

activity that followed that conference. In this case, the British administration believed that the initiative came from both the communist and Baathist parties in Damascus.³¹⁵

The following section will consider the strikes that occurred in Qatar in 1967. I will then consider the attempts by the British and local governments of Abu Dhabi and Qatar to regulate workers and develop labor laws. At the end, I will suggest that the use of foreign workers became preferable for local governments and the British administration due to the inability of these workers to make claims directly to the state. However, this inability to appeal to the state was not rooted in “tribal” notions of membership. I show that the idea of tribal membership had some fluidity: who could belong shifted and was constructed through networks of kin and obligation. Instead of relying on a rigid notion of tribal membership, I look at these kin networks in conjunction with colonial policies, oil companies’ practices, and local political actions.

Qatar Strikes, 1968

Between 1960 and 1972, the residents of Qatar experienced three regime changes. In 1960, Sheikh Ahmed bin Ali al-Thani came to power after his father, Sheikh Ali, abdicated. Sheikh Ahmed implemented Qatar’s first nationality and labor laws in the early 1960s. He also worked to regulate trade by setting up a trade registry and a chamber of commerce and regulation.³¹⁶ In 1972, Sheikh Ahmed’s cousin and the Deputy Ruler of Qatar, Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani, disposed of Sheikh Ahmed. Similar to Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi, when Sheikh Khalifa took the throne, he cut family spending and increased spending on social

³¹⁵ R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments,” 5 December 1967. FCO 8/70. *RE* (2), 287-300. The persistence of the strong Syrian influence is interesting, as some of the larger groups that were thought to influence workers in the Gulf, in particular the Arab Federation of Petroleum Workers and the Palestine Labour Federation, were based in Cairo.

³¹⁶ Steven Wright, “Qatar,” in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, ed. Christopher Davidson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 117.

programs. Also like Sheikh Zayed, Sheikh Khalifa is considered by many to be the first modernizing ruler of Qatar.³¹⁷

In August 1968, there was a strike in the offshore oilfields run by Shell Oil Company. In part, this strike was notable because it was the largest generalized industrial unrest in Qatar since 1963. It was also notable because workers defied the instructions of the Deputy Ruler, Sheikh Khalifa, to return to work — an uncommon reaction to the Ruler's intervention in Qatar. The British administration in Qatar viewed the strikes as similar to those by laborers in Abu Dhabi in 1963. In both cases, the administration believed that the strikes were spearheaded by a small, organized group of workers who were influenced by outside forces within the Arab world. The majority of workers in Qatar, the British administration believed, participated in but were not excited by the strike. Unlike in Abu Dhabi, worker committees were unable to get all oil workers in the country to participate and the workers at Qatar Petroleum Company (QPC), the other oil company in Qatar at the time, did not participate in the strike.³¹⁸

Workers at Shell first voiced their grievances on August 24, 1968. On August 26, daily-rate workers at both Shell Company and Shell Marketing Company went on strike. Monthly workers continued to work, and they maintained essential services. On August 27, workers at Shell on Halul Island joined and workers communicated between the onshore project and the island via a radio taken from a moored tanker. When the strike began, the Deputy Ruler ordered replacement workers to step in. This was refused by Shell because working on marine operations was very dangerous for untrained workers and because the company feared sabotage. By the end of the day on August 27, the British administration believed that most workers wanted to return

³¹⁷ See, for example, the United State's Library of Congress page on Qatar: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/qatoc.html>

³¹⁸ QPC was a subsidiary of the Iraq Petroleum Company. "Qatar," 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66; State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Assessment and Recommendations," 6 December 1968. LAB13/2164. *RQ* (2), 675-8.

to work, but were restrained by the organizers. On August 28, the workers' committee was thought to be negotiating with workers at QPC and those in government service for a general strike on August 31. It was assumed that if the strike had continued, the intermediate staff would have joined, most likely stopping Shell's oil production in Qatar completely. Before this could happen, on the evening of August 28, the strike leaders saw the Deputy Ruler, apologized for their behavior, and instructed the men back to work, telling them the demands would be pursued by constitutional means.³¹⁹ In addition to working with Shell, the Deputy Ruler also tried to pacify the workers. When Shell refused to pay workers for the days the workers were on strike, the Deputy Ruler said he would personally pay their wages if the workers agreed to give him, in writing, two weeks' notice before striking. The workers' committee refused this proposition.³²⁰ During the strikes, there was no violence or damage.³²¹

The engagement of workers with the ruling family in Qatar was slightly different than in Abu Dhabi in 1963, and the British administration believed workers in Qatar were less eager to work with the current Sheikh or the Deputy Ruler. They also believed that the objectives of strike leaders in Qatar were to "cultivate a more aggressive attitude on the part of the Qatari people vis-à-vis the oil companies, and to encourage the workers to reject the traditional paternalism of the state in labour relations."³²² In addition, it seems that the workers' organization was trying to undermine the position of the government in the strikes. Immediately

³¹⁹ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Labour Strike at Shell Company: August, 1968," 6 December 1968. LAB13/2164. *RQ* (2), 679-80.

³²⁰ This is like the policy the British government attempted to pass in England requiring workers to vote and then wait before striking. In 1968, it was refused by the Trade Union Congress. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/alevelstudies/1960-radicalisation.htm>; State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Shell Company of Qatar," R. Morris, 6 December 1968. LAB13/2164. *RQ* (2), 690-1.

