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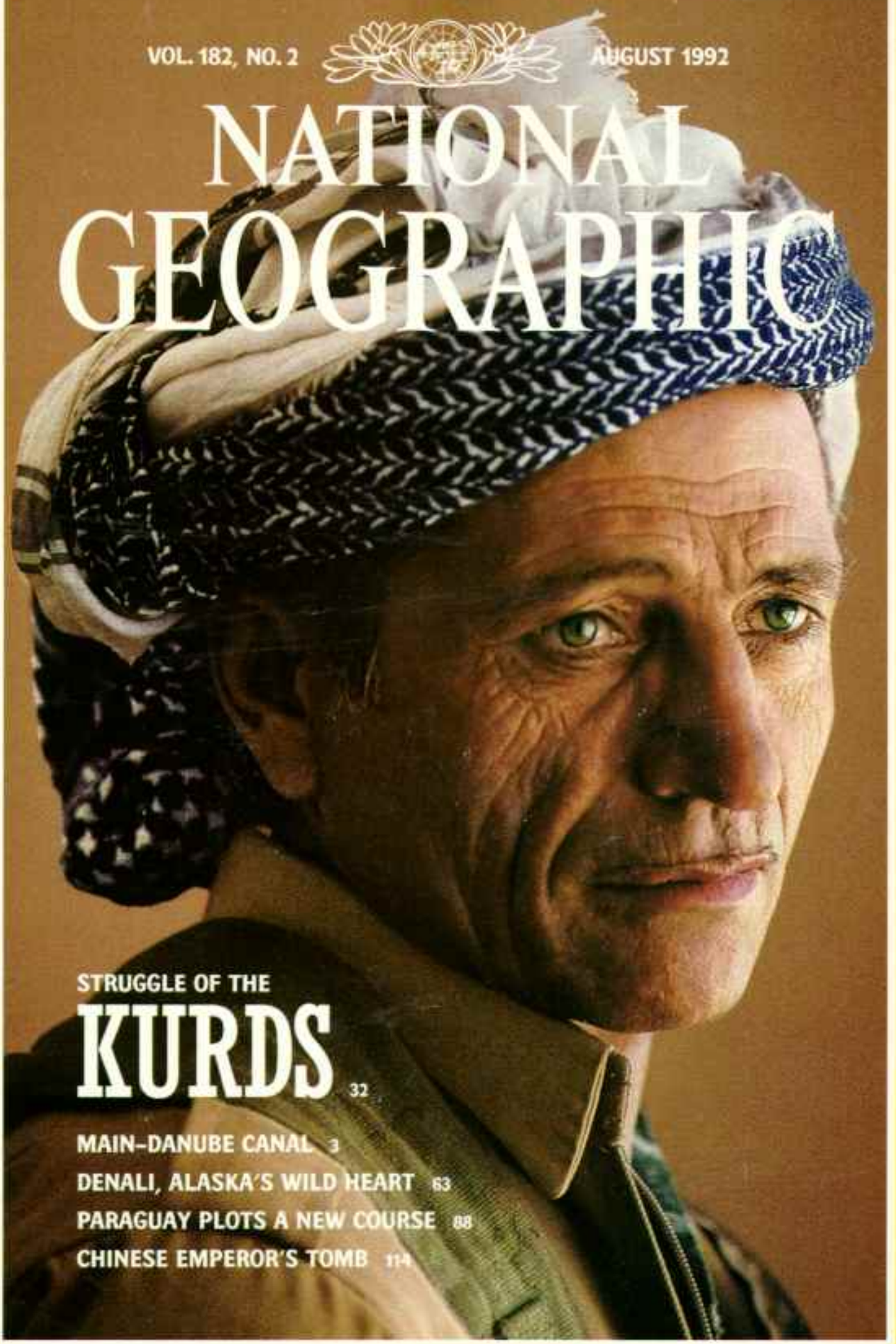

STRUGGLE OF THE
KURDS 32

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STRUGGLE OF THE

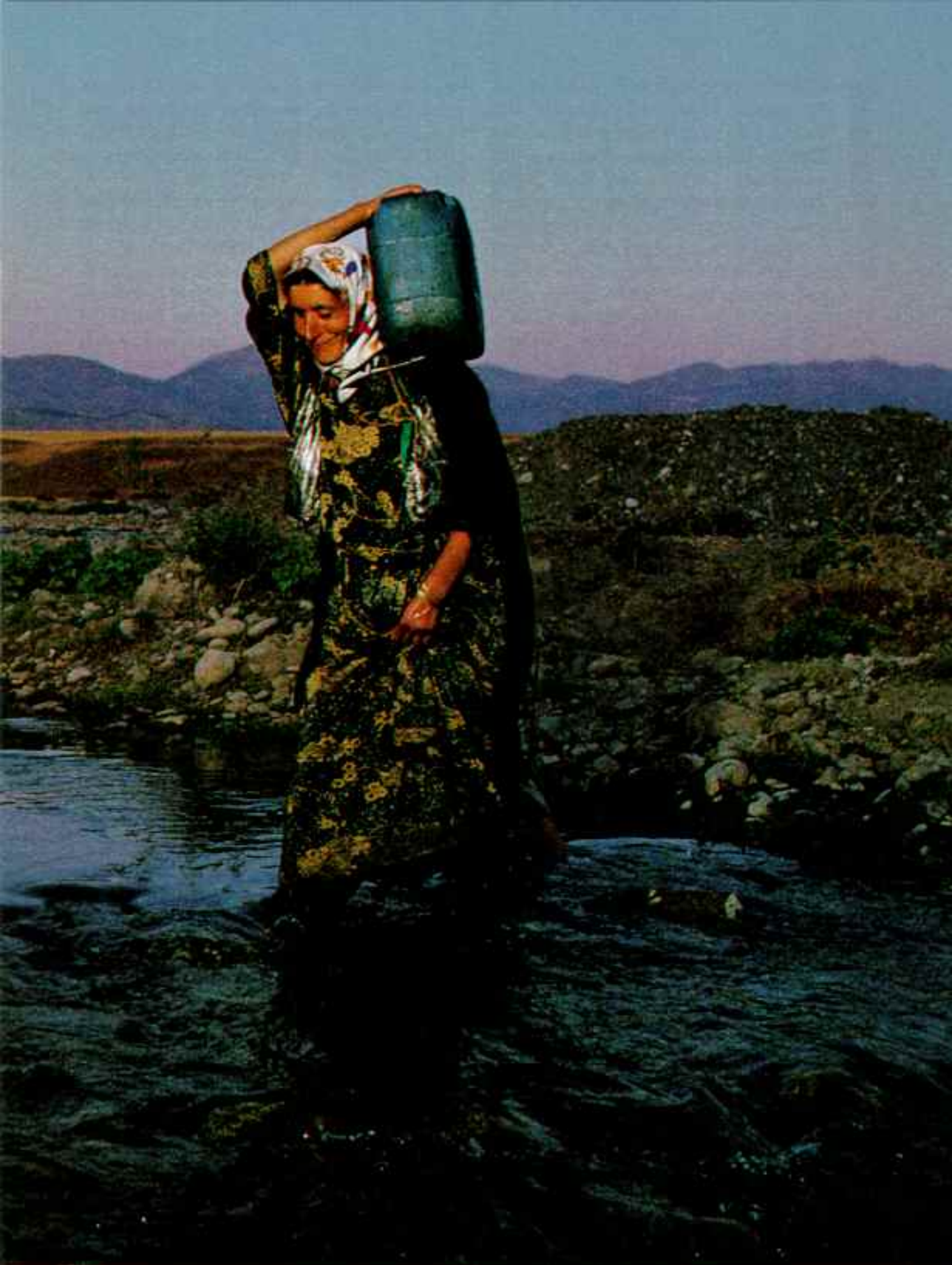
By CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

