**Report on Turkish Attacks on Kurdish Civilians in Northern Iraq**

By Jake Batinga, Peace in Kurdistan, April 2023

The Kurds are the largest ethnic population in the world without a state. Originally, the Kurdish national movement [advocated](https://genderandsecurity.org/sites/default/files/Rosa_-_Non-territorial_autonomy_G_equality_Rojava.pdf) for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, but in recent years the movement’s advocacy has turned away from statehood and towards a [demand](https://genderandsecurity.org/sites/default/files/Rosa_-_Non-territorial_autonomy_G_equality_Rojava.pdf) for increased Kurdish autonomy, decentralized self-governance, and civil and community rights within Turkey.

Over the last five decades, Turkey has responded to the Kurdish struggle for self-determination with extreme violence and repression. With military aid and weapons transfers, the United States and United Kingdom have supported Turkish atrocities against the Kurds. In the 1990s, Turkey used [American](https://theintercept.com/2019/10/07/kurds-syria-turkey-trump-betrayal/) weapons and [British](https://www.hrw.org/legacy/summaries/s.turkey95n.html) armored vehicles to depopulate over 3,000 Kurdish villages in Southeastern Turkey, killing tens of thousands of Kurds in the process. According to a [report](https://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/turkey0305/3.htm#_Toc97005223) by Human Rights Watch on the Turkish atrocities against the Kurds in the 1990s:

Evacuations were unlawful and violent. Security forces would surround a village using helicopters, armored vehicles, troops, and village guards, and burn stored produce, agricultural equipment, crops, orchards, forests, and livestock. They set fire to houses, often giving the inhabitants no opportunity to retrieve their possessions. During the course of such operations, security forces frequently abused and humiliated villagers, stole their property and cash, and ill-treated or tortured them before herding them onto the roads and away from their former homes. The operations were marked by scores of “disappearances” and extrajudicial executions. By the mid-1990s, more than 3,000 villages had been virtually wiped from the map, and, according to official figures, 378,335 Kurdish villagers had been displaced and left homeless.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the PKK–the Kurdistan Workers Party–frequently [called](https://www.routledge.com/The-Kurdish-National-Movement-in-Turkey-From-Protest-to-Resistance/Gunes/p/book/9781138898417) for ceasefires, which Turkey either outright rejected, or accepted and then violated. In 2013, the PKK–the Kurdistan Workers Party–and the Turkish government reached a [peace agreement](https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkey-and-pkk-saving-peace-process) which largely terminated the violence. However, in July of 2015, two Turkish police officers were [killed](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2016-03-14/between-ankara-and-rojava), and the Turkish government blamed Kurdish forces, broke the peace agreement, and immediately launched a massive operation against the Kurds. Turkey arrested nine Kurds it claimed carried out the attack against the police officers. However, Turkey was unable to provide any evidence linking Kurdish suspects to the attack, and all of the defendants were [acquitted](https://ipa.news/2019/04/16/acquittal-of-nine-ceylanpinar-murder-suspects-upheld/) in a Turkish court.

Since Turkey’s violation of the peace agreement in 2015, Turkey has continuously bombed and invaded the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria. Over the last 8 years, Turkey has bombed Northern Iraq and Syria thousands of times since 2015, including 130 drone strikes in Syria in [2022 alone](https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2023/03/incessant-war-turkeys-drone-campaign-in-nes-2022/). These attacks are supported by the United States and United Kingdom with billions of dollars worth of weapons transfers as well as cooperation in joint weapons development projects. For example, Turkey’s F-16 jets and the Bayraktar drone are the weapons systems most frequently used to attack Kurdish targets. The United States supplied Turkey with its fleet of F-16s, and the United Kingdom [heavily assisted](https://caat.org.uk/data/countries/turkey/uk-arms-sales-to-turkey/) the development of Turkey's Bayraktar drone. Between 2014-2018, [60%](https://www.bbc.com/news/50125405) of Turkish weapons imports came from the United States, and the United Kingdom exported £776 million in the last three years alone.

Even in light of these massive attacks on Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria, the Biden Administration is attempting to push through another [massive arms transfer](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-30/biden-supports-turkey-f-16-purchase-says-congress-will-agree) of a new fleet of F-16s to Turkey. The Biden Administration is continuing to move forward with this arms deal despite the fact that Turkey has [continued](https://jacobin.com/2023/02/turkey-earthquake-f-16s-military-arms-kurds-humanitarian-aid-erdogan-biden) bombing the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria even in the immediate aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria on February 6.

