3 How Conflict Came About

Public opinion may react with shock and surprise when the news media bring accounts of sudden confrontations between ethnic groups somewhere in the world. But ethnic conflicts do not arise spontaneously, and usually when they erupt in violence or have reached a level of intensity which draws the attention of the mass media, a period of preparation and incubation has passed. How do such conflicts arise? What are the factors which lead to these confrontations? Could they have been avoided? What interests do they address? And more to the point, who are the agents or actors in the conflict? And what are the social forces driving it?

When searching for the sources of contemporary ethnic conflicts it becomes clear that in many cases the roots of the confrontation can be found in the way a modern state, when originally established, related to the different ethnic groups within its borders, through constitutional arrangements, electoral systems, legislation or simply political culture and practice. Most post-colonial states adopted, at least formally, some kind of republican democracy in its parliamentary or presidential variety. How questions pertaining to the ethnic heterogeneity of the population were dealt with by successive governments (including colonial as well as sovereign administrations) has turned out to be directly relevant to the emergence or non-emergence of ethnic conflicts in later years. Most existing states are multi-ethnic or multinational. Ethnic diversity does not in itself signal the inevitability of conflict. It is only when ethnic diversity is politically mobilized to serve specific interests related to governance that the potential for conflict between ethnic groups becomes realized. A brief look at how conflicts arose in some cases will help us appreciate the factors involved in the emergence of ethnic conflicts around the world.

1. KURDISTAN

Perhaps the longest and oldest conflict included in the UNRISD project is the struggle of the Kurdish people for self-determination, or for at least a measure of liberty, equality and autonomy in the different states in which they live. This struggle has been studied by Gérard Chaliand, and his report was published in 1992.¹

The Kurds have traditionally occupied a large mountainous area which covers parts of Turkey, Iran and Iraq, and a small fraction of Syria. While
they have never had an independent state of their own, the Kurds maintain a strong ethnic identity which distinguishes them from the surrounding Turks, Persians and Arabs. Nowadays the Kurdish population is estimated at between 20 and 25 million, of whom 12 million live in Turkey, 4 million in Iraq, 7 million in Iran and fewer than 1 million in Syria. Most of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but while they share their religious identity with the other peoples of the region, the Kurdish language in its various dialects is quite distinct from the region’s other major languages (Turkish, Farsi, Arabic). The Kurds were incorporated into the Ottoman empire in the sixteenth century, and because of their strategic position along the Persian border, as well as their rugged mountain terrain, they were able to maintain a certain degree of local autonomy within the empire. When the Ottomans attempted to tighten their control during the nineteenth century, they were met by a series of generally unsuccessful Kurdish revolts. The first Kurdish nationalist stirrings occurred at the turn of the century. After the First World War, when new states were created from the ruins of the defeated empires, some Kurdish leaders and intellectuals hoped for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. However, their aspirations were frustrated by the play of the great powers and the opposition of Turkey and Iran. This may be considered the beginning of the ‘Kurdish problem’ in contemporary times. By the Ottoman Peace Treaty of Sèvres (1920), the Kurds were granted local autonomy and actually promised the possibility of independence at a later stage. However, Kemalist Turkey steadfastly opposed these and other provisions of the Sèvres treaty. Consequently, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) included Articles on the rights of minorities in Turkey but did not mention the Kurds at all. The subsequent national boundaries resulted in Greater Kurdistan being divided among five states – Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey and the Soviet Union. Since that time, the Kurds have been involved intermittently in political and sometimes military struggle for their independent statehood or for local autonomy. The nature of the conflict has varied from country to country and is related to the different policies that each of these states has adopted regarding its Kurdish minority. Such policies have ranged from brutal repression, to forced assimilation, to political accommodation and, at least formally, in some instances, local autonomy. The strategies and tactics of the various Kurdish organizations reflect these different policies, and so far this has prevented the emergence of a unified Kurdish movement. Given the strategic geopolitical importance of Kurdistan in western Asia (particularly its oil fields), it is not surprising that ever since the 1920s the Great Powers (Great Britain, United States, France and the Soviet Union) have been deeply