

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TWO STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT: THE CONVERGENCE OF COLD WAR POLITICS, LABOR, AND ETHNIC TENSIONS IN THE JULY 1946 STRIKES AT KIRKUK AND ABADAN

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This thesis explores the convergence of Cold War politics, labor issues, and ethnic conflict on the local scale during the labor strikes which occurred in July 1946 at the oil refineries in Kirkuk, Iraq and Abadan, Iran. The roles of the local communist parties in leading the strikes are weighed against the workers' economic concerns to determine that the workers' motivations for striking extended beyond political support for any particular party, and claims that the violence which ended the strikes was the result of inherent ethnic conflicts are debunked through examination of both regions' ethnic histories.

TWO STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT: THE CONVERGENCE OF COLD
WAR POLITICS, LABOR, AND ETHNIC TENSIONS IN THE JULY 1946
STRIKES AT KIRKUK AND ABADAN

by

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Introduction

Upon applying to the University of Maryland's history graduate program, I wrote in my statement of purpose that I intended to study the modern Middle East in order to better understand the region's position in the world today. Before graduate school, my only education about the Middle East came from the news, the political opinions of family, friends, and neighbors, and brief units on the Fertile Crescent and Persian Empire in tenth-grade world history. Coming from a conservative state, all my life I heard that the Middle East was full of people who hated the United States and wanted to see the country collapse. I knew this couldn't be the whole story and wanted to learn everything I could about what the Middle East is really like, why it is so important to contemporary international politics, and how it came to be that way.

It turns out that one of the most important lessons that I learned in the last four years is that the study of history is valuable for more reasons than simply gleaning knowledge from the past to understand the present. Regardless, in my study of twentieth-century Iran and Iraq, the influence of decades-old conflicts, alliances, and political marginalization of both majority and minority groups on current events continues to rear its head in surprising and meaningful ways. In particular, Iran's oil nationalization crisis and the 1958 Iraqi Revolution proved foundational in the trajectories of their respective countries, and the reverberations from these events are still felt in the Middle East today. This callback to my original intent upon

entering the program encouraged me to look back at a relatively minor event and to explore its major themes through the eyes of a group whose perspective had been previously ignored.

In the late nineteenth century, Great Britain established political control in Iraq and Iran. This control was sometimes direct and other times indirect, but altogether it was relatively short-lived. By the 1940s, both Iraq and Iran had gained independence from British governmental control, but the prevalence of British economic ventures and close relations between British officials and the ruling powers in both countries ensured that Britain maintained its influence. The oil industries, in particular, were dominated by British companies, and resentment over an oil concession which heavily favored British enterprise and netted Iran only a small portion of the profits from its own natural resources led Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh to nationalize Iran's oil industry in 1951. Iraq's relationship with Great Britain was quite different; the country was originally established as a British mandate by the League of Nations in 1921 and gained its independence in 1932, but the Anglo-Iraqi treaty that granted Iraq independence also contained provisions which continued to grant Great Britain significant economic and military power in Iraq.

In response to the Iranian oil nationalization crisis, in 1953 the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), the Iranian Shah, and Iranian General Fazlollah Zahedi planned and executed a coup to unseat Mosaddegh. In 1958, Iraq's

Hashemite monarchy was overthrown in the July 14 Revolution, establishing the Iraqi Republic. Both of these events proved critical in determining the paths of each country's history and the history of the Middle East as a whole in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mosaddegh's fall allowed the Shah to consolidate and regain much of his lost power through a series of reforms that became known as the White Revolution, facilitating the rise of an autocratic rule which inspired the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The revolution in Iraq marked the beginning of an era of Iraqi independence from colonial influence as well as a profound victory for pan-Arabism, a movement which was gaining traction and support widely across the Middle East.

Many complex factors contributed to oil nationalization and the 1953 coup in Iran and the Iraqi Revolution, but the same themes are strikingly present in seemingly small, insignificant earlier events as well. Two of these themes are Britain and America's fear of the spread of Soviet communist ideology and growing calls for self-determination across the Middle East, often based on ethnic or national identity. At the end of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union vied for power across the globe, and much of the United States' foreign policy, as well as the policies of its allies, was guided by a fear of communism spreading across Asia and Europe, culminating in the spread of the Soviet state into formerly independent states. Concerns that Mosaddegh would not prove a strong enough leader to prevent Soviet advances into Iran combined with

the British desire to regain its oil concessions spurred the CIA and the SIS to conspire in the 1953 coup, and Britain's interest in maintaining its influence in Iraq shared similar motivations. Both Iraqis and Iranians, on the other hand, became increasingly frustrated with continued British involvement in their countries' politics and with unfair economic agreements. Mosaddegh nationalized the oil industry because Iranians were tired of seeing the profits from Iran's natural resources go to another country, and Britain's continued military presence and close relationship with Hashemite rulers were unacceptable to Iraqis who sought to completely expel Britain along with the Hashemite monarchy in the 1958 Revolution.

Similar themes are present in the subject of this thesis, the July 1946 labor strikes at the oil refineries of Kirkuk and Abadan, which are widely agreed to be precursors to the anti-British actions of oil nationalization in Iran and the Iraqi Revolution. In the aftermath of the strikes, the American and British governments scrambled to understand why and how the strikes occurred and who was responsible for their bloody endings. The strikes were led by the communist parties of Iraq and Iran, but the United States' and Britain's fear of communism spreading in the Middle East led investigating officials to place disproportionate emphasis on the role of the parties and to misinterpret communist goals in leading the strikes. When pressed to uncover the cause of the Abadan strike's violent ending, in particular, ethnic tensions became the

scapegoat, perhaps in response to growing pan-Arabism which threatened Britain's position across the Middle East.

Outline and Organization

This thesis takes a microhistorical approach to explore the prominence of Cold War tensions and the rise of communism along with the complex relationship between ethnic identity and political affiliation in the 1946 strikes in Kirkuk and Abadan with the intention to analyze the events from the point of view of the workers, a point of view which has mostly been ignored thus far. I use internal correspondence from the United States Department of State to critically assess the workers' motivations for striking, including communist influence and tensions between ethnic groups as well as genuine labor concerns. Ultimately, I find that while the role of the communist parties in planning the strikes was hugely important, the workers participating in the strikes took action on more personal economic motivations—the workers were not paid enough and did not have adequate housing and transportation for themselves and their families. Additionally, despite British insistence that the Abadan strike's bloody ending was caused by bad blood between ethnic groups in the city, I argue that the truth is more complex and that class conflict played a larger role than ethnicity.

The first chapter focuses on the role of the Iraqi Communist Party and the Tudeh Party in organizing the strikes and galvanizing the workers.

The Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party had risen to prominence in the years leading up to the strike and were quickly growing and gaining support across both countries. Without leadership from the parties, it is likely that the strikes may never have occurred, but there also is little evidence to support claims by United States and British officials that furthering a communist agenda was the primary goal of the strikes. Furthermore, British and American fears that a communist success in Iraq or Iran could lead to a Soviet takeover in either country demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between local communist groups in the Middle East and the broader Soviet communist agenda. In this chapter I challenge the explanation most widely accepted, both contemporarily and by historians, that the strikes were politically motivated to strengthen the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party and to weaken the oil companies, arguing instead that while the roles of the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party were paramount in the strikes' organization, the workers themselves had no political agenda.

The second chapter builds on the first and offers an alternative explanation for why the oil refinery workers participated in the strikes. Unskilled laborers of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) lived in poverty because their wages did not provide a decent living, and both companies dragged their feet to address housing shortage issues and a lack of public transportation in both Kirkuk and Abadan. Raising wages, constructing more housing, and providing

transportation were the three primary demands in both strikes, suggesting that the workers did not participate in the strike because they wanted to further an agenda in line with Iraqi, Iranian, or Soviet communist ideology but because they had genuine labor concerns.

The final chapter closely examines the role of ethnic conflict in motivating the strikes and the bloody clash between the workers and the Arab Union in Abadan which ended the strike. In the State Department sources, it is clear that officials from the AIOC aggressively pushed the claim that friction between Arabs and Persians in Abadan led to the riot which resulted in the murders of several prominent Arab contractors and merchants, distancing the company from the violence. In this chapter, I turn a critical eye on the use of ethnicity to define opposition groups and offer class conflict as a possible alternate explanation.

The events discussed throughout the thesis occurred within a fourteen day period, so there is little existing scholarship about the strikes beyond superficial analysis to support an author's larger argument. Due to the lack of scholarship and the narrowness of the topic in question, there is no single account which summarizes the key events and chronology of the strikes. The following section is intended to fill this gap and to ensure that all readers can begin each chapter with a firm understanding of how events played out in the strikes.

Summary of Events

By 1946, the Iraq Petroleum Company was the largest oil company in Iraq, and the same was true of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in Iran, each employing thousands of skilled and unskilled laborers. The IPC established an oil refinery in Kirkuk, a city in northeast Iraq in what was the Mosul province at the time, which became operational in 1932, and the AIOC completed construction on a refinery on Abadan Island in the northern tip of the Persian Gulf and the Khuzestan Province in 1912. Working under conditions they deemed unsuitable, laborers at the oil refinery in Kirkuk submitted a list of demands to the IPC in mid-June 1946, threatening to strike if the company did not acquiesce to the demands by a July 1 deadline. The company failed to respond, and on July 4 the workers went on strike, demanding that the IPC:

- increase the basic minimum wage
- construct living quarters for workers
- cease unjustified firings by some company officials
- introduce social insurance
- compensate workers injured in the course of performing their jobs
- provide transportation for workers who live far from their job sites
- pay war bonuses comparable to workers at Haifa and Abadan

- and provide oil for fuel and allowances for travel between the refinery and workers' home when they are on leave¹.

A delegation met with the Mutaserrif² twice during the strike to negotiate but failed to move beyond a stalemate. The workers refused to end the strike before the company ceded to the demands, and the company refused to cede until the workers ended the strike. Throughout the duration of the strike, the workers, who lived in the city of Kirkuk but worked at the refinery several kilometers away, met daily at Gawur-Baghi, a garden outside the city, to discuss the progress of negotiations.

