

Persia/Iran

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Summary

The outbreak of the First World War coincided with a period in Persian history when, following the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909, the Iranians were poised to refashion the constitutional order and establish an independent, accountable and effective government. The global conflict between the Great Powers, which culminated in the outbreak of the Great War, embraced Persian social, economic and political establishments, deepened political factionalism and rigorously undermined the planned reforms. On the eve of the war, the global shift of industrial, military and naval units from coal to oil resulted in an exponential growth of demand for petroleum products. This global shift had enormous implications for the strategic significance of West Asia, a region that holds vast oil deposits. Iran/Persia and its oil were in the core of this transition and the pivotal position of Persian/Iranian oil not only refashioned the country's position during the war but through the long 20th century.

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Introduction

The First World War ended the somewhat ironically labelled "long peace" of the 19th century. The war represented the culmination of the [industrialization of warfare](#), after intensifying capitalist competition and new [technological developments](#). [Karl Polanyi \(1886-1964\)](#) regarded the First World War as the terminus of a "one-hundred-year peace" which had characterized the long 19th century. The war signalled the breakdown of an international system that had been built around high finance,¹ and the culmination of the industrialization of [warfare](#), after an era of intensifying capitalist competition and new technological developments.

On the eve of the war, the global shift of industry, armies and naval units from using coal to oil fuels resulted in an exponential growth in demand for [petroleum](#) products. This had enormous implications for the strategic significance of west Asia, a region that contains the world's largest oil deposits. Persian² oil became not only an economic resource of fundamental importance to British interests worldwide, but also a strategic military asset. Its vast oil deposits and its geographic location at the gates of the Indian subcontinent turned Iran into one of the major theaters of war in west Asia. The outbreak of war increased the geopolitical pressure of the major world powers on Iran, causing the long-lasting rifts in Iranian politics to widen. The [occupation](#) of north and south Iran by Russian and British troops prompted the Ottomans to invade western and north-western Iran early in the war. If we add to this list of adversities the subversion of German agents who were also active, especially in the south, we start to get a more complete picture of Iran's position in the war.

Since 1911, the presence of foreign [imperialist](#) powers on Iranian soil, which lasted for ten years, was the cause of various political acts. These included establishing dual political power in the country with the foundation of a Provisional National Government mobilizing regional reformist movements (sometimes with separatist inclinations), and practicing pan-Islamist ideas to founding the Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, inspired by the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#). Most of these political acts were linked, in one way or another, to the question of oil and its accessibility, a question that prevailed over the entire 20th century, locally, regionally and internationally. The 20th century was a century of oil capitalism.

Iranian Politics and Society in Wartime

The conventional European chronology of the First World War begins in 1914 and ends in 1918. For Iranians however, the war period lasted longer, at least within its own national frontiers. Following the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1909), in 1911 Russian military forces occupied the northern provinces of Iran and imposed an ultimatum on the government of Iran to observe the Russian interest in the country. This ultimatum concluded with the closure of the Second Parliament. The end of the war in Iran was also three years later than the Armistice in Europe: the last British troops withdrew from southern Iran, and the Russian [Red Army](#) from northern Iran in 1921.

The war in Europe reached Iran when the [Ottoman Empire](#) joined the Central Powers, making Iran a direct neighbour to combatants from both camps: [Russia](#) joined [Britain](#) in a fight against the Ottoman Empire, which in turn allied with [Germany](#). For Iranians, the declaration of war in Europe and among its imperial neighbours meant more foreign pressure to take sides in a conflict in which Iran had no national interest.

In November 1914, the war on the west Asian front escalated when the British forces marched toward [Mesopotamia](#) and landed in Basra. The British now aimed to control Mesopotamia to secure the route to Baghdad as a way station to the Russian army already stationed in northern Iran and to establish a line of defence against incursions by the Central Powers in central and south Asia. Additionally, the British wanted to secure the flow of oil from Persia, which had evolved as a cornerstone of their geopolitical and military strategy. Khuzestan's oilfields and the Abadan Oil Refinery were a mere sixty kilometres from Basra, and only the Shat al-Arab River separated Khuzestan from Ottoman Mesopotamia.³

The Iranian government's early reaction to the outbreak of the war was to declare Iran's strict [neutrality](#) with a royal decree on 1 November 1914.⁴ One might well ask what sense there could be in Iran's announcement of its neutrality when Russian troops were already occupying a sizeable part of Iranian northern territory. When Iran's Prime Minister [Mostowfi al-Mamalek \(1874-1932\)](#) approached the Russian authorities, demanding the withdrawal of their troops from [Azerbaijan](#) – on the ground that their presence would give the Ottomans a pretext for invading Iran – the Russian ambassador in Tehran replied laconically that he “appreciated the Iranian viewpoint but inquired what guarantees could be given that after the withdrawal of Russian forces, the Turks would not bring in theirs?”⁵

In the absence of a powerful central government in Iran to resist the Russian and British burden, some Iranians came to the conclusion that aligning with Germany was the best option to guarantee Iran's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The powerful neighbouring [empires](#) of the Russians, the Ottomans, and the British (whose [Indian dominion](#) bordered Iran) had interests which automatically led them to meddle and intervene in Iran. By contrast, Germany, a powerful but geographically remote power, seemed at first sight to present no direct threat to Iran.

