On February 13, 1925 a rebellion broke out in the Kurdish districts of southeastern Turkey. Thousands of Kurds, under the leadership of a Naqshbandi dervish and tribal leader known as Sheikh Sait, took arms against the recently established Ankara government of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). The outbreak soon enveloped almost the entire area occupied by Kurds in Turkey.¹ This article attempts to elucidate the causes of the rebellion and its consequences with special emphasis on its role in further consolidating Turkish nationalism, Mustafa Kemal's bases of power, and the development of the new Republic.

¹ Modern Turkish orthography will be used in the text with the exception of the familiar English sheikh.

¹ The Times of London, March 3, 1925 records the date of the outbreak of the rebellion as February 13. Kemal Karpat, Turkey’s Politics: The Transition to a Multi-Party System (Princeton, 1959), 46 states February 11 as the date of the rebellion. Because of the contemporaneity of The Times' account it will be accepted. The best concise survey of the Naqshbandi Brotherhood (Tarikat) is Hamid Algar, “The Naqshbandi Order: A Preliminary Survey of its History and Significance”, Studia Islamica, XLIV (1977), 124-152. The Naqshbandi order began to expand in Kurdistan under the guidance of Maulana Khalid Baghdadi (d. 1827) who was born in the Shahizur district of Kurdistan in 1776 and taught in a medrese or religious school in Sulaymaniya until 1805 returning to that city in 1811 after travel, study and teaching in Mecca, Iran and India. Algar states Kurdish adherents of the order have displayed great militancy and cites the revolt of Sheikh Sait as being an example, but with the caveat that Kurdish nationalist motivations should not be attributed to the Sheikh Sait rebellion or similar rebellions; Algar, 151. The authors, in disagreement with Algar, will attempt to demonstrate that Kurdish nationalist motivations were a factor in the rebellions of 1929, 1930 and especially in the 1938-1939 uprisings. For example see, Ismail Beşikçi, Doğu Anadolu’nun Düzeni: Sosyo-Ekonomik ve Etnik Temeller / The Social Structure of Eastern Anatolia: Socio-economic and Ethnic Foundations (Ankara: E. Yayınları, 1969), 313 states that Naqshbandi sheikhs were leaders of the Kurdish Rebellion in Şemdinli during 1928-1930. Beşikçi is of the opinion that, unlike Sheikh Sait’s rebellion, the Şemdinli rebellions had nationalist motivations.
of Turkey. The rebellion also acted as a catalyst in the incipient growth of Kurdish nationalism. Both of these developments contributed to estrangement, which is still manifest, of Turk and Kurd in the subsequent years.

Sheikh Sait was the son of Sheikh Ali Efendi of Palu and was the hereditary head of the Naqshbandi order, which was extremely powerful in the Kurdish districts. Sheikh Sait’s influence was great not only because he was the hereditary head or sheikh of an influential religious order but also because by virtue of that position he was simultaneously the leader of the tribes in the area. He consolidated these two positions by establishing medreses or religious schools in the areas where his authority was accepted. In as much as he was a tribal leader, Sheikh Sait was also a government official: tribal leaders having been designated as the representatives of the Sultan’s Istanbul government as well as official representatives to various nationalist organizations established by Mustafa Kemal during 1919-1923. It was his service in these three capacities that allowed Sheikh Sait to become such an influential figure and thereby a real threat to the Ankara government when he agreed to head a rebellion.2

Professor Beşikci stresses the significance of holding the three positions mentioned above for any would-be leader of rebellion. He emphasizes that in the early 1920s, tribal leaders and/or sheikhs cooperated with the government. It was the commitment of the Ankara government to a series of secular reforms which would have reduced the traditional governmental power of the sheikhs and/or tribal leaders which set off the rebellion.

Sources disagree on the causes of the rebellion. One argument consistently advanced by Turks and some Kurdish historians is British agitation among the Kurds.3 One of the main facts to support this charge is that during the first days of the rebellion Sheikh Sait received a variety of arms catalogs from munitions makers in London.4

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2 Beşikci, 311-312.
3 Beşikci, 308.
4 Beşikci, 308. But he gives no evidence to support this charge. Following the San Remo Conference in 1920 in which the problem of Kurdistan was left unsolved, one of the possibilities offered by the Foreign Office was to leave Kurdistan to Turkey and perhaps to incite the Kurds against the Turks. This suggestion appears never to have been taken seriously. See Briton Cooper Busch, Mudros to Lausanne: Britain’s Frontier in West Asia, 1918-1923 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976), 37.