In addition to the regular bombings of Kurdish communities, Turkey has also invaded and occupied large swaths of territory in Syria, and has engaged in ethnic cleansing of Kurdish cities. According to a [report](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/) from Amnesty International regarding the Turkish invasion in Syria:

The Turkish military offensive into northeast Syria has wreaked havoc on the lives of Syrian civilians who once again have been forced to flee their homes and are living in constant fear of indiscriminate bombardment, abductions and summary killings. Turkish military forces and their allies have displayed an utterly callous disregard for civilian lives, launching unlawful deadly attacks in residential areas that have killed and injured civilians.

Turkey has also invaded and occupied large areas of territory in Northern Iraq, a fact which is less well-known than Turkey’s occupation of parts of Syria. As described in this report, Turkey has constructed dozens of military outposts and occupation infrastructure in Northern Iraq, displacing over one hundred Kurdish villages. Thousands of Kurds have become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Northern Iraq, who are unable to return to their homes.

With this in mind, the following report details an on-the-ground account of the effects of Turkish bombings and occupation on Kurdish civilians in Northern Iraq. Through interviews with human rights defenders, journalists, community leaders, and witnesses, survivors, and family members of those killed by Turkish bombings, this report describes the heavy humanitarian toll on Kurdish civilians, and calls for the United States and United Kingdom to stop arming Turkish aggression. All interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

**Mullah Mohamed, Drone Strike Survivor, Ranya**

The Strike

*It was June 27, 2019. At the time I was living in Sulaymaniyah. One day I decided to take my family back to my village, which is called Ashcolkah, which is in the Qandil highlands. That area is controlled by the PKK. We went to our land, our farm, our orchards. In the evening we decided to go back [to Sulaymaniyah]. While we were driving, a PKK car was driving behind us for a while. This car was transporting injured PKK guerillas from a previous airstrike, which I had heard in the distance. When it tried to pass us, a Turkish drone bombed us. I lost my brother, I lost my dad, and I lost my sister. After the bombardment I tried to rescue them and help them, but the only people I could save were my mom, my wife, and my kids. The rest of my family was dead. I tried a lot to help them, but the body of my sister and my dad was stuck inside the car. Some of the pieces of the car or the bomb had punctured their bodies, trapping them in the car. I was wounded too. My leg was bleeding. I could not do anything for them.*

*When the bombing happened, I fained. When I regained consciousness, I looked behind me and saw that my dad was beheaded. He didn’t have his head. The sound of buzzing continued overhead. At first, I thought that I was beheaded, too. I was in shock. From the moment of the bombing until today, I have had a sound in my head. It never went away and never became better. I have visited many doctors. They have told me that this is from the bombing. I do not have an eardrum in my left ear anymore.*

*After the first bomb hit my car and my father was beheaded and my sister was killed, I took my wife, mother, and children out of the car. I saw what looked like a red light from above me and another bomb hit my car with my sister and dad still in it. This bomb engulfed the car in fire.*

*When I took my mom, my kids, and my wife out of the car, I saw the bodies of my sister and my dad and their bodies were burning. There was another car nearby. This car was hit by some shrapnel and got a flat tire. The driver of this car tried to help, but he could not take us to the hospital because the wreckage and the fire were blocking the way to the hospital in Ranya. We took a different route on a muddy road, but the car could not take us with a flat tire. Finally, we found another car who took us down to the mountain.*

*During the drive down the mountain, I fainted. They put me in an ambulance and took me to Sulaymaniyah. We first went to the hospital in Ranya but they told us that we must go to Sulaymaniyah because our injuries were too severe. When I woke up, I realized that my wife and my son were with me in Sulaymaniyah, but my mom and daughter were still in the hospital in Ranya.*

*I stayed in the hospital for 42 days. My brother in law watched over me while I was in the hospital. During these 42 days I had 18 surgeries to remove the shrapnel in my body. I have lost all of my muscles in my calf and I still have shrapnel in my body. At one point they decided to amputate my leg. But I told them, “you cannot cut my leg off.” They did not amputate my leg, but now I cannot walk or move very well. Now I still need two more surgeries to repair the arteries in my leg. But this is a very complicated and expensive surgery, and they cannot do it here. I also have a very big cut in my shoulder, and I cannot use my right hand.*

*Today, I still have 140 pieces of shrapnel still inside my body. When I do an X-ray you can see it.*

*Sometimes I have to go through surgery for them to remove a piece. Every time I go through a metal detector I set it off and have a big problem.*

*My children and my wife are also still full of shrapnel.*

*This event has traumatized my children. If they even see a commercial airplane in the sky they will run inside and say, “Daddy, daddy, there is a plane in the sky, it will bomb us now.” We cannot travel much now because we were bombed while in the car. At night, before they go to bed, my children are in so much pain. We massage them every night. The shrapnel is still moving in their bodies and it is very painful.*

