

## KUWAITI WORKERS AND WESTERN OIL COMPANIES 1946-1960

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### Abstract

Kuwaiti oil was very important for oil companies of colonial powers such as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, APOC, and Gulf Oil Company. Those two companies managed to acquire oil concession inside Kuwait. Although they achieved huge financial profits led to welfare and happiness of American and British peoples, they, however, broke the terms of the concession agreement regarding Kuwaiti workers rights by not providing jobs, training, qualifying, high position and other rights. In return, Kuwait witnessed a successful labor movement led to having workers' rights. Moreover, that Movement had a potential role in the decision of nationalization of foreign oil companies later in 1975. In light of the above, this study aims at highlighting the most important companies that had oil concessions in Kuwait. Also, it seeks to identify their real policies toward Kuwait and its workers. In addition, it tries to show the Kuwaiti workers response on the companies which exhausted Kuwait's resources and deprived Kuwaitis from their normal rights. As far as the method followed by the study, nature of the research requires applying the suitable analytical approach. That is, via the references and sources used in study, the linked points with the subject are being specified, analyzed and objectively criticized in order to show the injustice that had taken place from colonial oil companies upon Kuwaiti workers.

**Keywords:** Kuwait, Oil, Workers, Companies, Western

### Historical Preview

The discovery of Kuwait's oil in the few years preceding World War II by the Anglo-American owned Kuwait Oil Company marked a turning point in the history of that country's socio-economic developments.<sup>1</sup> Since the early twentieth century, the British authorities in the Arabian Gulf anticipated the possible existence of oil in Kuwait. This is evident from a request sent in 1913 by Sir Percy Cox, British Political Resident in the Gulf to Shaikh Mubarak Bin Sabah, Kuwait's ruler, not to grant any oil (tar) concession to foreign parties without the consent of the British Government.<sup>2</sup> Cox's request was based on the terms of the 1899 Treaty between Kuwait and Britain which gave the latter control over the foreign affairs of Kuwait. Consequently, Britain had the final say on choosing the foreign oil companies that were permitted to operate in Kuwait.<sup>3</sup>

However, during the 1920's two experimental wells were drilled in Kuwait by an American Major Holmes which indicated the potential existence of oil in feasible quantities.<sup>4</sup> Thus, negotiations took place between the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) and the U.S Gulf Oil Company which led to a partnership agreement in 1933 between both companies to share Kuwait oil concession rights. Under the approval of the ruler of Kuwait/ Shaikh Ahmad Al-Jaber, they established Kuwait Oil Company, Ltd. (KOC),<sup>5</sup> and Gulf Exploration Company.

This powerful Anglo-American oil syndicate succeeded in obtaining consent of Shaikh Ahmad Al-Jaber, who granted the oil concession rights to KOC<sup>6</sup> on 23 December 1934, for a term of 75 years.<sup>7</sup> In addition, KOC was granted other privileges, such as the right of duty-free import of all its needs as well as tax free export of oil.<sup>8</sup> In return, KOC paid trivial sum to the Kuwait Government which was 450,000 Rupees (30,000 Sterling Pounds), and an annual fee of 95,000 Rupees (6,000 Sterling Pounds), until the commencement of oil exportation and sale. Following this stage, this sum was to be adjusted to an annual payment 250,000 Rupees (16,000 Sterling Pounds) plus the royalty of 3 Rupees (less than a quarter of Sterling Pound) against each ton of exported oil.<sup>9</sup>

In 1953, the Petroleum Times stressed the importance of Kuwaiti oil for the British economy and added that it was likely that half of the cars on London streets were running on oil imported from Kuwait.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Kuwait was instrumental to the welfare of Britain whose war fleet and factories were fueled by oil imported from Kuwait. The British government owned more than half of the British Petroleum Co. shares, which acquired 50% of Kuwait Oil Company.<sup>11</sup> Paul Johnson, of the New Statesman newspaper (London), estimated that within 12 years of operation KOC has earned U.S.D 3400 million in income. It was obvious that oil imported from Kuwait was vital to many British and American economic and social enterprises. This study tackles the question of whether the oil companies belonging to these countries have contributed to the happiness and welfare of their Kuwaiti workers.<sup>12</sup>

### **Kuwait Labor Movement 1946 – 1960**

The first few decades following World War II witnessed the growth of Kuwait oil production and its significance to the economies of Britain and the United States. This motivated Kuwait Oil Company which was owned by both countries to maintain continued control over Kuwait's oil and closely monitor its labor movement. The KOC British management in particular, carefully observed the growth of nationalist sentiment among the Kuwaitis. These sentiments were articulated by Kuwait's first Legislative Council in 1938, which was instrumental in nationalizing certain service companies operating in Kuwait. Thus, Kuwait Oil Company was apprehensive<sup>13</sup> of this move and feared that nationalization may affect its concession, to the extent that it was reported that KOC<sup>14</sup> had played an effective role in dissolving the Legislative Council before it could survive its first year. This Anglo-American sensitivity became more acute a decade later, when the Gulf region was the theatre of popular moves calling for nationalization of oil industry, this time emanating from Iran in June 1951,<sup>15</sup> when the Iranian government which was headed by Dr. Mohammad Musaddaq decided to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company,<sup>16</sup> an act which lead to the shutdown of Iranian Oil production.

