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Crude Knowledge: Petro-Periodicals and Resource Sovereignty

Laleh Khalili 

The Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

Email: l.khalili@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

The period of struggle over hydrocarbon sovereignty in the Arab world—the 1950s–1970s—saw a spate of periodicals in Arabic about oil. These included periodicals produced by the public relations departments of Euro-American oil companies, as well as monthlies, weeklies and quarterlies produced by Arab journalists, experts, and former oil revolutionaries in Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut and Kuwait. This essay argues that the trajectory of these latter publications—both their context and content—traces the massive political transformations that saw a shift of power in the region, alongside a radical transformation in the representation of oil from a public good into a private property.

Keywords: Arab countries; colonialism; commodification; journalism; oil companies

Oil companies in the Middle East began to publish Arabic-language magazines in the 1950s. The best-known titles produced by the public relations departments of Aramco (whose largest shareholder at the time was Standard Oil of California, later Chevron) and the Iraq Petroleum Company (one of whose major shareholders was the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, later British Petroleum) had high production values and were widely disseminated. In the 1960s and 1970s, these oil company glossies were joined by seven new oil and gas periodicals produced in Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, and eventually Kuwait; these seven periodicals were published by Arab political and business organizations, rather than Euro-American oil companies. This article is about these seven oil and gas periodicals.

The knowledge produced in these seven periodicals and the conditions of their production and publication map the cataclysmic politics of resource sovereignty in the Arab world, and occasion two specific arguments about their context and content. First, the milieu of their publishing and their editorial staff bind together and imagine the whole of the Arab world—both the producing and nonproducing states—into a singular, although uneven, political petroscape. The breadth of this petroscape was a way of recuperating the pan-Arab conceptualization of oil as a general public good for all Arabs across borders, a conceptualization that has since been erased from popular consciousness with the particularization of oil within the narrower bounds of nation-states in the region. Second, these periodicals' treatment of oil and gas as a resource traces the way the fiction of oil as a commodity is challenged and subverted during decolonization, and subsequently reconstituted after nationalization. This process of politicization of oil during the struggle for resource sovereignty and its ensuing commodification also affect the entire knowledge regime

around oil. The quality of the knowledge produced on the pages of these periodicals shifts during this period from lucid, expansive, and political while decolonizing, to jargon-ridden, fragmentary, and hypertechnical after nationalization.

The main period of study in this article comprises the decades of decolonization following World War II. As struggles for independence in this period intensified, the newly decolonized or independent states' demands for sovereign control over their political affairs were further augmented by calls for sovereign rights over their natural resources.¹ In 1957, 63.9 percent of the world's oil was "owned" by US companies, most of which were outgrowths of Standard Oil, and 14.5 percent of the world's oil was owned by British Petroleum or Shell Oil.² The remainder, a little over 20 percent, was either claimed by smaller European or Canadian firms or was in the hands of state-owned enterprises, for example in the Soviet Union and Mexico. By the late 1980s, the control of oil had passed from the Seven Sisters to state-owned enterprises or had been subjected to dramatically modified participation agreements favoring the oil-producing states over the Euro-American companies.³ The nationalization of oil and the emergence of new participation agreements across the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America in those decades put in motion what historian Christopher Dietrich has called "the most concentrated nonviolent transfer of global wealth in human history."⁴

¹ Petroleum was first mechanically extracted in commercial quantities from oil wells in Pennsylvania and in Azerbaijan in the late 1850s. In the United States, John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil soon monopolized the transport and refining of oil. In Baku, the Nobel and Rothschild families were among the prominent actors in the industry. The first decade of the 20th century saw lavish oil concessions granted to British, US, and Dutch firms in the Caribbean Basin, Burma, Iran, and Java. By the end of World War II, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company held concessions in Iran, had subsidiaries with interests in Kuwait, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Oman, and was part of consortia in Iraq and Bahrain. Various progenies of Standard Oil in turn held concessions in Saudi Arabia and were members of consortia in Iraq and Bahrain. The nationalization of Azeri oil after the 1917 Soviet revolution and of Bolivian and Mexican oil in the 1930s was followed by Mohammad Musaddiq of Iran nationalizing Anglo-Iranian in 1951. The reversal of Iranian nationalization in 1953 was followed by the establishment of OPEC in 1960, and the gradual wresting of control of oil by the producing nations between the late 1960s and early 1980s. For more on the history of oil in toto, see Adam Hanieh, *Crude Capitalism: Oil, Corporate Power, and the Making of the World Market* (London: Verso, 2024), and the comprehensive if problematic account in Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2009). For histories of individual oil companies, see Ida Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1904); Ralph Hidy and Muriel Hidy, *Pioneering in Big Business 1882–1911* (New York: Harper, 1955); Ronald Ferrier and James Bamberg, *The History of British Petroleum*, vol. 1, *The Developing Years, 1901–1932* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); James Bamberg, *The History of British Petroleum*, vol. 2, *The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928–1954* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); James Bamberg, *British Petroleum and Global Oil 1950–75: The Challenge of Nationalism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontiers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Joost Jonker, J. L. van Zanden, Stephen Howarth, and Keetie E. Sluyterman, *A History of Royal Dutch Shell*, 3 vol. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); Joseph Pratt and William Hale, *Exxon: Transforming Energy 1973–2005* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013); Steve Coll, *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power* (London: Penguin, 2013); Steve Coll, *The Taking of Getty Oil: Pennzoil, Texaco, and the Takeover Battle That Made History* (New York: Open Road Media, 2017); Katayoun Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil: An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

² *Middle East Economic Digest* 2, no. 18 (1958): 219.

³ The Seven Sisters included British Petroleum (formerly the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company); Royal Dutch Shell; Texaco; Gulf Oil; Exxon/Esso (Standard Oil of New Jersey); Mobil (Socony Vacuum/Standard Oil of New York); and Chevron (Standard Oil of California). See Anthony Sampson, *The Seven Sisters: The Great Oil Companies and the World They Made* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976).

⁴ Christopher Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 4. In the Middle East, the Iranian prime minister Mohammad Musaddiq nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951. Anglo-Iranian responded by coordinating boycott of Iranian oil by the oil majors, and the British government policed and arrested tankers leaving Iranian oil terminals. Musaddiq's heroic but failed efforts further spurred the anticolonial oil elites toward coordination and

The research for this article encompasses the vast majority of the corpus of the periodicals produced independently of the US- and British-owned oil companies, as well as a sample of the oil company–produced Arabic-language periodicals across the decades.⁵ It is worth noting that complete runs of these journals are as rare as hens’ teeth, and even systematic data on start and end dates for their publication or who their editors were and where they were published are often hard to pin down. In an article in the 1988 bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), the author lamented that Arabic periodicals were published irregularly and were deficient in their bibliographic data.⁶ This also is applicable to Arabic-language periodicals about oil and gas.⁷ When possible, I have indicated bibliographic information I have gleaned from searches in Arabic and English databases, bibliographies, and library catalogs. Biographical details about the actors, including their birth years, educational background, years in public service or private employment, and their roles, are often difficult to find and frequently diverge from source to source. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

Most of the research for this article was conducted in the Yafet Library at the American University of Beirut, where this extraordinarily precious research resource is stored in sub-basement rooms rarely accessed by anyone, to make room for student study spaces upstairs. The life of these hugely important historic records echoes the fate of much other knowledge production in the region: at best, a lack of funding that leaves libraries and other repositories constrained in their ability to care for these resources, and at worst, dispersions caused by successive wars and political upheavals or suppression by repressive regimes and their proxies.

Oil Publishing

The major oil companies that controlled Middle Eastern oil until the latter part of the 20th century were in effect company states, corporate sovereigns for whom concession agreements gave territorial and political control over the countries where they extracted oil.⁸ They operated in conjunction with the US and British militaries and government representatives in the region, fueled their war machinery, and provided them with intelligence collected on the ground.⁹ These oil firms not only built infrastructures necessary for the extraction and export of petroleum, but also established services that could guarantee them

collaboration in their struggle for oil sovereignty. Among these efforts was the formation of OPEC at the invitation of ‘Abd Allah al-Turayqi of Saudi Arabia and Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo of Venezuela in Baghdad in 1960, with Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela as founding members. In the decades that followed both oil “revolutionaries” and “reformists” pushed toward producing states receiving more equitable shares of oil revenues and profits than the Euro-American major oil companies. The story of nationalization struggles is magisterially recounted in Dietrich, *Oil Revolution*. Also see Nathan Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa’ud and the Making of US–Saudi Relations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); and Giuliano Garavini, *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵ For details of the publishing run of these periodicals and the volumes consulted for this article, please refer to Tables 1 and 2.

