

# Iran's Kurds Appear to Have Won Autonomy

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## Iran's Kurds Appear to Have Won Autonomy

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TEHRAN—While the eyes of the world have been fixed on the crisis caused by the seizure of the U.S. Embassy by Muslim militants here, Kurdish rebels appear to have finally won their long fight for autonomy in the mountains of northwest Iran.

The Kurds, nomadic central Asian Muslims denounced by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini last summer as agents of the United States and "corrupters of the earth," have forced the Iranian leader to negotiate for peace on their terms.

The reason for the startling turnaround, diplomats say, is simple—the Kurds, fierce mountain warriors who have been struggling for an independent homeland since before World War II, have defeated the dispersed Iranian army along with Khomeini's disorganized revolutionary guard.

Kurdish guerrillas now control an area about the size of New Jersey, and the peace settlement being negotiated is virtually certain to recognize their dominance.

The collapse of the Tehran government's campaign against the Kurds has alarmed Iran's western neighbors—Iraq, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union and Syria—which also have restive Kurdish minorities.

"The situation is horrible," a diplomat from one of those countries said. "Kurdistan is becoming a truly autonomous area, and that is very, very dangerous."

The apparent victory of the 4 million Kurds may also raise the hopes of other minorities in Iran, people who have long chafed under the domination of the Persians. The Persians form a plurality—not a majority—of about 15 million in a total population of about 35 million.

Leaders of the ethnic Arabs of Khuzistan, the oil-producing province of the southwest, of the Azerbaijanis of the west, of the Turkomans of the northeast and the Baluchis of the southeast have also demanded more autonomy from the weakened central government.

"Once the ball gets rolling, you can't stop it," the diplomat said. "We may be in an international crisis in this area soon, because there's no reasonable force in the area to calm things down."

One of the few factors that have aided Khomeini's regime in keeping a lid on the ethnic problem is the current wave of anti-American fervor, for it has allowed the Ayatollah to make concessions to the Kurds in the name of national unity and at the same time appeal to other groups to think of the common good.

But there have been increasing reports of sabotage against oil pipelines in Khuzistan—six explosions in a single night last month, apparently the work of Arab separatists—and the leftists who make up a significant part of the Kurdish guerrilla army have made it clear that they believe their province is only the first to break free.

A guerrilla officer of the leftist Komala Party said recently, "Our aim is the liberation of all Iran . . . Our responsibility is not to the Kurdish nation alone but to all the nationalities of the country."

A year ago, when Khomeini was still an exiled religious figure urging revolution from his headquarters outside Paris, and Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was still apparently in control, the Kurds began cautiously throwing their support to the insurgent forces. They saw the Ayatollah's uprising as a vehicle for their own cause.

Once in power, Khomeini paid lip service to the rights of the ethnic minorities to some kind of limited autonomy. But soon he appeared to be centralizing power in Tehran (or in his case, the shrine city of Qom) as much as his predecessor did. When local Kurdish forces skirmished with Persian and Azerbaijani revolutionary guards, Khomeini sent in the Iranian army—against the Kurds. And when the Islamic republic's draft constitution was rewritten by Khomeini's council of experts, its promised guarantees of ethnic autonomy melted away.

The Kurds, led by their religious chief, Sheik Ezzedin Hosseini, and Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou of the Kurdish Democratic Party, protested. Khomeini responded by denouncing them. The Ayatollah's chief revolutionary prosecutor, the Ayatollah Sadeg Khaikhal, announced that both Hosseini and Ghassemlou had been condemned to death.

Khomeini sent elements of both the army and the revolutionary guard to crush the Kurdish rebellion. Neither succeeded. "The Kurds chased them all over the map," a Western diplomat said.

Iranian officials charged that the Kurds had the help of CIA, the British and Israeli intelligence services and the forces of the deposed shah. There is no available evidence of U.S. or British involvement, but diplomats in Tehran

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believe that Israel has sent the Kurds military aid, and Ardeshir Zahedi, once the shah's ambassador in Washington, is reported to have been in Iraq last month for talks with Kurdish leaders.

By last month, the four Kurdish factions held every major town in the province. Ghassemlou returned in triumph to Mahabad, the seat of a short-lived independent Kurdish republic set up by the Soviet Union in 1946. Posters of Khomeini came down and portraits of Hosseini, who is recognized by all the factions as their most effective spokesman, went up.

Khomeini sent a peace delegation headed by Darioush Forouhar, a moderate. It did not meet with immediate success. At one point the rebels nearly shot down Forouhar's helicopter. The Kurds, aware that they held the upper hand in the conflict, continued to attack revolutionary guard units and seize Kurdish villages.

Finally, the government made several concessions. It agreed to the basic principle of Kurdish autonomy. It agreed to negotiate with all the Kurdish parties, and not only the moderate wing of Ghassemlou's party, which it had initially approached in an apparent attempt to secure a separate peace.

In return, Ghassemlou declared a cease-fire—conditional on the withdrawal of all revolutionary guards from the

province by the end of this week—and issued a statement of support for Khomeini. Hosseini postponed his long-standing demand that Kurdish autonomy be explicitly guaranteed in the constitution, a sign that the Kurds are now more interested in establishing their autonomy on the ground than on paper.

The autonomy they envisage is almost total. If the Kurds get their way, the central government's only concerns will be foreign policy, defense of the borders, currency and long-range economic policy. Ghassemlou has proposed that Kurdish authorities even control army movements in Kurdistan.

Both sides are trying to appear conciliatory. Khomeini issued an uncharacteristically friendly message to the Kurds, in effect an apology for his excommunication of them in the summer, and Hosseini responded by pledging that the Kurdish people "consider themselves part of the Iranian nation."

But still there is little love lost. The Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, a Khomeini ally who is the religious leader of Tehran, threw a wrench into the talks Nov. 23 by publicly denouncing the Kurds as "agents of America and the Zionists."

Khomeini's Islamic Republican Party accused the Kurds of kidnaping Muslim women and nailing horseshoes to the feet of revolutionary guards they took as prisoners.

Hosseini, for his part, has not been intimidated. "There are two things I will not accept in any negotiations," he told a Tehran newspaper recently. "One is pessimism, and the other is compromise."

"I want to end the fighting, the fratricide in Kurdistan, as soon as possible. But that doesn't mean we intend to

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give up our rights . . . Either the government gives us what we want, or it doesn't."

By Monday, the negotiations appeared to be coming to a head. Ghassemlou's Kurdish Democratic Party announced that it would end the cease-fire on Dec. 19 unless the government meets its demands.

At the same time, the Khomeini ordered a special civilian commission headed by former Interior Minister Hashem Sabbagian to take charge of the negotiations. According to the official Pars news agency, the commission was given full "military and civilian authority" after its members met with Khomeini in Qom.