³²¹ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Labour Strike at Shell Company: August, 1968."

³²² State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Assessment and Recommendations."

before the strike, the leaders of the workers' committee had asked to see the Deputy Ruler, but the Deputy Ruler was busy thanks to a visit by the Iraqi Ambassador. The strike leaders did not tell the workers why the Deputy Ruler did not meet with them, giving the workers the impression that they were refused a meeting for no reason. On the day of the strike, the Deputy Ruler told leaders that they had gone on strike contrary to the Labour Law and he would not negotiate until workers returned to work, registered their grievances, and indicated they were willing to wait fifteen days before striking. On August 27, the leaders met with the Deputy Ruler and said they would return to work, but they did not actually do so until after a second meeting on August 28. During the strike, the Deputy Ruler was annoyed, angry, and suspicious of foreign influence behind the strike.³²³

This strike followed upon an earlier strike that occurred at Shell's operations in Qatar a year before.³²⁴ For the British, it was "difficult to understand" the labor troubles at Shell because "Shell was internationally known for the quality of its personnel management and the value it placed on good industrial relations."³²⁵ In fact, both the British and the Qatari government agreed that the management of Shell always properly negotiated with the workers' committee and that the working conditions at Shell were better than at QPC, where there were no strikes. As a result, the British administration and the oil company management decided that QPC workers did not strike because the company was staffed by older, more conservative workers and these workers took a leading role in labor relations between Qatari workers, the company, and the state.³²⁶

³²³ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Labour Strike at Shell Company: August, 1968."

³²⁴ This earlier strike ended due to the mediation of the QPC workers' committee. State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar," R. Morris, 6 December 1968. LAB13/2164. *RQ* (2), 681-6.

³²⁵ *ibid.*

³²⁶ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Assessment and Recommendations."

In contrast, the Director of Labour in Qatar, Mr. Khreis, a Jordanian,³²⁷ suggested that the Shell operation was “trouble prone” for a few reasons. First, it was an offshore operation, which generally caused labor trouble. Second, there were frequent changes on the personnel side, leading to a lack of continuity in policy and lack of contact with worker representatives. Third, the trouble tended to happen when the general manager was away. Finally, several members of the workers’ committee were thought to be irresponsible and “out to make trouble.”³²⁸

The other key problem for Shell, according to Mr. Khreis, was the organization of workers. At QPC, there were two workers’ committees. One of the committees was at the Dukhan oilfield and the other was at the Umm Said terminal. At each location, the committee representatives represented both Qatari daily-rate workers (i.e., unskilled workers or laborers) and Qatari monthly-rate workers (i.e., semi-skilled, skilled, and supervisory). Ideally, the workers’ committees were supposed to represent all nationalities, but in practice they represented only Qatari workers, leaving other nationalities to raise concerns through informal channels. At Shell, on the other hand, there were two different workers’ committees at the same worksite. One committee represented Qatari daily-rate workers and the other represented Qatari monthly-rate workers. The monthly-rate committee was inactive and the trouble stemmed from the daily-rate workers’ committee.³²⁹ The leaders of the committees were becoming “professionalized as the same people tend to be re-elected year by year. The members are working class and illiterate, but they are becoming more experienced and this makes dealing with them somewhat easier.” As the

³²⁷ Opinions of Mr. Khreis varied between QPC and Shell. Shell considered him unhelpful and a source of much of their labor problems. QPC found him to be “uncorruptable” and helpful. State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Shell Company of Qatar;” State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Qatar Petroleum Company (Q.P.C.)”

³²⁸ *ibid.*; State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar.”

³²⁹ Note that in 1966, there was only one workers’ committee at Shell, so there is an increase in the three years of an additional committee. “Qatar,” 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66.

committees became more established, they were likely to refer disputes to the court or to a conciliation hearing.³³⁰

At QPC, the workers' committees did not have a formal legal status, but they were treated as such by the company's management, and the workers' committees were decided by election. In 1967, the elections coincided with Ramadan and the government had decided to postpone them until after the holiday. Suspecting this was a tactic to postpone elections indefinitely, there was unrest at the camps. When the elections finally took place in March 1968, they were well attended and orderly. The tensions seen elsewhere in the Gulf between youth and an older, more conservative generation were also at play in Qatar. In Qatar, the young workers also identified more with the cause of Palestine. At the elections at QPC, the older generation won the election. As a result, "the workers' committees at both Dukhan oilfield and Umm Said terminal were loyal to the Al Thani family. They were very conservative in the outlook, and were bona fide representatives of the labour force, with real authority to negotiate with the Company on its behalf." In part, the loyalty was ensured by the election style. The laborers nominated ten men in order of preference to be on the executive committee. The names were then given to the Deputy Ruler and the first three he found to be acceptable were given the position.³³¹ Despite the formalization of this process, the actual ability of the Deputy Ruler to refuse the workers' choices appears limited. In 1965, a person considered by the Deputy Ruler to lack respect and who was suspected of making "clandestine visits" to Cairo was reelected by the workers at Shell. When the Deputy Ruler tried to block him taking the position, the workers resisted, "confirmed the election," and the Deputy Ruler acquiesced.³³² After the election of the executive committee,

³³⁰ "Qatar," 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66.

³³¹ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Qatar Petroleum Company (Q.P.C.)," R. Morris, 6 December 1968. LAB13/2164. *RQ* (2), 687-9.

