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‘Strong, United and Independent’: the British Foreign Office, Anglo–Iranian Oil Company and the internationalization of Iranian politics at the dawn of the Cold War, 1945–46

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The Iran crisis of 1945–46, beginning with the seizure of power in Tabriz by the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) in December 1945, is frequently hailed as the first crisis of the Cold War. The traditionalist narrative of this confrontation follows the chronology established by President Harry S. Truman, focusing on the Azerbaijan question which culminated in discussions at the United Nations Security Council in March 1946.¹ According to this triumphalist United States discourse, the Iran crisis proved to the Truman administration the perfidy of their Soviet ally, setting in motion an essentially reactive but fundamentally successful containment policy.

However, this orthodox interpretation contradicts the reality that Great Britain had a far greater vested interest in encouraging Iranian anti-communism due to Britain’s historic role as a Near Eastern hegemon, the strategic position of Iran *vis-à-vis* British India, and most importantly, the economic importance of the Anglo–Iranian Oil Company (AIOC, renamed British Petroleum, BP, since 1954). As a result of the latter’s concession in south-western Iran, British concerns during the Iran crisis heightened after the partial resolution of the Azerbaijan question with the April 1946 Soviet–Iranian agreement. By summer 1946, British interests in Iran appeared increasingly untenable in light of escalating pressure from internal communist forces. On 14 July, AIOC workers broke out into a general strike prompted by the communist Tudeh (Masses) Party, and on 1 August, Iranian Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam allowed three Tudeh ministers into his cabinet in a risky attempt to nationalize their doctrine.

To contain the spread of communism in Iran and to defend British economic interests, two agencies were of paramount influence: the Foreign Office, in particular the Eastern Department responsible for Anglo–Iranian relations, and the AIOC, which, although majority-owned by the British government, maintained a high degree of independence. Engaging in newly proactive propaganda initiatives within Iran, the Foreign Office summarized its policy as not to subjugate Tehran but rather to see Iran become ‘strong, united and independent’.²

This assertion contains an inherent paradox. On the one hand, the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, was keen to emphasize the enlightened new policies of the Labour Government in constructing post-imperialist relations with the Near East. But at the instigation of

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policy experts in the Eastern Department and AIOC representatives, this propaganda drive was symptomatic of a growing willingness to interfere in Iranian domestic affairs. Fearing that Soviet influence in northern Iran would ensure a Tudeh victory in the much-delayed elections for the 15th Majlis (ultimately not held until January 1947), the key factors behind this move towards complicity in the internationalization of Iranian politics were anti-communism and oil.

Great Power intervention in Iran was hardly a novelty. In 1907, Britain and Russia carved Iran into spheres of influence, repeated in August 1941 with the invasion which overthrew Reza Shah and established occupation zones due to expire on 2 March 1946. However, this paper will argue that these infringements on Iranian sovereignty, conducted in the context of traditional imperialist discourses and war necessity, were different from the situation in 1945–46. The gradual erosion of Foreign Office non-interference policy, explicable with reference to the inter-connected themes of ideology and economic interest, ultimately set the precedent which would facilitate the Anglo–American coup against Mosaddegh in 1953. Given the tendency to attribute more contemporary western interventions in the Middle East to oil requirements and democracy promotion, this subtle transformation is evidently worthy of analysis.

Hitherto, the 1946 Iran crisis has been dominated by traditionalist interpretations focused on United States policy, more recently complimented by Soviet archival studies which further reinforce this bipolar vision of the Cold War.³ In contrast to these often triumphalist accounts, a revisionist school has emerged which emphasizes the importance of Iranian nationalist figures such as Qavam in resolving the crisis despite the obstructionist efforts of the Great Powers.⁴ The few British-focused studies which exist are of only limited value in explaining continuity between 1946 and later events in the Cold War either because, as in the case of Louise Fawcett's otherwise excellent research, they focus on the escalatory period from 1941 and events in Azerbaijan, or, with reference to William Roger Louis' monumental work, over-emphasize the influence of figures such as Bevin in directing policy.⁵ In reality, the Foreign Office contained a range of competing voices. Within this bureaucracy, contrary to the popular interpretation, Bevin was far from the hard-line Cold Warrior he would later become.⁶

Consequently, by focusing on the events of the southern crisis after the Azerbaijan question, this study will fill a much-needed gap that emphasizes continuity between the events of 1946 and more documented confrontation between Mosaddegh and the West. With regards to the crises of the early 1950s, the historian Steve Marsh has successfully fused the diplomatic history of the Foreign Office with the role of the AIOC, but this has not been extrapolated to the mid-1940s.⁷ By comparing the role of these two policy actors, utilizing the Foreign Office records at the UK National Archives and BP Archive, this article will provide an original contribution to the history of both the origins of the Cold War and Anglo–Iranian relations.

British foreign policy towards Iran was dominated by a few influential personalities. Below Bevin's political leadership, policy within the Foreign Office Eastern Department was heavily influenced by the Ambassador in Tehran. From 1939 to March 1946, this position was held by Sir Reader Bullard. Formerly Britain's first official representative to the Stalin regime in the Soviet Union, Bullard additionally had plentiful Middle Eastern experience which had rendered him something of an Orientalist. Having deposed Reza Shah in 1941, the Ambassador would later gripe to his family that the inefficiency of

subsequent governments was even worse than the Shah's tyranny: 'Reza Shah cannot of course ever come back, but confess that I should like to see this miserable people if he did come back'.⁸

This utter disdain for the Iranian capacity for government was only equalled by his contempt for the Soviet system. Although beginning the Second World War with surprisingly cordial relations with his Soviet counterpart, by autumn 1944, when the Soviets first agitated for an oil concession in northern Iran, Bullard had become disillusioned, bemoaning that 'one of the things that one learns from contact with the Russians is that reciprocity does not mean to them what it does to us'.⁹ In his memoirs, the Ambassador describes the strong objections he raised against Soviet abuses of their position during this period, characterizing himself as one of the first 'Cold Warriors': a self-aggrandisement probably justified.¹⁰

