

Doc Number: KUP000297 Tragedy

Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic is trying to reassert its authority in the outlying districts peopled by the Kurds, a separate ethnic group that has been trying to gain autonomy. With slightly different details, the same news could have been written 4,000 years ago.

An identical political process can be discerned on clay tablets from the reign of the Emperor Sargon and for most of the central rulers from his time to ours. A strong monarch falls. For a year or two, his heirs or supplanters struggle to establish themselves in the capital, and in the meantime the tribal outskirts of the empire enjoy an interlude of self-rule. But when the new king gains control of his throne, he turns to subduing the rebellious provinces, and an oppressive peace prevails until the next succession.

The Kurds have been the oldest running victims of this "process," and their position today is little better than it was in 2000 B.C. The eight million or more mountain-dwelling members of this group live, with their own language and culture, in adjoining regions of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Since these three countries are, respectively, pro-American, pro-Soviet and neutral, no great power can support an independent united Kurdistan. So the Kurds are doomed to sporadic minority uprisings, apparently in rotation, in each of the three.

This situation jars sharply with the Western diplomatic mind as shaped by ethnic nationalism and Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination. So, with a three-year exception during the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the West has tried to ignore the Kurdish existence. There've been no UN resolutions on their behalf. No international committees of intellectuals have organized, even though (or perhaps because) the Kurds have decided to eschew terrorism and fight like men. International human rights groups have been so indifferent that, during the revolt in Iraq, a Kurdish student in England claimed that the only resolution he could obtain on their behalf was a resolution from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals condemning the indiscriminate bombing of donkeys and farm animals.

An independent Kurdistan is not exactly a human right, of course, any more than an independent Ukraine or an independent Confederacy. But the plight of the Kurds is at the very least a grim reminder that happy endings do not abound in foreign affairs. They may live for the next 4,000 years through the same cycle of rebellion and repression. The U.S. seems willing to let it happen that way, and this tragic realism only leaves us wondering why our diplomats have such a Pollyannish urge to find a quick fix to so many other foreign dilemmas.