³³² "Qatar," 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66.

a new council was appointed. The British believed that this council's representation and organization was based on tribal membership. In addition to facilitating the elections, the company gave the committee space to meet. During meetings, workers took their individual grievances to the committee. The efficiency of the system was seen in the fact that there had been no strikes at QPC since 1963.³³³

At Shell, the management of the company understood workers' committees to operate quite differently. They claimed that the committees had no influence and that there was a lot of dispute among the workers as to their committee. What they did agree with QPC on was that the leaders of the workers' committees were traveling to Egypt where they were exposed to pan-Arab nationalist sentiments. Shell's management also feared that the leaders of the workers' committees were in touch with workers at Kuwait Oil Company and with workers in Bahrain because they showed knowledge of conditions at other oil projects. Despite these beliefs, there was no evidence of workers coordinating with others.³³⁴

The difference in the treatment of worker committees by the management of Shell and QPC reflected the differing managerial styles at each company. At Shell, conflicts often had to be passed along to a supervisor who worked off-site. At QPC, conflict could be solved on-site with a superintendent. The immediacy of conflict resolution and familiarity between workers and management led the British administration to suggest that QPC had implemented a model that

³³³ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Qatar Petroleum Company (Q.P.C.)."

³³⁴ "Qatar," 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66; State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Shell Company of Qatar."

British firms in the Arab world might want to consider mimicking in order to avoid costly strikes.³³⁵

During the strikes at Shell in 1968, the workers demanded four basic things. First, they asked for a raise of sixteen percent, backdated to August 1967 to compensate for an increased cost of living. Second, the workers asked for an increase in annual increments. This increase would bring Shell in line with QPC's pay and had been promised by the Deputy Ruler the year before.³³⁶ The question of wages was, according to the Director of Labour, Mr. Khreis, the key issue in the strike and he narrated the history of this wage dispute in order to clarify the workers position to both the British administration and the oil companies' management. Mr. Khreis said that in early 1967, workers made a deal where they would not receive any wage increases. However, in 1968, with the closing of the Suez Canal, the price of rice was increasing. The workers argued that this was an exceptional circumstance. Shell's management rejected this argument and wages had been a source of dispute ever since. The disagreement over wages was further compounded because the company wanted to link a raise with the workers' approval of a pension scheme.³³⁷ Without approval of the pension scheme, neither QPC nor Shell were able to implement their redundancy schemes and, thus, were stuck with an excess of local workers.³³⁸

³³⁵ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Appendix II: Note on the organisation of personnel management and industrial relations at Q.P.C. and Shell." 6 December 1968. LAB13/2164. *RQ* 2, 695-7.

³³⁶ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Labour Strike at Shell Company: August, 1968."

³³⁷ Both QPC and Shell had developed the same pension scheme. The main difference was that QPC's scheme would only apply to Qatari workers, whereas Shell's would also apply to other Arab workers and South Asians. State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Shell Company of Qatar"; State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Appendix III: Shell Company of Qatar: proposed pension scheme," 6 December 1968. LAB 13/2164. *RQ* (2), 698-707; State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar."

³³⁸ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Assessment and Recommendations."

The result was that Shell was holding out a raise as a bribe to workers. However, the workers' saw through this and refused to link the two issues.³³⁹

The third demand by workers concerned the advancement of *khalijī* Arabs in Shell's administration. The workers were upset by the failure of the company to upgrade certain laborers and to promote certain workshop men who had passed the trade test earlier that year. Finally, the workers wanted the company to cease using contractors because contractors did not hire many locals and the contractors did not pay well.³⁴⁰ Both of these demands addressed the fact that Qatari workers were looking for promotion opportunities in the oil companies and they wanted training in order to take higher positions.

Contract work often caused problems in the 1960s at oil companies, even though the policies for contract work varied between companies. The conditions for contract work were different at Shell and QPC. At QPC "contracting was on social amenity work of direct benefit to the workers (whereas contracting at Shell was still mainly operational in character)."³⁴¹ At Shell, the drilling rig was operated on contract. Mainly Yemenis, Adenis, and Omanis were hired for the positions because they were willing to live on dhows and Qatari nationals were not. The Labour Department insisted that nationals must be hired, but Shell was reluctant to hire nationals as it would cause expenses to rise and they would have to hire twice as many workers. In order to avoid this, the company threatened to send the rig to Dubai or Abu Dhabi for maintenance.³⁴²

³³⁹ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar."

³⁴⁰ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Labour Strike at Shell Company: August, 1968."

³⁴¹ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Qatar Petroleum Company (Q.P.C.)."

³⁴² State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Shell Company of Qatar."

The British administration and Shell believed “the real cause” of the strike to be contract labor.³⁴³ Prior to this time, the Qatari government and the oil companies had signed a provision that limited contracting. According to this provision, contracting could only occur if a few key issues were satisfied: the work had to be temporary or specialized in nature; Qatari nationals had to be hired first if they were available and able;³⁴⁴ and wage rates had to be the same as for equivalent jobs with the company. In the summer of 1968, these conditions had been satisfied and Shell hired contract labor with the permission of the Qatari government. The British administration believed that because workers had agreed to this, they were unable to strike on the issue and were, therefore, merely using the issue of wages as a reason to strike. The oil workers’ resistance to contract labor was, according to the British and Qatari administrations, harmful to the country. It was believed by both governments that “non-local labor was an essential factor in the economic development of Qatar.”³⁴⁵

At both Shell and QPC, as was the case throughout the Gulf, firing redundant workers and, in particular, firing workers who were nationals was problematic and fraught. In the mid to late 1960s, the majority of Qataris were unskilled (*vis-à-vis* the oil industry) and did not have adequate knowledge of English to work in management positions. These workers could be hired for construction phases of oil projects, but the companies had little use for them after

³⁴³ *ibid.*; State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar.”

