



Københavns Universitet



## War of Clubs: Struggle for Space in Abadan and the 1946 Oil Strike

Elling, Rasmus Christian

*Published in:*

Violence and the City in the Modern Middle East

*Publication date:*

2016

*Document Version*

Early version, also known as pre-print

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Elling, R. C. (2016). War of Clubs: Struggle for Space in Abadan and the 1946 Oil Strike. In N. Fuccaro (Ed.), Violence and the City in the Modern Middle East (pp. 189-210). Stanford University Press.

## 12. War of Clubs: Struggle for Space and the 1946 Oil Strike in Abadan

Rasmus Christian Elling, University of Copenhagen

*[W]e cannot be over-nice about legality and fair play where it is a question of vital oil interests.*

The British ambassador in Tehran to the consul in Ahwaz, May 1946<sup>1</sup>

In its mid-twentieth-century heyday, the city of Abadan in southwestern Iran boasted the world's biggest oil refinery, and one of the Middle East's most modern cities. The 1980–88 war with Iraq turned the city into a mere shadow of its former self, and many locals and former residents today yearn nostalgically for the Abadan of the past, with its harmonious, cosmopolitan society. Yet this romantic popular recollection sometimes glosses over the fact that Abadan's trajectory from a mostly Arab village to a complex multicultural city was interrupted by moments of inter-ethnic violence. Conversely, the nationalist Iranian historiography—which hails the city's fight to oust British imperialism, nationalize oil, overthrow the shah, and resist the Iraqi invasion—also tends to reduce inter-ethnic conflict to the mere result of foreign enemy conspiracies.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I will attempt to counterbalance neglect, omissions and distortions by bringing to light a particular event in Abadan's history of violence, and placing it within its spatial context. On 14 July 1946, during a strike by oil workers, clashes broke out in Abadan between socialist labor

activists and members of a so-called Arab Tribal Union. Using oil company archives, accounts by labor activists, and local memoirs, I will investigate this under-examined event<sup>3</sup> that stands at the contentious intersection of local, national and global politics, imperialism, ethnicity, and industrial urbanism. In this investigation, one unit stands out in Abadan's geography: the club. As a key site of change and strife in Abadan's urban life, the club encapsulates certain important dynamics in the trajectory of the modern Iranian nation-state, its history of anti-imperialist struggle, and the place of its marginalized minorities.

### **Securing Output: Abadan under the Company's Aegis**

Abadan's modern history is inextricably tied to that of the Anglo-Persian—later Anglo-Iranian—Oil Company (henceforth, “the Company”). When oil was struck in Iran in 1908, Abadan was a village on an island between two rivers leading to the Persian Gulf—an outpost on Iran's border with Ottoman Iraq. It was inhabited mainly by Arab tribes living in adobe huts, cultivating date palms, fishing, and trading with the neighboring cities of Mohammerah and Basra. Whereas the northern and eastern parts of what is today the Khuzestan province were inhabited by Lors, Bakhtiyaris, and various Persian-speaking communities, the south had been dominated by Arab tribes since at least the seventh century. By the sixteenth century, it was known as Arabistan,<sup>4</sup> and from 1897, it was under the control of Sheikh Khaz'al of Mohammerah. Like the Bakhtiyari khans in central Khuzestan, where oil was

discovered, the sheikh acknowledged the sovereignty of the Iranian Qajar shahs in Tehran, but ruled more or less autonomously.

Since the eighteenth century, Britain had treated the Persian Gulf littoral around Bushehr, south of Abadan, as its de facto possession. Moreover, the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) and subsequent civil war, the 1907 division of Iran into Russian and British spheres of interest, and the increased military presence of the British Government of India in southern Iran up to and during the First World War all factored into the Iranian central government's dysfunction in Khuzestan. Consequently, when British diplomats and Company officials were tasked with facilitating the establishment of an oil industry in Khuzestan, they circumvented the Iranian government and instead dealt directly with the region's tribal leaders.

Wary of the arrival of a foreign entity in his domains yet keen on generating profit, Sheikh Khaz'al signed a lease in 1909 for the parts of Abadan Island on which the Company had decided to build its refinery. Despite challenges and obstacles, European engineers erected a refinery that was able from 1913 to process high-grade petroleum for export. When Winston Churchill, the Company's key lobbyist, decided to switch from the use of coal to oil in the British navy on the eve of World War I, his government acquired a controlling interest in the Company. Securing and expanding Abadan's oil output became a top priority, and Abadan's palm groves soon gave way to a sprawling modern city. The Company insisted that locals did not have the industrial discipline required for the operation, and instead it imported its skilled labor from India, Burma, Iraq, Palestine, Europe,

and even China. Abadan's population jumped from around 20,000 in 1910 to 40-60,000 in the early 1920s, and 200,000 in the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> To accommodate this influx of workers, the Company reluctantly engaged in urban development and colonial-inspired social engineering.<sup>6</sup>

<FIG. 12.1 NEAR HERE>

The British staff was housed in modern bungalows in the district of Braim at one end of the island, where the breeze made the extremely hot climate somewhat tolerable. Here, they were sheltered by the massive metallic barrier of the refinery, which stood in the middle of the island, and could nurture an exclusive, elite lifestyle. On the other side lay the “native town,” which consisted mainly of Arab villages, the workers' neighborhood Ahmadabad, and the bazaar—and, from the 1920s, also of sprawling shantytowns. This segregated urban geography was a material manifestation of the ethnically demarcated labor hierarchy with which the Company ran its operation in Abadan: white “senior staff” at the top; skilled and semi-skilled Indians, Christian (Armenian and Assyrian) and Jewish migrant labor from the Middle East in the middle; and masses of Iranian (“Persian” and “Arab”<sup>7</sup>) wage-earners, unskilled, and casual labor at the bottom.

Plagued by labor unrest from its early days, the oil industry was hit by a major strike in 1929, when workers protested against low wages and their appalling working and living conditions.<sup>8</sup> This historic strike inspired nationalist forces across Iran, and with the more resolute Reza Shah in power in Tehran from 1925 the Company was forced to make concessions. Pressured by growing social disorder, overcrowding, crime, and disease in the

shantytowns, the Company began in 1926 to engage in urban planning, building a new bazaar while providing sanitation and infrastructure, electricity and paved roads. Eventually, the Company would build hospitals, schools, cinemas, and a university, and in the 1930s and 1940s, new, modern neighborhoods for Iranian labor, such as Bahmanshir and Bawarda. Through these developments, the Company sought to present an image of the city as a modern, egalitarian space of welfare and progress.<sup>9</sup>

<FIG. 12.2 NEAR HERE>

Yet this image stood in contrast to the lived reality of most Iranians in Abadan. The Company's public relations strategy, combined with some improvements in quality of life and increased social mobility, was in the end not enough to gloss over the unequal distribution of power and resources in Abadan, or to deflect criticism of the British exploitation of Iranian resources.