These meetings were always attended by approximately a dozen mounted policemen who monitored the situation, but on July 12, over 100 policemen arrived at the meeting armed with rifles and a car-mounted machine gun and surrounded the workers. The Assistant Commandant of the police force ordered the workers to disperse but could not be heard by the crowd, which numbered several hundred. The workers continued the meeting, and the Assistant Commandant ordered the police to open fire on the crowd. As the workers fled the scene, the police chased them

¹ Report by Musa Shaikh Radhi to Political Committee of Al-Ittihad Al Watani (National Union) Party, July 17, 1946, enclosed in Dispatch No. 1342 from James S. Moose, Jr. to The Secretary of State, July 23, 1946; Folder 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Telegram No. 402 from James S. Moose, Jr. to the Secretary of State, July 14, 1946; Folder 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

² The Mutaserrif was similar to a city mayor and acted as a liaison between residents of Kirkuk and the IPC.

down, pursuing some even as far as the town. Altogether, between 10 and 18 workers were killed and several dozen wounded. The workers had gathered peacefully and were unarmed, and no policemen were injured in the fray.

The next day the workers continued to strike, marching from a café in the center of the city to the police headquarters, demanding that those responsible for the previous day's carnage be brought to trial and that the families of those slain be compensated for their losses. The procession then continued to the local Iraq Army headquarters before returning to the starting point. The police, meanwhile, had arrested the leaders of the strike. The workers continued to negotiate, and the company, fearing further conflict in response to the police force's violence, agreed to increase the workers' wages so that the living allowance and accommodation fees would equal a minimum of 310 fils³ per day. On July 16, the strike ended, and on July 20 the IPC announced that the basic minimum wage would be increased by 60 fils and housing allowances would be increased by 50 fils⁴. No further demands were met.

Meanwhile, a similar conflict erupted in Abadan. On May 18, 1946, the Iranian government implemented a labor law which the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company failed to fully observe, citing confusion over provisions

³ I was unable to find information tracking the value of the Iraqi Dinar beyond 1960. However, according to fxtop.com, 310 fils in 1960 equaled about 7.50 US dollars today. The 60 and 50 fil increases would have equaled approximately \$1.50 and \$1.20 today.
⁴ CICI Review No. 275 for Period Ending July 18, 1946; Folder 800; Box 21; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

regarding the required minimum wage and whether the company must pay workers for Friday, their day off, for their lack of compliance. In June, the Tudeh-led Workers' and Toilers' Union in Abadan approached the company with complaints that the labor law was not being observed, but the company refused to take any immediate action, arguing instead that the Iranian government must clarify the relevant provisions and promising that the AIOC would defer to its decision. Unsatisfied with the company's lack of action, the Workers' Union demanded that a satisfactory answer to the question of Friday pay must be given by July 5, or else they would take drastic action. The AIOC persuaded the union to extend the deadline to July 13 but doubled down on its stance of deferment to the Iranian government. Meanwhile, the government began to prepare a ruling and issued announcements stating that any strikes declared by the union would be considered illegal. However, despite orders on the contrary from the union's central committee in Tehran, the union leaders in Abadan called a general strike on July 14.

The day of the strike passed peacefully until violence erupted between the Workers' Union and the Arab League,⁵ a recently formed pro-British and anti-Tudeh organization of Arab merchants and AIOC contractors at least partially supported by the AIOC, on the evening of the 14th. The Arab League planned to celebrate the grand opening of its headquarters the following day, so only a few of its leaders were in town

⁵ Also called the Democratic Tribal Union and the Democratic Arab Union.

on the day of the strike. The striking workers had gathered in the city of Abadan for speeches, and the crowd, angry that the League had planned to celebrate its grand opening on nearly the same day as the strike, made its way to the Arab League headquarters. It is not clear which faction attacked first, but both parties' claims of total innocence ring false; though only one union landed the first blow, both contributed to escalating the situation until the tension exploded into violence. By the time the Iranian army had regained control of the city, around 50 people died and 150 were wounded. Among the dead were most of the Arab Union's leaders: Haji Haddad and his secretary, Syed Mohd Qudsi, Aziz, Sheikh Zorab Baghlani's son, and Sheikh Zorab's brother. The police arrested the leaders of the Workers Union.

On July 15, a commission led by Prince Firouz, representative of the Prime Minister, arrived in Abadan to negotiate a settlement. The commission ordered the AIOC to raise the minimum wage to 35 Rials⁶ per day and to pay workers the same amount for Fridays. The AIOC agreed to the wage increase but refused to pay workers their wages for the 14th and 15th. Firouz also ordered the release of the union leaders on bail on the condition that the strike end by the beginning of the 2 pm shift on the 16th. The union agreed to the terms set by the commission, and on July 16th the strike was ended and workers returned to the refinery.

⁶ In 1960, 35 Rials equaled around \$3.40 in today's United States dollar according to the [fx.com](https://www.fx.com) currency exchange and inflation calculators.

Chapter 1: The Cold War, Communism, and the Roles of the Iraqi Communist Party and the Tudeh Party in the 1946 Strikes

As the Second World War drew to a close in 1945, the world looked hopefully toward a new era of peace characterized by regrowth, renewal, and repair. What it found instead was the birth of a new conflict, rooted in ideology, fueled by fear, and fought through a series of proxy wars. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged from the war as global superpowers, vying for ideological control and dividing the rest of the world into three spheres of influence: the American sphere, the Soviet sphere, and the yet-unconquered Third World. Though the beginning of the Cold War is generally agreed to coincide with the introduction of the United States' Truman Doctrine in 1947, in 1946 unofficial lines had already been drawn in the sand, with both the United States and the Soviet Union looking towards the Middle East for its vast oil reserves.

Long before the start of World War II, Britain had already established control of the Iraqi and Iranian oil industries. In 1901, Qajar Shah Mozzafar al-Din and British oil mogul William Knox D'Arcy signed a concession granting D'Arcy the sole rights to prospect for oil in Iran (then Persia). D'Arcy discovered oil reserves large enough to support commercial enterprise in 1908, and in 1909 the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1935, took over the concession and built a refinery at Abadan, which was the largest

in the world at the time. In 1912, the British navy began modernizing its ships, vastly increasing its demand for oil, and in 1913 the British government obtained a controlling interest in the APOC when it signed an agreement to advance £2,000,000 to the struggling company with the promise that the money must eventually be paid back and could be converted into shares in the company at any time⁷. Thus, Britain firmly established a vested interest in the Iranian oil industry and no small measure of control of the AIOC.

A portion of the D'Arcy concession included a southern border territory which was transferred to Turkey from Iran in 1913 and then to Iraq. When the territory passed to Iraq, the Iraqi government agreed to honor the D'Arcy agreement, granting a new concession in 1925. Also, in 1925, the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), which was renamed the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1929 and of which the APOC owned 47.5 percent, was granted a concession covering the entirety of Mosul and Baghdad. In 1927, the TPC struck oil in Kirkuk and began drilling wells. In 1928, the TPC reorganized to include United States oil companies. Under the new arrangement, the APOC and a group of U.S. oil companies conglomerated under the name Near East Development Corporation and each received 23.75 percent of the shares with the remaining shares going to Dutch and French companies and British-Armenian businessman

⁷ R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol. 1, *The Developing Years, 1901 – 1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 158 – 201.

Calouste Gulbenkian⁸. Although the British government had no real control in the TPC beyond being a shareholder of one of its shareholders, the TPC concession combined with Britain's position as the administrator of the Iraqi mandate, a position Hopwood calls a "flimsy veil" for British domination⁹, allowed the government to establish a firm degree of control of the oil industry in Kirkuk and maintain a close relationship with the oil company's administrators.

As the Cold War heated up, control over oil proved a major concern for Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Britain needed a steady source of oil to update its navy, and oil was paramount to any number of Soviet and American industries necessary to maintain world dominance. The United States and Britain carefully monitored the strength and proliferation of communism in Iraq and Iran, and the influence of Cold War tensions on international politics is demonstrated through their preoccupation with the role of the local communist parties in the 1946 strikes. An understanding of Cold War politics and diplomacy helps explain the British, American, Iraqi, and Iranian governments' concerns surrounding communist involvement in the strikes, but it also helps one look beyond their preoccupation with potential Soviet involvement to examine other important influences. Government officials from each

⁸ R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol. 2, *The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928 – 1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152 – 162.

⁹ Derek Hopwood, "Social Structures and the New State 1921 – 1958," in *Iraq: Power and Society*, ed. Derek Hopwood, Habib Ishow, and Thomas Koszinowski (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1993), 8.

country were quick to point to the furtherance of the Soviet agenda as the true cause of the strikes in an attempt to discredit the strikers, and even historians have largely agreed that strengthening the communist parties in Iraq and Iran was the primary goal of the strikes, but closer analysis reveals a more nuanced tale. Although the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party organized and led the strikes, political goals informed by communist ideology cannot account alone for the workers' motivation to strike.

History of the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party

Although Britain and the United States held more influence than the Soviet Union in Iran and Iraq when the strikes at Abadan and Kirkuk occurred, communist parties had already been established in each country several years prior. The Iraqi Communist Party was established in 1934, and in 1941 Iran's communists came together to create the Tudeh Party. The Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party dominated leftist politics in their respective countries in the early years of their existence, and by 1946 both parties had established strong networks and linked themselves with unions in key fields, including the railroads and oil industry, and perhaps most importantly, were still operating legally¹⁰. The Iraqi Communist Party

¹⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 301-302.