KURDS

Fleeing their war-torn home near Kirkuk, Iraq, a Kurdish family clings to life in the ruins of Panjwin, on the border with Iran. Without a nation of their own, the Kurds live, as they have lived for centuries, at the mercy of powerful and often hostile neighbors.

Photographs by ED KASHI

For time out of mind, Kurdish women have filled their water jars in Qalat Dizah, Iraq. The modern city lies in rubble, dynamited and bulldozed by Iraqi troops in 1989.



Since the mid-1970s President Saddam Hussein's campaign to eradicate the Kurdish resistance movement has claimed 4,000 towns and villages and more than 100,000 lives.

IF YOU TAKE A PLANE from Istanbul and fly southeastward to Diyarbakir, you stay in the same country. But you leave Europe for the Middle East, and you enter the world of the Kurds. In Diyarbakir, a boiling, teeming city enclosed within ancient walls made of forbidding black basalt, the Kurdish flag is prohibited and use of the Kurdish language restricted. So elevator boys and waiters were being careful when whispering to Westerners like myself: "This is not Turkey . . . this is Kurdistan. Diyarbakır—*capital* of Kurdistan. . . . We are not Turks . . . we are Kurds."

I visited a coffee shop with my new friend Hasan, a young Kurd who had agreed to show me his city. I watched as he looked around in disgust through the plumes of tobacco haze and took the proprietor to one side. Within seconds the loud cassette music had been replaced by another tape, more wild and mournful sounding—but not until the boss had cast a swift glance down the street. Taking the best table, Hasan—a man of relatively few words—explained: "Stupid Turkish music. I told him play some good Kurdish tunes."

I had come in search of the Kurds, a people who in 1991 had been abruptly and cruelly promoted to center stage by their battle against Saddam Hussein's regime and by the sympathy felt in the West for those who had suffered longer than the Kuwaitis from Saddam's ambitions. For months I would travel among them, trying to make sense of where this ancient people fit in the modern world.

Who are the Kurds? They number 25 million and are scattered from the Middle East to Europe, North America, and Australia, which makes them one of the largest ethnic groups in the world without a state of its own. Once nomadic, most are now farmers or have migrated to cities.

Like the majority of their neighbors, most Kurds are Sunni Muslims; a few are Jews or Christians. Their language is fractured—like the Kurds themselves—by region and dialect, but it is distinct from Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. They are neither Turks, nor Persians, nor Arabs, and they regard their own survival as proof in itself of a certain integrity.

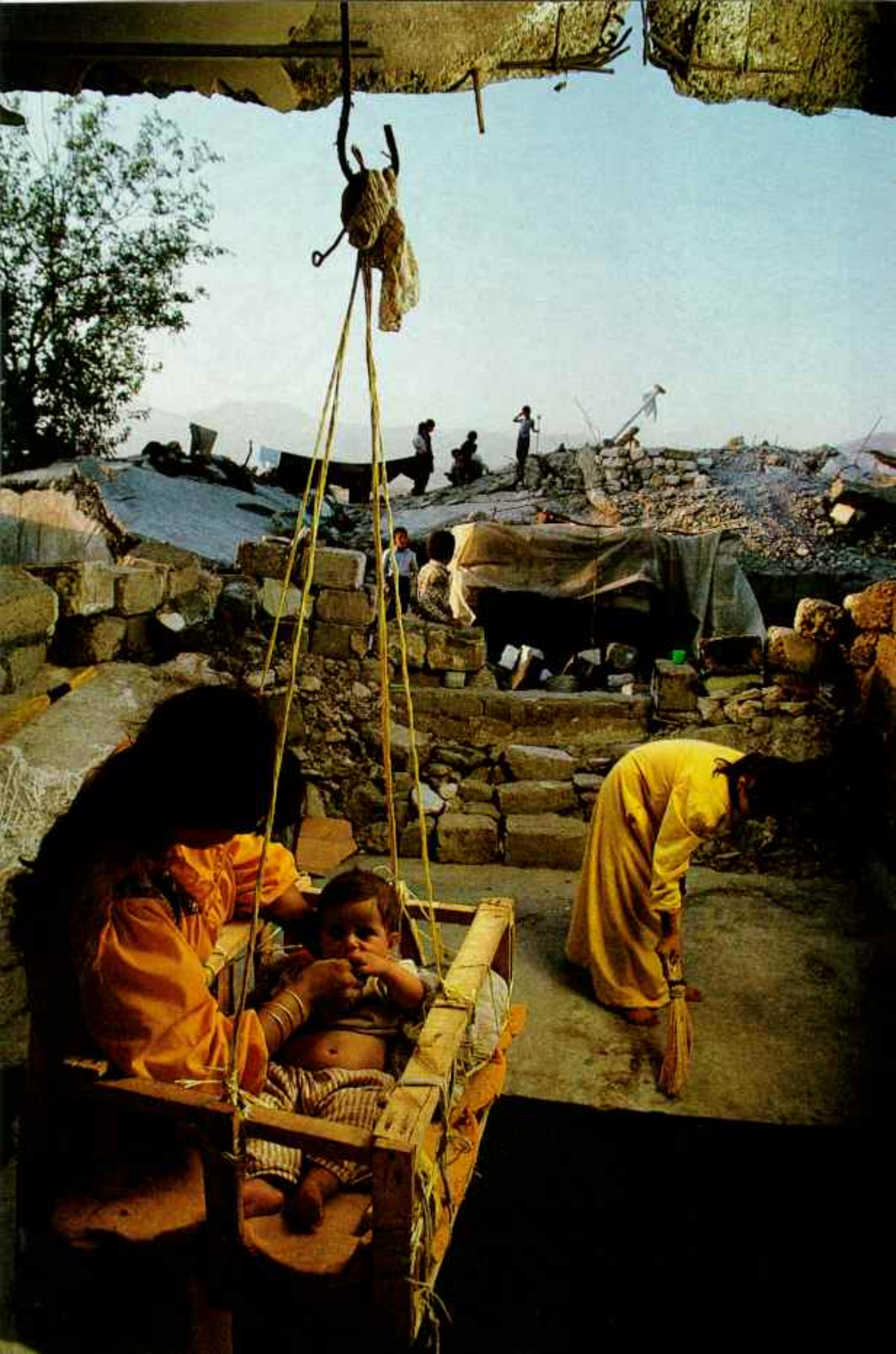
For more than 2,000 years, travelers to the heart of Kurdish country have reported on the blue or green eyes and fair hair seen among the Kurds—and on their fierceness. Four centuries before Christ, as the Greeks were retreating from the Persians toward the Black Sea, Xenophon recorded that they were harassed along the way by Kardouchoi, people who "dwelt up among the mountains . . . a warlike people . . . not subjects of the King." Most modern scholars agree that this is a reference to the Kurds.

