

# The Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925: An Analytical Report on its Origins, Nature, and Enduring Legacy

## I. Executive Summary

The Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 represents the first large-scale, organized challenge to the authority and ideological foundations of the newly established Republic of Turkey. Erupting in the country's eastern provinces less than two years after the republic's proclamation, the uprising occurred at a critical juncture, as the Kemalist government was simultaneously navigating the complex processes of post-war nation-building and contentious international diplomacy, most notably the dispute with Great Britain over the Mosul Vilayet.<sup>1</sup> The rebellion, led by the charismatic Naqshbandi Sufi leader Sheikh Said, rapidly engulfed a vast territory and posed an existential threat to the nascent state.<sup>3</sup>

From its inception, the rebellion has been the subject of a deeply polarized historiographical debate, framed by two competing narratives. The official Turkish state perspective has historically characterized the event as a reactionary and backward-looking religious revolt (*irtica*), instigated by feudal and clerical elements opposed to the modernizing and secularizing reforms of the republic, and potentially manipulated by foreign powers, namely Great Britain, for geopolitical gain.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Kurdish nationalist historiography has portrayed the rebellion as a national uprising (*serhildan*), a legitimate struggle for self-determination and the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in response to the Kemalist government's denial of Kurdish identity and its abrogation of previous promises of autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

A more nuanced analysis, supported by a wealth of historical evidence, reveals that the rebellion was a complex hybrid phenomenon, defying simple categorization. It was a nationalist movement, planned and organized by the secular-leaning Kurdish political society Azadî, which strategically employed the potent language and symbols of Islam to mobilize a deeply traditional and devout rural population.<sup>1</sup> The Ankara government's aggressive secularization, culminating in the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in March 1924, provided the immediate and powerful catalyst that fused Kurdish national aspirations with the defense of Islamic principles, creating a formidable, albeit temporary, coalition against the state.<sup>6</sup>

Although the rebellion was suppressed within two months by a massive and ruthless military and legal response from the Turkish government, its consequences were profound and

enduring. The state used the crisis as a pretext to consolidate its authoritarian one-party rule, silencing all political opposition and implementing a codified, long-term policy of forced assimilation and demographic engineering in the Kurdish regions.<sup>4</sup> For the Kurds, the rebellion and its brutal aftermath marked a point of no return, solidifying a narrative of betrayal and state oppression that has animated Kurdish nationalism for a century. The event thus stands as a pivotal moment that not only defined the violent trajectory of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict but also fundamentally shaped the authoritarian character of the modern Turkish state.<sup>4</sup>

## II. The Crucible of Conflict: Precursors to the 1925 Uprising

The Sheikh Said Rebellion did not emerge from a vacuum. It was the violent culmination of profound political, social, and ideological transformations that accompanied the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic. The conflict was rooted in the clash between a new, centralizing, and secular nation-state project and a traditional, peripheral society whose socio-political order, ethnic identity, and religious worldview were under direct and existential threat.

### From Empire to Nation-State: The Collapse of the Ottoman Order

For centuries, the Ottoman Empire's administrative framework, particularly the *millet system*, had provided a structure for the coexistence of its diverse ethnic and religious communities.<sup>3</sup> This system granted non-Muslim communities significant autonomy in their cultural and legal affairs. For the empire's Muslim subjects, including Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and others, a shared Islamic identity, institutionalized in the Caliphate, served as the primary "social glue," transcending ethnic distinctions.<sup>3</sup> Within this imperial framework, Kurdish society, organized around a feudal-like structure of tribal leaders (*aghas*), emirs, and influential religious figures (*sheikhs*), maintained a degree of de facto autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

The decline of the empire and the rise of nationalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries eroded this system. The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which came to power after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, increasingly abandoned the inclusive ideology of Ottomanism in favor of a more exclusive Turkish nationalism, a process that accelerated after the devastating loss of Balkan territories in 1912-1913.<sup>12</sup> This ideological shift, which prioritized a Turkic identity, laid the intellectual groundwork for the nation-building project of the future republic and signaled the end of the multi-ethnic imperial order that had long defined the Kurds' political world. The rapid fragmentation of the empire instilled a deep-seated fear in the Turkish leadership that any recognition of distinct ethnic groups would lead to further disintegration, leaving no land for the Turkish people themselves.<sup>3</sup>

## The Broken Promise of Sèvres and the Harsh Reality of Lausanne

The end of World War I appeared to offer an unprecedented opportunity for Kurdish statehood. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, imposed on the defeated Ottoman government by the Allied powers, contained articles that explicitly provided for the creation of an autonomous, and potentially independent, Kurdistan in the eastern provinces.<sup>9</sup> Article 62 outlined a plan for local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas, while Article 64 stipulated that these areas could, within a year, appeal to the League of Nations for full independence.<sup>9</sup> For the nascent Kurdish nationalist movement, Sèvres was a moment of profound hope. However, the treaty was never implemented. It was vehemently rejected by Turkish nationalists, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who launched the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922) to resist the partitioning of Anatolia. During this conflict, Atatürk actively sought the support of the Kurds, framing the struggle as a common cause of Muslims to defend their lands against foreign Christian invaders and to save the Caliphate from humiliation.<sup>9</sup> He made explicit promises of autonomy to Kurdish leaders in exchange for their crucial military assistance.<sup>9</sup>

