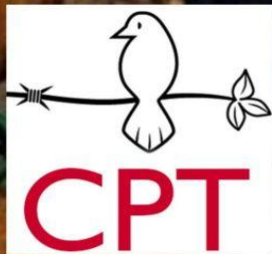


No Return

The Civilian Impact of Turkey's
Operation Claw-Lightning



No Return: The Civilian Impact of Turkey's Operation Claw-Lightning

June 2021

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Summary

This report documents the impact of the Turkish Armed Forces' (TAF) Operation Claw-Lightning on the civilian population living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Operation Claw-Lightning is a cross-border military operation that Turkey began on April 23, 2021. Turkey claims that the operation targets the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to eliminate terrorism in the Kurdistan Region. To launch its operation, Turkey has deployed paratroopers across the Turkey-Iraq border to construct military bases in the Kurdistan Region with the accompaniment of aerial and artillery bombardments. As Turkey has constructed these bases, it has further advanced into the Kurdistan Region to establish what Turkey claims is a security zone, spanning along the Turkey-Iraq border. While Turkey has gained control over Kurdistan Region territory, clashes between the Turkish military and the PKK have intensified in the region. Turkey has then conducted bombardments in the region targeting the PKK; though, as Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) reports, many of Turkey's aerial and artillery strikes have directly targeted civilians.

While Turkey claims to target the PKK in Operation Claw-Lightning, the reality is that civilians living in the border regions are most critically impacted by Turkey's bombings. These bombardments have devastated the region where hundreds of families live. Thousands of dunams of land and approximately 1,300 beehives have been destroyed, all of which are crucial resources for families. Turkey's bombings not only threaten the livelihood of families, but also their lives. Four civilians have so far been injured by Turkey's bombardments, and more than 1,500 civilians from 22 villages have evacuated their villages to escape Turkey's assault. CPT fears that these families may never have the ability to return to their homes, as Turkey has built nearby military bases armed with artillery that now threaten the lives of civilians.

Families living in the border regions of Kurdistan Region should not be forced to be targets in Turkey's conflict with the PKK. To ensure civilian safety, Turkey should immediately cease its military operations targeting civilians in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Only then will families be able to return to their homelands.

The Beginning of Operation Claw-Lightning in Kesta Village

On April 23, Turkey began Operation Claw-Lightning by bombing the outskirts of Kesta village at 6:35 PM as families were preparing to break their fast for Ramadan. The Turkish military continued to target the mountainous region of Kesta in the coming week, as warplanes, drones, artillery, and helicopters were deployed to bombard the region. Turkish Armed Forces also deployed paratroopers from helicopters who constructed a military base overlooking Kesta village, leading to clashes with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The Turkish military's clashes with the PKK have severely impacted families in Kesta village. Kak Mahmoud, who is the mukhtar¹ of Kesta, told CPT, "The fights are the worst in the nights. Every night we take the children out of the village and bring them to Chalke to spend the night there. In the early morning we are bringing them back. They are terrified." After Kak Mahoud reported this to CPT, Turkey continued to shell the region with artillery. On May 4, the artillery reached the homes of 34 families, all of whom immediately evacuated the area after the shelling and sought refuge at their relatives' homes in Chalke and other nearby villages.

Bombings targeting Kesta have not only traumatized civilians, but also have devastated agriculture in the region. On May 3, CPT documented large swathes of scorched agriculture and hundreds of burned fruit trees on the Kesta mountainside. Kak Saeed, who is one of the elders of Kesta, said, "This is the land of our ancestors. We don't want to leave. What Saddam did not accomplish, Turkey may now be able to finish."²



Smoke from Turkey's bombing raises above Kesta village

¹ Village leader.

² Kak Saeed's quote refers to Saddam Hussein's historic genocidal campaign against the Kurdish people, which included the systematic destruction of Kurdish villages and forced relocation of rural populations. He fears that Turkey may destroy his village permanently.

Chalke Village: Nowhere to Escape

When villagers fled from Kesta to escape Operation Claw-Lightning, they went to Chalke village. Within days of reaching their refuge, the families were forced to flee again on May 8, when Turkey conducted artillery bombardments that hit Chalke. The artillery bombing forced all 23 families in the area to evacuate. Mukhtar Mahmoud said to CPT, “The families are desperate. They are living in tents. They had to sell their animals. The bombings destroyed all our beehives. We need help.”



Mukhtar Mahmoud and Kak Saeed speak with two members of CPT Iraqi Kurdistan

Life Under Threat in Hirure Village

On the first night of Operation Claw-Lightning, Turkey bombed the mountainside above Hirure with drones and warplanes in 12 aerial assaults. The Turkish military deployed helicopters to drop off paratroopers for a ground invasion. The Turkish forces constructed a communications tower on a mountain range overlooking Hirure and its valley, as well as a new road to connect this base to Turkey. When members of CPT met with families in Hirure, a group of children and adults were peering through binoculars at this new base that the Turkish military constructed.