KOC found itself operating amid this fervent nationalist mood which extended to Kuwait. To encounter this rising trend, KOC decided to reduce its dependence on Kuwaiti staff, and to give priority of employment to foreigners such as Americans, Europeans, and Asians. Kuwaitis were excluded from occupying senior positions, receiving training and coaching. Thus Kuwaiti labor was made marginal to oil industry and if employed, they were assigned insignificant clerical and simple jobs.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the Americans, British and other European staff had senior positions, received high salaries and lived in areas which were well provided with modern

services and amenities.<sup>18</sup> Next to them, came Asian staff who also lived in modern quarters, Kuwaiti staff was relegated to the lower echelons of the KOC employment scale, received meagre salaries and lived miserably. Their houses were no more than wooden shacks<sup>19</sup> ('Ashish), with no electricity or running water.<sup>20</sup>

With these acts, KOC was seen to have contravened the Concession Agreement which stipulated that priority of employment should be given to Kuwaitis, followed by Arabs.<sup>21</sup> It was a well-known fact that productivity of the unskilled Kuwaiti labor exceeded that of unskilled foreign labor, as all the initial oil wells were drilled with the help of Kuwaiti labor.<sup>22</sup> It was recalled that in 1935 when KOC first began prospecting for oil in Bahra area north of Kuwait, it relied solely on Kuwaiti labor who enabled the company to surmount several local hardships. However, KOC failed to recognize their strength, and employed them in poorly paid menial jobs, in addition to denying them opportunities of professional developments.<sup>23</sup>

This deficiency was rectified in the December 1951 agreement between Kuwait government and KOC which imposed on the company that it must train Kuwaiti labor and contribute towards educating school and university students in Kuwait. Thus, the practice of employing American or British technical staff seen as a necessity in 1934 when the concession agreement was concluded, was no longer accepted after more than quarter of a century. Therefore, it was incumbent that all jobs should be given to Kuwaitis.<sup>24</sup> However, KOC's annual reports submitted to Kuwait government intentionally overlooked any mention of exact statistics on the number of its staff, their nationality, grade, and salary. It may be surmised that KOC intended this in order to hide its exclusionist policies against Kuwaiti labor.<sup>25</sup>

When we look through the specializations of the Kuwaiti students' missions abroad between 1946 – 1960, we will not find any one related to the oil industries. Furthermore, the first Kuwaiti student specialized in petroleum engineering, got his degree from South California University, was in 1958, which means 24 years<sup>26</sup> after establishing KOC. This shows clearly that Britain interfered in the educational policy. But the ruler of Kuwait Sheikh Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah and the Kuwait Information Council worked hard to find industry-specialized national cadres. They asked the British High Commissioner, Gallaway, in Kuwait to tell about the possibility of accepting four students in the College of Industry in Bahrain. They were accepted and studied on the expense of Sheikh Ahmed.<sup>27</sup> Despite the shortage of the national labourers, KOC did not take the initiative to take care of the national cadres and send them abroad to specialize in oil industries.

This means that the company aimed at employing ordinary Kuwaiti labourers not technicians. And this was what the colonial companies aimed at, the thing that showed racial discrimination towards the Kuwaiti workers. Dr. Mohammad Al Rumaihi noticed that the impetus of the society is not that produces wealth, but distributing it through the state. The actual production of oil was done by the foreigners in general and the local society played a marginal role in the process of productivity. The note of British ambassador, N. G. Jackson, supported this in 1946 where he said: "if a mysterious disease killed all Kuwaitis, the economy would continue without cease."<sup>28</sup> The two above – mentioned notes emphasized the negligence of KOC in training the national workers, fearing that they might go on strike when they were wronged, the thing that would lead to the cease of oil production.

Actually, this anti-national labor policy was a standard practice of the Western oil companies. U.S companies operating in Mexico relied on foreign labor from the U.S, England and Canada. But in 1938, the Mexican government insisted on employing its nationals in the oil industry and succeeded in increasing their ratio compared to foreign labor.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Venezuela imposed on oil companies operating on its soil to employ a large number of Venezuelans, such as in the case of Creole Oil Co.<sup>30</sup> One reason behind KOC's practice of non-reliance on Kuwaiti labor may be attributed to Sir Robert Hay's, the British Political Agent in Arabian Gulf, statement in 1952 that the development of education in the Arabian Gulf will have a disturbing impact on the oil companies, because they will have to deal with the educated Arabs instead of dealing with foreigners.<sup>31</sup>

This practice of avoiding the employment of national labor by western oil companies may have also served as means of providing jobs for the great number of the unemployed in the West. Thus, the Kuwaiti labor were frustrated at what they considered unjust policies of exploiting their toil and depriving them of their rightful dues, particularly in light of discriminatory employment and wage practices against them by the oil company.<sup>32</sup> However, they persisted in pursuing their demands for improving their employment conditions. They were helped by many factors, including increased knowledge and support of Kuwaiti press and civil society organizations, and expanded awareness of the functions and operations of workers syndicate due to their interaction with other nationalities.

In the late 1940's, the Kuwaiti workers managed to form a committee which had the task of providing the workers with directives and coordinated action. It was the first organized labor movement which made them aware of the degree of injustice inflicted on them and the necessity of concerting their action calling for equitable treatment. It is worth mentioning that there was no freedom of press, but the Kuwaiti newspapers always mentioned the KOC's corruption, the thing that led to closing it by the end of the fifties. It uncovered embezzlements of Kuwait's cut of oil by KOC. It used to sell oil with low price and give Kuwait its portion, then the buyers sold oil according to the world market's price. The difference in price went to the colonizer represented by the company.<sup>33</sup>

The committee's initial action centered round achieving some urgent Kuwaiti labor demands such as improving their salary and wage scale, the betterment of housing conditions as well as improving transportation and medical treatment. Strikes were adopted to announce their demands. However, due to the small Kuwaiti labor force, strikes were unsuccessful, as they had a negligible impact on the KOC's operations. Yet, such spontaneous steps provided the starting point for the labor union's future action. The first sustained strike occurred in 1948 and provided the impetus for a series of subsequent ones.<sup>34</sup> It was declared by drilling rigs workers in Wara area. Their spontaneous and unplanned move served as a means of expressing their dissatisfaction with the persecution, maltreatment at work and deprivation of all the privileges enjoyed by foreign technical staff.

