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Turkey Continuity and Change

Question: Was there a 'Kurdish problem' in Turkey during Atatürk's lifetime?

### **The Sheikh Said Rebellion**

*"Is Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Turkish Republic to blame for his country's troubled relationship with its Kurdish-speaking citizens?"*<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Mango

Kurds have been gerrymandered into being minorities within the existing societies in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria since the establishment of the new Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War, the new ideology of the Republican regime changed the whole situation of the Kurdish population in Turkey. The Kurdish problem is one of the main issues in Turkey, who has the largest portion of Kurdistan. The new ideology of the state, unlike its Ottoman predecessors, was to create a secular and purely Turkish state, under one language, one ethnicity and one culture, in turn this resulted in suppressing all other cultures, religions and ethnicities inherited from the Ottoman Empire's multi-ethnic and multi-religious structure. The project of modernization and new ideology required the elimination, assimilation and repression of the Kurdish identity. This essay will examine how the new ideology of the Republic of Turkey, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, caused Kurdish revolts and dissidents among them, who strived for cultural autonomy and self-government within the state.

This essay will argue that the underlying reason behind the Kurdish Problem can be found in two contending nationalist sentiments that were both products of the Turkish War of Independence, namely, Turkish and Kurdish nationalism and will argue that the trauma resulting from the loss of empire and the actions of the Entente Powers created a fertile place for Turkish nationalism to grow. At the same time, Atatürk's promises of autonomy to the Kurdish population in exchange for their help against the foreign aggressors planted the seeds of Kurdish nationalism. Furthermore, this essay will argue that in the opening stages of their

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<sup>1</sup> Mango, A. (1999). "Atatürk and the Kurds", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35(4), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Gunter, M. M. (1988). "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey", *Middle East Journal*, 42(3), p.390.

interaction, both Turks and Kurds found common ground in religion, however, the subsequent secularization process that took place in the Republic removed that element from the equation, creating a focal point of divergence both theoretically and practically, thus leaving the two contending national identities facing each other.

Throughout the essay, the patterns of political behavior taking place in the aftermath of the War of Independence will be examined; more specifically, the essay uses the Sheikh Said Rebellion as a paradigm to explain the multifaceted aspects of the Kurdish problem during Atatürk's lifetime. The Sheikh Said Rebellion provides a case in point for the main issues that surround the Kurdish Problem, even to this day.

Before examining the rebellion, it is necessary to understand the events that paved the way for the emergence of the Kurdish Problem. It is therefore imperative that we mention the significance of the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 and more importantly, the articles of the treaty that concerned Kurdistan.

Article 62 gave the possibility to predominantly Kurdish areas –east of Euphrates, south of the boundary of Armenia, north border with Syria- to have their local autonomy. According to Article 64, Kurdish people shall be separated from Turkey and become independent which can be seen as a provision for a future Kurdish state. According to Baskın Oran, these articles resulted in the Kurds falling into a future precipitance.<sup>3</sup> This seemed as a likely scenario since the Sevres Treaty provided national states to other peoples of the empire such as Armenians. But the Treaty of Sevres was annulled with the War of Independence, and in due course, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey declared that they would not accept any agreements signed by the Istanbul government.

It can be argued that during the years of the War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal was aware of the multi-ethnic structure of Turkey, one which was inherited from its Ottoman predecessor, therefore he had positive approaches to rights, legal and racial developments of Kurds. This was a part of his policy in an effort to draw their support and win the war. There can be no doubt that Mustafa Kemal was using Islam as his essential weapon to mobilize Kurds to fight with him. Mustafa Kemal's speech to Diyarbekir on 1919, states that he was emphasizing on religion to gain Kurdish support: "Our existence requires that Kurds, Turks and all Muslim elements

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<sup>3</sup> Cevheri, S. (2012). "*Defining and Naming the Kurdish Issue: Institutions, Opinion Leaders and Parties*" MA Thesis, Istanbul Kültür University, p. 26.

should work together to defend our independence and prevent the partition of the fatherland”.<sup>4</sup> When the Turkish Nationalist Movement decided to fight for their independence and to fight against the conditions of the Treaty of Sevres, the majority of the Kurds joined Mustafa Kemal largely because of religious concerns, rivalries between different Kurdish groups and fear of Armenian expansion.

