Rethinking “Oil Nationalism”:
The Case of Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)

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ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, Great Britain began a new wave of imperialism, focusing on areas in the Middle East strategic to enhance their trade. Iran was one of the countries in which Britain gained enormous power and influence. This power was derived from its control of Iranian oil resources, through the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). After many years of AIOC producing oil in Iran with Iranian Government support, a wave of economic nationalism led to the nationalization of AIOC in 1951 by the Iranian Prime Minister Musaddiq. The nationalization of the AIOC angered the British and seemed part of a growing pattern of pressure on their interests culminating in wresting Musaddiq from the control of the oil industry. As a result, in considering the above effects, by using AIOC as a case study, a textual analysis of the Chairman’s Statement to Shareholders is conducted and the validity of the Statements is reappraised with reference to historical evidence.

Keywords: Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), DICTION, Fraser, Nationalism, Oil Nationalism

INTRODUCTION

Oil was important to the global economy because it had advantages over coal which became apparent in the 1950s. Oil had the advantages of being pumped rather than manhandled and when burnt properly it enabled a complete absence of smoke, an attribute that was of particular importance to the British Admiralty and the British Government. Crude oil was one of the major commodities in the world trade arena, transferred between a range of international firms. Oil was important for both producing and consuming nations because it generated major revenue (taxation and royalties) and satisfied a whole range of consumer requirements. In a wider sense, oil had come to be synonymous with maintaining imperial integrity. As oil became more important, British willingness to maintain control became more necessary.

For Iran, oil played an important role in facilitating its ability to engage in global markets and giving it the opportunity to become more involved in oil production for exports. In the post war years, the development of the Iranian oil industry was considered to be an important event that had occurred during the previous fifty years. Iran’s participation in the world economy has been greatly emphasised by its strategic location and by its prized oil resources. Indeed, Iran’s oil reserves have accounted for the greater part of the total assets of the petroleum industry of

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the Middle East and the country has become a major supplier of oil to Britain following the initial oil exploration by AIOC.

Since oil was important for Britain in order to satisfy the whole range of consumer requirements and to generate a considerable source of government revenue, the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) was considered a suitable company upon which Britain could rely because it had significant political, strategic and economic power in Iran in the 20th century. In 1914, British interests influenced the Iranian deposits according to its own requirements, where the British government controlled oil for its navy and acquired a majority shareholding (51%) stake in the AIOC (Chandler, 1990; Millward, 2007). The AIOC was Iran’s main source of income because it had in Iran the world’s largest refinery, the second largest exporter of crude petroleum, and the third largest oil reserves which were mainly managed by the British government and British private citizens (Abrahamian, 2001). Moreover, AIOC ‘was so dominant within the Iranian economy that it was effectively a state within a state and regarded to all intents and purposes as an arm of the British Admiralty and the British Strategic policy (Cited in Marsh, 2003).

The company’s operations in Iran had a significant impact on the Iranian economy developing important consequences for British and U.S foreign policy in the 1950s. Nationalism and democracy had become new features of the Iranian political landscape. At the top of the agenda for nationalist politicians was the renegotiation of previous concessions made by the Shah on better terms for Iran. Notwithstanding the economic and military importance of Iran, British politicians and the senior management of AIOC have been accused of arrogance in their dealings with successive Iranian governments (Elm, 1992; Heiss, 1997). A series of unsuccessful negotiations culminated in the assassination of one Prime Minister in March 1951 and the subsequent ratification of nationalisation of AIOC’s Iranian assets by the Shah on 1st May 1951. The repercussions were serious, not just for the company, which lost a significant proportion of its assets, but for wider regional and indeed global geopolitics. The nationalisation therefore had major consequences for Anglo-Iranian relations and represented a blow to British imperial power which did not fully recover even after the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored coup to remove Musaddiq in 1953. Different phases and aspects of the dispute have been researched extensively, including Anglo-American relations, British and American foreign policies international law, covert operations, Iranian nationalism, the development of the Iranian oil industry, and the impact on international oil companies, including the AIOC.

Whilst the Iranian Prime Minister Mohamed Musaddiq (Bamberg, 1994) was conscious of the strategic importance of Iranian oil to the AIOC and the British government, his political priorities were to address the poverty of the people by securing control over their natural resources and the right to greater revenues. In addition to taxation, the Iranian government became concerned about discrimination against Iranian employees and misadministration. As a result, in considering the above effects, by using AIOC as a case study, contrasts are drawn between the AIOC’s management’s public view of the crisis and the actual events as documented in the literature, official papers, and financial records. Furthermore, the role of Sir William M. Fraser (1888-1970), the AIOC’s chairman (1941-1956) is examined in detail because his actions had important consequences for key AIOC stakeholder groups, including domestic investors and Iranian employees and society. In these respects, consideration is also given to how AIOC’s management attempted to influence the lobbying process and news agenda to counter the accusations of the Iranian nationalists.

According to one common view, Fraser’s chief asset was his commercial acumen, and his chief weakness his lack of political insight (Elm, 1992; Sampson, 1975). Fraser’s actions had important consequences for key AIOC stakeholder groups, including domestic investors and Iranian employees and society. The nationalisation crisis brought these into sharp focus, and they became the subject of claim and counter-claim from the AIOC board and Iranian nationalist
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