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## The 1918 Anti-British Revolt in Najaf: Local Primary Sources vs National and Religious Narratives

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**THE 1918 ANTI-BRITISH REVOLT IN NAJAF:  
LOCAL PRIMARY SOURCES VS  
NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS  
NARRATIVES**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Art, History

By

Mohammed Harba

August 2020

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# **THE 1918 ANTI-BRITISH REVOLT IN NAJAF: LOCAL PRIMARY SOURCES VS NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES**

History Department

Missouri State University, August 2020

Master of Arts

Mohammed Harba

## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines the diverse historical narratives of the 1918 Najaf Revolt against British forces during the concluding months of World War I on the Mesopotamian front. For a century, two distinguishable narratives have been developed and promoted in Iraqi literature: Pan-Arabist and religious, reflecting the objectives, motivations, and present-mindedness of two political eras in modern Iraqi history. Several local primary sources, mostly memoirs of Najafis who witnessed or participated in the revolt, have been re-surfaced and re-visited during the past twenty years. These primary sources shed new light on the established Pan-Arabist narrative or the recent religious framing of the revolt. The thesis aims to examine these primary sources to reveal how they corroborate or contradict with these two dominant interpretations of the revolt. This comparison showcases a complicated political and social reality on the ground in Najaf on the eve of a post-Ottoman Iraq, where simple and straightforward labels of Pan-Arabist or religious narratives do not entirely convey the complex social and political landscape, competing loyalties, and personal interests and objectives among the population of Mesopotamia's holiest city.

**KEYWORDS:** British occupation of Mesopotamia, Iraq, local revolts against British forces, Mesopotamian Campaign, military campaigns, Najaf, World War I

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A Master's Thesis  
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August 2020

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## INTRODUCTION

The 1918 Najaf Revolt against British forces during the First World War was recorded in several official British documents and in the local publications that were distributed by British authorities in Mesopotamia. These official documents, combined with eyewitness accounts from both sides of the conflict, have shaped the historical narrative of this event for a hundred years and provided historians with primary sources that shed light on varying social and political aspects of the reality on the ground in Mesopotamia, the Middle Euphrates in particular, during the war's final months.

The historical significance of this short-lived armed conflict that broke out during the final stages of the First World War is directly associated with the religious influence of its location; the Holy City of Najaf, where the seat of the world's Shia religious authority resides. Najaf houses the grand Shia seminary known as al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah, where Shia clerics and scholars are educated. This seminary, constituted by several senior Grand Ayatollahs, exerts religious authority over the majority of the Shia communities around the world. The holy city also houses the Golden Shrine of Ali, Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin and the Shias' paramount Imam. In 1908, the population of the city was roughly 35,000, and it consisted of the religious scholars, seminary students and clerics, and the local Iraqis, including the militias of al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt. These warring local militias, comprised of young men from the four quarters of the city; al-'Amārah, al-Burāq, al-Ḥuwīsh and al-Mishrāq, became prominent for their continuous role in protecting the city from the raiding tribes of the Arabian desert. The weak Ottoman authorities and their inability to defend the areas adjacent to the desert made it possible for these local militias to expand and flourish. The four high-ranking leaders who



controlled the quarters of Najaf also controlled al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt militias, allowing them to exert immense power over the city's political and social life. In addition to the local population, Najaf was also home to thousands of people from the Shia world who desired to reside near the Golden Shrine of Ali.<sup>1</sup>

The city was extremely unique, not only because of its religious status, but also because of the fact that it liberated itself from Ottoman control in May 1915. Several towns in the Middle Euphrates Valley rebelled against Ottoman authorities during the early stages of the First World War, and these rebellions were mostly crushed in a brutal fashion. Yet, the local militias of Najaf, with the support of the city's influential religious leaderships, managed to develop an autonomous governing system that remained in power until the British conquest of Baghdad in March 1917.<sup>2</sup>

Following their decisive victory in Mesopotamia's largest city, British authorities attempted to alter the political landscape in the Middle Euphrates and other parts of Mesopotamia that had been stripped away from the Ottomans during the war. However, the challenge for the British was that many local residents rejected these political changes. In the case of Najaf, this sudden change in the political landscape and the inadequate British experience in dealing with the local population, who also had their own agendas and priorities, culminated in an anti-British armed revolt in Mesopotamia's holiest city.

According to most of the scholarly literature, both British and Iraqi, the first shots of the revolt were heard on the morning hours of 19 March 1918 when a group of well-organized armed men who formed a political society in Najaf a few months prior, stormed the British

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<sup>1</sup> 'Abdullah al-Nifīsī, *Dawr al-Shi'ah fī taṭawir al-'Irāq al-siyāsī al-ḥadīth*, (Kuwait: Afāq, 2012), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Jāsim al-Yasārī, "Intifāḍat al-Najaf 1915: Dirāsah taḥlīliyah," *Journal of Kerbala University* 9, no. 2 (2011): 45.

administration's al-Haffiz; the local mispronunciation of the English word 'office', located outside the city walls. The attackers killed the British Political Officer of Najaf; Captain William Macandrew Marshall, and wounded another officer who rushed to the aide of his colleague. Another escalation took place that same day when two British-appointed local policemen were shot and killed. Following these incidents, British authorities acted swiftly, blockading the city and demanding the surrender of the perpetrators, in addition to paying a fine of 50,000 rupees and 1,000 rifles. When the rebels rejected these terms, British forces occupied the strategic southwestern quarter of al-Huwīsh. Captain Francis Cecil Campbell Balfour; the Political Officer of al-Shāmīyah Division, which included the city of Najaf, worked with the pro-British population of Najaf to locate and arrest the rebels and to collect the fine that was imposed on the city by British authorities. These joint efforts ultimately led to the conclusion of the blockade that lasted forty-six days. The trial of the arrested rebels was held on 5 May 1918 and was concluded twenty days later. The court martial sentenced sixteen rebels to exile to India, nine rebels to different periods of imprisonment, and eleven to death. These death sentences were carried out on 30 May 1918, ending the troubles in Najaf during that critical phase of the First World War on the Mesopotamian front.<sup>3</sup>

This research explores newly-popularized Iraqi primary sources, mostly memoirs written by religious scholars, students, residents and politicians from Najaf, and how these eyewitness accounts of the revolt challenge major aspects of both Pan-Arab nationalist and religious narratives that have dominated the revolt's historical characterization in the collective memory of Iraq. Several of these primary sources were published in post-2003 Iraq, following the collapse of the Pan-Arab nationalist government. As for the documents and memories that were

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<sup>3</sup> 'Alī. al-Wardī, *Lamaḥāt ijtīmā'īyah min tārikh al-'Irāq al-ḥadīth* Vol. 5-2, (Beirut: Sharikat Dār al-Warrāq lil-Nashr, 1974), 271-322.

previously published during the second half of the 20th century, they did not receive a sizeable academic attention or re-prints due to their controversial nature and the way they challenged the already established historical narrative of the revolt that mostly promoted Pan-Arab nationalist themes. These primary sources were also re-published in post-2003 Iraq.

Chapter One delves into British official records that documented the 1918 Najaf Revolt while it was unfolding. Although, these documents clearly focus on the British viewpoint, they uniquely provide a real-time narrative of the revolt and the evolving situation on the ground. Chapter Two, on the other hand, examines how British and Iraqi literature has revisited and interpreted the revolt during the past one-hundred years. These two chapters focus on the revolt's already established historical narratives and interpretations.

Chapters Three and Four employ Iraqi primary sources to question the two most established historical narratives of the revolt: Pan-Arabist and religious interpretations. These primary sources reflect various local viewpoints of individuals who experienced the revolt firsthand or even participated in it. Sayyīd Muḥammad Ḥassan al-Qūjanī, Sayyīd Muḥammad 'Alī Ḥibat al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī al-Shahristanī, Sayyīd Muḥammad Amīn Al-Khū'ī, Sayyīd Muḥammad Mahdī Baḥr al-'Ulūm, and al-Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭa' were all associated with Najaf's religious seminary al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah. Their recollections of the revolt reflect the diverse viewpoints religious scholars had towards the conflict. The memoirs of Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī, an Iraqi politician who hailed from a renowned Najafī family and was among the activists who later pushed for Iraqi independence, reflect the views of the educated class in the city. On the other hand, the recollections of Sayyīd Muḥsin Abū Ṭabīkh and Tūmān 'Adwah, who were active in combating British presence in Mesopotamia, reflect the experiences of those who opposed the rapid political and social changes that stormed the country

during the First World War. The memoirs of Sayyīd Muḥammad Ḥassan al-Qūjanī and Sayyīd Muḥammad Amīn Al-Khū'ī and Sayyīd Muḥammad Amīn Al-Khū'ī were written in Persian, while the rest were written in Arabic. These different primary sources provide a detailed historical narrative of the events that took place in Najaf during the spring of 1918. Although the eyewitness testimonies contain several discrepancies and inconsistencies, especially with dates, numbers and minor details, they generally tend to be personal reflections of the authors' own views, experiences, and reactions to these events.

Chapter Three examines how Iraqi primary sources, mostly memoirs published or re-printed for the first time during the past twenty years, challenge or validate the Pan-Arabist narrative that had surfaced during the 1970s and remained dominant for more than three decades. The Pan-Arab nationalist characterization of al-Hāj Najm al-Baqāl al-Duylaymī, a key leader of the revolt, as an Arab national idol who fought for liberty and independence is examined and compared against the recorded eyewitness experiences of local Najafis. Chapter Four examines how local primary sources address the role of the Najafī religious establishment in shaping the outcome of the revolt, with a focus on the various narratives surrounding the role of Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Kāzīm al-Ṭabātabā'ī al-Yazdī, the paramount religious scholar of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah. The actions of the religious establishment and its paramount leader are integral to the revolt's religious-centric narrative, which has become prevalent in post-2003 Iraq.

## CHAPTER ONE: OFFICIAL BRITISH RECORDS

The primary sources that documented the 1918 Najaf Revolt are mostly memoirs of local Iraqi eyewitnesses or of British officials who were directly involved in administering Mesopotamia during the First World War. The majority of these memoirs were penned years or even decades after the war. As for recorded eyewitness testimonies, the majority of them were the product of the 1960s and 1970s; more than fifty years following the conclusion of the First World War. The only exception is British official cables and records. Even the sole Arabic-language primary source that documented the revolt while it was unfolding is also an official British publication. These British documents differ from the other available primary sources because they are not heavily influenced by personal narratives or reflect recalled memories. Although they provide a real-time documentation of the revolt, they tend to focus on British military and political objectives in Mesopotamia during the war, covering a single aspect of this intricate short-lived military conflict.

British official documents and correspondence point to the tribal Arab inhabitants of Najaf as the primary instigator that triggered the revolt. These documents are quick to highlight the three different population groups that inhabited Najaf during that time-period, blaming the ensuing unrest that swept through the holy city in March 1918 on a single group, while exonerating the remaining two. These three major groups are: the Arab inhabitants from the competing al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt, the Persian Najafis, and the religious students and scholars.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Rush, *Record of Iraq 1914-1966*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 601.