Bullard's replacement from April 1946, John Le Rougetel, is traditionally viewed as a poor substitute due to his lack of prior regional experience, symptomatic of Iran's downgrading in Foreign Office priorities. But as will be seen, Le Rougetel proved a wily operator whose record in defence of British interests surpassed his predecessor due to his more nuanced understanding of the conflict between Tudeh communism and the brand of Iranian nationalism represented by Qavam.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of Sir William Fraser, the AIOC was one of the most powerful oil companies in the Persian Gulf. In addition to its sole ownership of the resources in its Iranian concessionary area, the Company held significant stock in the Iraq Petroleum Company, in addition to further operations in Qatar and Kuwait. In total, the AIOC controlled approximately 31% of Middle Eastern oil stock.¹¹

The evident economic—strategic importance of the Company is accentuated when considering the actual oil it controlled: this 31% stock equated to 41% of estimated Middle Eastern oil reserves between Egypt and Iran in December 1945. Although the Arabian—American Oil Company (ARAMCO) owned the most oil-rich concession in Saudi Arabia, this produced only 95,000 barrels daily, in contrast to AIOC's 385,000. Of this impressive production, the refinery at Abadan was capable of processing 100%, whereas that of ARAMCO at Ras Tanura had a more meagre capacity of 52% production.¹²

Behind these statistics, indicative of the potential significance the fall of Iran to communism would have upon British strategic oil reserves, AIOC policy was determined by a few key individuals. Most crucial to this discussion, E. G. D. Northcroft served as Chief Representative in Tehran. Effectively AIOC's private ambassador, Northcroft's duties were to promote relations with the Iranian government and to act as a bridge between the Company headquarters in Britannic House, London, and the Abadan operation, under General Manager Ivor Jones.¹³

Northcroft personally was far in advance of the Foreign Office position in Iran, advocating a campaign of 'constructive' pro-British publicity in August 1945, almost a year before the Foreign Office gave authorization to such measures. His proposals to invite a group of British pressmen and to place articles in the Iranian press on the benefits brought about by the Company enjoyed Bullard's support, indicating the discrepancy between the heightened concerns of local British representatives and the central government in London.¹⁴ Speaking with the authority of one of Iran's largest employers, Northcroft's voice would prove arguably more successful than that of either Bullard or Le Rougetel in securing the sympathies of the Qavam government.

The first stage of the Iran crisis revolved around the Azerbaijan question, from December 1945 to April 1946. A British Labour Member of Parliament visiting Tehran shortly after Pischevari's ADP seized power in Tabriz noted the prevailing panic in his diary. Entering the Tehran Club where many Foreign Office and British commercial representatives frequented, Morgan Philips Price MP commented that 'the Russian action in recent weeks in setting up an "autonomous" region in Azerbaijan with the aid of Russian bayonets had deprived many members of the British colony of Tehran of any capacity for cool reasoning. I even heard dark hints of war with Russia'.¹⁵ As well as illustrating the dramatic urgency felt by British observers on the ground, this is also interesting as a depiction of emerging Cold War perceptions in which Iranian left-wing elements such as the ADP and Tudeh were increasingly understood not in nationalist terms but as Moscow's internationalist stooges.

This urgency contrasted with the relative calm demonstrated by the administration of Bevin and British Prime Minister Clement Attlee back in London. In December 1945, Bevin was in Moscow for the Allied Council of Foreign Ministers summit, where Reader Bullard was summoned to discussions. In Moscow, Bullard authored a briefing memorandum strongly reflecting the hard-line view of the professional Eastern Department. Warning that the Soviet Union intended not to annex Azerbaijan but use it as a 'pace-maker' to gradually gain control over the entire country, Bullard hypothesized Soviet intentions as aiming to create a satellite regime in Iran before using support for the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad to spread Kurdish unrest throughout the region. By spreading economic dislocation, a situation would be created rife for the expansion of communism, and 'if Iraq goes, Kuwait will be in danger and the oil resources of Kuwait, which are enormously rich, are half American. And from Kuwait to the American oil interests in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain is only a step'.¹⁶

Although remarkably prescient of the founding principles of western containment policy, such as the link between economic dislocation and communism which provided the fundamental rationale for the Marshall Plan, Bullard's oil-driven 'domino principle' was of little consequence. Instead, Bevin remained committed to resolving the crisis through negotiation, having proposed an Anglo–Soviet–Iranian Tripartite Commission on regional devolution at the Moscow conference. Whilst Ibrahim Hakimi's government in Tehran remained the most concerned actor at this juncture, raising the question of Soviet interference in their domestic affairs at the United Nations, the Foreign Office was still committed to Allied cooperation. Even Bullard advised Bevin not to support an Iranian petition to the Security Council whilst the Tripartite Commission proposal was still in play.¹⁷

Hakimi's resignation in favour of Ahmad Qavam on 21 January 1946 set in motion the eventual showdown between British pseudo-imperialism, the Tudeh Party and Iranian nationalism in southern Iran. A series of personal notes shed light on Bullard's immediate antipathy towards Qavam. It is detailed that, in his previous tenure as Prime Minister from 1942 to 1943, Qavam had proved susceptible to Soviet pressure due to his personal estates in the north, where Soviet action could effectively hinder his income. This had resulted in the signing of a munitions production treaty highly advantageous to Moscow, and tacit consent to Soviet avoidance of customs charges during the war years.¹⁸

It is unsurprising that Bullard treated Qavam with suspicion, but this provoked strong debate in the Foreign Office. The Ambassador's dismissal of Qavam as a Soviet stooge

found disagreement in the analysis of Eastern Department chief Charles Baxter, who correctly predicted that the new Prime Minister would agitate for Soviet withdrawal from Azerbaijan.¹⁹ This distinction would prove important when Qavam became the focal point for assertive Iranian nationalism during the southern crisis from July 1946.

Therefore, whilst Soviet interference in the Iranian political process was unmistakable, by the start of 1946, the internationalization of Iranian politics was a remarkably one-sided affair. Despite flagrant Soviet violation of the December 1943 Tehran Declaration, pledging respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iran, under Bevin's tutelage the Foreign Office pursued a primarily reactive policy.