The Company was nonetheless able to manage discontent in Abadan during the boom years of the 1930s. With the ousting of Reza Shah and the British invasion of southern Iran in 1941, the Company further strengthened its foothold in Khuzestan. During World War II, Iran was plagued by food shortages, famine, disease, and insecurity. Citing a potential threat of sabotage against oil installations as well as Khuzestan's strategic position on the supply route through Iran to the Soviet Union, the Company pushed through a demand for martial law, eventually turning the whole province into a "special military zone" under a pro-British military governor-general. The militarization of daily life, increased social control, food rationing, drastic fluctuations in labor demand, widespread hunger, epidemics, overcrowding

and a spike in crime fuelled anti-British sentiment and socialist-inspired labor activism against the Company, and in May 1946, the oil worker movement reasserted itself in Abadan. By that time, Western diplomats and Company officials were convinced that the activism was orchestrated by Moscow as part of a bloodless war between Britain and the Soviet Union.

The July 1946 oil strike heralded the demand for oil nationalization that, in 1951, would bring an end to quasi-colonial British rule in Khuzestan. In order to properly grasp the violence that occurred during the 1946 strikes, however, it is necessary to take a closer look at the histories of two of the involved actors—the Arabs and the labor activists.

### **Tribes, Workers and Unrest in the Oil City**

By the 1910s, a *modus vivendi* had been established between the Company and Sheikh Khaz'al. The former lent the latter recognition, external protection, and loans in return for access to and security on Abadan Island. The Company often used Khaz'al's tribal forces to quell social disorder and labor. Under Khaz'al, Arab notables profited from the presence of the Company, and a handful of sheikhs enriched themselves as contractors or as bazaar merchants. Others were able to benefit from Abadan's development, working as guards, servants, or day laborers, while farmers and fishermen sold their produce to the Company. Yet the Company rarely employed Arabs as wage earners, and thus prevented their integration into the oil labor force.

<FIG. 12.3 NEAR HERE>

The Company's—and indeed Britain's—policy towards the sheikh was ambivalent: on the one hand, they depended on his cooperation to secure their oil output, but on the other they had by the 1920s become wary over his autonomist aspirations. The sheikh revolted against Tehran in 1916 and 1921, even proposing to separate his domains from Iran. Having toyed with the idea, Britain ultimately rejected Arab secession, and in 1925 Reza Khan took Sheikh Khaz'al prisoner and abolished the sheikhdom. A tribal insurgency erupted across Khuzestan, but now the British and the Company supported the state's clampdown against their erstwhile Arab allies. The unrest in Abadan and Mohammerah was crushed but rural Arabs continued for decades to resist and protest harassment, new taxes, forced conscription, and the expropriation of land, animals and foodstuff by state authorities.

The Iranian central government rapidly consolidated its rule by uprooting traditional authority. While tribal communities throughout Khuzestan (and indeed, throughout Iran) were violently subdued, disarmed and forcibly sedentarized, the Arabs were largely marginalized on the new political and social landscape that appeared after 1925. The free movement of families across the previously fluid national borders was curtailed, the use of the Arabic language in public was outlawed, and cities were given new Persian-sounding names—Mohammerah became Khorramshahr, for example. While the Iranian state was now present in Abadan through municipal, juridical, military and police authorities, the Company, backed up by powerful British diplomats, retained much real power. In the event of a crisis, the

Company either lobbied for British military intervention or used its own security forces, which operated in a legal grey area.

<FIG. 12.4 NEAR HERE>

While pockets of urbanization and modern education appeared across the region, most Arabs continued to live in poverty and illiteracy, barred from influence, and witnesses to a great influx of outsiders. Displacement of Arabs from Abadan had begun with Khaz'al's land leases in Braim, and continued with the Company-led evictions in the bazaar and in Bawarda in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>10</sup> While some Iranian white-collar workers were able to move gradually into the new middle-class districts in the 1940s, Arabs were mostly confined to the squalid, crime-ridden neighborhoods of Kofeysheh, Koshtargah, and Ahmadabad, located outside the Company's housing zones, or lived in simple villages on rural Abadan Island. Some resorted to highway robbery, smuggling, and piracy, and memoirs testify to the fact that Arab tribes would still engage in raids against Abadan's citizens as late as the 1940s.<sup>11</sup>

Against this backdrop of inequality, agitation with ethnic overtones spread among the Arabs in Khuzestan in the 1940s. Contrary to popular historical narratives still prevalent in Iran, which present this agitation as completely stage-managed by the British, recent research has demonstrated the development of a genuine Arab movement across the province.<sup>12</sup> The key grievances of this movement included the lack of land rights and the expropriation of Arab property, yet there were also demands for cultural rights, political recognition, and regional autonomy.

British diplomats regularly reported on Persian-Arab tensions during World War II, on Arab distrust of the Iranian authorities, and on the violent treatment of Arab civilians by the Iranian gendarmerie and military.<sup>13</sup> In May 1944, local authorities reported their worries that Sheikh Jaseb—son of Sheikh Khaz'al—was scheming to return from his exile in Basra in order to establish an independent Arab state in Khuzestan.<sup>14</sup> In February 1945, the Iranian army attempted unsuccessfully to disarm Arab tribes on Abadan Island.<sup>15</sup> In January 1946, another of Khaz'al's sons, Sheikh Abdollah, launched a futile rebellion. Britain did not—as Iranian nationalists at the time feared and have since maintained—back the idea of an independent Arabistan, and it is clear from diplomatic correspondence that the Arab leaders felt betrayed. The Company was not interested either: as a business enterprise, it nurtured no dreams of state-making.

<FIG. 12.5 NEAR HERE>

Faced with rising social disorder, political discontent, and troop withdrawal from Iran in early 1946, British diplomats were particularly anxious about the threat posed by the oil labor movement. The dramatic history of this movement began when Indian migrant workers staged protests and strikes in the refinery in the 1910s and 1920s, to which the Company responded with mass deportations and the use of Arab tribal forces to quell disturbances. By the late 1920s, Iranian workers began to extract concessions from the Company by threatening to paralyze the refinery. In a fascinating account, a Soviet-trained labor activist sheds light on the mobilization leading to the 1929 strike.<sup>16</sup> Alarmed by Bolshevik infiltration, the Company

pressured the Iranian authorities for tighter security while at the same time expanding its own system of surveillance. During World War II, thousands of Iranians were suddenly dismissed from the refinery, and while intercommunal clashes broke out, discontent even spread to British personnel.<sup>17</sup> Underground socialist activism escalated among the oil workers, and by 1946 the Soviet-backed Communist Tudeh Party and its affiliated trade unions were ready to take effective control of Abadan.