⁶ Ubaidly, “Indexing Arabic Periodicals: Problems and Prospects,” *BRISMES Bulletin* 15, no. 1/2 (1988): 87–100.

⁷ For the sake of brevity, I will refer to periodicals about oil and gas as petro-periodicals.

⁸ Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom*; Philip Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011); Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020), 87–94.

⁹ Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom*; Laleh Khalili, “The Infrastructural Power of the Military: The Geoeconomic Role of the US Army Corps of Engineers in the Arabian Peninsula,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 4 (2018): 911–33.

a robust—although inevitably racialized – labor force.¹⁰ Between them, the oil firms defined borders, boundaries, and legal territorial designations both onshore and off, created new regimes of property, and implanted new standards of engineering, accounting, and project management. Crafting consent, at first among their employees and later amid anticolonial, revolutionary, and nationalist populations, was a crucial function of the ideological apparatus of this quasi-state formation, and among the instruments of this ideological apparatus were magazines and films.

Euro-American oil companies published both glossy magazines for the public and mimeographed newsletters for their employees. Aramco's English-language publications included their in-house newsletter, *Sun and Flare* (1945–76; renamed *Arabian Sun*) and their public-facing glossy magazine *Aramco World* (1949–present). Corresponding periodicals for the Iraq Petroleum Company were the in-house *The Crescent* (1960–73) and the public *Iraq Petroleum* (1951–60).¹¹ *Aramco World* and *Iraq Petroleum* published archaeological and artistic knowledge of the “East” that at once exoticized and demystified the region. The two oil companies also published Arabic-language magazines that were intended to influence local populations (Table 1).

Aramco's *Qafilat al-Zayt* (The Oil Caravan, whose name changed to *al-Qafilah* or The Caravan in 2003) began publication in 1953 amid worker mobilization at the company that culminated in a strike by 13,000 workers in October of that year.¹² Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) published *Ahl al-Naft* (The People of Oil) between 1951 and 1962, which was replaced by *al-'Amilun fi al-Naft* (Workers in Oil; 1961–72). The dates are significant. The publication of IPC's Arabic-language magazine began when, in the wake of a fifty-fifty participation agreement with the government of Iraq, the company established a public relations company intended to explain “the company's operations in Iraq to internal company employees as well as the general public.”¹³ *Ahl al-Naft* and *'Amilun fi al-Naft* straddle General 'Abd al Karim Qasim's promulgation of Law 80 in December 1961 in Iraq.¹⁴ The law stripped the IPC of 99.5 percent of its concession areas in Iraq. The latter magazine ceased publication

¹⁰ Ian Secombe and R. I. Lawless, “Foreign Worker Dependence in the Gulf and the International Oil Companies: 1910–15,” *International Migration Review* 20, no. 3 (1986): 548–74; Abdulrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Vintage International, 1987); Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*; Michael Dobe, “A Long Slow Tutelage in the Western Ways of Work: Industrial Education and Containment of Nationalism in Anglo-Iranian and Aramco, 1923–1963” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2008); Khalili, *Sinews*, 53–57; Karine Walther, “‘The Same Blood As We in America’: Industrial Schooling and American Empire,” in *Religion and US Empire: Critical New Histories*, ed. Tisa Wenger and Sylvester Johnson (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

¹¹ The *Sun and Flare/Arabian Sun* and *Aramco World* archives can be found at <https://www.aramcoexpats.com/sun-and-flare> and <https://archive.aramcoworld.com>, respectively. *Iraq Petroleum* has not been digitized, but a range of libraries hold its entire back catalog.

¹² On the 1953 strikes, see Toby Matthiessen, “Migration, Minorities, and Radical Networks: Labour Movements and Opposition Groups in Saudi Arabia, 1950–1975,” *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 3 (2014): 473–504; and Rosie Bsheer, “A Counter-Revolutionary State: Popular Movements and the Making of Saudi Arabia,” *Past and Present* 238, no. 1 (2018): 233–77. On *al-Qafilah* see their account of the periodical's history published on the seventieth anniversary of its emergence, “al-Mamlaka Bi'ayun al-Qafilah fi Sab'in 'Amman,” 2023, <https://qafilah.com>.

¹³ Mona Damluji, “Visualizing Iraq: Oil, Cinema, and the Modern City,” *Urban History* 43, no. 4 (2016), <https://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/urban-sights-visual-culture-and-urban-history/damluji-a-cinematic-history-of-baghdad>.

¹⁴ Following the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq in 1958 by General 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, the government in Iraq attempted to secure a better deal from the Iraq Petroleum Company, while also beginning coordination with other oil nationalists in the region and beyond. Qasim's government hosted the first OPEC meeting in Baghdad in 1960, and in December 1961 his government passed Law 80, which reverted control over the vast majority of the land given to the IPC back to Iraq, while not affecting the production of oil. After the Ba'ath Party coup in 1963 and consolidation of power in the hands of Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr in a subsequent coup in 1968, the Iraqi government announced the nationalization without compensation of IPC production (with the exception of fields in Kirkuk and Zubayr) in January 1972.

Table 1. Arabic-Language Magazines Published by Euro-American Oil Companies

Name of periodical	Place of publication	Years published	Years consulted	Publisher and initial editor in chief
<i>Ahl al-Naft</i> (People of Oil)	Beirut	1951–1962	Smattering across the years of publication	Iraq Petroleum Company
<i>Al-Amilun fi al-Naft</i> (Workers in Oil)	Baghdad	1961–1972	1963–1965	IPC and the Iraqi Ministry of Oil; Lutfi Amin Fawzi (owner); Fakhri Khalil Aziz (editor)
<i>Qafilat al-Zayt</i> (The Oil Caravan) <i>Al-Qafilat</i> (The Caravan)	Dhahran, Saudi Arabia	1953–2023 and 2003–present	1953–present	Aramco; Hafiz al-Barudi and soon after Shakib al-'Awami

after the passage of Iraqi Law 69 in 1972, which “unilaterally transferred ownership of the IPC” (with the exception of the Basra Oil Company) to the Iraqi National Oil Company.¹⁵ The magazines published by the oil companies had the clout and resources to publish some of the best journalists, researchers, writers, and photographers working in the region.¹⁶

By contrast, the other Arabic-language magazines and journals that dealt with oil in those decades map the extraordinary political and social transformations of that time period. It is no surprise that all these periodicals began publishing shortly after the founding of OPEC (1961), and in the case of the Egyptian *al-Bitrul* (Petroleum), almost exactly ten years after the coup d’etat that reversed Muhammad Musaddiq’s nationalization of Iranian oil.

Everything about these periodicals—their language, their very material feel, their editors and editorial boards, their places of publication, and the trajectories of their publication—opens windows onto the processes of knowledge production in the region and their gradual ossification. The aforementioned article in the *BRISMES Bulletin* about inadequacies of Arabic-language publishing also criticizes Arabic periodicals’ lack of vitality. This assessment bears no relation to the reality of the independent Arabic-language oil journals published in the period of decolonization. These were vibrant spaces of intellectual debate, forums for eloquent polemics, and sites of articulating novel visions of a decolonized future. The journals and magazines that followed them from the mid-1970s onward, however, had different purposes and functioned much more as institutional or state mouthpieces, despite the involvement of intellectuals and scholars of note.

In this essay, I discuss the following magazines and journals (Table 2). These specialist periodicals were not the only serial publications discussing oil. Finance and economics

¹⁵ Ralph Lake and David Reitsema, “The Iraqi Nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company: Implications for the International Law of Expropriation,” *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 2 (1972): 217–30; Michael E. Brown, “The Nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979): 107–24; Brandon Wolfe-Humnicutt, *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 210.