British official literature highlights the role of the Najaf townsmen from al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt militias in driving the 1915 Najaf rebellion against the Ottomans, which allowed the holy city to enjoy complete autonomy for more than two years during the First World War. This control over a large urban area bustling with pilgrims and influential religious scholars mostly benefited the four tribal sheiks representing the two competing factions of al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt: Sayyīd Maḥdī Ibn Sayyīd Salmān who was the chief sheik of al-Zuqurt, al-Ḥāj ‘Aṭīyah Abū Qallal, and Kāzīm Ṣubḥī who were also of al-Zuqurt faction, and al-Ḥāj Sa‘ad al-Ḥāj Raḍī who was the chief sheik of the Shumurt. These sheiks controlled all four quarters, or neighborhoods, of the walled holy city. Al-Ḥāj ‘Aṭīyah Abū Qallal was the head of the al-‘Amārah quarter, Sayyīd Maḥdī Ibn Sayyīd Salmān was in charge of the quarter of al-Ḥuwīsh, Kāzīm Ṣubḥī was the head of al-Burāq quarter, and al-Ḥāj Sa‘ad al-Ḥāj Raḍī was the head of al-Mishrāq quarter.<sup>5</sup>

The militant nature of these two tribal factions, their astounding defense of the holy city against the raids of the Arabian desert Bedouins, and their successful revolt against the Ottomans had undoubtedly put them on the radar of the already tribes-obsessed British intelligence. Therefore, British official records pay considerable attention to the power and influence of al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt in Najaf and their relationship with other population groups such as the Persian and Arab traders on one hand, and with the other tribes in the vicinity of Najaf and the Middle Euphrates Valley on the other. British official records harshly criticize the leading sheiks of these two factions. Sayyīd Maḥdī Ibn Sayyīd Salmān, the head of al-Ḥuwīsh quarter, was the only sheik who avoided scrutiny in these records. He was also the only sheik who stood by the British and provided them with shelter and support during the 1918 Najaf revolt, whereas the

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<sup>5</sup> “*Reports of administration for 1918 of divisions and districts of the occupied territories in Mesopotamia. Vol. I*”, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/20/250, 68.

other heads of the remaining three quarters of Najaf sided with the rebels or openly joined their cause. Interestingly, Sayyīd Maḥdī Ibn Sayyīd Salmān was the archnemesis of al-Ḥāj ‘Aṭīyah Abū Qallal, who was a powerful adversary of the British in Najaf and a leading figure in the 1918 revolt. Sayyīd Maḥdī's decision to side with British authorities could be interpreted as another manifestation of this intense rivalry with Abū Qallal. Although both men hailed from al-Zuqurt faction, they competed over controlling the entire holy city. According to Iraqi sociologist Alī al-Wardī, Sayyīd Maḥdī Ibn Sayyīd Salmān might already have a history of siding with authorities to undermine his rival. It was rumored that Sayyīd Maḥdī instigated the Ottomans to accuse Abū Qallal with crimes against the state, leading to the latter's arrest and brutal torture by the Ottoman authorities in 1914.<sup>6</sup>

Official British literature persistently points out that for more than two years and prior to August 1917 when British forces took complete charge of the Middle Euphrates Valley, Najaf was wholly controlled by the four sheiks from the al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt. Interestingly, British officials were not impressed by these sheiks' style of governance or their quick rise to power, despite the fact that they received subsidies from the British government itself. These four sheiks collected municipal taxation that they themselves pocketed. They had many bands of armed 'bullies' in their employ; fellow townsmen who came from these four sheiks' own factions and neighborhoods, spearheading their rapid acquisition of a vast wealth and unchallenged power. According to a British political report from occupied Mesopotamia, "how

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Alī. al-Wardī, *Lamaḥāt ijtimā‘īyah min tārikh al-‘Irāq al-ḥadīth* Vol. 5-2, (Beirut: Sharikat Dār al-Warrāq lil-Nashr, 1974), 254.

any respectable citizen survived with his life or with his money is a mystery. Each quarter was a law unto itself; murders and street fighting were the order of the day.”<sup>7</sup>

Among the most noticeable aspects in the official British narrative of the situation in Najaf is that it attempts to separate the sheiks of the al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt and their armed militias from the rest of the population in the holy city. The educated and wealthy class that hailed from both Arab and Persian families and the religious students and scholars including Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Ṭabātabā’ī al-Yazdī, who was the paramount head of al-Ḥawzah al-’Ilmīyah of Najaf, “accepted the domination of the tribal sheikhs only because the alternative was the still more distasteful domination of the Turks; the merchant class suffered from their exactions and from the unchecked lawlessness of their followers.”<sup>8</sup>

With British direct rule and its resulting administrative reforms expanding in the Middle Euphrates Valley, the unchallenged power of Najaf’s four tribal sheiks started to rapidly diminish, alongside the subsidies that were provided to them by the British themselves to guarantee their loyalty. Escalations between the British administration in al-Shāmīyah Division; the British administrative region that included Najaf, were mounting, and disputes with tribes from neighboring areas required direct British intervention. These escalations culminated with the fateful attack on al-Ḥaffīz, where the seat of the British local government resided, during the morning hours of 19 March 1918 that led to the death of the Najaf Political Officer; Captain W. M. Marshall of the 37th Dogras and the British-Indian Political Department. Marshall’s assassination, however, was not generally viewed as the culmination of tensions between segments of the local population of Najaf and British authorities. E. A. Tandy’s *Records of the*

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<sup>7</sup> “*Reports of administration for 1918 of divisions and districts of the occupied territories in Mesopotamia. Vol. P*”, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/20/250, 68.

<sup>8</sup> “*File 756/1917 Pt 2-3 ‘Arab Bulletin Nos 66-114’*”, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/PS/10/658, 115.



*Survey of India*, for example, points out that "on the 21st of March 1918, the political officer at Najaf, Captain W.M. Marshall, was murdered for no apparent reason."<sup>9</sup>

The lack of apparent reasons behind Marshall's assassinations and the failure to connect the events of 19 March 1918 to previous British-Najafi tensions had left its marks on how the revolt was officially documented. Generally, official British government records, that mostly belong to the India Office, characterize the revolt as a criminal act driven by unruly tribal groups whose sheiks were vying for wealth and dominance. The British narrative also highlights the potential role of a foreign influence, German in particular, that might have driven some of the key players that led the revolt to rebel against British rule and to concoct a large-scale plan to target all British political officers in that part of the Middle Euphrates Valley.<sup>10</sup> British official records also mention that a rebellion committee was created in Najaf to agitate the local tribes against British forces, implicating more than a hundred members of the religious community in the city, none of whom belonged to the upper echelon of the powerful al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the fact that high-ranking religious leaderships were not involved in the revolt showcases another British attempt to place the blame on a single group within Najafi community.

This official British characterization of the revolt stems from their already-established understanding of the social and tribal dynamics that dominated Najaf in the aftermath of the successful uprising against the Ottomans in 1915. Official British documents are adamant in labeling al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt as the sole source behind the troubles in Najaf culprit, because

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<sup>9</sup> E. A. Tandy, *Records of the Survey of India Vol. XX*, (Dehra Dun: Superintendent Government Printing, 1925), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Rush, *Record of Iraq 1914-1966*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 602.

<sup>11</sup> *File 978/1917 Pt 3 'Mesopotamia and Persia: Occupation of Baghdad; Protection of Holy Places'*. British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers. IOR/L/PS/10/667.

the British understood the sacred status of the city and the level of influence its religious scholars could exert over the majority of the tribes in southern Mesopotamia. These scholars were also revered by millions of British subjects in India and millions of Iranian citizens whose country was an important ally of Great Britain in the Near East. It was paramount for the British to neutralize the religious leaders and keep the neighboring tribes in the Middle Euphrates Valley out of the conflict by targeting and punishing a very specific and well-defined group. Alienating these other groups in Najaf and the surrounding areas would have certainly created more military challenges for British authorities and have helped the rebels garner more sympathy and even material support from other tribes and the nearby urban communities. A full-scale military conflict in Najaf would have also created a diplomatic crisis with Iran, in addition to internal challenges in the British Raj, where Shia Islam is the official religion for several princely states' royal families that ruled vast swathes of British India.

This characterization of the revolt is heavily pushed on the pages of *al-'Arab* daily newspaper, which was published by British authorities in Baghdad to promote their policies and interests among the local population. This official publication persistently reminded its readers that the British administration and its military forces in Mesopotamia “took all necessary precautions not to harm the holy city,”<sup>12</sup> not to mention respecting and protecting its esteemed religious scholars. The newspaper also signaled to the local population that “the government wants to punish only the true instigators of the riots,”<sup>13</sup> while concurrently publishing articles that glorified the successful harvest season in al-Shāmīyah Division, highlighting the fortunes of the surrounding tribal communities compared to the chaos in the nearby Najaf.

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<sup>12</sup> *Al-'Arab*, "Anbā' al-Najaf," March 29, 1918, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Al-'Arab*, "Al-Mawqif fi al-Najaf," April 15, 1918, 2.

For British authorities, characterizing the revolt as the manifestation of lawless tribal townsmen's reaction to the loss of their power and control in a new era of enlightenment, that was ushered in by the British Empire, served the overarching objective of defeating the Ottomans. It also reflected the collapse of a ruling system that would have no place in the new post-Ottoman Mesopotamia. During the nineteenth century, Al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt competed over controlling the holy city for decades and rebelled against their Ottoman overlords on multiple occasions. These two factions were battle hardened by their constant confrontations with the raiding tribes of the Arabian desert. Crushing the rebellion of al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt and their power and reputation in the city once and for all signaled the end of an era whose roots were deeply intertwined with those of the Ottoman legacy in Mesopotamia. When official British reports discuss the aftermath of the revolt, among the most highlighted outcomes, beside punishing the perpetrators who led the attack on the British Office on 19 March 1918, is the total collapse of al-Zuqurt and al-Shumurt's influence in the holy city. Neutralizing and weakening tribal power in Mesopotamia are a recurring theme in the official narrative of the revolt and its outcomes. These reports point out that "the town was effectively purged there is no doubt, and it is improbable that under any circumstances whatever the Zuqurt and the Shumurt will again be able to exercise their maleficent influence."<sup>14</sup>

British official records do highlight the tribal-centric nature of this conflict. According to the official Records of the Survey of India that documented the events of the First World War, "after the suppression of the Najaf conspiracy, which had led to the murder of Captain Marshall in March, there was no other trouble with the tribes, on either the Tigers or the Euphrates L. of

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<sup>14</sup> "Reports of administration for 1918 of divisions and districts of the occupied territories in Mesopotamia. Volume I", 70.

C. during the summer of 1918."<sup>15</sup> However, this short-lived stability and the successful neutralization of the tribes in southern Mesopotamia came crashing down two years later when the majority of the tribes in Iraq were in an all-out conflict with the British administration of Mesopotamia.

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<sup>15</sup> E. A. Tandy, *Records of the Survey of India Vol. XX*, (Dehra Dun: Superintendent Government Printing, 1925), 34.

