

The Kurds- A Nation Without a State

Introduction

Of all the ethnic groups in the world, the Kurds are one of the largest that has no state to call their own. According to historian William Westermann, "The Kurds can present a better claim to race purity...than any people which now inhabits Europe." (Bonner, p. 63, 1992) Over the past hundred years, the desire for an independent Kurdish state has created conflicts mainly with the Turkish and Iraqi populations in the areas where most of the Kurds live. This conflict has important geographical implications as well. The history of the Kurdish nation, the causes for these conflicts, and an analysis of the situation will be discussed in this paper.

History of the Kurds

The Kurds are a Sunni Muslim people living primarily in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. The 25 million Kurds have a distinct culture that is not at all like their Turkish, Persian, and Arabic neighbors (Hitchens, p. 36, 1992). It is this cultural difference between the groups that automatically creates the potential for conflict. Of the 25 million Kurds, approximately 10 million live in Turkey, four million in Iraq, five million in Iran, and a million in Syria, with the rest scattered throughout the rest of the world (Bonner, p. 46, 1992). The Kurds also have had a long history of conflict with these other ethnic groups in the Middle East, which we will now look at.

The history of Kurds in the area actually began during ancient times. However, the desire for a Kurdish homeland did not begin until the early 1900's, around the time of World War I. In his Fourteen Points, President Woodrow Wilson promised the Kurds a sovereign state (Hitchens, p. 54, 1992). The formation of a Kurdish state was supposed to have been accomplished through the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 which said that the Kurds could have an independent state if they wanted one (Bonner, p. 46, 1992). With the formation of Turkey in 1923, Kemal Ataturk, the new Turkish President, threw out the treaty and denied the Kurds their own state. This was the beginning of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

At about this same time, the Kurds attempted to establish a semi-independent state, and actually succeeded in forming the Kingdom of Kurdistan, which lasted from 1922-1924; later, in 1946, some of the Kurds established the Mahabad Republic, which lasted for only one year (Prince, p. 17, 1993). In 1924, Turkey even passed a law banning the use of the Kurdish language in public places.

Another group of people to consider is the Kurds living in Iraq. Major conflict between the Kurds and Iraqis did not really begin until 1961, when a war broke out that lasted until 1970. Around this time, Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq. In 1975, Hussein adopted a policy of eradicating the Kurds from his country. Over the next fifteen years, the Iraqi army bombed Kurdish villages, and poisoned the Kurds with

cyanide and mustard gas (Hitchens, p. 46, 1992). It is estimated that during the 1980's, Iraqis destroyed some 5000 Kurdish villages (Prince, p. 22, 1993). From this point, we move into the recent history and current state of these conflicts between the Kurds and the Turks, and the Kurds against the Iraqis.

Causes for Conflict

The reasons for these conflicts have great relevance to geography. The areas of geography relating to these specific conflicts are a historical claim to territory on the part of the Kurds, cultural geography, economic geography, and political geography. These four areas of geography can best explain the reasons for these Kurdish conflicts. First, the Kurds have a valid historical claim to territory. They have lived in the area for over 2000 years. For this reason, they desire the establishment of a Kurdish homeland. Iraqis and Turks, while living in the area for a long period of time, cannot make a historical claim to that same area. The conflict arises, however, because the area happens to lie within the borders of Iraq and Turkey. Even though the Kurds claim is valid, the Turks and Iraqis have chosen to ignore it and have tried to wipe out the Kurds.

Second, and probably most important, is that this conflict involves cultural geography. The Kurds are ethnically and culturally different from both the Turks and the Iraqis. They speak a different language, and while all three groups are Muslim, they all practice different forms. The Kurds have used this cultural difference as a reason to establish a homeland. However, the Turks and Iraqis look at the contrast in ethnicity in a much different sense. The government of Turkey viewed any religious or ethnic identity that was not their own to be a threat to the state ("Time to Talk Turkey", p. 9, 1995). Saddam Hussein believed that the Kurds were "in the way" in Iraq and he perceived them as a threat to "the glory of the Arabs" (Hitchens, p. 46, 1992). For this reason, he carried out his mass genocide of the Kurds in his country.

A third factor in these conflicts is economic geography. The areas of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria that the Kurds live in is called Kurdistan, shown on the map "Confrontation in Kurdistan" (Hitchens, 1992, p.37, map). Kurdistan is a strategically important area for both Turkey and Iraq because it contains important oil and water resources which they cannot afford to lose (Hitchens, p. 49, 1992). Also, there has been no significant economic activity in the region, due to the trade embargo against Iraq that has been in place since 1991 (Prince, p. 22, 1993). Still, an independent Kurdish state would be economically viable and would no longer have an embargo placed against it. A final cause of the conflict is political geography. The Turks and Iraqis do not wish to lose their control over Kurdistan, and have resorted to various measures such as the attacks previously described. The Kurds, on the other hand, have political problems of their own. There is a sharp difference of opinion between the two main Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Hitchens, p.