Ilario Salucci, *A People's History of Iraq* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2003), 20.

was particularly successful despite its small size; between 1944 and 1946, twelve of the sixteen labor unions legalized in Iraq were run by the party¹¹. Similarly, by 1945, the Tudeh Party had thirty-three affiliate trade unions with membership that totaled seventy-five percent of the industrial workforce¹²

The July 1946 strikes were the largest Tudeh and Iraqi Communist Party-led strikes thus far, but both parties enjoyed prior success as well. In May 1946, the Tudeh Party's Central Council of Federated Trade Unions orchestrated a general strike in the oil industry which led to the Iranian government passing the first comprehensive labor law in the Middle East.

The labor law:

“promised the eight-hour work day; Friday pay; six day's annual holidays, including May Day; worker's insurance and unemployment pay; minimum wages based on local food prices; outlawing of child labor; and the right of workers to organize independent unions¹³.”

The labor law failed to address all provisions clearly, allowing the AIOC to shift blame and responsibility for addressing the workers' demands to the Iranian government in the subsequent July strike, but the Tudeh Party's success gave leverage to organize the much larger strike just months later. The Iraqi Communist Party led a series of smaller strikes in early

¹¹ Salucci, *People's History of Iraq*, 20.

¹² Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 109.

¹³ *Ibid*, 110.

1946 as well, focusing on the issues of working conditions and wages¹⁴.

Although these strikes were small and saw limited success, they gave the Iraqi Communist Party credibility among workers and helped set the stage for labor action in July.

Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Roles in Leading the Strikes

It was no secret that the strikes in Kirkuk and Abadan were led and organized by Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party members. Although no evidence exists to suggest that Tudeh Party leadership directed the Abadan strike, the leader of the Workers' and Toilers' Union in Abadan, Nejafi, had been a member of the Tudeh Party for nearly a year before the strike,¹⁵ and the earlier May strike had, in fact, been directly organized by the Tudeh Party¹⁶. Once the strike began, the Tudeh Party also distributed pamphlets in support of the workers in Abadan. However, in Kirkuk, the Iraqi Communist Party played a far more direct role, releasing a manifesto outlining the party's grievances with the Iraq Petroleum Company and a list of demands.

The Workers' and Toilers' Union and the Iraqi Communist Party released a very similar set of demands. Both wanted to see an increase in

¹⁴ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 113.

¹⁵ Memorandum of Conversation with Nejafi, Union Boss, Appendix 4 to Dispatch No. 3 from the American Embassy, Tehran to the Secretary of State, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 19.

minimum wages, company-provided transportation to the refinery work sites from the cities of Kirkuk and Abadan, and increased housing allowances or the construction of company-provided housing. The similar demands and overlapping timing of the strikes led some to speculate that the strikes were planned in conjunction, but there is no evidence to suggest this is true¹⁷. A Tudeh pamphlet distributed in Abadan justified the strike without taking responsibility, arguing that that the AIOC used state property and Iranian labor to turn a profit without being held adequately accountable¹⁸. Iraqi Communist Party publications employed a similar argument, and the party's daily meetings during the strike kept the workers focused on their goals.

Soviet Influence and the Azerbaijani Crisis

Any communist victory or display of strength was troubling to the United States and the United Kingdom, but they found the Abadan Workers' Union's ability to mobilize thousands of workers and successful negotiation for the most important of their demands particularly troubling in light of the growing crisis in Azerbaijan. The United Kingdom and the

¹⁷ Strike at Kirkuk Oil Fields, August 10, 1946, Prepared by William J. Handley; Folder 700 2/3; Box 9; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁸ Confidential Telegram from William C. Burdett, Jr. to James S. Moose Jr, August 29, 1946; Folder 700 2/3; Box 9; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Soviet Union strategically invaded Azerbaijan in 1941 to create a barrier against German expansion in the Middle East as well as to maintain a line of communication and supply chain between the Allied Powers during World War II. Since neither country had formally colonized Iran, the invasion was promised to be temporary; all British, American, and Soviet troops would be removed from Iran within six months of the end of the war. The United States and the United Kingdom withdrew their troops by the March 1946 deadline, but the Soviet Union refused. In the meantime, it had also established two pro-Soviet republics in Azerbaijan, which seized control of the territory and established independent governments¹⁹.

Already alarmed by the apparent influence wielded by the Soviet Union in Iran, British administrators were quick to attempt to discredit the Workers' Union and the strike. Colonel Underwood, AIOC security officer, argued that the union's reasons for striking were not economic, but rather political. In addition to referring to the workers' demands as "frivolous," Underwood claimed "the whole strike and subsequent actions of Muzafer Firouz savoured strongly of a political plot engineered by the pro-Russian Tudeh Party²⁰." Colonel Willoughby, British Consul at Khorramshahr,

¹⁹ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 111.

²⁰ Report by Colonel Underwood, AIOC Security Officer, July 19, 1946, Appendix 1 to Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Memorandum of Conversation with Colonel Underwood, AIOC Security Officer, July 20, 1946, Appendix 2 to Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy &

blamed the Soviets for the strike, arguing that it was a direct attack on the AIOC²¹. Nejafi, however, denied that the Soviets had any influence on the strike, pointing to the Workers' and Toilers' Union central committee as the source of direction for the Abadan branch of the party²². Although the Azerbaijani crisis had little to do with labor issues in southern Iran, it appears likely that the strong reactions against the strike by British and American Foreign Service officials were informed by a fear that the Soviet Union had successfully made an attempt to expand its influence further south.

However, this fear of Soviet influence in the strikes demonstrates American and British ignorance of how significantly the communist parties in Iraq and Iran diverged from globally-oriented Soviet policy. Communist parties across the Middle East tended to break from Soviet ideologies of anti-fascism and labor rights, instead concentrating their efforts on anti-colonial endeavors in European-occupied, or otherwise dominated, Middle Eastern states. From its inception to the mid-40s, the Iraqi Communist Party grew steadily, but it was still small and had little support among the

Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²¹ Disturbances in Khuzistan, Dispatch No. 36 from William C. Burdett, Jr., July 17, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²² Memorandum of Conversation with Nejafi, Union Boss, Appendix 4 to Dispatch No. 3 from the American Embassy, Tehran to the Secretary of State, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

working class and even less among rural peasants. The party was also plagued by factional splits, personal conflicts among leadership, and uncommitted membership, and as a result the party did not have a clear ideology or direction until 1944 when Fahd, one of the party's founders, consolidated his leadership of the party and introduced an ideological agenda primarily focused on achieving democracy and independence in Iraq rather than communist goals in line with the global Soviet agenda²³. The Tudeh Party initially fell into line with the Soviets, naming labor reform and elimination of the class structure system in Iran as their primary causes, but the party suffered from this association with the Soviet Union during the 1946 Azerbaijani crisis, which threatened Iranian sovereignty, and distanced itself from the Soviet line, moving towards nationalism instead²⁴. A strike motivated by specifically Iranian or Iraqi communist ideals as they existed in 1946 would have intended to weaken the positions of the IPC or the AIOC in Iraq and Iran, but the purely economic demands of the July strikes show no evidence for these motivations. Bein and Lockman invert the argument that striking workers across the Middle East made demands for economic gains with the purpose of furthering nationalist movements, arguing instead that nationalist movements were strengthened by workers demanding economic gains

²³ Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25 – 40.

²⁴ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 107 – 113.

from foreign-run companies and providing practical political rallying-points for anti-colonial agendas²⁵.

The Historiography of Soviet Influence in the Strikes

The U.S. State Department was not able to uncover any evidence tying the Soviet Union to the strike, and even the British officials most convinced of Soviet involvement failed to produce real proof. Colonel Underwood wrote in a report to a company official called the general manager that strike orders must have been made to the Tudeh Party from Russia because the strike was timed to occur the day before the Arab Union's headquarters officially opened, meaning that the league was not yet at full strength, and because the workers seized important Arab Union records— decisions which he claimed were too clever to have originated from Iranians²⁶. In addition to displaying appalling bigotry, this argument was the greatest, and most wholly unconvincing, evidence of Soviet involvement Underwood could muster. However, historians agree overall that the strike posed a victory for communism. Abrahamian²⁷ and Elwell-

²⁵ Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882 – 1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 14 – 18.

²⁶ Report by Colonel Underwood, AIOC Security Officer, July 19, 1946, Appendix 1 to Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁷ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 20.

Sutton²⁸ point to the Iranian government's support of the workers as a particularly helpful in securing the union's victory, and Marlowe comments that the strike's success was particularly meaningful to communists in the wake of the Azerbaijani independence movements²⁹.

However, although the Soviet Union played no role in the Kirkuk strike, the Iraqi Communist Party was still an important force in the region. Without the party's presence in Kirkuk, a general strike would likely not have been successful, or may not have even occurred. Salucci notes that between thirty and sixty percent of the oil workforce in Iraq was unionized, suggesting that securing support for a strike would not be a problem, but also points out that all major union leaders were also members of and supported by the Iraqi Communist Party³⁰. Perhaps the union could have organized successfully without the support of a leftist party, but Longrigg attributes the success solely to the influence of outside factors, namely, the Iraqi Communist Party³¹. Bet-Schlimon takes a less extreme, but similar, stance, arguing that the party's presence in Kirkuk made the city "fertile ground for labor organization" and pointing to the blurred lines between foreign entities and local power structures as further complications in untangling the relationship between workers, the Iraqi

²⁸ L.P. Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1955), 148.

²⁹ John Marlowe, *The Persian Gulf in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1962), 147.

³⁰ Salucci, *A People's History of Iraq*, 26.

³¹ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 177.

Petroleum Company, and the state³². Tripp further claims that the Iraqi Communist Party successfully led strikes in multiple industries because of its ability to integrate with and appeal to workers³³.

British and American Responses

However, although the success of the strikes worried United States and British diplomats and company officials, the volume of State Department correspondence regarding the Azerbaijani crisis compared to the volume of correspondence regarding both strikes demonstrates that of the two, destabilization in Iran due to Azerbaijani independence was the more pressing matter. Unsurprisingly, the sovereignty of Iran and its position within the United States' sphere of influence mattered far more than the AIOC's profit margins.