This is not to say that the British were publicly silent. Indeed, in February 1946, Bullard noted Iranian gratitude for Bevin's vocal defence of their interests at the Security Council, despite his previous reluctance. However, the Ambassador maintained that the Foreign Office must be careful not to represent these proceedings as an Anglo–Soviet duel over the fate of Iran, containing unwelcome echoes of 1907, but an instance of Great Powers submitting voluntarily to international judgement.²⁰ This suggests a clear move away from traditional imperialist constructs of rivalries over Iran, in favour of an acceptance of post-war international norms. Conforming to this advice, Bevin spoke before the House of Commons that 'I do not regard this Persian affair as a question of competition between Russia and ourselves'.²¹

In more practical terms, Bevin's commitment to non-interference is well attested by his attitude towards Seyyed Zia'eddin Tabatabaee. A former Prime Minister, Seyyed Zia was active in 1946 as leader of the pro-British National Will Party. In a telegram to Bevin, the ageing politician thanked the British Foreign Secretary for his 'fearless defence of the rights of small and weak nations'. This caused some consternation, lending credence to malicious Soviet rumours that the National Will Party was a British instrument.²² However, in reality, it was a purely domestic initiative resulting from Seyyed Zia's outdated political sympathies which enjoyed no support from the Foreign Office. His arrest along with former Chief of the General Staff General Arfa in April 1946 highlighted the sheer helplessness of Britain to prevent communist interference in Iranian domestic politics.²³

Irrespective of Bullard's antipathy, Qavam consistently applied to the British for support as the question of Soviet interference in Azerbaijan was compounded by Stalin's refusal to withdraw occupation forces by the agreed deadline of 2 March. But following a formal protest on 3 March, the Foreign Office defaulted into its traditional hands-off attitude. By 13 March, the State Department was hopeful of British support in raising the issue at the United Nations Security Council, but mirroring his earlier reluctance in January, Bevin favoured allowing Iran to take the lead.²⁴

With the Security Council deadlocked, the Azerbaijan crisis was only resolved through bilateral Soviet–Iranian negotiations, announced by Moscow on 24 March and concluded by 5 April. The resulting agreement pledged Soviet withdrawal by mid-May 1946, in return for Qavam's promise to negotiate peacefully with the ADP, and the formation of a joint oil company in the north. Despite this seeming end to the crisis, Bevin appeared reluctant to remove the dispute from the Security Council agenda until Soviet withdrawal was verified, suggesting a gradual hardening of the British position in confronting Soviet interference in Iran.²⁵

This oil agreement would not be a concession to a private company, as per the AIOC, but to another state, effectively opening the doors for Soviet political penetration. Under

the agreed terms, Moscow could easily claim the Iranian army was inadequate to safeguard their industrial assets, and thus reoccupy northern Iran at will.²⁶ During the Second World War, the Iranian government had been empowered to resist similar pressures for a concession due to the presence of British occupying forces, but by March 1946, Bevin's hands-off policy had created a more noticeable asymmetry between the influence of Moscow and London. During this phase of crisis, British policy remained under the tight control of the Foreign Office, but following the announcement of the Iranian–Soviet oil agreement, the AIOC would come to play a vital role in the erosion of Bevin's non-intervention consensus.

In the aftermath of this bilateral agreement, in the period between April 1946 and the Abadan general strike on 14 July, the difference between the policies of the Foreign Office in London, its representatives in Tehran and the AIOC increased. Regarding the former, R. G. Howe, the Assistant Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East, initiated a comprehensive policy re-evaluation. With communist influence appearing to be on the rise, the construction of a subservient Majlis by the Soviet Union did not appear an exaggerated risk. In this instance, the operation of the AIOC concession would likely become untenable.

Howe postulated three options: to continue applying moral pressure through the United Nations, to enlist United States support in the defence of British interests, or to foster opposition movements inside Iran ahead of the pending elections. The latter would have represented the complete abandonment of Bevin's policy of non-interference, rendering Britain equally complicit in the internationalization of Iranian politics.²⁷

However, during meetings held between 15 and 18 April, this extreme option was overruled. Lancelot Pyman, an Eastern Department expert with responsibility for Iran, was heavily influenced by Bullard's warnings, noting that 'we had to decide whether to continue to support Persian independence through UNO or to regard Persian independence as already lost and to take such steps as were open to us to preserve our own interests in South Persia'. This latter course, which Pyman broadly favoured, could involve interfering in the electoral process by organizing an anti-communist party to oppose the Tudeh, or 'play[ing] the Russian game' of encouraging secessionist forces in southern Iran which would preserve the AIOC concession.²⁸

Ultimately, this course was rejected, in no small part due to Bevin's personal intervention, maintaining the present policy of non-interference and indirect support via the United Nations, having evolved little since the December 1945 Moscow conference.²⁹

This complacency stood at complete odds with the warnings emanating from Foreign Office representatives in Iran, in addition to the AIOC. Bevin believed that his warnings to Stalin at Moscow would deter the Soviets from seeking to expand their influence southwards. In unmistakable contradiction, AIOC Chairman Sir William Fraser argued that, following success in the north, it was only a matter of time before Stalin turned his gaze to the richer oilfields in southern Iran.³⁰

Mirroring Bullard and Le Rougetel's warnings, Northcroft's predecessor as Chief Representative in Tehran, L. C. Rice, despairingly commented following a visit in March 1946 that only the Tudeh were showing any vigour in preparing for the expected elections. Although it appeared that the Tudeh leadership in the south was refraining from forcing a conflict with the Company 'until the right time comes', AIOC experts were in no doubts as to the inevitability of a confrontation.³¹ E. H. O. Elkington, a Deputy Director and former General Manager at Abadan, retrospectively wrote to Fraser that Tudeh infiltration of the

workforce became noticeable in November 1945 and escalated following the withdrawal of British troops by March 1946. Throughout the spring and early summer, local Iranian authorities were disinclined to interfere due to the growing Tudeh power in Tehran.³²

In view of this ominous threat, whilst the Foreign Office was complacently ignoring the advice of its local representatives, the AIOC proceeded with independent negotiations with Qavam. For example, Northcroft attempted to forestall a confrontation in the south by co-opting the Minister of Finance in persuading Qavam to pressure the Tudeh to call off their propaganda offensive in Abadan before it began to sway the workforce.³³ The Company's diplomatic suprema also made representations to the Iranian Cabinet before the approval of the far-reaching Labour Bill on 18 May 1946. Northcroft successfully persuaded the Qavam government to institute a number of revisions, including reducing mandatory overtime rates from 50 to 35 per cent, and restricting workmen's right of complaint to infringement of laws or contractual obligations.³⁴

A Tudeh-controlled strike at the Agha Jari oilfield in May 1946 heightened the strain in relations between the Company and the Iranian government. Even the otherwise pro-British Minister of Finance blamed the AIOC for the deteriorating situation, and ominously asserted that Tehran would not accept any responsibility for future events unless the Company gave an immediate wage increase.³⁵ Similar pressures were exerted by the local Governor-General, pressuring the Company to immediately announce their prior intentions regarding adjustment of wages. The Qavam government's willingness to appease communism caused the British oil men to despair that there was a general reluctance among all parties except themselves to take a strong line against the Tudeh whilst there was still a chance of preventing more serious escalation.³⁶ Although targeted at Iranian policy actors, this criticism could equally be applied to Bevin's Foreign Office in London.