¹⁶ Andrew Barry, “The Oil Archives,” in *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas*, ed. Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason, and Michael Watts (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 95–107; Damluji, “Visualizing Iraq”; Tiffany Floyd, “Floating on Oil and Antiquities: Iraq Petroleum, *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* and Iraqi Cultural Modernism,” *Journal of Contemporary Iraq and the Arab World* 15, no. 1/2 (2021): 85–101; Nelida Fuccaro, “The Oil Company’s Fields of Vision: Public Relations and Labour Images in the Arab World,” in *Life Worlds of Middle Eastern Oil: Histories and Ethnographies of Black Gold*, ed. Nelida Fuccaro and Mandana Limbert (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 87–119; Tiffany Floyd, “*Ahl al Naft*: An Adventure,” *Sawt al-Arsheef*, 2023, al Mawrid, NYU Abu Dhabi.

Table 2. Arabic-Language Magazines Published Independently of Euro-American Oil Companies

Name of periodical	Place of publication	Years published	Years consulted	Publishing organization and initial editor in chief
<i>Al-Bitrul</i> (Petroleum)	Cairo	1963–present	1963–2013	Egyptian Ministry of Oil; Muhammad Shawkat
<i>Majalla al-Bitrul wa-l-Ghaz al-'Arabi</i> (Arab Petroleum and Gas Magazine)	Beirut	1965–1971 (in Arabic) 1969–2011 (in French)	1965–1971	Arab Centre for Petroleum Studies; Naqula Sarkis, 'Abd Allah Turayqi until 1969
<i>Al-Risala al-Bitrul al-'Arabi</i> (Arab Petroleum Newsletter)	Beirut	1967–1976 ^a	1967–1969	Institute of Arab Petroleum; Sulayman Furzuli
<i>Naft al-'Arab</i> (Arab Oil)	Beirut/ Kuwait	1969–1975 ^b	1969–1975	'Abd Allah Turayqi's Oil Consulting; 'Abd Allah Turayqi
<i>'Alam al-Naft</i> (The World of Oil)	Beirut/ Cyprus/ Beirut	1968–1996	1968–1996	House of Translation and Publishing; Makram 'Atiyya (general director), Raja Saydawi (first named as EIC in late 1971)
<i>Al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya</i> (Oil and Development)	Baghdad	1975–1981	1975–1981	Revolution House (backed by the Government of Iraq); Abdulrahman Munif
<i>Al-Naft wa-l-Ta'awun al-'Arabi</i> (Oil and Arab Cooperation)	Kuwait	1975–present	1975–present	OAPEC; 'Abd al-'Aziz Watari

^aAhmad Mustafa Shaqaliyya, *al-Naft al-'Arabi wa Sina'at Takriruhu: Dirasa fi Jughrafiya al-Taqa wa-l-Sina'a* (Jidda: Tihama, 1980). Shaqaliyya cites the 1976 issue of the magazine.

^bMuhammad Sayf, "Mudir A'mal al-Turayqi fi al-Manfa: al-Sayyid Farid Junblat," *Elaph News*, 1, 2 June 2003; <https://elaph.com/Web/Archive/1054532099730733000.htm>. A bibliographic resource puts the end date at 1980, although I have not been able to otherwise confirm this end date. W. Valid Sharif, *Oil and Development in the Arab Gulf States: A Selected Annotated Bibliography* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 57.

magazines of this period all had substantial sections dedicated to oil news. But the seven magazines listed are distinctive in being solely dedicated to knowledge production about oil and gas, independently of the Euro-American oil companies. As such they are noteworthy emblems of this moment of political transformation.

Context: The Petrospheres of Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, Kuwait

A cliché of Arab literature has it that "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads." The landscape of petro-periodicals in the Arab world in the period under study reflects the flourishing publishing landscape in general, but also includes specificities arising from the political contexts and social life of these centers of reading, writing, and debate. Cairo was the home of Nasserist Arab nationalism; Beirut, the vibrant haven for Arab dissidents and exiles; and Baghdad was both a major cultural center and the most significant oil-producing capital among the three. All three were important nodes in the production of knowledge about petroleum and sites of struggle over its conceptual definition. Kuwait joined the trio as

a hub of knowledge production, destination for Palestinian intellectuals and experts, and site of political ferment.

The Egyptian Public Institute for Petroleum began publishing *al-Bitrul* in 1963. By this point, Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq of Iran had nationalized Iranian oil (1951) and been deposed in a coup (1953), the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) had been formally constituted (1961), and coups in Iraq and Syria (1963) had transformed the political landscapes there. The world's five largest producing countries in 1963 were, in order of production volume: the United States, the Soviet Union, Venezuela, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Egypt was systematically surveying onshore and offshore for reservoirs of oil and gas, and the head of the institute introduced the first issue with a brief message about the centrality of oil to the country. The magazine's inaugural editor in chief, Muhammad Shawkat, remained in that role until 1998. Of the seven periodicals, *al-Bitrul* was the only one to ever have a woman editor in chief; Layla Abu al-'Atta assumed the role for two years after Shawkat stepped down, before ceding the post to Hamdi 'Abd al-'Aziz. Abu al-'Atta had been a long-time petroleum journalist and had written for *al-Bitrul* for decades.¹⁷

Because *al-Bitrul* was published by the Ministry of Oil, its trajectory reflects transformations in the Egyptian state itself. When it represented the Nasserist state, its articles covered a gamut of subjects, from oil workers' unions to the legal landscape of concessions. Under Anwar al-Sadat's *infitāh* (liberalization) policies, it became more staid, began to accept advertisements from petroleum and hydrocarbon service companies, and dropped discussions of regional or global politics beyond geopolitical clichés. In the 1980s, the language of security began to dominate. *Al-Bitrul* continues to be published, albeit in an arid hypertechnical format targeted at a tiny readership of petroleum engineers. The magazine's persistence is a testament to the state backing for its publication, and its depoliticization has guaranteed its continued publication in the repressive atmosphere of authoritarian Egypt.

The fate of the four periodicals that began their life in Beirut is also illustrative of their particular context. They all began publication in the 1960s and were forced to shut down or relocate overseas because of political pressures or civil war. In the 1960s and until the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, Beirut was what Zachary Cuyler has persuasively called a "non-producing petrostate."¹⁸ Lebanon was a terminus of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), and Beirut served as the headquarters for a number of oil and gas service companies and construction firms, as well as a haven for pan-Arab political organizations and exiled dissidents.¹⁹ Beirut also was only twenty miles away from the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS) in Shemlan (nicknamed "the British spy school"), where many oil and gas executives took Arabic-language instruction.²⁰ As the finance, banking, and trade center of the Arab world, it was the meeting place of politicians, business moguls, journalists, and assorted other people who gathered intelligence, news scoops, and insider information for their businesses.

¹⁷ Walid Khadduri argues that although historically female Arab petroleum journalists were rare, today some of the best Arab journalists reporting on oil and gas for Reuters, Bloomberg, and other business news outlets are women. Online interview with Khadduri by the author, 18 September 2023.

¹⁸ Zachary Cuyler, "Fossil Lebanon: Oil and the Terrain of Politics in Lebanon, 1920–1978" (PhD diss., New York University, 2023).

¹⁹ The Trans-Arabian Pipeline extended from Saudi Arabia's oil-processing plants on the Persian/Arabian Gulf coast to Saida (or Sidon) in Lebanon. The pipeline was initiated in 1950, was subjected to sabotage by Arab guerrilla groups during its operation, especially after the Israeli occupation of Golan in 1967, through which the pipeline passed. The pipeline ceased operating beyond Jordan in 1976, and altogether in 1990.

²⁰ James Craig, *Shemlan: A History of the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998); Juliette Desplat, "A British 'Spy School' in the Middle East?" *UK National Archives Blog*, 3 March 2017, <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/british-spy-school-middle-east-centre-arab-studies>.