The Turkish victory in the war rendered Sèvres obsolete. The subsequent 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, negotiated between Atatürk's government and the Allied powers, established the internationally recognized borders of the new Republic of Turkey. In what is remembered in Kurdish nationalist history as the "great betrayal," the Treaty of Lausanne made no mention of Kurdistan or Kurdish rights.<sup>2</sup> The Kurdish homeland was formally divided among the new states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, leaving the Kurds as a minority in each. This diplomatic outcome was a devastating blow to Kurdish aspirations and became a primary driver of the nationalist discontent that would soon erupt into open rebellion.<sup>15</sup>

## The Kemalist Project: Secularism, Centralization, and Turkification

The new Republic of Turkey was founded on a set of radical principles—republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolution—that represented a complete break from the Ottoman past.<sup>16</sup> The Kemalist project aimed to forge a modern, Westernized, and homogenous nation-state from the ashes of a multi-ethnic, Islamic empire. This ideological program directly challenged the foundations of Kurdish society in three critical ways:

1. **Secularism (*Laiklik*):** The Kemalist elite viewed Islam as an "obstacle to progress" that needed to be removed from the public sphere and confined to the "conscience of individuals".<sup>16</sup> This conviction led to a series of sweeping reforms enacted in the brief period before the rebellion:
  - **Abolition of the Sultanate (1 November 1922):** This act formally ended 600 years of Ottoman dynastic rule, severing the political link to the old imperial

system.<sup>2</sup>

- **Abolition of the Caliphate (3 March 1924):** This was the most provocative and consequential reform. The Caliphate was the last and most powerful institution symbolizing the unity of Muslims, and its abolition by the Grand National Assembly in Ankara was viewed by many devout Kurds as an act of sacrilege.<sup>2</sup> It severed the primary religious and ideological bond that had historically united Kurds and Turks.<sup>19</sup>
  - **Closure of Religious Institutions:** On the same day the Caliphate was abolished, the government passed the Law for the Unification of Education, which closed the independent religious schools (*medreseler*), shut down Sufi lodges (*tekkes*), and abolished the Ministry of Sharia and Religious Endowments. All education was placed under the control of the secular Ministry of National Education.<sup>5</sup>
2. **Centralization:** The Kemalist project sought to impose the absolute authority of the central government in Ankara over all regions of the country. This directly threatened the traditional power of the Kurdish feudal elite—the sheikhs, aghas, and tribal chieftains—who had long exercised significant local control over justice, administration, and economic life.<sup>10</sup> The government's reforms were thus not merely an ideological assault but a direct attack on the material and social power structures that underpinned Kurdish society. The rebellion can therefore be understood not only as a defense of abstract religious principles but as a concrete struggle to preserve the very basis of the Kurdish elite's authority, wealth, and social standing.
  3. **Turkification:** The new republic's nationalism was explicitly Turkish. It sought to create a monolithic national identity, which required the assimilation of all non-Turkish Muslim groups. Kurdish identity was officially denied; the use of the Kurdish language in schools and public offices was forbidden, and Kurds were officially referred to as "Mountain Turks" (*Dağ Türkleri*).<sup>4</sup> This policy of cultural erasure aimed to dissolve a distinct Kurdish identity into a homogenous "Turkishness."

## The Birth of Modern Kurdish Nationalism: The Azadî Society

In response to the reality of Lausanne and the aggressive policies of the Kemalist state, Kurdish nationalists organized. The Azadî (*Freedom*) society was founded in Erzurum in 1923, representing the first major organized political vehicle for Kurdish nationalism within the new republic.<sup>4</sup>

Crucially, Azadî was not a religious organization. It was established by an urban elite of experienced Kurdish military officers, many of whom had served in the Ottoman army (such as Colonel Cibranlı Halit Bey) and the Hamidiye cavalry regiments, alongside intellectuals and notables like Yusuf Ziya Bey.<sup>4</sup> Their primary objective was political and secular: the establishment of an independent Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup>

At a congress held in 1924, the Azadî leadership made the strategic decision to prepare for a large-scale national uprising against the Ankara government. The initial date was set for the

spring of 1926 to allow for thorough preparation and coordination.<sup>4</sup> The rebellion was thus the product of two converging but distinct streams of opposition. On one hand was the religious-conservative reaction of the traditional elite, embodied by figures like Sheikh Said, who sought to defend Islam from secularism. On the other was the modern political nationalism of the Azadî intellectuals and officers, who sought an independent nation-state. The Kemalist government's dual assault on both Islamic identity and Kurdish identity created the conditions for a powerful, albeit fragile and ultimately ill-fated, coalition between these two forces.

### **III. The Spark and the Flame: A Chronology of the Rebellion (February–April 1925)**

The Sheikh Said Rebellion, though meticulously planned by the Azadî organization for a later date, was ignited prematurely by a local incident that quickly spiraled into a full-scale insurrection. Over the course of two months, the uprising spread with remarkable speed, posing the most serious internal threat the young Turkish Republic had yet faced. Its trajectory—from rapid expansion to a decisive military turning point and eventual collapse—was swift and brutal.

