

# The Islamic Revolution of 1920 in Iraq

## Authors(s):

Zuhayr Sulayman [3]

## Translator(s):

Batool Ispahany [4]

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## Introduction

The great Islamic revolution of 1920 led by the *'Ulama'* in Iraq became known as the 'Revolution of 1920' as it took place on the 30th of June 1920, and as most of those who wrote of it dated their articles and the events of the revolution according to the Christian calendar.

That was the revolution which taught Great Britain, the arrogant superpower of the time, a lesson which made it waver in its decision to stay in Iraq and continue its invasion. However, circumstances which paved the way for the invading forces, the revolution's encountering various difficulties, and the success of the English in winning over certain personalities – all these factors encouraged them to continue attacking the revolutionaries, make further advances, and remain in Iraq.

These factors must be reviewed in order to show the firmness and the true nature of the great revolution, and to show how the *'Ulama'* were its vanguard and its leaders, fulfilling their mission to make the people serve Allah, the Exalted, and serve the Islamic Shari'ah. They were working to safeguard the political, social, and economic framework of the country.

The legal ruling (*fatwa*) of Shaykh Mahdi al-Khalisi, may Allah have mercy on him, regarding the necessity of *jihad* against the English when they entered Basra in 1904 was only one of the courageous stands taken by the freedom fighting *'Ulama'*. There were many similar legal rulings (*fatawa*), such as the one in Iran forbidding the use of tobacco when Nasir al-Din Shah, the Qajar ruler, granted the tobacco concession to the English. Ayatullah Shaykh Muhammad Hasan al-Shirazi issued his famous fatwa which foiled the conspiracy and annulled the agreement.

We cannot, at the moment, carry out a detailed discussion on the revolution which humiliated the invading British forces, while being extremely difficult circumstances itself, particularly as regards suffices forces, supplies and weapons. The present discussion will be direct towards the following issues:

1. The roots and the beginning of the revolution.
2. Glimpses of the course of the revolution.
  - a. Its factors.
  - b. The events that occurred in it.
  - c. Its military outcome.
3. Its effects and results.

## The Roots and the Beginning of the Revolution

An intelligent scholar will investigate the facts to such an extent that as if he were reliving the event or were close to it. A discussion of the revolution of 1920 will trace the great history sketched by the heroes of Islam in a spirit of defiance, sincere sentiment, and with the highest motives of religious responsibility.

When I write about a revolution led by sincere and pious religious leaders, it is not because I have lived through and taken part in it or been a contemporary of it, but because I have lived it through certain personalities of the revolution who actively participated in its advancement, and also through their books and the writings and letters of its leader and generator, al-Shaykh al-Mirza Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi, may Allah be pleased with him.

Before embarking on the discussion, it must be mentioned that all the revolutions which have taken place in Islamic lands have been religious in nature, and carried out by those opposing oppression, tyranny, and despotism.

The roots of the great revolution can be traced back to an earlier period of Iraqi history. The land of the Euphrates and Tigris, which was known as the fertile land (*al-sawad*), was coveted by the arrogant Western powers, particularly in the period when the Ottoman caliphate was beginning to decline, though the idea of it preceded the beginning of the 20th century.

That is indicated by the fact that Britain and the West, which claimed to be civilized and advanced, invaded all parts of the peaceful world seeking their treasures and plundering the resources which Allah had bestowed on them.

It began with the formation of the East India Company at the beginning of the 18th century, until Britain occupied India in 1818. It occupied what it termed the 'protectorates' and 'emirates' of Kuwait, Bahrain, Aden and Oman in the last quarter of the 19th century. It also invaded Africa, Australia, East Asia, Canada, America, etc. Other arrogant states such as France, Germany, Italy and Holland also invaded various countries. For example, France occupied Tunisia in 1881, and Morocco in 1911, and had previously occupied Algeria.

Iraq was one of the countries which fell into the net of Britain as it was strategically important, had excellent natural resources, and was a centre from which the neighbouring countries could be contained and safeguarded, particularly after the resistance launched by the freedom fighting 'Ulama' in 1914, when Britain came to seize Iraq from the Ottoman Empire.

The perceptive 'Ulama' knew very well that the power of the people was stronger than the power of the tyrants. This glorious idea was expressed by the leader and the pioneer of the contemporary Islamic movement in Iraq, the Martyr Ayatullah al-'Uzma al-Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, may Allah be pleased with him, in his statement: "The masses are stronger than the oppressors, however tyrannous

the oppressors may be."

