

Thurs. Apr. 9/87

War, the Kurdish way

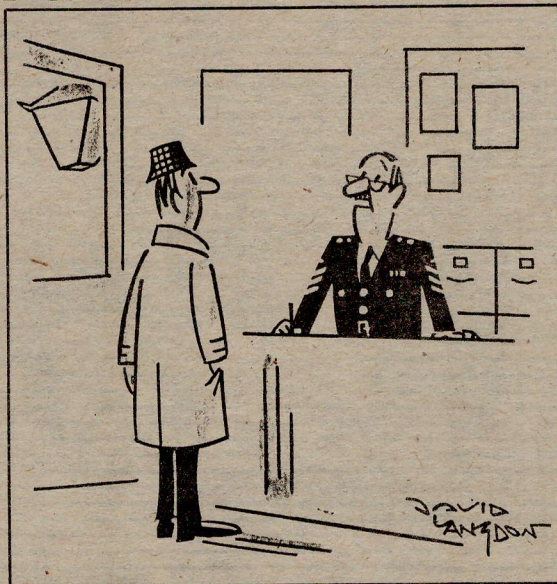
Early this month Turkish warplanes struck targets inside Iraq, killing 100 Kurdish tribesmen. What made this attack so unusual was that the hard-pressed government of Iraq had asked for Turkish help in attacking the Kurds. Having just suffered 16 dead in a Kurdish cross-border raid, the Turks lost no time in striking back.

This little incident along the remote Iraqi-Turkish border reminds us again of the Mideast's oldest and certainly one of its most complex ethnic conflicts. There are 16 million Kurds scattered across the mountainous zone that straddles Iraq, Iran, Turkey and the Soviet Union. Though Sunni Muslim, the fair-skinned Kurds are not Arabs or Turks but linked to the early Aryan invaders of Persia. Half live in Turkey's mountainous eastern region.

The Kurds, a warlike, tribal people, have been seeking some sort of independence for the past 50 years. In the process, they have managed to fight the Turks, Iran and Iraq — as well as each other. Kurdish fighters, or *peshmerga*, have been used by all sides to vex their enemies. The late shah and Israel armed the Kurds and used them against Iraq. Today some Kurds are fighting Iraq and others Iran. Soviet agents are said to be active in Turkish Kurdistan.

Unfortunately for the Kurds, their lands happen to be right on top of some of the world's most important geography. This includes Iraq's oilfields around Mosul and the vital geostrategic communications routes linking Turkey, Iraq and Iran. None of these three governments has ever appeared willing to even consider granting their Kurds anything more than token local autonomy. The idea of a united Kurdistan is even more implausible, since no one is about to lop off part of their country and give it to a new Kurdish republic.

Punch



"Are you sure you want to report it? It'll only add one more to our list of unsolved crimes."

ERIC MARGOLIS



Such gloomy realities hardly seem to bother the hard-fighting Kurds who, with their love of war and contempt for hopeless odds, remind me of the Albanian mountaineers. The Kurds may not be able to soon acquire a homeland but they are today posing a mounting threat to embattled Iraq. The two main Kurdish parties have at last joined hands and are now fighting the Iraqi army north of the Mosul oilfields. In recent weeks they have scored important successes that have brought them close to Iraq's most important oil installations and to the vitally important Iraq-Turkish pipeline. Cutting this pipeline, that carries most of Iraq's oil exports, would be a disaster for Baghdad.

Whether the Iraqis can hold off the Iranians and the Kurds at the same time remains an open question.

This upsurge in Kurdish power has also greatly alarmed the neighboring Turks. Eastern Turkey has seen constant Kurdish uprisings and guerrilla fighting for decades. Any major Kurdish success in Iraq would likely incite a rising among Turkey's eight million Kurds who make up 16% of the nation's population. Fertile ground, indeed, for the Soviets just across the border to the north.

The Russians have been hungrily eyeing eastern Turkey for centuries. They have long made serious efforts to stir up the Armenian and Kurdish peoples who inhabit this area. If the Soviets can break through the barrier of eastern Turkey, the plains of the Mideast will lie before them.

And there is the unresolved question of Iraq's oilfields at Mosul and Kirkuk. They were carved out of the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I and given over to the newly created British protectorate of Iraq. Not coincidentally, Britain's BP got control of the oil. Turkey has never accepted this spoils-of-war settlement.

There is a strong likelihood that the Turks, with their powerful army, will not stand by and allow Iraq's oil regions to fall to either Kurdish rebels or an Iranian invasion. If Iraq collapses, Turkey has hinted it may occupy the oilfields. This, of course, could provoke a war between Turkey and Iran, both of which today have good relations and a great amount of trade.

So the Kurds have the ability to provoke some dangerous developments in the high upland bridge that links Asia to Asia Minor. It is difficult not to feel a great deal of sympathy for these freedom-loving mountaineers. Why, for example, do we support the Afghans while ignoring the Kurds?

Still, realpolitik dictates that the Kurds will not get their way. Any form of Kurdish independence would be too disruptive to a region that is already the world's most turbulent. It's a pity the Kurds don't live somewhere else.