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### Chapter 3: Iranian Oil Nationalisation as Decolonisation: Historiographical Reflections, Global History, and Postcolonial Theory

Mattin Biglari

Now that by God's will, and through the attempts of the deputies of the two Houses, the country's major national resources have been restored, we all feel confident that if this overflowing wealth is utilised properly, our nation will be enabled to enjoy a prosperous and comfortable life, and in line with the progressive nations, accomplish its duty in contributing towards universal civilization.<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of Mohammad Mosaddeq, the newly appointed prime minister of Iran, addressing the country's population over radio. His message referred to the government's decision to nationalise oil operations in the southwestern province of Khuzestan, thereby expelling the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). His message not only conveyed the hope that national sovereignty over oil would provide the necessary basis for Iran's future internal development, but also that in doing so it would help create a path for other countries to follow. In this way, Mosaddeq's vision aligned with those of many contemporary anti-colonial figures across

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<sup>1</sup> 'Prime Minister's Message Broadcast on the Radio', *Ettela'at* 30 April 1951, BP Archive (hereafter BP)

the Global South who saw decolonisation as an opportunity for ‘worldmaking’, helping to realise universalist aspirations for a more egalitarian postwar world.<sup>2</sup>

In this reading, Iran’s nationalisation of oil in 1951 was part of a much broader story of global decolonisation. The Iranian government received messages of congratulation from leaders of the Non-Aligned movement, such as Nehru, as well as the former Mexican president Cardenas, who oversaw the nationalisation of oil in Mexico in 1937. Such messages of solidarity also extended below the level of government. For example, in September 1951 some 30,000 Mexican oil workers sent a message to oil workers in Khuzestan to share lessons they had learned from their own experience of nationalisation: ‘in the beginning we were also intimidated by nations who exploited us and we were told we could not administer our oil industry, but for nearly twenty years we have been running our oil industry’.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of nationalisation in Iran were well aware of the global attention they had garnered. For instance, in March 1951 the newspaper *Keyhan* proudly rejoiced that Iranian oil had ‘become the talk everywhere in the world’, especially in Muslim countries like

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<sup>2</sup> Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, 2019. However, as Getachew shows, ‘worldmaking’ envisaged self-determination beyond the limits of the nation-state framework.

<sup>3</sup> Telegram from Tehran embassy to US Secretary of State, 5 September 1951, Box 5505A, RG 59, Central Decimal File 888.2553/7-195 – 888.2553/9-1951, NARA. On the role of oil workers in Mexican oil nationalisation see Myrna I. Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1938*, 2006.

Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> Such transnational imagination ‘sought not only to disrupt colonial rule in one colony, but to attack colonialism everywhere as a systemic, worldwide problem in need of eradication’.<sup>5</sup>

In particular, Iranian oil nationalisation helped usher in a new era when governments across the Global South increasingly wrested control of natural resources from foreign governments and firms on the path towards securing postcolonial sovereignty. In June 1951, one Pakistani newspaper hoped

that Iran would not fail. For possession of the oilfields, vital as they are to Iran’s economy, vindicate a principle of far greater importance to the people of Asia... the rubber of Malaya, the oil of Iran, the control of the Suez, these belong without reservation to the people who inhabit these regions... no one doubts, or laments, the end of an Empire that had dominated the world for over a hundred years.<sup>6</sup>

As international historians have recently stressed, such resource nationalism animated various ventures across several postcolonial countries to build or take over national oil industries, laying the foundations for the establishment of OPEC in 1960 and its ascendancy in subsequent decades.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, for some time historians of the British empire have suggested that the events of 1951 in

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Reflection of the Iranian Oil Question in the World’, *Keyhan*, 29 March 1951.

<sup>5</sup> Heather Streets-Salter, ‘International and Global Anti-Colonial Movements’, in *World Histories from below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Antoinette M. Burton and Tony Ballantyne, 2016, 47–74, at 47.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Great Britain and Iran’, *Civil and Military Gazette*, 19 June 1951, FO 248/1527, the National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA).

<sup>7</sup> Christopher R. W. Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Sovereign Rights and the Economic Culture of Decolonization, 1945 to 1979*, 2017.

Iran emboldened the Free Officers in Egypt in their seizure of power in January 1952 and inspired Nasser's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal in 1956.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, it has long been acknowledged in the historiography of Iran's oil nationalisation that the expropriation of AIOC promoted among Global South countries the 'sovereignty of nations and their right to control their natural resources'.<sup>9</sup> The very first history of this subject written in 1956, Mostafa Fateh's magisterial *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran* ('Fifty Years of Iran's Oil'), situated it within a broader context of awakening in the 'East' and liberation from Western impositions.<sup>10</sup> Today, oil nationalisation occupies a central place in Iranian national memory, heralded as a triumph of democratic popular will and a marker of the country's stand against imperialism, marked each year on its 29 Esfand anniversary (20 March) both within Iran and amongst the Iranian diaspora. As will be elucidated, several rich historical accounts have been written in English and Persian, especially highlighting the role of the pro-nationalisation coalition, the National Front (*jebhe-ye melli*), and its figurehead, Mosaddeq, who has been likened to other leading anti-colonial and Non-Aligned leaders. For instance, in his recent textbook of modern Iran, Amanat writes that Mosaddeq

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<sup>8</sup> William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism*, 1984. For a recent study on Mosaddeq's influence in Egypt see Lior Sternfeld, 'Iran Days in Egypt: Mosaddeq's Visit to Cairo in 1951', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43/1, January 2016, 1–20.

<sup>9</sup> As quoted in one of the most comprehensive English-language account of Iranian oil nationalisation, Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath*, 1992, 341.

<sup>10</sup> Mostafa Fateh, *Panjah Sal Naft-e Iran*, 1335/1956, 448.

was quick to learn the populist politics of the postwar era and quicker to grasp and indigenize its anti-imperialist message as it circulated throughout the non-Western milieu, from China, India, and Southeast Asia to Africa and Latin America. In this and other respects, Mosaddeq represented a new face of postcolonial leadership pioneered by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and later by Sukarno in Indonesia and Jamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt.<sup>11</sup>

However, despite recognising the anti-colonial nature of the oil nationalisation movement, historians have stressed its importance for decolonisation outside Iran more so than within. This is because, as is commonly pointed out, Iran was not formally colonised or governed by Western powers. In this chapter I make an historiographical and conceptual contribution to consider oil nationalisation as an instance of decolonisation in Iran, and therefore also as a window to the utility of postcolonial theory in the study of modern Iranian history more generally. First, I survey the literature to show how historians have long acknowledged the anti-colonialism of oil nationalisation but have not fully accounted for the colonial context from which it emerged. In the second section, I suggest that oil nationalisation should be grounded in everyday life in the centre of oil operations, Khuzestan, to fully illuminate how oil was imbricated in global networks of colonialism and racial capitalism. I elaborate why through discussing the burgeoning field exploring the social history of the Iranian oil industry. In the final section, I outline how conditions in Khuzestan translated to the political sphere in Tehran to reappraise how oil nationalisation was an act of decolonisation. Incorporating insights from postcolonial theory, I conclude how oil nationalisation provides a vantage point to consider the nature of colonial modernity in Iran and can be generative of new research agendas in wider Iranian historiography.