A further argument to his moderate approach is promises given to the Kurdish people by Mustafa Kemal. For many years, some Kurdish elites have claimed that Mustafa Kemal had promised autonomy for them, in return for their support in the War of Independence.<sup>5</sup> An example of this can be the establishment of the Kurdish National Assembly on February 1922, which provided local autonomy for the Kurds, for them to be free to organize themselves and observe their national customs.<sup>6</sup> This provided for some autonomy on a local level but it did not provide a fully independent polity, In essence, real power rested within the Turkish Grand National Assembly; the Kurdish National Assembly would be composed of elected members of the Kurdish population. Their provided mandate by their Turkish overlords was the creation of educational infrastructure. Moreover, the position of a governor-general was created, however, the GNA had the power to approve and dismiss the incumbent position holder depending on their preferences.

Finally, the GNA insisted to use Turkish as official language for Kurdish National Assembly.

According to Çağaptay, Mustafa Kemal recognized Kurds as a separate ethnicity only for a short time during the Independence War.<sup>7</sup> After the abolition of the Treaty of Sevres and with the recognition of the Republic of Turkey with the Treaty of Laussane, Mustafa Kemal’s policy changed direction, and consequently altered the entire situation of Kurds in Turkey. The Treaty of Lausanne did not come concomitant with any special provision vis-à-vis Kurdish self rule.

After 1923, with the Sheikh Said rebellion, the promises of local autonomy and moderate approaches of Mustafa Kemal to the Kurds, to their language, to their culture and to their ethnicity withdrew from the Turkish political agenda. Consequently, Mustafa Kemal started to put all his energy to strengthen his power and to consolidate his reforms to establish a purely Turkish state. Sheikh Said rebellion is one of the major Kurdish rebellions during the early

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<sup>4</sup> Mango, A. (1999). “Atatürk and the Kurds”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35(4), p.6.

<sup>5</sup> Hür, A. (2017). “*Kürtlerin Öteki Tarihi*”, Literatür Yayınları: Istanbul, p.161.

<sup>6</sup> McDowall, D. (2014). “*A Modern History of the Kurds*”, Tauris: London, p.188.

<sup>7</sup> Çağaptay, S. (2009). “*Islam, secularism, and nationalism in modern Turkey*”, Routledge: London, p. 105.

years after the establishment of the Republic, led by the chief of Naqshbandi Islamic Order and started in February 1925, in Diyarbekir and Elazığ provinces.<sup>8</sup> Sheikh Said rebellion was one of the important threats faced by the new state. One can understand its importance by looking at the military forces used by the Turkish state to quell this rebellion: %35 of the annual budget of the state in 1925 was allocated to suppress the rebellion.<sup>9</sup> By the end of April, Turkish forces in the region numbered about 52,000.<sup>10</sup>

The insurgent forces, which were initially around 7,000, soon reached 30,000 thousand people and established control over the area.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the rebellion, insurgents took over the towns of Elazığ and Palu<sup>12</sup> nevertheless they were not being able to consolidate their hold in big city centers. The Republic of Turkey suppressed the rebellion after a short time. On 15 April, Sheikh Said and his last followers were caught and executed after a trial in the Istiklal Tribunals.<sup>13</sup>

Sources have not been able to provide a consensus on the causes of the rebellion. According to some scholars, the underlying reason for the rebellion was religion and emerged against the abolition of the Caliphate and the process of laicization of the state. According to various scholars, rebellion emerged as the end result of agitation by external factors, and some scholars emphasizing emerging nationalism as the cause of the rebellion.