At that point, the Arabs were practically the only Iranian community in Abadan not to have joined the socialist labor movement. There can be several reasons for this. The Company had from the beginning of its operations viewed Arabs as unreliable labor, and instead preferred Iranians from outside the region or imported labor from abroad. The Arab labor that was employed consisted mainly of day laborers or contractor teams headed by sheikhs. It may be that some Arabs chose to rely on alternative sources of livelihood rather than enduring the grueling work conditions in the oil industry, or—as Arab activists maintained—that the Company in its recruitment discriminated against the Arabs. Either way, Arabs were underrepresented among the Company's workers, and thus simply did not have the same stake in the labor movement as the mostly "Persian" wage-earners<sup>18</sup>.

There are also possible socio-cultural explanations. While others often severed tribal and traditional ties to their birthplaces when they moved to Abadan, Arabs still lived in their customary setting. Tribal power had even been revived in the political vacuum following the forced abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, and the conservative sheikhs were apprehensive of the Tudeh

challenge to feudalism and tribalism. It is also likely that some Arabs felt threatened by socialist rhetoric, which was antithetical to local mores, and perhaps alienated by the liberal spirit of new Abadan. Although Tudeh stressed ethnic equality in its propaganda, and translated some of its communiqués into Arabic, the party had largely failed to attract the Arabs. In the summer 1946, intercommunal differences gave way to political violence.

### **Talking Sedition: Spaces of Contention in Abadan**

Despite the Company's vigorous attempts to curb dissent, the success of the labor movement was nonetheless directly tied to the very spaces created by the oil industry. Khuzestan's refineries, oil wells, and workshops afforded activists close proximity to their peers and to sites for communication, debate, and the organization of dissent. In the overcrowded urban sprawls, the control of movement was nearly impossible. Memoirs testify to the fact that resentment towards the Company was fuelled by the combination of slowly improving living conditions for Iranian workers and the rapidly rising but unfulfilled expectations of modernity that urbanization had generated.<sup>19</sup> One urban space—the club—played a key role in the socialization and politicization of Abadan's citizens. Its history throws light on Company social engineering, as well as on the spatial context of the 1946 clashes.

In the 1910s, the Company opened the so-called Gymkhana Club in the exclusive Braim district, which catered to the British Senior Staff. The Gymkhana boasted billiard tables, a bar with a dance floor, a restaurant, and a hall for meetings and lectures. As the Western expatriate community grew, the

city saw a proliferation of clubs for boating, cricket, football, gardening, and so on—all with annual fairs, shows, matches, and balls. There were various freemasonry lodges, amateur theater groups, scout organizations, and social clubs that would later be graced by jazz legends such as David Brubeck, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington. The dancing saloons, swimming pools, tennis courts, cafeterias and bars presented a welcome alternative to the seedy speakeasies, opium dens, and brothels of the “native town.” The Company believed that clubs and social activities would not only cultivate Western urbanity, but also reduce alienation, restlessness, and disgruntlement among its senior employees.<sup>20</sup> The clubs remained exclusive to Europeans, while a couple of less well-equipped facilities were provided separately for Indians. Although a handful of Iranians managed to enroll in the latter, and while Iranian Armenians were able to open a club of their own, ordinary Iranian labor was generally barred from these social amenities.

<FIG. 12.6 NEAR HERE>

The first organized demand for a club for Iranians was tied directly to the emergence of a nascent socialist movement. When Soviet-trained activists arrived in Abadan in 1927, their strategy to mobilize laborers was two-fold: on the one hand, they organized a clandestine network to function as a secret trade union; and on the other hand, they would establish the first athletic club for Iranians in Abadan. Prepared for Company opposition to such a club, the activists enlisted a number of non-Communist Iranian white-collar workers to persuade a government official to issue a permit, and then swiftly announced the opening of Kaveh Sports Club to the public. Masses attended the

inauguration where they listened to representatives from various guilds giving “stirring speeches unheard of before in Khuzestan”<sup>21</sup>—a dress rehearsal for the 1929 strike. Although Kaveh Club was frequented by many who were unaffiliated with the secret trade union, the Company could not tolerate its existence. With the help of Abadan Police, the Company had Kaveh Club shut down after two months of workers’ resistance. Indeed, mere membership in the club was later used as a justification for arrest during the clampdown following the 1929 strike.<sup>22</sup> Yet the Company eventually had to allow new professional and recreational spaces. From 1931 onwards, the Company built clubs for clerks, seamen, artisans, and eventually the mid-ranking Iranian workers. To entertain the lower classes, the Company also established popular swimming pools and open-air cinemas. As sites of sociability and socialization, even athletic clubs were rightly feared to also function as sites of political activity, and Company managers allocated resources to have Abadan’s burgeoning club milieu monitored.

By the mid-1940s the budding labor movement had turned many Company clubs into centers of resistance, even creating a parallel set of clubs for the various trade unions of taxi drivers, welders, and so forth, all considered illegal by the Company. Whereas the Communist activists of the 1920s had to congregate secretly in private homes or in the palm groves outside of Abadan, the Tudeh activists of the 1940s would use clubs as venues for Party meetings, dissident activity, and speeches against British imperialism. The Company was aware that, in order to suppress discontent, the clubs had to be curbed, even if their sheer number made it nearly impossible.

In October 1945, the British consulate general in Ahwaz wrote to the ambassador in Tehran that the military governorship and martial law instituted in Khuzestan during the war should remain in effect because:

(1) it is easier in that way to prohibit meetings and generally to interfere with the activities of parties and clubs liable to *talk sedition*—though as you say even a Military Governor can't really suppress that sort of thing forever, and (2) malefactors are speedily punished (sometimes, I hear, even before they have done their foul deed) and that creates an excellent impression on other intending malefactors.<sup>23</sup>

As hotbeds of “sedition talk”—the subversive practice of ungrateful subalterns (“malefactors”) who had to be punished for their insubordination (“foul deeds”)—the clubs had thus developed from Company-controlled spaces to nodal points in an urban network of anti-British activism. Within days after the British troop withdrawal from Abadan in March 1946, sedition talk gave way to a series of wildcat strikes, and then a huge show of the labor movement's strength for the 1946 May Day demonstrations. The Iranian police first instructed Tudeh to celebrate the day inside the clubs but, realizing the sheer numbers of participants, local authorities allowed for “overflow orderly meetings outside in the vicinity” of the clubs.<sup>24</sup> In the end, tens of thousands of workers marched throughout Abadan, disregarding all instructions. In a very literal sense, labor activism had spilled over into the

streets, transgressing the coercive logics of social control in the oil city.

