



Research Article

International Journal of Kurdish Studies

11 (2), pp. 628-664

<http://www.ijoks.com>

**The Sheikh Mahmud Rebellion as Reflected in Ottoman Military Archives: A Struggle for Kurdish Independence under British Occupation**

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**Received:** Jun 18, 2025

**Accepted:** Sep 16, 2025

**Abstract**

This article investigates the uprising led by Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji during and after World War I, focusing on his determined efforts to establish an independent Kurdish state in Southern Kurdistan under British control. Drawing on Ottoman General Staff (ATASE) archives and contemporary memoirs, the revolt's origins, development, and suppression are investigated, emphasizing the difficulties posed by a fragmented tribal society lacking military coordination and political unity. Initially appointed by the British as Governor of Kurdistan, Sheikh Mahmud rejected a symbolic role and instead pursued sovereign authority, thus becoming a central figure in Kurdish nationalist resistance. His rebellion, which continued with varying intensity until 1931, included attempts to form alliances with Kurdish tribes in Iran, reflecting one of the earliest efforts toward Kurdish unity and self-rule. Although the uprising was ultimately quelled by superior British military force, it remains a significant episode in modern Kurdish history. The revolt illustrates the broader tensions between colonial powers and indigenous movements seeking self-determination. By shedding light on lesser-known aspects of the rebellion, the article situates it within the broader continuum of Kurdish uprisings during the late Ottoman and early British Mandate periods, offering insights into the early dynamics of Kurdish nationalism and its enduring legacy.

**Keywords:** Sheikh Mahmud, British Empire, Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan, Kurdish Revolt

**Recommended citation:**

Tüfekçi, V. (2025). The Sheikh Mahmud Rebellion as Reflected in Ottoman Military Archives: A Struggle for Kurdish Independence under British Occupation. *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, Volume 11 (2), 609-664, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21600/ijoks.1722635>

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## Osmanlı Askerî Arşiv Belgelerine Yansıdığı Şekliyle Şeyh Mahmut İsyanı: İngiliz İşgali Altında Kürt Bağımsızlığı Mücadelesi

### Öz

Bu makale, I. Dünya Savaşı sırasında ve sonrasında Güney Kürdistan'da Şeyh Mahmut Berzenci önderliğinde gelişen isyanı incelemekte, onun Britanya İmparatorluğu'na karşı bağımsız bir Kürt devleti kurma çabasını ele almaktadır. Osmanlı Genelkurmay Başkanlığı (ATASE) arşiv belgeleri ve dönemin hatıratlarına dayanan çalışma; isyanın nedenlerini, gelişimini ve bastırılma sürecini ortaya koyarken, Kürt aşiretlerinin dağınık yapısı ve askerî-siyasî eşgüdüm eksikliğini vurgulamaktadır. Başlangıçta İngilizlerce Kürdistan Valiliği'ne getirilen Şeyh Mahmut, sembolik bir pozisyonu kabul etmeyerek egemen bir Kürt hükümeti kurmayı hedeflemiş ve bu yönüyle Kürt milliyetçi hareketinin sembolü hâline gelmiştir. 1931'e kadar süren bu direniş, İran'daki bazı Kürt aşiretleriyle kurulan ittifaklarla birlikte, Kürt birliği ve devletleşmesi yönünde atılmış erken ve önemli adımlardan biri olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Her ne kadar isyan başarısız olsa da modern Kürt tarihinin erken döneminde belirleyici bir örnek teşkil etmiş ve emperyal güçlerle yerel halk arasındaki gerilimi çarpıcı biçimde yansıtmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Şeyh Mahmut, Britanya İmparatorluğu, Osmanlı Devleti, Kürdistan, Kürt İsyanı.

### Introduction

The important role of Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji in Kurdish history is an undeniable reality. He is arguably the figure who brought the Kurdish people closest to the goal of establishing an independent state throughout their history. The weakening of Ottoman rule in the region known as Southern Kurdistan (present-day northern Iraq) attracted the attention of the great powers. The region's location at the heart of the Middle East and its rich petroleum resources were key factors in this interest. Following centuries of relatively stable Ottoman governance, Britain assumed the role of 'protector' over the local population, yet instead of fulfilling promises of independence, equality, and justice, it subjected the people to years of suffering, loss of life, and deep poverty.

In this context, the Kurdish rebellion emerged as a response to the desperation and disillusionment of a people deceived by colonial powers.

This study examines the resistance led by Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji against the expansionist and often duplicitous policies of Britain, regarded as the dominant imperial power of the era. Initiated in 1919, the rebellion in the Kurdish regions of Iraq aimed to halt British control and establish a Greater Kurdistan, securing Sheikh Mahmud a lasting place in Kurdish historical memory. Employing a historical-documentary research method, the study draws primarily on previously unexamined archival materials from the Turkish General Staff's ATASE Archives, including military intelligence reports, administrative correspondence, and eyewitness testimonies. These sources provide detailed insights into both British imperial strategy and local Kurdish responses. In addition to these primary materials, the study engages with relevant secondary literature to contextualize the uprising within broader discussions of Kurdish nationalism and post-World War I Middle Eastern politics. A comparative lens is applied to highlight the divergence between British policy objectives and Kurdish aspirations, ensuring a critical and source-driven analysis.

This study is primarily based on previously unpublished documents from the Turkish General Staff's Military History and Strategic Studies Directorate (ATASE), which offers a rare and underutilized perspective on the rebellion. The Ottoman military archives include intelligence reports, eyewitness accounts, and official correspondence that reflect how the events were perceived and documented by contemporary Ottoman authorities. While British and other secondary sources are used to contextualize the rebellion, the ATASE documents form the core of the study, providing a first-hand narrative that challenges dominant interpretations based on colonial or Western sources.

### **The Early Life and Background of Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji**

Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, grandson of the prominent Sulaymaniyah figure Sheikh Kak and the son of Sheikh Said, was born in Sulaymaniyah in either 1878 or 1881. He became known as the initiator of Kurdish resistance against British domination. Sheikh Mahmud passed away on October 9, 1956, at Haydari Hospital in Baghdad. As he was an important to the Kurds as a Kurdish leader, his body was transferred to Sulaymaniyah, where it was received by a huge

crowd. His grandfather, Sheikh Kak Ahmadi, was one of the most distinguished spiritual leaders of the Qadiriyya Sufi order (Azamat, 2016, 131, 136).

Sheikh Ahmadi, venerated for his devoutness, held a prominent place in Kurdish collective memory, with his tomb in Sulaymaniyah remaining a site of popular visitation. The Barzanji family commanded notable religious and social influence, passing leadership from Sheikh Ahmadi to Sheikh Said, and later to Sheikh Mahmud. Unlike his predecessors, Sheikh Mahmud was marked by sharp intellect, formal education, and early political engagement, including disputes with tribes like the Jaf and Hamawand. His prestige grew further after a childhood visit to Sultan Abdulhamid II, who, in recognition of the family's legacy, granted them a stipend and a confidential cipher in 1894 (BOA, BEO., 444/33240).

The Barzanji family held a privileged status under Sultan Abdulhamid II, enjoying respect from Ottoman officials. However, this favor ended in 1908 with the rise of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and the Sultan's exile. Accused of loyalty to the deposed regime, Sheikh Mahmud and his relatives were exiled to Mosul. That same year, during Eid al-Adha, a scandal involving Sheikh Ahmad and his companion Baha led to mob violence—resulting in the deaths of Sheikh Said and Sheikh Ahmad, with Baha escaping. Sheikh Mahmud, absent during the incident, was later denied release by Mosul's governor until pressure from Kurdish tribes secured his return. Greeted with public celebration, Mahmud was sentenced to prison but refused to comply, a stance that further elevated his stature. His increasing influence and potential to lead a tribal uprising soon alarmed Ottoman authorities (Refik Hilmi, 1995, 15–17, 44).

### **Regional Political Conditions in Iraq**

Under the 1864 Vilayet Law, Baghdad province was divided into ten districts, including Sulaymaniyah, which encompassed sub-districts like Karadag and Baziyan. According to the 1875 census, Iraq's population was about two million, with approximately 125,000 residing in Sulaymaniyah. While Arabs in central and southern Iraq lived largely nomadic lives, Kurds in the north faced difficulties in settling due to persistent security challenges (Ceylan, 2022, 63–64, 196–198, 229).

Among the region's diverse communities, Yazidis and Kurds frequently clashed with the Ottoman administration. Despite being under imperial rule, both groups were often hesitant to

show full allegiance and motivated by aspirations for independence, at times collaborated with Kurdish factions in Iran and Turkey to revolt against the Empire (Jwaideh, 1999, 151).

From the late 19th century, Kurdish nationalist movements began to intensify. Sultan Abdulhamid II sought to suppress these uprisings, which undermined Ottoman control in regions like Mosul and Sulaymaniyah, yet he faced persistent resistance from tribal leaders advocating independence (Çetinsaya, 2006, 82–83).

Although many rebellious tribal leaders were prosecuted, exiled, or harshly punished, Kurdish and Arab uprisings persisted. External provocations—particularly from Britain and Iran—further destabilized the region. Following the Ottoman defeat in World War I, British forces entered the Middle East claiming a liberatory mission and were initially welcomed by parts of the Iraqi population (Korkmaz, 2021, 102).