Similar dissatisfaction was noted by Northcroft, whose efforts to explain to Qavam the unreasonable attitude of the strikers met a resilient concern with placing the initiative on the Company. Only after Northcroft stressed the financial loss which would hit the Iranian government if the strike continued was Qavam persuaded to accede to the AIOC's demands: sending further instructions to the Khuzestan Governor-General emphasizing that all steps necessary to maintaining order must be taken, and advising Tudeh leaders 'most strongly' to defer from making further trouble.³⁷ Therefore, setting an important precedent for future actions, Northcroft's oil diplomacy would appear reasonably successful in modifying Qavam's policy: much more effective than the official Foreign Office line.

Comparably, the new British Ambassador in Tehran, John Le Rougetel, attempted to warn Bevin that 'the Tudeh Party were virtually in control ... [and] increasingly under foreign influence ... If this process continued much longer unchecked I personally could see no outcome but a return to the situation of 1907'.³⁸ With the likelihood of both a confrontation with the Tudeh in southern Iran and of communist victory in the expected general elections, Britain was rapidly running out of options. Pressing for a more proactive policy, Le Rougetel argued that 'we can make a stand now ... or we can allow events to take their course until we are compelled to intervene with force in South Persia in defence of our own material interests'.³⁹ Unfortunately, due to Bevin's steadfast support for his self-denying dictum, this prediction almost proved true, with these unambiguous warnings going largely unheeded.

Qavam, however, could see another outcome: bringing the Tudeh into his government in an attempt to nationalize their doctrine. Predictably, this did not obtain Le Rougetel's

approval, who more cynically warned that 'the camel which comes into the city for shelter has a way of upsetting it'. When challenged by Qavam that the Tudeh may not all be real 'camels' (Soviet communists), the Ambassador pithily continued that 'I had seen the camel in various places and one camel looked to me very like another'.⁴⁰ This is highly indicative of the growing polarization of the Iranian situation, with crises in the north and south entailing dynamic interaction with the increasingly nationalist sentiments of the Tehran government. This explosive combination of Iranian sovereign awareness, British oil interests and Cold War fears would prove the ultimate test of Bevin's non-intervention doctrine.

Not unexpectedly, in a Cabinet memorandum of 11 July, the Foreign Secretary tempered acceptance of the worsening situation with characteristic optimism. In contrast to Le Rougetel's claim that 'the prospect of detaching them is, I fear, even more remote than that of concluding an ideological truce with the Soviet Union', Bevin expressed hopes not dissimilar from those of Qavam that the Tudeh may be weaned away from Soviet-inspired communism. Furthermore, the Foreign Secretary asserted that 'I do not myself believe the situation to be as grave as it may appear'.⁴¹ Three days later, Khuzestan erupted into general strike, providing the impetus to finally bring in line the policy discrepancies between Bevin's administration and the Foreign Office and AIOC representatives on the front line in Iran.

In contrast, only two days before Bevin's unfortunate words, Fraser had warned his Abadan staff that even if they were fortunate enough to avoid an immediate strike over the current issue of Friday pay (an Iranian day of rest), before long another excuse would be provided for the Tudeh to manipulate an inevitable confrontation.⁴² On 10 July, Fraser informed his New York representative that the Tudeh were steadily gaining control of the government: a forthright prediction given that Qavam would not bring the Tudeh into his Cabinet until the following month.⁴³ It is therefore apparent that Bevin's reluctant attitude towards the internationalization of Iranian politics was starting to have divisive repercussions for British policy.

With the formation of an Iranian Democrat Party by Qavam and his political supporters, including Labour and Propaganda Minister Prince Mozaffar Firouz, Tehran's position strengthened *vis-à-vis* the Great Powers. Alongside this developing nationalist rhetoric, the Tudeh Party augmented their power in the south-western province of Khuzestan. The Foreign Office Consul-General in Ahwaz, Alan Charles Trott, commented that 'the poison of Tudeh propaganda has spread with astonishing speed throughout the province; the sorry spectacle of thousands of human beings, who after all have a religion and a sort of culture of their own, suddenly turning communist like sheep following their leader is shocking and disgusting'.⁴⁴ As well as containing ample evidence of the chauvinistic attitude with which British officials in Iran approached local politics, this message is significant in suggesting how little the Foreign Office expected Soviet communism to take hold, given its atheist and European character.

Thus taken by surprise, British officials in Iran began to question the efficacy of Bevin's policy. The Consul at Kermanshah castigated this position, which was emphatically not shared by the communists: 'the Tudeh are accepting with both hands the opportunities offered to them, and are filling the gap made by HM Government's hands-off policy'. Astutely summarizing the political reality in which this self-denying dictum left Britain at a severe disadvantage, he continued to rail that 'it is very doubtful if the Tudeh will be kept

from the Russian Consul's doors as easily as the tribes will be kept from the British Consul's doors'.⁴⁵ With an Arab Union created in June 1946, and growing unrest among the Bakhtiari and Qashqai, this theme of tribal secessionism would prove the most divisive factor in Anglo–Iranian relations after the Tudeh general strike.

Rumours regarding an imminent strike reached the Company by 20:00 on 13 July, enabling contingency plans to be rapidly implemented. By 04:45 the following morning, pickets were erected, and only 15 minutes later, security forces in position. This rapid response was effected because the local Iranian authorities, Governor-General Mesbah Fatemi and Military Governor Major Fateh, acted fast in declaring martial law. Such decisiveness was possible for two principle reasons. First, because Northcroft's diplomacy with Qavam had ensured that contingency plans were in place on the Iranian side, and also because Fatemi shared the AIOC's perception that 'we had passed the stage of people trying to better the lot of the workers; and that the present trouble was 100% political'.⁴⁶ Due to ongoing discussions, there was little genuine cause for the strike other than Tudeh agitation.

