was that if such a zone were to be declared in the province, it would raise the level of anti-sabotage security. However, there was also the implicit argument that through such a zone, the Company could control its labour force more comprehensively. Indeed, it was stressed that any future Military Governor should be able to act completely independent of Tehran, and that he should oversee a far-reaching strengthening of police forces under his direct command.

Indeed, the Company was, in December 1942, in the process of introducing its own unilateral security measure. In the beginning of December, the General Manager of the Company in Iran and Iraq, J.M. Pattinson, inquired the military command about when the special military zone would possibly be declared.¹⁹ But then he continued:

“In the meantime, and in case the declaration [of a special military zone] is delayed, we want to get on with the identity card issue and we propose, subject to your agreement, to approach the Chief of Police on the lines that the Company is declaring a special area within the Company areas in Abadan, in which persons must carry identity cards, and that we require him to issue notices to the public and, with our help, to arrange for the issue of cards to Persian non-employees.”²⁰

In short, the Company was at the time preparing to enforce an identity card regime not only on persons directly in its employ, but also on “the Persian non-Company civilians and on the contract labour”.²¹ These statements raise several questions about Company authority in Khuzestan. First of all, there is the question of Company jurisdiction over non-employees. It seems that on the pretext of wartime exigencies and in a situation of Anglo-Soviet occupation, where Iranian central authority had all but broken down, the Company had decided to introduce its own scheme of control in the public spaces of urban Khuzestan. Secondly, the wording also betrays the Company’s view that since non-employees were “non-Company civilians”, Company employees must be considered a quasi-military force.

However, it still seemed at this stage as if the Company and the British military establishment needed one final excuse for pressing through the demand for a new security regime. It came in the form of the December 1942 riots in Abadan. The Company management presented the unrest as proof of the need to turn not just Abadan but all of Khuzestan into a special military zone. In correspondence with the British Embassy in Tehran, Pattinson argued for the immediate instalment of a capable and empowered Military Governor in Khuzestan with the following rationale:

“The remedy which has been suggested for Abadan is to appoint a Military Governor with summary powers of jurisdiction. In principle this appears to be correct, as previous experience has shown that the imposition of severe penalties is effective in engendering a respect to the laws and in achieving obedience to them. The Bakhtiari Khans were able to prevent theft in the oilfields areas by personal mutilation of offenders when caught, and the methods of the last regime were not dissimilar. We do not recommend that measures so severe as these are desirable, but it is quite clear that until evildoers are brought to book and adequately punished no form of security in this area can be expected”²²

Pattinson argued that if the police were unable to handle a riot, then they would surely be incapable of acting against looting – something he felt “could be expected certainly as a result of air raids or other forms of attack”.²³ He argued that it had been “clearly demonstrated that little or no reliance can be placed in the Persian police force in Abadan” and that the riots “provided ample evidence that they could not be counted upon to take effective charge in an emergency.”²⁴

The Company management even called for a British military intervention. However, the military authorities did not agree with this assessment and instead replied:

“The disturbance on the 19 Dec. 42., was intercommunal and there is not the slightest evidence or any possibility that the disorder was occasioned by anti-British feeling or directed towards interfering with the work of the Refinery It is not a British military responsibility to prevent or deal with this sort of disorder. It is purely a matter for the Persian police. Proposal to bring about an improvement in the Persian police force at ABADAN have already been made to the Persian Government ...”²⁵

The military stressed that rather than hoping for an increased British military presence, the Company should enforce its own mechanisms of socio-spatial control. This included strengthening fences that separated various neighbourhoods, and thus different classes of oil workers, in Abadan from each other.²⁶ However, the Company management did not seem to share this view. As Pattinson had already argued immediately after the riots, “improving fences” would not be sufficient. Indeed, he telegraphed his superiors in London, candidly urging them to use the riots “as affording proof [of] urgent need [in] declaring Abadan [a] Military Area.”²⁷ Eventually, the Company succeeded: a military zone under martial law was declared in Khuzestan, which lasted until late 1945.

In this fashion, the Company management sought to directly link the issue of internal security and labour relations in Company areas with that of external security concerns arising from the war. The real reason for demanding a heavy-handed military rule in Khuzestan, of course, should be sought out in the socio-economic state of Company areas at this time. Particularly, it should be understood within the context of the Company’s fear that the coercive, quasi-colonial order of inequality upon which Company activities in Iran rested was rapidly crumbling. In other words, the militarisation of Company activities and authority was tightly connected with the fear of labour heterogeneity, discontent and activism.