Although the Soviet Union likely had nothing to do with the strike in Abadan, Britain's paranoia very nearly played beautifully into Soviet interests. Worried that the strike was just the first step in a larger campaign orchestrated by the Soviet Union³⁴, the British Navy anchored the HMS *Norfolk*, a heavy cruiser, in Iraqi waters just 4 miles from

³² Arbella Bet-Shlimon, "State-Society Relations in the Urban Spheres of Baghdad and Kirkuk, 1920 – 58," in *State and Society in Iraq*, ed. Benjamin Isakhan, Shamiran Mako, and Fadi Dawood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

³³ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 113.

³⁴ Disturbances in Khuzistan, Dispatch No. 36 from William C. Burdett, Jr., July 17, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Abadan, ready to invade should the violence resume or escalate³⁵. Had British troops entered Iran, the Soviet Union certainly would have seized the opportunity to reoccupy Azerbaijan and perhaps even move further south under the auspices of defending Iran against British imperialism. William G. Burdett Jr., the American vice consul in Basra, criticized the move, stating that in its zeal to protect its oil interests, Britain had lost the moral high ground it previously held over the Soviet Union³⁶. In the Cold War's conflict of ideology, a perceived moral high ground was often the only advantage the British and Americans had and not something they could afford to lose.

Though the British and Americans shared concerns about the Tudeh influence on the strike at the Abadan refinery, in Kirkuk their analysis diverged. The United Kingdom still occupied Iraq, and as a result, the Soviet Union had little influence or interest in Kirkuk. The United States was deeply concerned about the level of violence Kirkuk police displayed in subduing the unarmed workers, and much of the correspondence between the Kirkuk Consul, American Embassy in Baghdad, and the Secretary of State reported on the findings of

³⁵ Report by Colonel Underwood, AIOC Security Officer, July 19, 1946, Appendix 1 to Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁶ Development of the Labor Unions, the Tudeh Party, and the Arab League in the Abadan Area, Dispatch No. 48 from William C. Burdett, Jr., August 13, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

investigations into the event³⁷. All reports, with the exception of a review by the Combined Intelligence Center Iraq, found that the police attacked the crowd unprovoked, and several documents point to the unwarranted violence as a trend in the Umari government. Since the Soviet Union's influence in Iraq was negligible and public backlash to the brutal police actions could have easily further destabilized Mosul, United States officials seemed to not worry about the Iraqi Communist Party's success. However, Britain had more to lose, and as in Abadan, attempted to discredit the workers by pointing to party involvement as evidence that the strike's intentions were purely political³⁸.

Iraqi and Iranian Responses

The Iraqi government responded to the strikes in a similar vein as the British, claiming that the strikers' motives were political rather than

³⁷ Conditions in Iraq, August 26, 1946; Folder 701.1 – 801; Vol. 10; Box 103; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Telegram No. 402 from James S. Moose, Jr. to the Secretary of State, July 14, 1946; File 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

CICI Review No. 275 for Period Ending July 18, 1946; File 800; Box 21; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁸ CICI Review No. 275 for Period Ending July 18, 1946; File 800; Box 21; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

economic. The government, particularly the Kirkuk police force, received the brunt of the criticism and vitriol that emerged after the violent clash with the strikers. James S. Moose Jr., the American Charge D'Affaire in Baghdad, wrote to the Secretary of State that he observed three general trends across the country in reaction to the actions of the police. Leftist parties wholly denounced the government and defended the right of the workers to strike, nationalist and anti-government newspapers criticized the government for its drastic action but did not defend the strikers, and pro-government newspapers barely mentioned the affair at all³⁹.

In the face of a storm of opposition, the Umari government attempted to censor its most vocal critics, even to the point of arresting and prosecuting Kamal Beg Al-Chadirohi, chairman of the National Democratic Party and director of its newspaper *Sawt Al-Ahad*, for publishing three articles condemning the Kirkuk police force's actions in firing upon peacefully protesting demonstrators⁴⁰. Communism was an easy scapegoat, but Umari's attempts to shift the blame were ultimately unprovable and ineffective. The Iranian government's response to the strikes, on the other hand, was more favorable to workers. Prime Minister Qavam sent Prince Firouz, a known Tudeh sympathizer to negotiate the

³⁹ Airgram from Moose to the Secretary of State, July 28, 1946; File 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁰ Conditions in Iraq, August 26, 1946; Folder 701.1 – 801; Vol. 10; Box 103; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

terms of the settlement between the company and the workers, essentially ensuring that the workers would receive some concessions and that the leaders of the strike would emerge untouched.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the roles of the Iraqi Communist Party and the Tudeh Party were paramount in organizing the July 1946 strikes in Kirkuk and Abadan. The parties were responsible for planning the strikes and for drumming support through the distribution of pamphlets and by holding meetings to incite the workers to action. However, even by 1946 much of American foreign policy stemmed from a fear of communism and the spread of the Soviet Union. Because the U.S. State Department, British Foreign Service, Iraq Petroleum Company, and Anglo-Iranian Oil Company— or in other words, American and British powers— placed such an emphasis on the role of the communist parties and potential Soviet role in the strikes in their initial reports, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that the parties' involvement was the only crucial factor in the workers' decision to strike. When the United States' and Britain's fear is factored in, however, it is clear that a more measured analysis must be made. Although the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party undoubtedly played vastly important roles in the strikes, the unity of the workers as a labor, not political, organization and the seeming disunity between ethnic groups deserve further attention.

Chapter 2: Labor Unions in Kirkuk and Abadan and Labor Issues as Motivation for the Strikes

When oil refinery workers at Kirkuk and Abadan went on strike in 1946, contemporary critics pointed to a communist political agenda as their primary motivation, and most historians have also largely emphasized the role of Tudeh and Iraqi Communist Party leaders in organizing the strikes. However, this emphasis on political leaders and party motives ignores the voices of the largest body of people involved in the strikes— the workers themselves. The leaders of the strikes most likely were politically motivated, hoping to increase support for their respective parties among the working class, but the evidence points to more personal motivations on behalf of the strikers. The oil workers who participated in the strikes had genuine concerns about wages, living conditions, and company compliance with existing labor laws and demanded the Iraq Petroleum Company and Anglo-Iranian Oil Company take action to address their concerns— demands which ultimately proved successful. Without physical acts of support from the workers, the strike would never have succeeded, and it is imperative that their motivations be credited equally to the motivations of their communist leaders.

Presence of Labor Unions in Kirkuk and Abadan

It certainly is no surprise that any communist party would easily gain support among the working classes in Iraq and Iran who watched a

foreign entity sweep into their country, harvest their natural resources, then keep the majority of the profits for itself while failing to pay workers a living wage. Rooted in European intellectualism, communism was popularized by Marx and Engels, whose introduction of the theory of class struggle in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 inspired the Bolsheviks to establish a regime in 1917 which claimed to represent the interests of the proletariat and to be committed to international communist revolutions. Marx and Engels theorized that all European societies followed the same progression from the primitive communism of man's earliest days to slave societies, then to feudalism and capitalism. Eventually, they claimed, workers would become conscious of social classes and their own poor standing in the social order and rebel against capitalism, establishing socialist states that eventually would give way to communism⁴¹. Although this theory of history was more difficult and problematic to apply to states outside of Europe, Marx and Engels' claim that the working classes would inevitably rise against exploitation by the state appealed to the frustrated oil refinery workers at Kirkuk and Abadan.

Isakhan, Mako, and Dawood describe the Iraqi Communist Party's presence in Kirkuk as "fertile ground for labor organization," but it is equally true that the large force of unskilled laborers made Kirkuk and

⁴¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 98 – 137.

Abadan ideal locations to target new membership for communist parties⁴². In an airgram dated July 9 to the Secretary of State, George Allen, the U.S. Ambassador to Iran, estimates that 35,000 workers in Abadan were “nominal” members of the Tudeh Party⁴³, a figure which is corroborated by Abrahamian, who estimates that in the whole of Iran, seventy-five percent of the industrial labor force was unionized by 1945, including 45,000 oil workers, who were primarily located in Abadan⁴⁴. Similarly, Salucci estimates that thirty to sixty percent of the oil workforce in Iraq was unionized, though Iraqi Community Party membership only numbered around 4000 nationwide⁴⁵. Even before plans for the July 1946 strikes began to take shape, Kirkuk and Abadan workers were demonstrating a strong interest in labor organization despite lukewarm political interest in communism.

Although the labor unions and communist parties of each country were separate entities, they were closely associated with each other due to the labor unions’ leadership coming nearly exclusively from the communist parties. This close association also affected the legal status of the labor unions, which often were only legal when the communist parties were able to operate legally. In Iraq, where the Iraqi Communist Party

⁴² Benjamin Isakhan, Shamiran Mako and Fadi Dawood, *State and Society in Iraq: Citizenship Under Occupation, Dictatorship and Democratization*.

⁴³ Airgram from Allen to the Secretary of State, July 9, 1946; Folder 800 – 800; Box 21; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁴ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 109.
Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 19.

⁴⁵ Salucci, *A People's History of Iraq*, 6, 26.

operated legally in 1946, workers were permitted to form unions. The Tudeh Party operated legally as well in 1946, and in fact held a number of seats in the Majles during Qavam's fourth term as Prime Minister from 1946 to 1947, and unions flourished during this period as well⁴⁶.

Membership in the union and membership in the local communist party were not necessarily a one-to-one correlation, but they were closely related enough that knowing the strength of one can give a general sense of the strength of the other. By the virtue of their pro-labor ideology alone, the communist parties already were in a position to gain significant support among Iraq and Iran's working classes, but the parties were further assisted by the IPC and AIOC's labor policies. The companies paid their workers bare subsistence wages, driving their employees into the arms of any party willing to represent the interests of laborers. Even if communism had no hold in either city, the combination of a politically active workforce and low wages made the Kirkuk and Abadan oil refineries ripe for unrest.