#### **The Piran Incident (13 February 1925): The Premature Spark**

The rebellion's original timeline, as envisioned by Azadî, was designed to allow for maximum preparation and coordination among various Kurdish tribes and regions, with an initial target date in the spring of 1925 or even 1926.<sup>4</sup> This strategic plan was abruptly derailed. In early February 1925, Sheikh Said was in the village of Piran (modern Dicle), near Ergani, attending the wedding of his nephew.<sup>5</sup> On February 13, a unit of Turkish gendarmes, led by two lieutenants, arrived in the village with orders to arrest several of Sheikh Said's followers who were wanted as military deserters.<sup>5</sup>

Sheikh Said, invoking his authority and seeking to avoid conflict, requested that the gendarmes wait to make the arrests until after he had left the village. The officers refused, leading to a tense confrontation that escalated into a firefight.<sup>6</sup> Sheikh Said's men overwhelmed the gendarmerie unit, killing some and capturing the rest.<sup>5</sup> This unforeseen clash, often referred to as the "Piran Provocation," became the unintentional spark for the general uprising. Forced into open conflict before he was fully prepared, Sheikh Said had no choice but to declare the start of the rebellion.<sup>4</sup>

#### **The Rebel Offensive: Rapid Expansion**

Following the Piran incident, Sheikh Said moved quickly to consolidate his forces and capitalize on the momentum. On February 14, he declared the town of Darahini (Genç) the provisional capital of Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup> On February 16, his forces captured Darahini's governor and other officials.<sup>5</sup> It was here that Sheikh Said issued a formal declaration, using his seal inscribed with the title

*Emîr-ul Mucahidîn* ("Commander of the Holy Warriors"), calling on all Muslims to rise up in the name of Islam and defend the Sharia against the "godless" government in Ankara.<sup>5</sup>

The call resonated powerfully across the region. Aided by the support of influential tribes such as the Mistan, Botan, and Mhallami, the rebel forces expanded rapidly.<sup>5</sup>

- By **February 20**, they had captured the strategic town of Lice, which housed the headquarters of the Turkish 5th Army Corps.<sup>5</sup>
- In the following days, the rebels seized a string of important towns, including Maden, Siverek, Ergani, Palu, and Çapakçur (modern Bingöl).<sup>5</sup> Another rebel force under Sheikh Abdullah advanced on Muş from Varto, though it was defeated at the Murat bridge.<sup>5</sup>
- By late February, the city of Elazığ had also fallen to the insurgents.<sup>22</sup> Within weeks, the rebellion had spread across a vast territory encompassing the provinces of Bingöl, Muş, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, and parts of Urfa, Mardin, and Siirt.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Siege of Diyarbakır (7-8 March 1925): The Military Turning Point**

The rebellion reached its military zenith with the siege of Diyarbakır, the region's largest city and the main administrative and military stronghold of the Turkish government.<sup>6</sup> A force of 5,000 to 10,000 rebels under Sheikh Said's direct command laid siege to the ancient walled city on the night of March 7-8.<sup>5</sup> The rebels launched simultaneous attacks on the city's four main gates, hoping that the local Kurdish population inside would rise up in support.<sup>5</sup>

The siege, however, proved to be the rebellion's undoing. The Turkish garrison, commanded by Mürsel Pasha, was well-equipped with machine guns and artillery and mounted a determined defense.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the anticipated urban uprising never materialized. Key Kurdish notables within the city, most prominently the powerful Cemilpasazade family, remained loyal to the government and helped organize the defense.<sup>5</sup> After several days of failed assaults, the rebels were repulsed and forced to lift the siege.<sup>5</sup> The failure to capture Diyarbakır was a major strategic and psychological blow, shattering the rebellion's aura of invincibility and marking the beginning of its decline.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Government Counter-Offensive (Late March - April 1925)**

The initial government response in Ankara, led by the more liberal Prime Minister Fethi (Okyar), was perceived as weak and ineffective, hampered by the severe winter conditions that made troop movements difficult.<sup>2</sup> The rebellion's rapid success caused panic in the

capital and led to Okyar's resignation on March 2. He was replaced the next day by the hardline General İsmet (İnönü), a close confidant of Atatürk, who was determined to crush the revolt with overwhelming force.<sup>2</sup>

İnönü's government immediately declared martial law and initiated a massive military mobilization. By April, more than 50,000 Turkish troops were deployed against the estimated 15,000 rebel fighters.<sup>3</sup> The Turkish army launched a full-scale, coordinated counter-offensive from multiple directions, systematically encircling the rebel-held territory.<sup>5</sup> For the first time in a major internal conflict, the Turkish military employed its nascent air force, conducting bombing raids against rebel positions in the Palu-Bingöl area, which had a devastating psychological effect on the tribal fighters.<sup>5</sup> The rebels, outgunned and outmaneuvered, began a steady retreat. The Turkish army recaptured the main towns in quick succession: Hani fell on April 1, Palu on April 6, Çapakçur on April 8, and the rebel "capital" of Darahini on April 12.<sup>22</sup>