Managerial Despotism

It was not before after the war – during the tumultuous events of May Day 1946 and the subsequent oil strike in June 1946 – that the indigenous, Iranian oil labour movement could return to the scene. Yet one of the many precursors for this well-documented case of industrial action has yet to be brought under proper scrutiny: the 1943-44 labour dispute amongst British workers in Abadan. In his magisterial work on Iranian history, Ervand Abrahamian briefly mentions this dispute, and ties it together with the Company’s concern about labour discontent spreading among its Iranian workers.²⁸ Here, I will outline the dispute within the context of World War II security issues.

Towards the end of 1943, production in the Abadan oil refinery again picked up speed, and in order to meet constantly growing demand, the Company decided to extend the working hours of the British shift operators. These shift operators oversaw the day-to-day running of the refinery, supervised a workforce of mostly Iranian and non-British descent and carried responsibility for safety precautions and in emergency situations. The Company justified their demand for increased work hours by stating that supervision was inadequate, that there was a large increase in demand for the refinery’s products and that a new plant

was to be opened. The shift operators refused to comply, and when management dismissed their complaints, they threatened with a strike.

The dispute escalated to a point where, on 1st January 1944, the Chairman of the Shift Workers Committee in Abadan called on the British Ministry of Labour and National Service in London to immediately dispatch investigators to Abadan. Although the Ministry of Labour admitted to have no official power to regulate conditions of employment in Abadan, it nonetheless agreed to act.²⁹ Initially, it dispatched a parliamentary delegation led by Conservative MP for Tyneside, Baroness Irene Ward, who incidentally had numerous people from her constituency among Abadan's employees. However, Ms Ward did not receive a warm welcome. As Abrahamian describes:

“When [Ms. Ward] lectured the British employees on how lucky they were not to be in a Japanese prison, angry members of the audience suggested taking her “on a tour of the Abadan graveyard” or “dealing with her in some dark corner in the proper Japanese fashion”.³⁰

Upon her return to the British Embassy in Tehran, Ms. Ward recommended the Foreign Office to send a “first-class investigator” to Abadan. In the meantime, the shift workers refused to extend their work hours, arguing that this refusal did not impede the war effort in any way. The investigator, who arrived on 9th February 1944 in Abadan, reported back the numerous grievances expressed by employees:

“The general picture presented was, briefly, that the British shift operators ... had serious grievances covering almost the whole range of their relationships with the Company's management and developed over a number of years, that resentment had become acute owing to the staff's impression that the management was taking advantage of the restrictions on their freedom of movement imposed by the Order in Council... and that the disputed extension of working hours was by no means the most important item in the differences.”³¹

Having organised under the name ‘The Abadan Society of Shift Staff’, the employees handed over letters and documents to the investigators, expressing a wide range of concerns. One was that the management exercised “an excessive measure of control over the personal and private lives of the staff”. This included monitoring and censoring of staff letters, in cooperation with the British consul in neighbouring Khorramshahr, who allegedly would report back to the Company any interesting content. This cooperation prompted employees to dismiss the consulate as “junior clerks” of the Company who would consistently act “as Company agents in any dispute between the Company and its Staff”.³²

The ‘managerial despotism’, the employees protested, took on several faces. The shift operators described how management would address employees in “autocratic terms”, how it would infiltrate staff committees and how it had, on at least one count, censored a staff periodical. Furthermore, management was consistently discourteous in dealing with staff, and would often not respond to even straightforward requests. One staff member reportedly did not receive a reply when he applied for permission to marry.

A more general set of grievances had to do with the arduous and onerous work environment. Staff complained that an extension in work hours would expose them to

excessive strain. Medical officers corroborated that heat exhaustion, stomach ills (the notorious “Abadan tummy”), malaria and sand fly fever was rampant among Company employees. According to the shift operators, the medical staff deemed that an increase in shift hours would cause “a rapid decline in general health”.³³

The employees also had numerous complaints about food and accommodation. According to the shift operators, there were shortages of sound food, uneven distribution of canned food, irregularities in rationing and appalling conditions at Company restaurants. It was implied that high-ranking officers received more and better rationing, that there was a thriving black market for alcohol and a trade in condemned Army goods. The inequality was also reflected in accommodation, with shift operators being allocated ‘bachelor’ accommodation in the less prestigious parts of Braim, in temporary structures or in the local RAF camp with its “disgusting conditions”. Some employees even lived in tents – quite normal for Iranian labour but unheard of for British employees. The shift operators noted that there had been acts of disobedience by employees housed in the RAF camp.

Investigators also found “anomalies” regarding differences in wage grading for new recruits, and employees argued that “Company administration is either ignorant of Abadan conditions or else hopelessly incompetent at dealing with them”.³⁴ The investigators noted that work conditions were significantly better in Bahrain where employees had air-conditioned accommodation, better food and regular leave options.

