Ethnic Feud Divides Warring Turks and Kurds in Iran
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Associated Press

Turkish-speaking Iranians man position at Naqadeh, site of fighting between them and Kurdish tribesmen.

By William Branigin
Washington Post Foreign Service

NAQADEH, Iran, April 23—A jeep full of Azerbaijani Turks halted on the bridge, dragged out the body of a dead Kurd and threw him into the roiling waters of the Gueddar River.

A crowd quickly gathered and cheered as the Kurd, dressed in the traditional baggy trousers and tunic, disappeared into the muddy water. When the body bobbed to the surface, children threw rocks at it as it floated downstream in the swift current.

That was an indication on the way to this embattled downtown that, despite a government-imposed truce, the hatred, fear and suspicion dividing Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking Iranians here is far from resolved.

The cease-fire, in principle, had taken effect at 5 p.m. It was ordered by Iranian Army troops, backed by tanks and artillery, who moved into Naqadeh to stop four days of fierce clashes between the two well armed ethnic groups which, although Iranians, refer to themselves as Kurds and Turks. Their battles underscore the flareup of ethnic tension here since the Islamic revolution emptied the central government in Tehran of much of the authority it had under the shah.

Nearer Naqadeh, flames and smoke rose from a mud, brick and thatch village in the middle of a fertile plain. Residents said Turkish-speaking Azerbaijanis had attacked the village's Kurdish residents and set fire to their houses.

Apparently outnumbered in this region by the Turks, many Kurds were said to have fled into the surrounding hills. Known as fearsome warriors, the Kurds have specialized in mountain fighting and guerrilla tactics during past struggles for an independent state against the government of neighboring Iraq.

Stacking the odds against the Kurds here is the fact that about 600 Iranian troops—both regulars and a redtag assortment of "Islamic revolutionary guards" loyal to the committee of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini — are overwhelmingly, Azerbaijani Turks.

They seemed to work hand-in-glove with the Azerbaijani residents of Naqadeh, who have been battling the Kurds in house-to-house fighting since a still unexplained shooting incident disrupted a meeting of the Kurdistan Democratic Party on Friday.

Inside Naqadeh, whose 20,000 residents are roughly divided between Kurds and Turks, a meeting of government representatives and religious leaders representing both sides signed the third cease-fire agreement in as many days.

"For the time being everything has stopped and the people are gathering their dead," said Iraj Tabrizi, the deputy governor general of west Azerbaijan Province.

He said the two sides "reached an agreement not to shoot any more and for all those who left town to come back and return to work."

Tabrizi said the casualty toll in four days of fighting so far was "not more than 100 dead and 150 injured." Some residents claimed as many as 1,000 persons died in the fighting.

By Dave Cook—The Washington Post

The Turkish combatants in Naqadeh related horrific tales of Kurdish atrocities committed against Azerbaijani men, women and children. Excited Turks claimed that Kurds slashed the throats of a number of children and wrote slogans on the wall with their blood. But neither a group of visiting correspondents nor a resident correspondent in the town for a Tehran newspaper saw any evidence of this.

In an effort to consolidate the cease-fire, the Army declared an overnight curfew in Naqadeh, starting at 8 p.m., officials said. But the truce agreement appeared to have been reached without the endorsement of a major party of the conflict. Officials in Naqadeh said the Kurds were represented by a Sunni Moslem religious leader, Sheik Saleh Rahimi. No representatives of the Kurdistan Democratic Party participated.

The party's agitation for an autonomous, socialist Kurdistan seems to have become a major factor exacerbating traditional animosity between the two groups. In addition to political and ethnic differences, sectarian divisions have been a key element. While the Kurds are predominantly Sunni Moslems, the Azerbaijanis belong to the Shiite majority led by Khomeini

The Kurds and the Turks have reputations as fierce, merciless fighters whose code of honor is synonymous with revenge. It is a code which tends to militate against an easy solution to the conflict, which threatens to engulf Iran's approximately 3.5 million Kurds and 4 million Azerbaijanis.

A truce committee reached an earlier cease-fire agreement Sunday, officials said, but there was so much shooting in Naqadeh that an announcement of it over loudspeakers from minarets of local mosques could not be heard above the din.

According to Seyed Hamid Adlani, a prominent Shiite religious leader in the area, the only thing an earlier meeting accomplished was an agreement by each side not to bring weapons to future cease-fire talks. Adlani himself likes to carry an automatic rifle, a habit which at first glance seems incompatible with his turban and flowing robes.

Despite the cease-fire, and their claim to have the upper hand the Azerbaijani Turks are decidedly nervous about Kurdish reprisals. On the road from Orumiyeh, formerly Rezayieh, to Naqadeh, a car full of Turks who had stopped to help another motorist stood guard by the two vehicles with their rifles pointed toward the mountain off to the west.

Gesturing toward the hills, the leader of the group said, "You can't see them, but the Kurds are back in there somewhere."

Also illustrative of the fratricidal nature of the conflict here was the attitude of an Azerbaijani taxi driver. After describing alleged Kurdish atrocities and acts of bloody Turkish vengeance in great detail, he sighed and said: "We are all brothers, but sometimes things like this come up."

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