## CHAPTER TWO: HISTORIOGRAPHY

There are several factors that have shaped the historiography of the 1918 Najaf Revolt and the method used to document it in both Iraqi and British literature. The religious status of Najaf, for instance, has played a significant role in shaping Iraqi historiography of the revolt. The city's tactical and religious importance in the British-Ottoman battle over Mesopotamia had also been extensively documented by British official records and correspondence. During the hundred years that followed this short-lived revolt, the religious importance of Najaf has not diminished, and al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah has continued to play an instrumental role in influencing the political reality of Iraq. The status and influence of this religious institution, combined with tribal dynamics, have motivated several historians to revisit this short-lived event that looks minuscule compared to many large-scale conflicts that wracked the modern Iraqi state during its first hundred years of existence.

Additionally, the historical literature of both British and Iraqi sides could be seen as present-minded with military and political realities on the ground in Iraq constantly reshaping the characterization of the revolt. Early British narrative, preserved in British official records, is clearly a product of the battlefield. The military situation on the Mesopotamian front and the armed conflict with the Ottomans in Iraq dictated how British authorities characterize the revolt. This battlefield-centric narrative seeped into the post-war British literature, which was mostly personal accounts of the reaction towards Captain W. M. Marshall's death. It took Western literature decades and another large-scale military conflict with Iraq in 1991 to intensely delve into the local nuances and motivations that drove the events in Najaf in 1918. The Iraq War of 2003 has also breathed new life into the notions of exploring and learning from the British

experience in Mesopotamia. This development on the ground in Iraq has yet again benefited historical research exploring the revolt, especially the research focusing on the relationship between British authorities and the religious and tribal leaders of southern Iraq, and the role local tribes could play in any potential conflict with a foreign power.

This present mindedness, shaped by the military and political realities on the ground in Iraq, has also hounded Iraqi literature concerning the revolt. The Arab nationalist government saw the revolt as yet another historical vehicle to broadcast its Pan-Arabism and homogeneous Iraqi identity. The collapse of this government in 2003 has provided Iraqi historians with a new opportunity to revisit their modern history, and the Najaf revolt has been among the prominent ‘rediscovered’ historical events. This time, the focus has shifted towards the role of the religious leaderships in shaping and leading the revolt in an attempt to reclaim ownership over a local movement with large-scale national ramifications. The interest in this religious aspect has generated new details and spotlighted new documents that expanded the overall historical picture of the revolt. The shifting military and political realities on the ground in Iraq will continue to ignite new interests and spotlight new themes, and both Western and Iraqi historians’ characterization of the revolt will continue to evolve and expand through the publication of new Iraqi primary sources and their translations. This chapter examines how the shifting military and political realities in Iraq have shaped both British and Iraqi literature, and how its historiography tends to reflect contemporary political objectives.

### **British Post-War Narrative**

Unlike official wartime records and documents, British literature concerning the 1918 Najaf Revolt, which was birthed following the conclusion of the First World War, is not chained

by the limitations of the military situation on the ground. An early revisiting of the events in Mesopotamia by those who shaped and witnessed them represent a personal narrative of how these colonial administrators evaluated the British policies in Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, the events in Najaf in 1918 could have easily highlighted the potential challenges that could face British authorities in Mesopotamia if a large-scale rebellion were to break out in the Middle Euphrates Valley. Yet, most post-war literature treats the Najaf revolt as an isolated incident with no true ramifications on the future of British rule in the country.

The fateful 19 March 1918 attack on al-Ḥaffīz, the seat of the British local government in Najaf, signaled the starting point of the Najaf revolt against British forces. The most prominent casualty of the attack was the highest-ranking British official in Najaf; Captain W. M. Marshall. The young political officer, who had already lost his only brother in the Gallipoli Campaign, was well-liked and respected by all his colleagues in Mesopotamia who survived the conflict and went on to write about it. For these eyewitnesses, the cornerstone of the 1918 events in Najaf was the death of Captain W. M. Marshall.

This focus on Marshall's death is visible as early as the first week of the revolt. When narrating the events in Najaf to her stepmother, Gertrude Bell, who acted as the Oriental Secretary in British Mesopotamia, labels the events in Najaf as a *tragedy*, stating that "a terrible cloud has fallen on our work here in the murder at Najaf of one of our young political officers - it seems absurd to talk of one death as a cloud, but we have felt it deeply. He was a brilliant creature; I personally was very fond of him."<sup>16</sup> In this private letter, written few days following the start of the revolt, Bell points out the impact the death of Captain W. M. Marshall had on the figureheads of the British administrative authorities in Baghdad.

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<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Bell, Gertrude Bell to Florence Bell, March 28, 1918, In *Gertrude Bell Archive*, accessed May 10, 2019, [http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=291](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=291).

In his post-war memoir, Sir Arnold Wilson, who was the British civil Commissioner in Baghdad from 1918 to 1920, echoes Bell's sentiment regarding Captain W. M. Marshall. Wilson does not shy away from calling Marshall "one of the best and wisest of men"<sup>17</sup> whose professionalism, fluency in Persian, and warm relations with the religious scholars in the Holy City of Kādhimīyah had immediately endeared him to the figureheads of the prestigious al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah of Najaf. Lieutenant Colonel John Tennant of the Royal Air Force also reverberates this interpretation of the revolt in his 1920 memoir, condensing it into a mere criminal act followed by the swift punishment of the perpetrators and that "after a period of siege, those responsible were surrendered."<sup>18</sup>

British journalist and writer Edmund Candler, whose account of the Mesopotamian Campaign was also published right after the end of the war, also frames the revolt as the criminal act of murdering Captain W. M. Marshall. Candler, who admired the young political officer and viewed him as a genuine supporter of the Arabs, states that 21 March 1918 was the date of the attack on al-Ḥaffīz.<sup>19</sup> This date does not match the one provided by most British government records and al-'Arab newspaper. Although E. A. Tandy's *Records of the Survey of India*, an official publication by the British government of India, designates 21 March 1918 as the day when Marshall's assassination took place,<sup>20</sup> almost all other official documents specify that the rebels' attack on the British office in Najaf took place during the morning hours of 19 March 1918.<sup>21</sup> It is possible this confusion was the product of early eyewitness narratives promoting the

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<sup>17</sup> Arnold Wilson, *Loyalties Mesopotamia 1917-1920, Vol. II*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 73.

<sup>18</sup> John Tennant, *In the Clouds Above Baghdad*, (London: Cecil Palmer, 1920), 261.

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Candler, *The Long Road to Baghdad, Vol. II*, (London: Cassell, 1919), 213.

<sup>20</sup> E. A. Tandy, *Records of the Survey of India Vol. XX*, (Dehra Dun: Superintendent Government Printing, 1925), 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Al-'Arab*, "Anbā' al-Najaf," March 29, 1918, 3.



notion that the rebels desired to declare their revolution during the Shias' New Year's celebration in southern Mesopotamia, observed on 21 March and coincides with Nowruz.

Nevertheless, the post-war British official publications present a more detailed narrative that focuses on the big picture and the overall conflict with the Turks and their German allies. Interestingly, the post-war official Review of The Civil Administration of Mesopotamia calls the troubles in Najaf "the most delicate situation which had occurred since the occupation,"<sup>22</sup> and a large-scale German plan to ignite a rebellion among the tribes once British authorities take active measures against the sanctity of the Holy City of Najaf. The plan was foiled because the German officers who orchestrated it were captured in the town of 'Anah with all their incriminating papers and documents.

The British official history of the First World War, collected in 109 volumes, also departs from the focus on the death of Captain W. M. Marshall, seen in personal memoirs and eyewitness experiences, to shed more light on the German role in spearheading the 'conspiracy' during that fateful spring in Najaf. Brigadier General F. J. Moberly, who penned the official history of the Mesopotamian Campaign, quotes Lieutenant General William Marshall's war despatch in its entirety to showcase that what fueled the fire of this Najaf conspiracy was German gold paid by German agents and political officers who were operative on the Mesopotamian front.<sup>23</sup> This war despatch is dated 1 October 1918 when it became evident that the Ottomans' surrender was a matter of days away. Sir Arnold Wilson also highlighted the

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<sup>22</sup> *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1920), 40.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Moberly, *History of the Great War: The Campaign in Mesopotamia 1914-1918, Vol. IV*. (London: H. M Stationery, 1927), 137.

German role in instigating the Najaf revolt, citing documents that were in the possession of German officers captured on the Euphrates during the same month; March 1918.<sup>24</sup>

Generally, post-war British official narrative characterizes the revolt as a criminal act within a large-scale German plot to destabilize the Middle Euphrates Valley and push the British and local tribes into a regional armed conflict over a potential British disrespect for the sacred city of Najaf. This plot, documented in German papers seized by the British in other parts of the Ottoman front, vindicates the choices that were made by the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia and British military commanders to delicately address that critical situation in Najaf without agitating the city's paramount religious leaders and the tribal sheiks of its countryside.

With the conclusion of the First World War, the British narrative of the revolt was no longer constrained by the military reality on the ground. Shedding more light on the German role in orchestrating these events became possible now that the Germans were defeated and the need to keep enemy activities hidden was no longer necessary. Moreover, pointing the finger at the Germans aligns with the overarching post-war narrative where "much of the intellectual history of scholarship and commentary on the causes of the First World War has been focused on Germany, and the debate over its responsibility and war guilt."<sup>25</sup> The quick collapse of the Ottoman forces in 'Anah and Khān al-Baghdādī in March 1918 allowed the British to capture the German liaison officers who accompanied these Ottoman forces. It is possible that this quick defeat did not give the German officers enough time to destroy the papers and records that

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<sup>24</sup> Arnold Wilson, *Loyalties Mesopotamia 1917-1920, Vol. II*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 75.

<sup>25</sup> Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15.

detailed their involvement in agitating the local tribes against British forces. These confiscated papers served as a straightforward evidence incriminating the Germans.

Additionally, for British eyewitnesses who documented the revolt, their own experiences and interactions with Captain W. M. Marshall, the young political officer who chose to postpone his marriage plans and his trip home so he could serve in Najaf, had shaped their characterization of these events. In published memoirs or personal letters of those who knew Captain W. M. Marshall, the revolt is mostly described as a murder or a crime. The personal attachment these individuals had with the deceased political officer explains why they characterized the revolt in the way they did.

### **Returning to Mesopotamia: The Search for Lessons from the Past**

By the late 1930s, the 1918 Najaf Revolt had received little to no attention, in comparison to the 1920 Great Iraqi Revolt and its role in birthing the modern state of Iraq. In the few times that the Najaf revolt surfaced in post-Second World War Western historical literature, it is typically discussed within the larger context of the Iraqis' struggle for independence, or as an earlier sign of political and social unrest prior to the 1920 Great Iraqi Revolt.<sup>26</sup> However, the return of the British to Iraq during the 1990s and later in 2003, alongside their American allies this time, and the resulting armed conflict, that has stormed the country for several years, have generated an interest in exploring the lessons that the British learned while fighting their first war in Mesopotamia. The Americans and the British were quick to realize that the tribal and the religious dynamics, which dominated Iraq ninety years ago, still have solid roots in the social fabric of the country. Therefore, revisiting British experience in Mesopotamia might provide

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<sup>26</sup> Amal Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3, no. 2 (1972): 133.

valuable insight into how the US and the UK could confront the escalating challenges of the Iraq War. This led to a historiographical expansion of the literature that explores the conflicts between the British colonial authorities and the local population in all different parts of Iraq during and in the aftermath of the First World War.

