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The Najaf Uprising of 1918: A Historical Review in Light of Selected References

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Abstract: This Review aims to provide a critical historical review of studies that have addressed historical accounts of the Najaf uprising, considered a significant historical period for Iraq and its general conditions on the eve of World War I. The article examines the accompanying political developments, namely the subjugation of Iraq in general, and Najaf in particular, to British occupation. This subjugation led to the people of Najaf's opposition to British rule, a rejection that culminated in the 1918 uprising led by the Islamic Renaissance Society. The harsh sentences imposed upon them ultimately galvanized Iraqi society at all levels to launch the 1920 revolution. The researcher concludes that most classical sources and modern studies on this topic unanimously agree that the primary cause of the uprising was the British authorities' response to the events in Najaf. This response ignited nationalist sentiment, broadening the base of popular opposition to the foreign presence and securing the country's independence. The article also concludes that the uprising's impact extended beyond Najaf in particular, and across Iraqi cities in general, marking a turning point in history. And it was a political event that marked the beginning of the Great Iraqi Revolution.

Keywords: Revolution, Iraq, Najaf, presentation, researcher, book

Introduction

Contemporary Iraqi historians are considered intellectual figures who have provided crucial information for studying fundamental aspects of modern Iraqi history. They have done so by documenting the events and developments of that history, offering researchers material preserved in important works that serve as a sound starting point for scholarly study in their respective fields. Their scholarly efforts have focused on documenting the history of Iraq during the monarchy, a significant period in Iraqi history. They lived through this era and followed its events, resulting in numerous important

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works that examine the history of that period and its accompanying political developments. One such work is a book that includes a review of the events and course of the Najaf uprising of 1918. It clarifies the city's political role in resisting the British occupation authorities, its active role in preparing for the uprising, and its participation in the events. Although the uprising failed to expel the British, it forced them to reconsider their plans for governing Iraq, despite the stringent measures taken by the British occupation authorities, including an effective military siege to contain the revolution and prevent its spread to neighboring cities.

Contemporary Iraqi historians have contributed significantly to the study of key aspects of modern Iraqi history by documenting its events and developments. This article aims to provide a critical and analytical historical review of the Najaf uprising of 1918, focusing on the diversity of methodologies employed. It seeks to guide researchers towards new horizons for studying this topic within a broader historical context, especially since some authors have not adhered to the principles of historical methodology, failing to cite their sources, particularly those from which they obtained their information. Furthermore, there have been no independent studies that have reviewed the events of the uprising in light of what historians have written, allowing for a comparative analysis of their writings to identify similarities and differences. This lack of independent study was one of the reasons that prompted us to undertake this independent research. The study is divided into two main sections: the first reviews previous studies on the uprising, while the second provides a critical analysis of the historical research, relying on analytical and critical review, classifying the studies related to the topic, and analyzing the methodologies used, such as descriptive and historical approaches. The article review relied on a range of sources and references relevant to the topic, including primary sources that reviewed the events and course of the uprising, not to mention modern studies such as peer-reviewed articles published in historical journals that dealt with the 1918 uprising.