When the Third Iranian Parliament was convened in December 1914, thirty deputies out of a total of 136 were members of the pro-German Democrat Party.⁶ Britain viewed the pro-German activities of the Democrats with mistrust and dismay, as did the Russians, who decided to increase their occupying forces in Iran. The situation became so tense that Russian troops began marching to the capital, stationed themselves 160 kilometres north-west of Tehran in Qazvin and threatened to occupy the capital. The cabinet of Mostowfi al-Mamalek seriously considered moving the capital from Tehran to Isfahan, with support from the majority of the Democrat deputies as well as a number of influential journalists and politicians. This coalition hurriedly set out on a “long march” for Isfahan to relocate the legitimate government there. Unable to reach Isfahan, the marchers finally established themselves in Kermanshah, where they called themselves Dowlat Movaqat Melli (the

Provisional National Government).⁷ However, this provisional government, which obtained the official recognition of the Central Powers as the sole legitimate government of Iran, could not survive ever-escalating pressure from Britain and Russia. In 1916, Kermanshah fell to Russian forces, and the Provisional National Government collapsed.⁸

Having defeated the Ottoman army in southern Mesopotamia, the British were able to secure the oilfields of Khuzestan. They established a stronghold in the Ottoman-occupied territories, and from there, gradually wrested control of the rest of Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula from the Ottomans.⁹ The “Arab Revolt” against the Ottoman Empire in 1916, initiated by [Thomas Edward Lawrence \(1888-1935\)](#), better known as Lawrence of Arabia, was eventually followed by the [capture of Baghdad](#) and Jerusalem in 1917 and finally Kirkuk and Mosul in 1918. The successive defeats of the Ottomans certainly changed the theater of war in Iran. Nevertheless, the Russian Revolution of February 1917 appears to have had a more significant impact.

A whole year after the second Russian Revolution in 1917, the last phase of the war began in Iran. On 30 October 1918, the [Armistice of Mudros](#) was concluded with the Ottoman Empire, and in Istanbul the cabinet of the [Committee of Union and Progress](#) resigned. [Ahmed Izzet Pasha \(1864-1937\)](#) formed his new cabinet, and called on all Ottoman troops to return home. Yet the departure of foreign troops from Iran – first the Russians, then the Ottomans – did not strengthen the Iranian government. The population was impoverished, the economy was ruined and almost bankrupt, and the treasury coffers were empty. Soon the government was besieged by centrifugal forces, because regional protest movements began to challenge the status quo. In the northern provinces of Azerbaijan, Gilan and Khorasan, there were reform-minded and revolutionary individuals who believed that, if they could succeed in launching campaigns to initiate change in their own region, the same reforms would gradually spread through the rest of the country. The regional campaigns of [Kuchek Khan Jangali \(1880-1921\)](#) in Gilan, of [Sheikh Mohammad Khiyabani \(1880-1920\)](#) in Azerbaijan, and of Colonel [Mohammad Taqi Khan Pesyan \(1892-1921\)](#) in Khorasan were not territorially separatist, but aimed to establish stable yet accountable political arrangements that would redress local grievances about an unfair distribution of power between central government and local authorities throughout Iran.¹⁰ Apart from these regional protest movements, there were other local insurgencies and movements in the south and the west of the country, which were not politically reformist in character, but aimed at weakening the authority of the central government in favour of local magnates.

Not only the political scene looked gloomy in Iran during those years. For most of Iran’s working poor, the First World War brought nothing but misery. Hunger, famine, drought,

insecurity caused by armed violence, price inflation and unemployment forced many to abandon their homes in search of a safer existence in other parts of the country, or even beyond its borders. Tens of thousands of migrant Iranians were employed in factories, oilfields, mines and construction works in the Caucasus. When they returned home after the 1917 Russian Revolution, they added to the army of unemployed.¹¹ Nor was nature benevolent to the country's poor: successive seasonal droughts caused widespread famine during 1917/1918. Requisition and confiscation of foodstuffs by occupying armies to feed their soldiers added to the famine.¹² In November 1915, when the total granary of the south-east province of Sistan was sold off to the British troops, "the price of one *kharvar* (100 kilos) of wheat was raised to twenty tomans, if there is any to be found".¹³ In the north-east province of Khorasan, Russian troops blockaded all roads and prohibited any transfers of grain, except those destined for the Russian army.¹⁴ The requisitioning of pack animals, mules and camels for the oil industry¹⁵ in Khuzestan, and for the British and Russian armed forces, left the country's [transport network](#) in serious disarray, and disrupted the distribution of foodstuffs and other goods throughout the country – with disastrous consequences. During the war, it often cost more to transport grain than to grow it, in many parts of Iran.¹⁶ All this made the living conditions of the poor even more dreadful.

