

Sons of Devils

In a turbulent region the stateless Kurds play the role of spoiler

by Robert D. Kaplan

IN THE WINTER of 401 B.C. a tired and defeated army of Greek mercenaries was slowly making its way home from Mesopotamia, after failing to topple the Persian king Artaxerxes II. Crossing the Taurus Mountains, in what is today southeastern Turkey, the mercenaries were set upon by bands of Carduchi, a fierce race of bowmen, who caused more harm to the Greeks in seven days of hit-and-run raids than had the Persians during the entire Mesopotamian campaign. An account of the harrowing retreat was provided by Xenophon, one of the Greek commanding officers. Xenophon wrote that the Carduchi lived in the mountains and were not subject to outside authority: "Indeed, a royal army of a hundred and twenty thousand had once invaded their country, and not a man of them had got back...."

Not all that much has changed in 2,400 years. The Carduchi may well have been what we now call Kurds, an Indo-European people, speaking a language akin to Persian, who first occupied the Zagros and Taurus ranges in the second millennium B.C. The Kurds are among history's greatest warriors: Saladin, the Muslim general who repossessed Jerusalem and much of the Holy Land from the Crusaders, was a Kurd. Their bows and slings have long since been replaced by Soviet-made AK-47 assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. Perched on isolated slopes, amid oak and mountain ash, Kurdish guerrillas known as *pesh mergas* ("those who are prepared to die") have in recent years wiped out whole units of Turkish and Iraqi soldiers and Iranian revolutionary guards. True to their past, the Kurds are a law unto themselves.

Although there are no trustworthy figures, it is estimated that upwards of 16 million Kurds inhabit an ellipse of territory that is larger than California and that spreads over portions of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Soviet Union. (There is also a Kurdish community about 70,000 strong in Lebanon.) In geopolitical terms the Kurds occupy one of the most tantalizing bits of real estate on earth. The deserts of the Middle East and the plateaus of Central Asia and Anatolia all ram up against the 10,000-foot massifs of Kurdistan ("the land of the Kurds"). Between the southernmost Red Army units and the northernmost of the great Arabian oil fields dwell the Kurds. More than 70 percent of Iraq's oil exports pass through Kurdistan on their way to the Mediterranean; a pipeline to transport Iranian crude is soon to be built. In a Kurdish region of southeastern Turkey one of the world's biggest hydroelectric projects is

under construction; Syrians fear that the project will drain the Euphrates, on which Syria also depends, in order to irrigate Turkish farms. Because statehood has always eluded them, the Kurds are hostage to the strategies of others. A Kurdish terrorist group, believed to have been trained in Syria, now constitutes Turkey's chief internal security problem, according to Turkish officials in Ankara. Other Kurdish guerrillas, supported by both Syria and Iran, control much of northern Iraq. And *pesh mergas* assisted by Iraq are the most militarily potent of the opposition forces inside Iran. All these disparate groups have at one time or another enjoyed crucial assistance from the Soviet Union, which not only is nearby but also has a long tradition of expansion in the area. Although Kurdistan does not officially exist as a state, a lesson in geopolitics could easily begin with the Kurds. For decades their fortunes have served as a barometer of the stability of every state in the region.

ACCORDING TO ONE legend, the Kurds are descended from 400 virgins who were raped by devils on the way to King Solomon's court. Fatah Kavian, a member of the central committee of the anti-Khomeini Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, smiled modestly when I mentioned the tale to him recently. "This may be true," he said. Kurds take satisfaction in their reputation as spoilers who, owing to their total command of one of the world's harshest terrains, can never be completely vanquished. Perhaps because they were a distinct people, with their own language and culture, for at least 1,500 years before converting to Islam, in the seventh century A.D., their religious affinity with Persians, Turks, and Arabs has counted for little. If anything, religion has helped to estrange the Kurds from their neighbors. Some Kurds from Iran flaunt their secular values as a way of demonstrating their opposition to the ethnic Persian, Shiite theocracy in Tehran. At every evening meal I took with Iranian *pesh mergas* in northeastern Iraq during a recent trip, whiskey and beer were served. In Turkey, however, a state founded on the fiercely secular principles of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Kurdish revolts have combined fundamentalism with nationalism. Kurds in southeastern Turkey today distinguish themselves from Turks by strict adherence to Muslim tradition. While polygamy is officially banned, many Kurdish peasants in Turkey have more than one wife. Last May, during the holy month of Ramadan, the only persons apparently not fasting in the ethnic Kurdish town of Hakkari, near the Iran and Iraq borders, were the Turkish troops sent there by Ankara.