In the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, Southern Kurdistan—especially Sulaymaniyah and Mosul—faced escalating unrest and tribal rivalries that eroded central authority. While Arab populations in the south led mostly nomadic lives, Kurds in the north struggled to settle due to chronic insecurity. Groups like the Kurds and Yazidis maintained uneasy relations with the state, occasionally aligning with Iranian and Anatolian Kurds to challenge Ottoman rule. Despite Sultan Abdulhamid II's efforts to suppress nationalist movements, particularly in frontier areas, autonomy-seeking tribal leaders proved resilient. Foreign provocations, especially from Britain and Iran, further intensified rebellion. After World War I, British forces entered Iraq, welcomed by some communities amid Ottoman collapse. The power vacuum enabled Kurdish tribes—like the Hamawand—to engage in lawlessness, weakening civil order. The assassination of Sheikh Said during a local uprising deeply affected Sheikh Mahmud, motivating a quest for political vengeance. The ensuing chaos saw armed groups dominate governance, religious leaders gain political influence, and even public ceremonies suspended. Although often viewed through an orientalist lens by British figures like Soane, these developments reflect the region's acute instability (Soane, 1912, 191–193).

### **The British Appointment of Sheikh Mahmud as Sulaymaniyah Governor**

Following British military successes in Baghdad, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji emerged as a key figure in Southern Kurdistan. His name first appeared in British records in mid-1918, when he

expressed interest in representing British authority in Sulaymaniyah. As British influence grew, many Kurdish communities, including the Hamawand tribe, sought alignment, viewing cooperation as a means to secure political advantage. Under Sheikh Mahmud's leadership, prominent Kurdish figures convened in Sulaymaniyah, declaring their intent to form a provisional government and maintain amicable relations with the British (Wilson, 1936, 86; E.J.R 1919, 5–6; BOA, DH.EUM. 4. Şb., 20/11; DH.ŞFR. 624/109).

As British forces advanced through Iraq from 1914 to 1917, occupying Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad, Sheikh Said—Sheikh Mahmud's father—remained loyal to the Ottoman Empire, contributing notably during the Ottoman-Russian War. However, the execution of Kurdish soldiers by Ottoman officials strained relations and led Sheikh Mahmud to reconsider his position. In May 1918, he wrote to Sir Arnold Wilson, expressing willingness to represent Kurdish interests under British authority and proposing the establishment of a Kurdish state under British mandate. He emphasized Kurdish support for British intervention and requested guarantees that Turkish officials would not return to administrative power in Kurdish regions (Hilmi, 1995, 17–21; Wilson, 1936, 86; E.J.R 1919, 5–6).

To consolidate British control in Southern Kurdistan, Major Edward William Charles Noel—an expert on Iranian tribes—was appointed Political Officer for Kirkuk in November 1918 and sent to Sulaymaniyah. Though tasked with maintaining stability, his actual mission was to advance British strategic interests by managing Kurdish affairs through local intermediaries. While publicly endorsing Kurdish autonomy, Britain's covert aim was to prevent Kurdish unity by leveraging tribal divisions (Celil & Lazarev, 1998, 127).

Before his deployment to Sulaymaniyah, Major Noel received detailed instructions defining his jurisdiction from the Lower Zab to the Diyala River and up to the Turkish-Iranian border, within the Mosul Vilayet. Given limitations on British military presence, his mission emphasized establishing order through alliances with local leaders. Authorized to appoint Sheikh Mahmud as Sulaymaniyah's representative, Noel was also instructed to ensure tribal acceptance of any governance model. A confederation guided by British officers was promoted to resolve disputes, and Ottoman-era tax structures were retained. By mid-November 1918, Sheikh Mahmud was officially appointed governor, with tribal chiefs acting under his leadership and British supervision (Jwaideh, 1999, 313–314; Sluglett, 1976, 117).

By deploying Major Noel to Kurdistan, Britain sought to gain Kurdish support, though its policy frequently shifted with global political dynamics. While promoting Arab identity to strengthen King Faisal's rule, Britain also employed divide-and-rule tactics by exploiting ethnic and tribal rivalries. Many Kurdish leaders were arrested or exiled, yet selective support was extended to influential figures, including the Bedirhan family in Istanbul, Sheikh Mahmud in Sulaymaniyah, Ahmad Mukhtar Bey in Halabja, and Sayyid Taha near the Iran-Iraq border (Natali, 2009, 68–76).

Arriving in Sulaymaniyah on 16 November 1918, Major Noel envisioned a Kurdish state under British protection, possibly extending to Van. To reduce Turkish influence and reinforce British control, he planned a meeting with 50–60 tribal leaders. In return for support against Turkish dominance, Britain offered recognition to tribes endorsing Sheikh Mahmud's leadership. While some groups in Kifri and Kirkuk resisted the proposal, efforts to win broader tribal backing were delegated to Sheikh Mahmud's political skill (Öke, 1987, 26–27).

Sir Arnold Wilson formally approved Sheikh Mahmud's appointment as British representative in Sulaymaniyah, as confirmed by an official declaration. A June report detailed plans to bolster his authority, including the formation of Kurdish irregular forces in Khanqin and Halabja under British command. However, the limited British control over Kirkuk hindered full implementation of this strategy (Government Press, 1918, 33).

Following the British capture of Kirkuk on 7 May 1918, Ottoman authority in the region weakened considerably. Unable to control local tribes, Sulaymaniyah's Ottoman governor, Mansur Bey, temporarily transferred power to Sheikh Mahmud. He was officially appointed governor on 1 November 1918 (Kartın, 2018, 189).

On 1 December 1918, Sir Arnold Wilson visited Sulaymaniyah to evaluate the region and strengthen British influence. Around 60 tribal representatives from both Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish areas attended the meeting with Sheikh Mahmud. While unified in opposing a return of Ottoman rule and favoring British protection, opinions differed on its form—ranging from direct British governance to administration from London. Some leaders privately rejected Sheikh Mahmud's authority but proposed no alternative (Jwaideh, 1999, 319; Öke, 1988, 62).

Following extensive talks, Sheikh Mahmud submitted a petition to Wilson, signed by about 40 tribal leaders, invoking Britain's promise to liberate Eastern peoples. The signatories formally requested British protection and the appointment of a representative to guide Kurdish development. They pledged to follow British directives if security and independence were ensured (Wilson, 1936, 86; E.J.R 1919, 129).

In December 1918, Wilson formally confirmed Sheikh Mahmud's appointment as Governor of Southern Kurdistan, building on Major Noel's earlier designation. The letter acknowledged tribal consent to Mahmud's leadership and affirmed British moral support, provided he remained loyal to British authority (Jwaideh, 1999, 320; Wilson, 1936, 86; E.J.R 1919, 129).

Although not a formal treaty, the correspondence between Sheikh Mahmud and British officials reflected Britain's short-term political aims. The petition from 40 tribal leaders portrayed Mahmud as a representative of all Kurds, a claim he also advanced. However, Wilson viewed this as overconfident and stressed that Mahmud's authority derived from British endorsement—not popular legitimacy. Thus, British support remained conditional on his alignment with their strategic interests (Jwaideh, 1999, 321).

During Wilson's visit to Sulaymaniyah, Sheikh Mahmud requested British officers to head major government departments and military forces, while reserving lower-level posts exclusively for Kurds, excluding Arabs. These proposals faced opposition from groups in Kirkuk and Kifri, who rejected his leadership and favored direct British administration. Sheikh Mahmud did not pursue their inclusion further (Wilson, 1936, 86; E.J.R 1919, 129).

Iranian Kurdish tribes seeking to join Sheikh Mahmud's Southern Kurdistan Confederation were declined due to international boundaries, but encouraged to maintain friendly ties. They accepted this arrangement. Meanwhile, Major Noel successfully secured support from the Erbil and Rawanduz tribes, who viewed the British-backed Kurdish administration as a path to stability and progress (Jwaideh, 1999, 322).

With the appointment of representatives to Koy Sanjaq and Ranya, these areas—alongside Rawanduz—were integrated into Sulaymaniyah's administrative framework. Rawanduz, devastated by famine, epidemics, and war, received emergency aid, briefly restoring order. Meanwhile, Sheikh Mahmud sought to consolidate power, leveraging British financial support to

secure tribal loyalty and assert himself as a sovereign leader. He filled key positions with trusted allies and required Kurdish military units to pledge personal allegiance, thus reinforcing his authority through patronage and centralized control (Government Press, 1919, 1–2).

While Sheikh Mahmud relied on British backing, Britain equally depended on his cooperation. As noted by Colonel Cayley Bell, without Mahmud's alliance, Britain would have required a costly military presence it could not afford. His leadership was crucial for maintaining order without direct intervention, effectively legitimizing British influence. Aware of his strategic value, Sheikh Mahmud leveraged his position to assert both political authority and regional relevance (Wilson, 1936, 86; E.J.R 1919, 133).

To consolidate control, the British sought to eliminate opposition to Sheikh Mahmud's growing authority. War-weary Kurds, desperate for peace, largely accepted the new order. As Ely Bannister Soane noted, their prolonged suffering made them receptive to any promise of security. Consequently, even previously skeptical tribes came to support Mahmud's leadership, with many formally pledging allegiance to the British-backed administration (Jwaideh, 1999, 324–325).