Although the role of Iraqi national aspirations in fueling the revolt started to surface in academic writings dating back to the 1970s, it was not until the 1990s that this topic received a thorough examination. In Eliezer Tauber's *The Arab Movements in World War I*, Iraqi national aspirations as a driving force behind the revolt are highlighted and directly linked to a national movement spearheaded by Jam'īyat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmīyah or the Society of Islamic Revival which was created by prominent tribal and religious leaders of Najaf in early 1918.<sup>27</sup> The Najaf revolt also surfaces in Yitzhak Nakash's *The Shi'is of Iraq*, and later in *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*. His works provide one of the most detailed narratives of the revolt in Western literature, and they heavily cite the writings of Iraqi historians and prominent local figures who witnessed these events in Najaf. The works of both Eliezer Tauber and Yitzhak Nakash indicate that both scholars are familiar with the Arabic language, and this has allowed them to expand the historical narrative of the revolt by citing more Iraqi primary sources.

The Iraq War of 2003 and the subsequent long-term involvement of both American and British troops in the conflict has intensified the academic interest in revisiting the British experience during the Mesopotamian Campaign, especially concerning Western military interactions with the country's tribes and the religious leaders. When examining the 1918 events in Najaf, Paul Knight's *The British Army in Mesopotamia, 1914–1918* focuses on the role of the tribes in shaping the political reality in Iraq. Knight points out that German agents handsomely

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<sup>27</sup> Eliezer Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 32.

paid the tribal sheiks who were willing to fight the British on their behalf.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Peter Sluglett's *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* highlights the fact that British authorities stopped their generous subsidies paid to the leading sheiks of Najaf who in return turned hostile few weeks later.<sup>29</sup> Knight and Sluglett's observations showcase the importance of the tribes in shifting political realities in Iraq. This theme is also highlighted in Abbas Kadhim's *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*. Although he labels the Najaf revolt as a local, short-lived and limited affair, Kadhim states that "Iraqis have learned a critical lesson: no successful uprising could be achieved without the involvement of the tribes."<sup>30</sup>

It is evident that the Americans have also learned the exact same lesson the hard way. Following a prolonged period of tension and conflict, the US military established successful liaison with the tribes of Western Iraq and financed al-Şahwah Movement, also known as the Sons of Iraq, to confront radical organizations that migrated to the country in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. However, the outcome of this American experiment mirrored that of the British in 1918 when they chose to stop the subsidies given to the sheiks. Once US subsidies disappeared when the Americans left Iraq in 2011, al-Şahwah Movement groups lost their main financial backer and became virtually nonexistent by 2013.<sup>31</sup>

Concerning the theme of lessons-learned, Ian Rutledge provides a very detailed narrative of the revolt in his book *Enemy on the Euphrates: The Battle for Iraq, 1914 - 1921*, highlighting the role of Jam'īyat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmīyah or the Islamic Renaissance Movement in planning

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Knight, *The British Army in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2013), 144.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 221.

<sup>30</sup> Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Myriam Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall," *Middle East Policy Council*. accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.mepec.org/iraqs-tribal-sahwa-its-rise-and-fall>.

and executing the rebellion. Rutledge points out how treating the revolt as an isolated incident that ended with what British authorities in Mesopotamia viewed as swift and muscular victory, was in fact a temporary withdrawal by the tribes that chose to sit on the sidelines for a while, waiting for the appropriate time to intervene. It was a missed opportunity for British authorities to learn how to address tensions with local tribal leaderships before they escalate into an all-out armed conflict.<sup>32</sup>

The tribal-British relations are a centerpiece in the recent Western historical literature exploring the 1918 Najaf Revolt. The local perspective and Iraqi national aspirations are visible in the overarching historical narrative, compared to the extremely British-centric viewpoint that dominates the official British records and almost all post-war memoirs and histories. This new characterization is based on a re-reading of British primary sources, combined with a serious attempt to include Iraqi sources, mostly derived from memoirs and diaries of local figures who witnessed the revolt and were in Najaf itself when British forces blockaded the holy city in April 1918. This ‘evolved’ characterization is a product of the contemporary political and military challenges directly related to the situation in post-2003 Iraq.

Revisiting the complicated British experience in Mesopotamia, especially when an all-out conflict between the Americans and the followers of the religious leader Muqtadā al-Sadr broke out in Najaf in August 2004, presented an opportunity to avoid reinventing the wheel. Repeating the obvious mistakes of that era could easily be avoided if a more comprehensive and inclusive examination of British-Iraqi relations during and in the aftermath of the First World War was conducted. Ironically, the majority of the Iraqi Shia community and its religious leaders have also viewed their previous experience with the British as a lesson. Both Shia and Kurdish

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<sup>32</sup> Ian Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates: The Battle for Iraq, 1914 – 1921*, (London: Saqi Books, 2014), 143.

communities in Mesopotamia revolted against British rule. This contentious relationship with the occupying force led to marginalizing and sidelining both communities for eight decades. Understanding that they had a once in a lifetime opportunity to reverse the mistakes of the past, “the Shi’a mujtahids, particularly Grand Ayatollah ‘Alī Sīstānī, took no action that might jeopardize a Shi’a rise to power for the first time in modern Iraqi history.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, it is fair to say that the 2003 war has remarkably reshaped the historiography of the 1918 Najaf revolt in both Western and Iraqi historical literature.

### **Pre-2003 Iraqi Historiography: In Search for a Nationalist Narrative**

According to Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, “because none of the governments of modern Iraq (including the monarchy) have permitted the kind of academic freedom in which original and innovative scholarship could flourish, little serious work on modern history has been carried out at universities within the country.”<sup>34</sup> The Iraqi historiography of the 1918 Najaf Revolt is no exception. Concerning this event in particular, there is no significant historical literature that was produced during the early decades of the Iraqi modern state. Although few magazine and newspaper articles about the revolt were locally published and a number of scholarly works had mentioned it in the context of the 1920 Great Revolt, no serious historical research to examine this event took place during this era. The monarchy in Iraq had very strong ties with the United Kingdom, and this strong relationship dwindled the chances of exploring anti-British movements in a country that erected statues for

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<sup>33</sup> Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 41.

<sup>34</sup> Marion Farouk-Sluglett, and Peter Sluglett, "The Historiography of Modern Iraq," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 5 (1991): 1409.

General Stanley Maude, Gertrude Bell, and other figureheads of the British administration in Mesopotamia.

The 14 July 1958 coup in Iraq resulted in the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy, which had been created by the British in 1921. With British influence rapidly disappearing in the country, several historians started to revisit the era that witnessed the birth of the modern Iraqi state. Additionally, prominent individuals who played key roles in shaping the events of that crucial time became more vocal about sharing their firsthand experiences and recollections.

The decade that followed the collapse of the Hashemite monarchy witnessed the publications of several memoirs detailing the personal experiences of prominent Iraqi figures who were involved in the revolt. ‘Alī al-Sharqī’s *al-Aḥlām* (Dreams) and Ja‘far al-Khalīlī’s *Ḥākathā ‘Araftuhum* (How I Knew Them) are among the early biographical works that provided personal narratives of the revolt. Even the renowned Iraqi statesman Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī, who was an acquaintance of Gertrude Bell, published his own detailed account of the revolt in 1969.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, during that same time-period, Arab nationalists led a coup that brought the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party to power in Iraq. The new political ideology that would go on to dominate the country for thirty-five years was relatively supportive of conducting historical research that would reflect its ideological objectives. The 1920 Great Revolt, which involved Kurdish, Shia and Sunni communities engaging in an all-out armed conflict against the British, received considerable amount of academic attention during the early years of Ba’athist Iraq, and this attention generated more interest in the lesser known 1918 Najaf Revolt.

Several renowned historians in Iraq revisited and wrote about the revolt during the 1970s. ‘Alī al-Wardī, Iraq’s most celebrated social scientist, explored the revolt in detail in his massive

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<sup>35</sup> Gertrude Bell, Gertrude Bell to Hugh Bell. December 4, 1920. In *Gertrude Bell Archive*, accessed May 10, 2019, [http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=440](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=440).



study of Iraqi modern history *Lamahāt ijtīmāʿīyah min tārīkh al-ʿIrāq al-ḥadīth* (Social Glimpses from Iraq's Modern History). Al-Wardī, who called the 1918 Najaf revolt the first anti-English revolution in Iraq, presents a new approach to examining the key elements that drove the uprising by pointing the finger at the Ottomans. He explains that Turkish authorities and the military despised the people of Najaf, especially after their successful revolt against Ottoman control in 1915. For the Ottomans, agitating the Najafis to fight the British would serve them on two fronts: creating more challenges for their British adversaries in one of the most influential towns of Mesopotamia and watching these adversaries destroy the people of Najaf who revolted against Ottoman control.<sup>36</sup> Al-Wardī also presents a positive portrayal of Captain W. M. Marshall that mimics that of British sources.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, in almost all examined Iraqi sources, W. M. Marshall is never portrayed as the villain. In fact, there are cases where he was presented as an honorable man who grew up in Iran and spoke fluent Persian.<sup>38</sup>

The memories of Sayyīd Muḥammad Ḥassan al-Qūjanī, written in Persian, seems to be the sole primary source that paints a negative image of Captain W. M. Marshall. Al-Qūjanī states that Marshall was a devil pretending to be a human.<sup>39</sup> His description of Marshall seems quite personal, yet Sayyīd Muḥammad Ḥassan al-Qūjanī, who was a native speaker of Farsi Persian, does not clarify whether he had encountered Captain W. M. Marshall or had the opportunity to converse with him. Interestingly, even this sole negative characterization of Marshall showcases the fact that he was indeed popular among the religious scholars of the city, and perhaps al-

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<sup>36</sup> ʿAlī. al-Wardī, *Lamahāt ijtīmāʿīyah min tārīkh al-ʿIrāq al-ḥadīth Vol. 5-2*, (Beirut: Sharikat Dār al-Warrāq lil-Nashr, 1974), 270.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 264.

<sup>38</sup> Kāmil Salmān al-Jubūrī, *Al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-maqtal al-kābtin Mārshāl, al-ḥākīm al-siyāsī al-Barīṭānī 1918, ḥaqāʾiq wa-wathāʾiq wa-mudhakkirāt min tārīkh al-ʿIrāq al-siyāsī lam tunshar min qabl*, (Beirut: Dār al-Qārī lil-Ṭibāʿah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʿ, 2005), 425.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 384.

Qūjanī was not personally happy with the fact that his peers, the religious elite in the Holy City of Kādhimīyah in particular, took a liking to the deceased British officer.

