

Iraqi civilians bear the brunt of Turkey's latest offensive against the PKK

A field-based commentary from northern Iraq showcasing the impact on civilians of Ankara's new operation against Kurdish insurgents.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Wilson Fache – BIC Middle East Consultant

The journey across the countryside from the town of Zakho to the village of Hirure would be idyllic in better times. Military checkpoints have recently mushroomed next to fortified Turkish bases that lurk from hilltops. Airstrikes ignited wildfires that scorched lush valleys. Tourists are long gone, and so are large segments of the local population.

Ankara launched ground and air offensives codenamed Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt on April 23 to root out militants of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) along its border. Turkish forces have since stepped up attacks on the Kurdish insurgents, focusing their firepower and incursions on a strip of territory up to 30 kilometres inside Iraq.

Ankara has conducted military operations in northern Iraq against the PKK for decades. But this latest round of violence is seemingly displacing more civilians than in the past.

"A lot of people have been displaced, much more than during previous operations. Since the 1990s, a total of 69 villages in the Avashin-Basyan region had been evacuated. But with Operation Claw-Lightning alone, 16 villages have been evacuated so far," Kamaran Osman, a worker for the NGO Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), told the BIC.

According to local reports compiled by the monitoring group Airwars, up to seven civilians were allegedly killed and several others wounded by Turkish airstrikes since the start of its new military operation. The International Crisis Group, for its part, was able to confirm two civilian fatalities between April 23 and June 8.

Ankara insisted that only PKK militants were hit.

CPT fears that the more than 1,500 civilians who have already escaped the on-going clashes may never be able to return home as Turkey has built nearby military bases armed with artillery that now “threaten the lives” of the local population, the NGO wrote in its latest report.

“What is different with this operation compared to previous operations is that Turkey is now building bases in the areas under its control. In the span of forty days, they built four new bases. These bases connect together, roads are built, and trees cut down, which prevents people from returning home after they fled,” he added, claiming that Turkey is creating a no man’s land that act as a buffer zone between its border and PKK hideouts.

“Whenever Turkish forces take control of an area, they don’t pull back,” Osman said.

Most of the region is under the control of the Kurdistan Democratic party (KDP) - the ruling party in Iraq’s autonomous Kurdish region and a long-time ally of Ankara. The KDP allowed Turkey to set up its military bases and conduct operations against the PKK on Iraqi soil.

“A week ago, there was very harsh combat on that mountain right here,” 26-year-old activist Ayad Hirure told the BIC, pointing his finger towards the horizon. “The closest Turkish base is only 400 meters from the vicinity of the village,” this resident added. “The PKK, I don’t know exactly where they are – they don’t show themselves to the people, especially at the moment – but I am sure they are all over the mountain.”

The PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union, has fought an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. More than 40,000 people died in the conflict.

Since a ceasefire broke down in July 2015, just over 800 people were killed in Iraq alone - including three dozen civilians - according to figures compiled by the International Crisis Group.

Despite the risks posed by the renewed fighting and the harming of one resident, most of the 54 families of Hirure village, located less than 15 kilometres from the border with Turkey, opted not to flee. “It’s scary but this is where we work, this is where we live. That’s why we stay despite the danger,” Ayad Hirure said.

Villagers are convinced that if they were to escape, PKK fighters would take over their homes, which would then be targeted by Turkish warplanes and drones. While refusing to leave may protect the village, living conditions have dramatically worsened in the past few months.

“Because of the bombardments, there were fires and the grass burnt so we can’t feed our livestock anymore. Our sheep can barely find any food to eat,” Adib Musa, Ayad

Hirure's father, told the BIC. "There is still grass on the northern side of the mountain, but we cannot go there because Turkey took over the area."

According to CPT, thousands of dunams of land (hundreds of hectares) have been destroyed so far, along with approximately 1,300 beehives in a district where local honey production is a crucial source of income for some families. The conflict also impacted tourism revenues in a region that usually attracts many visitors thanks to its picturesque landscapes.

Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar defended his country's actions: "All of our operations only target terrorists, respecting international law and respecting the territorial integrity of our neighbours, particularly Iraq."

Airwars' director Chris Woods told the BIC that his organisation had been tracking "intensive Turkish activity in northern Iraq in recent weeks. Thankfully, that doesn't appear to have translated into large scale civilian harm - though there are widespread reports of civilians being forced from their homes, and of farmland and crops being destroyed."

A security professional who asked not to be named in order to share confidential data told the BIC that a total of 412 airstrikes carried by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) were recorded in northern Iraq between early January and mid-July. An average of more than two bombings per day.

According to this data, Hirure was struck at least a dozen times in the span of six months. The pounding of neighbouring villages also regularly echoes through the mountains. "There have been so many bombings that the days when there is no airstrike, it feels strange. A normal day is when we hear the bombs," said Ayad Hirure.

A muffled explosion suddenly interrupted him. The activist froze, listening to the mountain. "Well, that was Turkey bombing the PKK," he said with a chuckle. "I guess today is a normal day after all."

Plumes of white smoke soon scarred the blue sky, indicating the attack may have started yet another wildfire. Peshmerga fighters manning a nearby checkpoint said that mortar rounds had fallen on Kesta and Chelke, two villages recently emptied of their residents.

"See, this is why we don't leave despite the risks," Hirure insisted. "So that our beloved village doesn't become a battlefield for PKK and Turkey. We don't want our home to be destroyed."

Mid-May, a rocket pierced through the night sky and crashed inside a garden. "It fell right here," said Gule Yousef, 60, pointing at a patch of mud. "That day, the bombings were constant. One 'boom' after the other. Then I heard a strange noise and it fell here without exploding. I was so scared," she told the BIC.

Still, Gule Yousef, like most Hirure residents, refuses to leave. The grandmother dedicated her entire life to this village, which was destroyed during the Ba'athist regime's Arabisation campaign in the 1970s, then rebuilt from scratch into what she describes as a paradise.

Aided by her sons, then her grandsons, she grew pomegranates, nuts, tomatoes, apples, and peaches. The murmur of a nearby waterfall mingled with the chirping of birds as the orange sun set on the valley. There is nowhere else she would rather be, she insisted.

"With the protection of God, we will stay here no matter what. Either we die or we live here, but fleeing is not an option," she smiled, holding a shovel double her size.

"Listen," she continued. "Every tree, every branch, every leaf is a part of my soul. After sacrificing so much, after being forced to flee [during the Arabisation campaign], after rebuilding and starting from zero, you understand why we cannot leave again."

**Halan Shekha contributed to this piece.*

About the BIC

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