### **The Recapture of Kirkuk by Turkish Forces and Its Aftermath**

A major setback occurred when the Ottoman Sixth Army granted Sheikh Mahmud the title of emir, prompting Kurdish resistance to British rule. Following rising tensions, British forces withdrew from Kirkuk on 24 May 1918, allowing Ottoman troops to retake the city. Viewing Mahmud's earlier cooperation as treason, Ottoman commander Mustafa Bey had him arrested and imprisoned in Kirkuk, along with several associates. Though sentenced to death, Mahmud was spared—likely to avoid igniting Kurdish unrest. Later, Ali Ihsan Pasha replaced Halil Pasha and, seeking to avoid conflict with the Kurds amid the broader war, offered Mahmud reconciliation, gold, and arms (Refik Hilmi, 1995, 17–21; Wilson, 1936, 9, 86).

Despite prior Kurdish collaboration with the British, the Ottomans pursued a conciliatory policy, aiming to reclaim Kurdish loyalty without provoking hostility. Sheikh Mahmud was briefly detained in Kirkuk and then released. The British withdrawal had undermined their credibility, while the Ottomans' diplomatic approach led some Kurdish tribes to cautiously reaffirm allegiance, restoring limited local support (Wilson, 1936, 87).

The Entente's reoccupation of Kirkuk and Erbil reshaped regional dynamics, prompting Ali Ihsan Pasha to withdraw Ottoman troops from Sulaymaniyah to preserve ties with Sheikh Mahmud. After the Armistice of Mudros (30 October 1918), authority was formally transferred to Mahmud, ending Ottoman rule. He soon welcomed British control under Major Noel. Despite initial cooperation, Sulaymaniyah faced food shortages, and emergency aid proved insufficient. Seizing the power vacuum, Sheikh Mahmud expanded Kurdish authority, aligned with British goals, and moved against pro-Ottoman factions. He also advocated for Kurdish independence in correspondence with British officials (Refik Hilmi, 1995, 17–21; Jwaideh, 1999, 312–313).

As Sheikh Mahmud's influence grew, his demands for formal cooperation prompted the British to pursue direct negotiations. Lacking the capacity for sustained military intervention in Sulaymaniyah's mountainous terrain, British authorities viewed a settlement with Mahmud as a more practical and cost-effective alternative to establishing permanent military control (Jwaideh, 1999, 313).

Sheikh Mahmud's brief rule in Sulaymaniyah was weakened by his reliance on tribal structures and the appointment of inexperienced, self-interested officials. Educated Kurdish elites, aligned with the CUP—whom Mahmud blamed for his family's deaths—distanced themselves, eroding his legitimacy. While Major Noel initially overlooked these issues, Wilson, favoring direct British control, pressed for greater intervention. This led to strained relations, Noel's removal, and the appointment of Ely Bannister Soane as Britain's new representative (Refik Hilmi, 1995, 21–22).

Amid rising tensions, several tribal leaders in Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah openly rejected Sheikh Mahmud's British-backed authority. In a related incident, Sheikh Qays of Samarra was imprisoned for allegedly breaching the terms of the Armistice of Mudros (Öke, 1989, 21).

### **The British Administrative System**

The administrative model Britain envisioned for Southern Kurdistan was heavily influenced by its colonial practices in India, particularly the use of indirect control through tribal leaders. However, the approach faltered due to structural differences. Kurdish tribes were less centralized than Indian ones, and religious figures often held greater influence than tribal chiefs. The British assumed that local leaders could ensure compliance in exchange for support—an assumption that

proved overly optimistic. Moreover, unlike in India, Britain implemented its civilian governance model without first securing firm military control. Logistic and financial constraints discouraged troop deployment, leaving the region under-resourced. Although success might have been possible with stronger military backing or sustained cooperation from Sheikh Mahmud, the model ultimately proved incompatible with Kurdistan's sociopolitical landscape (Jwaideh, 1999, 316–318).

While Britain aimed to unify Kurdish tribes under its control, it also sought to limit the role of tribal governance. Though initially appointed as regional overseer, Sheikh Mahmud failed to establish a functioning administrative system or enforce legal structures. Major Noel's departure to Turkey further weakened his authority. Despite rising dissatisfaction, the British retained Mahmud temporarily and created a parallel administrative structure under close supervision. Most tribes continued to support him, mainly due to British influence, but the arrangement was deemed unsustainable. Political officer Ely Bannister Soane soon began reducing Mahmud's authority, starting in Ranya and later expanding the campaign to other regions (Refik Hilmi, 1995, 23–28).

Major Soane's critiques of the British administrative model in Southern Kurdistan are pivotal for understanding the region's political challenges. He emphasized that Sheikh Mahmud exploited British policy to consolidate personal power through manipulation of the tribal system, which exacerbated administrative inefficiency. Soane viewed the governance model as misaligned with local sociopolitical conditions, arguing that authority should not be centralized under a single leader but balanced between tribal traditions and external oversight. He also condemned Mahmud's reliance on coercion and bribery to ensure loyalty, highlighting the contradictions of the system. His analysis called for a more pragmatic, locally attuned British strategy (Government Press, 1919, 2).

Lacking a deep understanding of Southern Kurdistan, British officials attempted to revive the tribal system as a governance tool—an effort that backfired. Prewar weakening of tribal ties had actually contributed to some social stability, yet political officers, aligned with Sheikh Mahmud's vision, reinstated tribal authority. The plan divided the region into sub-districts led by chiefs, even reviving dormant tribal structures. However, tribes are not easily reconstructed entities, and this revival revealed that Kurdish tribalism had not fully disappeared. In areas like Kifri,

fragmented tribes were reassembled, with chiefs tasked with distributing aid and administering justice—functions they performed in exchange for financial rewards and recognition of Mahmud’s authority. While this appealed to many tribes, it damaged trade, legal consistency, and social cohesion. According to British reports, the justice system became fragmented, with offenders relying on tribal pardons rather than formal legal mechanisms. In the end, governance rested with a loosely legitimate alliance of tribal figures shaped more by local dynamics than centralized authority (Government Press, 1919, 2).

The British-imposed administrative model in Southern Kurdistan encouraged corruption and authoritarianism. Major Soane criticized its structural injustices, noting how the tribal framework empowered leaders lacking legal legitimacy and suppressed individual autonomy. Despite recognizing these flaws, British authorities continued its implementation. While broadly accepted, the system faced strong opposition from those disadvantaged by it. Some even expressed nostalgia for Ottoman rule, fearing the new administration would replicate past repression. Rural communities, in particular, questioned the regime’s legitimacy. Rather than addressing these concerns, the authorities largely ignored them, deepening public discontent (Government Press, 1919, 2–4).

Even less critical British officials expressed concern over the sustainability of the tribal-based administration in Southern Kurdistan. Lacking adequate military and bureaucratic infrastructure, the British adopted the tribal model as a short-term, pragmatic measure. To ensure order, they offered significant concessions to local elites, including tacit approval for land seizures without legal documentation. These privileges compromised equitable governance and eroded legal protections for the broader population. Ultimately, the strategy backfired, as some of the favored groups soon rebelled against British rule (Jwaideh, 1999, 330).

### **Political and Social Conditions Prior to Sheikh Mahmud’s Revolt**

After attaining leadership, Sheikh Mahmud began to treat his position as a personal victory rather than a public duty. Focused on consolidating power, he neglected the administrative and legal responsibilities of governance. Though his authority was formally limited to the region between the Greater Zab and Diyala Rivers under British supervision, he saw these constraints as infringements on his sovereignty. Lacking prior experience in official Ottoman roles, he ruled

through intimidation and struggled to accept the conditional nature of his power. His frustration grew, especially in response to the limitations emphasized by Major Noel, revealing a disconnect between his ambitions and the realities of British oversight (Edmonds, 1957, 30).

According to Colonel Cayley Bell, Sheikh Mahmud was strongly influenced by an inner circle that encouraged defiance rather than pragmatism. Unaccustomed to British-imposed limitations—unlike his freer position under Ottoman rule—he began to view himself as the rightful leader of all Kurdistan. Reinforced by his advisors, he intervened in governance, placing loyalists and family members in key roles. Though he expressed gratitude for British support, he resisted their constraints and shifted focus toward expanding his personal authority. Initially aligned with British aims, Mahmud's growing ambitions alarmed officials, prompting a reassessment of policy in Southern Kurdistan just a month after his appointment (Jwaideh, 1999, 332).

Although Sheikh Mahmud's rise was largely enabled by British financial and political support, he did not perceive his authority as a British concession and felt no loyalty in return. He maintained cooperation only when it served his ambitions, eventually extending his influence beyond Southern Kurdistan. While avoiding direct violations, he gradually ignored obligations, rejected political counsel, and distanced himself from British oversight. Convinced that collaboration no longer served his interests, he initiated resistance without fully grasping its political and military consequences. His abrupt defiance disappointed many Kurdish nationalists, some of whom saw his actions as a betrayal. Captain G.M. Lees labelled his conduct treasonous, while Wilson attributed it to ignorance, unchecked ambition, and impulsiveness. Sheikh Mahmud's pursuit of Kurdish unity ultimately brought him into conflict with both British authorities and fellow Kurdish leaders (Wilson, 1936, 134).