A host of issues related to the war. Most important was complaints that since Abadan had been deemed a site of Essential Work under the Order in Council, lower-rung employees such as the shift operators only rarely received permission for leave. The operators claimed that the point system through which employees were given leave was arbitrary and unfair, that it favoured married men, and that even getting to South Africa for R&R was difficult. In this respect, the investigators found, the “position of Abadan is much worse than that of the fighting units”, and that this had ruined morale.

The shift operators claimed that “the legal position” of the Order in Council in Abadan was “vague”. In their complaints, the shift operators wrote:

“Roughly, a man refusing to work is to be sent home and after conviction of infringement of the Order in Council sentenced to two years imprisonment. The Consul [of Khorramshahr] stated that this was absolutely not sufficient deterrent to some people. He, therefore, in consultation with the Company, arranged for the diversion of these people to India, and for conscription there. Apparently, he does not have the faintest vestige of legal authority for this step. Further, as has already been stated, in almost doubtful causes he, himself and H.B.M. Minister in Tehran have adjudicated in a very one-sided manner.”³⁵

Employees reported that they were under “undue pressure”, including “third degree methods”, to volunteer for various defence activities and meetings called by the management. Investigators found that Abadan was similar to other sites of Essential Work in this respect, but with much fewer administrative facilities. The investigators concluded that it was “undesirable to keep men in Abadan against their will” and called on the

Company management “to do all in its power to prevent discontent from arising”. Yet, the investigators also concluded that no “automatic solution of the problems is conceivable”.³⁶

Company management had even suggested lifting the Order in Council since there was no longer any fear that large numbers of refinery workers would leave to join the Armed Forces. However, investigators disagreed, arguing that lifting the Order could result in an “embarrassing” situation where British workers would simply leave Abadan. Thus, the investigators concluded that it was “desirable to retain the generally overriding restraining influence of the Regulation upon the workpeople”.

However, the investigators did suggest measures to make it easier for the Company to dismiss workers in Abadan, and for workers in Abadan to request consent to leave, without creating an “embarrassment to the Company in its peculiar position in Persia”. The protesting employees demanded an independent institution to adjudicate in labour disputes, and that dismissed staff be sent for trial in the UK rather than India. If not, the employees warned, there would be a “steady increase in resentment”. The investigators agreed that there should be an independent body in charge of leave and dismissal. They also suggested that “misfits” and recalcitrant employees be dismissed, and that the Company see to better accommodation and food for the shift operators.

Despite conceding that there were numerous problems with accommodation, food, leave and general quality of life in Abadan, the investigators however dismissed the shift operators’ grievances. The investigators concluded that there “was no evidence ... that the Company was deliberately following a policy of despotism”, only that there had been “a lack of tact”, and a tendency to disregard complaints, which could be explained with the “excessive pressure of work”. Relying on Company managers’ statements, the investigators excused shortcomings with the difficult circumstances within which World War II had placed Abadan. Investigators described the challenges faced by the Company:

“The Company holds a concession from the Iranian government and its position has sometimes been of extreme delicacy. The interests of the European staff have not always been those to which the Company was able to attach paramount importance, no matter how well disposed the management might be. Further, and possibly of more immediate importance, the Company had perforce to undertake responsibilities towards its staff over an infinitely wider range than is customary as between employers and employees. In Abadan the employer has to provide not only employment, but housing accommodation, heating, lighting, water, sanitation, food, clothing, recreation, amusement, medical and even educational services. These points of contact between management and staff immeasurably increase the potentialities for friction which might, notwithstanding the peculiarities mentioned, be substantial in any undertaking of the size of that of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. at Abadan”.

In short, the investigators dismissed labour grievances with the excuse that the War had placed great stress on all industries essential to the war effort. A number of improvements were suggested to the Company, and it appears that the combination of coercive measures and appeasement successfully curtailed further discontent up until 1946.

Conclusion/Perspectives

[to be developed...]

It is impossible to ascertain whether there were any direct connections between the wartime British labour disputes and the sudden wave of Iranian labour agitation that led to the historic 1946 oil strike in Abadan. However, there are a number of observations that could be made in this regard:

Firstly, being subjected to intensified security measures and social control, suffering from food shortages and social unrest, and witnessing ethnically framed rioting and general discontent were wartime experiences shared by all workers. That the dispute occurred among the British – who were otherwise at the top rung of the labour hierarchy ladder and enjoyed markedly better living and working conditions than the rest of the labour force – testifies to this fact. During the War, it seems, all classes of labour witnessed what was termed managerial despotism. Obviously, the despotism experienced by non-White and non-British labour was much more severe, and that is one of the explanations for the success of the Tudeh and labour unions in 1946.