The strike which lasted for 3 days led to nowhere, and the workers had to return to their jobs under pressure and coercion.<sup>35</sup> Despite the fact that the strike failed to secure any labor demand, yet it represented a major landmark in Kuwait's labor history.<sup>36</sup> It is noteworthy that this strike was declared in the absence of an organized backing of a labor syndicate. As it was, attempts were made in 1946 to organize a KOC labor syndicate but the idea was aborted because workers feared discharge and lacked proper understanding of the functions of a syndicate. The mere thought of a labor syndicate was regarded by some workers as constituting an infringement of Islamic religious teachings and amounted to a meeting against existing local authorities.<sup>37</sup>

It was reported by Harlod Dickson, a former British political agent in Kuwait that he was told by a Kuwaiti prominent figure that the Arabs could not be blamed because they wished to imitate the West by adopting the labor syndicate system, among other means, to protect the rights of the oil company workers.<sup>38</sup> The Kuwaiti also told Dickson that the Arabs often learn about such organizations in the West from radio stations, and added that if oil truck drivers in England went on strike to demand wage increase, this would inspire the Kuwaiti labor to do the same.<sup>39</sup> In fact there are no statistics that can tell about the individual's portion out of the local production of oil. For this reason, there were demands in the fifties asking for distributing the fortunes in a just way, and not to be plundered by the colonizer,<sup>40</sup> the latter who had a role in the closure of the first legislative council in the history of Kuwait in 1938 because the council had the right to supervise organizing the general budget and spending it on the country's interests.<sup>41</sup>

A new development in Kuwait labor movement occurred in 1951 when some interested workers decided to establish a workers' co-operative which would provide a new model of labor coordination. Three workers took the lead, Fahd Al-'Atiyah, 'Ashur 'Isa, Saud Al-Faris, and Maslam Al-Sarraf. The workers paid monthly contributions out of their wages which went into opening a grocery store<sup>42</sup> which was run on co-operative and joint management basis. This enterprise provided the impetus for future concerted co-operative action to be undertaken by Kuwaiti labor.<sup>43</sup>

In the same year of the cooperative grocery store's establishment, drivers working for the KOC Ahmadi Transport Department declared a strike, demanding removal of unjust discrimination exercised by KOC against them. Their demands also included equal treatment with foreign workers who enjoyed several privileges such as free accommodation with running water, meals at reduced rates, free transport by KOC vehicles and annual leave. In contrast, Kuwaiti workers lived in shack houses to which they brought water from a remote old tank, no annual leave, no reduced meal rates, and no transportation. The strikers submitted their demands in writing to the KOC labor superintendent – a foreigner – who promised that all their demands would be realized in 1960 – i.e., a decade later!

The workers left the meeting frustrated because they reached a dead-end with the company management. They decided therefore to go on strike at the KOC Ahmadi Transportation Department where the majority of workers and drivers gathered. Leaders of the strike included 'Ashur 'Isa, Fahd Al-'Atiyah, Saud Al-Faris, Mijbil Al-Sa'ran, Muhammad Al-Saqqaf, and Salih Musa. Moreover, strikers formed two committees to meet with Abdullah Al-Mulla, representative of Kuwait Government at KOC, and Shaikh Abdullah Al-Salim, the ruler of Kuwait. Although this last strike was not that well organized, yet it was better arranged than

its precedent.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it had a shocking impact on KOC management, and succeeded in realizing some of the workers' demands including an annual leave of 14 days, paid holiday on Fridays, and meals at reduced rates. But these privileges came with a price tag: the strike leaders were discharged from KOC, a harsh measure which drew various reactions, and sometimes insubordination on the part of some KOC workers.<sup>45</sup>

Another development in the Kuwaiti labor movement took place in the early 1950's, when many civil society organizations were established, such as Al-Nadi Al-Thaqafi Al-Qawmi (National Cultural Club), Nadi Al-Mu'allimin (Teachers Club), Jam'iyat Al-Irshad (Guidance Society), and Nadi Al-Khirrijin (Graduates Club). The journals published by these organizations devoted prominence to labor issues. Moreover, many workers attended the civil society organizations debates and activities, and developed a good understanding of joint decision-making skills as a result.<sup>46</sup> The major labor issue raised by those organizations and their journals was the housing problem. KOC had made the false promise of building new houses for the workers who, as a result, agreed to move out from Ahmadi area to Al-Badawiyah village, the cite of their newly promised homes which never materialized.<sup>47</sup>

Al-Badawiyah village was a backwash and dirty place exemplifying human injustice.<sup>48</sup> Ten thousand workers lived in this village in miserable huts without electricity or running water.<sup>49</sup> The physician at Al-Badawiyah government clinic revealed that around 10% of the village population suffered from tuberculosis, and the majority of patients were infected by Bilharziasis, Inclostoma and Trachoma due to squalor.<sup>50</sup> Thus, by failing to provide decent housing conditions to its Kuwaiti labor, Kuwait Oil Company clearly disregarded its obligations as stipulated by the concession agreement, international law and human rights conventions.<sup>51</sup>

Because of these unacceptable and inhuman situations as well as the racial discrimination practiced by the KOC, preferring foreign workers to Kuwaiti workers and giving the formers privileges in a time the countries of those companies always boasted having freedom, equity and justice, there were demands by the establishments of the civil society to do justice to Kuwait workers. In the face of such humanly unacceptable conditions, the Kuwaiti civil society organizations and weekly press called on Kuwait Oil Company to provide its workers with proper housing<sup>52</sup> in the same way it provided its foreign workers who were accommodated in a well-designed housing area.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to Kuwaiti staff, the local press reported that the British staff were housed in fully furnished villas fitted with modern amenities, and lived in similar conditions to which they were accustomed to back home.<sup>54</sup>