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<sup>11</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, 2017, 531.

## Oil Nationalisation in Iran: An Historiographical Overview

Works on Iranian oil nationalisation fall into three main categories. First, there are studies in the field of international history that have focused on the Cold War dimensions of nationalisation and its place in global decolonisation. These are mostly concerned with the events that precipitated the 1953 coup and less with the reasons for the initial emergence of the oil nationalisation movement, and so they are less the focus of attention in this chapter.<sup>12</sup> Second, there are histories from the perspective of oil companies that offer detailed accounts of negotiations between AIOC and the Iranian government, as well as the global oil industry's reaction to the expulsion of the British company.<sup>13</sup> Though very informative about the motivations behind major oil companies, especially AIOC's management, they rely on documents from archives in the West, especially the UK National Archive and BP Archive. As a result, they provide a one-sided account and reveal little about Iranian perspectives except when quoted in foreign correspondence.

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<sup>12</sup> William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East*; Mary Ann Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood: The United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950–1954*, 1997; Steven G. Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East: Sterling and Postwar Imperialism, 1944–1971*, 2009; James Bill and William Roger Louis, eds. *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil*, 1988. A recent exception is Gregory Brew, *Petroleum and Progress in Iran: Oil, Development, and the Cold War*, 2022, which does assess why nationalisation happened and makes ample use of Persian sources. Dietrich's *Oil Revolution* is also concerned with reasons for nationalisation but situates Mossadeq's motivations within a global context of resource nationalism across the Global South.

<sup>13</sup> These include company histories such as J. H. Bamberg, *The History of The British Petroleum Company: Vol.2, The Anglo–Iranian Years, 1928–1954*, 1994; and also global histories of oil as in Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, 1991.

The third type, which will be the focus of this survey, relates to histories of oil nationalisation written by historians of Iran, written in Persian and English. While often relying on the same diplomatic archive as the types above, they provide much greater insight by also incorporating Persian sources such as memoirs, newspapers and, more recently, archival documents.<sup>14</sup> These studies offer more comprehensive accounts of the oil nationalisation movement and its internal tensions beyond Mosaddeq, especially the National Front (*jebhe-ye melli*) and other prominent proponents of nationalisation such as Hoseyn Makki, Mozaffar Baqai, Allahyar Saleh, Hoseyn Fatemi, and Ayatollah Kashani. They also highlight the position of the Left, including the Tudeh Party and Khalil Maleki's Non-Aligned 'Third Force'.<sup>15</sup> For instance, they point out that Tudeh co-founder Abbas Eskandari made the first calls for oil nationalisation heard in the Majles in August 1948 and again in January 1949.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there are several notable histories written by figures who were directly involved in government or the oil industry at the time of nationalisation and became important figures in oil policy, combining personal recollections with

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<sup>14</sup> The most notable of these works published in English include Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, Rev. edn, 1979; Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle*; Fakhreddin Azimi, *Iran: The Crisis of Democracy*, 1989; Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, 2nd edn, 1999; Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.–Iranian Relations*, 2013; and, in Persian, Fateh, *Panjah Sal*; Fu'ad Rowhani, *Tarikh-e Melli Shodan-e Şan'at-e Naft-e Iran*, 1352/1973; Mohammad Ali Movahed, *Khab-e Ashofte-ye Naft: Doktor Mosaddeq va Nahzat-e Melli-ye Iran*, *Jald-e 1 va 2*, 1378/1999; Qobad Fakhimi, *Si Sal-e Naft-e Iran: Az Melli Shodan-e Naft ta Enqelab-e Eslami*, 1387/2008; and Mansur Mahdavi, *Tarikh-e Nahzat-e Melli-ye Naft*, 1396/2017.

<sup>15</sup> Katouzian, *Musaddiq*, is particularly strong in this regard.

<sup>16</sup> Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle*, 52; Katouzian, *Musaddiq*, 68; Movahed, *Khab-e Ashofte-ye Naft*, 154.



a rich primary source base.<sup>17</sup> Finally, there has been a recent proliferation of memoirs in Iran written by former oil workers, residents, and onlookers present in Khuzestan at the time of nationalisation.<sup>18</sup>

Many of these works have long acknowledged that Iranian oil nationalisation must be understood within a global context. For instance, Fateh provides a long overview of Mexican oil nationalisation in 1938, and Rowhani de-exceptionalises the Iranian case by comparing it to various nationalisations across the world in the postwar period, including Britain, France, and Egypt.<sup>19</sup> Several authors have also drawn parallels between Iranian oil nationalism and anti-colonial movements elsewhere, especially India, even comparing Mosaddeq to Gandhi.<sup>20</sup> Movahed goes as far as asserting that oil nationalisation was a ‘revolutionary act in the struggle against colonialism’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Fateh, *Panjah Sal*; Rowhani, *Tarikh-e Melli Shodan*; Hossein Makki, *Ketab-e Siyah, Jald-e Sevvom: Khal'-e Yad az Sherkat-e Naft-e Inglis va Iran*, 1360/1981; Muḥammad Muṣaddiq, *Musaddiq's Memoirs*, ed. Homa Katouzian, 1988; Manucher Farmanfarmanian, *Blood and Oil: Memoirs of a Persian Prince*, 1997. In addition to these, Fakhimi, *Si Sal-e Naft-e Iran* and Movahed, *Khab-e Ashofte-ye Naft* both include eyewitness accounts of the authors.

<sup>18</sup> Iraj Valizadeh, *Anglo va Bangolo Dar Abadan*, 1390/2011; Heidar Dehqani, *Nim Qarn-e Khedmat Dar San'at-e Naft-e Iran*, 1394/2015; Majid Javaherizadeh, *Palayeshgah-e Abadan dar 80 Sal Tarikh-e Iran 1908–1988*, 1396/2017; Nosratallah Bakturtash, *Chand Yademan az San'at Melli Shodan-e Naft Dar Abadan va Qeireh*, 1396/2017; Hassan Kamshad, *Hadith-e Nafas: Khaterat-e Resteh az Faramushi*, 1396/2017.