Abrahamian describes the power grab:

By mid-June [1946], the Tudeh organization in Khuzestan paralleled, rivaled, and, in many towns, overshadowed the provincial administration ... Its branches determined food prices, enjoyed the support of the local fire brigades, and controlled communications, especially truck communications, between the main urban centers. Its unions represented workers' grievances before management, collected funds for future emergencies, organized an elaborate shop-steward system, and opened forty-five club houses in Abadan alone. Moreover, its militias patrolled the streets, guarded the oil installations, and impressed foreign observers by quickly transporting 2,500 volunteers from Abadan to Khorramshahr to build an emergency flood wall.<sup>25</sup>

The Company general manager in Abadan warned that, with over 25,000 members, local power was now effectively in the hands of "armed clubs" who were patrolling the streets wearing Tudeh armbands.<sup>26</sup> In the administrative language, *club*— and in the local vernacular, *kolub*—now signified a political actor rather than a material space. Despite a ban on public gatherings, Tudeh organized huge open-air meetings and took over Company buses, ending racially segregated public transport. In one incident, Indians, seen as lackeys of the British, were forced out of a football club by angry Iranians; and in another, labor activists climbed the walls of a club during a

theater performance, inviting an outside crowd of between 4,000 and 5,000 to “take possession” of the premises, and demanding an end to discrimination between Iranian and Western staff.<sup>27</sup> Tudeh vigilantes also forced Arab merchants, accused of hoarding, to sell goods to trade union members at reduced prices. The labor movement, in short, had broken the lines of urban demarcation, appropriating formerly exclusive spaces and threatening the Western enclave and its Indian and Arab servants. “Violence,” a group of British MPs warned, “can occur *at any moment*.”<sup>28</sup> The consul in Khorramshahr asked the Foreign Office in London to draw up a clandestine plan for a possible military intervention.<sup>29</sup> Such a move, however, would have been highly problematic, as Britain and the Soviet Union had just withdrawn from Iranian soil amid great controversy over Moscow-backed rebellions in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Indeed, the Tehran press was already claiming that the British army was in fact secretly using Company facilities as military bases.

The Company and the British diplomats were particularly alarmed by reports of increased Soviet activity and overtures to Arab tribal leaders. In what appeared a blatant publicity campaign inside the British sphere of interest, the Soviet consul at Ahwaz was seen openly socializing and playing dice with commoners in the coffeehouses of Khorramshahr.<sup>30</sup> After a tour of Khuzestan in June 1946, the British ambassador concluded that the Company would soon be forced to defend itself against Tudeh.<sup>31</sup> Looking for alternatives to an actual reinvasion of southern Iran, diplomats were contemplating a resort

to an old Company strategy: using armed Arab tribes against labor activists.

But there were more complex underlying dynamics in the July 1946 clashes.

<FIG. 12.7 NEAR HERE>

### **Arab Mobilization and the Politics of Fear**

Throughout 1946, Arab sheikhs repeatedly complained to the Company about Tudeh's aggressive campaigning. In Abadan's rural hinterland, Arabs violently confronted itinerant Tudeh propagandists, and during the 1946 May Day parades, the protesting crowds allegedly shouted slogans against the sheikhs, whom Tudeh considered henchmen of British imperialism. Following the parades, a sheikh reported that, due to threats and propaganda, some of the Arab contractors were likely to join Tudeh. This represented a frightening scenario for the Company: whereas the Arab contractors had until then been considered immune to socialist infiltration, there was now reason to fear that some might join the anti-British wave. The sheikh warned that the tensions might end in violence.<sup>32</sup>

Reading the diplomatic correspondence, it is impossible to ascertain a clear British strategy. On the one hand, the official line was one of caution and, as previously, official Arab requests for support were snubbed. The consul in Khorramshahr, for example, told a sheikh, who wanted to bring back the exiled Sheikh Abdollah from Kuwait to Khuzestan, that "the Arabs should do nothing which could be calculated to embarrass H. M. Govt. or their own Govt.," and that they should not "bring trouble on themselves."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, some Company officers certainly did assist in mobilizing the Arabs.<sup>34</sup> In

May 1946, Abadan's new governor promised these officers that action would be taken against Tudeh, including the deployment of Arab forces.<sup>35</sup> In July, a military attaché to the Company, Colonel H. J. Underwood, noted that violent attacks on Tudeh members by Lor tribesmen east of Abadan had had a "wholesome effect," which could be emulated in Abadan by a "discreet cultivation of good neighbourhood policy amongst the Arabs."<sup>36</sup> Underwood had already met with sheikhs in June, reporting that Arabs were "definitely against the Tudeh" and "ready to help the Company by force." In the same report, he also suggested that it was "perhaps all to the good that the Arabs should form themselves into a patriotic Union."<sup>37</sup>

On the night of 12 June, Arab sheikhs gathered in Khorramshahr and Ahwaz to establish such an organization—the so-called Union of Tribes of Khuzestan (Ettahadiye-ye 'Ashayer-e Khuzestan), or Arab Tribal Union (ATU). Yet this action may also be understood as more than simply a Company ploy. On several occasions in the 1920s, and again in the 1940s, Arabs in Khuzestan had attempted to organize politically. While some initiatives were local in orientation and tribal in structure, others had more elaborate pan-Arabist agendas, yet only few openly championed Arab independence. The ATU established in June 1946 instead appeared primarily motivated by anger with the fact that Tudeh was pressuring the Company to hire Persian rather than Arab contractors.<sup>38</sup> Fearful of Tudeh "threats," the Arabs even sent a telegraph to the prime minister in Tehran protesting over "the Tudeh closing of the Bazaar" in Khorramshahr.<sup>39</sup> In turn, Tudeh members warned Tehran that if they did not receive protection, they would have to

“arrange their own.” Indeed, the British feared that the Soviets were feeding Tudeh weapons through Basra, while the Tudeh claimed that the British were arming the Arabs.<sup>40</sup>

On 23 June, Arab sheikhs gathered for a traditional dance ceremony (*yazleh*) in Ahwaz, and the following day Arabs from across rural Khuzestan descended upon Khorramshahr to inaugurate the first modern Arab “club” under the auspices of the ATU.<sup>41</sup> A crowd of about 10,000 to 12,000 people attended the ceremony, allegedly including Sheikh Jaseb, son of Sheikh Khaz'al.<sup>42</sup> The organizers triumphantly read out a charter containing ethnic demands including parliamentary representation and the right to teach Arabic in public schools, as well as an end to Tudeh interference in provincial affairs and assistance from the Iranian state in developing the local infrastructure and economy.<sup>43</sup> Importantly, the charter also criticized the Company for neglecting Arabs by building its facilities on Arab land but hiring outside labor, which had resulted in “much poverty and distress.” In particular, it bemoaned the loss of historic Arab date palm areas, and demanded that the Company “examine the legal rights of the Arab labourers and engage Arabs in a much larger proportion to other Persians.”<sup>44</sup>

Such wording may put into question Tudeh’s accusation that the ATU was a mere Company pawn. The fact that the Union had its own agenda was underscored by its resistance to a demand from Tehran, reiterated by British diplomats, to change its name to the non-ethnic “Khuzestan Farmers’ Union.” Conversely, the anti-Tudeh emphasis indicates that the sheikhs shared mutual interests with the conservative faction of the divided ruling elite in Tehran.