Deserving much credit for his handling of the crisis, Northcroft immediately visited the pro-British Minister of Finance on 14 July, the day of the strike, who informed him that Qavam had foreseen the possibility of confrontation and authorized Fatemi to declare martial law on the previous night. This would indicate considerable success in modifying Qavam's sympathies since the Agha Jari strike in May 1946, for which both the representations of Northcroft and Le Rougetel can be held accountable.

Nevertheless, the importance of domestic agency must also be remembered. For as Northcroft remarked, with the formation of the Democrat Party to represent legitimate Iranian nationalism, Qavam was desirous of using every opportunity to discredit the Tudeh.⁴⁷ Because the Tudeh-affiliated Central United Council of Workers had signed an agreement rendering strikes in the AIOC concession illegal whilst a government commission settled new wage terms with the Company in light of the May 1946 Labour Bill, the strike was completely illegal in Iranian law, and therefore provided Qavam with just such an opportunity.⁴⁸

Following the return to work on 17 July, the AIOC took stock and reviewed its position. Political advisor and former wartime intelligence officer Colonel H. J. Underwood praised the actions of both the central Qavam government and its local representatives for their firm action in preventing more serious disturbance. Again this can be held as testament to Northcroft's influence as well as Qavam's growingly assertive policy, standing in stark contrast to his earlier reluctance to oppose the Tudeh noticed by both the AIOC and British Embassy.⁴⁹

However, these efforts were greatly undermined by Prince Firouz, in command of a commission including two members of the Tudeh Party Council, who on 16 July released the arrested Tudeh agitators responsible for the strike. As Underwood put it, 'Firouz obviously for political reasons prompted by the creatures who accompanied him white-washed the whole disgraceful affair'. This statement echoes the language used by diplomats including Bullard and Trott to emphasize the otherness and seeming unnatural character of Iranian communism. As a result, the atmosphere remained tense, with Underwood not expecting any improvement until the Tudeh leaders 'are removed for good (dead or alive)'.⁵⁰

Underwood's support for the Qavam government, with the exception of Firouz, stands in contrast to the view expressed by one Foreign Office Consul that, despite the good intentions of local Iranian officials, 'it is the centre which is rotten with Soviet intrigue and as long as that is the case a repetition is always possible'.⁵¹ This disagreement regarding Qavam's good intentions is important in explaining the different policies adopted by the Company and Foreign Office in response to the crisis.

On the one hand, having broadly achieved their aim of co-opting the agency of the Qavam administration in defence of their interests, the AIOC followed a policy of non-interference more akin to the earlier Foreign Office response. A directive from Britannic House instructed the Abadan staff that 'whilst we fully appreciate urgent need for pressure to be brought on Iranian Government it is essential that such request which may be later produced should be confined to need for adequate protection without interfering with Government prerogative of deciding upon ways and means to be employed by them to attain necessary result'.⁵²

In reply, Northcroft's office reassured Fraser that 'we have been particularly careful to avoid giving any impression [of] desiring to interfere in Iranian Government's handling of overall situation'. This was, however, qualified non-interference. Because Firouz, a 'most dangerous man', was perceived to be hiding information from Qavam and blaming the strike on Britain and the Arabs, Northcroft wanted to use influence with more favourably disposed cabinet ministers to counteract this misrepresentation: 'unless influence of Firouz counteracted we can see little hope to re-establish reasonable working conditions in Khuzestan'.⁵³

Further expanding on this, the Company's leadership instructed Abadan that 'present position indicates that we should be scrupulous to avoid showing anti-Tudeh or pro-Tudeh sympathies of any kind'. Given the role played by the Tudeh in the July confrontation, this is only explicable with reference to the delicate political situation in Tehran at the time. Indeed, the Company noted that present Iranian government action was dictated largely due to anxiety to avoid creating an excuse for outside intervention (that is, from either Britain or the Soviet Union), but this was not expected to continue. As the situation stabilized, the Tudeh could potentially secure a Majlis majority and thus increase their influence over the workforce. In such an eventuality, the AIOC would need to confront the Tudeh head-on, but whilst Qavam was still maintaining some sort of equanimity, it was considered sound to avoid making difficulties for him.⁵⁴

This nuanced appreciation of the Iranian political scene was partly enabled because of the quality of intelligence processed by Underwood for the Company. Transcripts of speeches by Khuzestan Tudeh agitators were highly revelatory of both the similarities and differences between their message and that of the Democrat Party.

On 15 July, Ali Pahlevan, Foreman of the Central Taxi Rank at Abadan, incited strikers to raid documents from the Arab Club to prove the collusion of these 'informers and spies of the English' with the Company. Although these suspicions accord with those later repeated by Firouz and Qavam during the tribal uprising of September–October 1946, their tone is notably more hostile, encouraging internecine violence of the sort the Qavam government sought to suppress. Further, Ali Pahlevan declared that:

We will obtain our rights by dint of force; if the Company will not give us our rights, we will break the contract and will give the contract to Russia or another nation. We are masters of

this land and water. If the Company is not willing to give us our rights then it should take its machineries to London and make the Refinery there and leave our country.⁵⁵

Although this contains echoes of the emergent nationalist rhetoric used by the Democrat Party, as seen in Firouz's frequent assertions that Iran would no longer tolerate intervention from foreign powers, it is also noticeably more targeted against specifically British interference.⁵⁶ Due to the ties of international communism, the Tudeh, unlike the Democrats, were willing to limit their nationalist aspirations by acceptance of friendliness towards Moscow.

Comparably, before an audience of 3000 workers, Tudeh leader Ghulam Moradi spoke on 9 July 1946 in a keynote address inciting the general strike. As with Ali Pahlevan's rhetoric, the Tudeh's qualified pro-Soviet nationalism is clear:

Brothers, you should follow the footsteps of Russia. If you do, you will get success. See Azerbaijan, the next door neighbour of Russia, who followed the footsteps of Russia and got crowned with success. We want the union of the world and want freedom in all spheres of life ... Oh, you English, all the world has awakened now, and because of this awakening they are longing for freedom. The time has passed when you put the whole [world] under your yoke ... You must give us our rights whether willingly or unwillingly.

