

# Kurds' Autonomy Cries Rekindle Ethnic Flashpoint in Iran: Kurds' Autonomy Cries Rekindle Ethnic F...

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MAHABAD, Iran, March 1—The single-story elementary school here houses the nearest thing to self-government that Iran's traditionally nationalistic Kurds have known for more than 30 years. With the collapse of the centralizing and ethnically repressive Pahlavi rule, and with the weak Tehran revolutionary government's writ far from universally respected, the Kurds in western Iran are pressing their claims for autonomy with new vigor.

"Democracy for Iran, autonomy for Kurdistan" is their slogan. A federal Iran is their professed goal. Threat of armed secessionist uprising is their officially discouraged but nonetheless real threat if negotiations with Tehran fail.

However commonplace that combination may appear, in Middle East terms it is a potential prescription for long-term violence and fighting that could tear apart Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan and involve the Soviet Union and perhaps the West. At stake are not just the ethnically artificial borders of these states, but policy deci-

sions for the Soviets and the West if fighting in Iranian Kurdistan kindled wider violence.

When Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was still in power, the Kurds' separatist yearnings were a constant nightmare. For Iran's minorities—Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Turkomans and Baluchis as well as the Kurds—probably come close to equaling the Persian-speaking population of the Iranian heartland.

Iran's Arabs were the original inhabitants of Khuzestan, the center of the oil industry bordering on Iraq and long claimed by the Baghdad government. Azerbaijanis, ethnic Turks in northern Iran, also have grievances, especially demands for cultural autonomy.

Iranian Baluchistan, in the southeast, borders on a similarly named province of Pakistan, where secessionists have long threatened the wobbly central government of Mohammed Zia ul-Haq.

The perhaps 16 million Kurds—spread out in unequal, but descending order in contiguous communities in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the Soviet Union—have a history of fighting,



By Dave Cook—The Washington Post

losing and fighting again for their freedom. Iran's 2 million Kurds are no exception.

Thirty three years ago, this city of 60,000 inhabitants was the capital of the so-called Mahabad Republic, an ill-fated, Soviet-backed secessionist

state crushed by the young shah's army after just 11 months.

Mulla Mustafa Barzani, now over 80 and living in exile in the United States, made his first major appearance in that endeavor. The swash-buckling Kurdish leader dominated two more serious but eventually disastrous secessionist efforts—guerrilla wars against Iraq's governments from 1960 to 1965 and then again from 1970 to 1975.

But given Iran's troubles, almost as inevitable as Kurdish men's baggy trousers, the women's bright dresses and the spectacular mountain scenery has been the Kurds' inclination to try their luck again.

Once again, Mahabad is the political center of Iranian Kurdistan, the only area in the country not controlled by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's otherwise all-pervasive committees.

Except in the city of Kermanshah in southern Kurdistan, Kurdish nationalists are running their own show politically. They have flexed their muscles enough to have taken over the local brigade-sized army camp, threatened three others nearer the Iraqi border and effectively prevented the army

command from sending in reinforcements.

It was the takeover of the Mahabad garrison early last week—and the wounding of its commanding general, Ihsan Pezeshpour—that prompted Khomeini and his government to dispatch Labor Minister Dariush Forouhar at the head of a mission to investigate the situation.

The envoys were confronted with a hastily chosen delegation representing all Kurdish towns. It swore that separatism was taboo but noted that the government mission had not been invited into its territory.

Mostly members of the long-banned Kurdish Democratic Party, the nationalists presented Forouhar with an eight-point program that pledged support for Khomeini's revolution, but otherwise was a list of demands involving the Kurds' "basic rights."

They demanded Kurdish "self-determination within the framework" of Iran, joint control of military installations in Kurdistan, a government boycott of the remnants of Barzani's ill-fated organization and sole representation in any negotiations for Sheik Ez-zedine Hosseini.

It was Hosseini who negotiated with the Forouhar mission that stayed here two days early last week. It listened, pleaded that the government had higher priorities, promised redress on some points, but basically stalled.

The tougher demands—especially self-determination—would be discussed, Forouhar has said, by the constituent assembly. That assembly, which is to approve a new constitution, is not expected to meet for several months.

The nationalists are in a hurry to extract maximum concessions now. Hosseini, a clergyman of the Sunni sect of Islam, which most Kurds profess, said he hopes informal contacts with Tehran will prove fruitful and allow him to head a large delegation to negotiate soon with the government or Khomeini himself.

"We are not separatists," the 57-year-old bearded cleric said in his school headquarters. "But the Baluchis, Arabs, Azerbaijanis and Kurds all want a certain autonomy."

In Kurdish nationalist terms a federation, possibly along West German, Swiss, Yugoslav or American lines,

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would empower the central government to handle defense, banking, all but local taxes and big economic projects. Local Kurdish authorities would be responsible for schools, the now suppressed teaching of the Kurdish language and cultural life.

But as Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a leftist nationalist who has recently returned from 20 years of exile in Czechoslovakia and France, put it: "It

is important for us not only to have Kurdish schools and economic development, but most important, Kurdish people must feel they govern themselves."

Hosseini, however, expressed doubt that the government would agree to federate.

Reflecting the nationalists' desire to avoid being tarred with the separatist brush, Hosseini, Ghassemlou and other officials denied contacts with

other minorities in Iran or with Kurds in Iraq and Turkey.

Young Kurdish nationalists, however, openly offered to take visiting newsmen across the snow-covered Ghandil Mountains into nearby Iraq to meet with leftist leader Jalal Talabani, an Iraqi Kurd said to head as many as 3,000 soldiers.

And Hosseini acknowledged, "We support any revolutionary movement in Kurdistan or anywhere else." He dismissed Iraq's program for cultural

autonomy for Kurds as "verbal promises."

The Mahabad leadership is determined to flatter the Tehran government into being generous and thus it shies away from any open advocacy of armed struggle. If the Tehran authorities reject the Kurd's demands, Hosseini said, "We will find some other way to obtain our rights with the other peoples of Iran."

"As far as possible we will not take up arms," he said. "We will seek peaceful means."

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