This impression is bolstered by correspondence between the ATU and Prime Minister Ahmad Qavvam, and by the fact that the ATU also intermittently identified as a “Democratic Union” in order to indicate support for Qavvam’s Democratic Party. In short, while Tehran certainly feared Arab separatism, there were probably also forces eager to exploit the Union as a tactical counterbalance to the Tudeh. It is important to note that the charter clearly stressed the ATU’s adherence to the constitution and territorial integrity of Iran.

After Khorramshahr, the ATU quickly moved to set up clubs in towns such as Bandar Mahshahr (Ma’shur), Hendijan, and Shadegan (Fallahiyah),<sup>45</sup> and then announced it would open a club in Abadan on 5 July. Fearing inter-ethnic conflict, local authorities refused to issue a permit. Tudeh, in turn, distributed pamphlets in Arabic warning people not to let the British and their allied sheikhs “plant seeds of enmity between Arabs and Persians,”<sup>46</sup> and announced that the ATU was funded and instigated by the British. The trade unions then called for a general strike across the province on 14 July. Among their demands, they included the dismissal of Khuzestan’s pro-British governor general; an end to Company political interference and intrigues with the ATU; and improvements in health services, housing and transport, as well as the institution of weekend (Friday) pay.<sup>47</sup> According to an article in the Tudeh-affiliated *Rahbar* daily, 2,000 workers took control of transport in and out of Abadan on 14 July “so as to prevent the British from inciting the local tribesmen”—a euphemism for Arabs. Other workers, *Rahbar* reported, maintained “perfect order” throughout the city.<sup>48</sup> The trade unions’ gradual

takeover of the city was recorded meticulously by Company intelligence: from truck garages to hospitals, port installations, and swimming pools, Tudeh moved to capture all facilities. Yet even then, the British consul rejected the governor general's proposal to arm Arab tribes.<sup>49</sup> As armed Arabs were gathering in Abadan, it was too late, however, to prevent a violent encounter.

### **Monsters of Mayhem**

Unsurprisingly, Tudeh and Company accounts of what happened on 14 and 15 July differ. Certainly, there was a clash sometime after 6 p.m., but the otherwise detailed Company accounts are murky on the exact sequence of events. According to one report, "excited irresponsible leaders" had mobilized "an inflamed roaring mob" of several thousand Tudeh supporters to "attack the Arabs" in order to pre-empt an Arab attack on a Tudeh club.<sup>50</sup> After this initial attack, a larger crowd poured into downtown Abadan, where the Arab club was burned down. During the clashes, several prominent sheikhs and Arab (as well as non-Arab) merchants were lynched or killed in fights with crowds, labor activists, and possibly police, including Hajj Haddad, Mahdi Hossein Gazi, Sheikh Naser, and Yusef Kowaiti. These killings, Company officers feared, would "definitely mean an immediate and serious Arab versus Tudeh war."<sup>51</sup> The houses and warehouses of sheikhs were looted, while files in the Arab club were confiscated. Police opened fire on looters, and by 2 a.m. on 15 July, the Company had received reports of "about 150 casualties in the hospital, and the mortuary already full," with between fifteen and twenty deaths. Injuries, the hospital reported, included "mostly clubbing, some knife

and gunshot wounds; several broken limbs.” Most wounded and dead, according to this report (and to Tudeh accounts<sup>52</sup>) were Persians; according to other reports, most casualties were Arabs.<sup>53</sup> Tudeh spoke of more than fifty dead, but claimed that actual numbers could never be ascertained, since corpses were dumped in mass graves outside Abadan.<sup>54</sup> Around seventy arrests were made, and there was similar unrest in other cities of Khuzestan. The following day, the atmosphere was tense and full of rumors of impending Arab retribution. Abadan’s governor had initially suggested “that Arabs might be ‘allowed’ to burn down Tudeh H.Q.” to settle the score,<sup>55</sup> but the Company apparently pressured the police to prevent this.

In a lengthy report, Counselor of the British Embassy in Tehran, Sir Clairmont Skrine claimed that Tudeh pamphlets called on locals “to make mincemeat” of agents of “the colonising foreign powers” and that when violence broke out, the crowd acted on this invitation by targeting the Arabs.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, British intelligence claimed that they had recorded speeches by Tudeh leaders on 14 July calling on workers to kill named Arabs collaborating with the Company.<sup>57</sup> According to Skrine, Tudeh had planned that Arabs be “murdered brutally *pour encourager les autres*; the Arabs were to be cowed, and the power of their Union was to be finally broken by terroristic methods.” He provided a vivid depiction of the violence:

At the monster meeting at 6.30 p.m. inflammatory speeches must have been made, for at about 7.30 the roar of a mob out for blood terrified all within earshot. Within an hour the Arab Union Headquarters had

been attacked, cars and houses set on fire, and at least three prominent Arab Union supporters brutally murdered in their houses. Bodies were mutilated and thrown into the river, women hacked with knives, houses set on fire. As might have been expected, the Arab population hit back in force and being in greater numbers than the Persians they cudgelled and chopped at a considerable number of Tudeh supporters, perhaps 150. Only the resolute action of Major Fatih [the Abadan head of police] and his men who used rifle fire to quell the mob saved Abadan from much greater catastrophe. Left to themselves, the Arabs might easily have beaten or hacked to death every Persian in the place.<sup>58</sup>

The killing of Hossein Gazi was described by another Company officer: “The crowd found this unfortunate man at home and brutally beat him to death with clubs. In the end his head was torn off and carried away. The crowd blooded themselves and their clubs with the blood of their victims.”<sup>59</sup>

The language is dramatic and the depiction of the crowd racist: the mindless, monster-like mobs of bloodthirsty Orientals out to terrorize, mutilate, and behead each other—and in the process, to raze the modern urban order. The description of violence is marked by feral viciousness: bodies—even the bodies of women—were “hacked,” “cudgeled,” and “chopped” with primitive weapons, while the attackers ritualistically smeared themselves with blood. The only force that quelled the mob and saved Abadan was the rational thinking, modern rifles, and “resolute action” of Major Fateh—the only official Company ally in this situation. Thus, the British diplomats and