The religious scholars kept a watchful eye on Islamic interests not only in the countries in which they lived but in all Islamic lands. Their *fatawa* formed an impenetrable barrier which prevented the tyrants and oppressors from achieving their aims. An example of this is the ruling of al-Shirazi from Samarra<sup>1</sup>, Iraq, against the Qajar king of Iran, forbidding the use of tobacco after the Shah had granted the monopoly for it to a British company.

He warned the Shah about it and asked him to cancel the agreement. There was also the fatwa of al-Sayyid Muhammad Kazim al-Tabatabai, who was the religious authority of his time. He ruled on fighting against the unbelievers invading North Africa and declared:

*Today the European states have attacked the Islamic countries from every corner. Italy has attacked Tripoli in North Africa, Russian troops have occupied northern Iran, and English troops have entered southern Iran. This will inevitably result in the disappearance of Islam.*

*Therefore all Muslims, Arab and non-Arab, must prepare themselves to repel unbelief (kufr) from the two Islamic countries. They must not hold themselves back or spare any expense to bring about the means to expel Italian troops from Tripoli, and Russian and English troops from northern and southern Iran. This is one of the most important Islamic duties, in order that the Ottoman and Iranian empires remain protected and safe from Christian attacks, with Allah's help.*

5 Dhu 'l-Hijjah

Muhammad Kazim al-Tabatabai.

Although the Muslims and their '*Ulama*' in Iraq suffered excesses and oppression under Ottomans, they did not consider them unbelievers, as they did the powers of arrogance who came to invade and rule the country. They often stood by the Ottoman troops and helped them against the West.

When invading British forces landed on Iraqi soil on 6 November 1914 and occupied the Fao fortress, the '*Ulama*' in Karbala<sup>1</sup> and al Najaf al-'Ashraf were enraged and began a serious study of the matter, so that they could take an appropriate stand and help the Ottoman troops – despite the many oppressive and iniquitous acts committed by the latter – since they themselves had no military forces.

They sent letters to the tribal chiefs and leaders of various regions, urging them to fight the English. The English spy, Miss Gertrude Bell, relates: "The Shi'ah religious scholars in Karbala<sup>1</sup> and Najaf urged the Shaykh of Muhammarah to take part in fighting against us, for he had excused himself by saying that he was one of the subjects of the Iranian government and had to remain neutral."

The invading forces entered Basrah on 22 November 1914, after the Turkish army withdrew along with the Iraqi tribes and Muslims who had joined the fighting on the instructions of the '*Ulama*'. Miss Bell continues: "The son of al-Sayyid Muhammad Kaim al-Yazdi, the grand *mujtahid* in Najaf, went to

al-`Imarah in January to urge the people to the *jihad*, and the call was passed on through the Bedouins to Ahwaz, Huwayzah and the region of Muhammarah ....".

The *fatawa* of the '*Ulama*' played a great part in arousing the people to take part in scattered battles which broke out on 12 April 1915. At a time when the Turkish forces were extremely weak in confronting the British, the Muslims in southern and central Iraq greatly impeded the enemy's advance, so that more than seven months elapsed from the time the British troops landed in Fao until their occupation of al-`Imarah on 23 June 1915. Throughout the two and a half years until Baghdad was occupied on 19 March 1917, the '*Ulama*' encouraged the Ummah to fight the invading unbelievers. This situation continued despite the hardships and the lack of real power in confronting the invading armies, and it did not abate until the great Islamic revolution, finally announced on 13 Shawwal 1338 (30 June 1920), which was preceded by uprisings lasting several months.

## Glimpses of the Course of the Revolution

### A. Factors of the Revolution

In spite of the political, economic and social conditions prevalent in the Ummah in Iraq during the oppressive and sectarian Ottoman rule – which was only interested in collecting taxes and duties – the government was at least outwardly described as being Islamic. The '*Ulama*' in all Iraqi cities, particularly Najaf and Karbala', wrote letters and advised the governors appointed by the Ottoman sultan, but to no avail.

However, the British invasion of Iraq and Islamic lands inflamed the people, and the dedicated '*Ulama*', despite their meagre resources, urged the Ummah on to *jihad*. Thus, the causes and factors of this massive revolution can be summed up in the following points:

- The direct rule by the British, which was against the laws of the Shari'ah which prohibited the government of unbelievers over Muslims. Allah, the Exalted, has said:

***And God will not grant the unbelievers any way over the believers. (4: 141).***

Naturally, after the British gained control of the country, they broke their promise that they would not remain in Iraq, that they would leave after peace was established, and that they had come to help the Iraqi people to achieve self-rule in an appropriate manner. These were nothing but lies and empty promises.