36, 1992). The parties are at odds about how to resolve the conflicts in which their people are involved. Until this internal conflict among the Kurds is solved, it will be difficult for them to deal with the Turks and Iraqis.

Recent History and the Current Situation

In 1991, after the defeat of his country in the Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein had the Iraqi army attack the Kurds again. As a result, the United States and its allies launched Operation Provide Comfort in April 1991 that created a safe haven for the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. Eventually, the Kurds were able to secure a small measure of autonomy in Kurdistan and on May 19, 1992, the Kurds held their first free elections in Iraq (Prince, p. 17, 1992). The Kurds had sovereignty in part of Kurdistan, called Free Kurdistan, but not to the point of being recognized as an independent state. Seeing how the Kurds in Iraq were able to hold elections, the Turks got scared and banned the People's Labor Party, a legal Kurdish party in Turkey, from the Turkish Parliament (Marcus, p. 9, 1994).

In Turkey, a civil war between the Kurds and Turks has been going on for the last ten years; approximately 15,000 people have been killed so far ("Time to Talk Turkey, p. 9, 1995). The Turks launched an invasion they called Operation Steel against the Kurds in March 1995, sending 35,000 troops against them, but the plan backfired, as only 158 Kurdish rebels were killed in the first week (Possant, Doxey, & Borrus, p. 57, 1995). To sum up the Turks attitude toward the Kurds, Tansu Ciller, the Turkish prime minister, said, "Turkey has no Kurdish problem, only a terrorist problem" (Marcus, p. 9, 1994).

As far as the United States is concerned, Kurdistan probably should not exist. During Operation Provide Comfort, the U.S. helped out the Kurds in Iraq, but did nothing to help the Kurds in Turkey. The reason for this is that Turkey is a NATO ally, while Iraq is one of the U.S.'s worst enemies (Marcus, p. 9, 1994) By helping out the Kurds, the U.S. would be siding with enemies of the Turks, which could create problems that the U.S. government would rather not deal with. This type of situation does not exist in Iraq, however, since the U.S. is not on friendly terms with Hussein's regime.

There are two main views on how to deal with the conflicts. The KDP, led by Masoud Baranji, seeks limited political autonomy within Iraq (Hitchens, p. 36, 1992). Interestingly, many Kurds would accept being a state of Iraq, holding some autonomy, provided that Hussein was removed from power, a democracy was installed, and the Kurds were treated as equals (Bonner, p. 65, 1992). This means that some of the Kurds do not believe it is absolutely necessary that they have their own state, only that they are recognized as equals by the Iraqi government. On the other hand, Jalal Talabania's PUK says that the Kurds should hold out for more political concessions from Iraq (Hitchens, p. 36, 1992). It is possible that they would try to use guerrilla warfare tactics to frighten the Iraqi army into meeting its demands.

Analysis: Looking Ahead to the Future

Looking at the current state of the conflict, the end does not seem to be near. On one hand, the Kurds have been struggling to gain their independence for a number of years, and even though they have been locked in a ten year guerrilla war with the Turks, have come too far to stop fighting and accept the harsh treatment they have received from the Turks and Iraqis. Even though Turkey has lost a large number of troops dealing with the perceived Kurdish "menace", they do have the support of the U.S., and that in itself seems to be a good enough reason to keep the war going.

As for the situation in Iraq, the situation is a bit more complicated. The plan of KDP seems like a plausible solution. However, the plan is not likely to succeed until Hussein dies or is forced out of power. The Iraqis also do not seem very willing to give up their territory to the Kurds. The plan of the PUK has a small chance to work, assuming that guerrilla tactics would scare the Iraqi government. By simply holding out, the Kurds would gain nothing, because the Iraqis are not threatened by the Kurds per se. However, by attacking the Iraqis, the Kurds run the risk of a counterattack which they probably could not effectively deal with. Basically, that would make the situation for the Kurds even worse than before.

Conclusion

Without the support of a large powerful nation such as the U.S., the Kurds will probably never establish an independent Kurdish state. The Kurds do not have enough military power to fight off the Turks and Iraqis without help. The Iraqis and Turks would not be willing to give up their economically important territory to people which they perceive a "threat" to their way of life and will most likely continue to fight the Kurds. The Kurds have no choice but to continue fighting until either they or the Turks and Iraqis are defeated, as both groups are unwilling to allow them to remain in their countries. The future definitely looks bleak for the Kurds.