<sup>19</sup> Fateh, *Panjah Sal*, 133–42; Rowhani, *Tarikh-e Melli Shodan*, 5–15.

<sup>20</sup> Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 5; Fakhimi, *Si Sal-e Naft-e Iran*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Movahed, *Khab-e Ashofte-ye Naft*, 154.

Nevertheless, there has arguably been a general tendency towards methodological nationalism in the above works. Many situate nationalisation within a longer tradition of struggle in Iran, beginning with foreign concessions and the Constitutional Revolution.<sup>22</sup> Of course, some leading figures actively took part in the Constitutional Revolution and often referred to it at the time of nationalisation. But it is not particularly helpful to include such events taking place so many years apart in one linear narrative. If read superficially, it might create the impression of Whiggish teleology, treating oil nationalisation as the completion of Iran's long march to democracy. This runs the risk of essentialising mass movements across time and underplaying contingencies that were less to do with long-term internal processes than the specific historical context of the postwar era (as will later be elaborated).

Furthermore, and perhaps an underlying reason for the above issue, most of these accounts focus on elites. To be sure, they are mostly political histories and so focus on the actors directly involved in negotiations between AIOC and the Iranian government. As such, they provide very valuable chronologies of the events leading up to the oil nationalisation bill in March 1951.<sup>23</sup> In addition, some scholars such as Katouzian and Movahed make particularly good use of the press to offer extremely rich accounts of the National Front and its various constituent parties, also

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, the narrative begins with the 1872 Reuter concession in Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle*.

Similarly, Fateh opens his section on the oil nationalisation movement by referring back to previous mass movements in Iran such as the Tobacco rebellion and the Constitutional revolution in Fateh, *Panjah Sal*, 515.

Likewise, Movahed considers the nationalisation movement as one of three mass movements in modern Iran, alongside the Constitutional Revolution and 1979 revolution, in Movahed, *Khab-e Ashofte-ye Naft*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> This is exemplified by Elm, *Oil, Power and Principle*.

acknowledging the importance of public opinion as a driving force.<sup>24</sup> For example, Katouzian argues that public opinion was already against the supplemental agreement of July 1949, which would replace the 1933 concession, and it was to this that figures such as Makki and Baqai ‘owed their success... to public opinion which they themselves had helped arouse. The press had been alerted to the oil issue more than ever before, the bazaar leaders had become active, students were drawn into the campaign, and public meetings were frequently held in support of the Majlis opposition’.<sup>25</sup>

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: Demonstration in Tehran in favour of oil nationalisation, 1951.

Source: Iranian Petroleum Museum

Nevertheless, in adopting a political history approach, they have left lacunae about exactly how public opinion emerged from below. Indeed, despite being a huge mass movement, illustrated by images of enormous crowds carrying placards bearing various anti-imperialist slogans, there has been remarkably little research on the mass base of the nationalisation movement.<sup>26</sup> The actors involved represented a much wider cross-section of Iranian society than the notable figures of the National Front, most of whom were wealthy men. For instance, we know little about the role of women in the nationalisation movement, despite women having long been integrated into the

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Katouzian, *Musaddiq*; and Movahed, *Khab-e Ashofte-ye Naft*.

<sup>25</sup> Katouzian, *Musaddiq*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> One exception is the role of university students in Tehran; for example, see Katouzian, *Musaddiq*, 224–26, 233–34.

historiography of other popular movements.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, there is much to learn about nationalisation from the perspectives of ethnically-minority groups. In short, there is ample room to unpack the ‘nation’ in ‘nationalisation’.

**Commented [MB1]:** I would like to retain ‘ethnically-minoritised’ groups because I think it has a different meaning. I don’t want readers to assume minorities are natural categories but rather want to signal that they are products of state centralisation and oppression

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2: Women at protest in support of oil nationalisation, 2 July 1951. Source: BP 78148.

Above all, and understandably given their focus, these histories are told fundamentally from the vantage point of Tehran rather than Khuzestan. Of course, they reference the malpractices of the oil company in Khuzestan and pay close attention to the implementation of nationalisation there from April 1951, detailing how AIOC was expelled. Some, such as Fateh, even highlight the earlier significance of the oil workers’ movement in making colonialism visible to the outside world.<sup>28</sup> More recently, histories written by former oil workers have re-centred nationalisation in Khuzestan, with Fakhimi even asserting that Abadan was the ‘heart’ of the nationalisation movement.<sup>29</sup> On the whole, though, most have underplayed the direct role played by workers in

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<sup>27</sup> However, we know that women were active in fighting for suffrage at the time of oil nationalisation, as shown in Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*, Oxford, 2011, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Fateh long ago acknowledged the importance of the 1946 general strike in this regard, outlining it and workers’ demands in detail in Fateh, *Panjah Sal*, 438–44. Most other historians of nationalisation briefly reference the 1946 strike to illustrate the malpractice of the oil company, for example Katouzian, *Musaddiq*, 65–66.

<sup>29</sup> Fakhimi, *Si Sal-e Naft*, 43. Abrahamian’s *The Coup* is also grounded in labour activism in Khuzestan.

shaping oil nationalisation from below and challenging how it was implemented from above.<sup>30</sup> As an illustrative example, just after the oil nationalisation bill was passed in March 1951 there was a general strike across all operations in Khuzestan, and yet this receives only passing reference in most studies of oil nationalisation.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in these studies, workers and residents are mostly invisible beyond episodic mobilisations and formal labour organisations—a problem in common with traditional labour histories—so very little is known about how oil nationalisation was connected to quotidian life in between the two major strikes of 1946 and 1951.<sup>32</sup>

These intervening years coincided with great social upheaval across the Global South in the wake of the Second World War. By the end of the decade, anti-colonialism had brought about the near-total collapse of European empires in Asia. Apart from partition in South Asia, countries in Southeast Asia such as Vietnam and Indonesia saw labour mobilisations, the sudden rise or return of communist parties, and the public outpour of popular nationalism.<sup>33</sup> This is not to mention the

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<sup>30</sup> This reflects a general tendency to neglect oil workers in history-writing, as argued in Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, and Kaveh Ehsani, eds. *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> This point is made in Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 72; Abrahamian provides the only detailed account of the strike on 64–74. In other studies of nationalisation, the strike only receives passing mention, for example Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle*, 84; Fateh, *Panjah Sal*, 409; Movahed, *Khab-e Ashofte-ye Naft*, 57; and Rowhani, *Tarikh-e Melli Shodan*, 117.

