

Iran's minorities are a potent force

By DAVID R. STAATS

The Kurds of Iran have a saying: "A root which has firmly implanted itself cannot be dug up by a gentle breeze." The roots sunk centuries ago by the Kurds, Azerbaijanis and Iran's other highly nationalistic and numerous ethnic minorities are deep and show no sign of loosening, even under the strain of storm winds from Tehran and Qom. On the contrary, they stir and embed themselves more deeply.

How powerful are the minority nationalities of Iran who comprise almost half its population? And to what purpose is their determination?

The minority problem of Iran is not merely a domestic issue, it is an international one because of the historical, national and cultural links that most of Iran's major national minorities have to large communities in adjacent countries. Only half of Iran's 36 million people are ethnic Persians. The other 18 million are a complex mixture of overlapping ethnic and religious groups actively seeking autonomy for their respective native regions.

Iran's ethnic minorities joined in the Islamic revolution for both national and religious reasons. However, the issue of regional autonomy, which these minority nationalities espouse, directly strikes at the fundamental governing principle of the Islamic Republic by pitting demands for local self-rule by secular authorities against an increasingly intransigent centralized theocracy.

Article V of the new Iranian Constitution establishes the exclusive right of the

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clergy to govern. As the supreme interpreter of Islamic law, Ayatollah Khomeini is empowered to veto any and all legislation which, in his opinion, does not conform to the Muslim legal code.

Growing frustration with the sweeping powers which allow Ayatollah Khomeini to rule virtually by decree was the principal cause behind the resignation of former Iranian Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, who likened secular government under these conditions to "a knife without a blade."

The expectations of the Kurds, Azerbaijanis and Iran's other ethnic minorities for a new era of political liberalism, following the downfall of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, were not utopian. However, the stubborn refusal by Ayatollah Khomeini even to consider their petitions for regional self-rule has created a serious political impasse. Until some sort of compromise on the autonomy issue is reached, the ethnic minorities' confidence in Iran's new political system will continue to diminish to the point where, unless dramatic steps are taken to reverse the erosion, the minority nationalities may consider casting their lots with foreign powers in the region to gain independence from Tehran.

At present, however, none of these peoples advocates separatism, but all are engaged in a determined struggle for regional national autonomy as well as for expanded opportunities in the Iranian economy. As Kurdish leader Sheikh Ezzedin Hosseini stated: "Fundamentally, we accept the role of the central government in

foreign and defense policy. But beyond that, we want to run our own show."

Of the four major non-Persian nationalities of Iran, the four million Iranian-speaking Kurds, who are Sunni Muslims (and with whom the other eight million Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and the Soviet Union, constitute the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East), have a long history of rebellion against central authority. These revolts inevitably have drawn in the major powers of the region, thereby elevating a local uprising by tribal dissidents to international significance. This is why unrest among Iran's minority nationalities is a serious problem of security not only for Tehran but also for other world capitals.

This history of the Kurdish national liberation movement is a classic case study of such manipulation of a local conflict by regional and global powers for their individual political advantage. Briefly, the Kurdish national liberation movement began to take a definite political form by the end of the last century. A Kurdish newspaper was established in Iran in 1897, which published irregularly until it was suppressed by Persian authorities in 1902. Its activities were resumed in 1908, in Istanbul, by a newly formed Kurdish political action party and its Kurdish cultural society.

During World War I the Kurds pressed their demands for an independent Kurdish homeland from their new headquarters in Cairo. Their efforts were rewarded in 1920 by the Treaty of Sevres, which provided for the creation of an independent Kurdistan; but the treaty was never rat-

fied. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which formally ended hostilities in the Middle East, made no mention of the Kurds. In fact, the chief Turkish delegate to the Lausanne Conference, Ismet Pasha, himself a Kurd, declared (wrongly) that because the Kurds are ethnic Turks and Muslims, their national and religious rights could be guaranteed within the Turkish state, and that no independent homeland for the Kurds was necessary.

Following World War II, a Kurdish state was created with Soviet backing in Iranian Kurdistan. When the United States and the Western allies forced Moscow to withdraw its troops from the area, the shah's army reestablished Iranian sovereignty over the area.

In 1961, Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani organized Kurdish tribesmen in Iraq in armed resistance to the Baghdad government. After 10 years of protracted guerrilla warfare, the Iraqis in March, 1970, agreed to a plan granting autonomy to the Kurds four years hence.