## Capture and End of the Rebellion (15 April 1925)

With his forces scattered and the Turkish army closing in, Sheikh Said attempted to escape eastward toward Iran with his remaining commanders.<sup>22</sup> On April 15, 1925, while trying to cross the Murat River at the Abdurrahman Pasha Bridge near Varto, his group was surrounded and captured by Turkish troops.<sup>22</sup> His capture was facilitated by a crucial act of betrayal: his own brother-in-law, Major Kasım Ataç, a former Hamidiye officer, informed the Turkish authorities of his location.<sup>22</sup> This internal betrayal underscored the persistent tribal and personal rivalries that the rebellion's leadership was ultimately unable to overcome. With the capture of Sheikh Said, the organized phase of the rebellion effectively came to an end, though sporadic resistance would continue for some time.

| Date(s)            | Event<br>(Military/Political) | Location(s)     | Key Actors/Forces<br>Involved                   | Outcome &<br>Significance   |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|---|---|
| <b>13 Feb 1925</b> | <b>Piran Incident</b>         | Piran (Dicle)   | Sheikh Said's men<br>vs. Turkish<br>Gendarmerie | Accidental<br>skirmish<br>prematurely<br>triggers the<br>general uprising.            |
| <b>14 Feb 1925</b> | Declaration of<br>Capital     | Darahini (Genç) | Sheikh Said                                     | Darahini declared<br>the provisional<br>capital of<br>Kurdistan.                      |
| <b>16 Feb 1925</b> | Capture of<br>Darahini        | Darahini (Genç) | Rebel forces                                    | Rebels capture<br>the governor;<br>Sheikh Said issues<br>a call to arms for<br>Islam. |

|                      |                               |                                |  |   |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>20 Feb 1925</b>   | Capture of Lice               | Lice                           | Rebel forces   | Strategic victory; rebels seize an army corps headquarters.                                       |
| <b>21 Feb 1925</b>   | Martial Law Declared          | Ankara / Eastern Provinces     | Turkish Government                                       | Government escalates its response to the spreading rebellion.                                     |
| <b>Late Feb 1925</b> | Rebel Expansion               | Elazığ, Maden, Siverek, Ergani | Rebel forces, various tribes                             | Rebellion spreads rapidly across a vast territory.  |
| <b>3 Mar 1925</b>    | <b>Change of Government</b>   | Ankara                         | İsmet İnönü, Fethi Okyar                                 | Hardliner İsmet İnönü becomes Prime Minister, signaling a shift to a policy of total suppression. |
| <b>4 Mar 1925</b>    | Law on Maintenance of Order   | Ankara                         | Turkish Grand National Assembly                          | Government granted sweeping authoritarian powers to crush the revolt and all opposition.          |
| <b>7-8 Mar 1925</b>  | <b>Siege of Diyarbakır</b>    | Diyarbakır                     | Sheikh Said's forces vs. Turkish Garrison (Mürsel Pasha) | <b>Military turning point.</b> Rebel assault is repulsed; momentum shifts to the government.      |
| <b>Late Mar 1925</b> | Government Counter-Offensive  | Entire rebellion zone          | Turkish Army (~50,000 troops)                            | Systematic military operation begins, including aerial bombardment.                               |
| <b>1-12 Apr 1925</b> | Recapture of Towns            | Hani, Palu, Çapakçur, Darahini | Turkish Army   | Government forces retake all major rebel-held centers.  |
| <b>15 Apr 1925</b>   | <b>Capture of Sheikh Said</b> | Varto (Abdurrahman             | Sheikh Said, Turkish troops,                             | Sheikh Said is captured after   |



|             |                      |               |                               |  |
|-------------|----------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|--|
|             |                      | Pasha Bridge) | Kasım Ataç                    | being betrayed by his brother-in-law. End of organized rebellion.                        |
| 29 Jun 1925 | Execution of Leaders | Diyarbakır    | Eastern Independence Tribunal | Sheikh Said and 46 of his companions are publicly hanged, marking the final suppression. |

## IV. Anatomy of a Revolt: Motivations, Leadership, and Participants

The Sheikh Said Rebellion was not a monolithic movement but a complex coalition of disparate groups united by a common opposition to the Kemalist state. Understanding its internal dynamics—the interplay of religious and nationalist motivations, the nature of its leadership, and the fractured landscape of its support base—is essential to grasping both its initial power and its ultimate failure.