Company officers maintained that Tudeh had started the violence, but that both sides constituted irrational crowds. Unsurprisingly, in their testimonies before a military tribunal convened by the Iranian authorities after the unrest, Tudeh activists presented a quite different account. Their testimonies were recorded by Farajollah Mizani (a.k.a. Javanshir), a prominent Tudeh activist who published them in exile in 1980 in the form of a booklet.<sup>60</sup>

During the trial, Tudeh leader Hossein Jowdat outlined a conspiracy: aided by British forces and Iraqi Arab nationalists, the Company had incited the Arabs to crush the labor movement. According to him, the first step was to bring Sheikh Abdollah, along with weapons and ammunition, from across the Shatt al-'Arab (Arvand Rud, in Persian) into Abadan's vicinity. By arming the Arabs, the Company would create chaos during the general strike, thus spoiling an otherwise orderly and legitimate industrial action. The end goal, Jowdat maintained, was to destroy Tudeh and stir the Arabs towards a separatist rebellion that could secure Britain's oil interests. To prove the British hand in this conspiracy, Jowdat claimed that those scheduling the opening of the Arab club had made calculation errors between the Islamic and Iranian calendar, and that an ATU proclamation calling for violence against Tudeh bore signs of a clumsy translation from English to Persian.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, Jowdat claimed that the Company had distributed employment notices in the region on the first day of the strike in order to attract hordes of unemployed riff-raff to Abadan. When these people converged in the city and were informed that the jobs had already been taken, they would drift around aimlessly in the streets, creating an atmosphere of

disorder, and eventually loot the residences of prominent sheikhs and merchants. Jowdat explained that clashes started when Arabs attacked a car carrying two Tudeh members who were about to inspect their own club. A melee resulted in the shooting of a Tudeh member, which in turn attracted others to the scene, including the aforementioned loitering riff-raff. Violence escalated from here, just as the Company had planned.<sup>62</sup> The next day, the military ejected the drifters from Abadan, rendering a proper investigation impossible. With this account, Jowdat exonerated Tudeh from the violence, placing the blame squarely on the Arabs, “the British” and the unemployed mobs.

Although this explanation differs from the official British line, some of the wording is quite similar. For example, Jowdat explained that the Company had unleashed a “monster of turmoil and disorder and mayhem” (*hayula-ye eghteshash va na-amni va harj-o-marj*). The violence of the real culprits—certain Arabs (referred to euphemistically as “contractors”) and the “loiterers” or “riff-raff”—was either mindless or rooted in suspicious motives. The Arab tribes and the riff-raff had “terrorized” ordinary people and ruined the state of peace and order instituted by Tudeh. Underlying this language, I would argue, is a tangible urban/rural discrimination, which intersects with perceived ethnic and ideological differences between the Arabs and Persians. While Tudeh leaders are careful not to indict the Arabs wholesale, and instead distinguish between loyal Arab compatriots and suspicious Arab “outsiders,” they nonetheless paint a picture of regressive tribes and treacherous separatists hiding across the river in Iraq. The Arab enemy, in this account, has descended

from the backwaters, armed by the British and then placed in the heart of Abadan's modern urban space, thus reawakening a backward monster and unleashing it upon the progressive order championed by socialism.

Apart from Company records and Tudeh testimonies, there is an eyewitness account by the esteemed writer and translator Najaf Daryabandari, which contains interesting details.<sup>63</sup> According to Daryabandari, Sheikh Haddad, who was beheaded during the violence, was a famous character in Abadan's urban life: he was a well-paid contractor, and would tour the city every day in a fancy open jeep; his office functioned as headquarters of Arabs working for the Company, which is why it was stormed by Tudeh.

Daryabandari acknowledged that, during the clashes, "a sort of Persian-Arab fight took shape," but argued that the real reason for the clashes was to be found in Company-Tudeh relations. He added that no ethnic violence had occurred after 1946. The day after the clashes, Daryabandari witnessed how "the ground and walls of [Haddad's office building] were smeared in blood," while "martial law was declared, the trade unions were besieged and labor activism in Abadan curtailed." However, Daryabandari recalls, activism "stayed in our hearts and minds and attracted us to the Tudeh Party and to resistance against the Company."<sup>64</sup>

Whether they had instigated the Arabs or not, the British reacted to the violence with trepidation. First, a sloop was anchored in the Shatt al-'Arab, threateningly facing Abadan. A British-Indian brigade was then deployed to Basra, ready to move into Khuzestan.<sup>65</sup> British diplomats feared that the strike had only been the first step of a larger Soviet-backed scheme to disrupt oil

production and ultimately oust the British from Iran. The Foreign Office, however, remained opposed to the idea of arming the Arabs in the event of further labor disturbances. Yet maybe such action was already redundant: indeed, the consul in Khorramshahr triumphantly declared in August that the combined effect of a British military presence in Basra and Iraqi agitation over the repression of Iran's Arabs had had "the very desirable effect of stimulating the [Iranian] Central Govt. into taking more vigorous measures against the Tudeh."<sup>66</sup>

Although the Company eventually agreed to Friday pay, thus ending the strike, the violence was utilized by Company-loyal local authorities as an excuse for draconian measures against the labor movement. There were mass arrests of Tudeh members, and all gatherings of more than three people were outlawed. Jowdat describes this situation as resembling a military occupation. The Company's "Iranian-lookalike" forces placed sentinels with machine guns on the roofs of private homes, holding the laborers hostage in their own city: "Soldiers and armed policemen had occupied the streets, public centers and thoroughfares of the city, and everywhere you could see the flash of bayonets."<sup>67</sup> Tudeh was forced to retreat and reorganize underground, as the laborers had lost control over Abadan. Yet the Company's foothold was unsustainable. Across Iran, newspapers gave extensive coverage to the violence as yet another example of British meddling in Iranian affairs and of the peril of Arab separatism. The experiences of July 1946 radicalized the leftist and anti-imperialist current, and in the aftermath of the strike, Prime Minister Qavam conceded a number of cabinet posts to pro-Tudeh

politicians. Five years later, with the nationalization of Iran's oil industry, British hegemony in Khuzestan came to an end. The very last remaining Company employees in Abadan, "toting tennis rackets and golf clubs" along with all their belongings, gathered in the Gymkhana Club—the first club in Abadan and a symbol of segregation—from where they were evacuated out of Iran on a British gunboat to the sound of a military band playing 'Colonel Bogey'.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, the disheartened Arab sheikhs feared that their peers would end up joining Tudeh out of fear for retribution. British diplomats reported that the military tribunals set up by the Iranian authorities were severely biased towards Tudeh, and that the Arabs themselves had not cooperated in a proper manner by documenting their side of the events.<sup>69</sup> Leading sheikhs went into hiding, while others headed to Baghdad and Cairo, where they presented the Khuzestani Arab case before the Arab League.<sup>70</sup> The Iraqi and Egyptian press expressed solidarity with their Arab brethren and outrage at the Iranian government and Tudeh. In the end, however, the Arabs did not receive international support sufficient for re-launching an autonomist movement—nor did they win any justice from the Iranian state. The Arab clubs were shut down, and to this day it remains virtually impossible for Arabs—still considered with suspicion by the authorities—to organize politically inside Khuzestan.