The '*Ulama*' and senior religious authorities observed the scene with caution, particularly after the referendum carried out by the British about the issue of accepting British administration in June 1919. After the hopes of the masses about British promises were dashed, the '*Ulama*' rose and demanded that the British leave the country and called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq. They also stressed to the masses the unlawfulness of obeying a non-Muslim ruler, and that kindled the enthusiasm

of the Ummah even further. This was one of the fundamental factors of the revolution, as Islam does not permit rule by a non-Muslim under any circumstances.

Some hold the view that one of the factors which led to the outbreak of the blessed revolution was that the clash between the two countries was followed by a vacuum which could be exploited. However the actual facts indicate that when the Turks were defeated and retreated, British forces took their place in order not to allow any further intervention into the situation. The chief cause of the revolution was the control of Iraq by the British. The Muslims could not remain silent in the face of such a situation or ignore it.

- The link between the religious leadership and the Muslims which helped in mobilizing a large number of people, attracted by the *fatawa* of the '*Ulama*' in the forefront. The *fatwa* from the leading religious authority of the time, Mirza Mubammad Taqi al-Shirazi, may Allah be pleased with him, regarding the necessity of *jihad* aroused every Muslim. Streams of men left their wives, children, and all their properties, and set off to fight the invading unbelievers. The brave religious scholars in the vanguard led the advance of the army and stirred up their enthusiasm. Revolutionary fervour mounted and revolutionary songs, called '*al-hawsat*' in Iraq, rang out.

- There were other factors of a secondary nature, which were not important and effective in themselves. Among these was the bad economic situation, the many taxes imposed by the Turks, their ill treatment of people, and the spread of sectarianism. Though some researchers regard these as fundamental factors, in our view they were not, as the great revolution flared up after the British came and occupied Iraq. However, we must not forget the effect of these earlier factors on the Iraqi people.

- Another factor was the arrogant behaviour of the British in an attempt to denigrate the Ummah, particularly during the period which followed the occupation of Baghdad, and until the outbreak of the revolution.

## **B. The Events of the Revolution**

The Iraqis did not possess any weapons, save determination, enthusiasm, and the zeal to launch a brave attack on the British forces with such weapons and equipment as they captured after vanquishing them. The leader of the revolution was determined to expel the British from Iraq without delay, after having sent them many letters and memos urging them –to leave the country. This peaceful method of struggle had continued from the time of the occupation until the revolution was proclaimed. This was because the religious leaders, because of their commitment to Islam, did not want war and bloodshed, but rather hoped to

**'repel with that which is fairer'. (41:34).**

However, when they found no way out of it, they resorted to war and revolution.

About a month before the revolution, Mirza Shhazi, may Allah be pleased with him, made a general proclamation to all the Iraqis calling them to carry out peaceful demonstrations. He said in this proclamation:

*The Iraqis are going towards Baghdad to demand their rights, and it is necessary for you and for all the Muslims to join their brothers on this noble principle. Beware of disturbing the peace and disagreeing and quarrelling amongst yourselves. I advise you to protect the lives, possessions and honour of all religious communities and sects in your country, and never to harm any one of them.*

Mirza Shirazi issued his command to proclaim the revolution after many meetings and after numerous delegations from Najaf, Kazimayn and the other cities, and after all the requirements with regard to general peace and order were completed and were under the control of the leader, and the personalities who met him had promised that the tribes and volunteer forces would fight against the British.

The first shot of the revolution was fired in the city of al-Rumaythah after the arrest of Shaykh Sha'lan Abu al-Chum. The Shaykh knew of it since he had agreed on a password with his paternal cousin Ghathith alHarchan. After he was arrested by the British officer, Shaykh Sha'lan informed his associates that he was in need of "10 lira" before the arrival of the train the following day. This meant that he needed ten men to attack the station before the arrival of the train on which they may take him. In the early morning ten strong men made an attack.

They were: Hmaydan Hajj Gati`, Jilhit Ha Gati, Hmud al-Radi, `Abd al-`Dharah, Khdayyir al-`Abbud, Najm al-`Idan, Abu `Uyun al-Harchan, `Ajil al-Radi, Gassad al-Mukhrid and Dkhayyil al-`Abbud. They freed Shaykh Sha`lan on the morning of 30 June, and that was when the revolution began. The rail tracks were cut, and the military garrison at al-Rumaythah was besieged on 4 July 1920. Various `Ulama' issued *fatawa* about *jihad*.

The revolution flared in Shamiyyah, Kufah and Hillah, and spread into central and southern Iraq. When Kufah was besieged, Captain Mann was killed. The uprising also took place in al-Najaf al-'Ashraf. However Lt. Col. Leachman arrested certain members of the uprising and had them executed. He himself was killed by Shaykh Dari before the flames of the revolution had died out.