Since the beginning of Operation Claw-Lightning, Turkey has conducted multiple bombings on the outskirts of Hirure, where villagers harvest wild plants and graze their animals. As villagers farmed, drones frequently flew above them. Residents of Hirure village reported to CPT that

both the bombings and the sounds of drones have traumatized their children. Kak Azad, the mukhtar of Hirure, reported to CPT: “The children are terrified when they hear the drones or warplanes flying. They scream and run to hide in their homes.” Half of the 44 families from Hirure have fled their homes to escape the trauma of Turkey’s escalating bombardments.

Those families who did stay in Hirure have now faced threats by the Turkish military to immediately leave. On May 28, Abbas Mustafa with two other farmers from Hirure went to irrigate their fields on the mountainside above Hirure. A group of Turkish soldiers armed with rifles accompanied by a Kurdish speaking translator came down from the base and approached the farmers. The soldiers told the farmers from Hirure that they are not allowed to come to their fields anymore or drive vehicles on the road outside of the village. The soldiers said that if the farmers come to their fields they will be considered members of the PKK and will be bombarded. After this, Abbas Mustafa and other families evacuated Hirure. Abbas told CPT, “I will never be able to go back to my land.” The Turkish military’s threat to villagers became a reality on June 1, when Turkish forces fired artillery at Ramazan Ali, a 70 year old farmer, injuring him as he was irrigating his fields in Hirure.

Turkey’s Operation Strikes East of Kesta

After the Turkish military constructed 4 bases on the mountain range where Kesta and Hirure are located, the military began to target villages east of Kesta. The military’s artillery began to hit lands belonging to villages of Adne, Ure, Seraro, Miska, and Dishishe which are located between Kesta and Kani Masi.

In Adne, a Turkish bombardment destroyed a water project, which distributed water to nine villages. 12 families were displaced from this attack. In Miska, a Turkish bombardment damaged several homes and a church. As a result, 16 of the 24 families living in the village have now fled. In Seraro, all 15 families in the area have fled their villages as a result of Turkey’s bombardments. In Dishishe, 16 families initially left the area to escape Turkey’s attacks. The remaining 6 families fled Dishishe on May 25 after a farmer was injured in a shelling. Turkey also conducted artillery shellings in Ure—the 6 families residing in the village decided to remain because they feared that they would not be able to return to their homes if they left.

By the end of May, at least 720 people had been displaced from the villages of Kesta, Chalke, Hirure, Adne, Miska, Seraro, and Dishishe because of Operation Claw-Lightning.



Families from Kesta leaving their homes after experiencing Turkey's bombardments

Economic and Environmental Impact on Kani Masi Sub-District

The economy of Kani Masi is contingent on many forms of farming, including beekeeping, raising livestock, and farming agriculture. Both farming agriculture and beekeeping are the primary source of income for more than half of the people who live in Kani Masi. Turkey's Operation Claw-Lightning has now critically impacted the economy of Kani Masi.

Since the Operation Claw-Lightning started, Turkey's bombings have burned more than 7,000 dunams of land and destroyed at least 800 beehives, making it impossible for many families to continue their labor in Kani Masi. Many families in the area have now sold their animals after Turkey's artillery shelling reached their homes, as the families fear they will never be able to return to their farms and continue raising the animals. Families are also not able to harvest wild plants in the mountains near Kani Masi since Turkey has begun intensively bombing the area.

In addition to farming, the economy of Kani Masi depends on tourism. Serbest Sabrie, the mayor of Kani Masi, reported to CPT that Kani Masi was an active tourist destination before Turkey's military operation: "Tourists from other cities and districts were visiting us to spend their weekends and vacations, and they came for picnics, but now, because of the current events, they are reluctant to come because the area is unsafe."

Kani Masi has also been environmentally impacted by Turkey's military operation. After taking control of Kesta mountain in Operation Claw-Lightning, Turkey began clearcutting trees on the mountain and selling the wood to Turkish furniture companies. Turkey has been devastating forests in the same way in the mountain region of Haftanin, which Turkish forces have controlled since 2020.

Operation Claw-Lightning Impacts in Avashin Region

Turkish Armed Forces further escalated its military operation by conducting heavy aerial bombings in Avashin on April 23. After this assault, the Turkish military deployed soldiers approximately 6-9 km into Kurdistan Region territory which provoked heavy clashes with the PKK already established in the area. In total, 16 villages have been abandoned in Avashin since Turkey began Operation Claw-Lightning in the region.

At this moment, not even local authorities are able to enter Avashin due to the constant bombings and clashes. In a conversation with CPT, Amedi district mayor Ismail Mustafa said, "Turkish Claw-Lightning military operation became the source of terror for the people of the region. The villagers don't feel safe. We demand that Turkey halts its operation and the people of the area shall not pay the price of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK's guerrillas any further."

Civilian Injuries from Operation Claw-Lightning

Up to June 2, Turkey's Operation Claw-Lighting has injured four civilians: Bawer Ahmed, Ali Muhsin, Hasan Muhsin, and Ramazan Ali.³

The first person to be injured was Bawer Ahmed. On May 25, at 10:30 in the morning, Bawer was with a group of farmers from Dishishe, all of whom were irrigating their fields when the Turkish military conducted an artillery shelling on the village. Bawer Ahmed, who is 20 years old, was injured from shrapnel that penetrated his leg, which caused severe bleeding. After this attack, all residents of Dishishe fled the village.

