LIZ THURGOOD in Tehran examines the motives of the Ayatollah in crushing the Kurds

The forgotten core of the Kurdish crisis

The last Kurdish stronghold has fallen. Iran’s central government, already gained fragile control of a province still seething with bitterness after some of the bloodiest fighting since the Shah’s overthrow.

The worst of the crisis seems over, but no one is pretending that the Kurdish problem will disappear overnight. Having driven the rebels from their towns, the Iranian Government is in all probability guaranteeing its security forces a long, drawn-out guerrilla war which the country can neither afford nor probably ever win.

But, more important in the short term, has been the growing suspicion in Tehran that the Kurdish crisis three weeks ago was not a real crisis at all, and that the bitter fighting was sparked off and then stage-managed as a ready vehicle on which the central authorities could assert their crumbling authority.

Such suspicion was fuelled last week when the Prime Minister, Mr Mohdi Bazargan, publicly admitted that Ayatollah Khomeini’s general mobilisation order was weeks earlier on basis of “false information.”

No one would deny that trouble had been brewing in the western provinces of Kurdistan, a land of gently rolling farmland suddenly rising to high mountain peaks along the border with Iraq. Ever since the collapse of the Shah’s regime seven months ago, the Kurds have been pushing for — and, in some cases, realising — a degree of independence that was evidently intolerable to the central powers in both Tehran and the holy city of Qom.

Few, too, would entirely dispute the Ayatollah’s allegations that they are not facing a Kurdish issue, but a “Communist one.” Khomeini had been arming Russia-made rifles and Czech pistols, and their bitter open espousal of groups professing Marxist-Leninist ideology has only damned the Kurdish Democratic Party leaders in the eyes of the masses, a Moslem group which has stoutly maintained the deposed Shah’s anti-Soviet position.

But the timing of the Kurdish campaign, the seeming pre-eminence of both sides to the fight, and the apparent manipulation of news, has raised some very real doubts as to the long-term intentions of the central authorities.

Ayatollah Khomeini was believed to have several motives in seeking to crush the Kurds. Chiefly, he wanted to demonstrate to all Iran’s mutinous minorities the utter futility of confrontation. Later, the Kurdish challenge was evidently overcome as it would appeal to his sense of justice and his desire to boost the morale and stiffen the backbone of the badly humiliated and internationalised armed forces. Crushing the Kurds would destroy the government’s policy of isolated, isolated pockets to the small towns, the exclusion of the central authority in Iran, the immediate political supplies from Kurdistan were not readily available. No one could argue that the government’s display of Ayatollah Khomeini’s authority after the fall of the Shah was being overshadowed by the political landscape. The only other gains appeared to have fallen to the credit of the Shah’s government, with Dr Mustafa Chamran who also doubles as head of internal security, and Sheikh Khalkhal who has since put many of the events that followed the fall of the Shah’s government to rest. His support, however, has been welcomed by the local government, and, privately, many Iranians believe that the man who has spent many years with the right-wing Al-Amal militia in the Lebanon was largely responsible for bringing about a more stable and indigenous leader in the leadership. The situation has become more complicated, but has not been a surprise to the authorities. The situation is not the same, however, that it was 10 years ago when the Kurds were being used as a ready vehicle on which the central authorities could assert their crumbling authority.

The result was three days of intense public demonstrations outside the Prime Minister’s office in Tehran. The Ayatollah announced that he would personally come to the scene and take command, if necessary, of the Kurdish troubles. The Kurds were banned and their leaders, Sheikh Ebrahim and Dr Ghassan, were declared traitors. As important, the army joined the Islamic Guard for what turned out to be a non-event.

There is a general feeling that the lead in the battle for Sheikh, further north, to the achievement of the Kurds. The government, however, has been held responsible for not acting decisively in the face of the Kurdish challenge.

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