*We have no aid or compensation from the government. They do not hear us or listen to us, or even visit us. They view us as ‘extra people’ on God’s earth. We do not have any sort of special ID to allow us to go through airports and metal detectors with our shrapnel in us without being harassed. The government will not even write the real cause of death on my family’s death certificate. They wrote that they died from ‘shrapnel’ and not from a Turkish drone strike.*

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The International Community

*We ask the international community to help us, help us pay for our medical expenses, or at the very least put pressure on the KRG to take care of us.*

*There is a lot of evidence that the weapons used by Turkey against civilians like me are provided by the United States and United Kingdom. I am not a nationalist. My life is not only impacted by Turkey but also by the PKK, who have never apologized either. However, there is a lot of evidence that the Turkish military is not only targeting PKK, but also Kurdish civilians like me. Turkey is a racist state, racist against Kurdish people. It is not about the PKK, the PKK is an excuse. They are targeting Kurdish people.*

*My message for the United States and United Kingdom is this: stop giving military support to Turkey. Why should the lives of Kurdish civilians suffer and be destroyed? We also want to live. I want the governments of the United States and United Kingdom to hear our stories, to listen to us. I want them to know that we are denied all of our rights as the civilians impacted by Turkey’s military operation here.*

**Badal Barwari, Human Rights Activist and Former Political Prisoner, Duhok**

Turkish Bombings and the KRG

*I have been arrested by the Kurdish Regional Government, four times in connection with my protests against Turkish bombings of Northern Iraq. These bombings have been devastating. They have destroyed many villages on the border and driven refugees south. Despite the fact that the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi government have called for Turkey to withdraw from Iraq and stop bombing, they have still cracked down on people like me who protest the bombings. The Kurdish Regional Government has threatened me and accused me of supporting the PKK, just because we criticize Turkey’s bombings. And I am not alone, there are 15 people currently in jail in Iraq for criticizing the Turkish bombings. The KRG is walking a line between calling for the end of the bombings while not wanting to anger Turkey too much.*

*A few years ago there was a major protest at Shelazad, a Turkish military base in Northern Iraq. The people who protested at the Turkish military base were arrested and are still in prison today. I organized a protest in Duhok in support of the arrested protestors at Shelazad, and I was arrested by the KRG for two months.*

Turkish Bombings and the West

*I have been protesting since 2007 to end Turkey’s interference in Iraq. I have visited the consulates of the United States, the United Kingdom, and many European governments to ask them to pressure the Turkish government to stop the bombings. I even met with the Foreign Minister of Sweden to discuss the bombings, among other issues. No one in the West has been receptive.*

*It is a major problem that the West sells Turkey weapons which are then used on us. But now there is an even bigger problem: the West has helped Turkey develop its own arms industry, so Turkey can now make weapons themselves. Nevertheless, the United States and United Kingdom should stop sending Turkey weapons used to attack us.*

*It is outrageous that the US and UK are unwilling to even put pressure on Turkey or even condemn the bombings, especially considering the fact that the Kurds are the best allies of the West in the entire region. We have helped the United States for decades, but they still end up selling us out in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey–every time. Unfortunately, Kurdish activists and community leaders do not learn this lesson. The activists and community leaders rely on American promises, to their peril. Many Kurds do not understand American politics and therefore believe, and rely on, American promises. Reliance, reliance, reliance. After 1992, all of the Kurds in Iraq and Syria believed that the United States would protect them. But look at us now, the United States is helping Turkey attack us.*

Rojava

*Before the Syrian Civil War the Kurds in Syria were essentially stateless. They had no nationality and very little rights. But there was an opening during the Syrian Civil War and the Kurds have been trying to make an autonomous zone in Syria since then. This was Turkey’s worst nightmare: the fear that an autonomous zone in Syria could inspire the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey. So, Turkey did two things: 1) they attacked the Kurds and continue attacking them until today, and 2) Turkey supported the radical Islamic groups in Syria and assisted them in their attacks on the Kurds.*

**Nazir Ali, Independent Journalist Investigating the Turkish Bombings of Northern Iraq, Duhok**

Turkish Bombings

*The most intense bombardment by Turkey is in the Duhok Governorate. Thousands of people have fled their villages in Northern Duhok out of fear of the bombings. The people of Duhok are very opposed to Turkey’s intervention, but do not know who to turn to: the KRG does not help. The people are afraid to even raise their voices because they fear being arrested, like Badal Barwari has been. Many have been jailed for protesting the attacks.*