Although it was not known at the time, in 1957 Aramco put forward funds for Palestinian journalist and publisher Fu'ad Itayim to produce the *Middle East Economic Survey* in Beirut. *MEES* was a weekly English-language newsletter dedicated to reporting and analyzing the minutiae of oil news.²¹ When *Petroleum Week's* Wanda Jablonski visited the bar at Beirut's Saint-George hotel in 1956, she “ran into several Aramco senior executives, two auditors from Price Waterhouse, the British ambassador, and of course Mac Macpherson.”²² James “Mac” Macpherson had been a former executive of Aramco, and at the time of Jablonski's visit was an adviser to King Saud of Saudi Arabia, whose then minister of oil and minerals was ‘Abd Allah al-Turayqi.²³

Turayqi belonged to a generation of young men and women in the Middle East—indeed the whole of the global South—who, as waves of decolonization swept the region, imagined a different future for their countries.²⁴ Turayqi, who was born to a Najdi father and a Kuwaiti mother, received an undergraduate degree in geology and chemistry from the University of Cairo, and from there traveled to Austin, Texas, where in 1947 he graduated with a Master of Science degree in petroleum engineering and geology. Turayqi worked for Texaco for a year before returning to Saudi Arabia.²⁵ Mustafa Hafiz Wahba, a Cambridge-educated economist and one of the founders of the Saudi Communist Party, recalled that Turayqi was first placed in the Ministry of Finance after his return, and gathered young, educated Arab men around him in order to develop the institutions of a modern state. Wahba recalled, “We wanted engineers, accountants, and geologists, and this required time. We were in a hurry and had no time.”²⁶ Turayqi eventually became the minister of petroleum and minerals. As a US diplomat in Saudi Arabia bluntly put it, Turayqi was one of the “commoners” who gained from a political rejigging in Saudi Arabia. The implication was that he was not to be taken as seriously as the royals in ministerial positions. As Turayqi's ascent to power accelerated, however, so did the apprehension of Aramco and US officials about this charismatic and serious man. US officials' diplomatic cables are rife with fearmongering about his desire to gain sovereign control over the oil. One diplomat in Saudi Arabia reported to Washington that he had met with King Saud to discuss Turayqi's initiatives:

²¹ Today, *MEES* proudly declares its origins on its website, but almost ten years after its founding US diplomats in Beirut would report back to the US Department of State that it was “widely assumed in Beirut journalist circles that MEES [is] subsidized by Saudis”; “Saudi Conditions for Cooperation: MEES Article,” 14 May 1975, WikiLeaks Public Library of US Diplomacy, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975BEIRUT06170_b.html.

²² Anna Rubino, *Queen of the Oil Club: The Intrepid Wanda Jablonski and the Power of Information* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 106. Also see Said K. Aburish, *The St George Hotel Bar* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989).

²³ Turayqi's name is variously rendered as Turaiqi, Tariqi, and Tariqi. I have chosen the standard *IJMES* transliteration here, which comes closest to how it is pronounced in Arabic.

²⁴ Stephen Duguid, “Technocrats, Politics and Planning: The Formulation of Arab Oil Policy, 1957–1967” (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 1976); Nathan Citino, *Envisioning the Arab Future: Modernization in U.S.–Arab Relations, 1945–1967* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nelida Fuccaro, “Oilmen, Petroleum Arabism and OPEC: New Political and Public Cultures of Oil in the Arab World, 1959–1964,” in *Handbook of OPEC and the Global Energy Order: Past, Present and Future Challenges*, ed. Giuliano Garavini and Dag Harald Claes (London: Routledge, 2020), 15–30.

²⁵ Stephen Duguid, “A Biographical Approach to the Study of Social Change in the Middle East: Abdullah Tariqi as a New Man,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 3 (1970): 195–220; Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Sayf, ‘Abd Allah al-Turayqi: *Sukhr al-Naft wa Rimal al-Siyasa* (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 2007): 49–69. Also see Walid Khadduri, ed., ‘Abd Allah al-Turayqi: *al-‘A‘mal al-Kamila* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-‘Arabiyya, 1999); and Philippe Pétriat, “Oil Pricing and the Challenge of an Arab Oil Trans-Nationalism: Abdallah al-Tariqi and Arab Oil Globalization,” *Journal of Energy History/Revue d'Histoire de l'Énergie* 9, 17 February 2023, <http://energyhistor.y.eu/en/node/318>.

²⁶ “Al-Sayyid Mustafa Hafiz Wahba li Elaph: Lam Yakun al-Turayqi Walad al-Maghruran,” *Elaph News*, 24 June 2003, <https://elaph.com/Web/Archive/1056434797410822700.html>; Toby Matthiessen, “The Cold War and the Communist Party of Saudi Arabia, 1975–1991” *Journal of Cold War History* 22, no. 3 (2020): 32–62.

[In] his oil policy Tariki was obviously not thinking in first line of the immediate financial returns to Saudi Arabia but rather as a political reformer. I told him that Tariki had mentioned to a member of my staff his admiration for Mossadegh and his regrets that latter had not succeeded in his nationalization plans (King burst into scornful laughter at mention Mossadegh). No one doubted Mossadegh's honesty or ideals but he had cost his country huge sums and political turmoil. Tariki, who quite frankly was pointing toward eventual nationalization or Arabization of oil production in Saudi Arabia had caused several potential concessionaires and crude oil off takers to take their business elsewhere.²⁷

In the years immediately following this communication, Turayqi along with Venezuelan Minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons, Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, founded the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) as a forum for producers from the global South to coordinate for better terms of access to and eventual control over their petroleum resources.²⁸ The attention Turayqi received for this action set in motion backstage intrigues from Aramco and US officials. King Saud's brothers Faisal and Fahd (both of whom eventually became kings) were receptive to these maneuvers, because Turayqi's popularity and his relentless criticism of corruption in Faisal's circles threatened their power. This led to Turayqi's ouster in 1962 and his exile in Beirut and later Cairo.²⁹ Arabian oil's loss was Arab oil publishing's gain.

In Beirut, Turayqi and economist Naqula Sarkis set up Markaz al-'Arabi li-l-Dirasat al-Bitruḥiyya (the Arab Centre for Petroleum Studies). The organization was at once a research body and a consultancy that allowed Turayqi and Sarkis to share their knowledge of the industry with less experienced oil bureaucrats and ministers. The Markaz began publishing the monthly *Majalla al-Bitruḥ wa-l-Ghaz al-'Arabi* in 1965. Every issue in the first four volumes contained pieces by Turayqi. These issues are rich resources for research on oil: essays on the various Arab oil companies, petrochemical production in the Arab world, the geopolitics of oil, histories of Mexican and Nigerian oil, the pricing of petroleum, legal debates around ownership of national resources, the politics of transport via the Tapline and Suez Canal, inter alia. Although one issue of the monthly remembered Musaddiq fondly, another showed a political cartoon of Iranians laying territorial claim to the Arab Gulf. In the same issue as the latter cartoon a piece about Iran asked, "Do the people of Iran have any idea about the depth of Iran's commercial relations with Israel?"³⁰ A number of essays in the magazine appeared either verbatim or with small changes in the Egyptian *al-Bitruḥ*.

Majalla ran for five years before Turayqi and Sarkis amicably parted ways. Its September 1969 issue contained a "Letter to Readers" from Turayqi, which explained that Sarkis obtained the publication license for *Majalla* on behalf of Turayqi and that Sarkis had now begun to publish an editorially and directorially distinct magazine with the same name in French. Turayqi thanked Sarkis for his efforts and announced his inauguration of a new magazine and a new consultancy. The last issue of *Majalla* in Arabic was published in October 1969, and at that point the magazine switched to its French version. *Pétrole et Gaz*

²⁷ "Telegram from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State," Jeddah, 26 November 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960*, vol. 12, *Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula* (Washington, DC: US Department of State). All grammatical and spelling errors in the original.

²⁸ Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC*; Francisco Parra, *Oil Politics: A Modern History of Petroleum* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003); Dietrich, *Oil Revolution*; Giuliano Garavini, *The Rise and Fall of OPEC*.

²⁹ Al-Sayf, 'Abd Allah al-Turayqi, 254; Cuyler, *Fossil Lebanon*, 325.

³⁰ *Majalla al-Bitruḥ wa-l-Ghaz al-'Arabi* 1, no. 8 (1966); 4, no. 11 (1969).