First: Previous Studies on the Najaf Uprising

1. The Najaf Uprising of 1918 in British Documents.

The discussion focused on previous studies that addressed the research published in the Kufa Studies Center Journal by Professor Dr. Yassin Shehab Shukri and researcher Muhammad Haider Kadhim. The research clarified the course of political events witnessed by the city, represented by British intervention in its affairs through the dispatch of political officials. Hamid Khan was appointed as a political agent in Najaf, and an Indian detachment was brought to Kufa to consolidate their authority. This detachment patrolled the city of Najaf daily, leading to opposition from the people of Najaf to the British administration and its military garrison. This opposition manifested in the establishment of a secret society based in Najaf, known as the Islamic Renaissance Society. Its goal was to liberate Iraq from British control, ignite nationalist sentiment to broaden the base of popular opposition against the foreign presence, ensure the country's independence, and gain the support of all Islamic governments in general and Arab governments in particular. The society pledged to dedicate all available resources, both financial and human, to securing independence. This was the first revolutionary action with a political and religious character in Iraq during World War I. It garnered the support of the tribes of the Middle Euphrates and paved the way for a general uprising, the details and events of which were led by the society. The Islamic Renaissance, however, this association did not achieve what it was seeking as a result of the haste of some of its members who entered the courtyard of the Saray and killed Captain Marshall, which led to the establishment of a movement in Najaf against the British on (March 18, 1918) and what followed it of a painful siege and harsh sentences against its participants of execution, exile and terror. One of the results of that event was the beginning of a new era of tense relations between Najaf and the British occupation authorities, as its impact extended to the history of modern Iraq and to the souls of its people of different classes who ignited the fires of the twentieth revolution in the Iraqi cities.

2-Najaf under Direct British Rule (1917-1920)

Numerous studies have addressed this topic from different angles. Some studies have focused

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on specific events that the city witnessed, including the research paper titled "Najaf al-Ashraf under Direct British Rule 1917/1920" by researcher Rahim Hassan Muhammad al-Shami. This paper clarifies the political events that the city experienced before the uprising, namely the events of World War I and the British occupation of Baghdad in 1917. It details Najaf's response to these events through the issuance of fatwas calling for jihad against British forces throughout Iraq, particularly in the south, and by inciting the tribes to resist the British. The paper then traces the course of events as the people of Najaf confronted British interference in the city's affairs by opposing the British administration and its military garrison. This opposition manifested in the establishment of a secret society based in Najaf, known as the Islamic Renaissance Society, headed by Sheikh Muhammad Jawad, with Sayyid Muhammad Bahr al-Uloom as his deputy. The society adopted the liberation of Iraq as an interim goal to focus its political activity and mobilize its members to prepare the ground for the idea of an uprising against the British. To achieve its objectives, the society worked on... Spreading its call among the tribes surrounding Najaf, Kufa, Abu Sukhair, and Al-Shamiyah, the association began its activity by issuing handwritten leaflets and distributing them in Najaf, where many of them were stuck on the doors of the holy shrine and the walls of houses to incite people against the occupiers. These actions led to creating the atmosphere for a general uprising that would be the beginning of a major Iraqi revolution. However, the enthusiastic members of the association, who were headed by Haj Najm Al-Baqal, rushed things and entered the courtyard of the Saray and killed Captain Marshall, which led to the establishment of a movement in Najaf against the British and what followed of it was a painful siege and harsh sentences against those involved in it, including execution, exile, and terror. One of the results of that event was the beginning of a new era of tense relations between Najaf and the British occupation authorities.

Secondly: Reviewing Historians' Views on the Najaf Uprising:

Historical writings reflect the interest of the Iraqi intellectual class, who were concerned with documenting the history of Iraq in its various aspects. Due to their intellectual and cultural background, the historical method became clear to them, enabling them to write on different topics. Historians emerged who documented the history of Iraq in the twentieth century, specializing in recording the events and developments of the political era during the monarchy, following a specific historical methodology. They documented their views on the events that Najaf witnessed in its modern and contemporary history, and the accompanying political developments, represented by the Najaf uprising of 1918. The researcher noted that the historians who documented the events in Najaf during that period referred to it as a revolution, although they differed in their terminology. Specifically, Sheikh Baqir Al Mahbouba, in his book "The Past and Present of Najaf," Volume 1, pages 344-351, called it a revolution, while Sheikh Muhammad Rida Al Shabibi, in his book "Memoirs of Sheikh Muhammad Rida," referred to it as such. Al-Shabibi, whose work was titled "The Najaf Revolution Against British Colonialism," and Hibat al-Din al-Shahristani, in his writings about the events in Najaf and the killing of Captain Marshall, wrote his memoirs titled "The Siege of Najaf and Its News," while al-Hasani called it a revolution in his book titled "The Najaf Revolution After the Killing of Its Governor, Captain Marshall," and Hassan al-Asadi called it a revolution in his book titled "The Najaf Revolution Against the British or the First Spark of the 1920 Revolution." However, the researcher believes, after reviewing a number of historical sources that documented the events in Najaf, that it is not possible to call it the Najaf Revolution because the latter encompasses the comprehensiveness of the revolutionary action, the existence of a broad popular base, and clear coordination to sustain and expand the event. Therefore, it is more appropriate to call it an uprising, or a popular rebellion carried out by individuals from Najaf, led by Najm al-Baqqal and his companions. In this, she differs from those who documented the events of 1918, whether in general history books or those related to the history of Najaf. It would have been better for historians, and what the historical method requires, to consult various types of sources and references pertaining to