Some three million Kurds live in the region of Iraq they call Free Kurdistan, in the mountains where Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq come together. Here, since the humbling of Saddam, the Kurds have established the largest and most populous area of autonomy in their modern history: an area of some 15,000 square miles where Kurds are giving orders, collecting taxes, holding rudimentary courts, and conducting their own parliamentary elections, primarily between the two major parties, Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party. But the Kurds seldom

CONFRONTATION IN KURDISTAN

Kurds have occupied the sweep of mountains and foothills northeast of Mesopotamia since ancient times. Rich in oil and water, the region called Kurdistan assumed its modern borders after World War I, the arbitrary partitions compounding existing religious and linguistic divisions among Kurds.

Now 25 million strong, Kurds constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the world without a country of its own. This political vulnerability prompted two million Iraqi Kurds to flee their homes for camps like Işkveren, Turkey (opposite), when the uprising against Saddam Hussein failed after the gulf war.



Lives hang in the balance as Sabry Ahmed cradles her son Howkar in what is left of Qalat Dizah. The Iraqi government has imposed a strict blockade of food and fuel to the region known as Free Kurdistan, where families struggle to rebuild amid the wreckage. Children of Panjwin study in a freezing warren of debris that remained after shelling by the Iraqi Army in the 1970s.

speak with one voice; indeed the positions of the two parties have often shifted. Today the central issues are: Should the Kurds sign a limited autonomy agreement with Saddam (the Barzani view) or should they hold out for more territory and more political concessions (the Talabani position)?

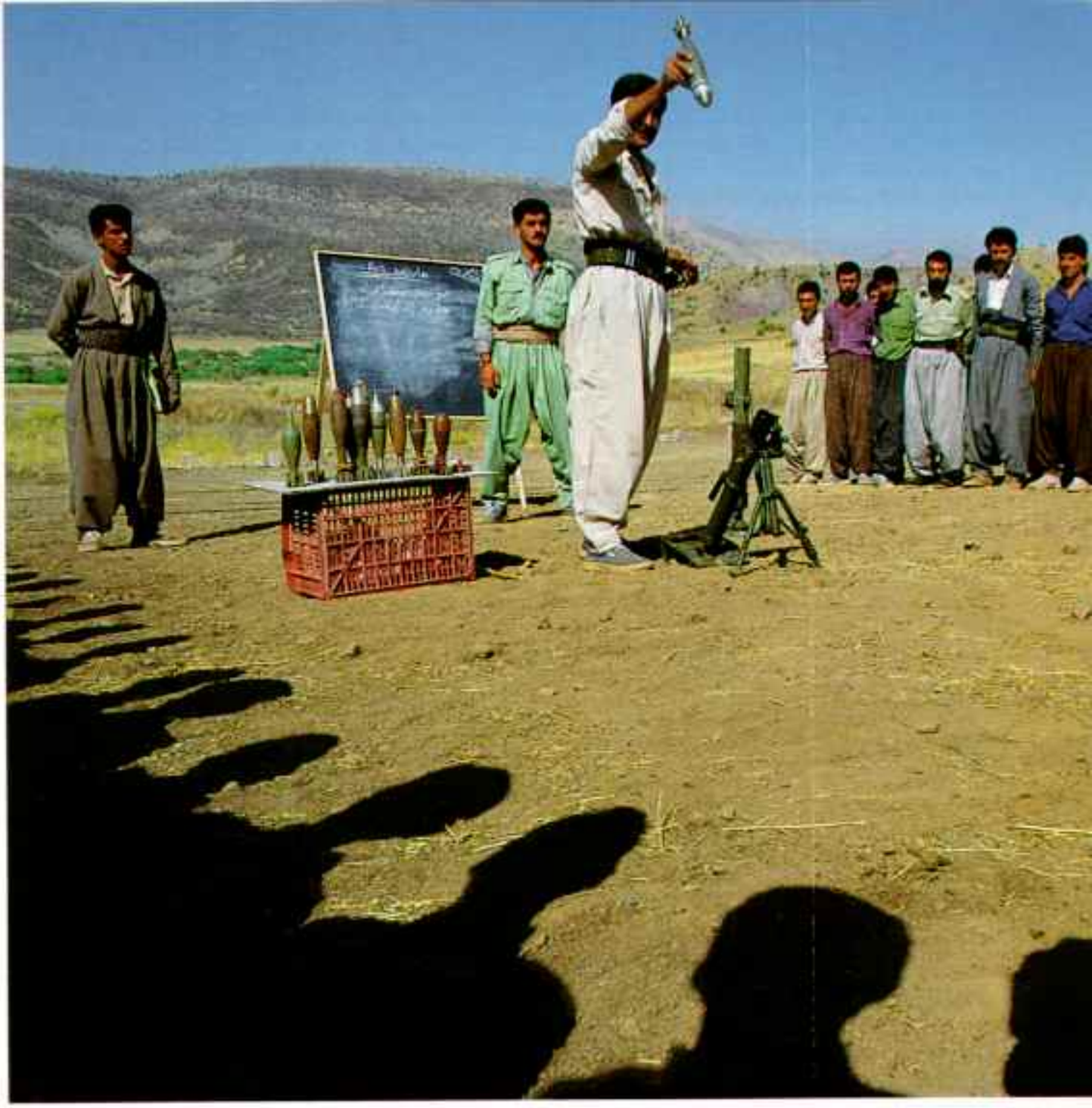
When I arrived in Free Kurdistan, in the spring of 1991, there was a swath of trouble and grief on every side. To the south, Saddam's forces were mustering again to reassert central control. To the north, the Turkish authorities maintained that Turkey was one nation and that Kurds were part of the Turkish family. To the east, the Kurds of Iran chafed under the rule of the mullahs as they had under the shah. To the west, in Syria, the Kurds were some distance from full citizenship; in Lebanon and beyond they were in diaspora.

