



The Effect of Robert Imbrie Murder on American and British Oil Policies in Iran

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Abstract

Although Imbrie's murder did not play a direct role in the transition of power from the Qajar to the Pahlavi dynasty, it significantly impacted the United States' involvement in the Iranian oil economy, keeping it excluded for several decades. Evidence suggests that multiple factors contributed to the incident, and unfortunately for Imbrie, all of them converged to seal his fate. Religious factors played a fundamental role in the escalation of events, particularly the anti-Baha'i propaganda, which had long been used as a pretext to eliminate political opponents of the Iranian government and suppress political movements—a practice dating back to the Naseri era. As a foreigner, Imbrie was also perceived as a threat to the Saqakhaneh. Previously, there had been claims that a Baha'i girl had attempted to poison the Saqakhaneh, leading many to suspect that Imbrie, as a Christian, might have harbored similar intentions. The religious fervor sparked by these suspicions provided Imbrie's adversaries with the perfect excuse to eliminate him. This incident also served a strategic purpose, as it allowed certain factions to remove him from negotiations related to oil contracts, which were expected to favor the United States at the expense of Britain.

The most significant outcomes of this incident include the marginalization of American oil companies, the stabilization of Britain's economic and political position, and the increased political power of Reza Khan. It appears that each party involved in the incident pursued its own interests, while the unfortunate Imbrie became the victim, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Although historical evidence suggests that the British orchestrated the incident, both the Iranian and American governments benefited from it as well. While the murder of Imbrie could have posed a serious challenge for Reza Khan, he leveraged the tense atmosphere to his advantage by taking decisive steps to eliminate his staunch opponents. Under the pretext of maintaining social order and arresting those responsible for the incident, he managed to detain or exile a large number of his adversaries and suppress opposition newspapers and movements through censorship. Additionally, he undermined the constitutional framework by declaring martial law and confronting the minority of parliamentarians who opposed the dissolution of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment of the Pahlavi monarchy, effectively reducing the National Assembly to a ceremonial institution. The heightened social and political tensions, coupled with the presence of oil-rich regions in both the north and south of Iran, intensified competition for oil concessions and further increased



the country's potential oil revenues. Another significant consequence of this event was Iran's release from its entanglement with the troubled Sinclair Company—a firm plagued by legal disputes and scandals, which had failed to fulfill the terms of its oil contract with Iran.

Despite losing its vice-consul and being forced to withdraw from Iran due to concerns over the safety of its representatives and citizens, the US government was still able to secure significant financial gains. Although the American government had proposed using the compensation received from Iran to fund educational programs in the field of Iranology, this plan was never implemented, and the compensation was ultimately retained by the US government. Another positive outcome of this incident for the United States was the trust it built in Iran by handling the situation rationally. This approach greatly benefited the country's political and economic policies in Iran in the subsequent years.

Britain, one of the key players in this chaos, benefited significantly from the incident. The first major benefit was the reduction of economic and political pressure from the United States on Iran, effectively removing America as a competitor in the country's oil industry. With America's temporary withdrawal, control over the oil resources of northern Iran also fell into Britain's hands for a time. Through the Southern Oil Company, Britain sought to manage the oil reserves in the northern regions. Additionally, due to its considerable political influence in Iran, Britain was able to secure relative support from the United States in the years that followed.

One aspect not directly addressed in most studies, including Katouzian's study on Imbrie, is the growing power of the ulama and clergy in Iran's political and social structure, particularly among the masses. Although Reza Shah later attempted to reduce their political and social influence, it was the radical Menbari-ha who incited the common people, the Ajams, and the mobs to attack Imbrie, ultimately leading to his death. By influencing these groups, they were able to strengthen their socio-political influence and continue to play a determining role in Iran's political life. This incident played a key role in the convergence of groups that were, in some way, influenced by the ulama.

Keywords: Imbrie, the United States, Britain, Reza Shah, Oil.

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