Secondly, the wartime labour dispute should be read within a longer history of industrial action that started with Indian migrant workers in 1918, spread to other classes of workers, and reached a momentary apex in the 1929 strike. Leftist labour activism, in other words, constituted a significant threat to the Company's operations. This, in turn, should be connected to wider regional and global politics: in the immediate aftermath of the War, Company officials and British diplomats routinely expressed fear that communism was spreading even among some of the British employees. This fear was directly connected to the larger concern of Soviet influence in Iran and across the world.

Thirdly, more research is needed to compare globally the experiences of oil workers during the War. Industrial workers in Canada, for example, agitated ferociously for the right to collective bargaining, and research shows that wartime 'states of exception' such as Orders in Council were used to curb this labour activism. It has also been argued more broadly that wartime emergency powers were used systematically to combat communism.³⁷

In other words, the wartime labour disputes must be understood within the global historical framework of labour activism, communism and great power rivalry. This study thus presents a tentative foray into one aspect of a topic that deserves much more attention: how do oil industries function in times of war? And, specifically, how do oil companies seek to exploit wartime exigencies to control restive labour forces? Much more work is needed in this respect, and should be connected to studies of more recent history in extractive industries in countries such as Angola, Nigeria, Iraq, and beyond...

¹ Chapters to appear in 2014 and 2015 in two volumes edited by Profs. Nelida Fuccaro and Ulrike Freitag as part of the Anglo-German *Urban Violence in the Middle East* research project. I would like to thank Nelida Fuccaro, Kaveh Ehsani and Touraj Atabaki for their help and encouragement throughout this research project. Fadi Dawood and Rowena Abdurazak have provided essential assistance for this paper.

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- ² See for example: Bayat, Kaveh. 2007. 'With or Without Workers in Reza Shah's Iran: Abadan, May 1929' in Atabaki, Touraj (Ed.): *The State and the Subaltern. Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran*; and Cronin, Stephanie. 2010. 'Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike' in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 5: 699-732.
- ³ See for example Eftekhari's account in: Tafreshi, Majid T. & Bayat, Kaveh. 1991. *Khaterat-e dowran-e separti-shode*, Tehran: Ferdows.
- ⁴ Cronin 2010: 715.
- ⁵ See FO248/1435: 24th February, 13th March 1942.
- ⁶ BP Archives 43758, December 4th 1942.
- ⁷ Yusef Eftekhari in Tafreshi & Bayat 1991.
- ⁸ BP Archives 25553 quoted in Bamberg 1994: 248-9. Bamberg, J. H. 1994. *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Vol. 2: The Anglo-Iranian years, 1928-1954*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁹ Bamberg 1994: 249.
- ¹⁰ 'Message received from Abadan', 5th August 1942, FO371/31429.
- ¹¹ Bamberg 1994: 250.
- ¹² Longhurst, Henry. 1959. *Adventure in Oil: the story of British Petroleum*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd.: 96.
- ¹³ Bamberg 1994: 240.
- ¹⁴ BP Archives 43758, 13th May 1941.
- ¹⁵ 'Security in Khuzistan, esp. in the Oil Fields', FO 248/1435.
- ¹⁶ BP Archives 68881, 19th July 1943.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5th August 1943.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9th December 1942.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Pattinson to Rice, BP Archives 68881, 9th December 1942.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Pattinson to Rice, BP Archives 68881, 22nd December 1942.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ J.M. Pattinson, General Manager to Administrative Commandant, Abadan, BP Archives 68881, 24th December 1942.
- ²⁵ GHQ PAIFORCE to HQ 12 IND DIV., BP Archives 68881, 12th January 1943.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Pattinson to Sunbury, BP Archives 68881, 24th December 1942.
- ²⁸ Abrahamian, Ervand 1982. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton University Press: 360.
- ²⁹ FO371/40158.
- ³⁰ Abrahamian 1982: 360.
- ³¹ 'Discontent of the A.I.O.C. employees at Abadan, report by Mr. Picton', FO371/40159.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*, Appendix B.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, Appendix A.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, Appendix A, FO371/40159.
- ³⁶ Discontent of the A.I.O.C. employees at Abadan, report by Mr. Picton', FO371/40159.
- ³⁷ See Laurel Sefton MacDowell. 1978. 'The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations System During World War II', *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 3, pp. 175-196; Reg Whitaker. 1986. 'Official Repression of Communism During World War II', *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 17, pp. 135-166; Jeremy Weber. 1985. 'The Malaise of Compulsory Conciliation: Strike Prevention During World War II', *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 15, pp. 57-90.