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Kurdish Landmine Plight Across and Along the Borders

This article discusses the intricate global and internal conflicts that plague the Kurdish region with emphasis on the profound impact these conflicts have on mine action in this area of the Middle East.

by Armin Köhli [Geneva Call]

The Kurdish region lies in one of the centres of ongoing global conflicts and has its own, home-grown disputes. Rich oil fields and water sources are abundant, and the living areas of Kurds, Arabs, Turks, Turkmen, Persians, Azeris and others overlap. All the countries where the Kurds live (Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey) are heavily mined, mainly along state borders, with mines generally imported from Western countries.

Despite the strong national ambitions of various Kurdish organisations since the 1940s, a Kurdish national state does not yet exist. In each of the four states with a Kurdish minority, Kurds clamour for national, cultural and democratic rights. Depending on both the legal and political situation, these outcries differ in kinds and methods from state to state. Some Kurds form human rights groups and committees; others promote Kurdish culture through cultural associations or join ethnically based political parties. Frequently, political campaigning occurs alongside armed struggle. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been fighting the Turkish Army for more than 20 years. The situation differs in northern Iraq, where a coalition of Kurdish parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party—have formed a regional government with their Peshmerga¹ controlling the territory since the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

The Kurdish question tends to be “exported” because there isn’t a common or coherent agenda among Kurdish organisations and the states in which they reside. Civilians have left, either freely or by force, areas of Kurdish resistance, and Kurdish guerrillas and political parties have been driven to neighbouring countries. In recent years, and especially since the start of the Iraq War in 2003, northern Iraq has become the stronghold for the PKK of Turkey and for various Kurdish groups of Iran.

Conflicts both with “global players” and internally are still “hot”—or at least latent—and far from being resolved. Ongoing conflicts, varying state legislation, and the differing interests and agendas of the involved states and non-state actors define the condition of mine action for the Kurdish region. Of the states with Kurdish populations, only Turkey and Iraq have signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention,² and since parts of the territories are controlled by armed NSAs, NSA engagement is essential for the mine ban and general clearance. The highly developed satellite media of various Kurdish NSAs can play an important role in mine-risk education in affected rural regions; therefore, Geneva Call has been working since its establishment in 2000 to engage Kurdish NSAs in dialogue.

Syria: A Lack of Mine Action

Eight to 10 percent (around 1.5 million people) of the Syrian population is Kurdish. A major reason for tension between the Arab majority and the Kurds stems from a resettlement project in the late 1950s—an “Arab belt” was created against a contiguous Kurdish region across the Syrian-Turkish border. Additionally, an estimated 120,000 Kurds lost their citizenship as part of the 1962 census, a number that has grown to

more than 300,000 Kurds today. The Syrian state recognises the problem and President Bashar al-Asad has announced willingness to renationalise the stateless Syrian Kurds.

Citizenship is crucial to Kurdish demands, which have been underlined by occasional demonstrations. Kurdish political parties, like all ethnically based parties, are illegal in Syria, but some are tolerated. For a decade, Syria was an important location for the Kurdish leaders from its neighbouring states. In 1988, Jalal Talabani, Iraq’s current president and then leader of the PUK, fled to Syria. In the 1990s, the PKK of Turkey had its political headquarters in Damascus until Syria, under heavy Turkish pressure, forced the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to leave in 1998.

As Syria is not a State Party to the Ottawa Convention, there is no official report about mine use there. According to the *Electronic Mine Information Network* and confirmed by a Syrian nongovernmental organisation, mines have allegedly been placed along the Syrian border with Turkey, which is mainly a Kurdish region. Some cases of mine- and unexploded ordnance-amputations come from the Syrian-Turkish border. Mine action in Syria is focussed on the town of Quneitra and its surroundings in the Golan Heights. There is no mine-risk education or specific survivor assistance in the Syrian Kurdish areas, and there is no demining there, either.

Iran: Ethnic Clashes

Around eight million Kurds live in the Islamic Republic of Iran, mainly in four northwestern provinces, but also in major cities outside the Kurdish region. Kurdish ambitions and demands, raised by various NSAs, are intertwined with a more general opposition to the Islamic Republic, especially as the Kurdish society tends to be more secular than the current Islamic state. In 2005 and 2006, at least 17 people were killed during protests and clashes in Kurdish towns, according to Human Rights Watch.³

The Kurdish region is severely affected by landmines and UXO. During the Iran-Iraq War,⁴ some 12–16 million landmines were emplaced in Iran, covering more than four million hectares (15,444 square miles).⁵ The contaminated area was reduced to 24,000 square kilometres (9,266 square miles) following clearance of 18,000 square kilometres (6,950 square miles) between 1988 and 2003.⁶ A mine problem also results from an internal Iranian conflict. Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, an offensive began in the north of the country against Kurdish rebels. At that time, the Iranian Army allegedly planted an unknown number of mines around their barracks and compounds to prevent Kurdish rebels from attacking.