The shah of Iran drew the Iraqi Kurds under Mr. Barzani into his border dispute with the Baathist government in Baghdad by arranging for them to receive assistance from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which then-Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger engineered in return for the shah's support of the Nixon Doctrine.

When the actual terms of the autonomy guarantee were delivered to Mr. Barzani in March, 1974, he rejected them as inadequate and resumed hostilities with the backing of the shah and the CIA. Within a year the shah had reached a compromise

on the border issue with the Iraqis and withdrew his support of the Kurdish rebels, which left the tribesmen to defend themselves as best they could against Iraqi armor and aircraft. Kurdish resistance quickly melted. Mr. Barzani took refuge in Tehran.

Unlike the overwhelming majority of the other Turkic-speaking peoples of the world, the five million Azerbaijanis of Iran belong to the Shiite branch of Islam. Their total national territory and population is divided nearly equally between Iran and the Soviet Union.

In 1945, a short-lived independent Azerbaijani state was created by the Soviet Union. As with the case of Soviet-backed Kurdistan, Moscow's post-war interference in Iranian Azerbaijan was brought to a quick end by decisive action by the United States and the other Western powers. The Azerbaijanis are today the second-largest ethnic group in Iran, and they are concentrated in the country's populous northwestern region where they form the majority population.

Like the Kurds and the Azeris, the Iranian-speaking, Sunni Beluchis are divided among several countries of the region—Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In Iran they number about 700,000, and are more closely related linguistically to the Pushtu-speaking Afghans than to the Farsi-speaking Persians. The Beluchis inhabit the southeastern highlands of Iran.

Another minority element in Iran is the Arab population of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan. Like the other Arabs of the Middle East, Khuzestan Arabs belong to the Sunni sect of Islam. Most of Iran's two



million Arabs resent what they feel is the inequitable distribution of oil revenues from the petroleum industry which is located on their territory.

Although the fabric of Iranian society is an intricate weave of many colored threads into bold, individualistic patterns, Ayatollah Khomeini is using his brand of Islamic fundamentalism to bleach out all of these distinctive, and therefore distracting, patterns.

Himself the principal political beneficiary of last year's rioting in Tabriz by the Azerbaijani Turks, the ayatollah today regards their same unfulfilled aspirations for regional national autonomy within the Iranian Islamic Republic as nothing less than "an insult to Islam." And, according to the ayatollah of Tehran, Hussein Ali Montazeri, the struggle for Kurdish na-

tional and religious rights by the Kurdish Democratic Party is being led by "agents of Zionism and corruption."

Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters are guilty of underestimating the volatility and revolutionary potential of these ethnic minorities, both individually and collectively. His failure to reach a compromise with the ethnic minorities on the issue of national autonomy could well forge a coordinated policy of political struggle among these peoples, leading to his overthrow in favor of a more enlightened national leadership under someone such as the Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariat-Madari.

Further frustration of the ethnic minorities' quest for their national rights, could persuade some to accept the patronage of a foreign power for the region. As has been shown in the case of the Kurds, such a combination of interests is the rule rather than the exception. The current head of the Iraqi government, Saddam Hussein Takriti, who came to power in July of this year, announced a program of new concessions to the Kurds of his country, including the granting of permission to 1,000 Kurdish tribesmen to return to their native Kurdistan.

In view of recent reports of incidents along the Iraqi-Iranian frontier, one cannot ignore the possibility that the Iraqi government is now considering substantial material support to the Kurds of Iran, just as the shah supported Kurdish insurgents in Iraq earlier in the decade.

One interesting question which remains is the attitude of the Soviet Union. Iran's pro-Moscow Communist Party, Tudeh, publicly supports Ayatollah Khomeini on the autonomy question, splitting the country's left-wing parties. The real problem for Soviet policy-makers is whether to try to take all of Iran or just parts of it.

Unlike Ayatollah Khomeini, the Soviets are highly skilled at manipulating the natural political forces within a society, and the current crisis of Iran's ethnic minorities in the struggle for their national rights offers Moscow tempting opportunities. As Boris Yerasov, a Soviet specialist on national liberation movements, comments: "Arbitrary attempts to ignore the national and cultural heritage are doomed to failure."

Currently, only two governments affected directly by the unsettled conditions in Iran are not heeding this admonition. These are Iran and the United States.