This speech was greeted with rapturous shouts of 'Long live Tudeh Abadan, death to ill-wishers of the nation!'⁵⁷

Even more than the taxi foreman's address, this explicitly reveals the communist agenda beneath the nationalist rhetoric of the Tudeh. Moradi's 'union of the world' echoes the internationalist sentiments of orthodox Marxist–Leninist doctrine. Therefore, although both the Tudeh and Democrats were mobilizing popular opinion behind an essentially nationalist rhetoric, the implications of communist internationalism divided the former from Qavam's party. In such a delicate balance, it is understandable that the AIOC believed itself well-advised to follow a restrained policy.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the Company's relative satisfaction with Qavam's handling of the situation, the July 1946 general strike provided the impetus for the Foreign Office to finally accept the internationalization of Iranian politics and move away from Bevin's position to one more closely in line with Le Rougetel's prescriptions. In June, a Parliamentary delegation had visited southern Iran, reporting to Bevin that there were only two hopes of thwarting Soviet designs in Iran: to support real democratic nationalism, or return to the imperialist partition of 1907. Incredibly, William Cuthbert MP believed the latter alternative more viable, urging that if Tehran would not stand up to defend its own interests, then Britain should adopt unilateral measures.⁵⁸

This was reflected in the initial reaction of the British Cabinet to the July crisis, heavily supported by both the Foreign Office and oil-driven Ministry of Fuel and Power. This was undisguised brinkmanship, dispatching the cruiser HMS Norfolk and sloop HMS Wild Goose to the Persian Gulf near Abadan from 17 to 18 July. Soviet propaganda reacted strongly to this development, in addition to generating rumours that Colonel Underwood was arming the Arabs for a showdown. Back in Moscow, the Soviet press accused the Company with acting like a 'state within a state', allowing its officials to play Lawrence of Arabia in stirring up the tribes: ignoring the reality that the Soviet Union was the only power encouraging regional secessionist movements.⁵⁹

Although justifiably dismissed by the Foreign Office as the result of Tudeh agitprop, the general strike provided much-needed proof that something had to be done to reform the British image. Reflecting the progressive agenda of the Labour government, Bevin suggested this might be achieved by selling the Iranian government a share in the AIOC, but this was treated with total antipathy by the Minister of Fuel and Power:

Even if we were to enter into arrangements on, say, a 50-50 basis, how long would it be before the country granting the concession desired to have a larger say, and we would have to accept a 60-40 or 70-30 basis, or perhaps to drop out altogether?⁶⁰

Eerily foreshadowing the crises of the 1950s, this remark is characteristic of the importance attached to maintaining Middle Eastern oil in western hands. In 1946, an estimated 25 per cent of the world's known oil supplies were controlled by British companies.⁶¹ This would appear to support a revisionist interpretation of British motivations in following a Cold War policy in Iran out of economic rather than ideological interest, and is reflective of the harder line taken by the oil lobby earlier in the crisis.

Thus in the short term, Foreign Office-approved policy represented neo-imperialist intransigence and an escalation of pressure upon the Qavam government. A growing willingness to threaten, if not to completely violate Iranian sovereignty is best typified by the Cabinet decision on 15 July, the day following the strike, to move a brigade of the Indian Army to Basra, a short striking distance from Abadan.⁶² This deployment, Force 401, would consist of 9952 troops, in contrast with 9192 withdrawn from Iraq in accordance with diplomatic obligations. Therefore a technical breach of the Anglo–Iraqi treaty, this dispatch was attacked by the hypocritical Soviet press as traditional imperialist pressure by a Great Power on a small nation.⁶³

In addition to these trademark Soviet objections, the Iranian Foreign Ministry referred to these British threats as 'intolerable', a 'sword of Damocles' hanging over Tehran. Counter-threatening to raise a complaint against Britain at the United Nations, this represented a major escalation in the Cold War competition, with the Foreign Office now pitted against both Moscow and Tehran in a triangular struggle.⁶⁴

Qavam personally requested the withdrawal of Force 401 due to its damaging effect on the prestige of his government. Regardless, Le Rougetel refused to recommend such action until the situation stabilized. Regarding the Tudeh cabinet ministers, Qavam attempted to reassure the Ambassador that 'the Camels were now in the tent and proving quite amenable', but the unconvinced British representative replied that 'I had good reason to believe that there were real Camels still trying to get in'.⁶⁵ Ultimately, Le Rougetel later believed that, irrespective of these protests, the presence of the British deterrent helped strengthen Qavam's hand when, from October 1946, he chose to take action against the Tudeh and Soviet interference in northern Iran.⁶⁶ Preparations for withdrawal were only taken following Qavam's reconquest of Azerbaijan in December 1946 and the triumph of his Democrat Party in the January 1947 general election.

Despite the deepening rift between Tehran and London, Qavam continued to reassure Le Rougetel that friendship with Britain remained the keystone of his policy. However, reflecting the more assertive Foreign Office stance adopted since the Abadan strike, Bevin instructed the Ambassador to press for more than just empty rhetoric: namely, the prosecution of the Tudeh labour agitators. The alternative was an implied threat of continued strain in Anglo–Iranian relations.⁶⁷ This diplomatic pressure is symptomatic of the new

British approach, not sanctioning direct intervention as practised by the Soviets, but increasingly willing to use veiled threats to steer Qavam in favour of an anti-communist course.

Throughout this panic, the Democrat Party emerged as a strong force of Iranian nationalism, challenging Bullard's earlier perceptions of Qavam's clique as Soviet stooges. On 5 August, Prince Firouz addressed a party meeting in which he declared that Tehran would not tolerate any more internal intervention from foreign powers.⁶⁸ This was a key milestone in Iranian attempts to regain their sovereignty. On a basic level, as expressed by the Shah's personal physician, 'the Persians are basically anti-foreign. They have, however, disliked the Russians for 200 years. We are also not liked but are definitely less disliked than the Russians'.⁶⁹ Given that Qavam presided over the Majlis refusal to ratify the Soviet–Iranian oil treaty four years before Mosaddegh moved against the AIOC, perhaps this summary of Iranian nationalism is not entirely unreasonable.

