

LIZ THURGOOD reports from Mahabad, once capital of the republic of Mahabad, on the Kurdish aspect of the Iranian revolution

# The defiant Kurds with a vision of an unpromised land



IRAN'S KURDS, taking advantage of the political upheaval and accompanying weakness of central government, are pushing ahead with a centuries old dream: autonomy.

With the local armed forces already neutralised,

the rebels are seeking outright control of the police and gendarmes along with an ultimate say in their own economic and political affairs.

"The government thinks we are simple minded," said a spokesman for the Kurds. "We want the right to solve our own problems, we want autonomy and freedom."

The Iranian Government appears undecided about whether to use the carrot or stick against the rebel Kurds. First, a senior government team was sent to investigate and then, according to the Kurds, it was the turn of the Iranian military which sent Phantom F4 jet fighters to menace scores of Kurdish villages and towns over two days. Neither approach seems to have succeeded.

But the Iranian Kurds are not just a Kurdish problem. The ancient Kurdish frontiers stretch far into modern day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and the Soviet Union. Given the traditional Kurdish desire to resist any government will be carefully watching Teheran's handling of what is potentially a new Middle Eastern trouble spot.

The pulse of Iran's several million Kurds beats hardest in Mahabad, a small town at the heart of Kurdistan not far from the border. Here, the women still wear their embroidered skirts of flaming red to bright green. The chador, the unflattering black veil of Islam, is rarely seen and most do not speak a word of Persian.

In Kurdistan, the Kurds

maintain law and order — not the armed Islamic guards of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who patrol the streets and control traffic throughout the rest of Iran. When the Kurds speak of Kurdistan, they do not mean the whole province shown on every central government map, but an 85,000 square mile chunk of territory running from Lake Rezaieh in the north to Elam in the south and across through Khorrnabad and Masjed-e-Soleiman in the south.

Thirty-two years after the short lived republic of Mahabad was declared, the Iranian Kurds are once again reports of pretensions to separatism are denied. Sheikh Ezzeddine Hosseini, the Moslem leader who has recently emerged as the spokesman for Kurdistan, says: Solving

their problem might involve Iran's other nationalities." Almost 50 per cent of Iran's 33 million people are Persian and already there have been sporadic, but unconfirmed, reports of unrest among the Baluchis in east Iran and the Arabs in the south.

If the Sheikh is to be taken seriously, the Kurds are still hoping, that the government is open to a compromise that would involve a federation arrangement.

The Kurds have defined their "minimum" demands in a declaration presented last week to the government's investigation team. The declaration, drawn up by 500 Kurdish elders and "educated" men at a specially convened Kurdish Revolutionary Council meeting in Mahabad, recognises Ayatol-

lah Khomeini as leader of Iran's revolution, but calls for "self-determination" and names the 57-year-old Sheikh as the only man authorised to negotiate on Kurdistan's behalf.

But a week has passed since the declaration was handed to the Government and still the Kurds are waiting. "We have no deadline," says the Sheikh. "We have tried to get in touch with the Government, but the telephone lines are always engaged."

"It would be contrary to the government's claims of being revolutionary," he added, when asked what action he planned if the Kurdish demands were turned down by Tehran. "We are prepared to wait."

The Kurds have noted that reports of separatism have

diminished since General Peshpour, a Shah appointee, was flown to Tehran. The general was wounded during the capture of the Mahabad base.

The Kurds are not entirely happy with the outcome of Iran's Revolution. The majority are Sunni Moslems compared with the rest of Iran which is mostly Shia. A sect of Islam, and many Kurds privately fear that the ayatollahs in Qom and Tehran will pursue similar policies to those of the Shah.

Already, television and radio broadcasting has surfaced as a Kurdish bone of contention. According to a Kurd who runs the Rezaieh television station, the one and a half hours of Kurdish language radio broadcast allowed before the revolution has been dropped.