The Kurds have survived like other large minorities, by sniffing the wind and being adroit at the business of tactics. While in large parts of the West the Kurds are hailed as tough, romantic, and dashing, it isn't unusual to hear them described by their immediate neighbors as downright uncouth, oil greedy, and for sale to the highest bidder.

To the impatient, proud regional powers that already enjoy statehood, the Kurds are *in the way*. In the way of Saddam's dream of a greater Babylon, glory of the Arabs. In the way of Turkey's plan to earn international respect by modernizing and assimilating the Kurdish provinces. In the way of Iran's scheme for a republic based on Shiite Islam. In the way of Syria's wish to make a militarized nation out of a patchwork of religious and ethnic minorities.

The Kurdish national motto, with origins older than anyone can remember, is simply: "The Kurds have no friends."

IN THE MONTHS just after the gulf war ended in March 1991 it was still dangerous to visit Iraqi Kurdistan, so I enlisted the help of an armed escort hardened by months of guerrilla fighting. Hoshyar Samsam, who knew this country well and had been the personal bodyguard of Jalal Talabani, was taking care of me. He calmly conducted me through bomb-shattered villages and deserted towns. He foraged for me in an area blighted by



famine and helped me dodge Iraqi patrols. He looked as if he could carry me if the need arose, and I wasn't sure it might not. He had a fierce, beaming face and huge hands. His hair was reddish and his eyes blue-green. I asked him to tell me his story.

Hoshyar was born to a peasant family in the hills near Kirkuk, the oil capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. He had been brought up on ancestral tales of Kurdish suffering and defiance and had carried this formative memory with him when he left home for Baghdad to study engineering.

In the great Kurdish uprising that followed Desert Storm, Hoshyar was an enthusiastic militant, and a photograph of President George Bush in a jogging outfit was gummed proudly to the windshield of his Toyota jeep. After the first exhilarating days of the revolution—"We took our great city of Kirkuk, without any help from anyone"—he had been caught up in the defeat, exodus, and massacre that captured world attention.

"What about your family?" I asked.

Hoshyar's answer was slightly shrugging. He is a *peshmerga*—in the Kurdish term of honor, one who has made an understanding with death. He was married to the struggle and had no time for domesticity. His relatives were extended all over the hills of the area and scattered between the refugee camps and shelters that dot Iraqi Kurdistan today. "Maybe, after victory, I have my own family."

The Kurds might well have broken and

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dispersed by now if it weren't for the strength of their family tradition. Everyone seems related to everyone else; it's also sometimes true. Cousins, for example, are encouraged to marry so that farms and orchards can stay in the family. In the squares and streets, men would keep asking photographer Ed Kashi to take pictures of their children. The Kurdish family is the nexus of their solidarity and survival. Even this, though, is linked to "the struggle." An old man we met in the village of Khalifan was sitting with his submachine gun hung over the back of a chair and watching his grandsons frisking about. When I praised their charm and friendliness, he beamed. "Yes," he said. "They will make good soldiers."

Even among the Kurds who live in seemingly normal circumstances, there are the daily reminders of reality.

Iraqi Kurdish guerrillas called peshmerga take lessons in mortar fire and single-file patrol near a captured military base. Although many Kurdish men have spent a lifetime under arms, their equipment, training, and numbers are no match for the best of the modern Iraqi Army.

In the old city of Diyarbakır, for instance, a foreign visitor can leave the noise and smoke of the street, pass through thick walls opening on to a shaded courtyard, and settle in at one of 20 tables at the Trafik Çay Bahçesı, a tea garden. Children play on brightly painted swings and slides nearby. Young men and women hold hands, chat, and loll away the warm autumn afternoon over bottled Coke or small glasses of thickly sweetened tea. The carefree mixing of the sexes comes as a reminder that we are deep in Kurdistan, where—unlike much of the

Dying of injuries from an Iraqi mine, a peshmerga lies surrounded by his comrades in the Zakhu hospital. In deserted Halabjah (below), a guerrilla inspects an unexploded bomb from a 1988 attack that killed some 6,000 villagers. A seven-year-old boy (opposite) was blinded by an Iraqi phosphorous bomb. He bears the scars of a generation too early acquainted with death and disfigurement.

Middle East—women have traditionally not been secluded or veiled.

Fadime Kirmizi, a law student in her early 20s (page 52), comes in, accompanied by her brother. They find a table where the light is good and settle down with her law books. He quizzes her through the afternoon.

The afternoon's serenity is regularly broken by fighter jets screaming overhead, one after another, buzzing the city before returning to their Turkish Air Force base. To an outsider the jets seem a pointed reminder to the Kurds that they do not really belong. Yet to most of the Kurds I met, the attitude seemed to be expressed in the thought, what are the Turks doing in *their* country?