This proves that Jonathan Frier<sup>55</sup> said: "The Labour Party which called for socialism, took over rule in Britain by the general elections which took place in 1945, where preparations went on to give India its independence and divide it. The sun of the British Empire had never set yet, so most of the colonial ideas and thoughts remained as they were, the thing that resulted with giving the European workers high posts (North Americans, Australians and New Zealanders), while Indian and Pakistani employees were classified as beginners, the thing that enabled them to have different jobs and high salaries. When the town of oil was built later on, it was divided into areas according to the racial diversity including Arabs.<sup>56</sup> The Kuwaiti Al-Sha'b newspaper stated that the Kuwaiti labor housing and work conditions were a far cry from what was expected

as a result of oil wealth. It cited the example of comfortable workers' living conditions around oil fields in the United States and Venezuela and compared them to those provided by KOC.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, *Al-Ra'id* magazine published by the Kuwaiti Teachers Club posted an article in which it reviewed the poor housing conditions experienced by KOC Kuwaiti labor and compared them to those enjoyed by Aramco workers. Aramco, as reported by *Al-Ra'id*, had constructed modern houses in Dahrán, eastern part of Saudi Arabia, and allocated them to its Saudi works. The cost of the construction was retrieved in small comfortable long-term installments which were commensurate to their staff salaries. Following full payment, the workers would be entitled to own their homes. *Al-Ra'id* stressed that KOC Kuwaiti workers aspired that a similar housing scheme would be adopted by their company.<sup>58</sup>

The issue of insufferable housing conditions experienced by Kuwaiti workers of KOC represented an anathema for *Al-Fajr* newspaper which stressed the right of Kuwaiti workers to enjoy –in their own country– a life style similar to those enjoyed by foreign workers in Kuwait.<sup>59</sup> A sarcastic comment was published by Khalid Khalaf, editor of *Al-Sha'b* newspaper who stated “The westerners describe us as starving and backward people. Well! It better befits these civilized [westerners] who have come to our country for plundering its wealth to embark on saving us from starvation and civilizing our lot”.<sup>60</sup> Actually, KOC malpractices against its Kuwaiti labor could be – in part – blamed on the absence of direct government control on the company's operations.<sup>61</sup> The workers soon realized this deficiency and demanded interference of Kuwaiti Ministry of Social Affairs which was responsible for protecting the labor rights, especially in the absence of labor syndicates.<sup>62</sup>

Besides the housing issue, other topics were strongly aired by Kuwaiti newspapers which demanded that KOC should re-consider the low amount of workmen's accident compensation due to its labor as a result of work-related injuries. The workmen's death compensation adopted by KOC did not exceed 4000 Rupees, equivalent to 296 Sterling Pounds per case.<sup>63</sup> On the issue of medical treatment, it is reported that KOC followed discriminatory policies towards its Arab workers. For instance, if a western staff fell ill, he would receive excellent medical treatment in KOC Maquwa hospital. Should the hospital be unable to provide him with the required treatment, the company would fly him to London where he would have the best possible medical care until full recovery following which he returns to Kuwait to resume his duties at KOC.<sup>64</sup>

The Kuwaiti and other Arab sick workers however, would be referred to *Al-Maquwa* hospital where they received medical care. If they failed to recover, they would be sent to Kuwait Government *Al-Amiri* hospital, or be dismissed from KOC. Numerous incidents were reported which would confirm such discrimination, including the case of a worker who suffered an eye injury at a KOC workshop. Following an initial treatment, it was found that he had lost much of his eyesight and was consequently dismissed by KOC without compensation. But this very worker lodged a complaint against the company at Kuwait Public Security Department which saw to it that he was paid the appropriate compensation.<sup>65</sup>

It is a well-established fact that Kuwaiti workers have made major sacrifices during their employment at KOC. A famous story is often told about a Kuwaiti worker who was in charge of shooting an ignition pellet at a well-head. He was operating without being provided a radio set or

an assistant. On discharging the pellet which ignited the well-head, he caught the flame and died of fire burns. In contrast, British KOC staff's performing hazardous jobs were provided with assistants and radio sets.<sup>66</sup>

Throughout the 1950's the all-important issue of Kuwaiti workers appointments, wages and promotions at KOC remained on the front burners. The company agreement with Kuwait government stipulated that priority recruitment should be given to Kuwaiti citizens, followed by Arab applicants. However, the Company paid negligible attention to Kuwaiti applicants.<sup>67</sup> In its Annual Report of 1957, KOC mentions that their Arab staffs at the year-end were 234 employees out of a total 2080. Thus, the Arab staff represented a mere 11.25% of total KOC staff. However, the report does not reveal how many of such employees occupied senior positions. The following table indicates the number of staff, workers and servants employed by KOC at the close of 1958.<sup>68</sup>

**Table 1: The Number of Staff, Workers and Servants Employed by KOC at the Close of 1958**

Nationality	Employees	Supervisors	Workers	Servants	Total
British	970	---	---	---	970
Other Europeans	6	---	---	---	6
Americans	75	---	---	---	75
Indians	777	53	411	794	2035
Pakistans	108	103	726	207	1144
Arabs	211	365	3293	12	3881
Total	2147	521	4430	1013	8111

Sumber: Shamma, S., *Bitrul al-Kuwait Hadiruhu wa Mustakbalahu (Kuwait's Oil, Present and Future)*, Damascus, April, 1959.