In Iraqi literature, the revolt's villain designation tends to be associated with Captain W. M. Marshall's superior, the Political Officer of al-Shāmīyah Division Francis Cecil Campbell Balfour, who was the nephew of the former British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour of the Balfour Declaration fame. Understanding the nature of the work British political officers had to accomplish in Mesopotamia could explain why it was Balfour - not Marshall - who was eventually designated as the paramount villain. These political officers acted as district officials, intelligence collectors, judicial authorities, and military leaders, and they ultimately could not wear all these different hats at the same time. "Most sought to fill the political vacuum by developing personal contacts with community leaders in their district."<sup>40</sup> Iraqi primary sources highlight the confrontational nature of Balfour who did not shy away from scolding and sometimes insulting community leaders and tribal sheiks in public before the observant eyes of the entire community. Renowned Iraqi sociologist 'Alī al-Wardī points out that there were rumors indicating that Balfour even chose to slap or physically insult leading members of the local community when disagreements surfaced between the two sides.<sup>41</sup>

In fact, several local eyewitness testimonies point out to Balfour's heated exchange with al-Ḥāj Sa'ad al-Ḥāj Raḍī, the chief sheik of the Shumurt and head of al-Mishrāq quarter. This exchange that took place during the morning hours of 19 March 1918 right after the assassination of Marshall was a major reason behind escalating the situation and causing an all-out conflict

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<sup>40</sup> Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder After 1914*, (Berkeley: Publisher University of California Press, 2008), 126.

<sup>41</sup> 'Alī. al-Wardī, *Lamahāt ijtīmā'īyah min tārikh al-'Irāq al-ḥadīth Vol. 5-2*, (Beirut: Sharikat Dār al-Warrāq lil-Nashr, 1974), 260.

between the city and British authorities.<sup>42</sup> Captain W. M. Marshall, on the other hand, did not exhibit Balfour's confrontational style and genuinely tried to build positive personal relationships with community leaders and religious scholars. The completely different communication styles of these two officers have shaped their characterization in Iraqi primary sources, with Balfour gradually becoming the paramount adversary and the villain of the story.

It is ironic, however, that both British and Iraqi sources mostly agree upon the portrayal of Captain W. M. Marshall, the man whose murder engulfed the holy city in total war. These identical British and Iraqi characterizations of Marshall himself could be viewed as an indirect admission that the revolt's causes were not genuinely linked to Marshall himself or any action he took while acting as the Governor of Najaf. Rather, his assassination was merely the spark that ignited an inevitable conflict between the old system that ruled Najaf for decades and the new one advocated by British authorities. To a degree, Marshall's assassination resembles that of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, which triggered a series of events that ignited an inevitable and long-awaited conflict.

Ḥasan al-Asadī's *Thawrat al-Najaf 'ala al-Inkīlīz* (Najaf Revolution Against the English) is perhaps among the most detailed narratives of the revolt that was produced during 1970s. Al-Asadī interviewed some key players who shaped the events of that fateful spring, which allowed their recollections to survive. 'Abdu Al-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī's *Thawrat al-Najaf ba'da maqtal al-Kābtin Marshall* (Najaf Revolution That Followed the Killing of Captain Marshall) and Ḥamīd 'Isā Ḥibān's *Ḥaqā'iq Nāṣi'a* (Bright Facts) are also among the most comprehensive works detailing the revolt that were written during the 1970s.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 274.

The historical literature that was produced during the height of the Pan-Arab nationalism era in Iraq paid considerable attention to the role of Jam'īyat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmīyah (Society of Islamic Renaissance) in spearheading the revolt. The fact that the chief Shia religious leaders of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah were not heavily involved in supporting the revolt was possibly what made it easier to frame this short-lived conflict as an anti-colonial movement instead of a religious one. Elevating the revolt beyond a mere local incident in a Shia town reflected the Arab nationalists' approach to reinterpreting Iraqi history and stripping it from its ethnic and religious drivers in order to construct the illusion of a homogeneous nation. Kārīm Waḥīd Ṣāliḥ's novel *Najm al-Baqāl: Qā'id Thawrat al-Najaf ḍidd al-Iḥtilāl al-Inkīlāzī 'ām 1918: Hāyātuh wa dawruh fi al-aḥdāth* (Najm al-Baqāl: Leader of the Najaf Revolution against English Occupation: His Life and His Role During the Conflict), is a perfect reflection of how the Arab nationalist authorities in Iraq desired to interpret and market the revolt among new generations of Iraqis. Although the novel employs the events of the 1918 Najaf Revolt to tell the story of two lovers, its glaring objective is to highlight Arab nationalism and a homogeneous Iraqi identity, and to portray the British as vile and greedy rapists.

### **Post-2003 Iraqi Historiography: The Religious Factor**

A thorough examination of Iraqi historiography concerning the 1918 Najaf Revolt would point to Iraqi historian Kāmil al-Jūbūrī as the primary expert on this topic and the scholar who unearthed and re-printed primary sources and wrote a number of books and articles documenting multiple facets of this historical event. Kāmil al-Jūbūrī's interest in the revolt is visible as early as the late 1970s when Arab nationalist authorities were invested in exploring and exploiting the

revolt. However, his post-2003 research, collecting and recording first-person narratives, is what makes him among the most knowledgeable Iraqi historians who researched the topic.

Al-Jūbūrī's extensive work in *al-Najaf al-Ashraf wa-maqtal al-kābtin Mārshāl, al-ḥākīm al-sīyāsī al-Barīṭānī 1918* (Holy City of Najaf and the Killing of Captain Marshall, the British Political Governor in 1918) and *Wathā'iq al-thawrah al-'Irāqīyah al-kubrā wa-muqaddimātuhā wa-natā'ijuhā, 1914-1923* (Documents from the Great Iraqi Revolution, Its Causes and Outcomes, 1914-1923) introduced new personal narratives of the revolt that challenged the official account solidified by Arab nationalists during the 1970s. He did not shy away from presenting the personal narratives of the Najafis who did not support the revolt and viewed the rebels as criminals.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, al-Jūbūrī's biographies of two grand ayatollahs who witnessed the 1918 Najaf Revolt: *Al-Sayyid Muhammad Kāẓim al-Yazdī and Muḥammad Taqī al-Shīrāzī*, both published in 2006, highlight the role these religious leaders played in shaping and driving the relationship between the British and the local population of Mesopotamia. Grand Ayatollah al-Yazdī was the head of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah during the Najaf revolt of 1918, while Grand Ayatollah al-Shīrāzī was the occupant of this position during the initial stages of the 1920 Great Iraqi Revolt. Al-Jūbūrī's biographical research of these two scholars showcases the power and resources of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah and its ability to impact the political and military reality on the ground in Iraq.

This post-2003 historical literature has encouraged historians and scholars to depart from the Arab nationalist interpretation and focus on the local motivations that drove the conflict. 'Abdullah al-Nifīsī's *Dawr al-Shi'ah fī taṭawir al-'Irāq al-siyāsī al-ḥadīth* (The Role of the Shia in the Political Progress of Iraq) reclaims the role of the Shia community in shaping the political

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 430.

reality of modern Iraq, and employs the Najaf revolt as an example of the impact Shia religious leaders and tribes have had on influencing the political reality of the country.<sup>44</sup> Al-Nifīsī also interviewed eyewitnesses who experienced living in Najaf during that short-lived conflict. Documenting these voices has protected their recollections and memories from being forever lost. In *Dawr ‘ulamā’ al-Shī‘ah fī muwājahat al-isti‘mār* (The Role of Shia Scholars in Combating Colonialism) Salīm al-Ḥasanī also employs the Najaf revolt to depart from the Arab nationalist narrative and shed light on the role Shia religious leaderships played in leading the Najaf revolt and other anti-colonial popular movements.<sup>45</sup>

New memoirs and biographies have also surfaced, enriching the revolt’s historical literature. Zuhayr al-Jazā’irī’s *al-Najaf al-thākirah wa al-madīnah* (Najaf: The History and the City), Muḥammad Amīn al-Khū’ī’s *Mudhakkirāt shāhid ‘iyān ‘an thawrat al-Najaf 1336 H/1918* (Eyewitness Account of Najaf Revolution 1336 H/1918), Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭā’s *‘Uqūd Hyātī* (Decades of My Life) provided more intimate details of the revolt and shed light on the experiences of the holy city’s local population during the British blockade. These experiences reflect a diverse local reaction towards the events that stormed Najaf in March 1918, indicating that the days where only a single homogeneous narrative of a historical event is allowed to exist in Iraq are gone. Among the most prominent local voices that did not shy away from criticizing the revolt was that of Muḥammad Māhdī al-Jawāhirī, one of the greatest Arab poets in the 20th century, opening the door to debate new and different narratives that were previously deemed unacceptable.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Abdullah al-Nifīsī, *Dawr al-Shī‘ah fī taṭawir al-‘Irāq al-siyāsī al-ḥadīth*, (Kuwait: Afāq, 2012), 72.

<sup>45</sup> Salīm al-Ḥasanī, *Dawr ‘ulamā’ al-Shī‘ah fī muwājahat al-isti‘mār*, (Beirut: Al-Ghadīr lil-dirāsāt wa al-nashr, 2004), 145.

<sup>46</sup> Muḥammad Māhdī al-Jawāhirī, *Dhikrāyāt*, Vol. I, (Damascus: Al-Rāfīdayn, 1988), 96.

Iraqi magazines and academic journals, unlike their Western counterparts, have been regularly publishing new articles about the topic since 2003. The majority of these new articles tend to be a reiteration of the revolt's basic historical outline with a focus on the role of the religious leaderships in supporting the notions of sovereignty and independence. It appears that this academic interest in revisiting the revolt has finally caught the attention of the Iraqi Federal Government. The basic historical outline of the Najaf revolt finally found its way to the pages of the national history textbook for twelfth graders in 2015, making its official debut in the mainstream government-sponsored national narrative.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Tārīkh al-bilād al-'Arabīyah al-ḥadīth wa al-mu'āşir lil şaf al-sādis al-adabī*, 4th ed, (Baghdad: Directorate of Curricula, 2017), 69-71.

### CHAPTER THREE: LOCAL PRIMARY SOURCES VS PAN-ARABIST NARRATIVE

Kārīm Wahīd Ṣālih's novel *Najm al-Baqāl: Qā'id Thawrat al-Najaf ʔid al-Iḥtilāl al-Inkīlīzī 'ām 1918: Hāyātuh wa dawruh fī al-aḥdāth* (Najm al-Baqāl: Leader of the Najaf Revolution against English Occupation: His Life and His Role During the Conflict), published in 1980, encompasses the Iraqi Pan-Arab nationalists' dream interpretation of the 1918 Najaf Revolt. The version of history, presented in this novel, is impossible to construct using available historical records. Therefore, a fictional piece of literature was created to encompass and promote this version of history. Interestingly, the novel does not present itself as a fictional piece of literature. The writing style, in fact, attempts to frame the novel as an accurate historical narrative of the revolt and a biographical re-telling of Najm al-Baqāl and his son's lives. The novel also links British forces, Captain Francis Cecil Campbell Balfour in particular, to atrocious war crimes that manifest the Middle Eastern anti-colonialism propaganda of the 1960s and 1970s. These alleged crimes are not recorded or mentioned by British or Iraqi primary sources, and they cartoonishly resemble popular anti-colonial tropes in Arabic literature of the 20th century. Balfour is portrayed as a lustful rapist who orders his soldiers to kidnap a beautiful Iraqi girl from Najaf and to bring her to his private chambers, where he attempted to assault her. This fictional history not only dramatically demonizes the British, but it also depicts the revolt as a movement that unified the city, whose people were universally supportive of the revolutionaries and their cause. Najm al-Baqāl, on the other hand, is depicted as the ultimate manifestation of nationalist and Pan-Arab aspirations and sentiment, portraying him and his son as national heroes who fought against colonialism and risked their lives for liberty and independence.