TODAY'S KURDS find themselves caught between their ancient culture and the rush of the 20th century. At an embassy dinner in Turkey I was seated next to an Iranian woman. Her father was a banker, and she was married to an American, and when she heard of my interest in the Kurds, she exclaimed: "How fascinating! Of course, Khomeini treated them very badly, and they have resisted very bravely. But don't you find them really very—you know—*primitive?*"

In Shaqlawah, a beautiful but run-down town in northern Iraq that serves as a guerrilla headquarters for Free Kurdistan, I was witness to another demonstration of the same attitude.

It was early in June 1991, and the barren "negotiations" between Saddam and the Kurds were being conducted in the nearby town of Arbil. A handpicked Iraqi intelligence officer had been sent to Shaqlawah to escort rival leaders Talabani and Barzani to the meeting. Lieutenant Colonel Zeid, as he was called, arrived in an immaculate dark green uniform with carefully straightened black beret.

I was eyeing Lieutenant Colonel Zeid when a hoarse and raucous voice broke in. It belonged to a Kurd named Malazada, an unkempt local balladeer with a shell-shocked aspect. Impromptu, he stepped forward and began a long free verse recitation for the occasion. He went on and on, and the lieutenant colonel's clipped mustache began to writhe impatiently. Siamand Banaa, a public spokesman for Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, touched my arm. "You'll have to excuse old Malazada," he whispered. "He's just missing a few strings, as we say."


گای
وکراتی کوردستان

Rivals for power Masoud Barzani, at left, and Jalal Talabani battled each other to a draw on the May ballot for the position of paramount leader of Iraqi Kurdistan. Infighting has crippled Kurdish opposition to Saddam Hussein, and the winner of the runoff election will face formidable obstacles.

I appreciated the courtesy, but I rather liked the tolerance of the Kurds, who were willing to stall their big meeting for an old man whose liking for the village epic did no harm. In many ways I was miles and years away from his shaggy, verbose, bucolic style and his horizon bounded by tribe and the rhythms of seasons. The sight of the lieutenant colonel, who thought of these folk as barbarians, reminded me that many outwardly advanced types have taken little from development except technology, which they have employed for barbarous purposes.

ALL ACROSS IRAQI KURDISTAN you can drive for miles, map in hand, and mark off each succeeding heap of stones as the place where a village once stood. One by one the Iraqis dynamited or bombed or poisoned these communities in the name of repressing Kurdish insurgency and shifted their inhabitants into relocation centers. You can still see those too, bleak and menacing blockhouses, hemmed in with wire, where people who had known no master were confined and supervised. The Kurds have been hardened by the digging up of mass graves; estimates of the missing and dead range from 100,000 to 300,000. A United Nations report concluded that the atrocities committed by Saddam's regime were "so grave and . . . of such a massive nature that since the Second World War few parallels can be found." Yet in this landscape of blasted and deserted hamlets there are two sites that all the Kurds insist you must see: Qalat Dizah and Halabjah.

Qalat Dizah's turn came in June 1989. As a large market town near the Iranian border, it may have shown an independence of spirit that annoyed Iraqi military planners. They made an example of the place by bringing in the bulldozers and the dynamite. After the expulsion of the population—perhaps 70,000 individuals—the city was leveled house by house. Only the trees were left standing.

By the time I arrived, many of the former inhabitants, finding life insupportable in the refugee camps over the border, had returned to squat in the ruins of Qalat Dizah. A single tiny dispensary, run by a depressed doctor named Osman Salim, tried to hold the line against malaria, typhoid, and malnutrition. They were Osman's daily enemies, and he was combating them with almost zero resources.

"Exactly *nothing* has been done for the people of Qalat Dizah," he told me, complaining that the storied Western relief effort—which would eventually deploy millions of dollars in a hugely successful operation—had not yet trickled down here. The survivors faced another harsh winter, with unclean water and poor food and not nearly enough of either.

Not even this was enough to prepare me for the town of Halabjah, a community that has the same resonance for the Kurds as does the Warsaw Ghetto for the Jews or Guernica for the Basques. The town became suddenly and horribly famous on March 16, 1988, when it was almost obliterated by Iraqi bombs and its people were savaged by nerve gas and other poison agents.

"I saw the planes come," Amina Mohammed Amin told me through an interpreter. "I saw the bombs fall and explode. I tried to get out of town, but then I felt a sharp, burning sensation on my skin and in my eyes."

Mrs. Amin then did something that astounded me. Without warning, she drew up her voluminous dress and exposed her naked flank. Her whole left side, from mid-calf to armpit, was seared with lurid burns. And they were *still* burning.

"The Red Crescent took me to a hospital in Iran," she said, "and then I had five months in a London hospital. But the burns need to be treated every day." Even as we spoke, her daughters began applying salves to the exposed area. It was hard to look, and hard not to look.

Mrs. Amin said that 25 members of her family had been killed that day, which was a terrible figure even if you allowed mentally for the way Kurds talk of extended families. Nizar Hassan, the chief physician at the hospital, told me later that the town lost 5,000 people in the attack, out of a total population swollen by refugees to 70,000. (Later estimates pushed the doctor's body count above 6,000.)

I found one of the causes of the horror in a blitzed building. Here, lodged in a basement corner where it fell from an Iraqi Air Force bomber, was a wicked-looking piece of hardware with stencil markings on its side. Worried about fallout from the Halabjah escapade, the soldiers of Saddam had entered the town and carried off all the evidence. Or almost all of it. There was the bomb, and there were the survivors. Halabjah would, after all, be remembered.

Politics follow Kurdish immigrants from Turkey to Düsseldorf, where thousands march to protest the jailing of 16 Kurds belonging to a terrorist group that supports Kurdish independence. Khalil Barakat (below) fled to Cologne from Syria with his family of 12 in 1988 to escape political persecution. They are among an estimated 400,000 Kurds living in Germany.

Taking arms against neo-Nazi attacks on foreigners, members of a Kurdish youth gang called the Sioux brandish gas-pellet guns in Berlin's Alexanderplatz. While these legal guns are more for effect than firepower, in Berlin alone some 5,000 young Kurds have formed gangs for self-defense.

YOU CAN'T TAKE MUCH from people who have nothing to lose, yet I was impressed at how the Kurds make the best of hopeless situations. They are tough and adaptable, which is perhaps the key to their longevity in this war-ravaged region. Their resilience may face its latest test sometime this summer. Iraqi troops have been massing just outside Free Kurdistan, held at bay by fighter planes of the post-Desert Storm coalition. When that air cover is withdrawn, it is likely that the Kurds will again be under direct attack.