*When someone is killed or injured by a Turkish strike, the KRG gives them a small, pathetic sum of money in return for their silence. They also pay these sums so the KRG can tell NGOs in the region, “don’t worry, we paid them.” The money, however, is so small that it does not even cover the funeral costs.*

Turkish Occupation

*In 2018, the United States effectively authorized the Turkish army to invade not just Syria, as is commonly known, but also Iraq. The occupation and ethnic cleansing of Northern Iraq is not known in the West at all. Turkey occupies areas from Rabanka Village in Northwestern Iraq to Shah Tunis Village in Northeastern Iraq, which runs almost 184 km. This occupation runs between 20-25 km into Northern Iraq, which is a massive area that they call their ‘safe zone.’ It is the worst in Duhok, where Turkey’s occupation accounts for nearly 40% of Duhok Governorate [Duhok Governorate is much larger than the city of Duhok]. If we account for Turkish actions in Northern Syria, Turkey’s plan is to create a Turkish-occupied ‘safe zone’ from Idlib in Northwestern Syria all the way to the Iranian border with Iraq, establishing a Turkish occupied zone of all of Northern Syria and Iraq.*

*Turkey is slowly ethnically cleansing these occupied areas of all Kurds. Since 2015, Turkey has already depopulated 180 Kurdish villages in the border area, using drone strikes, artillery shellings, jet bombings, and military operations. Many of the villages in Northern Duhok Governorate are now totally empty of Kurds. Nearly 70% of Amedi [a large, historic village in Duhok Governorate] is now under Turkish occupation. These are also the communities that were most terrorized by Saddam Hussein–and now they are terrorized by Erdogan.*

*In the Turkish-occupied zones, Turkey is not only constructing dozens of military bases but also roads and infrastructure used solely by the Turkish army. The end goal of Turkey’s occupation is to empty this ‘safe zone’ of Kurds, and eventually ‘arabize’ the region by moving Syrian refugees into Northern Iraq in order to break up the Kurdish region [Erdogan has repeatedly proposed moving Syrian refugees within Turkey into depopulated Kudish regions in Northern Syria for the same reason]. Furthermore, Turkish corporations are already working in Northern Iraq to steal Iraq’s natural resources. In the Turkish-occupied Northern Duhok Governorate region, Turkish corporations are taking lumber and transferring it back to Turkey. In the village of Sanat, near Zakho, Turkish corporations are taking coal and exporting it back to Turkey.*

*No one knows about this occupation. Turkey is engaged in ethnic cleansing and occupation in Northern Iraq, yet very few people in the world know about it.*

The West

*The United States and United Kingdom have repeatedly authorized Turkish invasions and bombardment of Northern Iraq and Syria. The Pentagon approves of these cross-border attacks and Turkey’s occupation. Where is the reaction of the West? Only support for Turkey. Most of these attacks have been carried out with Western weapons. But since 2001, Turkey has been developing its own weapons. But it does not do this alone: Israel, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and other European countries have weapons production agreements with Turkey. They are helping Turkey develop its drones, fighter jets, missiles and so on. I have found remnants on the ground in the aftermath of a Turkish strike that say “Boeing” on it. I say to the people of the West: stop supporting this.*

**Anonymous Kurdish Internally Displaced Person, North of Zakho**

Life Under Turkish Bombardment

*I am from a village near Zakho, but I now live with my family in Duhok. We fled our village last year during a period of regular bombings by the Turkish military. Our family knew several people who were killed or hurt, and many more who had their homes destroyed. We cannot go back or we may be killed. We lost everything. Almost everyone from our village now lives in Duhok. There is no one left in our village.*

*While we still lived in the North, my children were afraid to even go outside. My wife was too. Always afraid. We often heard ‘rattling’ in the sky, but not all of the strikes had that warning. For some, like the artillery strikes, we had no warning at all. Many people in our village had their homes totally destroyed, with no payments for the damage. We never saw any PKK. I am sure they were there, but we never saw any.*

Western Arms

*The West obviously should not support this. But they will continue to support Turkey, no matter what I say. The United States does not care when Turkey kills us, only when Saddam Kills us.*

**Anonymous Kurdish Refugee from Turkey, Makhmour Refugee Camp**

Fleeing Turkey

*My family fled Turkey to Iraq over 20 years ago. We are from a village in Southeastern Turkey and we were forced to flee south due to massive violence and destruction by Turkish forces. I was a small boy at the time but I can still remember it very well. Our village is now totally destroyed. And there are millions of Kurds who were forced to flee Turkey like me. I am very unfortunate that I am now in Makhmour.*