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any historical event in order to contribute to understanding the causes, course, and consequences of the event, thus enabling the historian to produce accurate accounts. However, the researcher observes, through reviewing al-Hassani's writings, that he relied entirely on foreign sources, specifically British newspapers, which presented their perspective on the events that occurred in Najaf. This led the historian into the problematic position of the British viewpoint, which places the blame on the revolutionaries, whom it labels as rebels, holding them responsible for what happened, and failing to portray the role of Iraqis in their struggle against the British colonizers to achieve their legitimate rights and independence. This contrasts with the accounts of earlier researchers who documented the events of the revolution, such as the historian Sheikh Baqir Al Mahbouba in his book "The Past and Present of Najaf" (Vol. 1), pages 344-351, or those who wrote after him, such as the historian Hassan Al Asadi. The researcher believes it would be better to conduct a comparative study between Arabic and foreign sources to reconcile the viewpoints in the writings of historians. To arrive at a definitive and satisfactory conclusion regarding that event, on the one hand, and on the other hand, some historians subjected their writings to the school of historical scientific methodology, organizing them with titles and arranging them according to chapters, sections, or sections. This is what the researcher found in the writings of the historian Baqir Al Mahbouba, who divided his work into topics, the first of which was titled "The Natural Location of Najaf." Similarly, in the writings of the historian Sheikh Al Shabibi, he divided his memoirs into sections, the first of which was titled "Memoirs of Sheikh Muhammad Rida Al Shabibi during the years 1914-1917 in the Struggle." In addition, Hassan Al Asadi's writings were divided into chapters related to the subject of the study, the first of which was titled "The Origin of Najaf and a Brief History." This contrasts with what the researcher found in Al Hasani's writings, as he organized his book with titles without numbering or arrangement according to chapters, sections, or sections. The historian mentions titles unrelated to the historical event, as he begins his book with the title "The First Rain," which appears on pages 8-14. The researcher believes that it would be better for the historian He should write his book according to a scientific methodology based on the foundations of the historical scientific method, and he should classify titles that are related to the text of the book, mentioning the footnotes from which he drew his historical material according to a scientific methodology, with mentioning introductory footnotes for some of the prominent figures who have an important role in Arab or Iraqi society at the bottom of the pages, which the researcher noticed in many of the sources that were referred to in mentioning the events of the Najaf revolution, including, for example, Al Mahbouba, mentioning an introductory footnote for a figure on page (155), so that readers and researchers can benefit from it in their historical writings.

The researcher noted that historians who documented or specialized in the history of Najaf agreed that the Islamic Renaissance Society was the main driving force behind the events of 1918. However, historians differed with Al-Hassani regarding the society's founding. Professor Abdullah Fayyad, in his book "The Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920" (pages 192-193), indicates that the society was founded during the tenure of Captain Marshall, the governor of Najaf. Many other historians, including Hassan al-Asadi (pages 169 and 218), Ali al-Wardi (page 264 of his "Social Glimpses," vol. 5, part 2), and Farouk Saleh Al-Omar (page 32 of "Political Parties in Iraq 1922-1932"), suggest that the society was established after the British forces entered Baghdad on March 11, 1917. Al-Hassani, on page 24 of his book, states that it was founded before the occupation of Baghdad. Professor Abdul Sattar Al-Janabi, in his book "The Political History of Najaf," also mentions this discrepancy on page 42. The researcher stated that this association was founded following the British occupation of Baghdad and the subjugation of Najaf to direct British military administration.