On May 26, Turkey's military operation caused two additional injuries. At 2:30 in the morning, the Turkish military shelled Bhare village, west of Kesta mountain in Darkar sub-district, Zakho district. The flying shrapnel wounded two brothers: Ali Muhsin, 16 years old, and Hasan Muhsin, 20 years old. Both of whom were guarding a flock of a thousand sheep and sleeping at the time of the attack.

³ Ramazan Ali's injury is recorded in the section, Life Under Threat in Hirure Village.



Ramazan Ali hospitalized after sustaining injuries from Turkey's artillery shelling

Conclusion

From Kesta to Dishishe, Turkey conducted Operation Claw-Lightning with a similar strategy. Initially, Turkey would bomb a region in Kurdistan Region territory and then immediately deploy paratroopers to construct military bases after the bombings concluded. PKK in the region would often be provoked by Turkey's presence in the area and engage in armed clashes with Turkey's military. Turkey would then bomb the area again and continue constructing bases. After constructing the bases, Turkey would begin launching artillery strikes at nearby villages, striking fear into the local families living there. Once the artillery shelling came close or even hit civilian homes, families would flee the area, clearing the region for Turkey's control.

Since launching this operation, Turkey first advanced 9 km south from the Turkey-Iraq border to construct 4 military bases. As the operation continued, Turkish military went further east to villages like Dishishe, Ure, Seraro, Miska and Adne. Turkey now controls several mountain regions engulfing the Turkey-Iraq border. But this is not a new strategy. Turkey has conducted a similar strategy multiple times since December 2017, as it has advanced 6 to 35 km south to some areas from its border, built bases, expanded its territory, and displaced civilians in the Kurdistan Region like Sidakan, Haftanin, and Zap.

While Turkey claims that Operation Claw-Lightning eliminates the threat of terrorism by building a security zone to protect itself from the PKK, the reality is that Operation Claw-Lightning has brought war to regions inhabited by civilians in the Kurdistan Region. Those who are most impacted by this conflict are neither Turkey nor the PKK, but rather the families living in the Kurdistan Region where Turkey and the PKK wage war. With Operation Claw-Lightning, Turkey has turned the border region of Iraqi Kurdistan into a battleground for its conflict with the PKK, and it is impacting every fabric of life for the families who live there.

Thus far, Turkey's military operation has displaced more than 1,500 people from 22 villages. CPT fears that families from villages in Kani Masi and Avashin will never be able to return to their homes, as Turkey has established control over these regions that we fear may be permanent. Operation Claw-Lightning has also devastated critical resources for these families, including their ability to farm their land, raise animals, and harvest plants. Those families who decide to remain in their villages even after their homes have been bombed still face the risk of death and injury. As long as Turkey proceeds to conduct military operations like Operation Claw-Lightning, civilians in the Kurdistan Region will continue to face the risk of injury, displacement, and death.

Recommendations

Christian Peacemaker Teams recommends the following:

- Turkey ceases Operation Claw-Lightning in the Kurdistan Region and allows for the unconditional return of all civilian population to their villages and farms.
- The Iraqi Government and Kurdistan Regional Government ensure that the lives and rights of civilian populations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are protected and that displaced and otherwise affected families are provided material support and compensation for their losses.
- The United Nations, the European Union, and other international organizations launch an investigation into allegations of violations of the International Humanitarian Law by the Turkish Armed Forces in Iraq, specifically the principles of distinction and proportionality.
- Countries which provide military support to Turkey halt their support for as long as Turkey continues to target and displace civilians.

Appendix:

1. Local Context



Burned land from Turkey's bombardments on Kesta Mountain

Kesta mountain range lies a few kilometers south of the Turkey-Iraq border—with an altitude of 2,300 meters AMSL, it is the highest mountain in Kani Masi sub-district. The southern fertile slopes of the mountain range are covered in fruit trees, agricultural land, and pastures that provide the primary means of sustenance for more than a thousand people who live in Kesta, Hirure, Chalke, Ure, Adne, Seraro, Dishishe, Miska, and other villages. The main produce in the villages are fruits, vegetables, spices, and wild plants. The villages also produce much honey, cheese, yogurt, meat, and eggs.

For many families the villages are their only homes. Families also have homes in the nearby towns Begova, Batifa and Zakho district. Some live as far as Duhok city because of job opportunities or their children's education, and they come to the villages seasonally to cultivate their fields and care for their livestock. The villages are diverse in religious identity. All villages are home to families who identify as Muslim Kurdish or Christian Assyrian.

Avashin is a mountainous region 80 km east of Kesta. Avashin and Basya rivers, important tributaries of Great Zab river and Tigris, cut through the mountains of Avashin. Besides its rich agricultural and water resources, the region has a significant presence of PKK guerilla members. Since Turkish airstrikes and operations started in the region in the 1990s, 85 villages have been abandoned by the local population.

2. Map of Turkish Military Control and Expansion in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Turkish military control and expansion in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