Sheikh Mahmud believed Southern Kurdistan's Kurds had a legitimate right to independence and that he was the rightful leader of such a state. This conviction stemmed not only from political ambition but also from his family's deep historical and religious influence in the region. Encouraged by Allied declarations on self-determination, Mahmud's claim was grounded in the Berzenci family's long-standing spiritual and social authority. His great-great-grandfather Node Sheikh Maruf's rivalry with Naqshbandi leader Mevlâna Khalid and the saintly reverence for his

grandfather Haji Kak Ahmad reinforced perceptions of his divine legitimacy. Thus, his leadership aspirations had political, religious, and cultural dimensions (Edmonds, 1957, 70–75).

Realizing the growing risk of losing his political standing, Sheikh Mahmud re-engaged with Ottoman authorities and distanced himself from former British allies. His strategic missteps and political inexperience, coupled with unrealistic ambitions and a rigid stance, eroded his credibility and alienated some Kurdish supporters. Ignoring British counsel, he overestimated his ability to confront a global power. Encouraged still by an idealistic inner circle, he rejected more pragmatic alternatives. A more diplomatic approach might have secured partial success. Meanwhile, constrained by wider colonial obligations and unrest in Mesopotamia, Britain lacked the resources and will to escalate conflict in Kurdistan. Thus, British officials favored a conciliatory stance when possible (Jwaideh, 1999, 339–340).

In response to Sheikh Mahmud's increasingly unpredictable and unreliable conduct, British authorities concluded that stronger action was necessary to safeguard their position in Southern Kurdistan. Wilson asserted that continued support for Mahmud's tribal influence was no longer viable. Consequently, British officials revised their approach and resolved to govern Southern Kurdistan through an administrative model aligned with that used elsewhere in Iraq (Wilson, 1936, 134).

In March 1919, Acting Civil Commissioner Arnold Wilson convened a conference in Baghdad with key figures including Soane, Noel, Leachman, and Gordon-Walker to reassess the situation in Southern Kurdistan. The meeting, focused on Sheikh Mahmud's growing influence, resulted in a strategy to reduce his authority without direct confrontation. Two key steps were adopted: replacing Major Noel with Edward Soane as Political Officer in Sulaymaniyah, and reassigning certain tribal and administrative areas under Mahmud's control (Wilson, 1936, 134–135). Soane's known hostility toward the Berzenci family, especially Sheikh Mahmud, signaled a clear shift from cautious cooperation to deliberate containment (Jwaideh, 1999, 341).

Following the Baghdad Conference, British authorities swiftly acted to curtail Sheikh Mahmud's power. Ely Bannister Soane was sent to Sulaymaniyah to assert direct control over key districts, particularly Kirkuk and Kifri. In Kifri, the Jaf tribe declared their separation from Mahmud's administration and aligned with British rule. Captain G.M. Lees, now Assistant Political Officer

for the Jaf, began issuing stipends directly to tribal leaders—funds previously funneled through Mahmud, effectively reducing his financial base. By March 1919, both Kifri and Kirkuk were formally withdrawn from the Southern Kurdistan Confederation and placed under a revised British administrative structure (Government Press, 1919, 1–4).

Although Halabja remained within the Sulaymaniyah district, it was brought under direct British control, reflecting the collapse of trust in Sheikh Mahmud. Stripped of financial and political support, he was no longer seen as the unifying Kurdish leader once promoted by the British. Former allies and rivals now regarded him as an overreaching figure to be discarded. While many welcomed his decline—particularly those who had questioned his legitimacy—his loyalists viewed him as a leader unjustly sidelined by external forces (Jwaideh, 1999, 339–342).

Sheikh Mahmud's removal proceeded peacefully, enabling the British to restore order in Sulaymaniyah and its environs. His political opponents welcomed the transition, and neither he nor his followers resisted. As his authority waned, the resulting stability and improved governance were well received by both local tribes and the broader population (Jwaideh, 1999, 343).

### **Sheikh Mahmud Rebellion**

Sheikh Mahmud's initial silence following his dismissal appeared to signal resignation, but this impression proved false. His temperament rendered passive acceptance intolerable; Sheikh Mahmud's resentment toward British authority intensified over time, eventually leading to open rebellion. Though an insulting remark by Soane is often cited as the catalyst, the uprising reflected deeper frustrations. Mahmud viewed British policies as attempts to humiliate his family and delegitimize Kurdish aspirations, framing his resistance as both personal and national in nature (Government Press, 1919, 2).

A key component of Sheikh Mahmud's leadership strategy was his use of Islam as a unifying force in a society where Kurdish nationalism had yet to fully develop. By invoking jihad and religious solidarity, he mobilized broad support among rural communities and tribal leaders. This approach resonated with traditional Kurdish values, where religious legitimacy often underpinned political authority. In Sulaymaniyah and beyond, he secured the backing of powerful tribal and religious figures, including the Berzenci family and the Hawraman, Merivani, Hemawand,

Mikaili Jaf, Jabbari, Shaykh Bizaini, and Ismail Uzairi tribes. He also gained support from local militias and religious circles. This swift consolidation of tribal-religious alliances significantly strengthened his position and posed a growing challenge to British control (Jwaideh, 1999, 353–355).

The growing collaboration between Iranian and Iraqi Kurds under Sheikh Mahmud's leadership marked a significant step toward broader Kurdish resistance against British rule. United by shared grievances, this cross-border alliance aimed to realize the vision of a Greater Kurdistan. Beyond challenging British authority, the movement threatened to alter the regional power dynamics in the Middle East (Hilmi, 1995, 32–33).

J.H.H. Bill, who succeeded Colonel Leachman as Political Officer in Mosul, shared Ely Soane's view that Sheikh Mahmud should no longer govern Sulaymaniyah. Bill's authoritarian approach and refusal to delegate authority intensified Kurdish tribal discontent. Disillusioned by British policies and perceiving Kurdish nationalism as a British tool, many tribes abandoned cooperation and rallied behind Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion (Hilmi, 1995, 29–32).

Despite British efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution, Sheikh Mahmud opted for armed resistance in a final bid to reclaim his lost authority and prestige. Determined to challenge British control, he initiated a military offensive. On the morning of 23 May 1919, a tribal force nominally led by Mahmud Khan—but effectively directed by Sheikh Mahmud—advanced toward the outskirts of Sulaymaniyah. This force was composed largely of fighters from the Hawraman and Merivan tribes, originating from across the Iranian frontier (Lees, 1928, 256–259).

Confronted with British policies that he perceived as increasingly distrustful and degrading, Sheikh Mahmud began laying the groundwork for an armed uprising by opening clandestine negotiations with Kurdish tribes that had started to shift in his favor (Celil & Lazarev, 1998, 127). In response to what he saw as British unreliability, Sheikh Mahmud secretly instructed tribal leader Mahmud Khan to seize control of Sulaymaniyah under the guise of paying homage at the tomb of Sheikh Ahmadi. Taking British authorities by surprise, Mahmud Khan successfully occupied the city. Unaware of the coordination between the two, the British initially turned to Sheikh Mahmud for help; he responded by claiming that the movement was merely a religious

pilgrimage he could not obstruct. In an attempt to defuse the situation, Arnold Wilson invited Sheikh Mahmud to Baghdad for negotiations, but Mahmud declined, attaching conditions Wilson considered unacceptable. As Wilson withdrew to Halabja, Sheikh Mahmud tightened his grip on Sulaymaniyah, attracting further tribal support beyond Mahmud Khan's forces. Fearing that Kirkuk might fall next, the British redeployed military units—including tanks and aircraft—from Kirkuk to Chamchamal and began mobilizing additional troops. Contrary to their expectations, British forces were ambushed by Sheikh Mahmud's fighters near Taşlıca and suffered a significant defeat. Reinforcements sent in haste were similarly routed with minimal resistance. The rebellion rapidly gained momentum as more supporters from Sulaymaniyah and surrounding districts joined the insurrection. Several officers, along with a British major serving as Soane's deputy, were captured and imprisoned. Declaring himself ruler of all Kurdistan, Sheikh Mahmud looted the regional treasury, raised his own flag, installed a new administrative hierarchy, and severed telegraph communication with Kirkuk. British forces were driven back as far as the Bazyan Pass (Derbendi Beziyan), while Captain Lees narrowly avoided capture and fled to Khanqin. The stunning defeat severely undermined British authority in the region, fueling speculation that they might withdraw entirely from Kurdish areas. In contrast, the uprising was hailed as a major triumph for Sheikh Mahmud and significantly boosted the morale of his supporters (Hilmi, 1995, 29–32; Wilson, 1936, 136; Lees, 1928, 260–264; BOA, DH.ŞFR., 639/69).

Sheikh Mahmud's unexpected rebellion stunned British authorities. In its aftermath, Arnold Wilson advised his superiors that reoccupying Sulaymaniyah had become the only viable strategy. There was widespread concern that neighboring tribes would soon join the uprising, and if it were not promptly contained, similar revolts could erupt across southern Anatolia, the Mosul region, and parts of Iran. More alarmingly, British officials feared the emergence of a broader Arab-Kurd-Turk alliance. Major Noel had already received intelligence suggesting that Faysal had traveled to Istanbul and reached an understanding with the Ottoman Sultan.