<sup>32</sup> On the need to examine everyday life in critique of traditional labour history, see Hanan Hammad, *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt*, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Alan Bayly and Timothy N. Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia*, 2010.

upsurge of anti-colonial labour activism in colonial Africa.<sup>34</sup> Beyond messages of solidarity, the direct transnational linkages between these movements and Iran should not be overstated. But the striking parallels force us to consider possible historical contingencies that Iran shared with much of the decolonising world at this time. They alert us to the fact that Iran's experience was not necessarily exceptional and warn us against viewing nationalisation as being simply the result of endogenous political processes, whether the rise of Iranian nationalism or democratic politics. Although the anti-colonial nature of oil nationalisation has been long acknowledged, its full extent has yet to be elucidated. In the next section, I argue that this requires a detailed grounding in the social history of the oil industry in Khuzestan, which can help us more comprehensively appreciate the coloniality of the oil company.

### **The Oil Company as a Colonial Presence**

Of course, although the British government had a majority share in AIOC, the company had its own commercial interests that were sometimes at odds with the British empire. There were often tensions between the British government and the company in the years immediately leading up to nationalisation, especially over labour and living conditions in Khuzestan. Nevertheless, as growing scholarship on the history of the Iranian oil industry has shown, by closely examining the company's operations in Khuzestan it is possible to detect several features and practices on the ground that were imbricated in global networks of colonialism.

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, 1996.

First, the assembly of operations in Khuzestan was predicated on dispossession of local populations. As Kaveh Ehsani shows, upon finding oil in Masjed-e Soleyman in 1908, the Anglo–Persian Oil Company (APOC, as AIOC was then known) soon began to secure territory at the expense of existing populations who were living and utilising this land. The company undertook cadastral surveys to make claims to private property, abstracting land from its seasonal, communal, and fluid use by pastoral nomads, especially the Bakhtiari confederation.<sup>35</sup> These served as bases for contracts with local khans for the company to lease territory for its pipelines and hire private security to protect them, exercising a form of corporate sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, its selected site for a refinery on the island of ‘Abbadan – more locally known as *Jazirat al-Khizr* – consisted of a mostly Arab population of 24,000, and was under the administrative authority of the Sheikh of Mohammerah (then Sheikh Khaz‘al). The company worked to frame the land as ‘wasteland’ despite its cultivation by the local population for date farming, which underpinned new contracts that simplified a pre-existing complex configuration of land rights into its own private property.<sup>37</sup> This process ultimately helped erase the island’s history, including the name of the island changing

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<sup>35</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, ‘The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry: The Built Environment and the Making of the Industrial Working Class (1908–1941)’, Ph.D. Dissertation, Leiden University 2015; Katayoun Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil: An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran*, 2018, 21–55. On these contracts also see Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921–1941*, 2007; and Arash Khazeni, *Tribes & Empire on the Margins of Nineteenth-Century Iran*, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Joshua Barkan, *Corporate Sovereignty: Law and Government under Capitalism*, 2013. There are parallels here to the English East India Company, as shown in Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India*, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> As Ehsani demonstrates in detail, this process also involved representing the island as desolate and wasted by ‘Arab apathy’. See Ehsani, ‘The Social History’, 134–39; cf. Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil*, 36.

from its local Arabic version to 'Abadan' (although this was also the Persianised name that many Iranians used as well).<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the very foundations of the Iranian oil industry shared central features with settler colonialism.<sup>39</sup>

Second, the company's workforce structure was based on a racialised division of labour. In initial operations, white European geologists and drillers oversaw teams of manual labourers consisting mostly of seasonal and lower-status pastoral nomads. Company managers most often conceptualised these workers as 'coolies' as late as the 1930s, reflecting the prevailing colonial discourse that they were intimately familiar with through their colonial service (especially in India).<sup>40</sup> As historians of the colonial world have shown, in areas such as India and the Persian Gulf, the term 'coolie' carried the meaning not just of a manual labourer, but specifically one uprooted from home and thus devoid of any traditional skills, merely serving as a temporary hired hand for a particular job.<sup>41</sup> For skilled labour positions, however, the company recruited Indian

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<sup>38</sup> Willem M. Floor, 'The Early Beginnings of Modern Abadan', *Abadan: Retold*, 2016,

<http://www.abadan.wiki/en/the-early-beginnings-of-modern-abadan/>.

<sup>39</sup> For example, see Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8/4, December 2006, 387–409.

<sup>40</sup> Ehsani, 'The Social History', 46. Fateh suggests that the company's managers brought colonial attitudes with them from India, which were then reproduced by junior technicians arriving from Britain; see Fateh, *Panjah Sal*, 424.

<sup>41</sup> Jan Breman and E Valentine Daniel, 'Conclusion: The Making of a Coolie', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19/3, 1992, 268–95.



workers.<sup>42</sup> Well into the 1930s, managers maintained that Indians were inherently more suited for such work thanks to their docile nature and technical competence compared to local workers, drawing on stereotypes from British colonial tradition about Indians having some degree of technical competence compared to other ‘races’.<sup>43</sup> Of course, this stratification was more reflective of wider trends in corporate capitalism towards dividing workforces along racial lines while maintaining the supremacy of white management.<sup>44</sup> This was especially pronounced in the world’s oil and mineral frontier, with Khuzestan being no exception.<sup>45</sup>

Third, following from the above, racialisation extended into spatial segregation at work and beyond. Around its refinery at Abadan, the company initially built bungalows for its European staff in the area of ‘Braim’, as well as more basic accommodation for its Indian workers in the area known as ‘Coolie Lines’. At the same time, the area around the sheikh bazaar spontaneously grew into a boomtown by the 1920s as people migrated to Abadan for work from other parts of the country. The refinery was located in the middle of the city, functioning as a *cordon sanitaire*

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<sup>42</sup> Touraj Atabaki, ‘Far from Home, But at Home: Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry’, *Studies in History* 31/1, 2015, 85–114.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, 1989. This was acknowledged as early as Fateh, *Panjah Sal*, 424.

<sup>44</sup> As is well established by scholars of racial capitalism, influenced especially by Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 1983.