Al-Baqāl, a former Ottoman soldier who turned against and fought the Ottomans during the Najaf rebellion in 1915, was not a native of Najaf or one of its tribal sheiks or religious scholars. Yet, Pan-Arab nationalist narrative elevated his status as the primary figurehead of the 1918 Najaf Revolt. The impact of this elevation has left its marks on the overall historical narrative of the revolt. Ironically, this manufactured pan-Arabist narrative of al-Baqāl and his role during this short-lived conflict in Najaf did not disappear with the collapse of the Pan-Arab nationalist government in 2003. The current government of Iraq continues to view the memorialization of Najm al-Baqāl as an integral element of the revolt's official historical narrative. When the 1918 Najaf Revolt made its debut on the pages of the national history textbooks, the only photograph associated with the revolt in these textbooks is the statue of Najm al-Baqāl from a local museum in Najaf.<sup>48</sup> This museum, which is housed in a rehabilitated Ottoman building that served as the jail where the revolt's condemned revolutionaries were imprisoned in 1918, is a government-ran institution, where once again al-Baqāl managed to occupy the centerstage in how museum frames the story of the revolt. Furthermore, the current Iraqi government had recently funded the production of a feature film narrating another fictional version of Najm al-Baqāl's story with themes of anti-colonialism and Iraqi nationalism.<sup>49</sup> This version of al-Baqāl's story appears to be a product of the so-called *Mashrū' l'ādat Kitābat al-Tārīkh* (Project for the Rewriting of History), spear headed by the Pan-Arab nationalist government of Iraq during the 1970s and the 1980s. This government project attempted to reconstruct Iraq's history to serve the political and social objectives of the Ba'thist government. Painting the 1918 Najaf Revolt as an anti-colonial nationalist movement, led by al-Baqāl, fits perfectly with the party's propaganda literature and interpretation of history. The scope and scale

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<sup>48</sup> *Tārīkh al-bilād al-'Arabīyah al-ḥadīth wa al-mu'āshir lil ṣaf al-sādis al-adabī*, 70.

<sup>49</sup> "Najm al-Baqāl film 'Irāqī bikhibrāt ajnabīyah," *Al-Jazeera*, accessed July 28, 2019, [shorturl.at/lqNQ7](http://shorturl.at/lqNQ7).

of the Project for the Rewriting of History, implemented throughout the years of Ba'thist rule, "was unprecedented in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, it is logical that remnants of the Pan-Arab nationalist literature and interpretation of history managed to remain valid even after the complete collapse of the Ba'thist government of Iraq in 2003.

Nevertheless, memoirs of local figures who witnessed the revolt portray a complicated image of Najm al-Baqāl that does not match that of the Pan-Arab nationalist narrative. Most Iraqi eyewitness testimonies and historical research conducted by Iraqi historians indicate that al-Baqāl was the head of the group that attacked the British Office in Najaf, and some eyewitness accounts claim that he was the rebel who killed Captain Marshall. However, al-Baqāl is not universally praised by Najafis who witnessed the revolt. This mixed response to his actions reflects the divided political reality of the city during that fateful spring of 1918. In his memoirs, al-Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭa' blatantly calls members of al-Baqāl's group 'ignorant', signaling out al-Hāj Najm al-Baqāl al-Duylaymī as the man behind the whole attack on the British al-Ḥaffīz.<sup>51</sup> Sayyīd Muḥammad 'Alī Ḥibat al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī al-Shahristanī also confirms that it was Najm al-Baqāl who led the attack against al-Ḥaffīz in Najaf and assassinated the British governor, turning Najaf into a chaotic place with a horrified population that dreaded the consequences of this action.<sup>52</sup>

Muḥammad Amīn al-Khū'ī recalls that Najm al-Baqāl had been planning to attack the British for months, but he did not have any supporters at the time.<sup>53</sup> Al-Khū'ī also highlights the Ottoman connection concerning Najm al-Baqāl's decision to fight the British. He points out that

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<sup>50</sup> Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 148.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 355.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 425.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Khū'ī, 67.

al-Baqāl “regretted his previous hostile actions and animosity against the Ottomans, and he felt ashamed. Therefore, he did not want to go back to them empty-handed.” Najm al-Baqāl desired to capture a prisoner or two so he could present them to the Ottomans as a gift in order to amend their relationship.<sup>54</sup> Other memoirs and journals of people who witnessed the revolt are also adamant that Najm al-Baqāl was driven by the desire to amend his relationship with the Ottomans. The memoirs of Sayyīd Muḥammad ‘Alī Ḥibat al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī al-Shahrīstānī states that al-Baqāl traveled outside the city of Najaf a few months prior to March 1918 to meet with tribal leaders who were fighting with the Ottomans in order to secure support for a potential anti-British action in Najaf and its surroundings.<sup>55</sup>

Al-Hāj Najm al-Baqāl al-Duylaymī was a former Ottoman soldier who fought the Russians and defended the Caliphate, but he turned against it when Najaf revolted against Ottoman control in 1915. This conflict had allowed al-Baqāl to confiscate a salt shop that belonged to the Ottoman authorities, turning it into a convenience store, where he sold vegetables and dairy products. This store earned him the name ‘al-Baqāl’ which is the Arabic word for ‘grocery shopkeeper’.<sup>56</sup> Although the 1915 Najaf revolt against the Ottomans had financially benefited Najm al-Baqāl, it appears that he had a change of heart. He believed that his actions would force the British to attack Najaf, and this disrespect of the holy city would force the tribes of the Middle Euphrates to fight the British. The resulting conflict would be his venue to atone for his betrayal of the Turks in 1915. The situation on the battle in early 1918 made al-Baqāl more anxious. The Ottoman military failures on the Mesopotamian front and their approaching all-out defeat had agitated al-Baqāl who believed that attacking the British in Najaf

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 424.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 53.

and dragging them into a large-scale conflict with the tribes of the Middle Euphrates would create an internal hostile front that would eventually strengthen the Turks. A rebellion in Najaf would force British forces to retreat from the Upper Euphrates and focus on an internal conflict instead of fighting the Ottomans up north.

In his memoirs, Sayyīd Muḥsin Abū Ṭabīkh states that he was summoned several times by the British to be questioned about his relationship with a secret Najafī organization and its plot to assassinate British officers in the Middle Euphrates Valley. Abū Ṭabīkh explains that one of the reasons why he was a suspect is the recovery of Ottoman correspondence documents that were in the possession of a German officer, highlighting the secret organization's allegiance and connection to Turkey.<sup>57</sup> The testimony of Abū Ṭabīkh, who himself was among those who fought the British during that period, puts a question mark on labeling the revolt and al-Baqāl's attack on al-Ḥaffīz as a national movement for independence. Eyewitnesses, who were in direct contact with al-Baqāl, state that he intended to support the Ottomans. He did not seek independence or self-rule for the native population of Najaf or the rest of Mesopotamia, and his objective was to replace British rule with that of the Ottomans.

Interestingly, even Najm al-Baqāl himself knew that his actions garnered little support from the population of Najaf and its surrounding tribes. When he opened his convenience store right after the attack on al-Ḥaffīz on the morning of 19 March, he pretended that he did not know anything about the attack that he had led few hours prior. Furthermore, he tried to publicly blame one of the tribes of southern Kufa, and he accused them of killing the British governor, while watching the city decent into chaos during that fateful morning. The reason why he chose to

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<sup>57</sup> Jamīl Abū Ṭabīkh, *Muthakarāt al-Sayyīd Muḥsin Abū Ṭabīkh 1910-1960* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 2001), 65.

accuse this tribe in particular is because it rejected his request for support when he approached them with plans to attack British authorities in Mesopotamia.<sup>58</sup>

Although Najm al-Baqāl's true motives, his pro-Ottoman objectives, and his desire to bring back the Turks to rule Mesopotamia are highlighted by several eyewitness testimonies and Iraqi historians, they are seldom criticized or questioned, considering the fact that they contradict with painting him as a champion of Iraqi liberation and independence. The continuous trend of neglecting al-Baqāl's true motives showcases how Pan-Arab nationalist narrative had managed to cement this unrealistic status of this figure even after the end of the Ba'athist rule in Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, dissident voices highlighting al-Baqāl's allegiance to the Ottomans have recently emerged. Iraqi historian Kāmil Salmān al-Jubūrī, who is considered a subject matter expert on this topic, does hint to this contradiction in how al-Baqāl is portrayed in Iraqi historical literature, but it is Iraqi historian Nabīl al-Karkhī who blatantly describes al-Baqāl's true motives and his commitment to fighting for the Ottoman Empire and its return to rule Mesopotamia. So far, it appears that al-Karkhī is the sole Iraqi historian who has not shied away from confronting, highlighting, and questioning al-Baqāl's true motives, which could no longer be ignored following the publications and re-discovery of various memoirs and eyewitness testimonies.

Tūmān 'Adwah, one of the revolutionaries who fought with Najm al-Baqāl, was interviewed by an Iraqi weekly magazine in 1968. 'Adwah is among the few foot-soldiers who managed to have his recollections of the 1918 Najaf Revolt recorded. However, this interview remained irrelevant until Iraqi historian Kāmil Salmān al-Jubūrī unearthed and re-published it in 2005. The interview, which was first published prior to the Pan-Arab nationalists' coup in Iraq in 17 July 1968, exhibits several discrepancies concerning how the revolt was later depicted by

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<sup>58</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 64.

Pan-Arab nationalists. The most glaring diversion is how Tūmān ‘Adwah describes the Najafis reaction, which does not remotely resemble the Pan-Arab nationalist narrative of a unified people coming together to defend their city and to collectively fight for liberty and independence.

‘Adwah states that the revolutionaries, headed by al-Baqāl, “wanted to ‘torment’ the population with the revolt, and for this reason we selected one man from each tribe so all tribes will be held responsible for the revolution.”<sup>59</sup> This testimony of ‘Adwah indicates that the general public in Najaf did not know about the revolt and was not eager to be involved in an armed conflict with the British.

Tūmān ‘Adwah’s testimony showcases the complicated political reality of Najaf in 1918 and how al-Baqāl’s desire to ignite a regional war with the British was doomed from the start. Several Iraqi primary sources provide a complex political and tribal map of the holy city that has no connection to the simple and straightforward Pan-Arab nationalists’ narrative of the revolt. For example, there are conflicting accounts concerning the Najafis’ desire to maintain the de-facto independence that they won themselves by vanquishing Ottoman forces in 1915. British records, on one hand, describe the chaotic and criminal nature of this self-rule system, developed by the leading neighborhoods’ sheiks and their militias in the city.<sup>60</sup> The desire to end this chaos led many high-ranking religious leaders and prominent figures in the city to reject the rebels’ cause, side with the British, or at least choose neutrality. On the other hand, some local testimonies, such as that of Sayyīd Muḥammad Mahdī Baḥr al-‘Ulūm, point out that the local population indeed wanted to maintain this self-rule system.<sup>61</sup> In his memoirs, Sayyīd Muḥammad

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 493.

<sup>60</sup> “*Reports of administration for 1918 of divisions and districts of the occupied territories in Mesopotamia. Vol. P*”, 68.