It is clear from the table that the ratio of Arab staff is about 50% in relation to other employees, despite the fact that the oil agreement stipulated that they should be given priority of appointment.<sup>69</sup> In this context, Al-Fajr newspaper uncovered the extent of KOC manipulation of appointments. It said that despite the numerous job advertisements by KOC in Arabic newspapers, yet these announced only the menial vacancies. The advertisements also claimed that KOC was an equal opportunity employer. The senior positions, however, were not announced and were denied to Kuwaitis.<sup>70</sup> This was confirmed by 'Abdul-Rahman Al-'Atiqi, a KOC personnel officer in 1945 who also revealed that the Indian applicants were given priority of appointment over the Kuwaiti applicants.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Amin 'Izz Al-Din adds says the employment policy was constantly characterized by political bias on the part of senior KOC officials".<sup>72</sup>

Besides the poignant issue of appointments, the labor movement demanded that KOC should reconsider the salary and promotion scales of Kuwaiti labor,<sup>73</sup> as they considered that KOC did not follow fair promotion policies, and did not assign jobs according to qualifications.<sup>74</sup> "Al-Sha'b" magazine was viewed as the labor's mouthpiece. It published a series of articles on workers' issues including a letter by a Kuwaiti worker who explained that he



served in KOC for over ten years with no promotion, while the Indian workers were promoted within the first few years of service. He added few lines on discriminatory KOC practices against the Kuwaiti worker's leave compared to the Indian worker's leave, which started on the date of his arrival to his home town, and he was paid for the travel days. In contrast the Arab worker's leave would start on the day preceding his travel date, and his leave was shorter compared to that of the Indian worker.<sup>75</sup>

For many, Kuwait Oil Company seemed to adopt 19th century colonial practices towards its workers who had no possible way to obtain a fair hearing of their complaints.<sup>76</sup> In order that the workers be oblivious of their rights, the terms of the oil concession agreement were kept confidential by KOC.<sup>77</sup> The above instances reveal the extent of the instrumental role played by Kuwaiti civil society organizations and the local process in motivating the labor movement at KOC and articulating its demands for better work conditions and improved benefits. Some KOC circles were alarmed by the influence of the Kuwaiti press on strengthening the national workers' belief in their demands and encouraging them to insist on improved benefits. This is reflected by the assistant to the superintendent of KOC personnel department Mr. Brockdon who mentioned in a confidential report to KOC chief management that the local press campaigns against the company policies have resulted in strengthening of the workers' morale. He also commented that the company's continued policy of ignoring articles of *Al-Sha'b* and *Al-Fajr* by not replying to them would only serve to postpone coping with the inevitable forthcoming results of the freedom of expression in Kuwait.<sup>78</sup>

In fact, Kuwait Oil Company was extremely apprehensive of the labor movement becoming stronger. In dealing with workers, it resorted to under-handed techniques by recruiting dozens of its British and foreign staff, in addition to a number of outcast Arabs to spy on the workers<sup>79</sup> and report on their political ideas to KOC officers.<sup>80</sup> *Al-Sha'b* revealed that KOC assigned a full department which comprised a private police force for this purpose. It had employed one officer known as Melain who maintained his own jail which was provided him by KOC since 1948. *Al-Sha'b* also disclosed that the company maintained its own courts which dealt with workers and other staff.<sup>81</sup>

These issues were complicated further when *Al-Fajr* newspaper published an article on KOC under-handed methods of dealing with its labor. *Al-Fajr* revealed a secret KOC document dated February 10, 1953, in which the superintendent of labor welfare and housing, Mr. I. R. Anderson<sup>82</sup> requested the company personnel department to employ an Iranian citizen in a senior position at the workers village, so he could spy and report on the labor movement. Further, *Al-Fajr* demanded that the Kuwaiti Security Department take immediate measures to put an end to KOC practices.<sup>83</sup> The Department responded promptly, as its president ordered the arrest of the Irani staff and ten of his accomplices who were subject to police interrogation.<sup>84</sup> In addition to press reports on Kuwait Oil Company's anti-labor movement, it was revealed that it objected to any form of expressing pan-Arab national sentiments by its employees, including celebrating Arab national occasions or fund-raising in support of Arab causes.<sup>85</sup> By adopting such policies, KOC thought that it could stop the tide of Arab nationalism from reaching Kuwait.

Nonetheless, the underhanded police-like practices failed to suppress the worker's national sentiments. For example, as soon as the Egyptian president Gamal Abdul-Nasser

declared that his country was attacked by Britain, France and Israel in 1956, an event which was known as the Suez War, the Kuwaiti and Arab national labor refrained from loading the British and French oil tankers. The oil workers' anger reached unprecedented high levels that led the KOC foreign oil experts to request protection of their homes and offices. On the other hand, Kuwait Oil Company threatened to dismiss striking workers if they did not go back to work.<sup>86</sup> The Kuwaiti press and labor movement escalated their campaign against KOC which they saw as a symbol of western crimes against the Arab people of Algeria, Egypt and Palestine. In 1958, the press and labor alike, called for the creation of a new shareholding company to handle Kuwait's oil, and proposed that such company be staffed by experts from countries with no history of colonial interests. For company capital, it was proposed that its shares be floated in Arab countries to raise the required amount.<sup>87</sup>

Not all the West was regarded as "evil" by the Arab labor, for there were some sympathetic westerners who supported the workers' demands. In its issue of July 15th, 1958 the British Tribune newspaper carried an article which called on all the British who believed in world peace, international justice, and the progressive nature of the labor movement to stand against the criminal intervention [of western powers] in the Middle East. The Tribune also invited its readers to firmly declare this stand in public meetings, trade union branches and the Parliament. It added that Britain needed the oil, but did not need to control the oil fields or the producing countries.<sup>88</sup> Mr. W. A. H. Hay was another English KOC officer who was sympathetic to Kuwaiti workers. It is reported he was quite moved when a Kuwaiti worker died and requested that the deceased's son, 'Ajnan Al-'Azmi who was only 12 years old be employed by the company. 'Ajnan was personally accompanied by Hay for enrollment at KOC technical school. Moreover, Hay followed 'Ajnan's progress until he was employed by KOC management.<sup>89</sup>

