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The Forgotten Kurds

A Kurdish proverb says that the Kurds have no friends – a proposition which has been all too painfully obvious in the last few weeks.

However, while the Kurds may be friendless, they are no longer ignored. The mass media, and particularly television, have seen to that. This does not mean, of course, that their problems are better understood. I heard a radio commentator remark that the Kurds were unlucky because, unlike the Kuwaitis, they have no oil. This is to invert the problem. The Kurds do have oil: or rather, they live in a major oil-bearing area of northern Iraq. What they lack, and have always lacked, is sovereignty over the area and hence the ability to gain revenue from oil.

Some history is important. The Kurds are a non-Arab people who trace their history back to the ancient Medes, whose empire flourished in the same region in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The most famous Kurd was Saladin, who established a dynasty which ruled the area between the Nile and the Euphrates-Tigris valley. The historic area of Kurdistan was ruled for many centuries by Kurdish princes who paid tribute to the Muslim caliphate. The Kurds are Sunni Muslims, and were converted at the same time as the Persians.

Kurdish troubles date from the mid-nineteenth century. The Ottoman empire, crumbling under attacks from newer imperial powers – the Russians, French and British --

turned against its rebellious minorities – Armenians, Bulgarians and Kurds, among others. By the outbreak of the First World War, there was an articulate Kurdish nationalist movement demanding independence; its claims were recognised in President Wilson's Fourteen Points, which became the basis for the peace treaties and the Covenant of the League of Nations. The Kurds were promised a homeland, but the promise was withdrawn as a result of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, negotiated between the Western powers and the new Turkish republic headed by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

The history of Turkish repression of the Kurds is itself a long and melancholy tale. As far as Iraq is concerned, the story dates from the establishment of the new state of Iraq in 1921. Oil had been discovered in the largely Kurdish province of Mosul in the north of the river valleys (though not yet in commercial quantities), and the British, who were already exploiting oil discoveries in neighbouring Persia, were anxious to maintain their control over the Mosul province as well.

The League of Nations, having invented the new concept of a 'mandate', gave the French a mandate over Syria, while the British gained mandates over Palestine and Iraq. The British insisted that the newly mandated state of Iraq should include the Mosul province. The Kurds, having been promised their own state, now rose in revolt, and were bombed into submission by the RAF on behalf of the new Iraqi government.

The Kurdish resistance in Iraq was led mainly by traditional tribal chiefs, of whom the most important belonged to the Barzani clan. In 1958, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by a military coup d'état, and the new government promised much greater autonomy to the Kurds – a promise which did not last long. Mulla Mustafa Barzani, a veteran opponent of the Iraqi regime, then established himself in the north with support from the Soviet Union and

later from the Iranians, the Americans and the Israelis. In 1975, however, the Shah of Iran made a deal with Saddam Hussein and withdrew his support for the Kurds. The Americans followed suit and pressured the Israelis to do likewise. The Iraqi army defeated the Kurds and Barzani fled into exile, where he died in 1979.

The hostility of Turkey, Iran and Iraq towards Kurdish claims for autonomy is not difficult to understand. All three are centralised, authoritarian states which do not tolerate ethnic (or religious) minorities. A more perplexing question is why their plight has attracted so little attention, until very recently, on the Western Left.

Gerard Chaliand, a radical French journalist who has written movingly about other victims of imperialist and colonialist oppression, remarks on the failure of 'progressive' people to pay attention to the Kurds. The Kurds do not fit into the conventional categories approved by liberal or radical opinion. In a 1980 collection of essays, Chaliand observes that left-wing people who support the Arab cause seem unable to extend their sympathy to the Kurds. "For some people", he notes caustically, "Arabism is revolutionary by definition. The Kurdish movement is 'insufficiently radical' to be supported by those who accept the claims of Iraq to be 'anti-imperialist'."

Chaliand is right to point out that Iraq was, for a long time, regarded as "objectively progressive" by many people on the Left who were seduced by its "anti-imperialist" rhetoric and ignored the violent and brutal character of the Iraqi regime and the quasi-fascist ideology of Saddam Hussein's ruling Ba'ath Party. A solution to the problem of the Kurds will require drastic rethinking in a world where concepts derived from the Cold War no longer match with such unpleasant realities.

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