I was resting near the town of As Sulaymaniyah, then held by Iraqi troops. We were roasting a lamb for dinner. In every direction the land looked naked and lunar, stripped of life. It was hot. I wondered, out loud, if there was any beer in this wilderness.

"Beer," said one of my Kurdish bodyguards. "The Englishman wants beer!"

One of the fighting men dropped what he was doing and walked up to me. "How many Saddams you have?" he asked.

"Many Saddams," I replied.

We were talking money. Some of the bills in Iraqi currency are printed with the portrait of Saddam Hussein, leading the Kurds to joke incessantly about "dirty money."

"For 50 Saddams," the guerrilla said gravely, "I can bring quite a lot of beer."

I peeled off 60—it seemed no time for penny-pinching—and my man vanished into the dark. He was back in an hour, lugging an old sack containing cans of frosted Western ale.

"Ali, how on earth?"

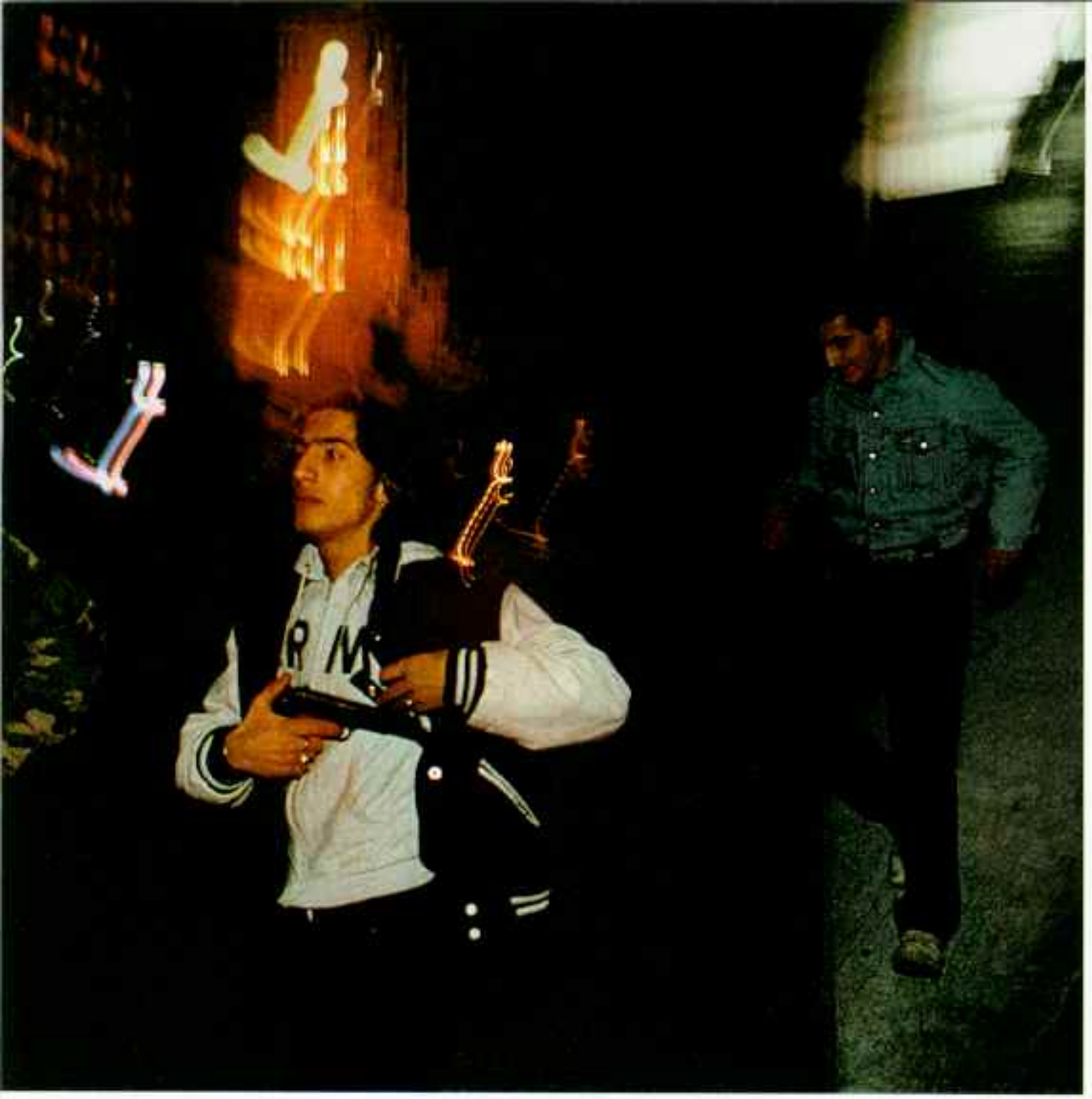
Ali smiled, revealing nothing, but I suspected that he had struck a deal with a bored Iraqi guard in town.

A few days later, passing the war-scarred settlement of Rawanduz on our way back to the Turkish border, I saw other evidence of Kurdish enterprise. The owner of a roadside café had scrounged canned goods from somewhere and kept them chilled in a mountain stream, ready for sale. Small boys sold Western cigarettes still in their cellophane-wrapped packages. (How had they gotten them?) Families sat eating, half in and half out of cannibalized cars and trucks that were kept going on God knows what. The café proprietor and his wife were singing away, dishing up kabobs in exchange for fistfuls of Saddams.

These people had been bombed and routed, but they had come back and were evidently enjoying their moment of independence. Kurds, once regarded as suspicious of strangers, now took every Westerner as a friend.

"You will tell of us?" asked the old cook, as I pressed my last Saddams on him. "Tell people not to forget?"

The Kurds usually make their appearance in other peoples' narratives by virtue of a readiness to quit their mountain fastness and engage in battle. But their tendency is to go back to the mountains as soon as war is over.



Unfortunately, the Kurds live in an area that is strategically important to three great modern nationalisms, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, and that is enormously rich in the two great natural resources of oil and water. The tendency of nationalism is to try to assimilate minorities and to invent a new "nation" such as Iraq (which is actually three communities, the Sunni Muslim ruling group, the southern Shiite Muslim majority, and the northern Kurds, mostly Sunni, rolled into one uneasy state). And the tendency of Middle Eastern politics is to establish control over oil fields and headwaters, not just for their own sake but before anyone else does.