A bloody battle took place in the region of al Rarinjiyyah on 23 July after the freedom fighters entered the city of Kifl, south of Hillah, on the previous day. The revolutionaries plunged into battle and were victorious over the British armies that came to occupy Kifl on 23 July. There were estimated to have been about eight to nine hundred enemy troops, though it has been said that it was actually three times this number (i.e. 2700 troops).

According to the enemy statistics, there were 20 dead, 60 wounded and 318 missing, along with heavy loss of equipment and animals. In another report it is estimated that there were 200 dead. But according to the revolutionary sources the enemy losses were estimated to be 800 dead and wounded.

Battles also took place in the region of the Saddat al-Hindiyyah which the British were protecting in the city of Twayrij. The revolutionaries set fire to a wooden bridge there which linked the main road to the city, and tried to cut it off completely from the 53rd brigade which intended to turn towards the city of Karbala'. The heroism of the revolutionaries was magnificent. The weapons of the revolution were faith, the famous *'mugwar'* – a piece of wood a metre or more in length, which had a round ball of tar at one end – and whatever the revolutionaries could capture from their enemies.

The revolution succeeded at first and liberated many large and small cities and the areas surrounding them. It liberated the holy city of Karbala', 'the capital of the revolution,', and also Diwaniyyah, Musayyab, the Saddat al-Hindiyyah, and Twayrij. When the revolution expanded, it included Ramadi, Nkiriyyah, Khidr, Samawah, Diyala and Miqdadiyyah and also Arbil and Samarra', and other towns. It continued despite all hardships, and recorded a memorable union between all Muslims of the Ahl al-Sunnah and the Shi'ah.

### **C. The End of the Military Revolution**

By 11th October, many regions had been liberated and governors and district chiefs had been appointed in them. Among these was the city of Twayrij, where the chief had been appointed by the revolutionaries. However, certain badly regulated measures enabled the British to occupy the city and head towards Karbala' where some people surrendered and the city fell. This pattern was followed in other cities, though the revolution was still ablaze despite certain regions falling into British hands.

In the Battle of al-Suwayr; one of the most important battles in the region of Al Hchaym, the British lost 1200 men. However, various circumstances led to the end of the revolution on 20 November, after 170 days of bitter and bloody fighting, when the British had thousands of dead and wounded, and hundreds of prisoners of war, and lost much weapons and materials. It was, in truth, a profound lesson for the arrogant occupiers. It opened their eyes to the Muslims, particularly the leaders and '*Ulama*' in al Najaf al-'Ashraf and Karbala'. From that date on, the arrogant powers began to keep a close watch and wait for an opportunity to tear down the centre of religious learning in al-Najaf al-'Ashraf and take revenge on the Muslims, particularly the '*Ulama*'.

## **The Effects and Results of the Revolution**

There is no doubt, that the British were helped by the fact that their adversary had no comparable weapons, forces, or fighting equipment. The weapons of the revolutionaries were simple and in fact non-existent; some of them were untrained and inexperienced, and there was also a lack of real cooperation between certain sections which claimed to be patriotic and called for freedom along with the revolutionaries.

There were also the existence of groups of certain religious minorities which formed a fifth column, a lack of money among the revolutionaries, and other such handicaps. All these factors were instrumental



in the discontinuance and abortion of the revolution, and helped the occupiers to overpower it. However, in spite of that, we see that there were many positive achievements made by the glorious religious revolution. Among them were the following:

- The creation of a revolutionary spirit among the Ummah, and its experience of the revolution and the uprisings following it which trained it in rebellion, disobedience and non-surrender to foreigners and unbelievers, and created in it the desire for just Islamic rule.
- A declaration of the effectiveness of religion and its hold on the Ummah, and of how the element of faith could mobilize the Ummah to struggle against oppression, humiliation and subjugation.
- It taught the British a painful lesson, which they remember to this day, despite all the poison which they had directed against the Iraqi Muslims and their sincere *'Ulama*.
- It helped to create the indirect rule by the British, by using Faisal I, the son of Sharif Husayn, to rule Iraq under the pretext of Arab-Islamic rule with the Islamic Shari'ah as one of the bases and sources of Iraqi law, so that the government issuing these laws was constituted by responsible Muslims from Iraq itself.

Some of the leaders and *'Ulama'* were exiled to Oman, the Island of Saranjam and India, and the confrontations stopped completely. Nothing remained except a secret hatred in the hearts of the British against the Muslims and religious scholars of Iraq, particularly those based in the city of Najaf and the Islamic centre of learning there.

It made the British and their surrogate rulers – from the time of the first government formed with the efforts of Miss Bell – wary of passing any laws which were in clear opposition to the Shari'ah, and fearful of the reactions from Najaf and other cities with any considerable number of *'Ulama'* and religious seminaries

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