³⁴⁴ In order to ensure in the future that there were more Qataris to take skilled jobs, the Qatari government was setting up adult vocational training classes based on a model developed in Saudi Arabia. This would allow for Qataris to take highly skilled and professional/technical positions. Once the centers were established, they also planned to accept “suitable trainees from other Arabian States in the Gulf.” State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar.” A detailed explanation of the scheme is given in: State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Appendix I: Note on Industrial Training Project,” 6 December 1968. LAB 13/2164. *RQ* (2), 693-4).

³⁴⁵ State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar.”

construction was finished. At QPC, the management wanted to dismiss a group of redundant workers, but the government would not let them. There were four main reasons for this. First, the government feared the workers would leave, with their money, to find work in Abu Dhabi. Second, the “workers wanted to force the Company to produce a permanent and generous pension scheme.” Third, the dismissal of workers had been the source of QPC labor trouble in 1963 and neither the company nor the British administration wanted a repeat of the strike.³⁴⁶ Finally, the state feared swelling the numbers of unemployed as there was a link between high unemployment and political instability. This was the case of the strikes in Bahrain in 1965. As a result, QPC retained approximately four hundred workers who management had already found to be redundant.³⁴⁷

Oil companies were not alone in having worker redundancies. In government positions in Qatar, over half of the nationals employed were redundant. Similar to the “tribal capitalism” that Davidson posits helped secure Sheikh Zayed’s position in Abu Dhabi, the Qatari government relied on family connections and favors to maintain stability. Nationals qualified for social assistance and “fit men expect[ed] personal aid from the sheikhs connected with their families.” Students who had gone abroad for education also relied on the government to find them jobs that suited their “qualifications and prestige.”³⁴⁸ While both the oil companies and the Qatari government were forced to deal with a large number of redundant workers, not all nationals of Qatar received the same job protection. In 1964, QPC fired some redundant employees. These workers were all members of the Mohennedy tribe. This tribe had some disagreements with the ruling family of Qatar, al-Thanis, and migrated to Kuwait in 1963. Failing to find work there, the

³⁴⁶ State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Qatar Petroleum Company (Q.P.C.),”

³⁴⁷ “Qatar,” 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66.

³⁴⁸ *ibid.*

group returned to Qatar.³⁴⁹ The tribe's uncertain political standing led to the government not protecting all nationals equally. This standing may also have influenced the fact that other workers did not feel solidarity with the workers who were dismissed and, as a result, there was no collective action following their dismissal.

The Uncertain Role of Foreigners in the Oilfields

Non-*khalījī* workers were the easiest to fire when their positions became redundant. In particular, the oil companies' management found that Indians and Pakistanis could be fired without any problems.³⁵⁰ Like the situation in Abu Dhabi, nationals and other *khalījī* workers with connections to the nation were potentially destabilizing. Furthermore, the authority of the Ruler was not always absolute and the consequences of strikes meant the loss of money for oil companies. Managing the population also required heavy investment in policing and armed forces. In contrast, workers from India were thought to be largely apolitical and, therefore, as posing little danger of destabilizing the state government or having the ability to create large-scale work stoppages.³⁵¹ This was particularly true because Indian workers showed no interest in the pan-Arab movements that the British administration, oil companies, and local governments suspected of influencing the *khalījī* and other Arab workers.

In 1968, Jordanians and Palestinians were the largest minority groups in Qatar. Future industrial projects would require additional outside laborers because it would take a long time for

³⁴⁹ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Qatar Petroleum Company (Q.P.C.)."

³⁵⁰ "Review of the Events in Qatar in 1964," British Political Agency, Doha, 2 January 1965. *PG* (24), 359-68.

³⁵¹ One British administrator wrote, that over half of the population was foreigners "and have continued to devote their energies into making money and have not greatly troubled themselves with thoughts of politics." "Review of the Events in Qatar in 1964," British Political Agency, Doha, 2 January 1965; "Review of Events in Qatar in 1970," FC08/1472. *RQ* (3), 566-73.

the government-training scheme to produce enough skilled workers to stop needing immigrants to fill the positions.³⁵² The presence of foreign workers was problematic for many reasons. First, some Arab groups were believed by the British administration to undermine the political situation in the Gulf; Palestinian workers, for example, openly disliked the Qatari and the Jordanian governments. In part, Palestinian dissatisfaction was due to the discrimination they faced. In addition, Palestinians were upset because of deportations from Qatar. Nonetheless, as much as the British believed Palestinians contributed to destabilizing the Gulf, there was no actual evidence of organizing efforts among the Palestinians working in the Qatari oilfields.³⁵³

In the 1960s, the British administration feared that there was discontent in the Gulf due to growing nationalism, the Arab League, pan-Arab movements, and the oil industry. Similar to the destabilizing forces that were thought to influence the 1963 strikes in Abu Dhabi, Palestinians and the Arab Federation of Petroleum Workers were thought to be at the heart of the strikes in Qatar.³⁵⁴ While the British understood the most destabilizing forces to come from other parts of the Arab world, they also feared that labor movements in England and the United States would influence worker committees. In particular, the British administration wanted to “discourage” contact between workers in Qatar and international labor organizations.³⁵⁵ By focusing so much attention on outside influences, however, the British failed to recognize and address the interest of workers in international labor movements or the tensions among Arab workers in Qatar. “Arab” workers were not a homogenous category and not all non-Qataris were viewed the same

³⁵² State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar.”