### A Duality of Purpose: Reconciling Religion and Nationalism

The central historiographical debate surrounding the rebellion has long been whether it was primarily a religious uprising or a nationalist one. This, however, presents a false dichotomy. The evidence strongly suggests that the rebellion was a Kurdish nationalist movement that strategically and sincerely utilized the language of religious defense as its primary vehicle for mass mobilization.<sup>1</sup>

The **religious motivation** is undeniable and was central to the rebellion's public identity. Sheikh Said's own rhetoric, delivered from the pulpit of the Piran mosque, was explicitly framed as a defense of Islam against the secularizing policies of Ankara.<sup>5</sup> He condemned the closure of madrasas, the abolition of the Ministry of Religion, and the perceived insults to the Prophet by "irreligious writers" in state-sanctioned newspapers.<sup>5</sup> The rebels marched under green Islamic banners, and Sheikh Said adopted the title *Emir-el Mücahidin* (Commander of the Holy Warriors), casting the fight as a jihad.<sup>6</sup> For the rank-and-file participants, the abolition of the Caliphate a year earlier was a profound and deeply felt grievance, seen as a betrayal of the faith by the new government.<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneously, the **nationalist motivation** formed the rebellion's political core. The uprising

was conceived, planned, and prepared not by clerics, but by the Azadî society, a political organization of secular-leaning Kurdish military officers and intellectuals whose explicit goal was the establishment of an independent Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> The very fact that Azadî's leaders, after their own arrests, turned to a religious figure like Sheikh Said reveals a crucial strategic calculation. They understood that in the deeply devout and traditional society of Eastern Anatolia, a purely secular call for a nation-state would have limited appeal. A call to defend Islam, however, was a powerful mobilizing force that could transcend tribal loyalties. This dynamic is best summarized by the observation that religion served as the "cover" (*perde*) for the ultimate "goal" (*amaç*) of national independence.<sup>3</sup> Captured rebel documents confirm this underlying political aim, with references to a provisional "Government of Kurdistan" and a "Kurdistan Ministry of War".<sup>4</sup>

The choice of a religious leader by a secular-nationalist organization reveals a fundamental and enduring tension within Kurdish nationalism: a disconnect between the modernizing political aspirations of its urban elites and the traditional, religious worldview of the rural masses whose support was essential. Azadî could provide the political blueprint, but it required the charismatic authority of a figure like Sheikh Said to animate it. This dependency highlights a critical weakness, as the movement's political head and its popular body were driven by different, though temporarily aligned, motivations.

## The Role of Sheikh Said: Charismatic Unifier

Sheikh Said (c. 1865-1925) was uniquely positioned to lead such a hybrid movement. Born in Palu, he was a Zaza Kurd from a highly respected family and a hereditary sheikh of the influential Naqshbandi Sufi order.<sup>31</sup> As both a religious scholar (*müderris*) and a spiritual guide (*sheikh*), he commanded immense prestige and authority that extended across tribal and linguistic lines.<sup>35</sup> His personal charisma and reputation for piety allowed him to unify disparate and often rivalrous Kurdish groups in a way that a secular military commander could not.<sup>37</sup> He was approached by Azadî in 1923 and became its leader after the arrests of its founders, Cibranlı Halit Bey and Yusuf Ziya Bey.<sup>31</sup> He was chosen "largely by default" due to the leadership vacuum, but also because his religious stature was seen as the key to mass mobilization.<sup>4</sup>

## A Fractured Front: Alliances and Opposition

Despite Sheikh Said's unifying role, the rebellion's support base was dangerously fractured. The uprising was primarily led and supported by Sunni Zaza and Kurmanji-speaking tribes.<sup>3</sup> However, significant segments of Kurdish society either remained neutral or actively opposed the revolt.

- **Internal Opposition:** The failure to secure broader support was a key factor in the rebellion's defeat.

- **Alevi Kurds:** The Alevi Kurdish tribes, particularly in the Dersim region, largely refused to join the uprising. Having faced persecution under the Sunni Ottoman establishment, they were deeply suspicious of a Sunni-led religious movement and saw the secular Kemalist republic as a potential protector of their rights.<sup>3</sup>
- **Loyalist Sunni Tribes and Notables:** The Kemalist state had successfully cultivated relationships with many powerful Kurdish aghas and sheikhs who saw their interests as being better served by loyalty to Ankara. Influential figures like Sheikh Ziyaettin of Norşin and the powerful Cemilpasazade family of Diyarbakır actively supported the government, playing a crucial role in the defense of the city.<sup>5</sup>
- **Tribal Rivalries:** Long-standing feuds, such as the conflict between the Sunni Cibran and Alevi Hormek tribes, were exploited by the state and prevented a united front.<sup>21</sup> The final act of the rebellion—the betrayal and capture of Sheikh Said by his own brother-in-law—is the most poignant example of how personal and tribal loyalties could override any sense of national solidarity.<sup>22</sup>

This lack of unity demonstrates that a cohesive "Kurdish" national consciousness had not yet fully formed. The rebellion's failure was therefore not just a military defeat but a political one, revealing the deep sectarian, tribal, and personal fissures within Kurdish society that the nationalist project had failed to bridge.

- **The Question of Foreign Involvement:** The official Turkish narrative has consistently maintained that the rebellion was instigated by Great Britain to weaken Turkey's claim to the oil-rich Mosul Vilayet, which was then a subject of intense dispute at the League of Nations.<sup>1</sup> The timing of the rebellion was indeed highly advantageous for British interests, as it crippled Turkey's military and diplomatic capacity to press its case for Mosul.<sup>38</sup> However, while British officials may have privately welcomed the uprising, there is no conclusive evidence in the available sources of direct British planning, funding, or material support for the rebels.<sup>4</sup> Most international scholarship views the rebellion as an indigenous movement rooted in genuine local grievances, even if its timing had significant international repercussions.<sup>1</sup>

## V. The State's Response: Suppression and the Consolidation of Power

The Turkish Republic's response to the Sheikh Said Rebellion was swift, overwhelming, and transformative. The government did not merely seek to suppress a regional revolt; it seized the opportunity to fundamentally re-engineer the country's political landscape, eliminate all forms of opposition, and codify a long-term strategy of forced assimilation for its Kurdish population. The crisis became the catalyst for the consolidation of an authoritarian, one-party state.