And if that were not enough, a series of severe droughts from 1916 on further depleted agricultural supplies. By early February 1918, the famine spread all over the country, and panicked crowds in major cities began to loot bakeries and food stores. In the western city of Kermanshah, confrontations between the hungry poor and the police ended in casualties. In Tehran, the situation was "aggravated by hoarding and short-selling to the customers by bakers".¹⁷ Adulteration of bread, as well as the exorbitant prices charged by some bakers, outraged Tehran's working poor. Thus, for example, the printing-house workers, who had recently formed a union, staged a demonstration in Tehran in 1919, during which crowds attacked the bakeries and granaries, and called on the government to increase food rations, to standardize the price of bread, and to regulate the quality, supply and sales of foodstuffs. Nevertheless, in this turbulent post-war era neither the national government nor foreign powers were in a position to do much to alleviate the human crises. The devastation caused by famine and contagious diseases continued for many years.

Beyond deaths from starvation, epidemics also killed many people.¹⁸ The colossal food crisis, plus large numbers of soldiers, [refugees](#) and destitute people constantly on the move in search of work and survival, facilitated a deadly combination of pandemics and contagious diseases. Cholera, the plague and typhus spread with terrifying speed across the country,

claiming huge numbers of deaths every day. From 1915, cases of cholera were reported in Azerbaijan.¹⁹ In the following year, the disease was widespread not only in all northern provinces:²⁰ it also reached the south. Typhoid, too, spread in many parts of the country, and caused so many deaths that, according to an eyewitness, “the high mortality in Tehran was not due to famine, but rather because of typhoid and typhus”.²¹ Through the end of the war in Europe, [Spanish Influenza](#) also reached Iran. The foreign diplomatic missions in the capital registered reports of the devastation all over the country, the most horrendous being in Hamadan.²² A British officer in north-west Iran and south Caucasus refers in his eyewitness account to the devastating famine and disease in Hamadan, which brought 30 percent of the city’s 50,000 inhabitants to the verge of starvation, and caused many deaths. Cases of cannibalism were also reported.²³

In the historical memory of the Iranians, as those who had lived in the Ottoman Empire, or in other parts of West Asia, the First World War is remembered as a period of carnage – not primarily because of combat deaths, of which there were certainly many, but much more because of famines and epidemics that claimed far more victims.

Ottomans’ Jihad, and its Practice in Iran

Three months after the outbreak of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany. In October 1914, its fleet entered the Black Sea, bombarding Odessa and the Crimean ports. In addition, Ottoman forces were deployed along the Caucasian frontier with Russia, where intense fighting began in harsh mountainous terrain. The military strategy of [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), the Ottoman Minister of War, involved the [declaration of a Jihad](#). Muslims were incited to rise up against British and Russian rule in India, Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Enver Pasha was convinced that by joining forces with Germany, the Ottomans had a fighting chance of halting the disintegration of their [empire](#). The Ottomans might perhaps even regain some of the territories they had lost over the years to the Italians, Russians, Greeks, Serbs and Bulgarians. For the British, Russians and Germans, the major transport networks in western Asia that connected the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, also provided access to the vast oil deposits of the Caucasus, Mesopotamia, Persia and the Persian Gulf. These sea and land routes became much too vital to be ignored in the overall strategy of a war, which at first appeared as a mainly European affair. Soon after war was declared, control over the Bosphorus Strait, the Suez Canal, and the Persian Gulf became a priority in the overall calculations and aims of imperial military strategy.²⁴

Enver Pasha first proposed his idea of an Islamic Jihad against Russian and British imperialism to the Germans, and he kept insisting on it from the early days of the war:

We call the whole world of Islam to rise up in arms.... We will send our most resourceful men to strike the Allies' interests where ever it will be. In this way we will cause India, Baluchistan, Afghanistan, Persia, and all Africa to rise up against the Allies enemy. The world of Islam will come soon under the command of the Caliph.²⁵

In the geographic area where Enver Pasha was calling Muslims to a Jihad, Iran with its majority Shiite population was exceptional. On the eve of war, neither the Ottomans nor the Germans believed that the government of Iran would react positively to the Jihad call and join the Central Powers. Instead of negotiating with the Iranian government, they therefore opted to approach the Iranian population directly, hoping that ordinary Iranians would react favourably to a call for Jihad as a political canon.