³⁵³ “Qatar,” 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66.

³⁵⁴ *ibid.* For example, worker resistance to contract work was believed to originate from the Arab Federation of Petroleum Workers, an organization that was opposed to contracting on principle. However, the effect of workers striking against contract work was that they disliked it when it involved non- *khalijī* Arabs, but were not upset by the presence of other *khalijī* Arabs in the workforce. This discrepancy added to tensions at oil projects.

³⁵⁵ “Qatar,” 7054, [illegible] 4/05 530/66.

by Qatari workers. While some Arab workers were considered outsiders to Qatar and their presence, via contract work, was one of the worker complaints during the strike, other Arab workers were considered to be part of the worker movement. For example, one of the three strike leaders was Bahraini.³⁵⁶ This points to a circumstance similar to that of Abu Dhabi in 1963, in which workers who were local were defined more by *khaliji* networks that spanned the Gulf region than clearly demarcated, as the British believed, by recently drawn national boundaries.

Qatari Labor Laws

While the British were wary of outside influences among the workers in Qatar, the Qatari government wanted to join international organizations in order to improve the situation of workers. In Qatar in 1963, the Ruler, Sheikh Ahmed, implemented new labor laws, but by 1966, Shell, QPC, and the Ruler were dissatisfied with the way the laws were being interpreted.³⁵⁷ In 1968, Mr. Khreis, the Director of Labour in Qatar, considered the labor situation to be unsatisfactory. He pointed, in particular, to the issue of workers' committees' legal standing – or lack thereof. The labor law permitted joint consultative committees, but these had not been implemented. This meant the workers' committees in 1968 had no legal status and were not registered with the Labour Department. Instead of restricting committees' activities, however, this situation gave the committees greater leeway to “meddle” in politics. The solution,

³⁵⁶ State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Labour Strike at Shell Company: August, 1968.”

³⁵⁷ Confidential Annex to Qatar Diary No. 1 of 1963. *PG* (24), 80; F 0371/185470: R.H.M. Boyle Letter to G.P. Wall, Bahrain, 17 August 1966, *RQ* (1), 417; R.H.M. Boyle to Letter to G.P. Wall, Bahrain, 7 September 1966, *RQ* (1), 419.

according to Khreis, was to legalize trade unions and specify their responsibilities and limits. In this way, he argued, order and discipline could be maintained in industrial relations.³⁵⁸

A judge of the Labour Court in Qatar also complained that labor relations in the country were problematic and claimed that a major problem was the court's inability to enforce its judgment. This was particularly true in cases in which defendants had influence with the ruling family. In 1968, for example, there were fifty cases in which the judgments were ineffective. According to the judge, "this was contrary to the basic conception of the rule of law and a denial of the elementary rights of the individual worker." Furthermore, the judge argued that non-nationals in Qatar were a "great disadvantage" in the court system. The Labour Code provided indemnities and paid holidays only for Qatari nationals. Other workers could only obtain these benefits if an appropriate clause was inserted in their contracts, and the majority of non-national workers did not have formal contracts of service. As a result, it frequently happened that Qatari and other workers were employed side by side on the same job, but enjoyed different conditions of labor. The whole situation, the judge argued, was due to the influence of the merchants of Doha who wanted a supply of cheap foreign labor. The judge noted that the situation would have to change when Qatar joined the International Labor Organization (ILO).³⁵⁹ Joining the ILO, he

³⁵⁸ Workers' committees were only present at the oil companies. In cases where a labor problem arose with other private companies, the government's position was to "encourage the workers to select a delegate to represent their case. With personal complaints, individuals could always go and complain at the *majlis* of the Deputy Ruler." State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar."

³⁵⁹ By 1967, the only Gulf State to have joined the ILO was Kuwait. The British understood Kuwait's participation in the organization thusly: "[In 1962, Kuwait was] anxious to project itself on the international scene by joining the United Nations and its associated agencies. In 1963 it applied for membership of the International Labour Organisation and sent a tripartite delegation to the annual conference. On arrival, the credentials of the workers' representative (a Kuwaiti Personnel Officer from the Kuwait Oil Company) were challenged by the communist group and by Egypt. Through the mediation of the Arab League Office in Geneva a compromise was arranged. The communist block withdrew its objection; the Kuwaiti delegates took their seats; the application for membership was approved; and the Kuwait Government agreed to legalise trade unions. These were, in fact, set up in 1964 and there oil unions have ever since been under Arab nationalist influence (although not representative of the Kuwait

argued, would pressure the government to “amend its labour laws and practices to conform to internationally accepted standards.”³⁶⁰