Kurdish Attacks

*We are refugees here and Turkey bombs us all the time. Turkey is bombing a refugee camp and no one cares. We are very, very deep in Iraq. We are nowhere near the Turkish border. Yet Turkey sends its drones and planes to attack us many times. Even the head of the camp was killed by Turkey [A Turkish drone strike killed Dr. Selman Bozkir, the director of the refugee camp, in June of 2021]. I do not want you to tell them my name, because then I may be targeted too.*

*There is no one who does not fear for their life, who does not fear being killed by a Turkish strike, including me. Many children are afraid to even go outside. There are many children here. We have schools and the children are afraid.*

*Most of us are not allowed to leave Makhmour. We cannot go to Erbil or Baghdad, we cannot leave the camp. We are forced to stay here and hear the planes above us. Turkey strikes peoples’ homes. They blow up homes and buildings, they kill civilians. No one cares what they do to us. The United Nations is supposed to be here but that does not stop Turkey. We are refugees who are being bombed and killed by Turkey, and no one cares.*

Western Arms

*Why does the United States and Europe support Turkey? Why do they give money and weapons to Turkey? They are killing us too. Not the people, but the leaders [of the United States and Europe]. Turkey is a very violent state. They should not support it. They should be against bombing refugees.*

**Hoshyar Malo, Executive Director of the Kurdish Organization for Human Rights Watch, Erbil**

Turkish Bombings

*Turkey justifies its attacks on the PKK due to its designation as a ‘terrorist organization’ by the West. Every time they attack, they point to that PKK as a justification. It is very useful for them. Since 2014, Turkey has attacked Iraq over 4,000 times. The Kurds of Northern Iraq have very limited options to stop these attacks because Turkey has Western support, and therefore there is a massive power imbalance. We are not even in a position to negotiate with Turkey to stop the attacks due to this power imbalance. As Winston Churchill said, “You cannot negotiate with a tiger when your head is in its mouth.” That is the position that we are in. Turkey can make outrageous demands both to Iraq and the West, while the Kurdish Regional Government is largely impotent. Turkey claims that its attacks are legitimate because it has an agreement with the Iraqi government to invade within 30km of Northern Iraq. One detail is left out: Turkey did not sign this agreement with the current Iraqi or Kurdish governments [who have repeatedly called on Turkey to withdraw and end its cross-border bombing campaigns] but rather with Saddam Hussein!*

Internally Displaced Persons

*Turkish and Iranian attacks on Kurds are creating more Internally Displaced Persons within Iraq than the West realizes. These IDPs often cannot return to their homes due to the bombings. Areas such as Zakho [where Turkey struck with artillery in the summer of 2022, killing nine Iraqi tourists] are still unsafe for Kurds to return. The regular Turkish attacks in Sinjar have created countless IDPs who are unable to return to their homes. The same is true of the mountainous areas of Northern Iraq. Iran’s bombings have created IDPs too, but nowhere near the level of Turkey. According to Iraq’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran has bombed Turkey less than 200 times, Turkey has bombed Iraq over 4,000 times.*

Turkish Occupation

*The Turkish military has a de-facto occupation of much of Northern Iraq. They are creating what they call a “security buffer” in Northern Iraq [like they are in Northern Syria]. There are Turkish military bases everywhere. Once, I was going for a picnic near Zakho and I took a wrong turn and ended up in a Turkish occupied zone, which I didn’t even know existed. Turkey regularly attacks from these military bases, killing Kurdish civilians and driving the populations south.*

The West

*The United States was established on principles of freedom and democracy. They supported us in 1991 [with the establishment of the no-fly zone] and 2003, and we fought for them. We fought for the United States. We gave our blood. Even the brother of former President Barzani was paralyzed while leading a battalion to fight with the United States. Yet again and again, the United States lets us down after we help them. Today, Turkey is able to attack Iraq every day, and the State Department will only make vague and weak statements in response. People often ask us: why do the Kurds continue to rely on the United States when they keep letting you down? Well, we have no other options. Who else can we turn to?*

*In Syria, the United States is supporting the YPG–which is directly linked to the PKK, by the way. But when the YPG is no longer useful, the United States will abandon them too.*

*NATO will never help the Kurds at the expense of its relationship with Turkey. That relationship is too valuable. Turkey can do as it pleases. The Kurds are a good ‘card’ for the West to play, but the relationship with Turkey is too valuable for them to actually stand up for us. NATO could act positively and use Turkey’s major interest in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany as leverage to end Turkey’s attacks on the Kurds, but I do not think it will.*

**Annex: Photographs from the June 27, 2019 Drone Strike, Mullah Mohammed**

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