A few months before the war, an Ottoman military attaché in Kermanshah addressed the commander of the Ottoman Sixth Army in a memorandum, unveiling his intention to set up a society in Iran called *Jamiyat Islami* (Islamic Society) that would "bring the Muslims of Iran into unity with the Ottomans under the Istanbul House of Caliphate".²⁶ In designating the commander of the Ottoman army to the Ottoman Sultan, the Ottoman Grand Mufti similarly called on all Muslims, Shiites as well as Sunnis to rise for *Jihad-e Akbar* (Grand Jihad) against the Allied infidels.²⁷ Following this appeal, in numerous seditious flyers published by "societies" such as *Kafkasya Ihtilal Cemiyati* (Caucasus Revolutionary Society), in Iran as well as in the Caucasus and in Russian Turkestan, Ottomans called on the Muslims of the region and beyond from Cairo to Mesopotamia, to Iran to Afghanistan and emphatically to India to rise against the infidels.²⁸

For crafting this sentiment, high-ranking Sunni and Shiite clergies were approached by representatives of the Central Powers, who petitioned the clergymen to declare a Jihad against the enemy alliance. In the early months of the war, some Ottoman military commanders, together with some high-ranking German military figures, tried to obtain cooperation from the eminent 'ulama in Najaf and Karbala, and to persuade them to declare a Fatwa for Jihad against the Allies.²⁹ A mass [propaganda](#) campaign coordinated in the region even claimed that [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#), had converted to Islam, had made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and was now known as "Haji Wilhelm".³⁰ According to the report by an employee at the German Embassy in Tehran, the fact that [Radolf von Kardorff \(1881-1967\)](#), the Charge d'Affaires at the German Embassy, attended the Shiite mourning

and remembrance ceremony for Ashura in Tehran, made a great impact on public opinion. The preachers perceived this act as a sign of victory for Islam, and praised the Germans for their gesture of solidarity with the Iranians.³¹

During the course of the war, and following Ottoman and German political intuitions about Muslim sentiments, a division of labour was practiced between the two Central Powers. The Ottomans, given their own religious affiliation, limited their lobbying largely to the Sunni establishment, while the Germans worked among the Shiite 'ulama. Captain [Fritz Klein \(1877-1958\)](#), one of the renowned German agents in the region, was appointed as head of a special taskforce, and, using the advantage of his acquaintance with [Sheikh al-'Iraqin Haeri \(-1928\)](#), endeavoured to secure the Fatwas for Jihad from the established high-ranking Shiite 'ulama in Najaf and Karbala against the Allies.³²

However, since the majority of the Iranians remained non-receptive to such long-distance appeals, those 'ulama in Najaf and Karbala who were endorsing Jihad, ultimately decided to send special envoys to Iran, to communicate their commitment to their counterparts there. Yet, in Iran there was no consensus amongst the high- and low-ranking 'ulama against the Jihadi decrees issued in Najaf and Karbala. While some 'ulama rejected the Fatwas, and left it to individuals to decide whether to join the war or not, other 'ulama stated that *both* sides in the war, including the Sunni Ottomans, were "infidels". [Aqa Seyyed Reza Quchani \(1878-1944\)](#) went even further and proclaimed that the Russians were preferable to the Ottomans, since "they are Christians and have nothing to do against Islam". On the other hand, the Deputy in charge of the holy shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad claimed that "Iran reached a secret treaty with the Ottomans and the Germans, and soon she will go to war in favour of the Central Powers."³³ The war, therefore, divided the house of Shiite Islam and consolidated the position of those 'ulama who had a more political reading of Shiite jurisprudence against those with more conservative apolitical inclination.

The Battle for Control over the Oil Supply

Although the recovery of territories lost in the 19th and 20th centuries was the major objective of Ottoman war strategy, in the early months of the war, the Ottomans realized the importance of the oil in running the war machinery. Together with their war companions the Germans moved to the south-eastern front to seize, preferably intact (and if not, to dismantle), the oilfields and refineries of Baku, Masjid Suleiman and Abadan.

On the eve of the First World War, the technological, military and industrial shift from coal to oil fuels made oil a crucial strategic commodity, a status that it kept for decades to follow.

Since 1911, the retired admiral, [John Fisher \(1841-1920\)](#), headed a commission investigating transitioning the British fleet from coal to oil and in 1914 when he returned as the head of the British admiralty for the second time, he succeeded in getting the British navy to convert all its boilers from coal to oil. Following this rapid change, in 1914 [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#) as the First Lord of the Admiralty succeeded in coordinating the [British government](#) alliance with the Persian oil industry. With a 51 percent share in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), the British government became a major shareholder, significantly supporting the expansion of the oil industry under its indirect control.³⁴ Once the initial phase of constructing the pipelines that brought the oil from Masjid Suleiman to Abadan and building the refinery were completed, Abadan began to supply the Royal Navy with up to two-thirds of its fuel, in addition to nearly 200,000 tons of refined petroleum products to the British forces in Mesopotamia.³⁵ The wartime military requirements for fuel were very large. Consider that at its maximum strength, the British war machine assembled almost 450,000 troops in Mesopotamia alone,³⁶ mostly recruited from India. This increasingly mechanized war machine created an insatiable demand for the Abadan refinery output. Some 6,400 motorized vehicles were being used (running on internal combustion engines), and forty-five [aeroplanes](#) were deployed. In addition to petroleum products, the British war machine also absorbed most of the manpower available in the region, employing almost 900,000 people during the war.³⁷