However, communism and the growing strength of local communist parties cannot completely account for workers' motivations to participate in the strikes. As previously mentioned, approximately 45,000 oil workers in Iran were unionized and 35,000 workers in Abadan were at least marginally affiliated with the Tudeh Party, but altogether, between 65,000

⁴⁶ Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 110.

and 70,000 workers participated in the strike⁴⁷. Similarly, the Iraqi Communist Party's total membership numbered about 4000 across all of Iraq, but 5000 workers in Kirkuk alone joined the strike⁴⁸. Participation statistics indicate that not all strikers in either city were particularly interested in communism or in furthering a communist agenda. A lack of sources documenting ordinary workers' concerns make it difficult to know exactly why they may have gone on strike in 1946, but analysis of working conditions and demands presented in the strike clearly indicates that labor issues played a larger role in galvanizing workers than communism.

Wages, Benefits, and Services at the IPC and AIOC

That workers at the Kirkuk and Abadan refineries were underpaid was not disputed. Both the Iraqi and Iranian governments attempted to address the wage issue by passing labor laws earlier in the year but were either unable or unwilling to enforce the new laws. In Iran, the passage of the labor law was forced by the Tudeh Party when it led a successful strike in the oil industry on May 1. The 1946 labor law is referred to widely by historians and United States State Department records alike in the context of the July strikes, but details of the law's requirements beyond the

⁴⁷ Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 303.

Touraj Atabaki, "Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1908 – 1951." in *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, ed. Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, and Kaveh Ehsani (United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 215.

⁴⁸ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 114.

basic issues addressed are frustratingly absent. In a defense of the AIOC, Colonel Underwood hints at two of the provisions of the 1946 labor law when he names two points the AIOC lacked a clear understanding of— what the new minimum wage was in Abadan and how Friday pay should be administered— suggesting the law required the company to pay workers for their Fridays off and set a new minimum wage with the additional requirement that regional adjustments be made for the local cost of living, but it failed to specify how much the adjustment should be⁴⁹. Reports on the Iraqi labor law were even vaguer, but it's likely that the Iraqi law also attempted to set a new minimum wage. In a report to the Embassy in Tehran and other American posts in the region, United States Vice Consul to Basra William G. Burdett, Jr. comments on the need for a higher minimum wage in Abadan, noting that AIOC workers were paid at a bare subsistence level. He further argues that the issue was exacerbated by the AIOC's total monopoly on goods and services in the region, meaning that local bazaars could not thrive and workers could not acquire the goods for their basic needs from anyone else for a lower price⁵⁰. Historian Hanna Batatu notes a similar problem in Iraq and argues that as the

⁴⁹ Report by Colonel Underwood, AIOC Security Officer, July 19, 1946, Appendix 1 to Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁰ Development of the Labor Unions, the Tudeh Party, and the Arab League in the Abadan Area, Dispatch No. 48 from William C. Burdett, Jr., August 13, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

decades passed, Iraqi workers became worse off as wages failed to keep up with the rapidly increasing cost of living⁵¹. Salucci estimates that between 1939 and 1948, food prices increased by eight times in Iraq, but wages only increased by four⁵². As reluctant as the IPC and AIOC may have been to raise the minimum wage, it clearly was an issue that could no longer be ignored.

In addition to poor wages, IPC and AIOC workers faced housing issues as well. American Legation to Baghdad attache William J. Handley reports that although the closest distance between the refinery and the city of Kirkuk was only about 1.2 kilometers, less than a mile, most workers lived in an area of Kirkuk that required a 5 kilometer, or 3 mile, journey to work, and the IPC refused to provide transportation, claiming it was the city's responsibility to provide public transportation⁵³. Handley also reports that the lack of housing in Kirkuk was further exacerbated by the destruction of 700 houses in the previous winter's heavy rains⁵⁴. A report prepared by the State Department's Division of International Labor, Social and Health Affairs similarly reports that during World War II the AIOC grew rapidly and could not keep up with the increasing demand for housing due

⁵¹ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 472-3.

⁵² Salucci, *A People's History of Iraq*, 19.

⁵³ Strike at Kirkuk Oil Fields, August 10, 1946, Prepared by William J. Handley; Folder 700 2/3; Box 9; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

to a lack of building materials, resulting in a severe shortage of adequate housing for the company's employees⁵⁵.

However, although the IPC and AIOC did not exactly champ at the bit to raise wages or improve the housing issues, they also did not completely ignore their workers' needs. About a month before the strike began in Abadan, AIOC works manager W.K. Ross began to hold biweekly meetings between three AIOC representatives and three union representatives to address complaints and issues raised by the union⁵⁶. Additionally, both the IPC and the AIOC provided a wide range of services and benefits for their employees, including healthcare. However, Longrigg notes that the services met a lukewarm reception at best; the services offered were not ones that the workers actually wanted or needed⁵⁷. On the other hand, Sutton reports that in Kirkuk, the scale of services offered by the company failed to meet the worker's needs. For example, the company employed only thirty-five doctors, not nearly enough to adequately care for its employees' health needs⁵⁸. Regardless of the

⁵⁵ Recent Labor Disruptions Among Anglo-Iranian Oil Company Workers: Background and Implications, enclosure to Airmail to Officer in Charge of the American Mission, Baghdad, November 4, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁶ Development of the Labor Unions, the Tudeh Party, and the Arab League in the Abadan Area, Dispatch No. 48 from William C. Burdett, Jr., August 13, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development*, 154.

⁵⁷ Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development*, 157 – 158, 178.

⁵⁸ Development of the Labor Unions, the Tudeh Party, and the Arab League in the Abadan Area, Dispatch No. 48 from William C. Burdett, Jr., August 13, 1946; Folder

Abadan workers' supposed apathetic reactions to the services offered by the AIOC, Longrigg argues that the AIOC was a better employer than other companies in Iran, discontent was the exception rather than the rule, and the strikes only occurred as a result of outside influence⁵⁹. However, the lack of communist party membership or affiliation among striking workers simply does not support Longrigg's emphasis on the role of outside factors. Labor issues clearly played a more dominant role than historians have usually agreed.

Demands in the July 1946 Strikes

Despite claims by Longrigg and more contemporary critics of the strikes, if one judges by the demands made of the IPC and AIOC alone, the strikes appear to have been primarily motivated by frustrations related to labor issues. Even the AIOC works manager Ross reported that negotiations between workers and the company leading up to the strikes were based purely on economic grounds⁶⁰. Reports on the exact demands of the striking laborers vary, but overall the demands primarily focused on changes to workers' wages and quality of life and to services offered by

850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁹ Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development*, 154, 177.

⁶⁰ Development of the Labor Unions, the Tudeh Party, and the Arab League in the Abadan Area, Dispatch No. 48 from William C. Burdett, Jr., August 13, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

the IPC and AIOC. The strikers in both Kirkuk and Abadan demanded increases in their wages and the provision of transportation for the large portions of workers who lived far from their work sites, and in Kirkuk they also demanded the company either construct housing for workers or provide them with housing allowances⁶¹. Abadan workers further demanded that the company grant Friday pay⁶². F. Lester Sutton, Secretary of the United States Embassy in Tehran, reported to Ambassador Allen that the workers in Abadan also requested the removal

⁶¹ Telegram No. 402 from James S. Moose, Jr. to the Secretary of State, July 14, 1946; File 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Report by Musa Shaikh Radhi to Political Committee of Al-Ittihad Al Watani (National Union) Party, July 17, 1946, enclosed in Dispatch No. 1342 from James S. Moose, Jr. to The Secretary of State, July 23, 1946; File 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Report by Colonel Underwood, AIOC Security Officer, July 19, 1946, Appendix 1 to Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Memorandum Concerning Khuzistan, enclosure to Dispatch no. 90 to the Secretary of State, July 22, 1946; Folder 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁶² Transmitting Documents and Memoranda of Conversation Concerning Political and Labor Situation in Khuzistan, Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

of a particular garage foreman for unspecified reasons⁶³. In the same document, Sutton claimed that the strike was purely politically motivated.

As previously discussed, evidence of the motivations of the leaders behind the strikes is scarce, making it difficult to conclude whether Sutton's claim is legitimate, but it certainly is possible that the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party saw growing labor issues in Kirkuk and Abadan as opportunities to be exploited to demonstrate their strength or to increase party membership. The Tudeh Party, in particular, may have been emboldened by Soviet success in Azerbaijan. However, it is unlikely that the majority of laborers who participated in the strikes were motivated by anything other than a desire for better wages and living conditions. Ambassador Allen's description of Abadan workers as "nominal" members of the Tudeh Party suggests that most were not deeply committed to the party or its political ideology, and most workers in Kirkuk were only members of the union, not of the Iraqi Communist Party. The voices of the workers were not recorded, but their presence and participation in strikes with demands for labor policy change speak volumes. Without the momentum created by workers fighting for labor rights, any political motives the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party may have harbored would likely have gained little support.

⁶³ Memorandum Concerning Khuzistan, enclosure to Dispatch no. 90 to the Secretary of State, July 22, 1946; Folder 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Global Reactions and Outcomes

Reactions to the strikes by the United States, Britain, Iraq, and Iran varied from vicious opposition to sympathy, though the workers received little outright support from entities other than the Iraqi Communist Party and Tudeh Party. The United States was monitoring the situation closely but also refused to become involved, perhaps because it would not take the same financial hit that Britain would take if the workers were successful. Though no State Department official formally endorsed or condemned the strikes, the tones of reports back to the Secretary of State often revealed sympathy for the workers⁶⁴. British reactions were, unsurprisingly, almost wholly negative, both from the oil companies and from representatives of the state, though the Tudeh's success in Abadan led one unnamed British official at the Ministry of Fuel to remark that the party may well prove to be the future party of the working class⁶⁵. The IPC's Acting Field Superintendent, Mr. Green, also expressed empathy for the workers and placed some blame on the company, calling the lack of

⁶⁴ Conditions in Iraq, August 26, 1946; Folder 701.1 – 801; Vol. 10; Box 103; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Development of the Labor Unions, the Tudeh Party, and the Arab League in the Abadan Area, Dispatch No. 48 from William C. Burdett, Jr., August 13, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

These documents are just two examples of a sympathetic attitude towards the strikers. Many more examples can be found in State Department correspondence.