<sup>61</sup> Muḥammad Sādiq Baḥr al-‘Ulūm, “*Dhikrayāt al-Sayyīd Muḥammad Sādiq Baḥr al-‘Ulūm 'an thawrat al-Najaf aw thawrat al-‘ishrīn.*” *Al-Mawsim* 19, (1994), 336.

Ḥassan al-Qūjanī also states that the local heads of this self-rule government tried to do a decent job at managing the city's affairs and providing the citizens with their basic needs. These local eyewitness testimonies surely contradict with the British narrative, largely detailed in official records, that the situation in Najaf was chaotic and it lacked the rule of law during its short-lived self-rule period.<sup>62</sup> The question over how the people of Najaf viewed their de-facto independence remains one of the very few major topics where British and Iraqi sources immensely diverge. Having said that, it appears that British authorities understood that a modified version of this local self-rule system in Najaf would be the solution to prevent the influential city from causing problems that could hinder the situation on the military Mesopotamian front.

The British appointed Ḥamīd Khān as a British governor of Najaf in August 1917, and it appears that choosing him to govern the holy city was a form of compromise, because Khān was both a local Najafī and a British subject. This compromise showcases a British attempt at allowing the holy city to maintain some forms of its local self-rule system. Ḥamīd Khān himself is another manifestation of the political division among the people of Najaf. The well-educated and English-speaking Khān was encouraged to occupy this position by the paramount head of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Ṭabātabā'ī al-Yazdī. Yet, for some of the revolutionaries, his willingness to represent British rule in Najaf was viewed as a form of betrayal. Only recently have the negative views of Ḥamīd Khān's actions and his service as British governor in Najaf have been debated and challenged.<sup>63</sup> Khān, was eventually replaced by Captain W.M. Marshall when British authorities realized that this compromise did not put an end to the escalations between the British and the tribal heads of the city.

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<sup>62</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 371.

<sup>63</sup> 'Abdul Riḍa Farhūd, "Ḥamīd Khān: Ḥakam al-Najaf nīyābah 'an al-Inkilīz qabl 93 'ām," *Dhākirah 'Irāqīyah*, June 6, 2011.

The complicated political map of Najaf is also showcased during the fateful day that witnessed the attack on al-Ḥaffīz. There were two major incidents that took place on 19 March 1918 in Najaf: the assassination of Captain W.M. Marshall and the killing of two local pro-British policemen, who were members of a non-Najafī police force created by Marshall himself. The motivations and the circumstances behind these two incidents are markedly different. Concerning the first incident, Najm al-Baqāl and his group intended to support the Ottomans by forcing the British to go to war with the tribes of the Middle Euphrates. As for the second incident, there are several eyewitnesses who state that the shooting of the two local policemen was an escalation of a fight and verbal spars. There was no unified plan that was embraced by various key players and personalities in Najaf to revolt against British authorities. The latter obviously also had no clear plans to immediately address any possible large-scale rebellions in this vital region of Mesopotamia.

In his memoirs, Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī states that Captain Francis Cecil Campbell Balfour did not rush into attacking the city's leaders and he wanted to conduct an investigation, but the Najafī 'gang' chose escalation by killing two policemen and attacking and burning down the old government office. These rapid developments led Balfour to escape the walled city and allowed the revolutionaries to succeed in imposing complete control over the city. This control, however, did not reflect a unified front inside Najaf now that British presence there had been eliminated. There was a serious divide among the citizens, since those who led the initial hostilities, including the attack on al-Ḥaffīz and the killing of the two policemen, came from al-Mishrāq quarter, which made these escalations appear to be generated by a single neighborhood and not the entire city. Some locals in the other three neighborhoods did not hesitate to provide



British soldiers and the local government police force with shelter.<sup>64</sup> In fact, even the head of al-Mishrāq neighborhood al-Ḥāj Sa‘ad al-Ḥāj Raḍī, who accompanied Balfour when he came to Najaf right after the attack on al-Ḥaffīz and the killing of Marshall, did not intend to drag the entire neighborhood into this conflict. One of the sons of al-Ḥāj Sa‘ad al-Ḥāj Raḍī was behind the killing of the two policemen, and when Balfour, who was touring the marketplaces of Najaf with the rest of the city leaders, discovered the connection between Raḍī and the death of the two policemen, he scolded him and accused him and his sons of also killing Marshall. However, Raḍī and his family had no connection to and knew nothing about the attack on al-Ḥaffīz and the assassination of Marshall.<sup>65</sup> This public humiliation enraged al-Ḥāj Sa‘ad al-Ḥāj Raḍī’s sons who tried to shoot Balfour himself upon learning about what he did to their father. Captain Balfour was adamant that al-Ḥāj Sa‘ad al-Ḥāj Raḍī was behind the killing of Captain Marshall, and this had pushed Raḍī to eventually join the revolt and act as its de facto leader. Balfour’s villainous status in Iraqi primary sources makes sense in this context, because it was his verbal spars and insults that most likely turned the killing of Captain Marshall into a full-scale rebellion in the holy city of Najaf.

According to the eyewitness testimony of Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī, Najm al-Baqāl, alongside a large number of Najafī figures who participated in the revolt, were eventually arrested by none other than the people of Najaf themselves. Al-Shabībī states that it was the peaceful people of Najaf who desired to end the dire situation inside the besieged city by meeting all the surrender terms imposed by British authorities. Upon his capture, the crowd, still suffering from severe water and food shortage, attacked al-Baqāl verbally and physically<sup>66</sup> Once again,

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<sup>64</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 296.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 321.

Iraqi primary sources challenge the Pan-Arab nationalist narrative that elevated the status of al-Baqāl and neglected the intricate and complex social and political spheres in Najaf during a critical time-period that eventually shaped the future of the modern state of Iraq. Tūmān ‘Adwah, whose recently re-discovered eyewitness account provides a rare description of the revolutionaries’ state of mind while in captivity and prior to execution, narrates disturbing details about al-Baqāl’s final days. ‘Adwah states that al-Ḥāj Najm tore up his garment with his own teeth and he ended up completely naked because he did not want his enemies to take his clothes and wear them once he was executed.<sup>67</sup> The status of al-Baqāl as a tragic figure was further cemented when his own son ‘Abbās, a former Ottoman non-commissioned officer who helped connect his father with the Ottomans and encouraged him to attack al-Ḥaffīz, died the same day that witnessed his father’s execution on 30 May 1918 succumbing to a sudden fever.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 496.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Wardī, 289.

## CHAPTER FOUR: LOCAL PRIMARY SOURCES VS RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE

The role the Najaf religious establishment played during the 1918 revolt has suddenly become a subject of scholarly interest in post-2003 Iraq. The focus on this role showcases a shift in how the national memory of the entire country has been re-framed to rid Iraqi history of its Pan-Arab nationalist narrative. The religious scholars and students of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah are directly associated with Najaf, and these figures showcase the local nature of revolt, which has been sidelined for decades. Interestingly, confronting the dominance of the Pan-Arab rhetoric in Iraqi national memory has led to a renewed focus on the history of local communities in Iraq and their role in shaping the identity of the modern Iraqi state that emerged following the collapse of Ottoman control over Mesopotamia. The recent academic and popular interest in this short-lived local conflict and the new focus on the role of the Najafi religious establishment highlight the increasing attempts at countering the decades of neglect and even ridicule that marked the treatment of Iraqi marginalized communities' histories. Associating the revolt with the religious leaderships of Najaf and labeling it as a religiously-motivated movement frame this anti-British armed movement as a product of a local institution and rebuffs the notion that anti-colonial struggle in Iraq is a mere segment of its larger conflict within the Arab sphere.

Yet the positions of the religious establishment in Najaf and its actions during the 1918 revolt are as complicated as the overall situation in Najaf during that fateful spring. Iraqi primary sources pay considerable attention to the actions of Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Kāzīm al-Ṭabātabā'ī al-Yazdī, the head of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah and the most powerful Shia religious scholar in the world at the time who was resident in Najaf during the 1918 revolt. Once again, these primary sources showcase a very complicated political and social reality that dominated the

holy city. Interestingly, Grand Ayatollah al-Yazdī was portrayed as ardently pro-British by a number of prominent Iraqi historians and scholars who researched and wrote about the revolt during the height of the Iraqi Pan-Arab nationalists' rule in the 1970s. Ḥassan al-‘Alawī, who was the most prominent Pan-Arab nationalist scholar in Iraq with ties to first-tier leaderships in the Ba’ath Party, has promoted the notion that Grand Ayatollah al-Yazdī chose to side with the British during the conflict. Similarly, the widely respected Iraqi sociologist ‘Alī al-Wardī also states that “there are indications that the highest-ranking religious scholars, headed by al-Yazdī, where deep down against the revolt.”<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, there are local eyewitness testimonies pointing out the disagreements between Grand Ayatollah al-Yazdī and the leaders of the revolt who did not hesitate to show indifference and even disrespect towards the most powerful religious figure in Najaf and the Shia world.<sup>70</sup> However, the focus on al-Yazdī’s negative views about the revolt, which were heavily highlighted during the Pan-Arab nationalist era in Iraq, could be interpreted as an attempt to paint this local armed conflict as an exclusively national movement, by nullifying the religious factor, the role of al-Ḥawzah al-‘Ilmiyah in particular. Highlighting the narrative that the first-tier religious leaders chose neutrality or take the side of the British would also disconnect this paramount religious institution from the struggle for independence in Mesopotamia.

However, this does not change the fact that a number of local eyewitnesses are adamant that the views of the highest-ranking scholars of al-Ḥawzah al-‘Ilmiyah, including its head Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Ṭabātabā’ī al-Yazdī, were not supportive of the Najaf revolt and “some of them had possibly considered it a form of disorder and the work of a group of

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Alī. al-Wardī, *Lamahāt ijtīmā’iyah min tārikh al-‘Irāq al-ḥadīth Vol. 5-2*, (Beirut: Sharikat Dār al-Warrāq lil-Nashr, 1974), 289.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 68.

hoodlums.”<sup>71</sup> In fact, during the early stages of the revolt on 25 March 1918, the religious leaders of al-Ḥawzah al-’Ilmīyah signed a telegram that was sent to General William Raine Marshall, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in Mesopotamia, asking him not to punish the entire population of the holy city because of the actions of a group of hoodlums. Among the religious leaders who signed this telegram was Grand Ayatollah al-Yazdī himself.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, a British telegram sent to the Persian Foreign Ministry in Tehran on 11 April 1918 states that al-Yazdī had communicated with the highest ranking British official in Mesopotamia and informed him that “the ulama and the poor had no part in the matter and urged that the water be turned on again,”<sup>73</sup> in reference to the serious water shortage that was resulted from the British siege of Najaf.

In this case, Iraqi eyewitness testimonies align with official British records and correspondence that highlight the lack of support the revolt received from the most prominent leadership ranks of the Najaf’s religious establishment, who clearly chose not to be involved. However, it is not possible to construct a detailed narrative of the complex the relationship between the revolutionaries and the religious establishment in Najaf by only focusing on how the first-tier religious scholars viewed and reacted to the revolt. Interestingly, the role of the religious establishment is perhaps the most complex aspect of this short-lived armed conflict, where even the views of those who chose neutrality or to side with the British could be open to multiple interpretations.