<sup>45</sup> Similar racialised divisions of labour and attendant segregation elsewhere in the global oil industry also drew on Jim Crow, as famously shown in Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, 2007; cf. Miguel Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture and Society in Venezuela*, 2009; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*.

separating these areas.<sup>46</sup> Abadan quickly resembled a colonial city, both physically in its spatial segregation between ‘indigenous’ and European areas, and discursively through references to ‘bungalows’ and ‘coolies’.<sup>47</sup> Scholars have pointed out that the presence of Indian labour complicates the classic colonial ‘dual city’ model, making Abadan more of a ‘tripartite’ or ‘quartered’ city.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Europeans living in Abadan conceptualised the Iranian areas as sources of disease and disorder.<sup>49</sup> As such, from the late 1920s the company resolved to intervene increasingly in the town through the destruction of the bazaar and the creation of new enclaved neighbourhoods like Bahmanshir, aimed at socially engineering populations architecturally and infrastructurally.<sup>50</sup> For its urban planning the company even hired James M. Wilson, who had served as an assistant to the famous British architect Edwin Lutyens in the reconstruction of Delhi.<sup>51</sup> The infrastructural disparities between management areas and predominantly Iranian likes Abadan Town and Ahmadabad, not to mention shantytowns such as the notorious Kaghazabad,

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Crinson, ‘Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo–Iranian Oil Company’, *Planning Perspectives* 12/ 3, January 1997, 341–59, at 345.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, there are remarkable parallels here to Delhi as set out in the classic study Anthony D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*, 1976, 83–84, 90–91.

<sup>48</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, ‘The Social History, 15; Atabaki, ‘Far From Home’, 100. The concept of ‘dual city’ was popularised through Janet Abu-Lughod, *Rabat, Urban Apartheid in Morocco*, 1981.

<sup>49</sup> Crinson, ‘Abadan’, 342.

<sup>50</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, ‘Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan’s Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman’, *International Review of Social History* 48/ 3, December 2003, 361–99; Crinson, ‘Abadan’.

<sup>51</sup> On the social engineering of urban planning in colonial Delhi see Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism*.

became a major source of political grievance by the 1940s. Likewise, the persistence of segregated social clubs, transport and leisure facilities had striking similarities to the ‘global colour line’.<sup>52</sup> The colonial nature of such segregation was not lost on visitors and residents at the time: after his first visit in 1941 Manuchehr Farmanfarmaian likened it to a ‘British colony’, and the writer Hassan Kamshad later reflected that the system was a form of ‘apartheid’.<sup>53</sup>

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Figure 3: Mud huts in the shantytown of Kaghazabad, 1948. Source: BP 78030.

Fourth, the company’s training programme drew on practices from the wider colonial education system. From the late 1920s, and especially after the 1933 concession agreement mandated the promotion of Iranians to more senior positions (known as ‘Iranianisation’), the company introduced training schemes for apprentices and students.<sup>54</sup> This included sending Iranians to trade schools and universities in Britain to study engineering and petroleum technology. Within Iran, the most ambitious project was the Abadan Technical Institute, established in 1939, which was nominally designed to train Iranians to become genuine oil experts and future managers. However, the institute and its hostel most closely resembled colonial boarding schools in their architecture,

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<sup>52</sup> Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, 2008; cf. Carl Husemoller Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities*, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Kamshad, *Hadith-e Nafs*, 92. Farmanfarmaian, *Blood and Oil*, 87–88.

<sup>54</sup> Mattin Biglari, ‘Making Oil Men: Expertise, Discipline and Subjectivity in the Anglo–Iranian Oil Company’s Training Schemes’, *The Life Worlds of Middle Eastern Oil*, ed. Nelida Fuccaro and Mandana Limbert, forthcoming 2022.

curricula and extra-curricular activities, aimed at socially engineering students into becoming disciplined, professional employees and detached from the supposedly feminised sphere of social reproduction of the town.<sup>55</sup> This was best exemplified by the sports programme, which focused on ‘character building’ much like the games ethic tradition of the wider British empire.<sup>56</sup> Yet like colonial boarding schools elsewhere, the institute could produce anti-colonial subjectivities by bringing together boys from different and disparate parts of the country and defining them against British management, especially when they faced barriers to promotion.<sup>57</sup> These were ‘tensions of empire’ common to many colonial contexts.<sup>58</sup>

Fifth, like the rest of the country during the Second World War, Allied forces occupied Khuzestan and implemented a series of measures to redirect resources and fix wages to aid the war effort.<sup>59</sup> This contributed to inflation, famine, and disease throughout the country, but the situation was especially pronounced in Abadan, where the cost of living increased by 900 per cent during the

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<sup>55</sup> Sanjay Srivastava, *Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School*, 1998; and Heather J. Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, 2003. For a similarly Foucauldian analysis of boarding schools in the British context, see Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800*, 2013, ch. 5–6.

<sup>56</sup> See J. A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal*, 1986.

<sup>57</sup> Biglari, ‘Making Oil Men’. For a similar account charting the rise of anti-colonialism among colonial school students see Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism*.

<sup>58</sup> For comparison see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, 1997.

<sup>59</sup> Touraj Atabaki, ‘Chronicles of a Calamitous Strike Foretold: Abadan, July 1946’, *On the Road to Global Labour History*, ed. Karl Heinz Roth, 2017, 93–128.

war.<sup>60</sup> In taking full control of food matters, the company effectively expropriated existing sources of food provision and replaced them with its own, in the process making the population dependent.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the refinery's importance as a source of aviation fuel led to heightened securitisation and a 1941 Order-in-Council that severely restricted freedom of movement, followed by martial law in 1942 as the company and British government turned Khuzestan into a 'special military zone'. As Elling and Razak conclude, 'the wartime militarisation of the oil complex exposed the true face of the Company as not just an extension of but a critical component to British imperialism'.<sup>62</sup>

It was in this context that resource nationalism emerged and gave birth to the first calls for oil nationalisation. As Touraj Atabaki shows in detail, these factors coalesced to underpin the sudden ascendance of the communist Tudeh Party during the 1946 general strike, which halted nearly all oil operations.<sup>63</sup> The party had been active in Khuzestan clandestinely since 1943, but through its affiliated trade union federation (CCFTU) now played a central role in a resurgence of labour activism.<sup>64</sup> In the months leading up to the strike, Tudeh activists appealed to local opposition

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<sup>60</sup> Atabaki, 'Chronicles', 99.

<sup>61</sup> Then, the local population could be cast as lacking the knowledge and experience to produce its own food, requiring education; David Nally, 'The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36/1, January 2011, 37–53, at 43.

<sup>62</sup> Rasmus Christian Elling and Rowena Abdul Razak, 'Oil, Labour and Empire: Abadan in WWII Occupied Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, July 2021, 1–18.

<sup>63</sup> Atabaki, 'Chronicles'.