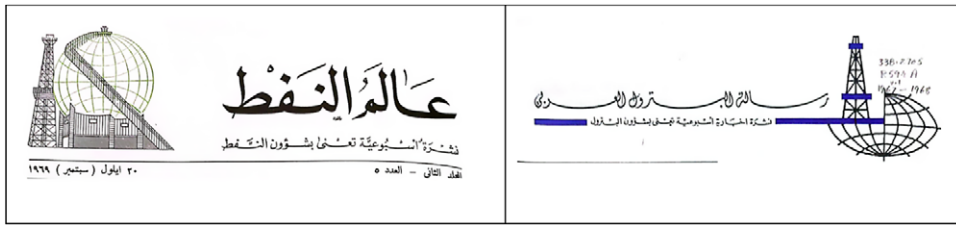


Figure 1. Logos of *'Alam al-Naft* (left) and *al-Risala al-Bitrul al-Arabi* (right).

Arabes ceased publication in 2011 and was replaced with a periodical on renewable energy.³¹

Maktab 'Abd Allah al-Turayqi li-l-Istisharat al-Bitruliyya ('Abd Allah Turayqi's Petroleum Consulting) began the monthly *Naft al-Arab* in October 1969. The latter periodical's name was based on Turayqi's mantra: "*Naft al-'Arab li-l-'Arab*" (Arab oil is for the Arabs; *Majalla* also used the motto but used the word *bitrul*, or petroleum, rather than *naft*, or oil).³² The first managing director of the periodical was Talal Salman, who later founded the leftist Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir*. The look and content of *Naft al-'Arab* was a continuation of *Majalla* before it, and Sarkis appeared in a January issue of *Naft al-'Arab*. In October 1971, Turayqi was forced by "the long arm of [Saudi King] Faisal's unrelenting spite" to move to Cairo.³³ He attempted to take the magazine with him, but political repression and the narrowing of public space in Egypt meant that the magazine stayed behind in Beirut for a time with Turayqi's spouse, Maha Junblat, holding the license for its publication. In 1974 the magazine moved to Kuwait. Turayqi's right-hand man, Farid Junblat (Maha's brother and the son of the Lebanese Druze socialist Kamal Junblat), shuttled between Turayqi's consultancy in Cairo and his publishing house in Kuwait until the periodical ceased publication in 1975.³⁴ The ability of King Faisal to scupper Turayqi's aspirations indicated the changes in contours of power in the Arab world in the wake of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's death in September 1970.

Beirut also was home to the weeklies *al-Risala al-Bitrul al-Arabi* and *'Alam al-Naft*, which began publishing in 1967 and 1968, respectively, and which have similarities that perhaps indicate they were either funded or published by the same people: the periodicals' logos are similar, with an oil rig flanking a globe characterized by latitude and longitude lines, and they follow similar formats (Fig. 1).

The first managing editor of *al-Risala* was Abdulaziz Mu'mina, a Saudi journalist who published a commerce journal in Saudi Arabia until the issuance of the media organizations law of 1963 restricted publication. Decades later, he returned and became the editor of Aramco's *al-Qafila*. *Al-Risala*'s editor in chief was Sulayman Furzuli, a Ba'thist journalist and writer who in his later years wrote a book refuting Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal on Nasserism.³⁵ The three volumes of the periodical I have consulted primarily comprise

³¹ "New Magazine on Renewable Energy Launched," *Emirates* 24/7, 23 October 2011, <https://www.emirates247.com/lifestyle/new-magazine-on-renewable-energy-launched-2011-10-23-1.424863>.

³² "Letter from Abdullah Turayqi to the Readers of *Majalla*," *Majalla al-Bitrul wa Ghaz al-'Arabi* 4, no. 12 (1969): 3.

³³ Linda Blandford, *Oil Sheikhs: Inside the Supercharged World of the Petrodollar* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976), 235. As various accounts of the time show, Faisal made petroleum transfer to the crisis-ridden government of Lebanon conditional on their expulsion of Turayqi. Faisal personally loathed Turayqi because of both his popularity and his unimpeachable and persuasive accusations of corruption against Faisal and his coterie. See al-Sayf, 'Abd Allah al-Turayqi, 254; Cuyler, *Fossil Lebanon*, 325.

³⁴ Muhammad Sayf, "Mudir A'mal al-Turayqi fi al-Manfa: al-Sayyid Farid Junblat," *Elaph News* 1, 2 June 2003; <https://elaph.com/Web/Archive/1054532099730733000.htm>.

³⁵ Sulayman Furzuli, *Hurub al-Nasiriyya wa-l-Ba'th* (Beirut: Nawfal, 2016).

petroleum news, recounted country by country. The weekly's regularly published interviews with Saudi ministers and Petromin officials indicate that it was likely funded by Saudi Arabia.

'Alam al-Naft, which from the start followed the format and content of the *Middle East Economic Survey* even more closely, seems to have received an injection of funds from Saudi Arabia in September 1974: the periodical's page count increased, its paper quality improved, and its masthead began including both Gregorian and Hijri dates. The journal moved to Cyprus during the Lebanese Civil War but returned in 1991, when it began to be edited by well-known right-of-center Lebanese journalist Samir 'Atallah, who also wrote for *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (The Middle East) and *al-Nahar* (The Day). The periodical changed its title to *'Alam al-Mal wa-l-Naft* (The World of Finance and Oil) with the move back to Lebanon but reverted to its original title in 1995. It is the only periodical of the seven that explicitly announced that it was winding down in 1996. It also was the one periodical that very frequently changed its managing director, editors, and writers, most of whom were professional journalists who wrote for major Arab newspapers either before or after their stint at the periodical. The 1996 end of the last petro-periodical to be published in Beirut reflected the broader shift of finance, trade, and business headquarters to Kuwait and Dubai. The geographic shift in knowledge production had started with the Lebanese Civil War and only accelerated after its end, as the loci of Arab power moved from Baghdad/Beirut/Cairo to the monarchies of the Gulf.

Al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya began publishing in Baghdad in October 1975, only a few weeks before the nationalization of Basra Oil Company on 8 January 1976, which completed the transfer of all IPC holdings to Iraq. The periodical had the distinction of being edited by Abdulrahman Munif, a petroleum economist and the author of arguably the most important petro-novel ever, *Cities of Salt*.³⁶ This was the first time a great literary figure of Arab letters had edited an oil magazine, although the ground-breaking Palestinian author Jabra Ibrahim Jabra had overseen the publishing of IPC's Arabic-language magazines, *Ahl al Naft* and *al-'Amilun fi-l-Naft*, in his capacity as an officer of the company's public relations office.³⁷ Munif was the son of a Najdi trader and Baghdadi mother. He studied law in Baghdad and completed a doctorate in oil economics at the University of Belgrade in 1961. Although he was a generation younger than Turayqi, he was fiercely committed to using the region's resources to transform Arab lives.

The journal was rich and openly political. It published intelligent and well-researched pieces on economic strategies behind refining, shipping of oil, petrofinance and speculation, the geographies of trade, and a range of other issues that showed how alive its writers were to the rapid transformation of the global hydrocarbon sector. Munif frequently wrote political essays in the journal, as did others who were perhaps better known for their literary works. The distinguished Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and his brother 'Abd Allah (who was a petroleum engineer) and the great Palestinian novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, all of whom had worked for the Iraq Petroleum Company, now and again wrote for *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya*. The periodical also published notable Arab oil analysts such as Walid Khadduri and Hazim Biblawi, as well as Iraqi communist and leftist Ba'th writers. The

³⁶ Mahir Jarrar, *'Abd al-Rahman Munif wa-l-'Iraq: Sirat wa Dhikrayat* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2005); Sabry Hafez, "An Arabian Master," *New Left Review* 37 (2006): 39–66; Omar AlShehabi, "The Political Commodity: Oil and US–Middle East Relations in the Historiography of Abdulrahman Munif," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 16 (2023): 145–72.