⁶⁵ Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 20.

housing and transportation a “rotten situation” and remarking, “we were not caught with our pants down but holding them up with our fingers crossed⁶⁶.” Iraqi public opinion, on the other hand, firmly supported the workers, though condemnation of the police force’s brutal actions outweighed actual support for the labor issues raised by the workers⁶⁷. In Iran, the AIOC was enraged at Prince Firouz’s generous ruling in favor of the strikers and leniency in the punishment of the strike’s leaders⁶⁸. Ultimately, however, the only reactions that really mattered were those of the central governments in Baghdad and Tehran, and despite any fear of or personal distaste for the communist parties, both governments granted important concessions to the workers. Though they did not receive every demand made at the beginning of the strikes, employees of the Kirkuk and Abadan refineries received significant wage increases and living allowances, an altogether remarkable achievement.

⁶⁶ Strike at Kirkuk Oil Fields, August 10, 1946, Prepared by William J. Handley; Folder 700 2/3; Box 9; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁶⁷ Airgram from Moose to the Secretary of State, July 28, 1946; File 850.4; Volume 17; Box 108; Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717953, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁶⁸ Transmitting Documents and Memoranda of Conversation Concerning Political and Labor Situation in Khuzistan, Dispatch 103 from the American Embassy, Tehran to The Ambassador, July 24, 1946; Folder 850.4; Box 24; Confidential File Iraq; U.S. Embassy & Legation, Baghdad; Classified General Records; Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, NAID 1717955, Record Group 84; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Conclusion

When studying any labor, social, or political movement in history, it is important to always keep in mind the agency of all the people involved in the movement, not just the leadership. When the agency and motivations of the July 1946 strikers in Kirkuk and Abadan are taken into account, it becomes clear that the workers did not participate in the strikes to further a communist agenda, but rather to stand up for themselves and to demand better wages, working conditions, and a better quality of life. This focus on the actual workers is also important when considering the causes behind both strikes' violent endings. The British foreign service officers and company officials responding to the deadly clashes quickly pointed to ethnic conflict as the culprit, but reality was far more complicated.

Chapter 3: Ethnic Divisions and the Eruption of Violence

The United States Department of State officials, British Foreign Services officials, and spokesmen for the Iraqi Petroleum Company and Anglo-Iran Oil Company primarily focused on the role of the communist parties in reports about the 1946 strikes, but State Department documents reveal an interesting emphasis on ethnicity and ethnic conflicts as well, particularly in Iran. The sources do not place a great emphasis on ethnicity in Iraq, perhaps because the Mosul region's heterogeneous nature did not lend itself well to a narrative pitting ethnicities against each other. However, the State Department spent many resources attempting to understand the relationship between the Arab Union and the Workers and Toilers Union in Abadan, the reason for and causes of violence between the two groups, and the relationship between the Arab Union and the AIOC. These sources at times explicitly posit that the violence which ended the strike in Abadan was fueled entirely by ethnic tensions. This perspective, however, vastly oversimplifies the problem, which had less to do with ethnic conflict and more with class, economic status, and politics.

Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the Genesis of the British Mandate in Iraq

Before the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the state of Iraq did not exist, and the three provinces⁶⁹ that now make up modern Iraq fell under Ottoman rule. When the Ottoman Empire fell, France and Britain negotiated a secret agreement, which was quickly uncovered and made public by the Soviets in 1917. The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement divided the Middle East into French and British spheres of influence arbitrarily assigned based on strategic and economic concerns rather than ethnic, religious, or cultural considerations, with Britain dominating in the Persian Gulf region⁷⁰.

In 1920, the Ottoman Empire began to be dismantled with the Treaty of Sèvres. The new Turkish state contested the Treaty, and in 1923 the Treaty of Lausanne settled the question of Turkish authority in the former Ottoman territories, ceding Mosul to Iraq⁷¹. Britain's presence and influence in Iraq were reinforced by the decision of the League of Nations to grant Britain a twenty-year mandate in the region, a decision which Abdullah claims was "nothing but a cover for colonialism" and was met

⁶⁹ In 1946, Iraq was composed of the Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul Provinces. It should be noted that these three provinces were much larger than their 19 modern-day equivalents, and no modern governorate of Iraq is named Mosul. Kirkuk was located in the northernmost Mosul province under the British Mandate but now falls into the governorate also called Kirkuk.

⁷⁰ M.R. Izady, "Kurds and the Formation of the State of Iraq, 1917 – 1932," in *The Creation of Iraq 1914 – 1921*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 96.

⁷¹ Sarah D. Shields, *Fezzes in the River* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 252.

with revolt in across Iraq⁷². Though the revolt failed, Yaphe argues that it “played an important role in the creation of an Iraqi national mythology and in shaping future British policy in Iraq⁷³.” Upon the insistence of Woodrow Wilson that nations within the former Ottoman Empire experience some degree of autonomy, the Treaty of Sèvres also included a provision allowing for the creation of a Kurdish state in the Mosul region⁷⁴. However, this provision was never enforced, a failure that Sluglett attributes to Britain’s lack of a “moral purpose” in implementing the Iraqi mandate which resulted in any policies contrary to British economic goals to be undermined or cast aside⁷⁵. Britain annexed most of the oil-rich region which would have been the independent state of Kurdistan into Iraq, a move which fostered resentment among the Kurds of Mosul, especially when compounded by discrimination in the oil industry.

Britain in Iran

British influence in twentieth century Iran looked very different than in Iraq, largely due to the fact that Britain was never granted power over the entire country by a larger governing power as the League of Nations

⁷² Thabit A.J. Abdullah, *A Short History of Iraq* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), 96 – 97.

⁷³ Judith S. Yaphe, “The View from Basra: Southern Iraq’s Reaction to War and Occupation, 1915 – 1925,” in *The Creation of Iraq: 1914 – 1921*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 31.

⁷⁴ Izady, “Kurds and the Formation of the State of Iraq,” 99 – 102.

⁷⁵ Peter Sluglett, “Les Mandats/The Mandates: Some Reflections on the Nature of the British Presence in Iraq (1914 – 1932) and the French Presence in Syria (1918 – 1946),” in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Nadine Méouchy (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004), 120-121.

had established the British mandate in Iraq. In the nineteenth century, Russia defeated Qajar Persia in two wars, establishing a strong degree of influence through the adoption of treaties which were unfavorable to the Qajar regime. Russian influence in Persia worried Britain, and fueled by the further desire to have access to the Persian Gulf, Great Britain began establishing connections in Persia through commercial enterprise, such as telegraph and mineral-exploration concessions⁷⁶. British influence in Iran began in earnest with military conquests leading to the adoption of the 1857 Treaty of Paris, which established independence for the British-allied city of Herat.

The introduction of British influence in Persia established a new status-quo for Persian politics, which tiptoed carefully around Russia and Britain, pitting them against each other in a delicate dance to maintain some degree of independence— a dance which lasted long beyond the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the creation of Iran under a constitutional monarchy ruled by Reza Pahlavi in 1906⁷⁷. Meanwhile, at the same time that the Persian government worked to maintain the balance of power between Britain and Russia, the Constitutional Revolution's successful establishment of a Constituent Assembly in 1906 introduced yet another source of political tension between the Shah and the many parties that sprang up around the democratically elected assembly⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894 – 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 37.

⁷⁷ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 36 – 45.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 45.

Well before the July 1946 strike at the Abadan refinery, Britain set a precedent for stirring up trouble among ethnic and tribal groups to achieve their own ends. In 1912, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, took advantage of the Bakhtiari drive to dominate newly formed Iran and signed a treaty with the tribe, obtaining promises of protection in areas controlled by the Bakhtiari⁷⁹. When the Qashqai in Shiraz damaged British trade through the imposition of illegal taxes, violating agreements between the Iranian government and British companies, Britain goaded the Bakhtiari into conflict with the Qashqai. Ironically, this move ensured the Qashqai would refuse to side with Britain and the United States in the 1953 coup to depose Prime Minister Mosaddegh. The British continued to maintain relations with the Bakhtiari and as the oil nationalization crisis swelled, employed them to revolt against the central government in order to weaken and discredit Mosaddegh. Even early in its tenure as a dominant power in Iran, Britain saw opportunities to leverage existing disunion for its own benefit, a strategy which the AIOC effectively employed to influence political events, including the 1946 strike in Abadan.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 54.

The Mosul Question and League of Nations Investigation

Although reports to the State Department did not emphasize ethnicity to any large degree when assessing the political motivations and outcomes in the Kirkuk strike, the question of whether ethnicity determines political stance became relevant in Iraq well before 1946. As the former Ottoman Empire was being divided under the Treaty of Sèvres, the League of Nations faced a dilemma: should the ethnically diverse Mosul province be given to Turkey or the newly-formed state of Iraq? Determined to make a judgment based on what the majority of the community wanted, the League conducted an investigation to learn what Mosul residents preferred. Dodge and Shields argue this decision was the result of Woodrow Wilson’s liberal vision for a restructured world based on self-determination after World War I⁸⁰. Fully expecting opinions to be divided along ethnic lines, the League was surprised to learn that the answer was not nearly so simple.

First, as Anderson and Stansfield illustrate with their chart (Figure 1) contrasting Turkish, British, and Iraqi

	<i>Turkish Statistics Presented at Lausanne Conference, 1923</i>	<i>British Military Estimates, 1921</i>	<i>Government of Iraq Enumeration, 1922-24</i>
Kurds	263,830 (39.2%)	427,720 (54.5%)	520,007 (64.9%)
Arabs	43,210 (6.4%)	185,763 (23.7%)	166,941 (20.8%)
Turkmens	146,960 (21.8%)	65,895 (8.4%)	38,652 (4.8%)
Christians and Jews	31,000 (4.6%)	62,225 (7.9%)	61,336 (7.7%)
		16,865 (2.1%)	11,897 (1.5%)
Yezidis	18,000 (2.7%)	30,000 (3.8%)	26,257 (3.3%)
Total settled population	503,000 (74.7%)	—	—
Nomads	170,000 (25.3%)	—	—
Total population	673,000	785,468	801,000

Figure 1: Population of the Mosul Vilayet

⁸⁰ Toby Dodge, “International Obligations, Domestic Pressure and Colonial Nationalism: The Birth of the Iraqi State Under the Mandate System,” in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004), 146 – 147.