The two major wartime challenges facing APOC were political security and labour scarcity. While the belligerent powers looked on Iran as one battlefield among many, and not a major one, it was by no means an easily controllable area. Soon the whole country was plagued by incessant tribal strife, instigated by both camps to undermine the positions and interests of their enemy, in addition to famine, epidemics and the massive dislocation of populations. Furthermore, because the oilfields and the Abadan refinery were close to the front, valuable and urgently needed skilled workers left the area, making it more difficult to sustain production. Even the supply of local unskilled labour became scarce, and this became a major hurdle for the company.³⁸

On 1 November 1914, a military contingent made up of mainly Indian [infantry](#) landed in the south of Iran to secure the oilfields and Abadan refinery.³⁹ While the British warship *Odin* patrolled the Shatt al-Arab River, deploying this contingent was a preventive measure against likely Ottoman and German attacks on the oil refinery. There were reports of 30,000 Ottoman troops being stationed in Basra.⁴⁰ According to [Christopher Sykes \(1907-1986\)](#), the German secret agent in Iran, [Oskar Ritter von Niedermayer \(1885-1948\)](#) planned to set fire to the Abadan refinery, and then to sink the German cargo steamer *Ekbatana* and other vessels south of Abadan, to block the British from travelling up the river to rescue their European

employees at the burning refinery.⁴¹ The British fear was partly realized on 6 November 1914, when the Ottoman army's coastal batteries opened fire on the British Navy sloop *Espiegle*, which had started to sail up the Shatt al-Arab in September 1914. The Ottomans then made a futile attempt to block the river above Mohammareh (later Khoramshar), by sinking *Ekbatana* and three other smaller ships.⁴² After this failed offensive, there were some sporadic exchanges of fire in the following days. With the retreat of the Ottomans, however, the military confrontation ended.⁴³

The retreat of the Ottomans, and the British seizure of Basra on 22 November 1914, was followed by British advances to Amara and Tigris. Basra became the bastion of British forces in Mesopotamia, which stopped the Ottomans from mounting any direct offensive against the oil industry in southern Iran. Yet for the oil company, Ottoman and German intrusions and acts of sabotage remained a major threat. Moreover, the Ottoman offensives in northern Mesopotamia forced APOC to adopt some precautionary measures. In January 1915, the oil company decided to move all its European employees from Ahvaz and Abadan to Mohammareh. On the eve of the war, the number of staff and labourers in the Persian oil industry reached 4,277, including sixty-four Europeans, 2,744 Persians and 1,074 Indians.⁴⁴

The Ottoman defeat in Basra was considered minor compared to what they suffered in the north. In December 1914, a Russian advance toward Erzurum was countered by the Ottomans, but at the [battle of Sarikamish](#) in January 1915, after heavy losses in the north, the Ottomans decided to reinforce their southern frontiers, and transferred a large proportion of their troops to Iran and Mesopotamia. However, while the attention of the German-Ottoman alliance was now focused more on the south, they opted to avoid any major military confrontation with the Allied troops and instead tried to stir up popular uprisings with [pan-Islamist](#) propaganda from below, in conjunction with negotiating with the local tribal chiefs from above.

In January 1915, the Germans launched a major infiltration campaign in southern Iran. They dispatched a number of agents to the region, whose mission was to instigate popular rebellion against the Allied forces, and to sabotage and destroy British installations and interests.⁴⁵ [Wilhelm Wassmuss \(1880-1931\)](#), initially the German Acting Consul at Bushehr, later nicknamed "The Lawrence of Persia", became the most celebrated of these secret agents, partly because of his dashing and adventurous lifestyle. Other German and Ottoman agents were sent to Isfahan, Kermanshah, Hamadan, Najaf and Karbala, and the oil province of Khuzestan. Their general objective was to obtain a Jihadi decree from the Shiite and Sunni 'ulama, and rally the local population to the Central Powers. They succeeded quite well in

establishing a substantial network among the Tangestani, Dashtestani, Qashqaii, Bakhtiyari and Kurdish tribal chiefs, and in organizing revolts against the British.⁴⁶ Yet, in the south, the oilfields of Masjid Suleiman with thirty drilled wells and the Abadan refinery remained the most attractive targets for German sabotage ventures.⁴⁷