<sup>64</sup> Fateh, *Panjah Sal*, 437; Atabaki, 'Chronicles', 94. On the Khuzestani labour movement in 1946 also see Ervand Abrahamian, 'The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Labor Movement in Iran, 1941–1953', *Modern Iran:*

towards the oil company as a colonial entity, manifested in a grassroots resource nationalism that saw even fourteen-year old children talking about how ‘liquid gold’ should belong to Iranians and not the British.<sup>65</sup> The Tudeh Party, along with the CCFTU and its organ *Zafar*, positioned oil as a source of wealth that needed to be reclaimed not only for Iran, but as part of an ‘economic revolution’ in which the masses in Khuzestan were part of a ‘worldwide democratic movement’.<sup>66</sup> It was in this moment, as Abrahamian finds, that the first known calls for oil nationalisation were heard in Khuzestan, made by a woman named Maryam at a public meeting on 20 May 1946.<sup>67</sup> Thus, Iranian oil nationalisation was rooted in very similar conditions to those in other parts of the Global South also affected by the Second World War, meaning it should be viewed as part of a broader global moment in which labour activism and anti-colonialism were intricately linked.<sup>68</sup>

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*The Dialectics of Continuity and Change*, ed. Michael E. Bonine and Nikki R. Keddie, 1981, 211–32; and Habib Ladjevardi, *Labor Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, 1985), 117–47; Rasmus Elling, ‘A War of Clubs: Inter-Ethnic Violence and the 1946 Oil Strike in Abadan’, *Violence and the City in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Nelida Fuccaro, 2016, 189–210; and Nimrod Zagagi, ‘An Oasis of Radicalism: The Labor Movement in Abadan in the 1940s’, *Iranian Studies* 53/ 5–6, November 2020, 847–72.

<sup>65</sup> Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 20; J. H. Jones, ‘My Visit to the Persian Oilfields’, *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 34/1, January 1947, 56–68, at 65.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Abadan Labour Movement’, *Zafar*, 10 May 1946. On Tudeh propaganda during the 1946 strike see Atabaki, ‘Chronicles’; Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> For a classic account of this moment see Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*.

This fact should also counterbalance narratives that treat the emergence of postwar resource nationalism as deriving exclusively from a transnational milieu of anticolonial elites.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, by examining local politics in Khuzestan, we observe how labour activism extended beyond a methodological nationalist framework. Through the Zionist construction company Solel Boneh, there had been over 200 hundred Jewish employees working at the Abadan refinery since 1942. As early as 1944 AIOC management expressed concern that these employees were attempting to sabotage installations to undermine British imperial interests, especially as the Zionist offensive in Palestine intensified in 1947.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, the politics of Indian partition played out amongst the company's South Asian workforce, such that there were soon separate social clubs for Indians and Pakistanis and some outbreaks of communal violence. Independence had emboldened many workers to mobilise for better terms, with Indian workers sending 'shoals of telegrams' to the Indian ambassador and helping spread anti-company propaganda in the Indian newspaper *Blitz*, much as Indian migrant workers were doing from Bahrain using the prevailing postwar discourse of international human rights.<sup>71</sup> At other times, as in the in 1946 May Day

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<sup>69</sup> As is presented in Dietrich, *Oil Revolution*. On the contribution of labour to postwar resource nationalism see Peyman Jafari, 'Labour in the Making of the International Relations of Oil: Resource Nationalism and Trade Unions', *Handbook of Oil and International Relations*, ed. Roland Dannreuther and Wojciech Osrowski, forthcoming 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Elling and Razak, 'Oil, Labour and Empire: Abadan in WWII Occupied Iran', 14. V.W.D. Willoughby, 'Report for the Quarter April–June 1947 on the affairs of the Anglo–Iranian Oil Company', 17, LAB 13-519, TNA.

<sup>71</sup> V.W.D. Willoughby, 'Report for the Quarter January–March 1948', 9–11, LAB 13-519, TNA; Andrea Grace Wright, 'Migratory Pipelines: Labor and Oil in the Arabian Sea', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Michigan, 2015,

demonstrations, workers from different ethnicities articulated a multi-lingual, cosmopolitan anti-colonialism based on class unity, although there were also ethnic divisions due to the mobilisation of Arab tribes against the labour movement.<sup>72</sup> Through transnational labour networks, then, Abadan was imbricated in the postwar reconfiguration of international politics more than just through its place in Iranian oil nationalisation.

### **Oil Nationalisation and Colonial Modernity**

Having accounted for the colonial context out of which oil nationalisation emerged, we may more fully appreciate how nationalisation was an act of decolonisation within Iran. At the same time, like many other instances of decolonisation across the Global South, it was capable of reproducing colonial modernity. In this section I indicate several ways this happened through a postcolonial analysis. As such, I argue, oil nationalisation shows how postcolonial theory may be applied to Iran despite the country not being formally colonised and opens a window to the nature of colonial modernity in the country more generally.

First, the translation of events in Khuzestan into Tehran's political discourse reproduced modern ontologies separating technology from politics. Following an invitation from AIOC, from 1947 onwards journalists from Tehran began visiting Khuzestan to investigate the reasons for the general strike the previous year and learn more about the workings of the oil industry. In their findings, they framed technical installations as a discrete, objective domain separate from local

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42. On the globalisation of human rights discourse at this time, especially through labour politics, D. Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization 1940–70*, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Atabaki, *Chronicles of a Calamitous Strike Foretold*, 107. On ethnic divisions in the strike see Elling, 'A War of Clubs'.



society, much as the oil company had done through its public relations machinery.<sup>73</sup> In doing so, they were drawing on the cultural capital of Tehran's middle classes about how Western science and technology could be utilised to modernise the country and civilise its population.<sup>74</sup> They contrasted the Abadan refinery to the squalor and lawlessness of the town's Iranian neighbourhoods, which they saw as emblematic of the nation's cultural backwardness and company's colonial nature. In delineating between technology and culture as separate domains, these writers displayed a common feature of anticolonial nationalism that positioned Western science as a source of emulation.<sup>75</sup> Even *Shahed*, one of the leading newspapers in favour of nationalisation, claimed that despite its disgust for AIOC, its administrative and technical organisation was amongst 'the most perfect in the world'.<sup>76</sup> Postcolonial scholarship has shown

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<sup>73</sup> Mattin Biglari, *Refining Knowledge: Labour, Expertise and Oil Nationalisation in Iran, 1933–1951*, forthcoming 2024, ch. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Cyrus Schayegh, *Who Is Knowledgeable, Is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society, 1900–1950*, 2009; Bianca Devos, 'Engineering a Modern Society? Adoptions of New Technologies in Early Pahlavi Iran', *Culture and Cultural Politics under Reza Shah: The Pahlavi State, New Bourgeoisie and the Creation of a Modern Society in Iran*, ed. Bianca Devos and Christoph Werner, 2014, 266–87.

<sup>75</sup> As famously argued in Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, 1993. Parallels can be drawn here to another country that was not formally colonised, China, as evident in Edmund S. K. Fung, *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity: Cultural and Political Thought in the Republican Era*, 2010.