The Ottoman Ministry of War fundamentally misjudged the significance of Sheikh Mahmud's uprising, dismissing it as a mere tribal disturbance rather than recognizing its potential to challenge British authority. Although aware of British plans to suppress the rebellion, Ottoman

officials limited their response to requesting that military operations avoid Mosul and Diyarbakır, citing concerns over violating the Armistice of Mudros (Öke, 1989, 45–48).

In the wake of the rebellion, the British quickly recognized that military superiority alone was insufficient to secure lasting control; establishing effective political institutions became imperative. Wilson later acknowledged that British officials had underestimated the complexities of Sulaymaniyah and assumed that Kurdish loyalty could be secured through vague promises. Meanwhile, British priorities increasingly favored Armenian political interests, further complicating relations with the Kurds. With Turkish forces advancing and holding Mosul under the command of Ali Ihsan Pasha, British strategy shifted—ceding Kirkuk to Sheikh Mahmud appeared to be the more practical option. British attempts to retake Kirkuk via Khanqin failed, while Turkish troops regrouped and gained support from Kurdish tribes in northern Iran.

Despite these setbacks, British forces re-entered Kirkuk on 25 October. The armistice was signed shortly afterward, as Turkish troops remained under siege in Mosul. Major Noel was again dispatched to Sulaymaniyah, tasked with persuading Kurdish tribes to align with British interests. Though many promises remained unfulfilled, Noel succeeded in securing the support of several tribes. On 1 December, he convened a meeting with sixty tribal leaders, leading to a provisional agreement with the British government. However, Kurdish factions promised control over Mosul grew suspicious, especially after French statements indicated Mosul's administration would be temporary and possibly ceded to France. As awareness of French intentions deepened, many Kurdish tribes began shifting their allegiance toward the Turks, marking the beginning of a noticeable deterioration in Kurdish-British relations (Öke, 1989, 61–64).

Amid escalating regional instability, Wilson remained skeptical about the depth of Kurdish nationalism. He observed that Kurdish aspirations for independence were largely defined by a desire for order, development, and local governance, rather than the ideological nationalism characteristic of Western movements. Meanwhile, tribal unrest in Iran—suspected to be instigated by Turkish agents—further complicated the situation. British indecision and delayed military responses emboldened Kurdish actors in Mosul, encouraging Sheikh Mahmud to expand his influence beyond British-sanctioned boundaries, particularly toward Erbil and Mosul. However, his increasingly autocratic conduct began to alienate his base in Sulaymaniyah. When British efforts to limit his power intensified, Sheikh Mahmud responded with force. On 22 May

1919, supported by the Avroman and Merivan tribes from Iran, he launched a coup against the British in Sulaymaniyah. The political officer was detained, administrative offices were seized, and treasury assets confiscated. Wilson later conceded that he had merely observed the rebellion unfold without intervening. British officials began to view Kurdish political dynamics as bifurcated between two loosely defined camps: Islamists and Nationalists, both united in their resistance to British dominance. Anti-British sentiment was further inflamed by propaganda from the Committee of Union and Progress and by Kurdish nationalist circles in Istanbul. Moreover, British favoritism toward Armenian interests contributed to growing Kurdish distrust. There was widespread consensus within British policymaking circles that lasting regional peace hinged on resolving the Kurdish question. Yet the lack of a cohesive Kurdish leadership, coupled with the fragmentation of tribal loyalties, rendered self-governance implausible in the short term. Turkish rule remained a theoretical alternative, but Ankara's resistance to territorial concessions complicated any resolution to the Armenian issue. As such, British officials increasingly viewed their own administration as the only viable framework for regional stability—either through direct military occupation or the establishment of a locally supported autonomous governance model (Öke, 1989, 64–68).

In the early stages of the rebellion, Sheikh Mahmud's forces intercepted a British government convoy en route from Kifri to Sulaymaniyah. The ambush resulted in the seizure of essential supplies, including funds, rifles, and horses. This material windfall provided a substantial boost to Sheikh Mahmud's military capacity and morale, reinforcing his position in the unfolding conflict (E.J.R, 1919, 16).

Upon receiving reports of the escalating conflict, the British resolved to implement immediate countermeasures. A military communiqué noted that, following the fall of Sulaymaniyah, several British officers had been captured. Prior to the arrival of the main relief column from Baghdad, infantry units and a contingent led by the deputy political officer of Kirkuk advanced to Taşlıca on 23 May 1919. By 25 May, these forces were encircled by Kurdish fighters. The Kurdish troops, now under the command of Longrik and composed almost entirely of former British auxiliaries who had defected to Sheikh Mahmud, inflicted a decisive defeat on the British. Forced to retreat to Derbendi Bazyan, British forces lost two tanks during the engagement. News of the uprising prompted the garrison at Beji to dispatch a relief detachment, which managed to reach

only as far as Chamchamal. In this skirmish, ten British soldiers were killed and twelve wounded. Simultaneously, reinforcements from Kirkuk arrived and merged with the Chamchamal detachment. To capitalize on the British retreat, Sheikh Mahmud ordered his brother, Sheikh Abdülkadir, to deploy 500 cavalymen to block the road between Kirkuk and Chamchamal. Sheikh Mahmud himself advanced toward Derbent, encircling the British position in Chamchamal. On 20 May, an ammunition and food convoy attempting to reach the besieged troops was ambushed in mountainous terrain approximately 24 miles from Kirkuk, resulting in the seizure of critical supplies. In another maneuver, Mahmud Khan's forces besieged a British detachment near Karaincir, about 17 miles from Kirkuk. British aircraft responded by bombing the village of Birne. Meanwhile, efforts intensified to prevent the influential Jaf tribe—still uncommitted—from joining Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion. These coordinated insurgent operations significantly expanded Sheikh Mahmud's territorial influence and further eroded British authority in the region (Hilmi, 1995, 32–33; Hakan, 2013, 133–134).

Sheikh Mahmud's dramatic successes unleashed a wave of euphoria across Southern Kurdistan, leading, in Wilson's view, to events spiraling beyond British control. The rebellion soon crossed into Iranian territory, where several tribes—having declared themselves supporters of Sheikh Mahmud and his vision of a free, United Kurdistan—rose up against the Iranian government. By this point, the British fully grasped the severity of the situation. All of Southern Kurdistan acknowledged that Sheikh Mahmud had outmaneuvered British forces in Sulaymaniyah and delivered them a decisive defeat at Taşlıca. It became clear that British influence over vital occupied regions was gravely threatened. Wilson understood that, unless the British took immediate and decisive action to neutralize Sheikh Mahmud, he could mobilize the entire country against them. He believed the urgent task was to dispel any impression of British helplessness without delay (Wilson, 1936, 136–138).

Responsibility for leading the campaign against Sheikh Mahmud was assigned to Major-General Sir Theophilus Fraser, commander of the British 18th Division stationed in Mosul. Fraser was tasked with suppressing the uprising in Sulaymaniyah and also dispatched a second column to Khanqin to deter the tribes of Kifri and Khanqin from joining the revolt. British forces concentrated in Kirkuk were reinforced with cavalry units, armored cars, and air support to ensure a decisive response. On 15 June 1919, Fraser's troops reached Chamchamal, and on 17

June they advanced to Takya Kak Ahmed, located approximately three miles from the Bazyan Pass. At dawn on 18 June, British infantry units began ascending the steep terrain of the pass under intense machine-gun fire. Although Sheikh Mahmud's forces initially succeeded in holding the narrow defile, the British soon executed a pincer movement. While troops positioned on the western slope attacked from one flank, a second force outflanked the defenders from the east, effectively trapping them in the pass's only outlet. Local tribal allies played a decisive role—most notably Süleyman of the Hemavand tribe, who guided British artillery to strategic positions that enfiladed the Kurdish lines. Outmaneuvered and outgunned, Sheikh Mahmud's forces were swiftly overwhelmed. The battle resulted in 48 Kurdish casualties and the capture of approximately 144 fighters. Several key figures, including Sheikh Mahmud's uncle Seyyid Hasan and Sulaymaniyah's Police Director Tahir Bey, were taken prisoner. Sheikh Mahmud himself was wounded and unhorsed during the engagement. He was eventually discovered hiding among the rocks by the men of Müşir Ağa and was turned over to British forces. Escorted under heavy guard, he was transported to Baghdad. With Sulaymaniyah reoccupied by British troops and all previously captured British personnel released, the organized phase of Sheikh Mahmud's resistance came to an end. His defeat effectively extinguished his ability to launch any further large-scale opposition (Wilson, 1936, 136–138; Hilmi, 1995, 32–33; ATASE Archive, İHK., 82/83; 106/87).

In an affidavit dated 11 July 1919, Lieutenant Hamdi Emin Efendi of the 14th Corps based in Harput recounted his escape from British captivity and detailed Sheikh Mahmud's military campaign to expel British forces from the region. According to his testimony, during his flight on 10 June 1919 from Telkih—approximately a four-hour march from Mosul—he observed that Sheikh Mahmud's forces had taken control of Altinköprü, Kirkuk, and Şehriban (ATASE Archive, İHK., 89/111).