In early 1915, the Germans and Ottomans intensified their propaganda campaign among both Sunni and Shiite 'ulema, to persuade them to call a Jihad against the British forces.⁴⁸ Captain Fritz Klein and Lieutenant Hans Lühns succeeded in winning the support of the Bawi and Bani-Turuf tribes. Reports by Iranian government secret agents active in the region disclosed that the Sheikh of Ghazban missioned the Sheikh of Bani-Lam in the company of certain 'ulama to meet with the chief of the Bani-Turuf tribe and other Arab tribes in the region, to celebrate their allegiances by calling a Jihad against the British.⁴⁹ There were also reports that "the Ottomans had dispatched some 2,000 foot soldiers and [cavalry](#) and a number of canon in order to cross Mohammareh, and reach Basra." ⁵⁰

Finally, in February 1915, the German and Ottoman lengthy campaign to persuade local Arab tribes to sabotage APOC installations was realized.⁵¹ The tribes attacked pipelines and some oil installations north of Ahvaz. They set fire to the oil spilled from the broken pipelines, cut telephone lines between Abadan and the oilfields, and looted the oil company's stores.⁵² The impact of the February disruption lasted until June of the same year, causing Abadan's output to fall from 23,500 tons to 5,600 tons. "At the field, large quantities of oil had to be burned, since all available storage was soon filled and the producing wells could not be completely shut off."⁵³

The sabotage of February 1915 was the only significant, direct attack on oil installations in Khuzestan during the wartime. In the following months and years no other major incident was recorded and somehow the security of oil installations in Khuzestan was preserved.⁵⁴ This result was largely due to protection offered by the Bakhtiyari Khans,⁵⁵ "securing the oil company's employees and properties within the limits of their jurisdiction".⁵⁶ The Bakhtiyari Khans affirmed their commitment to protecting British interests in the south, including the oilfields, the refinery, and transport networks, and to cooperating with the [Sheikh Khaz'al \(1861-1936\)](#), the Arab tribe chief most trusted in the south by the British.⁵⁷ Furthermore, on a request by APOC, [Nasir Khan Sardar Jang \(1864-1931\)](#), the Bakhtiyari tribe chief, sent a reprimand message to the chiefs of Bavi and Bani-Turuf tribes, ordering them to evacuate the lands of Bakhtiyari at once. With such a setback, the Bavi and Bani-Turuf accepted the

authority of the rival tribe, the Ka'bian headed by Sheikh Khaz'al, who enjoyed British support. The Bavi and Bani-Turuf subsequently turned their backs on the Ottoman and Germans, and took on the new task of guarding APOC pipelines and installations in the region.⁵⁸

After an agreement was signed with the Bakhtiyari Khans, and the Arab tribes were pacified, it looked as though there would no longer be any hazard that could threaten the strategic interest of the British in the south, or jeopardize the lives of British employees. However, it soon turned out that this expectation was too optimistic, and overlooked the reality of local politics in the region. Within the Bakhtiyari establishment, rivalry existed between the old chiefs and the younger generation who missed no opportunity to challenge the authority of the old guard. The war and the great powers contesting each other's presence in the region offered them an opportunity to raise their status within the tribal hierarchy. Furthermore, when the total disruption of the Khuzestan oil installation failed, German and Ottoman agents began to track the activities of the APOC beyond the borders of Khuzestan.

The increasing demand for the Persian oil during the war made the APOC extend its exploration to the west and south of Iran. However, the limited oil deposits of the oil in the west, and the difficulties in its excavation due to the proximity to the war front, caused the APOC to focus more on the south.⁵⁹ On the advice of the British Navy, the oil company extended its discovery mission to south-eastern Iran, in a region along the Persian Gulf sea shore of Mokran, from Baluchistan to Bushehr, covering Qeshm Island. The expanding excavation activities in Qeshm, led the oil company to conclude that soon Qeshm would become another major oilfield in southern Iran. These new developments obviously could not escape the attention of German and Ottoman agents, who followed APOC's activities in the region with interest and concern.

Having assessed the British presence in the region, and following their limited success in rousing the Arab tribes in southwestern Iran against the British, the Germans and Ottomans decided to leave Khuzestan, and prioritize other regions instead. Thus, except for the western front in Kurdistan, the main zone of German and Ottoman presence during the war was to the west of a line between Isfahan and Bandar Abbas, an area which included Shiraz, Bushehr, Tangestan and Dashtestan. By exploiting traditional rivalries among local tribes, and encouraging the local Muslim 'ulama to call for a Jihad against the British and Russians, they opened a new front in south-eastern Iran for their political and military sponsors. Once again, the Germans became political and military advisers to the tribal chiefs and the agents of the [Taşkilat-i Mahsusa](#), the Ottoman secret service, dispatched the Najaf and Karbala decrees, as well as local Muslim 'ulama's Jihadi Fatwas, among the southern population of Iran.⁶⁰

After scrutinizing the subversive activities of their enemies, the British sent troops to Bushehr in August 1915.⁶¹ The occupation of Bushehr was followed by the establishment of a special military proxy unit in the spring of 1916, known as the South Persia Rifles (SPR). It comprised locally recruited troops, whose task it was to put down tribal insurgencies and local resistance.⁶² The establishment of the SPR was supported by a number of local tribal chiefs who were close allies of the British, but the Iranian government strongly objected to it and resented the implied violation of its territorial sovereignty.⁶³