<sup>76</sup> 'Our Honour and Prestige at Stake', *Shahed*, 7 June 1951.

that Iran was far from unique in reproducing colonial modernity through such scientific rationality at the time.<sup>77</sup>

Second, in the public discourse that emerged surrounding oil, a pervasive developmentalism took shape that was premised on the externalisation of ‘Nature’ as an ontological domain separate from humanity.<sup>78</sup> In the late 1940s, journalists, politicians, and members of the public engaged in debates about how Iran could exploit its own oil as part of the country’s development planning. After their investigations, they tended to arrive at the conclusion that knowledge of oil should be produced via its measurement, abstraction, and calculation from afar, and this knowledge could be applied regardless of local particularities.<sup>79</sup> In this reordering of the world, in which the ‘Nature’/‘the Environment’ could be objectified, calculated, and utilised, space opened up for the production of expertise and new forms of transnational governance, especially through development projects across the postcolonial world in the twentieth century.<sup>80</sup>

Hence, foreign expertise occupied a privileged position in the Tehran-based oil nationalisation movement, such that the leading proponents of oil nationalisation consulted ‘experts’ who had never even visited Khuzestan over oil workers who had been there for decades. When enquiring

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<sup>77</sup> For example, see Omnia S. El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt*, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> On the colonial origins of this separation, see Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis, On Decoloniality*, 2018, 153–76. On the centrality of this binary to modernity see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, 1993.

<sup>79</sup> Biglari, *Refining Knowledge*, ch. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, 2002, especially ch. 1.

into the feasibility of nationalisation in early 1951, Mosaddeq drafted a questionnaire enquiring into the feasibility of nationalisation, which explicitly delineated ‘technical’ considerations from ‘political’ ones.<sup>81</sup> He sent the questionnaire to the engineers of the Iran Oil Company, who had either been consulted by Western oil experts or had trained in centres of standardised oil expertise. In response to the questionnaire, the engineers advised that nationalisation would not be possible without retaining AIOC’s existing foreign experts, especially in refining. This high modernist judgment framed oil expertise as an exclusively abstract and disembodied set of knowledge removed from embodied, in-situ experiences.<sup>82</sup> As such, it overlooked oil workers’ quotidian contestations of AIOC’s expertise on the ground in Khuzestan.<sup>83</sup> For instance, in 1950 workers highlighted toxic exposure in the refinery through reference to sensory experience and their own corporeal damage, despite the company dismissing such claims based on the disembodied measurement of dangerous gases.<sup>84</sup> Thus, in contrast to the oil nationalisation movement in

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Views expressed in respect of questions H. E. Dr Mussadiq’, folder ‘AIOC, vol 3’, FO 248/1526, TNA.

<sup>82</sup> The ‘high modernism’ of state development projects, as James C. Scott calls it, was premised on the marginalisation of embodied, local knowledge (what he terms *metis*) in favour of abstract and disembodied knowledge (*techne*) James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, 1998. Talal Asad observes a similar transformation wrought by colonial modernity, away from embodied to disembodied knowledge as a basis for authority; see Talal Asad, ‘Reconfigurations of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt’, in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 2003, 205–256.

<sup>83</sup> Biglari, *Refining Knowledge*, ch. 4.

<sup>84</sup> Petition written by representatives Ali Mohamad Daneshmand and Gholam Ali Salehi to Majlis ‘on behalf of the sick workers of the AIOC’, undated (ca. 1950–51), document no. 2109236, Library and Archive of the Majlis, Tehran; cf. Biglari, *Refining Knowledge*, ch. 4. As postcolonial and feminist scholars in STS highlight, such bodily damage is especially pronounced in the world’s mineral frontiers where conditions are more conducive to

Tehran, these workers challenged the ontological dualisms underpinning colonial modernity that separated mind and body, reason and Nature. The marginalisation of these workers' expertise reflects a wider trend of 'epistemic violence' brought forth by colonial modernity, especially through the global oil industry.<sup>85</sup>

Third, the oil company's expertise was reproduced through centres of knowledge production. In the company's training schemes, oil expertise was defined as scientific knowledge and distinguished from manual dexterity. This created aspirations amongst students at the Abadan Technical Institute, and from the Iranian government, to gain access to this knowledge rather than redraw the boundaries delimiting what knowledge constituted legitimate expertise. As a result, these students gradually distinguished themselves from 'simple workers' in the refinery, disavowing manual dexterity and demanding to be treated as oil experts as had been defined through the company's own knowledge production.<sup>86</sup> As in the words of Frantz Fanon, the company had 'deeply implanted in the minds' of a native elite the 'essential qualities of the West'.<sup>87</sup> Together with students whom the company had sent to study in the UK – especially the 'Birminghamers' (*birminghami-ha*) who had studied Petroleum Technology at Birmingham University – many of these individuals took up prominent positions in the post-nationalisation

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manufacturing its 'invisibility'; for example, see Gabrielle Hecht, 'The Work of Invisibility: Radiation Hazards and Occupational Health in South African Uranium Production', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 81, March 2012, 94–113..

<sup>85</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, 2011, 192; cf. Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil*.

<sup>86</sup> Biglari, *Refining Knowledge*, ch. 6.

<sup>87</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, 2001, 36.

period, either in the National Iranian Oil Company or in other departments of the Iranian government. Yet they also played a leading role in driving AIOC out of the country, organising the general strike of 1951. Here colonial domination did not come up against an autonomous indigeneity, but rather produced the very subjects that fought for its downfall.<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, the company's system of knowledge production deeply influenced wider society. Newspapers such as *Ettela'at* took great interest in the number of students from Tehran going to study at the Abadan Technical Institute, regularly publishing articles on entrance exam results and even reporting on trips that had been arranged for Tehrani students to visit the oil installations in Abadan. This enthusiasm perhaps explains why the University of Tehran was so receptive to assistance from the oil company: in fact, AIOC helped establish its Engineering Faculty through provision of laboratory equipment worth £150,000 as well as three full-time British lecturers, a laboratory supervisor and a training shop supervisor.<sup>89</sup> Of course, this faculty became one of the most important centres of knowledge production for Iran's modernisation and development projects in the second half of the twentieth century. The foundations were set, then, for the reproduction of AIOC's expertise long after its expulsion from the country in the form of 'epistemic coloniality'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> On this point, drawing on a Foucauldian analysis, this case aligns more with the postcolonial tradition concerning Africa and Asia rather than Latin America; see Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*, 2021, 74.

<sup>89</sup> 'Education and Training in Iran, 1928–1951', 11, BP 142640.

<sup>90</sup> As decolonial scholars argue in relation to the Global South more generally; see Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.