In order to cement labor relations and improve labor conditions, other members of the Qatari government also wished to join the ILO. Joining an international organization was not new for Qatar and in 1964 the country had joined the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Health Organization.³⁶¹ As a first step in joining the ILO, the Deputy Ruler had sent a letter to the British Political Resident in Doha indicating Qatar’s desire to join the organization. The British replied that they were against Qatar joining the ILO.³⁶² When pressed on this issue, the British tried at first to defer the conversation. They told the Director of Labour that if all Qatar wanted from joining the ILO was technical assistance that they could receive such assistance without becoming a member and pointed to the example of Saudi Arabia, whose lead the British felt Qatar should follow in all matters relating to international labor politics.³⁶³ However, this reply did not satisfy the Director and he felt that the technical assistance was “irrelevant.” Instead he argued “the object of joining would be to take part in the widespread international activities of this United Nations organization.” To which the Political Resident’s office replied that if Qatar joined the ILO, it would have to follow the rules set by the organization. This meant Qatar would need to send a tripartite committee to the annual conference and include a worker representative in this committee. The British argued

oil workers as a whole).” R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments.” The British understood Kuwait’s participation in the ILO to have caused greater Arab nationalist movements in the country and, they claimed, to have been to the detriment of Kuwaiti national workers.

³⁶⁰ State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar.”

³⁶¹ Review of Events in Qatar in 1964, P. McKearney. 2 January 1965. *PG* (24), 358-68.

³⁶² State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar.”

³⁶³ State of Qatar, “Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Assessment and Recommendations.”

this would be hard to do, especially considering that workers' committees did not have legal status. Therefore, the British argued, "It would be unwise for Qatar to join the ILO unless it was prepared to give full legal recognition to labour unions in the internationally accepted sense."³⁶⁴ Despite the fact that the British were not eager for Qatar's government to recognize trade unions, both the Director of Labour and the Arab Federation of Petroleum Workers were eager to formalize the government's recognition of unions.³⁶⁵

While the British administration did not want Qatar to join the ILO, they were more ambivalent with regard to the country strengthening ties with the Arab League. The British believed that such an association was likely to bring into question state labor policies that the British also found problematic – in particular, the discriminatory treatment between Qataris and other Arabs and the permissive attitude adopted toward Iranian immigration. While the British wished for a stricter view by the Qataris on Iranians in the country, they also feared that closer association with the Arab League would lead to increased demand for workers' associations, specifically, the legal recognition of trade unions in place of the de facto recognition by the government of existing oil company committees. This would allow Qatari workers to organize themselves more effectively and would bring the union leaders into closer contact with pan-Arab and international labor movements.³⁶⁶

The British anticipated that the labor question was likely to become very important in Qatar in the coming years. In particular, they believed the legalization of trade unions would likely be a serious issue and they contended that this issue was political, not industrial. The British argued that the effective mobilization of Gulf workers was a tempting target to three

³⁶⁴ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Record of discussions: Government of Qatar."

³⁶⁵ State of Qatar, "Report on Labour, Industrial and Social Developments: Assessment and Recommendations."

³⁶⁶ *ibid.*

groups. First, it was a potential target to the nationalist elements in Qatar and Bahrain who were frustrated by the lack of devolution of power by ruling families. Second, it could also be targeted by other Arabs working in the Gulf States – Arabs who suffered from discrimination and lack of political expression. Finally, it was a target for pan-Arab political groups as a means to exert pressure and support pan-Arab policies. Despite these dangers, the British cautioned that a negative stance regarding trade unionism was not necessarily the wisest course. They saw the trend in Arab countries towards the development of trade unions. While there was the danger of subversion, unions could also be a major factor in the gradual political revolution of the Arab world in terms of internal social reform and blocking international communism. Therefore, the British suggested that the Deputy Ruler delegate this aspect of government administration to a member of the ruling family; importantly, that person should have sufficient control over the Labour Department and be able to maintain relations with both the oil companies and with international labor groups.³⁶⁷

Shifting Labor Patterns, 1969 Qatar

While members of Qatar's government wanted to implement stronger labor laws and strengthen the position of unions in the country, by the late 1960s and early 1970s fewer and fewer Qataris were actually working in vulnerable positions in the oil industry. By 1969, in oil wealthy countries like Qatar, local people no longer did the lowest level jobs—this position had been assumed instead by migrants. Increasingly, the majority of Qataris had shifted away from performing manual labor. This did not mean all Qataris were rich; indeed, a “minority of indigenous Qataris [were] still living in poorer circumstances” but the British administrators argued that this was because they were “too proud to beg assistance from the Ruler, and either

³⁶⁷ *ibid.*

too lazy, or too backward in education and training, to find themselves a better niche in society.” This led to a stark situation in which one could literally see the contrast between the “very large palaces and grandiose villas” of the native Qataris and the “shanties and sheds in which the mainly expatriate labour-force live.”³⁶⁸

As suggested by Davidson, the discrepancies between the conditions for national and foreign workers were due, in part, to the reallocation of oil money. The huge amounts of oil revenues were beneficial in distributing wealth across Qatari families. According to one Qatari government official, fifty-three percent of the oil revenue went to the ruling family. Of that, ten million pounds went to the Ruler and his immediate family and three million pounds went to the Deputy Ruler.³⁶⁹ From the Ruler, wealth was then redistributed through tribal networks. However, “tribal capitalism” was not the only factor in the decreasing numbers of Qataris working in the oil fields. The British administration and companies’ resistance to recognizing unions and the increased pressure on the state to reinforce security measures meant that the stability of the state was best assured by hiring foreign workers – workers who could be easily fired and deported from the country.