The Kurds themselves have certain fundamental similarities. All are survivors. All are well acquainted with dispersal and persecution. But I began to discern variations in their status throughout the region. In Jerusalem, for instance, there is a small but prosperous middle class of Jewish Kurds who live in peace. In Beirut, however, Kurds are the lowest of the low. A large Kurdish community has been in Lebanon since the beginning of this century, but on the identity card that Kurdish immigrants must carry, the words "domicile under review" appear in the space for citizenship. This puts the Kurds into a category of seasonal or migrant workers. In Lebanon the Kurd is almost always a menial, depicted by Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury as a faceless toiler and random victim.

Stateless in a state where statehood is itself a tenuous thing, Lebanese Kurds have thrown their support to the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK. This is a Marxist organization run by an enigmatic figure named Abdullah Öcalan,

In the dock for terrorism, Yildiz Alpdogan denied charges of belonging to the violently separatist PKK, or Kurdistan Workers Party, which seeks to create an independent

state in southeastern Turkey. Convicted in Diyarbakır of membership in the outlawed party, she was eventually sentenced to twelve and a half years in prison.


Coca-Cola

Success in Turkey once exacted a heavy price—cultural assimilation. In Diyarbakır, the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan, Kurds now vigorously pursue their rights in market and tea garden. Taking a study break, law student Fadime Kirmizi embodies the new opportunities opening up for Kurdish women.

with a camp in Lebanon's notorious Bekaa Valley. Here the PKK operates under Syrian protection, carrying on a guerrilla war against Turkey. Syria provides an umbrella for the same reason that umbrellas are always provided—water. In Turkish Kurdistan the huge new Atatürk Dam allows the Turks to control the flow of the Euphrates River before it crosses the Syrian frontier. Anxious for leverage, the Syrian regime uses the Kurds to remind the Turks not to exploit this advantage.

THOSE IN THE RANK AND FILE of the PKK seem unaware that they are foot soldiers in the game of nations. Jawan and Soubhi, two young people who met me in Beirut, conducted me through a series of safe houses (never as reassuring as the phrase suggests, especially in Beirut). All my questions, they said, could be answered when I met the man they call Apo—Uncle: Abdullah Öcalan.

When I arrived at the camp known as the Mahsum Korkmaz Academy, for a PKK member who died in a battle in Turkey, I found hundreds of young people in well-cut, olive drab military fatigues, much more disciplined and military in aspect than any of the local militias, or indeed than either the Syrian or Lebanese Armies. Men and women mixed freely, a change from the monastic character of peshmerga camps in Iraq.

Hearing English spoken, I soon found myself talking with Milan, an olive-skinned teenager who had come from Australia, where her Kurdish parents had gone for work. Now she was a soldier in the war against Turkey.

"I'm trying to forget I ever knew English," she said. "All I care about now is Kurdistan." Unlike rival Kurdish parties in Iraq that seek autonomy within that nation, the PKK calls for a separate Kurdish state spanning the existing borders of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. As if to prove her dedication, Milan had just been to a Maoist-style "self-criticism session," held under an awning just off the hot square at the camp's center. Face alight with belief, she invited me to watch rehearsals for the forthcoming PKK fiesta. In a few days tens of thousands of Kurds would converge on the camp for dances and speeches, with *Serouk Apo*—Apo the Leader—the guest of honor.

Apo himself, whom I met later that day, is a stern critic of the Kurdish people and their attachment to tradition. "We are a feudal society," he told me, "and our leaders have been chieftains who betray us. Our cultural and political level is low." He pointed to dark moments in the Kurdish past, such as the role played by Kurdish mercenaries in the Turkish slaughter of the Christian Armenians in 1915. He said that the Kurds were victims of the divide-and-rule mentality and could always be counted on to fight among themselves. There was some truth to all this, but Apo's own chieftain-like appearance and the tame eagle tethered rather eccentrically to his desk didn't inspire the absolute confidence he demanded.

AN EXPERIENCED KURD can tell his grandchildren of betrayal by colonial Britain and France, of promises made by Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey to support the Kurds for as long as they were fighting only on the rival's territory, of interventions in Kurdistan by Israel to weaken Arab nationalist regimes, and of promises made by both Cold War superpowers that turned out to be false.

Ever since President Woodrow Wilson incorporated promises for Kurdish autonomy into his Fourteen Points following World War I, the Kurds have traditionally looked to the United States as their deliverer from old injustices. George Bush appeared to sympathize with their cause during Desert Storm, yet his subsequent lack of support has left them baffled. Western politicians seem unable to appreciate the depth of the Kurdish yearning for a homeland. I sat with Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, at his guerrilla headquarters in northern Iraq. He was telling me about the city he was most fiercely contesting with Saddam Hussein. "Kirkuk," he declared, "is our Jerusalem."

Lacking an alternative homeland of any kind, Kurds can emigrate, but they can't escape. In the grim factory belt that stretches between the Spandau and Charlottenburg areas of Berlin, Kurds work to produce the brand name goods of Osram, Siemens, and Volkswagen. The German government doesn't recognize them as Kurds but only as the Turkish passport holders that they are. They tend to cluster in rundown areas like Kreuzberg.

My guide to this world was a young man named Bayram Sherif Kaya, born in Germany of Kurdish parents who emigrated from southeastern Turkey. He divided his day between a Kurdish-language radio station, a kindergarten for Kurdish children, and various Kurdish relief organizations, all of which he helped run. "Fortunately I speak perfect German and I look European, so I don't have the problems that most of our people have."

Bayram doubts that he can go home again. "We are watched by the Turkish Embassy,

Embracing traditional ways, members of the Beritan tribe camp for the summer near Karlıova, Turkey. Despite government efforts to force them to settle down, these pastoralists migrate more than 500 miles round-trip between summer and winter pastures, subsisting on the milk, yogurt, and other sheep products they also sell in nearby markets.

Live ammunition focuses the minds of trainees at the Mahsum Korkmaz Academy in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. Graduates will join the PKK's insurgency in Turkey, where more than 3,700 people have been killed since 1984. Syria supports the PKK, using it as a bargaining chip in water-rights negotiations with Turkey.

which hates Kurdish nationalism. We are watched by Turkish extremists, who believe all Kurds are dogs. We are attacked by German fascists who shout '*Ausländer raus*—Foreigners out!' and paint it on our walls."