It would have been better for the historian to be objective and impartial regarding the historical event, the action, and the actor, rather than allowing personal emotions to influence their judgment. This is precisely what the researcher found throughout the study. For example, the historian Baqir Al Mahbouba's accounts of the siege and its details are inconsistent. He greatly exaggerates the number of forces besieging Najaf, describing them as a massive army of forty-five

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soldiers, as mentioned on page 347. This contrasts with the accounts of Al Shabibi (Memoirs, pp. 294-335) and Al Asadi (The Najaf Revolution, pp. 260-305), where the actual force that carried out the siege was an infantry brigade led by General Sanders. Furthermore, on pages 38-45 of his book, he presents the British occupation authorities' stance on the events in Najaf, relying solely on the British perspective without consulting historical sources such as general histories, Najaf history books, or memoirs that addressed the events of the revolution and the local population's stance towards the British authorities. This constitutes a deficiency in the historian's perspective. The events, the bias towards one side over the other, and the exaggeration of the strict British measures towards the events of the revolution, and this is what the researcher does not agree with through the analysis of the measures taken by the British occupation authorities, as they sought to tighten the noose on the revolutionaries, and confine the historical event to the city without other Iraqi cities, as evidenced by the imposition of the strict siege on the city of Najaf and its men, and they even sought to win some of them over with gifts at times and fear at other times for fear of the leakage of that event. Add to that what the occupation authorities made in concessions after this, on the one hand, and on the other hand, Al-Hassani did not mention in his book that the main reason for the frustration of this revolution was the lack of religious support for it, so no movement in Najaf can succeed without the support of the mujtahids from the religious men.

The researcher observed in the writings of some historians a lack of precise terminology and concepts in historical writing, and a failure to use accurate expression. Instead of analyzing historical texts, they simply reproduced the meaning without alteration, deletion, or substitution with synonymous meanings. This is a necessary approach, as the historian al-Hasani's book contains many colloquial expressions, such as: "When the British entered Baghdad... fear gripped everyone, and the means to gauge public sentiment regarding this entry were lost. Hypocrites abounded, and deceivers spread... and then came the consolation." This contrasts with the approach found in many historical sources that documented the events of the Najaf Revolution. Therefore, the researcher decided to reformulate these texts and replace them with synonymous meanings. For example, in the book of the historian al-Asadi, the content of the objectives of the Islamic Renaissance Society, which led the events of the revolution, is reformulated as follows: "To rid Iraq of British control and to stir up national sentiment to broaden the base of popular opposition rejecting the foreign presence, thus ensuring the country's independence." Furthermore, the researcher agrees... The historians' writings are distinguished by their simple language, making them easy for researchers and readers to understand. Their avoidance of difficult and complex linguistic structures has contributed to their widespread adoption. Their style is characterized by its simplicity and engaging nature.

Conclusions

After reviewing the historical sources that addressed the situation in Najaf and British policy towards it, the researcher believes that this policy was the primary cause of this uprising. Furthermore, the religious factor was a fundamental and driving force behind the events of 1918, especially since the leadership of the uprising and its intellectual orientation were purely Islamic, originating from the Islamic Renaissance Society, which was founded by some religious figures.

It cannot be definitively stated that what occurred was a revolution, as a revolution has a specific political definition. Its most important characteristic is its profound strategic nature for any historical event. It is defined by its results and the tireless work required to achieve the ultimate goal: the liberation of Iraq and the establishment of an Islamic system of governance. It is more accurate to call it an uprising, considering it a prelude to a larger event. This is what happened; the 1918 uprising in Najaf was one of the precursors to the 1920 Revolution, which led to the establishment of the modern Iraqi state.

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