According to Beşikçi, the main reason was the British interference in the area and their use of the Kurdish people as proxies against the Turks.<sup>14</sup> He supports his argument by showing arms catalogues coming from munitions makers in London received by Said, during the first days of rebellion.<sup>15</sup> At the time, the British were seeking the oil of Mosul and thus were trying to provoke anti-Turkish feelings among the Kurds. Anti-Turkish feelings among them caused rapprochement with the British; in addition, Said was thinking that the British would be less dominant and oppressing compared to the new Republic.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.121.

<sup>9</sup> Yüksel, M. (2006). "The encounter of Kurdish women with nationalism in Turkey". *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42(5), p.779.

<sup>10</sup> McDowall, D. (2014). "*A Modern History of the Kurds*", Tauris: London, p.195.

<sup>11</sup> Hür, A. (2017). "*Kürtlerin Öteki Tarihi*", Literatür Yayınları: İstanbul, p.175.

<sup>12</sup> Cagaptay, S. (2009). "*Islam, secularism, and nationalism in modern Turkey*", Routledge: London, p.22.

<sup>13</sup> Cagaptay, S. (2009). "*Islam, secularism, and nationalism in modern Turkey*", Routledge: London, p.

<sup>14</sup> Olson, R. W., & Tucker, W. F. (1978). "The Sheikh Sait Rebellion in Turkey (1925): A Study in the Consolidation of a Developed Uninstitutionalized Nationalism and the Rise of Incipient (Kurdish) Nationalism". *Die Welt des Islams*, 18(3/4), p.196.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.196.

Mustafa Kemal attempted to reduce Islam, which was the crucial ideological tie between Kurds and Turks. This resulted into a body blow for Turkey. The abolition of Islam played an important role for creating Kurdish dissent against the Turks. During the War of Independence Mustafa Kemal was using Islam as an apparatus that binded Kurds and Turks together. With the disestablishment of the Caliphate on 1924, Kurds lost their loyalty to the Turkish state, because Islam functioned as social glue for different ethnicities during the War of Independence.<sup>16</sup> But with the secularization process of new the Republic, Islam lost its potency. In its place a new Turkish identity was constructed, one that would provide for a secular Turkish state.

At the same time, elimination of religious institutions, an important move of Mustafa Kemal's attempt to replace Islam, gave rise to Kurdish dissent against state authorities. For example Sheikh Said was a powerful leader, and attained his power partly from religious schools that he had built. The destruction of religious institutions led sheikhs to lose their powers and privileges. Subsequent elimination of traditional religious schools prevented Kurds from learning their language. This was in accordance with Atatürk's broader Turkification project.

Sheikh Said's letter to other sheikhs will be a good example to illustrate his grievance regarding Mustafa Kemal's attempt to replace religion:

"We used to have a common Caliph in the past and this would the feeling of being a part of a community, to which Turks also belonged to, to our religious community. From the abolition of the Caliphate until now we are facing with the oppression of Turks."<sup>17</sup>

While these arguments may sound compelling, one cannot underestimate the effects of Mustafa Kemal's desire to craft a new Turkish state in the aftermath the War of Independence. The 1920's were important times in the establishing of the new Turks.<sup>18</sup> Who is the new Turk? Mustafa Kemal proposed a new, national and all-inclusive identity<sup>19</sup>, which was required in order to establish a homogenous state, and which would be obtained through assimilation and integration into Turkishness. According to the new policy of the regime, they denied the presence of a separate Kurdish identity.<sup>20</sup> Consequently; everything regarded as a sign of a

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<sup>16</sup> Gunes, C. & Zeydanlioglu, W. (2013). *"The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, representation and Reconciliation"*. Routledge: London, p.8.

<sup>17</sup> Cevheri, S. (2012). *"Defining and Naming the Kurdish Issue: Institutions, Opinion Leaders and Parties"* MA Thesis, Istanbul Kültür University, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Kadioğlu, A. (1996). "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Contruction of Official Identity", *Middle Eastern Studies*, p.12.