In June 1915, local tribes in Qeshm with the support of the Ottoman secret agents of Taşkilat-ı Mahsusa organized a surprise attack against the APOC installations in Salkh on the Qeshm Island. The immediate result of this *camisado* was the end of APOC's work in the island.⁶⁴ The spring attack on the British enterprise in Qeshm was followed by an even tougher setback for Britain.⁶⁵ In early summer the British military forces in Bushehr came under siege by the local tribes. In retaliation, the British introduced [martial law](#) and declared the total subjugation of the port. According to the witness account of [Mehdi Qoli Khan Hedayat \(1864-1955\)](#), also known as Mokhber al-Saltaneh, the Iranian government representative in Bushehr, the British troops in the port even printed a postage stamp with the wording: "Bushehr under British Occupation".⁶⁶

The British military presence in Bushehr caused major grievances amongst the population. Public protests were staged against the British and their war allies, the Russians, which extended to Isfahan, Ramhormoz and Bushehr. Once more the local 'ulama called on their people to rise up in a Jihad against the Allied troops. In a number of incidents, even local APOC offices were set on fire.⁶⁷ However, once more, the British regional command opted for confrontation rather than compromise. By founding the South Persia Rifles unit and suppressing local protests (in particular, the revolt of Tangestanis in August 1915), the British authorities generally attempted to cultivate the local tribal chiefs and pacify them, even if they could not win them over to their side.

The year 1917, with two revolutions – in February and October in Russia – had a major impact on the development of war in Iran. Russia withdrew from the chessboard of the First World War, and the Russian troops occupying Iran were in total disarray, so the Ottoman and the British forces played an even greater role in the Iranian war theater. While the spirit of Communism was spreading over the Caucasus and northern Iran, the Ottomans, disenchanted with their sponsored pan-Islamism, especially following the Arab Revolt of 1916, adopted a more ethnic dimension in their war propaganda. By 1917, they launched a new campaign calling all Turkish people to congregate around pan-Turkism and pan-

Turanism rather than marching behind the old tattered banner of pan-Islamism. Concerned with the Ottoman irredentism in the northern province of Azerbaijan, such a shift in Ottoman war policy caused major bewilderment and remonstrance in the Iranian political sphere during the last year of the war.

When the armistice was reached in Europe, of the last rival powers playing in the war theater in Iran, it was only the British who stayed on stage. With Bushehr still under their military occupation and experiencing the tyrannous command of extracting, refining and exporting Persian oil, it seemed that the frontier of the British colonial empire reached the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, by imposing the 1919 agreement on Iran, the British Empire confidently endeavoured to realize their post-war expansionism. However, in the world coming out of the war, there were other major players in addition to the old colonial powers. The war brought with it the expansion of the public sphere and inadvertently opened up new avenues for greater political participation by ordinary people globally. In Iran, the end of the First World War was marked by the emergence of a new political era of mass politics, characterized by waves of anti-colonial [nationalism](#), reformist and radical regional movements. An array of new social movements, aimed at practicing constitutionalism and building a modern state.

Conclusion

Iran, with its vast deposits of oil and its geographic location being a bridge between Europe and the Indian subcontinent, was one of the major theaters of the confrontations between the Great Powers during the First World War. Nevertheless, in Iranian 20th century historiography, the War is remembered not for major military confrontations, but for economic and political hardships embodied in devastating famine and diseases. Moreover, Iranian historiography remembers the world coming out of the First World War as a world where Iran, by maintaining its territorial integrity, succeeded in avoiding the fate that befell its neighbours, the Ottoman and Tsarist Empires.

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Notes

1. Writing about 1940s London during World War II, Polanyi gives “the conservative 1920s and the revolutionary 1930s” short shrift. See Polanyi, Karl: *The Great Transformation, The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, London 2001, pp. 3–34. [↑](#)
2. Prior to 1935 the country was known to non-Iranians as Persia, while Iranian in their Persian language referred to their country as Iran. In 1935, the government of Persia called on all international institutes as well as foreign delegates to adopt the name of