At the end of 1950's, the labor movement reached the stage of discussing the establishment of a labor syndicate. The idea was fermenting since 1954 when the Kuwait Department of Social Affairs (Now Ministry) was created, whose tasks included regulating labor affairs and the workers relationship with their employers. Two divisions were created by the Department: the "Unemployment Prevention Division" which was concerned with finding employment for Kuwaiti citizens, and the "Immigration Division and Employees Cards" which was concerned with issuing work permits for non-Kuwaiti citizens.<sup>90</sup>

In 1956 the Department opened a vocational training institute which was tasked with educating technical staff. The Kuwaiti learners at this institute discussed the idea of establishing a club which was proposed by Hasan Saqr<sup>91</sup> with the aim of providing a meeting venue for the learners. The idea was submitted to the Department officials who readily granted their approval. Eventually the club materialized as "The Labor Cultural Center". It was managed by a board consisting of Jasim Al-'Awadi, Ali Asad, and Hasan Saqr. Among other activities, the center published a magazine which reflected opinions and ambitions of the working-class segments of Kuwaiti society. The Center also served as an intellectual, literary and political forum which was attended by members of various political orientations, and where seminars on labor union organizations were held.<sup>92</sup> Thus, it played a significant role in enlightening the workers about their duties and rights and inculcated in them the spirit of co-operation and comradeship.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, the Center took part in numerous Arab and regional conferences. Its representatives

attended their first event outside Kuwait when in 1959, they took part in the Afro-Asian Youth Conference in Cairo-Egypt.

However, the idea of establishing a federation for Kuwaiti workers took many years to materialize. It was not until 1960, when Hasan Saqr and his colleagues prepared a detailed rationale for establishing the federation which was submitted to the Department of Social Affairs and Labor. The idea was rejected by the Department officials on the ground that Kuwait was still a British Protectorate, and was not entitled therefore to allow such syndicates.<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

Before World War II, British and U.S oil companies were privileged to obtain oil concessions in Kuwait based on the 1899 protectorate agreement between Kuwait and Britain. Instead of giving preference to Kuwaiti and Arab labor as stipulated by their concession agreements, the oil companies imposed inequitable conditions on them and favored foreign workers. Consequently, the Kuwaiti workers made a series of demands which included decent housing, promotions, wage increase, medical care, leave, and equitable treatment. Labor demands were subsequently developed to include the establishment of labor syndicates, sharing in decision making, and nationalization of oil wealth.

Kuwaiti civil society organizations and press played an instrumental role in enlightening Kuwaiti workers and supporting their demands. In general the British K.O.C. officials pursued an autocratic management approach against the Kuwaiti workers. However, some British officials were sympathetic towards the national labor. Although Kuwait oil was a significant factor in rebuilding the post-World War II British economy and welfare system, yet in contrast, it was thought to have brought injustice to Kuwait oil workers in the initial stages. One of the most important things left by the colonial companies pertaining the commercial culture was the culture of the commercial monopoly they used to practice in Kuwait. Many merchants were affected by that culture in monopolizing commodities, commercial agencies and privileges up till now. In fact, the aspirations of Britain and America in having Kuwait's oil still exist and never ended by the departure of their companies.

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## Note

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<sup>1</sup> Fryer, J., *Al-Nift wa al-Tanmiyah fi al-Kuwait, al-Qissah al-Kamilah li-Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait* (Oil and development in Kuwait: the complete story of Kuwait oil company), London: Stacey International, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Mansfield, Peter, *Kuwait Vanguard of the Gulf*, 1990, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Kuwait Political Agency, *Arabic Documents 1899-1949*, 9 (archive edition), 1994, p. 649.

<sup>4</sup> Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber consented to Major Holme's request to drill two wells, which definitely gave enough data about the potential existence of oil. For more information see, Al-Rushaid, "*Al-Tarikh*", p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> Kuwait Oil Company was registered in Britain, in accordance with the Companies Act of 1929. For more information, refer to: *Waltha'iq Al-Nift* (Oil Documents), State of Kuwait: Ministry of Oil, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Qal'aji, Al-Nizam, pp. 196-198.