<LINE-BREAK>

The city of Abadan was simultaneously the stage for and the object of the July 1946 clashes. The fight over a particular socio-spatial unit—the club—in the urban landscape of a city such as Abadan was an expression of multi-layered conflicts over resources and power in a modern nation-state. The club developed from being the symbol of a British/European/white enclave in a segregated city to become, first, a symbol of resistance against imperialism in a multicultural city marked by leftist mobilization, and finally, for some Arabs, a symbol of a minority's fight for representation in a nation-state dominated by a Persian-speaking majority. Thus, there were multiple interests at work in the violence that interacted in more complex ways than the simplified binaries of Arab/Persian, contractor/wage earner or tribal/leftist suggest.

Ethnicity certainly played a role: there is ample evidence that the mobilization, contention, and violence were perceived by all sides at least partially to reflect ethnically framed emotions, demands and interests. But it is important not to reduce the clashes to a straightforwardly ethnic conflict: the presence of some Arabs among the labor activists, and the fact that not all Tudeh targets were Arabs, underscores that the lines were blurred. Although the Arab community remained partially marginalized from the rest of the city, Abadan was also a place of intermingling, cosmopolitanism, and peaceful coexistence. As Daryabandari mentions, there have been practically no overt inter-ethnic tensions in Abadan after 1946, with the partial exception of the heated days of the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79. In other words, it would be

wrong to perceive the 1946 violence as an expression of inherent primordial animosity between “Arabs” and “Persians”.

Similarly, the conflict should not be boiled down to a mere British conspiracy against Iran. Although some Company officers—perhaps on their own initiative, and perhaps in conflict with official British policy—were directly involved, there is also ample evidence that the British government was reluctant to back the sheikhs. Furthermore, the Arab mobilization was not only aimed at the labor movement and Tudeh, but also expressed grievances against the Company. Sober historical research into the relationship of the anti-Tudeh faction in Tehran with the Arab sheikhs in Khuzestan could furthermore shed light on the under-examined topic of center-periphery politics in Iran. But this does not mean that the British government and the Company, with its coercive policies in Khuzestan, can be exonerated. The oil industry was established according to a colonialist, segregationist logic that was expressed in both its urban development and its labor policy, which favored some groups and marginalized others, thus exacerbating ethnic divides in Khuzestan.

This inequality spawned a struggle for physical spaces of political representation such as the club—a key urban space for articulating claims, expressing identity, and demanding representation and inclusion. The club must therefore be located within the context of the various scales of activity at the time: the new global economic imperialism of a Western-owned oil company, Iranian nationalism, leftist labor activism, and the ethnically framed mobilization of a marginalized minority. The stake invested in the club during

the urban violence of 1946, then, had as much to do with control over public space in Abadan as with a contestation of national space in Iran.

---

<sup>1</sup> National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NAUK) FO 248/1435: Tehran to Ahwaz, 30 May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Minorities and ethnicity constitute highly complex and controversial topics in Iran, and only recently have scholars questioned the Persian-centrist bias in Iranian historiography. For comprehensive studies on these topics in post-revolutionary Iran, see Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Apart from ethnography on nomads and tribes, there are only a few studies on ethnic minorities in pre-revolutionary Iran. See Touraj Atabaki, *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); and Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> From my knowledge of the English-language literature on Iran, only Abrahamian has dealt with these clashes in more than a passing remark. See Ervand Abrahamian, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Labour Movement in Iran, 1941–53,” in M. E. Bonnie and N. Keddie, eds, *Modern Iran: The Dialectics of Continuity and Change* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1981); and Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

---

<sup>4</sup> Svat Soucek, “Arabistan or Khuzistan,” *Iranian Studies* 17 (Spring–Summer 1984): 195–213.

<sup>5</sup> Adopted, with slight variation, from 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)* (doctoral dissertation, Leiden: Universiteit Leiden), 374.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Crinson, “Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company,” *Planning Perspectives* 12 (1997): 341–59; 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 (2003): 361–99; Ehsani, *The Social History of Labor*.

<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, “Persian” refers broadly to all those Iranians that moved to Abadan in the twentieth century to work in the oil industry. In order to distinguish them from “the Arabs”, who were also Iranian nationals, they are here called Persians, although most would probably self-identify in regional terms, rather than as Persian (*fars*). Thus, the generic Persians in Abadan could include migrants from Tehran, Shiraz, and Esfahan, from Bushehr and Bandar ‘Abbas in the south, as well as from other cities in Khuzestan. Non-Arab Iranians in and around Abadan also included large numbers of Lors, Bakhtiyaris, Kurds and some Turkic-speaking Azeris. In other words, “Persian” in this context does not refer to a particular ethnic group. The Arab community in Abadan, in contrast, was a more or less homogeneous group, tribally structured around kinship traditions, and Arabic-speaking. For sake of

---

simplicity, they will simply be referred to as Arabs, although ‘Iranian Arabs’ or ‘Khuzestani Arabs’ would arguably be less controversial terms. It should under all circumstances be stressed that the label Arab conceals important social differences between urban Arabs, farmers and semi-nomadic communities, between various tribes, and between Arabs from different parts of Khuzestan. Finally, it should be reminded that despite a strong tradition for endogamy, the ethnic boundaries between the Arabs and their neighbor communities was never infrangible.

<sup>8</sup> On this strike, see Kaveh Bayat, “With or Without Workers in Reza Shah’s Iran: Abadan, May 1929,” in Touraj Atabaki, ed., *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 111–22; 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 (2010): 699–732.

<sup>9</sup> See Mona Damluji, “The Oil City in Focus: The Cinematic Spaces of Abadan in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s *Persian Story*,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33 (2013): 75–88.

<sup>10</sup> Yusef Eftekhari, *Khaterat-e dowran-e separi-shodeh, 1299–1329*, ed. Majid Tafreshi and Kaveh Bayat (Tehran: Ferdows, 1991), 31–32. As Ehsani points out in his ground-breaking research, poor Abadanis of all ethnic backgrounds were affected by the Company’s “coercive commodification of urban space and everyday life” (Ehsani, *The Social History of Labor*, 356).

<sup>11</sup> Iraj Valizadeh, *Anglo va bungalow dar abadan* (Tehran: Simia Honar, 2003): 55.