Iran instead of Persia. ↑

3. Cohen, Stuart: Mesopotamia in British Strategy, 1903-1914, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 9/2 (1978), pp. 171-181; Miroshnikov, Lev Ivanovich: Iran in the World War I, lecture read at Harvard University in November 1962 (Persian translation by Dokhaniyati, A.: Iran dar Jang Jahani Avval, Tehran 1965). ↑
4. Sepeher (Movarekh al-Dowleh), Ahamd Ali: Iran dar Jang-e Bozorg 1914-1918 [Iran in the Great War 1914-1918], Tehran 1983, p. 102. ↑
5. Ibid., p. 15. ↑
6. Newspaper Kaveh , numbers 29 and 30, July 1918. ↑
7. Sepeher, Iran dar Jang-e Bozorg 1983, p. 239. ↑
8. For the Provincial National Government see Ettehadiyyeh, Mansoureh: The Iranian Provincial Government, in: Touraj, Atabaki (ed.): Iran and the First World War, A Battleground of the Great Powers, London 2006, pp. 9-27; Tavani, 'Alireza Malaii: Iran va Dowlat Melli dar Jang jahani Avval [Iran and National Government in the First World War], Tehran 1999; Sami'i, Hossein/Ardalan, Amanollah: Avvalin Qiyam Moqadas Melli dar Jang Beynolmelel Avval [The First National Sacred Insurrection], Tehran 1953; Vahid al-Molk Shaybani, 'Abdolhossein: Khaterat Mohajerat. Az Dowlat Movaqqat Kermanshah ta Komiteh Meliyyoun Berlin [The Memoire of Migration. From the Provisional Government of Kermanshah to the Berlin Nationalist Committee], Tehran 1999. ↑
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10. Atabaki, Touraj: Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and the Struggle for Power in Iran, London 2000, pp. 39-51. ↑
11. For a study of the migrant Iranian labourers in the Caucasus see: Atabaki, Touraj: Disgruntled Guests, Iranian Subaltern on the Margins of the Tsarist Empire, *International Review of Social History*, 48/3 (2003), pp. 401-426. ↑
12. Iran National Archive, 240-3920, 293-3828, 240-1493, 240-6246, 240-5161. ↑
13. Archive of Documents and Diplomatic History, Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs. GH-133-58-4-91, GH-1333-58-4-68. ↑
14. Iran National Archive, 293-003828. ↑
15. British Petroleum Archive (hereafter "BP Archive"), ARC141294, January 1938. Lockhart, Laurence: Record of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, volume I, 1901-1918, London 1938, p.& 268. ↑
16. Iran National Archive, 240-18279. ↑
17. Floor, Willem: Labour Unions, Law and Conditions in Iran (1900-1941), Durham 1985, p. 12. ↑
18. For an eyewitness account of the famine and epidemics spreading across Iran during the First World War, see Salour, Qahreman Mirza: Rouznameh Khaterat 'Ayn al-Saltaneh

[The Diary of 'Ayn al-Saltaneh], volume 7, Tehran 1999, pp. 5275-5277. ↑

19. Iran National Archive, 360-1569. ↑
20. Archive of Documents and Diplomatic History, Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs. GH-1334-25-1-305. ↑
21. Mostowfi, 'Abdollah: Sharh Zendegi Man [My Life], volume 2, Tehran 1964, p. 513. ↑
22. Report from the US Legation in Tehran, 1 November 1918, US National Archive 891.00/1072. ↑
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29. ATASE. K. 1828, D. 14-10, F 1-30. ↑
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31. Sepehr, Iran dar Jang-e Bozorg, 1983, p. 45. ↑
32. Ibid., p. 70. ↑
33. Mahdavi, 'Abodlreza Houshang: Tarikh Ravabet-e Khareji Iran az Ebteday-e Safaviyyeh ta Payan Jang-e Jahani-e Dovvom [The History of Iran's Foreign Relations. From Safavids to the End of the Second World War], Tehran 1975, pp. 342-372. ↑
34. Cohen, Stuart: Mesopotamia in British Strategy, 1903-1914, in: International Journal of Middle East Studies, 9/2 (1978), pp. 171-181. ↑
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37. Ibid. [↑](#)
38. BP Archive, ARC 68779, Strick, Scott & Co. to Wilson, 7 October 1916. [↑](#)
39. BP Archive, ARC 141294, p. 265. [↑](#)
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44. Ferrier, History of the British Petroleum Company 1982, p. 276. [↑](#)
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49. Letter by Akram al-Molk, 29 January 1913 in: Ketab-e Sabz. Bitarafi Iran [Green Book. Iran's Neutrality], Tehran, 1957, p. 90. [↑](#)
50. Ibid. [↑](#)
51. Ibid., p. 97. [↑](#)
52. BP Archive, ARC141294, January 1938. Lockhart, Anglo-Iranian Oil Company 1938, p.

269. Ferrier, History of the British Petroleum Company 1982, p. 280. Gehrke, Pish beh Sou-ye Sharq, 1998, p. 163. ↑
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54. Archive of Documents and Diplomatic History, Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs. GH-132-66-35-014. ↑
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58. BP Archive, ARC 141294, p. 272. See also Farman-Farmian: Jang-e Engelis va 'Osmani, 2007, p. 64. ↑
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60. For a study of Taşkilat-i Mahsusa in Iran see: Touraj, Atabaki: Going East, The Ottomans' Secret Service Activities in Iran, in: Touraj, Atabaki (ed.): Iran and the First World War. Battleground of the Great Powers, London 2006, pp. 29-42. ↑
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