Race and language aside, what seems to make a Kurd a Kurd is an almost spiritual affinity with the beloved moors and snow-streaked mountains of Kurdistan. As the first row of domed, yellowy hills appeared on the horizon, rippling upward from the desert floor in northeastern Iraq, my Kurdish driver glanced back at the desert, sucked his tongue in disdain, and said, "Arabistan." Then, looking toward the hills, he murmured, "Kurdistan," and his eyes lit up. But if geography helps to define the Kurds, it also helps to divide them. The ranks of jagged peaks, with their walled-in valleys and forbidding chasms, seal the Kurds off from one another as much as from the outside world. Like the Scottish highlanders of previous centuries, the Kurds are more an assemblage of clans than a united people. This disunity is

reflected in the myriad of Kurdish guerrilla armies fighting at cross-purposes, making statehood an impossible dream.

Bad luck has abetted disunity. In the aftermath of the First World War the Kurds came close to winning a state of their own. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, whose purpose was to carve up and distribute the Ottoman Empire, provided for a Kurdish homeland in eastern Turkey. The following year, however, Kemal Atatürk defeated an invading Greek army and, by laying the groundwork for a new, cohesive Turkish state in the Anatolian heartland, was able to demand the treaty's revision. After the Second World War the Soviets, who had occupied northern Iran, allowed for the establishment of a small pro-Moscow Kurdish republic around the city of Mahabad. But as a result of Anglo-American pressure and an increasing preoccupation with Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Stalin abandoned his Iranian holdings at the end of 1946, leaving the Kurds at the mercy of Reza Shah, the late Shah's father, who crushed the fledgling regime and executed its leader, Ghazi Mohammed. To this day photos of Ghazi Mohammed occupy a prominent place in Kurdish redoubts in Iraq and Iran.

Another influential figure in Mahabad, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, lived in exile in the Soviet Union for more than a decade. Barzani later returned to lead several rebellions in northern Iraq -- supported covertly this time by the United States, Israel, and Iran. The most serious of these rebellions broke out in March of 1974, when the Iraqi regime had to use tanks and planes to repel Barzani's forces. Following an agreement between Iraq and Iran in 1975, the Shah withdrew his support from the Kurds and the revolt collapsed. The *pesh mergas* retreated to their caves in the mountains, and Barzani went into exile in the United States, where he died in 1979, in Washington, D.C.

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September of 1980 provided the Kurds with another opportunity. As Iraqi troops were diverted to the war front in the south, fewer were available to confront resurgent *pesh mergas*. Northern Iraq is now a cauldron of Kurdish separatism. Heading north into the mountains from the city of Sulaymaniyah, one comes to a point where the hitherto ubiquitous billboard pictures of Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein Al'akriti, suddenly vanish. So do Iraqi soldiers. Replacing them are *pesh mergas* with bandoliers, wearing turbans, baggy trousers, vests, and cummerbunds. According to the map it is still Iraq. But in this part of the country Baghdad's writ is hardly law. The 2.5 million Kurds who live in Iraq make up almost a fifth of the country's population. Most of them live in the mountains of the oil-rich north, where their very presence calls into question the viability of the Iraqi state. (Iraq was created after the First World War through the ad hoc process of joining Turkey's ethnic-Kurdish Mosul province with Arab Mesopotamia.) Although in Arabic the word Iraq means "well rooted," Iraq's shallow roots as a nation have been a factor in the psychological insecurity that has given one Baghdad regime after another its perverse, bloodthirsty quality. By all accounts, Iraqis are among the most greatly oppressed people in the Arab world. Iraq's record of human-rights violations includes the documented torture-related murder of several Kurdish youths, in the fall of 1985. Of all the governments in the region, none has less control

over the Kurds than Baghdad. Even Iraq' s own troops are a question mark, since many of Iraq' s irregular soldiers in the north are themselves ethnic Kurds- known to *pesh mergas* as the *josh* ("sons of donkeys") -- upon whose loyalty Iraq cannot rely.

