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War on the Kurds

The Iranian army driving the Kurdish insurgents to mountain redoubts, and repressing the Kurds in the towns, is winning hollow victories. The Ayatollah Khomeini is trying to reconstitute the armed forces as a tool without which his regime cannot survive. But colonels who had to accept that it was wrong to battle civilians for the Shah now find themselves unhappily doing it for the Ayatollah.

This is only one more in a series of Kurdish revolts that have flared on and off in Turkey, Iraq and Iran since World War I without result. But it must rekindle Kurdish aspirations in those nations, where the Kurds are in the millions, and in Syria and the Soviet Union, where they number in the hundreds of thousands.

But because the Ayatollah is imposing a Shia Muslim theocracy and most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, the fighting also fans the growing tensions between these sects. Kurds have been victimized by violence in western Turkey. In Iraq, a Shia majority newly inspired by the Ayatollah lives under a Sunni ruling class. In Syria, where communal outbreaks have occurred, the people are Sunni and the regime Shia.

The ten million or so Kurds are a people with a language and tradition who have never had a state. There were many such in the world a century ago. Many nationalisms were accommodated however imperfectly in the peace following World War I. One treaty of the

time, to dismember the vanquished Ottoman Turkish empire, called for a Kurdish state. Never ratified or implemented, it went forgotten by all but the Kurds, a piece of paper that endorsed and frustrated their national hopes.

Kurdish revolts since the 1920s have been aided by anti-regime conservatives in Turkey, by imperial Britain in Iran, by the Soviet Union in Iran, by Iran in Iraq and now, according to the Ayatollah, by Iraq in Iran. The Shah maintained and then abandoned the Kurdish cause in Iraq. Kurds and Iraqi Arabs in Iran helped the Ayatollah to overthrow the Shah, in return for which they expected autonomy or sovereignty. But the Ayatollah has found himself heir to an empire as much as a nation, dedicated to ruthless repression along the borders to protect its integrity from voracious neighbors. It is a role that suits his own intolerant zeal against fellow Shia Persians who stray.

So long as the Kurdish revolt rages out of control, it menaces a cruel fundamentalist dictatorship that would probably be succeeded by a Marxist dictatorship. It raises the threat of war between Iraq and Iran. It foments conflict between the Muslim world's equivalents of Catholics and Protestants. How much wiser the Ayatollah would be to allow a large measure of cultural and regional autonomy, and to challenge other states with large Kurdish minorities to do the same.

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