³⁷ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's Suitcase: Carrying Modernism and Exile across Borders from Palestine into Iraq," *Journal of Contemporary Iraq and the Arab World* 17, no. 1/2 (2022): 67–88. Although Mejcher-Atassi states that Jabra edited IPC's *Ahl al-Naft*, his name never actually appears on the masthead. Floyd is probably more accurate in describing him as a "supervisory editor" of *al-'Amilun fi-l-Naft*; see Floyd, "Floating on Oil," 90.

general tenor of the periodical was not dissimilar to Turayqi's *Naft al-'Arab*, with an insistence on the developmentally crucial role of petroleum for Arab advancement. As Omar AlShehabi has argued in an analysis of Munif's nonfictional petroleum writings, the presence of leftist writers and Munif's oil analysis in the periodical leavened "the magazine's Arab Nationalist outlook" with "a notable leftist bent."³⁸

Munif had been a member of the Ba'th Party in his youth but had resigned in the 1960s. Although he was respected in Iraq and *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya* "was lavishly financed by the government," he nevertheless maintained an "independent mind, deep-rooted values, self-doubt and constant questioning [that] would be anathema to party discipline" in Baghdad.³⁹ The periodical's government funding meant that its inaugural issue opened with congratulatory letters from Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein (then the Ba'thi president and vice president of Iraq, respectively), and subsequent issues of the magazine continued to publish letters and texts of speeches from both. As Saddam Hussein consolidated his base in the course of the following years, finally seizing power in July 1979, *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya* did not reflect on the upheavals in Iraqi politics. Still more strikingly, any analysis of the Iranian revolution next door was notable for its absence from the pages of the magazine.⁴⁰ One can only assume that Saddam Hussein's antipathy toward the revolutionary movement of Iran, led by Shi'i clerics he considered anathema, was the reason for this silence. Although the magazine was not straightforwardly a mouthpiece for the government, it was nevertheless funded by the regime, and seems to have capitulated to the demands of those in power whenever they needed a tribune. At the same time, Munif took pains to distinguish the magazine's own writings from the government pieces presumably forced upon the editors.

The October 1980 issue of *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya*, published immediately after the Iraqi invasion of Iran, is prefaced by a hastily arranged unnumbered addendum that includes a speech by Saddam Hussein about the "Battle of Liberation and Construction," and pieces characterized by an excess of ellipsis marks and fervor. The November issue includes a special pull-out section, again unnumbered, on the war, and contains an image of Iraqi soldiers triumphantly raising the Iraqi flag over a sign in Persian demarcating an industrial zone in Khurramshahr. The addendum has several pages of patriotic oratory (some by Saddam Hussein) and a few more propaganda pieces arguing that the Arab Gulf region was economically better capable of bearing the costs of the war. An unsigned piece argued that the Iranian economy was relatively weak and on the verge of collapse. In the numbered part of the periodical that followed, the first article by Sabah Khachachi had a more measured assessment of the Iranian economy in the wake of the revolution, based on statistics collected by sources such as the World Bank and the Economist Intelligence Unit, but very little editorial commentary on those statistics. Even the color of the paper in these different sections vary, clearly indicating the boundary between the magazine's writing and the published government line.

The penultimate double-issue of *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya* was dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of OPEC and boasted a range of Arab luminaries, including a roundtable with 'Abd Allah al-Turayqi himself. The issue analyzes the effects of OPEC on the global economy, pricing of oil, oil company monopolies, the strategic role of oil in

³⁸ AlShehabi, "Political Commodity," 148.

³⁹ Hafez, "Arabian Master," 48.

⁴⁰ The Iranian Revolution of 1979 overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy and installed the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The revolutionary victory was followed by US diplomats being taken hostage in November 1979, leading to a regime of sanctions and other punitive measures against Iran. The Iraqi regime in turn planned to take advantage of the postrevolutionary instability in Iran, and invaded in September 1980, quickly occupying a significant swath of the oil-producing Khuzestan region. The war that followed lasted for eight years, and at the end of it the borders remained where they had been before the war.

development, the widening gulf between the world's rich and poor, and related matters.⁴¹ The final issue under Munif's editorship was published in March of 1981. Munif and his family left for Paris shortly thereafter, presumably because of the heightened repression and Munif's allergy to the intensification of Ba'th authoritarianism under Saddam Hussein.⁴² Sabry Hafez writes that "[Privately], Munif is said to have told friends that the Iraqi regime was now little better than the Saudi."⁴³

Oil publishing had been the preserve of so many young, brilliant oil modernists and technocrats, including Palestinians and others from nonproducing states. Many of these figures, now in their more mature years, moved into roles at OPEC, or the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC). The latter began publishing several magazines, foremost among them *al-Naft wa-l-Ta'awun al-'Arabi*, whose inaugural editor in chief was 'Abd al-'Aziz Watari.⁴⁴ Watari was a former Iraqi oil minister (1963–65) who had established the Iraqi National Oil Company and had led negotiations against the IPC for a more equitable participation agreement. The first editorial committee of the periodical included the Palestinian economist Yusuf al-Sayigh, Egyptian economist Mahmud Rushdi, who had written for *al-Bitrul*, former Syrian minister of economics George Tu'ma, and the notable and influential Palestinian oil journalist Walid Khadduri.⁴⁵ The editorial committee, both at the start and as the periodical continued, was composed of many Arab oil technocrats, former ministers, and scholars who had served as advisers to the oil-producing states. It is, of course, symbolically significant that the last Arabic-language oil periodical to be published in this period of ebbing anticolonialism was issued in Kuwait, not in one of the nationalist Arab republics. As oil passed into producing states' hands, and as political spaces shrank throughout the Arab world, former Arab ministers exiled from their own countries and members of the Palestinian diaspora were to dominate the periodical's editorial committee.

Content: Arab Petro-Periodicals' Epistemic Sphere

If the context of these oil and gas periodicals showed something of the spatial ebbs and flows of petropolitics in the region, their content was shaped by the emergence of resource nationalists and the ensuing co-optation or pacification of their radical impulse around oil.

In the heat of the struggle over resource sovereignty, these journals resembled the oil revolutionaries Christopher Dietrich has described, as their editors and contributors "wrote and spoke about redistribution, price readjustments, and permanent sovereignty not in the dispassionate language of social science but in the flesh and blood politics of subjugation and liberation."⁴⁶ How they thought about oil went beyond development. In an astute reading of this politics, a US diplomat wrote that, under 'Abd al-'Aziz Watari, the establishment of the Iraqi National Oil Company was "part of [a] larger GOI plan to exert maximum pressure on [the] British position in [the] Persian Gulf and Aden with [a] view to drive [the] British out as soon as possible."⁴⁷ The petronationalist intellectuals who wrote for these organs were engaged in the modernist project of economic development imagined as a necessary

⁴¹ *Al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya* 6, no. 4/5 (1981).

⁴² Online interview by author with Yasser Munif, 25 September 2023.

⁴³ Hafez, "Arabian Master," 52.

⁴⁴ His surname in English is often rendered as Wattari.

⁴⁵ Tu'ma's surname in English is sometimes rendered as Tomeh.

⁴⁶ Dietrich, *Oil Revolution*, 90.

⁴⁷ "Telegram From the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State," Baghdad, 7 February 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 34, *Energy Diplomacy and Global Issues* (Washington, DC: US Department of State).

element of their anticolonial struggle.⁴⁸ This was of course a double-edged sword, because postcolonial economic projects led by the national bourgeoisie conformed to what Fanon has described as “the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period.”⁴⁹

One central function of petro-periodicals was provision of information for the oil technocrats. Turayqi and Sarkis’s consulting firms provided coaching for Arab government officials as they negotiated with the oil companies, but to negotiate one needed both basic data and information about the position of other companies and oil ministries. It was no surprise that most of the periodicals consulted here included a great deal of raw data as well as texts and analyses of various laws, agreements, and contracts. The weeklies published in Beirut, *‘Alam al-Naft* and *al-Risala*, were basically newsletters full of information about contractual changes, new discoveries, announcements by state officials, analyses of meetings between oil ministers, and accounts of negotiations between states and companies. The news was gleaned from sources in English, French, and Russian, as well as sympathetic Arab (and occasionally Iranian) officials. The monthlies provided similar information in condensed form at the back of their magazines. For example, Turayqi’s *Naft al-‘Arab* had around ten pages at the back of each issue that covered oil prices, news of Arab oil, prices in ports of export, and a sample of prices at import terminals and the like. Munif’s monthly and OAPEC’s quarterly included book reviews, institutional and country news, and journalistic and scholarly articles translated from Western languages.

Every one of the monthlies and quarterlies studied here saw their task, at least at first, as educating a broader public about oil and the businesses constituted around it. For example, Turayqi and Sarkis described their periodical as representing “the rights and interests of producing nations in the use of their natural wealth.”⁵⁰ The inaugural editorial of *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya*, likely written by Munif, declared explicitly that the magazine was not for a specialist audience, but rather for “Iraqi and Arab citizens who want to understand the political situation around oil ... so they can participate in the politics of oil and its utilization for development and progress.”⁵¹ Crude knowledge was seen as a lever for democratic redistributive policies.