## The Iron Fist: From Okyar to İnönü

The initial government of Prime Minister Ali Fethi (Okyar) adopted a relatively moderate approach, attempting to contain the uprising with existing military forces and legal frameworks.<sup>2</sup> However, as the rebellion expanded with alarming speed in late February 1925, hardliners within the ruling Republican People's Party (CHP), led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, deemed Okyar's measures insufficient. Okyar, a proponent of a more liberal political path, resisted calls for extraordinary authoritarian powers and was consequently forced to resign on March 2.<sup>2</sup>

He was immediately replaced by General İsmet (İnönü), Atatürk's most trusted lieutenant and a figure known for his uncompromising and authoritarian stance.<sup>2</sup> İnönü's appointment signaled a decisive shift from containment to a policy of absolute and ruthless suppression.<sup>2</sup>

## The Legal Apparatus of Repression: Takrir-i Sükûn and the Independence Tribunals

Within two days of taking office, on March 4, 1925, İnönü's government pushed the *Takrir-i Sükûn* (Law on the Maintenance of Order) through the Grand National Assembly.<sup>2</sup> This law was a pivotal piece of legislation that granted the government virtually dictatorial powers for a period of two years (later extended). It authorized the government to ban any organization, publication, or activity deemed to incite "reactionism" (*irtica*) or disturb public order.<sup>41</sup>

In conjunction with this law, the government re-established the notorious Independence Tribunals (*İstiklal Mahkemeleri*). These were special ad-hoc courts that had operated during the War of Independence and were now revived to deal with the rebellion.<sup>2</sup> Two tribunals were created: one in Ankara, and a second, the Eastern Independence Tribunal (*Şark İstiklal Mahkemesi*), established in Diyarbakır to operate in the rebellion zone.<sup>10</sup>

These tribunals were not independent judicial bodies but political instruments of the state, designed to dispense swift and severe punishment. Their decisions were final and not subject to appeal.<sup>42</sup> The Eastern Independence Tribunal, in particular, became the primary tool for the legal terror that followed the military suppression of the revolt. Over the next two years, it tried thousands of individuals. More than 7,000 people were arrested, and official records indicate that 660 were executed, though the true number is likely higher.<sup>6</sup> On June 29, 1925, Sheikh Said and 46 of his leading commanders were publicly hanged in Diyarbakır's Dağkapı Square after a summary trial.<sup>6</sup>

## The Blueprint for Assimilation: The Report for Reform in the East (Şark Islahat Planı)

The state's response extended far beyond immediate military and legal repression. In September 1925, a high-level "Reform Council for the East" (*Şark Islahat Encümeni*), chaired by İsmet İnönü and comprising top military and political leaders, produced a secret policy document known as the *Şark Islahat Planı* (Report for Reform in the East).<sup>8</sup> This report was a comprehensive, long-term blueprint for the pacification, Turkification, and assimilation of the Kurdish regions. Its key recommendations included:

- **Administrative Control:** The creation of special administrative zones, known as Inspectorates-General, to govern the eastern provinces under indefinite martial law.<sup>8</sup>
- **Cultural Suppression:** An absolute ban on the use of the Kurdish language and other non-Turkish languages in government offices, schools, markets, and all public spaces. The report even suggested fixed financial penalties for each Kurdish word spoken.<sup>8</sup>
- **Elimination of Elites:** Policies designed to impede the emergence of a distinct Kurdish intellectual or political elite.<sup>8</sup>
- **Forced Resettlement:** The systematic and forced deportation of large segments of the Kurdish population from their ancestral lands to western Turkey, with the aim of breaking up Kurdish communities and diluting their demographic concentration. In their place, Turkish migrants from the Balkans and Caucasus were to be settled.<sup>4</sup>

This report codified the state's denialist and assimilationist policies, providing the ideological and administrative framework that would govern its approach to the "Kurdish Question" for the next several decades.

## Exploiting the Crisis: The Elimination of Political Opposition

The Kemalist government skillfully used the atmosphere of national crisis created by the rebellion to eliminate all organized political opposition. The *Takrir-i Sükûn* law was wielded not only against the Kurdish rebels but also against the Progressive Republican Party (TCF), Turkey's first opposition party, founded in 1924 by respected figures from the War of Independence like Kâzım Karabekir.<sup>5</sup> The TCF, with its more liberal platform and its stated respect for religious beliefs, was accused of having created a political climate that encouraged the religious-reactionary uprising.<sup>5</sup> The party was summarily banned in June 1925, and its leaders were tried (though later acquitted) by the Ankara Independence Tribunal.<sup>43</sup>

This move effectively ended Turkey's brief and fragile experiment with multi-party democracy. The rebellion provided the perfect pretext for the CHP to consolidate its power, silencing the press and all dissenting voices, and establishing an authoritarian one-party state that would last until after World War II.<sup>41</sup> The state's response was thus profoundly transformative, using the crisis to achieve its broader political goal of creating a centralized, homogenous, and authoritarian republic, free from the challenges of both Kurdish separatism and organized political pluralism.