<sup>19</sup> Cagaptay, S. (2009). *"Islam, secularism, and nationalism in modern Turkey"*, Routledge: London, p.39.

<sup>20</sup> Gunes, C. & Zeydanlioglu, W. (2013). *"The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, representation and Reconciliation"*. Routledge: London, p.263.

separate Kurdish identity was to be eradicated<sup>21</sup> In the course of this aim, Turkish Republic changed its policy towards aggressive and assimilationist policy to Kurds.

This new ideology of assimilation and the subsequent establishment of pure Turkishness paved the way for grievances of Kurds towards the Turks and helped elevate Kurdish nationalism into a mass movement.<sup>22</sup> One can argue that Sheikh Said rebellion emerged as a reaction to the new nationalist ideology; at the same time it served as a catalyst for the growth of Kurdish nationalism. Forgetting the promises given during the War of Independence, ignoring Kurdish culture, traditions and languages, silencing their voices and the attempt to turn them into Turks were not in accord with the previous policy of Mustafa Kemal during the War of Independence.

It's necessary to examine the consequences of the rebellion, as it has led to important changes both in the new Republic and the Kurdish situation in Turkey.

Fethi Okyar's government was unsuccessful in coping with the rebellion, therefore on 4 March Ismet İnönü came into power and introduced the Law to Maintain Public Order (Takrir-i Sükun), to repress any organization, revolt or institution, which can be threatening for the Republic.<sup>23</sup> This was a turning point for the state policy; they adopted a more aggressive military policy.<sup>24</sup> Takrir-i Sükun, was seen as an opportunity for the state to use their military forces to suppress all forms of opposition to state authorities. On 7 March 1925, Mustafa Kemal announced that this law would serve as the foundation of social, economic and political life.<sup>25</sup> Following the activation of this law, newspapers and publications, which were opposed to Mustafa Kemal and his reforms, were closed. The Law to Maintain Public Order and Independence Courts were two crucial tools that helped to homogenize the nation, moreover, this newfound power granted by the aforementioned law increased the pace and intensity of reforms.

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<sup>21</sup> Gunter, M. M. (1988). "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey", *Middle East Journal*, 42(3), p.390.

<sup>22</sup> Cagaptay, S. (2009). "*Islam, secularism, and nationalism in modern Turkey*", Routledge: London, p.106.

<sup>23</sup> Cagaptay, S. (2009). "*Islam, secularism, and nationalism in modern Turkey*", Routledge: London, p.22.

<sup>24</sup> Olson, R. W., & Tucker, W. F. (1978). "The Sheikh Sait Rebellion in Turkey (1925): A Study in the Consolidation of a Developed Uninstitutionalized Nationalism and the Rise of Incipient (Kurdish) Nationalism". *Die Welt des Islams*, 18(3/4), p.203.

<sup>25</sup> Mango, A. (1999). Atatürk and the Kurds. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35(4), p.19.

The rebellion consolidated Turkish nationalism, tightened Mustafa Kemal's power base and cemented the regime's grip on power.<sup>26</sup> With the failure of this rebellion, Mustafa Kemal has found an opportunity to carry his reforms at a more vigorous pace.<sup>27</sup> For example, the British agitation hypothesis caused hostility to foreign countries and consolidated Turkish nationalism. If one looks at the Islam hypothesis, this rebellion can be seen as the confirmation of the fears of Mustafa Kemal in terms of religious reactions.<sup>28</sup> That's why it was essential to attack religious institutions. Finally, nationalism hypothesis served to consolidate Turkish nationalist feelings. Suppressing policies of state used in this rebellion consolidated Kurdish nationalism at the same time, it strengthened Turkish nationalism and Turkish hostility towards Kurds.

