

The Kurdish Question

CONSIDER THE KURDS, an ethnically, culturally and linguistically distinct community of perhaps 12 million souls dispersed across parts of western Asia, notably, these days, Iran. In any world truly devoted to the principle of national self-determination, they would have had their own state decades ago. But they live in countries (the Soviet Union, Turkey, Iraq) with the determination and force to suppress their political longings, and currently the Kurdish question is alive only in Iran. Kurds there initially welcomed the new regime for its promise of hospitality to their aspirations for autonomy. When the new regime turned out to be no less cynical toward Iran's several non-Persian minorities than the old, the Kurds moved into armed revolt. Ayatollah Khomeini is trying to suppress it now, having proclaimed himself supreme military commander to that end.

It is inconsistent on its face for the ayatollah to demand independence for the Palestinians, whose Arab brothers possess already more than a score of sovereign states, and to deny independence, or even autonomy, to the no less nationally worthy Kurds, who have no home of their own. Why do the ayatollah's Arab and Moslem friends not point this out to him? Do not hold your breath. The best way for the Kurds to win Arab/Moslem backing would be to move to Israel.

It was not so long ago that a Republican administration's supposed betrayal of Kurds (Iraq) was widely

cited as an example of the cynicism that a new Democratic administration would eschew. Yet the Carter administration has left the Khomeini regime to do what it will with the Kurds. It is supplying the regime with the spare parts and ammunition for its suppression of them. It has not been heard advising Tehran to accept their legitimate rights, human or political, or protesting that Iran is using its American-supplied weapons for purposes other than external defense. The United States needs Iran's oil.

To be sure, sovereign states cannot go around lightly suggesting that others grant autonomy, let alone full independence, on their national territory to ethnic claimants. Such claims go to the heart of the integrity of nations. They are too sensitive, too disruptive. They strike too close to home.

Yet the real "Kurdish question" is the political weight of oil. Oil is a legitimate reason of state, but not one that a great power can afford to place above all others. It is chiefly oil that has put Palestinian self-determination on the international agenda, and kept Kurdish self-determination off. But while oil supplies a reason to accommodate an established nation and a once and potentially future friend like Iran, it does not supply a reason to let down another established state and a constant and special friend like Israel. Americans appear to be feeling their way toward just such an equation. It must be pursued with humility as well as with political care.