Labor Laws in Abu Dhabi and Colonial Narratives

The development of labor laws in conjunction with labor unrest and oil industry growth occurred not only in Qatar, but throughout the Gulf. In 1966, Abu Dhabi established a labor law and in 1967, Sheikh Zayed, inaugurated the Labour Department. Abu Dhabi’s labor law was similar to the laws established in other parts of the Gulf and was studied in London before its implementation. This law applied not only to nationals of the Trucial Coast or Muslims, but to all

³⁶⁸ E.F. Hendersen Letter (“First Impressions of Doha”) to British Residency, Bahrain, 13 July 1969. *RQ* (3), 15-21.

³⁶⁹ *ibid.*

workers in the emirate. However, the working conditions laid out in the law were basic. So basic, in fact, that the Abu Dhabi Petroleum Company happily viewed them as “reasonable and simple,” noting that “the Company’s own regulations are more advanced” and that the new law lacked even provisions to ensure that workers had access to shade and drinking water.³⁷⁰ The law also sided heavily with companies; it prohibited strikes and lockouts prior to the hearing of the case by a reconciliation committee, forbade violence to persons and property, and forbade workers in public utilities from striking “if such action will endanger public health, endanger life, or cause serious damage to property.”³⁷¹

In conjunction with writing the Labour Laws, the British administration outlined a series of problems that they understood Abu Dhabi to be facing as the state developed. First, there was a problem of wage levels. The labor law allowed the Department of Labour to regulate minimum wages, but a year after the law’s drafting, this still had not happened. An even larger problem regarding wages was that the government had recently issued a schedule of grades and salaries for government employment. The oil companies, in particular, feared that this would cause all wages in the country to rise. Instead of raising wages in the government, the British administrator suggested a family allowances scheme.³⁷² Abu Dhabi government officials resisted this input from the British, insisting that “the worker in Abu Dhabi should benefit through increased wages in the growing prosperity of the town” and that, as the town developed, the average worker would need more money to enjoy these new amenities.³⁷³ They also objected to

³⁷⁰ R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments.”

³⁷¹ Abu Dhabi Labour Law. Appendix B to R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments,” 5 December 1967. FCO 8/70. *RE* (2), 305-7.

³⁷² The Lebanese Social Insurance Scheme, developed by the British Embassy in Beirut, was held up as a model for this. R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments.”

³⁷³ “Note of a discussion with Syed Hussan Jumaa,” 5 December 1967. FCO 8/70. *RE* (2), 302-4.

the family allowances scheme because it would improve the working conditions of nationals, but would do nothing to help the large foreign workforce in the country. Second, the British administration worried that “attempts would be made to subvert labour,” especially because there was not a social security scheme currently in effect. Finally, the development of Abu Dhabi through oil wealth, the British administration argued, would necessitate the development of health and other services. A solution to these problems, according to the British administration, was that a United Nations expert should draw up a scheme for the development of social services based on Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and other Gulf sheikhdoms. The alternative, the British administrator argued, was sure to be similar to “the unfortunate pattern of development in Kuwait and Qatar, where [the] all-important oil industry has been run largely by expatriate labour, whilst the local nationals prefer the easier life in government services.”³⁷⁴ This suggestion moved national and *khalījī* labor out of the oilfields and put these workers solely under the management of the local government.

Another problem facing Abu Dhabi’s newly developing oil economy was illegal immigration. The British feared that as wages increased, so too would illegal immigration.³⁷⁵ Abu Dhabians did not want to take jobs as unskilled workers and preferred more prestigious jobs, such as truck driving and working on the oilrigs. Large contractors were thus forced to hire foreigners to take these jobs and would even send “a truck to the town with the foreman” to get extra laborers if needed. The Ruler drew up a law concerning foreigners, but they had to wait to implement it until the Political Resident in Bahrain offered his suggestions. One key issue that was immediately apparent was the need to better regulate work permits. The regulation of work permits points to the differences in how labor was being understood. The Director of Labour

³⁷⁴ R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments.”

³⁷⁵ “Note of a discussion with Syed Hussan Jumaa.”

issued permits to nationals regardless of skill (red permits) and to all foreigners working in skilled or executive posts (blue permits), but no permits were issued to unskilled foreigners. For the British administrators, not giving permits to unskilled foreigners was a potential source of trouble because it resulted in unskilled laborers not being properly overseen. Increased oversight of unskilled foreigners, according to the British, diminished the risks of internal political subversion. The British tried to encourage the issuing of work permits to all workers by arguing that doing so would be beneficial to nationals. Permits, according to the British, ensured nationals “benefitted as much as possible from the development at hand” by not losing jobs to unskilled foreigners.³⁷⁶ However, considering most nationals refused unskilled labor positions, this seems largely incongruous.

Like the development of labor policies in Qatar, the British administrator offered opinions on the development of Abu Dhabi’s labor laws. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the administration had a very negative opinion of trade unions, especially in the Gulf. The Director of Labour, Sayyid A. Hijazi, was dissatisfied with the current condition of labor laws in Abu Dhabi and wanted to implement a series of reforms. These reforms included Abu Dhabi joining the ILO, labor education that would inform workers of their rights, the recognition of trade unions, the opening of more labor offices in the oil fields, and setting up a Department of Social Affairs.³⁷⁷ The British administration’s objections to these reforms were similar to the objections given in Qatar. In particular, the British administration worried that these reforms would open Abu Dhabi to disruptive outside influences, such as pan-Arab groups.