- <sup>7</sup> Al-Lughani, B. et al. *Waltha'iq Al-Naft* (Oil Documents), State of Kuwait: Ministry of Oil, pp. 1-4.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-4.
- <sup>9</sup> *Mu'assat al-Bitrul al-Kuwaitiyah* (Kuwait Petroleum Corporation), *Al-Thaqafa al-Niftiyah Li al-Jami* (Everyone's Oil Knowledge), Kuwait: *Da'irat al-'Ilaqat al-'Amnah wa al-'I'lam*, 2015, p. 14.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 278-283.
- <sup>11</sup> Shamma, *Bitrul al-Kuwait*, pp. 59-61.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 88-89.
- <sup>13</sup> KOC General manager Mr. Scott strongly reacted on learning that the Council was determined to cancel several monopolies and privileges. For further details refer to Khalid Sulaiman Al-Adasani, *Mudhakkirat*, pp.53-56.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 55.
- <sup>15</sup> H.R.P, Dickson, *Al-Kuwait wa Jaratuha*, p. 281.
- <sup>16</sup> Joyce, M., *Al-Kuwait 1945-1996 Ru'yah Injliziyah Amrikiyah*, Kuwait 1945-1996: An Anglo-American Perspective, Tr. Mufeed 'Abduni, Lebanon: Dar Amwaj li-al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi, 2001, 1(29).
- <sup>17</sup> A-Wasmi, M. et al., *Arba'un Aman min al-'Atta' wa al-Wafa'*, Forty years of selfless Contribution and Dedication, Kuwait: *Ittihad Naqabat al-'Amilin bi al-Qitta' al-Hukumi*, p. 13.
- <sup>18</sup> Saqr, H. *Rihlah Dakhil al-Dhakirah Ma' al-Harakah al-'Ummaliyah al-Kuwaitiyah* (Journey into the Memory of Kuwait Labor Movement), 1, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ashish*, plural of 'Ushah: a wooden hut.
- <sup>20</sup> Saqr, H. *Rihlah Dakhil al-Dhakirah Ma' al-Harakah al-'Ummaliyah al-Kuwaitiyah* (Journey into the Memory of Kuwait Labor Movement) 1, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>21</sup> *Watha'iq al-Nift*, pp. 1-4.
- <sup>22</sup> Al-Zayed, A. "Matha Nurid" ,p. 56.
- <sup>23</sup> Khalaf, K., "Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait Hukumah Mustaqillah" (Kuwait Oil Company is an Independent Government) , *Al-Sha'b* newspaper, 25 September, 1958, p. 8.
- <sup>24</sup> Shamma, *Bitrul al-Kuwait*, pp.53-56.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Fryer, J., *Oil and its development in Kuwait – revised by Abdul Malik Tamimi*, p. 103.
- <sup>27</sup> Shehab, S. J.: *History of Education in Kuwait and the Gulf in the Past*, pp. 355 – 366.
- <sup>28</sup> Smith, Cimon C., *Kuwait during the era of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem 1950 – 1965*, Britain, the al-Sabah, and oil, Translated by Bader Al Mutairi, pp. 229-230.
- <sup>29</sup> Heints, Z., *Al-Iqtissad al-Isti'mari li al-Bitrul wa Ususuhi al-Jughrafiyah* (Colonial Economics and Geographical Principles of Oil), Tr. Ihsan Al-Jabiri (Beirut: *Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi*), 1954, p.74.
- <sup>30</sup> Shamma, *Bitrul al-Kuwait*, pp.53-58.
- <sup>31</sup> Joyce, *Al-Kuwait 1945-1996*, p.31.
- <sup>32</sup> Saqr, *Rihlah*, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>33</sup> Al Fajr Magazine, *A State Within a State, State of Kuwait. 60(2<sup>nd</sup> Dec.)*, 1958, p. 3.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp.21-25.
- <sup>35</sup> Al-Ajmi, M. *Al-Harakah al-Ummaliyah wa al-Naqabiyah fi al-Kuwait* (Labor and Syndicate Movement in Kuwait) (Kuwait: Sharikat al-Rabai'an li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'), p. 59.
- <sup>36</sup> Saqr, *Rihlah*, pp.21-25.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.25.
- <sup>38</sup> Saqr, H. *Rihlah Dakhil al-Dhakirah Ma' al-Harakah al-'Ummaliyah al-Kuwaitiyah* (Journey into the Memory of Kuwait Labor Movement). 1, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>39</sup> Dickson, *Al-Kuwait wa Jaratuha*, 611.
- <sup>40</sup> Sabti, Al., *Shanties for Kuwaitis. Al Fajr Magazine*, Kuwait,4 (45). 3. Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958.
- <sup>41</sup> Al-Adsani, K. S., Half a Year of the Parliamentary Rule in Kuwait. (2), 25. Beirut. *Jumada Al Awal 2nd, 1357 H. 25th Shawwal 1357 H*, 1947.
- <sup>42</sup> Al-'Ajmi, *Al-Harakah*, pp.21-56.
- <sup>43</sup> Saqr, *Rihlah*, pp.21-56.
- <sup>44</sup> Al-Ajmi, *Al-Harakah*, pp.60-62.
- <sup>45</sup> Saqr, *Rihlah*, pp.21-56.
- <sup>46</sup> Al-Asbahi, A. *Al-Harakah al-Naqabiyah al-Kuwaitiyah: Lamhah Tarikhiyah* (Labor Syndicate Movement in Kuwait: A Historical overview). 1, p. 15.
- <sup>47</sup> Personal interview with Mr. 'Ajnan Qablan Al-'Azmi, co-founder of Kuwait Oil Company Labor Syndicate. Interviewed by Dr. Ayed Jeraid, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