All over Kreuzberg, with its squatters and rent-controlled communes, were the slogans of different Turkish and Kurdish political factions. I paid a visit to Hînbûn, a women's center in Spandau that was originally founded to teach literacy but now serves as a sort of community center in hard times. "Most of the Kurds here come from one single town called Muş, in the Lake Van region of eastern Turkey," I was told by Aso Ağace, a Kurdish woman who works at the center. "Often they can speak German but not write it, so they need help with form filling, and they need help with the schools, which don't recognize Kurdish as a language."

Hînbûn is a counterpart to the male-dominated side of Kurdish life, in that it is for women only and acts as a support group. It tries to make Kurdish housewives and women workers feel more secure. "People are afraid," Aso Ağace told me. "We have also seen pressure from the Turkish Consulate on the municipal government of Berlin, which used to help us distribute our literature." Here, too, one found a sort of transplanted ghetto solidarity. The problem, as ever, was that of trying to survive as Kurds, while not seeming alien to a larger society.

IT IS DIFFICULT for an outsider to learn the essentials of the Kurdish cultural style. For one thing, although most Kurds who are Muslims adhere to the Sunni sect, some are Shiites; still other Kurds practice one of several indigenous religions. In addition, the Kurdish language is divided by dialects and subdialects. Kurds in northern Iraq, eastern Turkey, and the former Soviet Union speak Kurmanji, while those in western Turkey speak Zaza; in southern Iraq Sorani prevails, in Iran the Guran and Laki dialects. This problem of Babel is an impediment to Kurdish identity. Nonetheless, all Kurds can recognize Kurdish. Scholars at the Institut Kurde in Paris are at work on a Kurdish-French dictionary of about 50,000 words.

While this codification goes on, the mass of Kurds keep together with a sort of musical vernacular. During my sojourn in Iraq, for example, everyone was glued to cassette tapes by singer Juwan Hajo, a Syrian Kurd whose productions are bootlegged all over the region. And in Diyarbakır the cassette business proved so popular that the Turkish authorities relaxed their ban on Kurdish music—the ban that my friend Hasan had so casually defied.

Kurds who have made the United States their home live in communities from California and Texas to Brooklyn, New York, where the Kurdish Library and Museum acts as a focal point for Kurdish affairs and crafts.

Commanding the devotion of tens of thousands of Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon, PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan promises to lead them to the victory of an independent Kurdistan. Apo, or Uncle, as he is called, greets some of the 20,000 gathered at a festival in the Bekaa Valley to support the organization.

Most of them live in and around San Diego, where they began settling after the collapse of another Kurdish revolt in Iraq in 1975. The late Mustafa Barzani, father of political leader Masoud Barzani, came to the U. S. first, followed by a few hundred of his retinue.

A community leader sponsored a social evening for me in the suburb of Chula Vista. Though almost all present had made good lives for themselves, they struck me as stranded in time, compelled to watch the sufferings of their kinsmen from afar. They had all recently been, once more, taken up as a cause during the gulf war, and then dropped. There was much wistful talk, over tea and cakes, of the way it had been fashionable to be a Kurd during Desert Storm and of how newspapers never sent photographers any more.

"We are known as a refugee people," said Jamal Kasim, who runs a trucking business. He's a burly, smiling fellow who doubles as California spokesman for the Kurdistan Democratic Party. "So our image depends on the daily and weekly news," he went on. "People are generally friendly, and they sympathize with Kurds, especially since Halabjah, but Americans these days are not so interested in foreign affairs, and there are many who do not like immigrants of any kind."

Yet again, it seemed, the Kurds had pitched their tents in a difficult environment—the San Diego-Tijuana border, with its daily flux of illegals and its mounting anxiety over language, culture, and integration. (One local Kurd, I later found, had resolved the problem of his own assimilation by landing a job with the U. S. Border Patrol.)

Our gathering in Chula Vista included a food store manager, an architect, a free-lance journalist, and two computer engineers. Only one guest was unemployed. The two computer engineers worked for Ted Turner; one of them, Alan Zangana, was very proud of his company's having colorized "a film you may have seen called *Casablanca*."

Successful as they were, though, I noticed again the absence of women, a tender subject that caused a mini-controversy when I brought it up. Alan Zangana picked up an argument I had been hearing off and on since I had innocently asked, back in Shaqlawah, where all the women had got to. One of my Kurdish guides then took to pointing every time he saw a female, as if to vindicate the good name of Kurdistan, "Look. There is one. Now

In and out of Turkish jails for political activities, 98-year-old Kurdish cleric Mele Abdurrahman lamented that he would not live to see a free Kurdistan; he died last February. Whether seeking autonomy or true independence, Kurds struggle to secure their place as a free people in command of their own destiny.

are you satisfied?" It is easy for Westerners to mistake the Kurds for backward fundamentalists, but Alan maintained that it was high time that women played an equal role in the political struggle. Nobody exactly disagreed, although I had the sense that I had stumbled into an argument they would have again.

I HAD ALMOST ABANDONED MY DREAM of finding a "typical Kurd" when I was introduced to Sheikh Talib Berzinji of Los Angeles. "Sheikh" is an honorific title; in the old country his family claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Talib himself, with his leonine head and ample military mustache, is from the area of As Sulaymaniyah. He had been a follower of Mustafa Barzani—"Ah, the old general!"

He now divides his time between running a laundry service in Los Angeles, which he must do to make a living, and writing and translating plays, which he would do full-time if he could. He has translated *The Merchant of Venice* into Kurdish.

But his days are filled with the endless responsibilities of being a Kurd. The old sheikh explains to journalists and radio interviewers who the Kurds are and how long they have been fighting. He has to raise money for refugees. He has to think of his extended family back in the perilous mountains. A spread of the hands: "You see how it is."

If I had started my quest by talking to Sheikh Berzinji, a lot of what he said would have seemed either mysterious or self-pitying. But now I saw the stages through which he had passed. The Kurds are homeless even at home, and stateless abroad. Their ancient woes are locked inside an obscure language. They have powerful, impatient enemies and a few rather easily bored friends. Their traditional society is considered a nuisance at worst and a curiosity at best. For them the act of survival, even identity itself, is a kind of victory. The old man, holding on to his Kurdishness in a choice of hostile or indifferent environments, is the Kurd for all seasons. □