Sarah D. Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 242.

survey results, a lack of consistent methodology and definitions for what it means to be Kurdish, Arabic, or Turkic led to wildly differing and unreliable results⁸¹. Furthermore, the investigation found that decades of intermarriage and coexistence had blurred ethnic lines to the point that most people's ethnic identity was fluid and had no meaningful impact on their political views⁸². As Bet-Schlimon eloquently states, "...the political interests of the people of Kirkuk were primarily determined by their ties to one or more of three patrons: the British administrators of Mandate Iraq, the fledgling Iraqi central government, or Turkey⁸³."

However, even if no strong correlation existed between ethnic identity and political stances, the League of Nation's emphasis on protecting the rights of minorities leading up to Iraqi independence in 1932 continuously brought identity politics to the forefront of Iraqi politics, causing communities which previously did not identify as separate ethnic groups to begin defining themselves through the lens of ethnic identity⁸⁴. Pan-Arabism was also becoming increasingly popular in the Middle East

⁸¹ Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 25.

⁸² Shields, "Mosul Questions," in *The Creation of Iraq*, edited by Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 55 – 57.

Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 243 – 245.

⁸³ Arbella Bet-Schlimon, "Kirkuk, 1918 – 1968: Oil and the Politics of Identity in an Iraqi City," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012), 13.

⁸⁴ Nelida Fuccaro, "Minorities and Ethnic Mobilization: The Kurds in Northern Iraq and Syra," in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004), 586 – 587.

at large during this time, not least as a form of resistance against European colonialism, and Iraq was no exception.

Ultimately, the commission to determine Mosul's fate ruled that the province should become a part of Iraq, but it also required Iraq to remain under mandate for twenty-five years and to permit the Kurds in Mosul to exercise some non-specific degree of autonomy⁸⁵. Though rising Kurdish nationalism throughout the 1920s and 1930s likely contributed to the success of opposition groups to the Iraqi government, primarily the Iraqi Communist Party, as Tripp suggests⁸⁶, if the League of Nations' findings about the fluidity of identity among Mosul residents were accurate, twenty-five years surely is not long enough to cement formerly ambiguous identities, which begs the question: how much did ethnicity and ethnic conflict actually contribute to the 1946 strike in Kirkuk?

Ethnicity and the 1946 Strike in Iraq

Unsurprisingly, it turns out that the relationship between ethnic conflict and labor movements in Iraq is quite complicated. Historians readily agree that tension between ethnic groups or between ethnic groups and the government already existed, but it is also clear that the discovery of oil in Mosul and segregation among the Iraqi Petroleum Company's workers further exacerbated preexisting issues. However,

⁸⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 57.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

analysis of primary sources equally clearly indicates that while ethnicity colored some underlying tones of the strike, ultimately it came about as the result of genuine labor concerns that transcended politics of race and ethnicity.

The Iraq Petroleum Company was founded in 1912 under its original name, the Turkish Petroleum Company, but it was not until oil was struck in Baba Gurgur near Kirkuk that the oil industry began to take off in 1927. Eager to take advantage of the discovery, the Iraqi government tightened its grip on Mosul. The Kurdish autonomy promised by the Treaty of Sèvres never came to be, and to add insult to injury, the Turkish Petroleum Company began Arabizing Mosul, hiring Arabs and Assyrians from other parts of Iraq rather than local Kurds. Anderson argues that the influx of workers significantly changed the social order as new, better neighborhoods were built to accommodate the better-paid Arabs and Assyrians, which led to marginalization of the Kurds and increasing violence between Kurds and the Iraqi government and made Kurdish laborers easy targets for recruitment by the Iraqi Communist Party⁸⁷.

Similarly, Bet-Shlimon argues that the IPC primarily worked toward its own corporate and imperial interests and perpetuated social segregation in the city along ethnic lines⁸⁸. Although Iraq was not a colony and the IPC, despite being owned in part by the British government, was not a colonial power, the company perpetuated British colonial rule in

⁸⁷ Anderson and Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk*, 25 – 33.

⁸⁸ Bet-Shlimon, "State-Society Relations," 28.

respect to ethnic minorities, reserving the better jobs, housing, goods, and services for workers of certain ethnicities, a trend which Fuccaro says the workers noticed and became increasingly more angry and frustrated with⁸⁹. Segregation was determined by the ethnic identities Britain had defined during the League of Nations' investigation into Mosul, and these definitions were largely arbitrary as most people could fall in any number of ethnic categories⁹⁰.

Social segregation, in fact, was the major issue on the subject of Arab nationalism that divided Iraq's communists from other political groups. Pan-Arabism was a popular movement in the early twentieth century in Iraq, even garnering support from communists, but communists differed from most Pan-Arabists by emphasizing a more local approach rather than calling for one large, united Arab nation⁹¹. Vitalis argues that the closeness between communism in Middle Eastern states, ethnicity, and anti-colonialism contribute to a larger trend across the region of oil companies downplaying wages and benefits as causes for labor unrest, pointing instead to nationalism and xenophobia among the workers as sources for conflict⁹². Investing in oil put these firms at greater risk for nationalization in the increasingly anti-colonial climate of the Middle East,

⁸⁹ Nelida Fuccaro, "Reading Oil as Urban Violence: Kirkuk and Its Oil Conurbation, 1927 – 58," in *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*, edited by Ulrike Freitag, Nelida Fuccaro, Claudia Ghrawi, and Nora Lafi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 226.

⁹⁰ Bet-Schlimon, "Kirkuk, 1918 – 1968, 61 – 67.

⁹¹ Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 134 – 135.

⁹² Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 12 – 13.

so the companies projected their own xenophobia onto the workers in an attempt to divert attention from labor issues that could be exploited by communists to push back against colonial enterprises such as European oil companies.

This issue of social segregation calls into question the origin of ethnic conflicts in relation to labor and of the origin of ethnic identity in Iraq in general. Division in the labor force along ethnic lines was not organic, but rather resulted from racial bias among IPC officials, and the Iraqi Communist Party was quite clearly more concerned about economic inequality than ethnic inequality in their demands for reform in the strike. Haddad's *Sectarianism in Iraq* calls scholars to examine identity, partisanship, and sectarianism through a broader lens than merely race, ethnicity, religion, or even class, arguing that British influence in Iraq imposed many of these categories on Iraqis, obfuscating the modes of identity which were in reality far more subtle and complex⁹³. When the causes and motives of the 1946 Kirkuk labor strike are examined through this lens, it is clear that while ethnic discrimination certainly correlates with the workers' complaints, economic distress was a stronger motivation. The workers who participated in the strikes came from roughly the same class and social standing; the fact that social classes in Kirkuk were sharply divided along ethnic lines can be traced back to discrimination by company officials rather than any inherent racial or ethnic conflicts.

⁹³ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011).

Indeed, historians largely agree that ethnic identity was not a divisive factor in the strike. Abdulla claims that two conflicting tribes set aside their differences for the strike, but provides no additional details, calling into question the legitimacy of that claim, especially considering no other historians mention this alliance. In a survey of Iraqi social classes, however, Batatu writes that social classes in Iraq could not be defined alone by ethnicity, religion, politics, or economic standing, but rather they were defined by a complicated combination of all of these factors⁹⁴. He also agrees with the findings of the League of Nations commission; ethnicity was not an important factor in determining a person's political leanings. He notes that several of the founding members of the Iraqi Communist Party were of mixed racial ancestry, but so were ten out of the twenty-three Iraqi Prime Ministers during the period of the monarchy, suggesting that race and ethnicity were of little consequence in Iraqi political struggles⁹⁵. Correspondence from the United States' Department of State suggests that Batatu was likely correct. When discussing the strike, the Americans and British never refer to the specific ethnicity of the workers, and the lack of ethnicity-specific demands presented by the workers suggests that labor issues were altogether the most important and influential cause of the 1946 strike. Tensions between the workers and the company were on the rise as far back as 1931 when the IPC laid off over 1000 native Iraqi workers to decrease their oil output and exercise

⁹⁴ Batatu, *Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, 6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 423.

greater control on the market⁹⁶. If any previous ethnic conflict contributed to the strike, it was likely to have been pushed to the tipping point by ethnic segregation in the IPC.

Ethnicity and the 1946 Strike in Iran

The role of ethnicity in the Iran strike, however, was even more complex and more prominent than in Iraq. The United States and Iran clearly viewed the strike as a clash between the (largely Persian) workers and the anti-Tudeh Arab League, which rushed to the defense of the AIOC, primarily to push back against the communists leading the strike. Elm argues that the AIOC was shocked when the strike broke out and encouraged Arab workers to form a labor organization to counter the strike, a claim which some United States officials also made in reports back to the secretary of state⁹⁷. In reality, with British support, the Arab League began to form before the strike officially began, suggesting its foundation was a preemptive decision and not merely reactive. In response to the strike in Abadan, the British also moved much more forcefully against the workers than in Kirkuk, replacing troops in Basra with more elite units from India and sponsoring an anti-Tudeh Bakhtiari and Qashqai revolt against the central government⁹⁸, illustrating once again a

⁹⁶ Bet-Schlimon, "Kirkuk, 1918 – 1968, 152 – 154.

⁹⁷ Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 50.

⁹⁸ Marlowe, *The Persian Gulf in the Twentieth Century*, 148.

willingness to manipulate ethnic groups already at odds with the status quo into acting in the interests of Britain.