- <sup>48</sup> Khalaf, K., *Al-Sha'b*. Sep. 25<sup>th</sup>, 9, 1958.
- <sup>49</sup> Khalaf, K., *Al-Ma'jurun wa al-Murtazqah*" (Hired Men and Mercenaries), *Al-Sha'b*. Jan. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 8, 1958.
- <sup>50</sup> *Al-Sha'b*, 25<sup>th</sup> Sep, 9, 1958.
- <sup>51</sup> Abu Firas, *Al-Ummal, wa al-'Ashish wa Sharikat al-Nift* [Workers, Huts, and the Oil Company] *Al-Fajr* newspaper. July 1<sup>st</sup>. 2, 1958.
- <sup>52</sup> Khalaf. K., *Al-Sha'b*. Sep. 25<sup>th</sup>. 9, 1958.
- <sup>53</sup> Khalaf. K., *Al-Ma'jurun, Al-Sha'b*, Jan. 2<sup>nd</sup>. 8, 1958.
- <sup>54</sup> "*Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait wakr Khatir li-Al-Jasusiyah Yajib Tathuruhu*" (The Oil Company: Dangerous Espionage Den to be Purged), *Al-Sha'b*, Sep. 11<sup>th</sup>, 9, 1958.
- <sup>55</sup> Jonathan Fryer: A British writer, broadcaster, and lecturer in London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and comparative social sciences, and Asian and African political affairs. He published his book "Fuelling Kuwait's Development" in 2007, by which he highlighted on the foundation of Kuwait Oil Company.
- <sup>56</sup> Fryer, J. *Oil and Development in Kuwait* \_ revised by Abdul Malik Al Tamimi, p. 60.
- <sup>57</sup> *Al-Sha'b*, Sep. 25<sup>th</sup>. 9, 1958.
- <sup>58</sup> "*Hdith Al-Nas*" (People's Talk), *Al-Ra'id (Kuwait: Jam'iyah Al-Mu'allimin*, March ed.) 50, 1952.
- <sup>59</sup> Abu Firas, *Al-Ummal, wa al-'Ashish wa Sharikat al-Nift* (Workers, Huts, and the Oil Company), *Al-Fajr* newspaper. July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1958, p. 2.
- <sup>60</sup> Khalaf, K., "*Sharikat Nift Al-Kuwait Hakumah Mustakillah*", *Al-Sha'b*, Oct. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 3.
- <sup>61</sup> "Sharikat Nift Al-Kuwait Wakr Khatir", *Al-Sha'b*, Sep. 11<sup>th</sup>, 1958, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>62</sup> Abu Firas, "*Al-'Ummal wa al-'Ashish*", *Al-Ra'id*, July 1<sup>st</sup>. 1958, p. 2.
- <sup>63</sup> Al-Zaid, A., "*Madha Nurid*", *Al-Bi'thah*, January, 1952, p. 56.
- <sup>64</sup> Khalaf, K. "*Sharikat Nift Al-Kuwait Hakumah Mustakillah*", *Al-Sha'b*, Oct. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 53.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.
- <sup>66</sup> Farghali, Y., "*Madha fi Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait*" (What is Going on in Kuwait Oil Company), *Al-'Amil*, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1976, pp. 29-30.
- <sup>67</sup> "*Sharikat Nift Al-Kuwait Hakumah Mustakillah*", *Al-Sha'b*, Oct. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 11.
- <sup>68</sup> Shamma, *Bitrul al-Kuwait*, pp.53-56.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>70</sup> "Al-Nifaq al-Hukumi" (Government Hypocrisy) in *Al-Fajr*, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958, p. 6.
- <sup>71</sup> Personal interview with Mr. 'Abdul-Rahman Al-'Atiqi, KOC recruitment officer in 1945, and later, Minister of Finance of the State of Kuwait in 1967. He was interviewed by Dr. Ayed 'Atiq Al-Juraid and Dr. 'Abdul 'Aziz Al-'Atiqi on December 4, 2016.
- <sup>72</sup> Shamma, *Bitrul al-Kuwait*, pp.53-56.
- <sup>73</sup> Al-Zaid, A., "*Madha Nurid*", *Al-Bi'thath*, January, 1952, pp. 53-56.
- <sup>74</sup> "*Ilayki Ya Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait*" (A Message to Kuwait Oil Company), *Al-Sha'b*, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1958, pp. 9-13.
- <sup>75</sup> "Ma'a Al-Sha'b" (With the People), *Al-Sha'b*, 18 Sep. 18<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 14.
- <sup>76</sup> "*Ilayki Ya Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait*" (A Message to Kuwait Oil Company), *Al-Sha'b*, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1958, pp. 9-13.
- <sup>77</sup> Khalaf, K. "*Sharikat Nift Al-Kuwait Hakumah Mustakillah*", *Al-Sha'b*, Sep. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 2.
- <sup>78</sup> "Sirri Jiddan" [Top Secret], *Al-Sha'b*, Oct. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 4.
- <sup>79</sup> "Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait Wakr", *Al-Sha'b*, Sep. 11<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 7-8.
- <sup>80</sup> "*Ilayki Ya Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait*" (A Message to Kuwait Oil Company), *Al-Sha'b*, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1958, pp. 9-13.
- <sup>81</sup> Khalaf, K. "*Sharikat Nift Al-Kuwait Hakumah Mustakillah*", *Al-Sha'b*, Oct. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 3.
- <sup>82</sup> The newspaper reported that I.R. Anderson, author of the secret document was a former officer having the title of "Captain" who occupied senior positions in KOC, and was recently appointed as manager of local affairs at KOC office in Kuwait. For further details see "Nift wa-Jasusiyah" (Oil and Espionage) *Al-Fajr*, Sep. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 3.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>84</sup> "Al-Qabd 'ala Al-Jawasis" (The Spies Arrested), *Al-Fajr*, Sep. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 1.
- <sup>85</sup> "*Ilayki Ya Sharikat Nift al-Kuwait*". *Al-Sha'b*, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1958, pp. 9-13.
- <sup>86</sup> Al-'Ajmi, *Al-Harakah Al-'Ummaliyah*, p. 66-67.
- <sup>87</sup> Ma'a al-Sha'b", *Al-Sha'b*, Jul. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1958, pp. 2.
- <sup>88</sup> "*Al-Watan al-'Arabi wa al-Suhuf al-Ajnabiyah*" (The Arab Countries in Foreign Newspapers), *Al-Fajr*. Jul. 29<sup>th</sup>, 1958, p. 6.
- <sup>89</sup> Personal interview with Mr. 'Ajnan Qablan Al-'Azmi.
- <sup>90</sup> *Al-Asbahi, Al-Harakah al-Naqabiyah*, pp. 21-56.

<sup>91</sup> Hasan Saqr, *Played a role in Kuwaiti workers union movement, where he was the first chairman of Kuwait workers public union in 1948.*

<sup>92</sup> Saqr, *Rihlah*, p. 17.

<sup>93</sup> Al-Asbahi, *Al-Harakha al-Naqabiyah*, pp. 21-56.

<sup>94</sup> Saqr, *Rihlah*, pp. 21-56.

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