

LIZ THURGOOD in Tehran examines the motives of the Ayatollah in crushing the Kurds

The forgotten core of the Kurdish crisis



THE LAST Kurdish stronghold has fallen, and Iran's central authorities have gained fragile control of a province still seething with bitterness after some of the bloodiest fighting since the Shah's overthrow.

The worst of the crisis seems over, but no one is pretending that the Kurdish problem will disappear overnight. Having driven the rebels from their towns, the Iranian Government is in all probability guaranteeing its security forces a long, drawn-out guerrilla war which the country can neither afford nor probably ever win.

But, more important in the short term, has been the growing suspicion in Tehran that the Kurdish crisis three weeks ago was not really a crisis at all, and that the bitter fighting was sparked off and then stage-managed as a ready vehicle on which the central authorities could reassert their crumbling authority.

Such suspicion was fuelled last week when the Prime Minister, Mr Mehdi Bazargan, publicly admitted that Ayatollah Khomeini's general mobilisation order of two weeks earlier was based on "false information."

No one would deny that trouble had been brewing in the western provinces of Kurdistan, a land of gently rolling farmland suddenly rising to high mountain peaks along the border with Iraq. Ever since the collapse of the Shah's regime seven months ago, the Kurds have

been pushing for — and, in some cases, realising — a degree of de facto self-rule that was evidently intolerable to the central powers in both Tehran and the holy city of Qom.

Few, too, would entirely dispute the Ayatollah's allegations that "We are not facing a Kurdish question, but a Communist one." Kurdistan has long been awash in Russian-made rifles and Czech pistols, and their leaders' open espousal of groups professing Marxist-Leninist ideology has only damned the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in the eyes of the Shi'a Mosque which has stoutly maintained the deposed Shah's anti-Soviet position.

But the timing of the Kurdish campaign, the seeming reluctance of both sides to fight, and the apparent manipulation of news, has raised some very real doubts as to the long-term intentions of the central authorities.

Ayatollah Khomeini was believed to have had several motives in seeking to crush the Kurds. Chiefly, he wanted to demonstrate to all Iran's mutinous minorities the futility of insurrection. Later, the Kurdish challenge was evidently considered to be as good as any other vehicle to boost the morale and stiffen the backbone of the badly demoralised armed forces. Crushing the Kurds would further more deprive the Mosque's highly organised Left-wing opponents of the refuge traditionally provided by the Kurds.

It was a dangerous game to play and, despite the fall of all major Kurdish towns to the Tehran-Qom axis, it was unlikely that the Government realised the apparent risks. As Ayatollah Shariatmadari, one of Iran's three most important religious leaders, has pointed out: "Peace attained (through the barrel of a gun) loses much of its value."

The timing of the Kurdish campaign was unfortunate. Exactly a week after bloody Tehran rioting led to the

silencing of virtually all the leftist papers, Ayatollah Khomeini assumed the title of Supreme Commander of the armed forces and ordered the troops into Kurdistan. Ironically, the Persian date was Mordasie 28 — the same day exactly 26 years ago when the Shah staged his return from exile and embarked on a brutal campaign to crush all dissent.

Significantly the introduction of the armed forces into Kurdistan was gradual. When fighting first broke out in the small town of Paveh three weeks ago, reinforcements from the Islamic Guard (bearded young men fiercely loyal to the Ayatollah) were sent in. Eighteen guardsmen were reportedly beheaded before the town was recaptured.

Two days later, on August 19, it was the turn of the town of Sanandaj and the first serious mobilisation of the armed forces. Events in Kurdistan appeared to have quietened down with the occupation of Paveh when the country was suddenly stunned by reports (later denounced as "lies" by Governor-General Mohammad Rashid-Shakiba) that rebel Kurds had attacked the army base in Sanandaj and taken soldiers' wives and children as hostages.

The result was three days of well-publicised demonstrations outside the Prime Minister's office in Tehran. The Ayatollah announced that he would personally come to the capital and take command, if necessary, of the Kurdish troubles. The KDP was banned and their leaders, Sheikh Ezzuddin Hosseini and Dr Ghessemlan were declared traitors. As important, the army joined the Islamic guard for what turned out to be a non-event.

The Iranian military finally took the lead in the battle for Saqqez, further north. Local pressmen filed vivid descriptions of intense fighting and tough Kurdish resistance, but the town was taken with relative ease and

foreign correspondents later in the area reported little evidence of heavy fighting.

Next came the collapse of Mahabad and then last Thursday, Sardasht close to the Iraqi border. The Kurds, it seemed, were never under any real illusion that these towns could be held against the might of the Iranian military machine — its reputation was tarnished in the February uprising which swept the Ayatollahs to power, but nevertheless it is a force to be reckoned with.

Just before the fall of Mahabad, KDP leader Dr Ghassemlou said: "Ever since the (February) revolution we have tried hard to reach an agreement with the Government. . . I met Khomeini twice. I told him that the Kurds had been seeking autonomy not just today but for the past 34 years. Always they said: "All right, we are all brothers, we are all Moslems and everybody will have their rights' . . ."

Such intentions, however well-meaning, were clearly unpalatable to the Kurds who saw the chaos following the Ayatollahs' rise to power as possibly the last opportunity to carve out their demands for autonomy. The Kurds, spread through three provinces and believed to number over four million, have never trusted Tehran, thanks largely to the Shah's old policies of buying off big landowners and quasi-Kurdish leaders. Moreover, the Shah before them, the new Government evidently believed that the KDP's calls for autonomy amounted to nothing more than the start of a gradual process aimed at separating Kurdistan from Iran.

The immediate political spin-offs from Kurdistan were not readily apparent beyond, perhaps, the incontestable display of Ayatollah Khomeini's authority after months of hovering unhappily on the political sidelines.

The only other gains appeared to have fallen to deputy Prime Minister Dr Mostafa Chamran who also doubles as head of internal

security, and Sheikh Khalkhali who has sent over more than 80 Kurds before Islamic firing squads. Dr Chamran, still something of a mystery in local political circles, has been acclaimed a national hero by the local press, but privately many Iranians believe that the man who spent many years with the right-wing Al-Amal militia in the Lebanon was largely responsible for bringing a simmering crisis to a badly timed head and, in his efforts to re-establish central control, created more friction and bad feeling than the situation warranted.

Initial fears that the increased power and authority given the armed forces during the Kurdish campaigning might lay the ground-work for a later coup against the clerical establishment seemed premature.

But as the dust settled over Kurdistan last week, everyone appeared to be studiously ignoring the core of the crisis: Kurdish demands for autonomy, or Kurdish control of their own gendarmerie and police forces, cultural and linguistic rights, and a greater role in local development projects.

The prime minister's mission to Mahabad last Friday was an obvious attempt to try to show the Kurds a modicum of Government goodwill. In addition, the Government has shown readiness to allow a Kurdish revolutionary corps in the small town, the conversion of the local garrison into a Kurdish university, and the paring of all KDP members.

And here lay what was potentially the biggest stumbling block: the pardon has not been extended to the KDP leadership who in the words of one local newsman "have only expressed what the Kurds really feel."

Ayatollah Khomeini has branded the pair, Sheikh Hosseini and Dr Ghassemlou, "traitors" and said they should be executed for being "corrupt on earth." It was never easy to rescind an order made in the name of Allah.