The mountains of northern Iraq are home to no fewer than five Kurdish guerrilla armies. In the Turkish border area Mustafa Barzani' s son, Massoud Barzani, leads the Kurdish Democratic Party. The Ayatollah Khomeini is backing the Barzani clan, as the Shah did in the early 1970s. Barzani is also receiving support from Libya. Thus the KDP, a tool of American policy only fifteen years ago, when it got help from the Shah, the United States, and Israel, is now very much a tool of anti-American forces. Barzani' s troops threaten Iraq' s international highway and oil pipeline to Turkey. Over to the east, near the border with Iran, is Jalal Talebani' s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), backed by Iran and Syria. Talebani split with the Barzanis in 1975, but they are now reconciled and both organizations are fighting Iraq. However, Talebani is hosting on his territory another *pesh mergas* force, Abdel Rahman Qassemlu' s Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), which cooperates with Iraq against Iran. The compact was explained to me by Said Badal, a Qassemlu aide: "Our cooperation with Iraq is limited to the struggle with Iran, so that does not necessarily make us enemies of Talebani, who is fighting Iraq." Barzani' s KDP, Talebanis' s PUK, and Qassemlu' s KDPI can put into the field as many as 10,000 *pesh mergas* each. The two other Kurdish groups, both Iranian in origin but based in Iraq' s northeastern border area, are much smaller, with about 500 *pesh mergas* apiece: the Marxist-Leninist Komala, and the force of Shaikh Ezzedin Hosseini. Hosseini, who was the Sunni Muslim leader of Mahabad in the 1970s, now maintains a loose alliance with Qassemlu. The complexity of the military situation becomes apparent at the KDPI command center in the cliffside town of Gowreh-deh, five miles from the Iranian border. Looking out over the deforested valley, one can see four different armies.

Crossing into Iran involves a fast march of two hours, by night, from a point north of Gowreh-deh. The thud of Iraqi and Iranian artillery is heard throughout. The two armies exchange fire from the mountain tops on each side of the border; the valleys and defiles in between are controlled by Qassemlu' s Kurds. The KDPI is said to have fifteen staging posts on the Iranian side of the border, from which it launches attacks as deep as a hundred miles into Iran. "When darkness approaches, the *pasdaran* [Revolutionary Guards] leave the towns and we enter to get food from the villagers," says Ahmed Nastani, a *pesh merga* commander. "At night everything is free for us." Iran' s five million Kurds, who account for about 11 percent of the country' s population, are the second largest of all of Iran' s ethnic minorities, after the Azerbaijanis. The *pesh merga* rebellion, which appears to be militarily more significant than that of the better-known *Mujahidin Khalq* (a leftist, Persian-dominated organization led by Massoud Rajavi), illuminates an aspect of the Iranian reality that has been more or less obscured in recent years. Ethnic minorities, who also include Arabs, Baluchis, and Turkomans, make up nearly half of Iran' s population. Because some of these people, like the Kurds, are not Shiites, Ayatollah Khomeini' s brand of nationalism is even more alienating

than was that of the late Shah. As a consequence, the mullahs' regime, after eight years, still has not managed to consolidate its rule in the outlying minority regions to the extent that the Shah was able to. Here may be where the authorities in Tehran are the most vulnerable to foreign pressure and involvement.

THE LARGEST KURDISH population is in southeastern Turkey, where half the Kurds in the world live. Although 15 percent of Turkey's 52 million people are Kurdish, Turkish governments since Ataturk's have made no concession to the Kurds. The Kurdish language is not taught in schools, and Kurdish broadcasts and publications are banned. Officially, the Kurds don't even exist; the Ankara government prefers to call them "eastern compatriots" or "mountain Turks." Despite the size of the community, its history of revolt, and the extent of government repression, for the first half of this decade the Kurds were less of a menace to Ankara than they were to either of the two war-weakened regimes in Baghdad and Tehran. A military coup in 1980 -- which occurred, coincidentally, in the same month that Iran and Iraq went to war -- gave Turkey a strong central government better able to control the country's volatile southeast.

Lately, however, the situation has deteriorated. According to the Turkish daily *Hamiyet*, more than 400 armed attacks by Kurdish guerrillas have taken place in the past three years. Some 150 Turkish security officers and several hundred civilians, many of them women and children, have been killed. Turks see unsettling similarities between the recently quickening pace of Kurdish attacks and the urban guerrilla activity in the late 1970s that led to the coup. And because these attacks are happening at a time of increasing democratization, people in Ankara, both in and out of government, are discussing the Kurdish problem more openly and more honestly than ever before.