The extent to which a publication was tied to a state determined the degree of its embeddedness in reasons of state, rather than more radical aspirations. In the first issue of *al-Bitrul*, the head of the Egyptian Public Institute for Petroleum, Ahmad Kamil al-Badri, introduced the magazine as a “robust cultural resource for Arab citizens” and a document “of faith in future progress.”⁵² Of the seven periodicals, *al-Bitrul* was explicitly an organ of Egypt; at *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya*, Munif struggled mightily to keep his editorial content apart from the hagiographies of Bakr and Hussein that were forced upon the monthly. OAPEC’s *al-Naft wa Ta’awun al-‘Arabi* sought to find a middle way between the positions of accommodationist and insurrectionary members of the organization.

In her description of Anglo-Iranian Oil Company knowledge production, Katayoun Shafiee has described how the company officials relied “on various forms of information

⁴⁸ Citino, *Envisioning the Arab Future*. On struggles over resource sovereignty, see Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (London: Verso, 2014); and Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴⁹ Frantz Fanon, “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 152.

⁵⁰ “Opening,” *Majalla al-Bitril wa Ghaz al-‘Arabi* 1, no. 1 (1965): 3.

⁵¹ “Why Oil and Development?” *al-Naft wa-l-Tanmiyya*, December 1975, 7.

⁵² Ahmad Kamil al Badri, “Ihda” (Dedication), *al-Bitrul* 1, no. 1 (1963), 1.

management to transform political issues into technoeconomic calculation.”⁵³ As the struggle for resource sovereignty gave way to Arab state control over these resources, this process of depoliticization intensified.

‘*Alam al-Naft*’s initial issues, although primarily focused on providing a summary of news, were nevertheless rich with analysis, not only of economic news, but also of what the politics of this news was. By 1996, and as the weekly wound down, such analysis had disappeared. Perhaps most noteworthy is that, despite the rise of commodity trading, futures contracts, and even the weekly’s brief name change to include finance, ‘*Alam al-Naft*’ never actually discussed what this commodity trade might mean politically. The educational intent of petro-periodicals had ebbed. The magazines were now writing for specialist audiences, rather than broader publics.

Throughout the 1960s, *al-Bitrul* was decidedly a tribune of pan-Arabism, and it was intent on educating a reading public on the political economy of petroleum. The first volume included articles with titles such as “The Historical Development of Oil Pricing,” “The Trade in Oil and Its Maritime Transport in Expanding Arab Ports,” “Trade Unions in Socialist Arab States,” “Maritime Transportation in the Oil Industry,” and “Ocean Liner Companies and Their Role in the Development of Oil.” A single 1960s issue featured analyses of the Israeli oil industry, an essay about the uses of the oil weapon, an article about shipbuilding in Japan overtaking European shipyards after 1967, and a discussion of the Onassis case. More than any other, this periodical was interested in the legal ramifications of the concessions and of questions of resources sovereignty. Their account of the Onassis arbitration bore this out.

The Onassis case was an arbitration claim brought by Aramco in Switzerland in the 1950s against the Saudi state, which had dared to offer an independent maritime oil carriage contract to Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, in defiance of Aramco. The 1958 tribunal decision declared that because Saudi “law did not contain any definite rules relating to the exploitation of oil deposits, this lacuna was filled by the Concession Agreement, which became the fundamental law of the parties.”⁵⁴ In other words, a Swiss tribunal with European judges, acting on the basis of European legal premises, ruled that the concession agreement of 1933 granted US-owned Aramco legal sovereignty over Saudi oil. Further, the Saudi claim to jurisdiction over its maritime business was “contrary to the needs of international commerce and involved a restriction of the principle of the freedom of the high seas unjustified under international law.”⁵⁵ Nearly ten years later, the *al-Bitrul* that discussed the Onassis case also featured a commemoration of Mohammad Musaddiq’s nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).⁵⁶ As Anwar Sadat’s “open door” (*infitāh*) policies shifted the state’s broader commitments, the periodical also changed. By the 1980s, it primarily employed a language of security and geopolitics. Gone was the celebration of anticolonial heroes, and instead the magazine boasted full-page advertisements by British Petroleum, the same AIOC that had been nationalized by Musaddiq. By the 2000s, politics had wholly disappeared from the pages of the magazine, and the focus was entirely on petroleum engineering matters.

⁵³ Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil*, 8.

⁵⁴ Stephen Schwebel, “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Aramco Arbitrate the Onassis Agreement,” *World Energy Law and Business* 3, no. 3 (2010): 10. Also see Nathan Citino, “Defending the ‘Postwar Petroleum Order’: The US, Britain and the 1954 Saudi–Onassis Tanker Deal,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 11, no. 2 (2000): 137–60; and Khalili, *Sinews*, 87–94.

⁵⁵ Schwebel, “Onassis,” 11.

⁵⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, “The 1953 Coup in Iran,” *Science and Society* 65, no. 2 (2001): 182–215. Articles about Musaddiq appeared in *al-Bitrul* 5, no. 2 (1967) and 9, no. 1 (1971); and in *Majalla al-Bitrul wa Ghaz al-Arabi* 1, no. 8 (1966); 1, no. 9 (1966); and 2, no. 6 (1967)—but in no other periodical.

OAPEC's *Naft wa Ta'awun al-'Arabi* began with research that could prove useful to policy-makers. Its first issue had a number of articles concerning industrialization policies, repatriation of petrodollars for investment in the Arab world, and consideration of maritime carriage capacity for oil. By contrast, issue 186, published in 2023, had only three articles, about carbon removal in refining, European sustainable energy policies, and a phlegmatic report on the Arab–China energy cooperation without any analysis. The periodical today no longer contains book reviews, raw data, or other forms of analysis.

After nationalization, the content in these periodicals became both more technical and more opaque. Politics gave way to recitation of policy. Language changed from lucid and direct to complex and jargon-ridden. Analysis was replaced by anodyne description. Incomplete and unreliable quantitative data and formulas supplanted qualitatively rich accounts. The trajectory shows that although petroengineering knowledge expanded, critical deconstruction of economics, finance, management, and accounting of oil, all of which had been mainstays of the earlier issues, had contracted.

In a different context, historian Margaret Schotte traces an epistemic shift “from practice to theory,” when “the natural world [was viewed] through a lens of rules and mathematics.”⁵⁷ Rules and mathematics also became the measure of petro-periodicals after nationalization. Katayoun Shafiee has described how this quantitative and formulaic manner of accounting for oil (its reserve volumes, its pricing) was characteristic of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's knowledge production as far back as the 1920s.⁵⁸ It is fascinating to see this modality of viewing oil become normalized in petro-periodicals once the Arab states controlled oil, from the 1970s onward. I will next discuss the trajectory of the representation of oil in these journals as an instance of changes in regimes of knowledge production about oil and gas.

Decommodification and Recommodification of Oil

As I have shown, the anticolonial intellectuals, technocrats, and knowledge producers who published the seven Arabic-language periodicals discussed here believed in oil being a public good intended for the Arab people as a whole. They saw their role not only as providers of specialized knowledge to the oil bureaucrats struggling to coordinate across national boundaries, but also, and perhaps more significantly, as educators of the public. The processes of knowledge production about oil and gas in the Arab world bore the mark of the politics of their time. The magazines' publication schedules, materials, and processes were affected by interstate and intrastate conflicts, wars, and repression. The nationalization of oil effected a shifting of centers of political power in the Arab world to the oil-producing states. And as the latter consolidated their control over oil resources, the independent magazines ebbed away, as did the vision of oil as a public good. The decommodification of oil had been an anticolonial aspiration that state control over oil nullified. In this final section, I will address how both the political context and content of the Arab petro-periodicals cast a light on this process of decommodification and its reversal.

In his ground-breaking account of Venezuelan oil, Fernando Coronil has described the commodification of nature, and especially “the Third World's nature,” as interdependent and mutually constitutive with the global division of labor that is embedded in the process of accumulation of capital.⁵⁹ How do soil, subsoil, water, and other naturally occurring

⁵⁷ Margaret Schotte, “Sailors, States, and the Creation of Nautical Knowledge” in *A World at Sea: Maritime Practices and Global History*, ed. Lauren Benton and Nathan Perl-Rosenthal (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

⁵⁸ Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil*.