## **VI. The Long Shadow: Consequences and Legacy**

The Sheikh Said Rebellion, though lasting only two months, cast a long and dark shadow over the history of the Turkish Republic. Its violent suppression had profound and lasting consequences that reshaped Kurdish-Turkish relations, defined the trajectory of Kurdish nationalism, influenced Turkish foreign policy, and established a cycle of violence and repression that continues to resonate in contemporary political debates.

### **The "Acrimonious Divorce": Solidifying the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict**

The rebellion and the state's brutal response marked a definitive and tragic turning point in the relationship between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population. It represented, as one scholar noted, an "acrimonious divorce".<sup>4</sup> The shared bonds of a common Islamic identity, already weakened by the abolition of the Caliphate, were shattered by the violence. The conflict transformed what had been a relationship of strained coexistence within a shared imperial and religious framework into one of open antagonism between a dominant state and a subjugated minority.<sup>4</sup> The mass executions, village destructions, and forced deportations created a deep well of collective trauma, resentment, and a powerful narrative of state oppression that has been a central feature of the Kurdish political consciousness ever since.<sup>4</sup> The event established a pattern of state response to Kurdish demands—overwhelming military force followed by intensified assimilationist policies—that would be repeated for decades.

### **A Foundational Moment for Modern Kurdish Nationalism**

While a military failure, the rebellion was a foundational event for modern Kurdish nationalism. It was the first large-scale, organized uprising that explicitly, if strategically, combined nationalist goals with popular religious sentiment.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath, Sheikh Said was elevated from a regional religious leader to a national martyr ( *şehîd*) in the Kurdish political pantheon, a symbol of resistance against Turkish rule.<sup>37</sup> The rebellion and its failure became a central, defining moment in Kurdish collective memory. It clearly demonstrated the direction that future Kurdish nationalist movements would take, often employing a similar blend of nationalist symbols and religious or cultural grievances.<sup>21</sup> The memory of the 1925 uprising, along with the subsequent Ararat (1927-30) and Dersim (1937-38) rebellions it helped inspire, became a powerful tool for mobilizing future generations and cementing a distinct Kurdish identity in opposition to the Turkish state.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Mosul Question and International Diplomacy**

The rebellion had immediate and significant international consequences, most notably on the dispute between Turkey and Great Britain over the fate of the oil-rich Mosul Vilayet. At the time, the issue was before the League of Nations. Turkey's primary diplomatic argument was that the majority-Kurdish population of Mosul was culturally and historically linked to Anatolia and would choose to join the new Turkish Republic.<sup>4</sup> The outbreak of a massive Kurdish revolt within Turkey's own borders, and the government's violent suppression of it, completely undermined this claim.<sup>4</sup> The rebellion exposed the deep rift between the Turkish state and its Kurdish citizens, making the argument for voluntary union untenable. Militarily and financially weakened by the internal conflict, Turkey was in no position to challenge Great Britain. In 1926, Ankara was forced to sign a treaty formally ceding the Mosul Vilayet to the British Mandate of Iraq, a major strategic and economic loss for the young republic.<sup>38</sup>

## **The Enduring Legacy and Modern Commemoration**

The legacy of the Sheikh Said Rebellion is alive and deeply contested in the 21st century. Contemporary Kurdish political movements, including the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), explicitly draw a direct line from their own struggle to the resistance of 1925.<sup>51</sup> The rebellion is seen not as an isolated historical event, but as the first major battle in a century-long struggle for recognition and rights.

Modern commemorations starkly reflect the opposing narratives. Among the Kurdish diaspora and within pro-Kurdish political and civil society groups in Turkey, Sheikh Said is honored as a national hero. The centenary of the rebellion in 2025 is being marked by major academic conferences in European capitals like Brussels and mass rallies in cities like Cologne, events designed to reinforce the narrative of a just struggle for freedom.<sup>50</sup> In Diyarbakır, annual commemorations are held at the site of his execution, where participants demand that the Turkish state reveal the location of his and his companions' unmarked mass grave, a potent symbol of the ongoing struggle for historical justice.<sup>52</sup>

These commemorations are often framed in both nationalist and Islamic terms. Islamist groups in the region also claim Sheikh Said's legacy, portraying him as a martyr who died defending Sharia law against a secularist state.<sup>6</sup> In sharp contrast, Turkish nationalist discourse continues to portray Sheikh Said as a traitor, the rebellion as a backward-looking feudal-religious plot, and often repeats the claim of British instigation.<sup>25</sup> The debate over whether to name a boulevard in Diyarbakır after Sheikh Said has sparked fierce political controversy, demonstrating that the wounds of 1925 are far from healed. The figure of Sheikh Said remains a powerful and polarizing symbol, embodying the unresolved historical and political conflict at the heart of the modern Turkish state.