In conversations with Sayid Hassan Jumaa, a high-ranking Abu Dhabi government employee, a British administrator elaborated the problems with trade unions and the reasons that

³⁷⁶ *ibid.*; R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments.”

³⁷⁷ *ibid.*

Arab nations “had never had the ability” to develop industrial movements. First, trade unions had become the only civilian institution with political significance. This was because Arab countries were unable to evolve adequate political institutions. Second, “in the traditional evolutionary Arab states, it was difficult for trade unions to develop on Western European lines because industry was either relatively unimportant to national security or it was all-important.” Third, Arab nations were “paternalist in nature,” meaning that they protected the rights of workers without workers themselves having to agitate for changes. Finally, given the “the lack of developed political institutions and the banning in many countries of political groups opposed to the ruling regime, the trade unions became a target for infiltration by political forces seeking some form of expression.” When asked if the Abu Dhabi government should try to help develop these unions, the administrator insisted that the change must happen slowly. The administrator argued, “there was certainly no case for formation of trade unions in a primitive society such as existed in Abu Dhabi.” A better solution, according to the British, was a system of Joint Consultative Committees for the oil industry, such as the ones in Qatar.³⁷⁸

This narrative of Abu Dhabi and other Gulf States as primitive societies was used by British administrators to reinforce an understanding of sheikhly rule that relied upon the rulers distributing wealth amongst the population and differential treatment between national and foreigner workers. According to this view, the labor reforms that the Director of Labour wanted to implement were “quite unsuitable for a primitive society in an early stage of evolution.”³⁷⁹ In many ways, this rhetoric by British administrators mimics the discourse that oil companies developed at oil sites in countries as diverse as “Mexico, Iran, Venezuela, Colombia, Nigeria,

³⁷⁸ “Note of a discussion with Syed Hussan Jumaa.”

³⁷⁹ A British administrator reported that when he told this to Hijazi, who had a degree in sociology from a university in London, Hijazi was “extremely frustrated and angry.” The administrator seemed to be at a loss as to why. R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments.”

[and] Saudi Arabia.” In these countries, local populations asked oil companies for development and training. The companies responded with the nineteenth-century idea that “long, slow tutelage” was best for the development of native populations.³⁸⁰ In the Gulf, this view reinforced the role of the sheikh in a “tribal society” to distribute money, provide social services, and protect the nationals in a paternalistic fashion.³⁸¹ While this view of labor relations was contested and debated amongst Abu Dhabi governmental employees, the British administration’s insistence upon tightening measures in order to ensure the stability of the sheikhs or the internal security of the state most often won out.

Conclusion: Evacuating Politics from the Oilfields

In 1963, local laborers working in the oilfields of Abu Dhabi went on strike to negotiate for better working conditions. These strikes were similar to many of the strikes of *khalijī* workers in the Gulf throughout the 1960s. While these strikes contributed to the instability of political regimes during this period, they also reflect *khalijī* networks, the desire for local governance, and Gulf workers’ engagement with international conversations about labor laws that were occurring in the 1960s. By examining these strikes and the responses they engendered among the oil companies, the British administration, and local rulers, we can begin to see their significance as cornerstones in the development of labor policies in the Arabic-speaking Persian Gulf. The strikes reflect a key moment in the shifting demographics of workers in Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and other countries in the Arabian Peninsula. This shift tracks from a time when many laborers, or unskilled workers, were nationals of Abu Dhabi or other areas in the Arabic-speaking Gulf to the

³⁸⁰ Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 40.

³⁸¹ R.L. Morris to British Embassy Beirut, “Abu Dhabi: Report on Labour, Social and Industrial Developments.”

present, when labor is supplied from outside of the region. This shift was not merely a consequence of the new wealth from oil production. Rather, labor movements in the region were instrumental in this transition.

In 1972, the British formally ended their colonial relationship with the Gulf. In the 1970s, the relationship between oil companies and the states further shifted with the formation and rise to prominence of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the subsequent decision of many countries to nationalize their oil supply. Despite these shifts towards state-controlled oil, the evacuation of politics that began in the 1960s continued. One major result is that even today, forty-five years later, there are no *khalijīs* working as laborers in the oilfields of the Gulf; instead, foreigners do the bulk of the work.

Due to the Gulf's labor history, foreign workers in the Gulf are structurally vulnerable. These workers are dependent on their employers for their visa, paycheck, and continued work. They are also disenfranchised and unable to unionize. The labor policies developed in the wake of strikes by *khalijī* workers in the 1960s helped alter attitudes in the Gulf towards foreign labor. In addition, the policies and procedures implemented in the wake of these strikes shaped an approach to labor relations that endures to this day. Through their prescriptive advice and approaches to strikes that often used military or police action to resolve conflict, the British government constructed and reinforced an understanding of Gulf governance that looks today like Davidson's "tribal capitalism." This form of governance had consequences for which types of jobs foreigners and citizens took, as well as the implementation of labor laws in the Gulf. In the next chapter, I look at how this understanding of the Gulf is used to define the *kafala*, or sponsorship, system, thereby occluding the ways in which oil companies and the British colonial administration constructed contemporary labor hierarchies.