⁵⁹ Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 28–30.

planetary features become commodified and transformed into property? European colonialism has been a particularly significant mechanism for this process of propertification. Rosa Luxemburg described this process in *Accumulation of Capital*:

The ultimate purpose of British capital was to possess itself of the very basis of existence of the Indian community: the land. This end was served above all by the fiction, always popular with European colonisers, that all the land of a colony belongs to the political ruler. In retrospect, the British endowed the Moghul and his governors with private ownership of the whole of India, in order to “legalise” their succession. Economic experts of the highest repute, such as James Mill, duly supported this fiction with “scientific” arguments.⁶⁰

In her account of the emergence of the “machinery” of the Anglo-Persian/Iranian Oil Company, Shafiee points out that the format of concession and oil contracts “embodied a particular relationship to the land and the subsoil designated for exploitation that was not readily familiar to and practiced by local regional groups or governing bodies.”⁶¹ In this process oil is transformed into a commodity: “The concessionaire justified the rule of concessionary property (backed by state authority) in part through a lack of understanding, exhibited by local population, regarding mineral rights.”⁶² In Venezuela’s case, the 1943 petroleum laws drawn up by Manuel Egaña drew on US mining regulations “where a distinction is made between the contractual rights of private parties and the government’s rights as a sovereign state.”⁶³ The law “recognized that the subsoil was national property and that the role of the state was to safeguard this property on behalf of the collectivity. The law confirmed the state’s dual role as a sovereign power and as a landowner.”⁶⁴ In other words, a distinction was made between the state’s sovereign right to a collective property and a commodity to be privately traded.

The central tension arising from both the trajectory of the journals and the shift in their content is the transformation of oil from collective property to oil traded both by the state and privately, with its profits accruing to the ruling families and even still to the Euro-American majors that have continued to invest alongside national firms. Fanon warned of postcolonial regimes in which the national bourgeoisie simply usurped the “unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” rather than enacting changes that uprooted colonial social relations. His warning was proven prescient when modes of governance enacted by the nationalist states borrowed their processes and forms of knowledge from preceding colonial regimes. In his essay on “economentality,” Timothy Mitchell argues that after World War II economic calculations provided a grammar for governance in which businesses and banks would be served and labor would be disciplined. The language of growth, of accounting and arbitration, and new modes of visually representing the growth in profit and productivity—an exponential curve “that was to rule people’s lives”—all became instruments of governance.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge, 2003), 352. See also Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) on settler colonial creation of private property.

⁶¹ Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil*, 34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 37–38. Also see Jason Cooke, “Property as a Pillar of Oil-Based Capitalism: The Case of the Southern Pacific Company in Southern California, 1865–1926,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 46, no. 1 (2014): 1–12; and Eliot Tretter, “Producing Alberta’s Tar Sands: Oil, Ideas, Rents, and New Enclosures,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 31, no. 3 (2020): 94–113.

⁶³ Coronil, *Magical State*, 106.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁵ Timothy Mitchell, “Economentality: How the Future Entered Government,” *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (2014): 494.

After decolonization, oil as private property became the nub of a great deal of legal, legislative, and arbitral struggles in the mid-20th century. Legal institutions and other devices, financial and otherwise, proliferated even more wildly after the nationalization of OPEC nations' oil. It is fascinating to see that, of all these journals, only Beirut-based *'Alam al-Naft* was truly alive to the other changes by, for example, foregrounding finance and commodities markets for a time. However, all the Arabic-language oil journals did engage with the global legislative and legal struggles, and most of the earlier journals discussed the centrality of the Onassis case to these struggles, none more frequently and substantively than the state-published *al-Bitrul*.

The resource nationalists were deeply aware of these arbitral and legal definitions that pursued a fiction of oil as property to be held by private firms, subject to the "laws" of supply and demand. Instead, the nationalists described oil as a common or collective asset intended for use by all Arabs. The Egyptian *al-Bitrul* thought of oil as a possible gateway to "self-sufficiency and justice."⁶⁶ Sarkis and Turayqi's *Majalla* conceptualized oil in terms of "rights" and in relation to the entirety of the Arab world: "Our lands are some of the richest in the world, and our people some of the poorest."⁶⁷ That such a situation persisted was what the magazine was founded to challenge. Abdulrahman Munif's periodical similarly saw the Euro-American firms' monopoly over oil as a modality of colonial control that exposed the fiction of supply and demand as the basis of oil pricing.⁶⁸ Even OAPEC's policy-oriented and staid *al-Naft wa Ta'awun al-'Arabi* declared that the creation of a new financial system, technological transfer, and new legal regimes was pivotal to the development of the hydrocarbon industrial sector for *all Arab states*.⁶⁹

The aforementioned Onassis case mattered because it brought up the question of sovereignty. Writing in 1966 in *al-Bitrul*, an Egyptian judge Sa'd 'Allam discussed the case in neutral language, detailing its twists and turns as a matter of state control.⁷⁰ But beyond legal discussions about state sovereignty, none of the Arabic-language periodicals analyzed other ways that, from the 1970s onward, taxation, accounting for reserves, financial instruments, and new modalities of ownership and pricing were influenced by actors beyond the states. Even Turayqi's *Naft al-'Arab* became consumed with the geopolitics of oil in the wake of the 1973 war, and discussions of oil as the birthright of the Arab peoples receded. The most recent issues of *al-Bitrul* I consulted were basically a compilation of oil news, and contained hagiographies of Egyptian president Husni Mubarak just as he was to be deposed in the Arab uprisings of 2011. As mentioned, OAPEC's periodical became thinner, more technical, and much more concerned with its specialist audiences. The processes of decommodification had politicized oil, and its recommodification as states took over the oil industries led to the same technopolitical defanging of knowledge production about oil that colonial times had produced.

Conclusion

'Abd Allah Turayqi's death in 1997 occasioned an outpouring of genuine grief and reflections on the trajectory of oil in the Arab world. Abdulrahman Munif published an eloquent obituary in the Lebanese *al-Safir* newspaper, whose founder Talal Salman had been the managing editor of Turayqi's *Naft al-'Arab*. Munif enumerated Turayqi's battles against Aramco in Saudi Arabia and the Seven Sisters globally and described his accomplishments.

⁶⁶ "Dedication," *al-Bitrul* 1 (1963): 1.

⁶⁷ "Opening," *Majalla al-Bitril wa Ghaz al-'Arabi* 1, no. 1 (1965): 3.

⁶⁸ Also see AlShehabi, "Political Commodity."

⁶⁹ "Editorial," *Naft wa Ta'awun al-'Arabi* 2, no. 1 (1976): 9.

⁷⁰ Sa'd 'Allam, "The Onassis Arbitration," *al-Bitrul* 4, no. 4 (1966): 16–19.

These included Turayqi cofounding OPEC, his demands for accountability from Aramco, and his advocacy for usage of the “oil weapon” as political leverage. Munif also emphasized Turayqi’s writings, research, and publishing about oil, and his aspiration to educate the Arab public about this *sal’at al siyasiyya* (political commodity).⁷¹ He ended his obituary plaintively: “Because modern Arab history neither makes the best reading, nor grants the Arab peoples their rights, we are condemned to death-by-silence, in darkness.”⁷²

The gradual waning in the quantity and quality of Arab petro-periodicals in the aftermath of Arab states’ control over this political commodity bears out Munif’s lament. The forms of knowledge bound in these publications were deeply shaped by their political and geographic context. One can trace a transformation in the representation of petroleum in these journals from a public good to private property. And this transformation created a concomitant degradation and ossification of forms of knowledge. The state-owned enterprises’ sovereignty over oil had not produced national(ist) capital accumulation for the benefit of all, but had reproduced a kind of knowledge that ratified the exploitation of labor and nature just as they had been exploited in the colonial period.

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⁷¹ Abdulrahman Munif, “The Silence Remains,” *al-Safir*, 18 September 1977, reproduced in al-Sayf, ‘Abd Allah al-Turayqi, 465–70.

⁷² *Ibid.*

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