A look into the mindset of Grand Ayatollah al-Ṭabātabā’ī al-Yazdī and his intimate views about the 1918 Najaf Revolt are recorded by Sayyīd Muḥammad Ḥassan al-Qūjanī, who visited the Grand Ayatollah during the height of the conflict when Najaf was besieged by British forces.

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<sup>71</sup> Al-Wardī, 289.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 290-291.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 221.

In his memoirs, al-Qūjanī documented the interactions he had with the paramount head of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah, revealing nuanced aspects of al-Yazdī's line of thought. According to al-Qūjanī, al-Yazdī was deeply hurt by the rumors that he befriended the British, because he viewed his interactions with them as a venue that allowed him to combat discourse and misunderstanding. Al-Yazdī told al-Qūjanī: "I did go to Kufa and I stayed there for a week or two. Indeed, I was visited by some English officials. During these meetings, I managed to eliminate many harmful disillusions they had in order to benefit the Muslim community."<sup>74</sup> It appears that al-Yazdī understood that avoiding conflict with the British would eventually benefit the Shia community and, according to his own words recorded by al-Qūjanī, he attempted to confront misunderstandings and disagreements between the two sides to prevent unnecessary escalations and bloodshed.

Al-Yazdī's successors; Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Taqī Shīrāzī and Grand Ayatollah Faṭḥullah Isfahānī' rejected the British-led political process in Iraq in 1920 and authorized an all-out revolution against British authorities. In post-2003 Iraq, their decisions have been debated as being among the main reasons behind the second-class citizenship status of Shia Iraqis that lasted more than eighty years.<sup>75</sup> Al-Yazdī's actions and the way he responded to the 1918 Najaf Revolt indicate that the political and social map of British Mesopotamia might have looked completely different if he managed to stay alive and maintain his position as the head of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah for few more years. This probably would have allowed the British to avoid the hasty approach to creating the modern state of Iraq. This approach was a reaction to the all-out armed revolt that stormed Mesopotamia in 1920, and it led to marginalizing the Shia and Kurdish

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 399.

<sup>75</sup> Abdul Rahim al-Ruhaymi, "1920 Revolt: Military Gallantry and Political Failures," *al-Ghadeer TV*, July 5, 2016, accessed December 10, 2019, <http://www.alghadeer.tv/notes/489>.

communities for decades. Al-Yazdī's willingness to interact with British authorities and avoid unnecessary conflict might have easily prevented the escalations that led to the 1920 revolt. Additionally, al-Yazdī's handling of the British presence in Najaf in 1918 and Grand Ayatollah 'Alī Sīstānī's handling of the American presence in Najaf in 2004 are strikingly similar. Both religious leaders chose to reduce tensions between the two warring sides and broker a truce that would spare the holy city and the Shia community at large from harsher political and social complications similar to the ones that surfaced following the 1920 revolt against the British.

Al-Yazdī's lack of support for the 1918 revolt in Najaf does not, however, exonerate the religious establishment from having a direct involvement in this short-lived armed conflict with the non-Muslim British. Painting the revolt as a religious movement also has its merits. Afterall, Najm al-Baqāl and his group, whose actions were the primary reason behind the escalations in 19 March 1918, were fighting to restore the Muslim Ottomans as the rulers Mesopotamia. Most importantly, a large number of the prominent local figures who founded Jam'īyat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmīyah (Society of Islamic Revival) were religious scholars and students of the religious seminary of Najaf. This organization, established in Najaf, had al-Baqāl and his group as members, and its literature and rhetoric appear to be a product of religious scholars and students of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah.

According to the prominent Iraqi historian 'Abdul Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, Jam'īyat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmīyah (Society of Islamic Revival) was created prior to the fall of Baghdad in 1917, and its objective was to liberate Iraq from the foreign infidel colonizers. Al-Ḥasanī also states that among the members of this political organization were a number of religious scholars such as Sayyīd Muḥammad Baḥr al-'Ulūm, Shaykh Muḥammad 'Alī al-Dimashqī, al-Mīrzā 'Abbās al-

Khalīlī, and Shaykh Muḥammad Jawād al-Jazā'irī.<sup>76</sup> The latter was among the convicted revolutionaries who were sentenced to be sent to India following in the summer of 1918. The memoirs of the Iraqi politician Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī also highlights the details of a meeting that took place between Captain Balfour and Grand Ayatollah al-Ṭabātabā'ī al-Yazdī in late April 1918, where Balfour handed al-Yazdī a list of religious scholars and students of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah who were suspected to be involved in supporting the revolt. al-Shabībī states that the number of the wanted religious scholars on that list was between forty to sixty, while other rumors claimed that the number was below twenty.<sup>77</sup> Regardless, this list of wanted religious scholars clearly indicate that this community had indeed played an active role in igniting and leading the revolt.

‘Alī al-Wardī singles out al-Mīrzā ‘Abbās al-Khalīlī as the most prominent religious scholar and most active member of Jam‘īyat al-Nahḍah al-Islāmīyah who was involved in the 1918 Najaf Revolt. However, al-Wardī highlights the fact that al-Mīrzā ‘Abbās al-Khalīlī was not a first-tier religious scholar and was only twenty-two years old during the revolt.

Interestingly, the armed conflicts against the British in 1918 and against the Americans in 2004 were both led by young religious scholars who lacked support from the first-tier leaderships of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah and from other prominent religious figures of Najaf. Like al-Khalīlī, Muqtadā al-Ṣadr, who led the revolt against the Americans in August 2004, was also a young religious scholar whose supporters were mostly working-class people. In both conflicts, the highest-ranking figure in al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmīyah chose neutrality and also managed to prevent further escalations by brokering a truce that eventually led to the conclusion of the hostilities in the holy city. The mixed reaction among the population of Najaf and Southern Iraq to the more

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<sup>76</sup> Al-Jubūrī, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 333.



recent short-lived armed conflict with the Americans in August 2004 indicates that youth-led uprisings, where less influential religious scholars are involved, tend to lack unanimous popular support. Several eyewitness testimonies indicate that the 1918 Najaf Revolt had a similar fate and it lacked universal support among the population of the holy city and the Middle Euphrates region.

The intricate details concerning the role of the religious establishment during the 1918 Najaf Revolt makes it impossible to simply label this armed conflict as a religiously motivated movement. However, highlighting the different social and hierarchical dynamics that governed how various groups of religious scholars reacted to this revolt is essential to understand the complex nature of the Najafi community during the end of the Ottoman era in Mesopotamia. For the post-2003 historians of Iraq to reclaim ownership of their local history and rid it of the Pan-Arab nationalist narrative, showcasing the role of the religious establishment is a legitimate approach, considering the fact that this aspect of the revolt has been neglected for decades, and it needs to be examined and revisited without the propensity to label the complex decisions that were made by the various religious leaders as either patriotic or pro-occupiers. These decisions need to be examined in the context of the political and social reality of Najaf and Southern Mesopotamia during the final stages of the Ottomans' collapse, where the country was going through a rapid transformation that would eventually set the foundations for a new political and social era that lasted for more than eight decades.

## CONCLUSION

Iraqi primary sources, including memoirs and journals of local eyewitnesses who experienced or participated in the 1918 Najaf Revolt, reveal a complicated political and social reality on the ground in Najaf during the final stages of the First World War. The revolt itself is a direct outcome of this complex reality on the ground. For more than a century, this armed conflict against British authorities in Mesopotamia has been framed as nationalist or religiously motivated movement. Yet, these simple and straightforward labels bypass the complex political and social landscape of the holy city and simplify all the intricate motivations, competing loyalties and personal interests and objectives of the variant segments of the Najafi community. The Pan-Arab nationalist narrative that adamantly labels Najm al-Baqāl as a national hero goes against eyewitness testimonies stating that he desired to drag the city and the surrounding tribes into an all-out war with the British in order to serve Ottoman interests. His loyalty to the Ottomans, not the desire for a Mesopotamian independence, was his primary drive. This also has been confirmed by British records and German documents that were recovered from the German liaison officers who were captured with the Ottomans in western Iraq in late March 1918. Based on the communications between al-Baqāl, and his son ‘Abbās, their decision to hasten the attack on the British government office in Najaf was solely motivated by the desire to reduce military pressure on the Ottomans who were fighting a fierce battle in the Upper Euphrates Valley in March 1918.<sup>78</sup> The Pan-Arab nationalist narrative that portrays the revolt as a popular movement that garnered the support of the entire population, except for the first-tier scholars of the religious establishment, has also been challenged by recently re-discovered eyewitness testimonies and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 54.

memoirs of local Iraqis who witnessed or participated in the revolt. The city was not united behind the revolutionaries, and many citizens, including members of the elites and tribal heads, chose to publicly side with the British.

Regardless of its deep-rooted influence on Iraqi national memory, the Pan-Arab nationalist narrative has been challenged following the collapse of the Ba'athist government in 2003. This sudden collapse has provided Iraqi historians with a new opportunity to revisit their modern history, and the 1918 Najaf Revolt has been among the prominent 'rediscovered' historical events. This time, the focus has shifted towards the role of the religious leaderships in shaping and leading the revolt in an attempt to reclaim ownership over a local movement with large-scale national ramifications.

Pan-Arab nationalists' attempt to paint the religious establishment as pro-British during the revolt has been challenged following the collapse of the Ba'athist government in 2003, where allocating a prominent and leading role to the local religious establishment appears to be an attempt at refuting the version of history that elevated Pan-Arabist and nationalist themes that downplays the local nature of the revolt. However, recently republished or newly discovered Iraqi primary sources indicate that this alleged role of the religious establishment was far more complicated, and it could not be viewed through a black and white lens. Iraqi primary sources points to a generational disagreement among the religious scholars of Najaf. The most prominent figures of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmiyah, including its chief scholar Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Ṭabātabā'ī al-Yazdī were not keen to support the revolt and desired to bring peace and stability back to the holy city. On the other hand, a number of young religious scholars and students of al-Ḥawzah al-'Ilmiyah chose to side with and participate in the revolt. The decision to support the revolt meant that the prominent religious figures would have to accept the return of

the Ottomans, while younger scholars viewed the Muslim Ottomans as the only available option to combat the presence of the non-Muslim British forces in Mesopotamia. Grand Ayatollah al-Yazdī's direct dialogue with British officials made him conclude that addressing misconceptions and disagreements would lead to serve the Muslim community as a whole. For al-Yazdī, de-escalation with the non-Muslim British was a practical path to avoid bloodshed and end hostilities in the war-ravaged Mesopotamia. This pragmatic vision disappeared immediately after his death when his successors; Grand Ayatollah Muḥammad Taqī Shīrāzī and Grand Ayatollah Faṭḥullah Isfahānī chose to declare war on the British during the 1920 revolt that engulfed the entire country.

Al-Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭa', who witnessed the revolt, states that although many books have been written to document that time-period, not all its secrets and details have been revealed yet, and that many facts are yet to be recorded.<sup>79</sup> The ever-changing political and social realities in Iraq will continue to expand the interest in the revolt and spotlight new themes and previously unknown stories. These new revelations will once again reshape both Western and Iraqi historians' characterization of the revolt, which will continue to evolve and expand whenever new Iraqi primary sources are unearthed.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 362.

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