Although the June 1919 confrontation at the Bazyan Pass held limited strategic significance for the British Empire, it marked a pivotal moment in the development of Kurdish nationalist consciousness. Under Sheikh Mahmud's leadership, the uprising crystallized demands for autonomy and galvanized sentiments of resistance across Kurdish society. Tribes in southern Kirkuk—particularly the Dilo, Çigeni, and Davudi—were notably influenced, exhibiting increased opposition to British authority. While the rebellion failed to achieve its immediate

objectives, it became a powerful symbol of Kurdish aspirations for sovereignty. In the broader historical context, it helped cultivate unity among previously fragmented tribal groups and accelerated the emergence of a cohesive Kurdish political identity, laying foundational groundwork for subsequent nationalist movements (Jwaideh, 1999, 349; Kahraman, 2003, 43).

In the aftermath of the Bazyan Pass engagement, British forces launched an intensive operation to locate Sheikh Mahmud and eventually found him severely wounded. British officials were deeply concerned that, if he remained at large or unaccounted for, rumors of a miraculous escape could spark renewed Kurdish resistance. Compounding these concerns was the situation in Sulaymaniyah, where British officers remained unharmed but vulnerable. British commanders feared that news of Sheikh Mahmud's defeat might provoke retaliatory violence against them. To forestall such a development, a swift cavalry detachment was dispatched with orders to reach Sulaymaniyah before word of the battle spread. The mission succeeded: the detained British personnel were safely recovered, and the town was re-secured under allied control (Edmonds, 1957, 45–47).

Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion was warmly received by the people and tribes of Revandiz, who had grown resentful of British arrogance and the Kurdish levies serving under British command. Despite the risks, many villagers and tribal members pledged allegiance to Sheikh Mahmud, viewing his resistance as a just struggle against foreign occupation. The desperation caused by widespread poverty further intensified support for the uprising. British food depots were raided by locals, temporarily alleviating famine in the region and reinforcing popular backing for the revolt. As a result, numerous tribes dismissed British assurances and joined Sheikh Mahmud's cause. In response, British authorities deployed a dual strategy—offering financial incentives to hesitant tribes while employing coercion and threats to suppress those who remained openly defiant (Hilmi, 1995, 34–35).

Though widely admired for his courage, Sheikh Mahmud's strategic miscalculations and intellectual limitations became increasingly evident following his initial success at Taşlıca. He failed to develop a coherent strategy against the better-trained and more disciplined British forces. Despite securing a few localized victories, he struggled to mount an effective challenge against larger, organized British units. One of his most critical tactical errors was concentrating all his forces in a single location, reducing their mobility and making them vulnerable to

coordinated British offensives. Additionally, the lack of political cohesion among Kurdish factions, coupled with Sheikh Mahmud's increasingly autocratic leadership style, contributed to the demoralization of his early supporters. Lacking both formal military training and experienced advisors, he was ill-equipped to meet the demands of modern warfare. These cumulative weaknesses led to the erosion of his military capabilities and the eventual collapse of the rebellion. Following this failure, discussions emerged about replacing Sheikh Mahmud with Sheikh Taha, a figure the British had courted from the outset. Although some clashes with Mahmud's remaining loyalists persisted, British forces remained especially concerned about his potential to regroup and initiate a new front, particularly in the direction of Köysancak. On 18 June 1919, a combined force from the 18th Division in Mosul and a unit from Kirkuk under French commander Fraser engaged Sheikh Mahmud's forces. Despite retaining considerable popular support, by mid-1919 the revolt had become unsustainable. In the end, it was not only Sheikh Mahmud who was defeated, but also the thousands who had placed their hopes in him. With their loss, the dream of a free Kurdistan was—at least temporarily—silenced (Hilmi, 1995, 39; Karademir 2019, 103).

Following World War I, Britain refrained from providing direct military support to Kurdish uprisings. On 22 July 1919, British forces re-entered Sulaymaniyah, initiating a campaign of repression that inflicted severe hardship on the Kurdish population. Despite earlier British promises hinting at Kurdish autonomy—or even the establishment of an independent Kurdish state—these assurances were soon abandoned in favor of a policy aimed at curbing Sheikh Mahmud's influence and co-opting local support. In retrospect, the notion of Kurdish independence functioned more as a diplomatic instrument than a genuine policy objective. The British used it strategically to secure cooperation but never intended to translate such rhetoric into concrete political outcomes (Selvi, 2010, 819–827).

The failure of Sheikh Mahmud's revolt can be primarily attributed to inadequate organization and a critical shortage of resources. His military capacity was confined to a single battalion of four companies and a cavalry unit whose effectiveness was undermined by poor mobility. From the outset, Sheikh Mahmud faced significant financial constraints and was unable to pay his troops, resulting in discontent and widespread desertions. Additionally, a severe lack of ammunition further weakened his position. Firearm use was strictly regulated, with unauthorized discharges

subject to severe penalties, and even machine guns were heavily restricted. These limitations critically undermined the operational effectiveness of his forces, rendering them incapable of sustaining prolonged resistance against the better-equipped and more disciplined British military (Edmonds, 1957, 46).

Additional factors contributed to the failure of Sheikh Mahmud's struggle. Despite the geographic spread of the uprising, it failed to develop into a comprehensive Kurdish national revolt. A key reason for this was the fragmented political and geographical structure of Kurdistan, which was compounded by persistent rivalries among Kurdish tribal leaders. The absence of a clear and unified political objective further undermined the movement's cohesion. At various points, Kurdish factions alternately aligned themselves with either the British or the Turks, which diluted their collective strategy and weakened their position. Crucially, Britain exploited these internal divisions—as well as the lack of coordination between Arab and Kurdish independence movements—to suppress each separately and retain control over the region (Celil & Lazarev, 1998, 132–133).

Despite the seemingly broad tribal backing, the support Sheikh Mahmud received was both misleading and ultimately insufficient. His close circle of loyal followers seldom surpassed 100 to 200 individuals, while the majority of tribal supporters demonstrated inconsistent and short-lived allegiance. This irregular commitment, typical of tribal structures, proved ineffective against the disciplined and well-equipped British military. Deep-rooted intertribal rivalries had long prevented Kurdish society from forming lasting unity against external powers. Though temporary cooperation among tribes occasionally occurred, such solidarity was fragile and lacked the endurance necessary for sustained resistance. In an effort to mobilize the southern Kurds, Sheikh Mahmud appealed to both Kurdish nationalism and Islam, presenting his cause as a dual struggle—national and religious. However, the idea of a national movement was unfamiliar to most Kurds, and jihad, having recently failed under the Ottoman caliphate's leadership in World War I, had lost much of its mobilizing power. These historical and structural limitations left Sheikh Mahmud with only a minimal and ultimately inadequate support base (Jwaideh, 1999, 355–356).

### **The Reflection of Sheikh Mahmud's Uprising in Archival Captivity Reports**

In the post-Armistice period, two members of the Süleymaniye notable class among the displaced persons, Nuri and Ahmet Tevfik Efendi, submitted a report to the Ottoman Government regarding the uprising of Sheikh Mahmud, who proclaimed his authority in Süleymaniye on October 31, 1919, with British encouragement, and the developments that took place during this process. This report, now housed in the General Staff ATASE Archives, details the fate that Sheikh Mahmud faced as a result of British interference, the then-current state of Süleymaniye, and the tragic events experienced by its people. Particularly striking were the vivid descriptions of the calamities endured by the Muslim population and Islamic fighters. After entering Süleymaniye without any resistance, the British pursued a conciliatory policy for approximately two months, aiming to win the hearts of the local people and tribal leaders. During this period, peace was maintained without disturbing public order. However, this approach changed dramatically with the appointment of a new political officer named Greenhouse. His tenure marked a shift in administration characterized by a harsh and exclusionary attitude, particularly toward tribal chiefs. This policy shift negatively affected the relationship between the local authority and the population. It became evident that the underlying aim of these policies was to undermine the influence of Sheikh Mahmud, who held considerable power in Süleymaniye and its surrounding areas. Approximately three months later, another British administrator, Soane, known by the title "Governor of Kurdistan," was appointed to Süleymaniye. Immediately upon assuming office, he demanded the surrender of all weapons by the tribes and the local population. Furthermore, his authorization of the public opening of brothels—an occurrence unprecedented in Süleymaniye—sparked a direct confrontation with the religious and cultural values of the people (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

Traditionally, once or twice a year, Muslim tribes made visits to Süleymaniye to pay their respects at the tomb of Sheikh Mahmud's grandfather, the late Sheikh Kak Ahmed Efendi. These visits, however, were prohibited by the British administration. Following these prohibitions, large sums of monetary fines were forcibly collected from the public and members of the tribes under various pretexts, and a regime of intense oppression was instituted over the population. During this period, British officials also attempted to implement certain practices that were fundamentally incompatible with Islamic beliefs and values. These oppressive policies drew

significant reaction from the public and tribal communities, leading many to rally around Sheikh Mahmud in support. In response to the conduct of the British officials, the people of Süleymaniye and the surrounding tribes declared unequivocally that they would not recognize British authority under any circumstances. They swore an oath on the Qur'an, affirming their loyalty to the ancient Islamic state—the Ottoman Empire—and expressed their desire for a return to Ottoman rule. To this end, they resolved to initiate efforts with the United States to eliminate British dominance over Süleymaniye and to have the region re-annexed to the Ottoman Empire. As part of this initiative, a captain was dispatched to the American consulates located in Tehran and Tabriz, Iran. Furthermore, Captain Reşid Zeki Efendi, the commander of the Altunköprü district, and Seyyid Ahmed Efendi were appointed to communicate the situation in the region to the United States Government. However, it was reported that the British political officer in Süleymaniye, Soane, became aware of these initiatives. As a result, the aforementioned envoys were intercepted by the British in Aleppo during their journey to Istanbul through the intervention of a telegraphic message (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