Nevertheless, Foreign Office policy was still one of caution and restraint, not directly intervening in the political process. But during the final denouement of the southern crisis – the tribal rebellion of September–October 1946 – the Iranian Democrats were quick to blame British instigation. As interpreted by the historian Fakhreddin Azimi, the anti-communist nature of the rebellion actually benefited Qavam by providing justification for his cabinet reshuffle excluding the Tudeh, beginning a newly assertive programme which culminated in the defeat of the ADP in December.⁷⁰

Although this would appear to indicate that the interests of Qavam and the British were increasingly aligned, following the initial suppression of the tribal plot, Firouz blamed the conspiracy on Foreign Office and AIOC instigation, particularly Consul-General Alan Charles Trott. Steadfastly asserting Trott's innocence, Le Rougetel found a sceptical audience in the person of Bevin, who scribbled across his report: 'there was a suggestion that we should enlist the tribes and I vetoed it. Are we quite sure that our people right down were told of my decision?'⁷¹ But before the outbreak of the plot, Le Rougetel had indeed passed on this message, providing sound evidence against these charges.⁷²

Certainly the British knew of the developing conspiracy. Le Rougetel admitted awareness of tribal plans since late August.⁷³ But whilst this could be taken to imply tacit consent, since no communication of this intelligence was passed to the Tehran government, and undoubtedly the rebellion served British interests in finally prompting Qavam's suppression of the Tudeh, there is no confirmable evidence to suggest that Foreign Office representatives actively supported the plot.

On the local level, unrest in Fars province brought General Zahidi to power as Acting Governor-General, an interesting coincidence if for no other reason than that the General would become Iranian Prime Minister by grace of the Anglo–American coup of 1953. Back in autumn 1946, Zahidi told the British Consul that he was willing to collaborate with the tribes in putting pressure on Qavam if they laid down their arms, appealing to the British for support since the situation 'had now got out of our hands'. But as the Consul in Shiraz, H. G. Jakins, replied '[the] situation had not got out of our hands *because it was never in them*'.⁷⁴ Trott himself attributed these 'lies and absurd fabrications' to the legacy of Tudeh propaganda, consistently accusing the British with arming the tribes since the start of the Azerbaijan crisis.⁷⁵

With no positive evidence, remembering the decisions taken in April 1946, it seems highly unlikely that the Foreign Office were involved. Ultimately, knowing that the

rebellion would probably go ahead irrespective of their attitude, the British had little to gain and much to lose by intervening directly in the Iranian political landscape, which would undermine the credibility of their policy in the United Nations and potentially escalate into civil war.

Comparably, the revolt threatened to rupture the fragile relations between the AIOC and the Iranian government. Suspicions were raised regarding the friendship between Area Liaison Office Aliston Jeacock and tribal leader Malek Mansoor Khan, and also the latter's association with Aghai Hamsavi, AIOC Administrative Assistant in Gach Saran. The Governor-General used these connections to support allegations that the Company was assisting the tribes: but this is dismissed as completely unfounded. Instead, Jeacock consistently followed a policy of corporate self-interest in balancing contact with all the tribes to maintain their cooperation, with no favoritism or any political support to the rebellious movement.⁷⁶

The tribal leader implicated, Malek Mansoor, who had through bribery obtained a minor local government position, disarmed local security forces at Gach Saran and was refusing to surrender their weapons. At the Governor-General's request, the Company sent a representative to make it clear to Malek that he did not enjoy their support in this matter, that the AIOC regarded his actions as inimical to their interests, and advising him to conform to government instructions. The Abadan Assistant General Manager then spoke to Trott, explaining 'the utmost need that London should not be given the impression that we had exceeded the limits of the clear-cut directions we have received regarding non-interference'.⁷⁷ As stated following earlier accusations by the Tudeh, the idea that the AIOC could support separatist movements was 'unthinkable, when one considers how important it is for the Company to maintain an unassailable position in Iran'.⁷⁸

In one regard only did both the Foreign Office and AIOC become equally complicit with the Soviet Union in the internationalization of Iranian politics: propaganda. Whilst Northcroft had begun the task of reforming the Company's image in Iran through positive publicity in summer 1945, the Foreign Office only began serious discussions of countering the vigorous Soviet campaign of political warfare from May 1946. Even after accepting the need for a more assertive campaign in Iran, Bevin remained typically cautious, desirous of focusing on positive publicity about Britain and the discrediting of communist ideology, rather than direct attacks on Soviet foreign policy.⁷⁹

In practical terms, the positive element of this publicity drive focused on the AIOC, resulting in measures including the publication of a pamphlet in March 1947. Full of glossy photographs of smiling workers attending sports clubs and educational classes, the brochure reminds its readers that 'forty-five years ago the districts in south-western Iran, where the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company now operates, were mostly uninhabited wastelands ... Today the contrast is startling'. As well as benefiting the local economy through vast investments in industry and infrastructure, Tehran had netted £65,000,000 in royalties since the granting of the concession of 1909.⁸⁰

This positive publicity was complimented by the appointment in July 1946 of Colonel Geoffrey Wheeler as Information Officer in Tehran: an enigmatic figure from the Indian Department of Information. Although few records remain of the substance of Wheeler's campaigns, it is clear that the Foreign Office was impressed with his work. Ahead of a meeting between Howe and the Colonel, Lancelot Pyman prepared a brief summarizing that since Wheeler's appointment 'a great deal has been done ... and it certainly seems as

if our propaganda has made a mark'. In terms of white propaganda, Wheeler was cooperating with the BBC to highlight progressive actions of the current Iranian government, but the Foreign Office wanted to observe caution in avoiding giving the appearance that Qavam, following his anti-communist turnaround, was in any way 'our man'.⁸¹ Evidently, following the stabilization of the immediate threat, it was deemed prudent to scale back Britain's slight involvement in the domestic political scene.

Relating to more dubious shades of publicity, the central Foreign Office overruled Wheeler's suggestion of using his old Iranian agents from India to disseminate oral propaganda in influential circles, as this could provoke charges of subversion if discovered.⁸² Similar indecision from the centre was provoked by a plan in January 1947, against the context of the much-delayed Majlis elections, to publish the Canadian White Paper on the Gouzenko spy scandal in Persian and Russian.