Almost all the violence is done by the Kurdish Workers' Party, a self-declared Marxist group that Western diplomats and others believe has, at most, a thousand active fighters. The group assaults remote border-area villages, going after anyone (often another Kurd) who has a close relative believed to be cooperating with the Turkish authorities or who is believed to be doing so himself. Its zeal in murdering civilians -- in one instance, a grenade was tossed down a house's chimney -- has caused the Workers' Party to be branded "terrorist." The Workers' Party leader, Abdullah Ocalan, is reported to be living in Damascus. Turkish officials privately accuse Syria of training the group, with Soviet-bloc help. Adnan Kahveci, the chief adviser to Turkey's Prime Minister, Turgut Ozal, explained to me that "Syria has never been favorable toward Turkey." He said that "a good argument" could be made for describing the Workers' Party as a tool of Soviet and Syrian policy.

The Turks are now securing the Syrian border with barbed-wire fences and video cameras. Nevertheless, officials in Ankara admit that terrorists based in Syria (whose Kurdish population is more than half a million) can cross into Turkey by way of Kurdish-controlled parts of northern Iraq. Given the forbiddingly mountainous topography of the region, no one

can say for certain that they' re not based inside Turkey itself, hiding in caves for months at a time. On several occasions the Turkish air force has, with the consent of the Iraqi government, bombed guerrilla hideouts across the border; the utility of these raids is doubted.

Quite apart from the human toll taken by the Workers' Party, it presents an economic threat. More than a third of Turkey' s oil comes from the Kirkuk fields, just across the border in Iraq. There is speculation that if Baghdad' s authority in the north weakens further, Ankara might attempt to occupy the oil-rich Mosul province that Ataturk relinquished six decades ago. The tension is palpable in Hakkari, a town of 20,000 people less than thirty miles from the border with Iraq. The streets bristle with walkie-talkies and European-designed G-1 and G-3 rifles. Four separate security services patrol the streets, and helicopters prowl the surrounding mountains.

Both Syria and the Soviet Union have ample incentive to harbor ill will toward Turkey. Kahveci pointed out that the Syrians have never accepted Turkey' s incorporation, in 1939, of Hatay, a predominantly Arab province, located strategically in the northeast corner of the Mediterranean; to this day official Syrian maps do not recognize Turkey' s sovereignty there. And Damascus now sees another threat in the thirteen-dam South-East Anatolia Project, scheduled to begin operation in the 1990s, in the vicinity of the ethnic-Kurdish city of Diyarbakir. As observers in Ankara explained the problem to me, although Turkey has declared that it has no intention of using Syrian water, the Damascus government knows that the network of dams will give Turkey the ability to do so.

Turkey is on less overtly hostile terms with the Soviet Union, but this relationship remains deeply ambivalent. Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, yet its Bosphorus Strait provides the only warm water egress for the Soviet navy. Thus, even though the two countries are traditionally enemies and now belong to opposing alliances, Moscow' s official dealings with Ankara have usually been correct. The ambivalence was evinced in the 1970s when the Soviet Union, through its satellite Bulgaria, supplied arms to various Turkish extremist factions, while at the same time giving Turkey significant economic aid. Today, even as the Turkish-Soviet economic relationship is again warming up, Moscow is broadcasting Kurdish-language radio programs into southeastern Turkey, using a high-powered transmitter in Yerevan, in Soviet Armenia. The content of these broadcasts is said to be more cultural than political. But with Turkey' s discontented Kurds wedged between the Soviet Union and its ally Syria, there is no need for Moscow to be blatant.

ANKARA' S VULNERABILITY helps explain why the Turkish government has permitted the Soviets to use an air-and-land corridor through eastern Turkey in order to supply Iraq with military hardware. Throughout the seven-yearlong Gulf War, Moscow has remained Iraq' s principal arms supplier. Its motive is clear. An Iranian victory would serve to improve the morale and the strength of the *mujahidin* fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan: four of the

seven main Afghan resistance groups are fundamentalist, and many of their members are Farsi-speaking like the Iranians, and look to the Shiite clergy in Tehran for support.

Were Iraq to be defeated in the Gulf War, despite tremendous Soviet military support, the various Kurdish guerrilla organizations, all of which have left-leaning ideologies and have dealt with Moscow before, would constitute the best available insurgency option for the Soviets -- a way to keep Iran weak and preoccupied, and thus in a position, as it is now, where it needs to curry Moscow' s favor. It is an option that the United States, conceivably, could also employ as a means of pressuring the mullahs -- much as Washington used Barzanis Kurds in 1974 to pressure Iraq. Draw up any scenario you please: the Kurds are available. Lacking a state of their own, the Kurds thrive when all the existing states are in turmoil.

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