During all these developments, Soane was engaged in planning various strategies aimed at provoking armed conflict with the local tribes and population. As mentioned earlier, it had been reported that a group of approximately 500 individuals, composed of tribes from Iran's Hawraman and Marivan regions who were coming to visit the tomb of Sheikh Mahmud's grandfather, Sheikh Kak Ahmed Efendi—a pilgrimage considered a religious tradition—was approaching Sulaymaniyah under the leadership of Mahmud Khan. Upon learning of this situation, Soane ordered the soldiers to prevent the tribes from entering the city. He then mobilized the entire British military force under his command and launched an armed confrontation by intercepting Mahmud Khan's units. After an intense clash lasting approximately four to five hours, the British troops were unable to maintain resistance and were forced to retreat. Victorious, Mahmud Khan and the tribal members entered Sulaymaniyah, where they captured the assistant political commissioner Greenhouse along with several other British officers, subsequently handing them over to Sheikh Mahmud. After remaining in Sulaymaniyah for several days, the tribal units returned to their respective regions (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

The aforementioned battle took place on May 20, 1919, approximately ten days before the beginning of the month of Ramadan. Five days after the confrontation, a force of around 30,000 troops was dispatched, along with several machine guns, from Kirkuk toward Sulaymaniyah and Sheikh Mahmud. When this force approached within about three hours of Sulaymaniyah, Sheikh Mahmud, having been informed of their arrival, sent his brother, Sheikh Abdulqadir Efendi, to intercept them for defensive purposes. Following a clash that lasted two to three hours, the British troops were dispersed—some were killed, while others were taken prisoner or fled and retreated back to Kirkuk. On the following day, Sheikh Abdulqadir advanced to the Derbend area, where he encountered a British reinforcement unit of approximately 500 men. After a three-hour battle, this unit was also routed; weapons, supply wagons, and several vehicles were seized and sent to Sheikh Mahmud. Anticipating that the confrontations would intensify, Sheikh Mahmud took direct command of the movement. During this period, the Hemavend, Cebbari, Ismaili, Azizi, and Sadan tribes, as well as local populations around Sulaymaniyah, rallied to Sheikh Mahmud's side. As the clashes escalated, the region experienced relentless bombardments from morning until evening, with heavy shelling and gunfire from the ground and aerial attacks from British aircraft. Every new unit sent by the British sustained heavy losses and suffered significant defeats. In light of these developments, the British, fearing that continued fighting might trigger a widespread tribal uprising extending as far as Baghdad, were compelled to temporarily suspend military operations (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

During this phase of the conflict, the British launched a psychological and strategic maneuver by disseminating leaflets over Sheikh Mahmud's headquarters and surrounding areas via aircraft. These leaflets extended an offer for peace negotiations and declared that a representative would be dispatched from Baghdad for this purpose. In response to this gesture, a temporary ceasefire was observed. While awaiting the arrival of the British delegate, Sheikh Mahmud redeployed his forces across the regions surrounding Erbil, Salahiye, and Kirkuk. However, the British used this period of truce as a tactical ruse. In a covert operation, they mobilized a military force of approximately 12,000 troops. In the early hours of the 19th night of Ramadan (June 18, 1919), Sheikh Mahmud's headquarters were encircled from four sides. At dawn, an intense assault was launched, combining ground fire from rifles, artillery, and machine guns with aerial bombardments from five aircraft. This sudden and coordinated attack resulted in substantial losses among Sheikh Mahmud's mujahideen. Some were killed, others wounded, and the

remaining fighters scattered. Despite these heavy setbacks, Sheikh Mahmud continued to fight with 15 loyal men until their ammunition was entirely depleted. During the combat, he sustained an injury to his heel and was ultimately captured on the 20th day of Ramadan, along with his brother-in-law Sheikh Muhammad and Reshid, the son of Jawahir Agha from the Hemavend tribe. All three were taken into custody and transferred to Baghdad under British guard. Simultaneously, the British redirected a force of 5,000 troops from the Kermanshah Front, along with several artillery pieces, toward Halif. In a parallel offensive, five British aircraft bombarded the towns of Aluca and the village of Ebaide. These aerial assaults caused severe destruction, resulting in the deaths of 16 women and 3 men, and inflicted heavy damage on the local infrastructure and civilian population (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

Following the wounded Sheikh Mahmud's capture, a significant portion of the local population and tribal supporters were forced to flee the region due to increased military pressure and widespread insecurity. Under extremely harsh conditions, these displaced people—barefoot children without even blankets to cover them—sought refuge in mountainous terrain, eventually crossing into Iranian territory as refugees. Many prominent figures involved in the resistance were arrested in various regions of Iran: Baba Resulzade and Seyyid Ahmed Efendi were detained in the town of Saqqez; the leaders of the Hawraman and Meriva tribes, including Mahmud Han, were captured in Sanandaj; while Mecid Beyzade Hamid, Abdullah Bekirzade Suleyman, and Abdurrahman Bey were taken into custody in Hawraman through deceit and subterfuge by Persian authorities (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

Sheikh Mahmud's uncle, Seyyid Omar, along with Emin Efendi from the Süleymaniye elite, was transferred to Baghdad. Previously detained figures such as Jawahir Ahmed, Arif, and Captain Abdulkadir Efendi had also been sent to Baghdad. From among the Süleymaniye elite, Haji Ibrahim Beyzade Fettah Bey was arrested, subjected to insults, and later imprisoned in Baghdad alongside Sheikh Mahmud. Sheikh Mustafa Efendi, the Mufti of the Halif region, was apprehended in the village of Aluca. Following these events, British forces re-entered Süleymaniye. During this period, certain local collaborators aligned with the British committed acts of mistreatment against the mujahideen, which provoked significant public outrage. The number of displaced households exceeded 8,000, and most of the abandoned properties were plundered. The remaining population fled, preserving only their lives and honor. The looted

possessions included personal belongings, agricultural stores, commercial establishments, real estate, and lands—all seized by British forces and their local Muslim collaborators, described in the archival report as "irreligious." According to contemporary estimates, the total economic damage amounted to approximately 10 million Ottoman liras. In the report preserved by the Turkish General Staff's ATASE Archive, individuals who committed acts of betrayal, insulted the mujahideen, and aligned themselves with the British were labeled as "accursed enemies of the nation and religion." Among those explicitly named were: Izzet, Ahmet, and Dinsiz Ali—the sons and nephews of Osman Pasha—along with Fettah Beyzade Abdülkerim and his brother Rıza; Ali, son of Ahmed from the village of Peristin; Muhammed Havva Kerem Abdullah from the Nurlu tribe of the Saf region; and several other relatives and soldiers. Additional collaborators from the Süleymaniye populace—despite having been nurtured by the Ottoman state and educated in its schools—were also named: Captain Cemal Adnan, Second Lieutenant Izzet, Major Rıza, Süleymaniye court member Faik, assistant judge Hacı Resul Beyzade Mehmed Bey, and Hasan Agazade Hacı along with his brother Gavur Agha (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

For four months, women, infants in cradles, sayyids, families of notables, tribal members, and ordinary people—having abandoned their homes and possessions to protect their honor and lives from falling into enemy hands—endured tremendous suffering as they fled barefoot and without bedding, wandering through mountains and ravines. The cruelty and persecution inflicted by pursuing British forces and their collaborators exacerbated the torment these Muslim refugees and freedom fighters experienced, leaving a deep, irreparable wound in their hearts. Rustem Khan, a member of the Baneh Beyzade family who provided these refugees with temporary shelter, was executed in the town of Saqqez by order of the British consul and at the hands of the political governor of Sanandaj in Iran. Among the displaced were Sheikh Mahmud's family members, including his brother Sheikh Abdulqadir, his cousin Seyyid Abdullah, and thirty relatives, who took refuge under the protection of Seyyid Taha Efendi in the district of Şemdinan at the entrance of the Van province. Other members of Sheikh Mahmud's family, including his sons and brothers-in-law, remained under the protection of Seyyid Abdulhakim in the Iranian village of Zenbil. Meanwhile, other mujahideen waited in the mountains along the Iranian-Ottoman border, hoping for an opportunity to cross back into Ottoman territory. Merchants and residents of the villages and towns around Sulaymaniyah were subjected to heavy fines, imprisonment, and forced labor under extremely harsh conditions, including stone hauling and

land excavation. In sum, the Muslims of Sulaymaniyah—the refugees and the fighters alike—struggled to survive while facing the very real threat of annihilation. In a letter from Sheikh Mahmud, it was conveyed that he would be tried by the Military Tribunal (Divan-ı Harb) in Baghdad (ATASE Archive, İHK., 106/87).

In conclusion, Nuri and Ahmed Tevfik Efendi of Sulaymaniyah's notable class provided a detailed account of the local population's resistance to British occupation in the aftermath of the Armistice, particularly highlighting the role of tribal leaders and mujahideen under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud. The imposition of British rule in the region, accompanied by repressive measures against the tribal hierarchy and a disregard for the religious and cultural values of the people, ignited widespread unrest and ultimately fueled a full-scale uprising. Coercive policies—such as forced disarmament and the suppression of Islamic traditions—intensified grievances and led to the emergence of a grassroots resistance movement.