When Sheikh Said was on trial, he declared that this rebellion emerged as a reaction to the replacement of religion. For Mustafa Kemal, it was important to attack on religious institutions and leaders, especially dervishes and sheikhs, to push Islam out of the public domain. And he feared that this could result in other religious reactions. On September 1925, three decrees were issued: All religious orders closed, all religious institutions regulates their dress and forbade those not specifically designated as religious officials to wear religious things, and all civil servants were to wear western clothes and hats.

Another consequence of this rebellion was the emerging communication problem between Kurds and Turks. To maintain order, the new regime began sending officials to predominantly Kurdish areas, officials who didn't know Kurdish. This resulted in a gap between the state and Kurdish citizens; it also reduced the trust of the Kurds to state authorities. This was supported by the ban of the Kurdish language in public spaces. Following this, names of the cities in Kurdish are replaced with Turkish ones. Official authority sanctioned this practice in 1924, when the Ministry of National Education prohibited the use of non-Turkish ethnic group names and place names in public spaces and in textbooks.<sup>29</sup>

The declaration of East Reform Plan, after the rebellion in 1925, played a crucial role for Kurdish problem in Turkey. Kurdish tribe chiefs, relatives and their followers were sent to other

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<sup>26</sup> Olson, R. W., & Tucker, W. F. (1978). "The Sheikh Sait Rebellion in Turkey (1925): A Study in the Consolidation of a Developed Uninstitutionalized Nationalism and the Rise of Incipient (Kurdish) Nationalism". *Die Welt des Islams*, 18(3/4), p.195.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.205.

<sup>28</sup> Kadioğlu, A. (1996). "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Contruction of Official Identity", *Middle Eastern Studies*, p.12.

<sup>29</sup> Cevheri, S. (2012). "Defining and Naming the Kurdish Issue: Institutions, Opinion Leaders and Parties" MA Thesis, Istanbul Kültür University, p. 29.

parts of the country.<sup>30</sup> According to Baskın Oran, the most noteworthy things about the plan are the official prohibition of Kurdish, the acceleration of assimilation by taking girls to school, relocation of rebellious Kurdish people, disarmament of the Kurdish tribes, prohibition of the Kurds being civil servants and gendarmes. It can be said that this plan prepared for the prevention of the Kurdish problem, but worked other way around and it increased the Kurdish problem in Turkey. In that way Kemalist regime strengthened its grip over the country in the aftermath of rebellion.<sup>31</sup> Also by declaring this plan, which aimed at assimilation and domination of Kurds, Mustafa Kemal admitted that government's Turkification and westernization project was the main cause of the Sheikh Said rebellion.

This essay argued that there was a Kurdish Problem during Atatürk's lifetime; the essay choose to analyze one of the defining events in the Turkish-Kurdish history, namely, the Sheikh Said rebellion. The essay presented a historical account on the events that took place, examined the process of the rebellion and finally presented analysis on the causes.

Firstly, it argued that the rebellion can be attributed to three elements, firstly, foreign involvement aimed at creating provocative action that would serve British interests, secondly, reactions to the suppression of religion by the Kemalist establishment of new regime and finally, the rise of Turkish nationalism, the state sanctioned policy of Turkification and the blowback resulting from the Kurdish side.

Secondly, this essay analyzed the reasons behind the construction of the two identities, the Turkish and the Kurdish one. It argued that in the new world of the Republic, secular nationalist identity and not religion was the common denominator of the state. It is in this new environment of ethnic nation states that the problems of coexistence arise between Turks and Kurds.

Finally, this essay argued that in the process of neutralizing the rebellion, the İnönü government passed significant legislation that would allow for effective internal suppression of the Kurdish minority. Moreover, the essay argued that these laws also created the legal framework, which would be used as a tool to solidify the Kemalist's grip on power.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.29.

<sup>31</sup> Kadioğlu, A. (1996). "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity", *Middle Eastern Studies*, p.13.

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