---

<sup>12</sup> Brian Mann, “The Khuzistani Arab Movement, 1941–1946: A Case of Nationalism?” in Kamran Aghaie and Afshin Marashi, eds, *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity: Histories and Historiographies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> See for example NAUK FO 248/1412: Ahwaz to Tehran, 11 September 1943, and FO 248/1436: Ahwaz to Tehran, 11 June 1944.

<sup>14</sup> NAUK FO 248/1436: Khuzistan Governor-General to Interpreter, Ahwaz, 17 May 1944.

<sup>15</sup> NAUK FO 248/1435-53: Khorramshahr Confidential Diary, 16–18 February 1945.

<sup>16</sup> Eftekhari, *Khaterat-e dowran-e*.

<sup>17</sup> On inter-communal clashes, see Rasmus Christian Elling, “On Lines and Fences: Labour, Community and Violence in an Oil City,” in Ulrike Freitag, Nelida Fuccaro, Nora Lafi and Claudia Ghrawi, eds, *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation-State* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015). On discontented British workers, see Rasmus Christian Elling, “The World’s Biggest Refinery and the Second World War: Khuzestan, Oil and Security,” paper delivered at the conference *Comparative Histories of Labour in the Oil Industry* (Amsterdam, June 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 363–4.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Ali Farrokhmehr, *Abadan, khak-e khuban, yad-e yaran* (Qom: Najaba, 2011); and Valizadeh, *Anglo va bungalow*.

<sup>20</sup> For an insight into British culture in Basra and Abadan, see Reidar Visser, “The Gibraltar that Never Was,” unpublished paper from the conference

---

*British World* (Bristol, 11–14 July 2007), available at

<http://www.historiae.org>. For some notes on clubs in Abadan, see Abdolali Lahsaiezadeh, *Jame'e-shenasi-ye abadan* (Tehran: Kianmehr Publications, 2006); and Valizadeh, *Anglo va bungalow*, 62–8.

<sup>21</sup> Eftekhari, *Khaterat-e dowran-e separti-shodeh*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> NAUK FO 248/1435: Ahwaz to Tehran, 14 October 1945. My emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, 3 May 1946.

<sup>25</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 361–2.

<sup>26</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Abadan to Tehran, 16 May 1946.

<sup>27</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Abadan to Tehran, 29 May 1946.

<sup>28</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Foreign Office to Tehran, 22 June 1946.

<sup>29</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, 13 May 1946.

<sup>30</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Secret Report to the AIOC General Manager, Abadan, 7 June 1946; and FO 248/1468: H. J. Underwood to AIOC General Manager, Abadan, 8 June 1946.

<sup>31</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Tehran Ambassador to Foreign Office, 8 June 1946.

<sup>32</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, 3 May 1946.

<sup>33</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, 15 July 1946.

<sup>34</sup> In a report by the American vice consul in Basra to the US Secretary of State, it is stated that information “from other sources” confirmed that a Company security officer “gave undercover support” and “at least ‘assisted’ the Arabs in obtaining arms”; and the British consul in Khorramshahr is quoted as admitting that “a few men” from the Company “may have given

---

encouragement to the Arabs”. See: US Consulate in Basra, ‘Disturbances in Khuzistan’, 17 July 1946, collected in F. David Andrews (ed.), *The Lost Peoples of the Middle East: Documents of the Struggle for Survival and Independence of the Kurds, Assyrians, and other Minority Races in the Middle East* (Salisbury: Documentary Publications, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Abadan to Tehran, 16 May 1946.

<sup>36</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Underwood to General Manager, 11 July 1946.

<sup>37</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Underwood to General Manager, 12 June 1946.

<sup>38</sup> NAUK FO 371/72700: Consul-General Diary, Ahwaz, June 1946.

<sup>39</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Secret Memorandum No. 36/B, 16 June 1946.

<sup>40</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Secret Report to General Manager, 24 June 1946; US Consulate in Basra, ‘Disturbances in Khuzistan’.

<sup>41</sup> NAUK FO371/72700: Consul-General Diary, Ahwaz, June 1946. It is unclear how the Union itself named its facilities in Khorramshahr. However, the Abadan facilities were known locally as *kolub-e ‘ashayer* or The Tribal Club.

<sup>42</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Secret Report to AIOC General Manager, 24 June 1946. Indeed, the club was housed in a building owned by Jaseb’s sister: US Consulate in Basra, ‘Disturbances in Khuzistan’.

<sup>43</sup> NAUK FO248/1468: Khorramshahr to General Manager, 22 June 1946.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Underwood to Tehran, 4 July 1946.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Tehran to Foreign Office, 16 July 1946.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, Ahwaz to Tehran and Tehran to Foreign Office, 14 July 1946.

<sup>50</sup> British Petroleum Archives (hereafter BP) 130264: “Abadan General Strike Report,” 19 July 1946.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Farajollah Mizani Javanshir, *Hamase-ye 23-e tir. Gushe’i az mobarezat-e kargaran-e naft-e khuzestan* (unknown publisher, 1980), reprinted as PDF file by Chawoshan Nowzai Kabir, available at <http://chawoshan.mihanblog.com>, n.d., 60.

<sup>53</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Ahwaz to Tehran, 17 July 1946.

<sup>54</sup> Javanshir, *Hamase-ye 23-e tir*, 60. The US Consulate in Basra put the number “conservatively” at 40 but admitted that numbers were probably higher (*Disturbances in Khuzistan*).

<sup>55</sup> BP 130264, “Abadan General Strike Report,” 19 July 1946.

<sup>56</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, Skrine’s report, 17 July 1946.

<sup>57</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, 23 July 1946.

<sup>58</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, 17 July 1946.

<sup>59</sup> BP 130264, Secret Report to General Manager, 19 July 1946.

<sup>60</sup> Javanshir, *Hamase-ye 23-e tir*.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 57–8.

---

<sup>63</sup> Najaf Daryabandari, “E’tesab-e bozorg-e kargaran dar abadan,” interviewed by Hossein Mirzai (*Feydus* online magazine, [www.feydus.ir](http://www.feydus.ir), 2 January 2014).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Foreign Office to Tehran, 18 July 1946.

<sup>66</sup> NAUK FO248/1468: Khorramshahr to Tehran, 21 August 1946.

<sup>67</sup> Javanshir, *Hamase-ye 23-e tir*, 67.

<sup>68</sup> Karl E. Meyer & Shareen Blair Brysac, *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company), & Company), 330.

<sup>69</sup> NAUK FO 371/52711: Underwood to Foreign Office, 31 July 1946.

<sup>70</sup> NAUK FO 248/1468: Underwood to General Manager, 22 August 1946.