Although initially gaining momentum and achieving temporary victories, Sheikh Mahmud's capture and the subsequent forced displacement of the local population cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future of Sulaymaniyah. The people endured severe hardships during and after the rebellion, including loss of life, mass migration, and economic devastation. For the Kurdish population, this struggle represented more than a military confrontation—it symbolized a broader fight for the preservation of religious identity, communal honor, and territorial autonomy. Ultimately, this episode remains a poignant testament to a people's resilience against colonial imposition, and a formative chapter in the collective memory of Kurdish national consciousness.

### **The Aftermath of Sheikh Mahmud's Capture**

After recovering from his wounds in Baghdad, Sheikh Mahmud was tried by a British military court—composed solely of British judges—alongside his son-in-law. Charged with rebellion, bloodshed, and replacing the British flag with the Kurdish, he rejected the court's legitimacy, asserting that no foreign power had the right to judge someone acting on behalf of Kurdistan. He cited President Woodrow Wilson's Twelfth Point in his defense. Despite his objections, he was found guilty, allegedly based on testimonies from witnesses he claimed were bribed or coerced. Sentenced to death, Sheikh Mahmud remained defiant, though he was deeply pained by Kurdish

collaboration with the British. For British authorities, the sentence served both as a show of imperial power and a possible display of clemency. Indeed, London later commuted his sentence—first to ten years in prison, and then, in 1921, to exile in the Andaman Islands with his son-in-law. Acting Civil Commissioner Arnold Wilson opposed this decision, arguing that Mahmud's continued existence would embolden his followers and unsettle the region. According to Wilson, lasting peace in Sulaymaniyah would be unattainable as long as Sheikh Mahmud lived (Hilmi, 1995, 39–40; Wilson, 1936, 136–139).

During his trial, Sheikh Mahmud argued that the British had entered Kurdistan under the pretence of safeguarding Kurdish rights and freedoms. However, he claimed they had broken these promises through deceit and political manoeuvring, leaving the Kurds no alternative but armed resistance. Declaring himself a prisoner of war, he stated that he did not expect mercy from his enemies and was fully prepared to face death (Celil & Lazarev, 1998, 131).

Following his exile to India, sporadic uprisings occurred in areas such as Amadiya and Akrah, but these movements had limited impact. Nonetheless, the enduring loyalty of the people to Sheikh Mahmud led to his return to Sulaymaniyah on 10 October 1922 (Dağdeviren, 2020, 157; Selvi, 2010, 799).

Following the British withdrawal from Sulaymaniyah on 17 June 1923, Sheikh Mahmud returned and established his third government on 11 July. The British deemed this act illegal and issued an ultimatum demanding his surrender by 20 May 1924, threatening aerial bombardment. When Sheikh Mahmud refused, the British bombed Sulaymaniyah, causing extensive destruction and forcing him to flee to Iran. He returned in October 1924, pardoned rival tribes, and sought unity. Between 1925 and 1926, he continued resisting near the Iran-Iraq border, facing offensives by British and Iraqi forces, supported by some Iranian Kurdish groups. Despite these pressures, Sheikh Mahmud prioritized the Kurdish national cause over personal interest. In 1926, following a British defeat and the capture of a pilot, High Commissioner Cornwallis initiated negotiations, offering Mahmud financial support and residence in Iran—an implicit exile. Mahmud rejected the offer, asserting that Kurdish aspirations for freedom outweighed personal benefit. In response, British aerial attacks resumed. Later that year, the Ankara Agreement between Britain and Turkey officially defined the Iraq-Turkey border, dividing the Kurdish population and marking a turning point in the Kurdish national struggle (Kutschera, 2006, 134–136; Aydoğan, 2013, 190).

Sheikh Mahmud's father, Sheikh Said—esteemed for his ties to Sultan Abdulhamid II and martyred by a group from Mosul—was a revered figure, which elevated the Berzenci family's status. Although not the eldest of the Node branch which traces lineage to Hasan, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Sheikh Mahmud commanded respect within his family and among the broader Kurdish population due to his charisma and personal loyalty. These qualities, combined with a strong sense of mission, led him to believe he was uniquely entitled to lead Southern Kurdistan. He claimed to hold mandates of leadership from both the Kurds of Mosul and parts of Iranian Kurdistan. However, the territory under his control was smaller than his ambitions, and he perceived British-imposed limitations as infringements on his rightful authority. Deeply convinced of the legitimacy of his leadership, Sheikh Mahmud maintained that no foreign military court could rightfully judge him. After being seriously wounded at Bazyan Pass, he reiterated this claim to Acting Civil Commissioner Wilson during a hospital visit. Wilson, who had met Mahmud multiple times in Sulaymaniyah, noted that Mahmud consistently invoked President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points—particularly the twelfth—as justification for his struggle (Wilson, 1936, 139).

While Sheikh Mahmud hoped for an autonomous Kurdish state under British protection, British objectives were rooted in securing a mandate over the region and exploiting its resources. A key legal basis for this was Article 24 of the Armistice of Mudros, which granted the Allied Powers the right to occupy parts of the six Ottoman vilayets in the event of unrest (Kurubaş, 2004, 31).

In later years, Sir George MacMunn, who would become Commander-in-Chief, offered a rationale for the British leniency shown toward Sheikh Mahmud. Although Mahmud had been captured near Bazyan Pass, tried, and sentenced to death amid public calls for his execution, MacMunn argued that such punishment lacked justification. Given the political uncertainty in Iraq at the time, even well-informed observers struggled to assess the situation clearly. MacMunn contended that Sheikh Mahmud was not bound by any permanent loyalty to the British and noted that, during the coup, he had spared the lives of several captured British officers. In MacMunn's view, executing Mahmud would have been neither justifiable nor beneficial to British interests (Lees, 1928, 277).

Sheikh Mahmud's efforts to mobilize Southern Kurdistan were unlikely to succeed without fostering a new political consciousness among the region's tribal communities. Yet initiating such

awareness proved difficult, particularly due to his inability to reconcile with rival factions and secure broader support (E.J.R, 1919, 16). Political Officer Colonel Cayley Bell, who served in Northern Syria and southern Turkey, observed that Mahmud's rebellion lacked a solid foundation; of the thousands who could have joined, only around 300 actively participated (Jwaideh, 1999, 356).

The uprising led by Sheikh Mahmud in 1919 was neither the first nor the last Kurdish revolt. In the years that followed, Kurds repeatedly rebelled against the newly established states in pursuit of an independent Kurdistan. Many hoped that the end of the British Mandate in Iraq—established under the 1925 League of Nations decision—would lead to the realization of Kurdish rights. Instead, violence against Kurds intensified. During this period, Sheikh Mahmud wrote to British officials, declaring that peaceful coexistence between Kurds and Arabs was unfeasible. With negotiations failing, he was ultimately compelled to surrender to the British in late 1931 (Kutschera, 2006, 138–139).

## **Conclusion**

The uprising led by Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji in 1919 emerged not merely as a reaction to foreign occupation but as a manifestation of the nascent Kurdish nationalist consciousness developing in the geopolitical vacuum left by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Rooted in a centuries-long absence of Kurdish statehood, this movement attempted to articulate a vision of national self-determination amid competing imperial agendas and fragmented internal dynamics.

What distinguished Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion was not only its direct confrontation with British imperial rule but also its symbolic challenge to the legitimacy of any external governance over Kurdish lands. Despite his efforts to position himself as a unifying figure, capable of consolidating tribal loyalties under the banner of "Independent Kurdistan," the realities of intra-Kurdish divisions—fueled by long-standing tribal rivalries and divergent interests—proved to be a critical obstacle to a cohesive national movement.

British policy in the region, particularly after 1916, was marked by strategic ambiguity: promises of autonomy and self-governance were extended to the Kurds not as a matter of principle, but as tools of imperial manipulation. The failure to honor such promises not only exposed the moral hollowness of British diplomacy but also deepened political fragmentation among the Kurds. In

this context, Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion can be interpreted as a direct response to imperial duplicity as much as to indigenous disunity.

Crucially, the defeat of the rebellion did not extinguish Kurdish political aspirations. Rather, it became an early and instructive episode in the history of Kurdish nationalism—demonstrating both the potential and the limits of charismatic leadership in the absence of institutional and ideological consolidation. While Sheikh Mahmud's movement failed to establish a lasting political entity, it seeded a memory of resistance that would later inform and inspire successive Kurdish struggles across Iraq and beyond.

At the same time, the legacy of the uprising invites a more nuanced reflection on Kurdish-Turkish relations. Though marked by moments of open conflict, these relations were also shaped by shared cultural, religious, and historical frameworks. Any analysis that seeks to reduce the complexity of these interactions to mere hostility risks obscuring the possibility of reconciliation and cohabitation that has at various historical junctures, also defined the Kurdish-Turkish experience.

In the end, Sheikh Mahmud's rebellion stands as both a cautionary tale and a foundational narrative: a reminder that national liberation movements, if not grounded in broad-based unity and strategic realism, risk being subsumed by the very hegemonies they seek to dismantle.

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