The Gouzenko case, in which the defection of a Soviet intelligence officer exposed the extent of espionage conducted by their embassy in Ottawa, would sow suspicion upon the activities of the Soviet community in Tehran. Furthermore, Wheeler suggested the scandal proved that the British Commonwealth was at the forefront of a global ideological contest, not just interfering cynically in Iran to defend their oil interests. In addition, the Soviets would be left in no doubt as to Britain's willingness to confront their own propaganda offensive. As Wheeler succinctly explained, 'I am no more in favour of using half measures in publicity than of pitting Brown Bess against dive bombers'.⁸³

Incredibly, the Foreign Office Northern Department opposed publishing this material in Russian as this would be offensive to the Soviet Union, although Wheeler was strongly supported by Pyman and the Eastern Department.⁸⁴ This starkly highlights the importance of Iran in the origins of Britain's Cold War, with officials equated with the Near East already reconciled to the political reality of a containment policy yet to be universally adopted by the Foreign Office establishment.

In conclusion, by the start of October 1946, the Cold War crisis over Iran appeared to be winding down. On the last day of September, United States Ambassador George Allen visited Qavam, who explained that he was now preparing to radically change his policy to be less conciliatory to the Tudeh and Soviet Union.⁸⁵ It is telling that this information was given out only to the United States, with Le Rougetel informed through his friendship with Allen rather than direct consultation by Qavam, suggesting the seeds of Iranian distrust in British policy had firmly taken root.

But even by mid-August, the immediate crisis was over with the Tudeh firmly in retreat. This was attributed by Abadan General Manager Ivor Jones to the stronger measures taken by the British government, which had in turn influenced Qavam's swing to the right. Jones praised the Cabinet decision to dispatch Force 401, having suggested something similar himself to Le Rougetel in April 1946, 'because it stood to sense than as now that any threat to bring in British troops would stiffen the attitude of the Persian Government towards the Tudeh in order to prevent any possible justification for an actual intrusion with its inevitable concomitant of a Russian intrusion in the North'. But at the time of his first suggestion, 'HMG were all for inaction with the inevitable result that we were at the mercy of the Tudeh'.⁸⁶

Comparable enthusiasm for British governmental intervention was espoused by the AIOC representative in New York, Basil Jackson. Jackson agreed with Northcroft that financial self-interest was an incentive for the Qavam government to allow the enjoyment of

the concession, but that this may prove insufficient to overcome their fear of the Soviet Union. In this case, 'unless HMG is disposed to furnish the Iranian Government with the strongest possible proof of their determination to support them in promoting peaceful conditions in the south, I fear the latter may be unwilling to take the measures necessary.' Bevin's policy was, for Jackson, simply too soft on communism.⁸⁷

The Foreign Office eventually adopted such proof of their determination to resist communism in Iran by approving the dispatch of Force 401 and engaging in proactive propaganda competition with the Soviet Union. But ultimately, despite a more assertive diplomatic posture, British representatives never interfered in Iranian domestic affairs to the same extent as their Soviet counterparts, demonstrated most explicitly by the refusal of both the Foreign Office and AIOC to sanction the secessionist plot of the southern tribes.

During the Azerbaijan crisis from December 1945 to April 1946, the Foreign Office was dominated by Bevin's cautious personality, unwilling to accept the termination of wartime cooperation with the Soviet Union. As a result, the British state was reluctant to take measures to involve themselves directly in the Iranian political process, despite Moscow showing no such scruples. This non-intervention consensus was questioned both by Foreign Office representatives in Iran and the AIOC following the announcement of the Soviet–Iranian oil agreement in April 1946. However, whilst protests from Le Rougetel made little immediate headway, with the full support of Sir William Fraser and the Company leadership, Northcroft achieved some success in representations to Qavam to take a stronger line in southern Iran.

This oil diplomacy was vital in ensuring local Iranian officials could take rapid action following the outbreak of the general strike. As a consequence of the firm stance demonstrated by Governor-General Fatemi and Military Governor Major Fateh, the AIOC was broadly satisfied by the Iranian government's handling of the crisis, so scaled back its diplomatic efforts and warned against involvement in the political process.

In contrast, more concerned with the broader picture of increasing Tudeh influence in Tehran and the potential for a general election to lead to the communization of Iran, the events of July 1946 prompted the Foreign Office into stronger action. Following the lead of professional diplomats including Le Rougetel, Bevin accepted the need for more assertive propaganda, the dispatch of a deterrent force to Iraq and thinly veiled diplomatic threats against Qavam. Initially this policy can be seen to have enjoyed some success, if not in determining Qavam's resistance to communism, then in reinforcing his innate nationalist desire to do so. But in the long term, it would prove to the detriment of British diplomatic interests as Tehran increasingly looked to the United States for leadership. Likewise, the AIOC would find itself increasingly marginalized, culminating in its expulsion by Mosaddegh in 1951.

This slide towards cautious intervention in the internationalization of Iranian politics resulted directly from the growth of Tudeh influence ahead of the 15th Majlis elections and the threat thus entailed to the British oil concession. Although infringements upon Iranian sovereignty were nothing new, as expressed by this paper, the 1946 crisis saw a fundamental shift in reasoning away from traditional imperialist discourses so abhorrent to the post-war Labour government.

The longer term influence of this policy culmination is apparent in the Anglo–American coup against Mosaddegh in 1953. According to the Central Intelligence

Agency report of Operation Ajax, in addition to the need to regain Iran's oil reserves for the West, the primary reason for this most direct intervention was that 'it was estimated that Iran was in real danger of falling behind the Iron Curtain; if that happened it would mean a victory for the Soviets in the Cold War and a major setback for the West'.⁸⁸ As well as illustrating the extent to which the Cold War had evolved as a zero-sum game by 1953, this suggests the concerns espoused by the likes of Bullard and the AIOC representatives had become widely accepted by policy-makers. Evidently the truism that a rise in Tudeh influence over a strongly nationalist Iranian Prime Minister would constitute an implied threat to western interests did not end in 1946.

Despite this continuity between the crises of 1946 and 1953, it is important to note that at no point during the former did the Foreign Office or AIOC favour breaking the final taboo of direct intervention to topple the Iranian government. Nor was it intended to reduce Iran to the state of 1907. Rather, measures such as the deployment of Force 401 were intended to encourage Qavam to take a stronger hand himself in asserting Iranian independence against Soviet action and the spread of Tudeh influence. Therefore, perhaps the Foreign Office dictum that they wished to see Iran 'strong, united and independent' can be accepted with only a few qualifications. Britain desired a government in Tehran which would be strong in support of British oil interests, united against the domestic threat of the Tudeh, and independent from the Soviet Union. But on this basis, to get from 1946 to 1953 was only a very small step.

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