The workers in Abadan also declared the strike out of similar frustration due to discrimination of Iranian workers. By the late 1940s, the AIOC was the largest foreign investor in Iran, but it had no Iranian workers in high-level positions⁹⁹. However, before rushing to point at ethnic conflict between Arabs and Persians as a major cause behind the strike's violent end, it is important to consider the class differences between the strikers and the Arab League's founding members. The strike's participants were largely unskilled Persian workers who had migrated to Khuzistan from other parts of Iran, but the Arab League was comprised of landed merchants and AIOC contractors of a higher social status and deep local roots. This social divide greatly complicates the relationship between the workers and the League. The tensions which eventually led to the strike's violent end cannot be boiled down simply to Arabs versus Persians but must also take into account the conflicts between the settled population and migrant workers, economic concerns that a strike may have incurred among contract laborers and local merchants, and anti-communist sentiment among land-owners who would be adversely affected by a Tudeh rise to power.

⁹⁹ Michael Quentin Morton, *Empires and Anarchies: A History of Oil in the Middle East* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2017), 49.

Rejecting the Persian-Arab Dichotomy in Iran

The issue of ethnic conflict in the 1946 strike in Abadan is generally framed as a dichotomy: Persians versus Arabs. However, Atabaki and Elling push back against this claim, pointing to the involvement of Indian workers in the strike as evidence that the issue, as is almost always true, was much more complex. When the AIOC originally began operations, it initially hired local tribesmen to work in the oil refinery, but later imported workers from India, Iraq, other parts of Iran, Palestine and Europe, resulting in only 40% of the workforce being local to Khuzestan. Indian labor migration came in two waves; in the first, Indians primarily were brought to Iran to work as skilled and unskilled workers, but second phase workers were hired for middle-ranking positions¹⁰⁰. Atabaki found that Indian migrant workers comprised the majority of the skilled and semi-skilled workforce at Abadan and were treated as second class workers rather than third class workers as the Persians were¹⁰¹. As in Kirkuk, the AIOC segregated its workers of differing ethnicities into a hierarchy, with Iranians at the bottom, then Indians, then Iranian and Armenian Christians¹⁰².

¹⁰⁰ Rasmus Christian Elling, "On Lines and Fences: Labour, Community and Violence in an Oil City," in *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*, edited by Ulrike Freitag, Nelida Fuccaro, Claudia Ghrawi, and Nora Lafi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 199 – 200.

¹⁰¹ Touraj Atabaki, "Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1908 – 1951." in *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*, ed. Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, and Kaveh Ehsani (United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 204 – 208.

¹⁰² Elling, "On Lines and Fences," 199 – 200.

The AIOC's social stratification of ethnic groups in Abadan led to further inequality in terms of quality of life. For example, because Abadan is located on an island in the middle of a river and could only expand so far, the influx of foreign workers and the AIOC's disinterest in providing adequate housing unless forced led to a housing shortage which disproportionately affected the poorest workers, which were primarily Persian¹⁰³. Considerable tension existed between Iranians and Indians in Abadan that was exacerbated, if not caused by, company-enforced segregation, and on a few occasions, this tension even erupted into violence¹⁰⁴. However, although Indian workers were generally treated better than Persian workers, they had grievances as well, and in 1920 Indian workers at the Abadan refinery led the first mass strike in Abadan, demanding higher wages, fewer work hours, overtime pay, better living conditions and treatment¹⁰⁵. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that in 1946, Indian workers were able to overcome their differences with Persian workers, at least temporarily, and joined the strike, proudly associating with the labor union. Having a more direct line to company officials than the unskilled laborers who made up the majority of the strike, the Indian protestors even took their grievances directly to the British Consul¹⁰⁶. Failing to acknowledge the role of Indian workers in the strikes is a

¹⁰³ Ibid, 207, 213.

¹⁰⁴ Atabaki, "Indian Migrant Workers," 208.
Elling, "On Lines and Fences," 204 – 205.

¹⁰⁵ Elling, "On Lines and Fences," 202.

¹⁰⁶ Atabaki, "Indian Migrant Workers," 215 – 217.

mistake and illustrates the pitfalls of focusing too exclusively on one ethnic group. The Indian workers' contributions to the strike were significant, but only examining the role of Persian workers masks the Indian workers' importance.

The limitations of presenting ethnic conflict in Iran as tensions between Arabs and Persians also ignores the spaces Jewish workers occupied within the AIOC. Shenhav explores the Zionist settlement in Abadan's relationship to British colonial interests in *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* and finds that even people of a shared ethnic group experienced life in Abadan very differently depending on their country of origin. The AIOC gave European Jews better jobs, higher pay, and company-sponsored housing, but Arab Jews were treated similarly to Persian workers¹⁰⁷. Whether Jewish workers participated in the 1946 strike is not discussed in the State Department correspondence, perhaps because acknowledging the participation of Arab Jews would undermine the assertion that the violence was ethnic in nature or perhaps because the Jewish workers simply did not participate. However, Shenhav's findings demonstrate yet again, the weakness of a narrative which upholds ethnicity and race as the foremost causes of violence in Abadan.

¹⁰⁷ Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 19 – 76.

Conclusion

Haddad's warning that sectarianism cannot be adequately understood through the lens of ethnicity rings especially true when examining the July 1946 strikes in Kirkuk and Abadan. Ethnic lines dividing the oil refinery workers in both cities were not organically drawn but imposed by the IPC and AIOC through discriminatory hiring practices and wage and benefits distribution. Taking this discrimination into account reveals again that the strikes were influenced by labor and economic issues above all else; Kurds, Persians, and Indians did not strike because they were being treated badly as ethnic groups but because they were being treated poorly as individuals.

Conclusion

The struggle between communism and democracy dominated global politics and international relations from the end of World War II to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 to such a degree that any event involving communism or communists was viewed with the utmost suspicion by anti-communist regimes. The Iraqi Communist Party's and Tudeh Party's involvement with the labor strikes at Kirkuk and Abadan in July 1946 are perfect examples of how this played out, even at local levels. The United States, Great Britain, the oil companies, the governments of Iraq and Iran, and even historians have largely attributed the cause of the strikes to a desire to strengthen the communist parties in Iraq and Iran and to weaken British control in each country.

American, British, and scholarly convictions that communism was the greatest influence on the strikes can probably be explained by the previous successes the Iraqi Communist Party and the Tudeh Party had enjoyed earlier in 1946. During the Azerbaijan Crisis in early 1946, communists in northern Iran helped establish two pro-Soviet republics, and both the Tudeh Party and Iraqi Communist Party organized strikes that led to the passage of labor laws in Iraq and Iran. However, in spite of the United States' and Britain's concerns about the communist influence on the strikes, they ultimately proved to be relatively minor events that did not cause any great changes in the region.

Although it certainly is true that the leaders of the strikes were members of the local communist parties and undoubtedly became involved in labor issues to drum up support for their parties, placing too much emphasis on the strikes' leadership ignores some of the most key players- the workers themselves. Although the Iraqi Communist Party and the Tudeh Party were growing rapidly in the early 1940s and found significant support among the workers at the oil refineries in Kirkuk and Abadan, the number of participants in the strikes far outshone the membership rosters of the communist parties in each city. Furthermore, the demands made in the strikes revealed only everyday concerns about wages, housing, and transportation. These were the issues that the workers showed up for, not a grand communist agenda.

The refineries at Kirkuk and Abadan grew quickly during World War II to keep up with demand for oil, but the IPC and AIOC could not keep up with housing demands for their rapidly growing labor force. This explosive growth resulted in a severe shortage of adequate housing for low-level laborers, especially in Kirkuk where winter floods had destroyed thousands of houses in the previous year. The workers felt that IPC and AIOC should be responsible for either building housing for their employees or for paying housing allowances to help the workers afford housing from other sources and demanded that the companies provide at least one of these. The housing that did exist for workers was located several kilometers from the refineries, so even when workers were lucky enough

to have a house, they had to walk a far distance to work because there was no mode of transportation provided by the city or the companies. This inspired the workers' second major demand that the IPC and AIOC use company vehicles to provide transportation for workers from the cities to the refineries. Finally, the workers demanded an increase in pay because during the war they saw their wages stagnate while the cost of living continued to soar.

The challenges faced by the laborers at Kirkuk and Abadan were so great, that even some company officials were sympathetic to their plights. American officials from the State Department expressed sympathy for the workers, as did the Iraqi and Iranian public, but the most surprising expression of support came from an IPC official who confessed the company failed to take necessary action to care for its workers. Even despite the overwhelmingly negative response to communist leadership, the workers themselves were a sympathetic lot, and in both Kirkuk and Abadan were able to see some demands met, achieving great success.

However, although both strikes proved to be successful, they ended quite tragically with violent clashes that led to dozens of deaths. The Kirkuk strike was ended with an act of police brutality, but the ending of the Abadan strike introduces a new component to the mix. The striking workers rioted and attacked a local pro-British and anti-Tudeh political organization, the Arab League, killing most of its leaders and sparking riots that took several hours to control and resulted in several dozen

deaths. The British Foreign Service and AIOC were quick to point to ethnic conflicts as the cause of the attack, claiming that the Persian workers attacked the Arab League's headquarters because they felt threatened by the organization. This explanation does not ring true, however, because many ethnic divisions in the city had been created by the company itself through discriminatory employment practices and because the class differences between the workers and members of the Arab League were much more salient reasons to attack.

The 1940s and 1950s were eventful years in Iraqi and Iranian history, and in the grand scheme, the July 1946 strikes were relatively insignificant events. The strikers won concessions on the most important of their demands, but labor issues continued to plague unskilled and low-level workers across both countries in all industries. The value in studying these events does not come from understanding how they fit into the grand arch of history but instead from empathizing with the ordinary people involved in them. The Kirkuk and Abadan strikers did not care about contributing to a global ideological war or about conforming to false dichotomies of ethnic identity; they cared about providing for their families, being able to work and live in dignity, and about having a place to call home. If we can learn to empathize with the regular people whose stories often get pushed aside to focus on major players and the bigger picture, perhaps we can better learn to empathize with the small people in big, important events as well.

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