Fourth, the position of subalterns in oil nationalisation challenges nationalist and Eurocentric frameworks. In late March 1951, just after the oil nationalisation bill had been passed, a general strike erupted and swept across oil operations in Khuzestan. The timing of the strike was no coincidence: workers and trainees who led the strike had been emboldened by the oil nationalisation bill and used the spotlight shone on them to highlight their everyday grievances, which they had raised through industrial relations mechanisms for several years but hoped nationalisation would now redress. Demands included raising the minimum wage, improved infrastructure, ending segregation, ensuring pathways to promotion, and for trainees, lower exam pass marks. However, most leading newspapers such as *Ettela'at*, *Keyhan*, *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, and *Shahed*, condemned the strike and circulated a conspiracy theory that it was initiated as part of a British plot to undermine nationalisation. Moreover, local authorities clamped down brutally on the strike, blockading the Abadan Technical Institute because it was supposedly a centre of intrigue and killing several protestors in Abadan and Bandar Mahshahr.<sup>91</sup> Through the strike, then, subaltern actors put forward a vision of what nationalisation should entail concretely on the ground in ways that did not neatly conform to the discourses and tactics of the nationalist elite.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Biglari, *Refining Knowledge*, ch. 6.

<sup>92</sup> The Subaltern Studies Group of South Asia long ago made this intervention to critique Eurocentric and nationalist historiographies of Indian independence, exemplified by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 1988. It is in this area that Iranian studies has perhaps most benefited from the postcolonial tradition; for example, see Stephanie Cronin, *Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran: Opposition, Protest and Revolt, 1921–1941*, 2010; and, more recently, Stephanie Cronin, *Social Histories of Iran: Modernism and Marginality in the Middle East*, 2021, which connects subaltern and global history approaches. However, so far there have been no subaltern studies of oil nationalisation.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Figure 4: Troops deployed to put down strike in Abadan, April 1951. Source: BP 78148.

Finally, we observe how 1951 did not necessarily mark a rupture from the centralising tendencies of the Pahlavi dynasty, but rather a continuation of its ongoing civilising mission and modernisation programmes, albeit in an increasingly technocratic form.<sup>93</sup> Thus, we are reminded of Marashi's argument that even though Iran was not formally colonised, the Iranian government acted as a "surrogate colonial state," enacting many of the same practices of colonialism within the borders of Iran.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the nationalist middle class from which the government drew its base could still forge alliances with subaltern groups. During the 1951 strike, workers and students appealed to the National Front and chanted pro-Mosaddeq slogans in attempts to fraternise with the army. When faced with local repression in Bandar Mahshahr, workers sent a petition to the Majles demanding that the government intervene to protect their 'human rights'.<sup>95</sup> Thus, nationalist elites could forge an alliance with subaltern groups around national liberation because of an external colonial presence in the oil company. Indeed, oil workers regularly appealed in petitions to the Iranian government and Majles well before the emergence of the National Front, contradicting Eurocentric models about the rise of class consciousness occurring independently

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<sup>93</sup> On centralisation under Reza Shah see Cronin, *Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran*.

<sup>94</sup> Afshin Marashi, 'Paradigms of Iranian Nationalism: History, Theory, and Historiography', in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie and Afshin Marashi, 2014, 3–24, at 18.

<sup>95</sup> Mattin Biglari, *Refining Knowledge*, ch. 6.

from state formation.<sup>96</sup> As postcolonial scholarship on the Middle East indicates, rather than searching for the liberal subaltern subject endowed with autonomous consciousness, we should examine how workers and politics were co-constitutive.<sup>97</sup>

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The importance of the Enlightenment in shaping Iran is well established in Iranian historiography. From the ideas that animated the Constitutional Revolution to those that were inherited by the Left, and from the reforms of Reza Shah to the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the ‘modern’ is pervasive. To what extent this was also colonial has been asked much less. Certainly, many postcolonial scholars would argue that modernity cannot be viewed as endogenous to a

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<sup>96</sup> For example, see Stephanie Cronin, ‘Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 46/ 5, September 2010, 699–732; Ehsani, ‘The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry’; Atabaki, ‘From ‘Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker)’. Studies on the post-nationalisation period reveal a similar relationship; see Maral Jefroudi, ‘“If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me”: A Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry 1951–1973’, Ph.D. Thesis, Leiden University 2017; and Peyman Jafari, ‘Oil, Labour and Revolution in Iran: A Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1973–83’, Ph.D. Thesis, Leiden University 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Postcolonial scholarship has shown how the history of labour in the Global South cannot be separated from modern state formation, pre-capitalist structures of power and negotiations over democratic rights in the political sphere. On the pitfalls of searching for the autonomous liberal subject see Rosalind O’Hanlon, ‘Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia’, *Modern Asian Studies* 22/1, 1988, 189–224; Timothy Mitchell, ‘Everyday Metaphors of Power’, *Theory and Society* 19/5, October 1990, 545–77.



hermetically-sealed Europe, but rather was the result of global connections and power relations forged through colonialism.<sup>98</sup>

While in agreement with this argument, in this chapter I have made the case that the question of whether modernity can be equated to colonialism should not determine the utility of postcolonial theory to Iran. This is because although Iran was not formally colonised in the same way many parts of Asia and Africa were, and Latin America much earlier, there was still an actual colonial presence in the country: the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. I demonstrated this through an overview of how the oil company's practices drew on wider colonial networks, including dispossession of local populations, racialised divisions of labour, spatial segregation, colonial education, and military occupation. As a result, many developments in Khuzestan closely mirrored those in other colonial contexts, culminating in the rise of anti-colonialism that was manifested in calls for oil nationalisation. It is by rooting oil nationalisation in this context that we more fully appreciate it as an act of decolonisation *within* Iran, even if existing scholarship has already acknowledged its anti-colonial nature and significance for global decolonisation.

Moreover, I argued that oil nationalisation offers a window to examine the reproduction of colonial modernity in Iran beyond Khuzestan. Incorporating the insights of postcolonial theory, I proceeded to show how events in Khuzestan had profound effects on the oil nationalisation movement in Tehran, shaping anti-colonialism in a way that reproduced several features of colonial modernity, especially epistemologies. In exhibiting many of the common paradoxes of decolonisation, oil

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<sup>98</sup> For instance, see Timothy Mitchell, 'The Stage of Modernity', *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell, 2000, 1–34.

nationalisation shows the utility of post-colonial theory in relation to Iran in the decades after nationalisation, even if there were important differences with the decolonising world. Furthermore, by fully accounting for all the factors that contributed to nationalisation, we are taken into relatively underexplored areas of Iranian history and underrepresented subfields such as environmental humanities and STS. Through the window of decolonisation, then, the study of Iranian oil nationalisation has the potential to open many avenues of future research.

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