## **VII. Conclusion: A Contested History**

The Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 was far more than a regional disturbance; it was a pivotal and defining conflict in the early history of the Turkish Republic and the genesis of the modern Kurdish-Turkish conflict. A comprehensive analysis demonstrates that the rebellion cannot be reduced to a single, simplistic cause. It was a multifaceted event born from the violent collision between two irreconcilable projects: the Kemalist state's drive to construct a centralized, secular, and ethnically homogenous nation-state, and the resistance of a peripheral Kurdish society seeking to preserve its traditional socio-religious order and nascent national identity.

The uprising was fundamentally a Kurdish nationalist endeavor, orchestrated by the political organization Azadî with the clear objective of establishing an independent Kurdistan. However, its leaders pragmatically recognized that the most effective way to mobilize the deeply religious and tribal society of the eastern provinces was through the potent language of Islamic defense. The abolition of the Caliphate provided the perfect catalyst, allowing the nationalist goal of political independence to be articulated as a sacred duty to protect the Sharia. This hybrid nature was the rebellion's greatest strength, enabling rapid mass mobilization, but it also contained the seeds of its failure, as it failed to attract the support of Alevi Kurds and secular urbanites who were wary of a Sunni-led religious movement.

The response of the Turkish state was equally consequential. The government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and İsmet İnönü used the crisis not merely to crush the revolt militarily but as a strategic opportunity to accelerate and consolidate its authoritarian nation-building project. Through the Law on the Maintenance of Order and the Independence Tribunals, it eliminated all organized political opposition, ending Turkey's first experiment with multi-party democracy. Through the secret Report for Reform in the East, it codified a long-term, systematic policy of forced assimilation, cultural suppression, and demographic engineering aimed at erasing a distinct Kurdish identity.

Ultimately, the Sheikh Said Rebellion stands as a tragic and transformative turning point. It failed in its immediate objectives but succeeded in cementing a legacy of conflict that has endured for a century. It created a pantheon of martyrs for Kurdish nationalism and a deep-seated narrative of state oppression and betrayal. For the Turkish state, it reinforced a security-centric approach to the "Kurdish Question" and solidified an authoritarian political culture. The history of the rebellion remains profoundly contested, with its memory continuing to be a battleground where the fundamental and unresolved questions of identity, religion, and statehood in modern Turkey are fought.

| Narrative Perspective                        | Primary Motivation Attributed to Rebels                          | Characterization of Sheikh Said                   | Key Terminology Used   | Interpretation of Outcome                           |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| <b>Official Turkish State Historiography</b> | Religious reactionism ( <i>irtica</i> ) against secular reforms; | Traitor; reactionary cleric; "mad and unfortunate | <i>İsyan</i> (rebellion), <i>İrtica</i> (reactionism), <i>Gerici</i> | A necessary victory for the Republic, progress, and |



|   |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|---|--|
|   | feudal opposition to centralization; instigated by Great Britain over Mosul. <sup>1</sup>   | person"; British pawn; leader of "bandits." <sup>10</sup>   | (reactionary), <i>Hain</i> (traitor). <sup>11</sup>   | modernity over backwardness and foreign plots; consolidation of the revolution. <sup>12</sup>  |
| <b>Kurdish Nationalist Historiography</b> | National liberation; resistance to Turkification and the denial of Kurdish identity; response to the betrayal of promises of autonomy. <sup>3</sup>         | National hero; martyr ( <i>şehîd</i> ); leader of the first major national uprising; a symbol of Kurdish resistance. <sup>37</sup>                                  | <i>Serhildan</i> (uprising), <i>Berxwedan</i> (resistance), <i>Tevger</i> (movement). <sup>5</sup>                              | A tragic but heroic military defeat; a moral and political victory that sparked a century of struggle for freedom and national rights. <sup>4</sup>    |
| <b>Islamic-Oriented Narrative</b>         | Defense of Islam and the Sharia against the "godless" secularist policies of the Kemalist regime; a righteous rising to restore the Caliphate. <sup>6</sup> | Pious Islamic scholar; defender of the faith; martyr who stood against tyranny ( <i>tawheed</i> vs. <i>tyranny</i> ). <sup>6</sup>                                  | <i>Kıyam</i> (righteous rising/revolt), <i>Cihad</i> (holy struggle), <i>Şehadet</i> (martyrdom). <sup>6</sup>                  | A sacred stand for Islamic principles; a pivotal moment in the struggle between faith and state power in the Muslim world. <sup>6</sup>                |
| <b>International Academic Consensus</b>   | A complex, hybrid movement with dual motivations: a nationalist project (led by Azadî) that used religious rhetoric for mass mobilization. <sup>1</sup>     | A charismatic and influential religious leader who became the unifying figurehead of a nationalist-led revolt; a pivotal but ultimately flawed leader. <sup>1</sup> | Rebellion, revolt, uprising (used interchangeably); often analyzed as a "nationalist rebellion in religious garb." <sup>1</sup> | A turning point that solidified the authoritarian nature of the Turkish state and the violent trajectory of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. <sup>1</sup> |

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