Provinces with Kurdish populations—Kurdistan, Western Azerbaijan, Ilam and Kermanshah—all lay on the heavily mined border with Iraq but are less affected than Khuzestan in the south. Between 1988 and 2002, there were 6,765 landmine casualties in Iran.^{7,2} Casualties were recorded in Kurdistan, with 437 killed and 1,720 injured; Western Azerbaijan, with 198 killed and 192 injured; Ilam, with 730 killed and 250 injured; Kermanshah, with 874 killed and 522 injured; and Khuzestan, with 601 killed and 1,241 injured.



A Kurdish survivor receives treatment.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF GENEVA CALL

The *Landmine Monitor* reports increasing mine action in recent years. For instance, the Republic of Iran Mine Action Center developed a 10-year plan to eliminate all landmines in Iran by 2015. According to the plan, Kurdistan province would have been completely cleared by March 2006 and Western Azerbaijan province would have been demined by March 2007; however, the *LM* has not received any information about the progress made so far. MRE is focussed on Kurdistan province. An MRE video was produced in Kurdish with Persian subtitles. From 2002 to April 2005, 115 of 891 urban schools and 523 of 2,236 rural schools received MRE.⁸ This program was reviewed during 2005; it was found that 70 percent of the students retained knowledge of landmines and that there was an 80-percent reduction in mine-related incidents in Kurdistan compared to 2004. During 2005, the program focussed on shepherds and schoolchildren. However, there seems to be almost no MRE in the Kurdish regions except in Kurdistan province.

Of the armed Kurdish NSAs, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and Komalah Party-Iranian Kurdistan have suspended their armed struggle for the time being. PDKI unilaterally declared its renunciation of the use of anti-personnel mines and signed Geneva Call’s *Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action*⁹ on 4 December 2007. Komalah, approached by Geneva Call, also shares this position (at least verbally). Both parties are members of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples

Organization, which adopted a resolution of committing to a total mine ban and calling on all NSAs to sign Geneva Call’s *Deed of Commitment* in October 2006.

One NSA still fighting is based in the Iraqi Qandeel Mountains; the Party for Freedom and Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) launches dozens of guerrilla attacks in Iran. The Iranian Army reacts with frequent artillery shelling of the Qandeel Mountains. The PJAK is widely considered a wing of the PKK of Turkey. In contrast to the PKK, however, it has made no statement on the use of APMs or mine action.

Turkey: No-go Areas and Commitments

More than 15 million Kurds live in Turkey. The armed struggle of the PKK—today called Kurdistan People’s Congress Kongra-Gel with its military wing People’s Defence Forces HPG—began in 1984. The first period of this long armed conflict ended in 1999 when PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was arrested. Approximately 30,000 people died in this war. Millions in the Kurdish northeast of the country were displaced and fled to the urban centres and cities in the rest of the country. Some 3,000 Kurdish villages were evacuated. The Turkish security forces burned many villages. After evacuation, “mines were laid around villages, military installations, border areas, water springs, feeding grounds, pathways and mountain caves.”¹⁰ The PKK itself admitted to sporadically using AP mines until 1999.

After Öcalan’s arrest, many of the 10,000 PKK fighters fled to Iraqi Kurdistan. Since June 2004, when the PKK ended a unilateral ceasefire declared in 1999, it has been wag-

ing a guerrilla war from its headquarters in the northern Iraqi Qandeel Mountains. The Turkish state reacts with heavy troop concentrations at its border with Iraq and occasional cross-border operations.

In May 2006, Turkey reported under Article 7⁹ of the Ottawa Convention a total of 984,313 emplaced mines, of which 164,497 were anti-vehicle mines on the Syrian border and 819,816 were anti-personnel mines in an unspecified number of areas.¹⁰ Turkey acceded to the Ottawa Convention in 2003.⁸ The PKK stated in 2005 that it had banned AP mines, and in 2006, its representatives signed Geneva Call’s *Deed of Commitment*. There is no confirmed use of AP mines by either side since they declared the ban. However, the PKK admits the use of command-detonated mines.

According to the *LM*, in 2005, the Initiative for a Mine-Free Turkey identified at least 220 new mine/UXO casualties in 62 incidents, including 68 people killed and 152 injured.⁶ This figure represents a significant increase, compared to the 168 mine/UXO casualties reported in 2004 and 67 in 2003. These numbers may not accurately reflect the incidence of mine/UXO casualties, however. Turkey reported 194 military mine casualties—39 killed and 155 injured—for 2005.¹⁰ This number, quoted in the *LM* 2006, might include military casualties from command-detonated mines amongst AP mine casualties. Additionally, it seems that many of the military casualties reported are not mine/UXO but conflict casualties.

Turkish media and security forces regularly accuse the PKK of causing the incidents



Collected UXO in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2007.

by planting new mines, which the PKK denies. Field research done in the Kurdish Dicle district, which was conducted by the Initiative for a Mine-Free Turkey on behalf of the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines to examine incidents in 2007, suggests a different picture. Local communities reported that the incidents were caused by “old” mines laid by the security forces. The victims are mostly poor Kurdish villagers who were evacuated in 1991–1992 and have now returned to their villages. According to them, many minefields are insufficiently marked or completely unmarked. The returning villagers are in danger when going to their fields, vineyards, gardens and water resources. Additionally, MRE is almost non-existent in the affected regions, except for some warning signs by the Turkish Army in some areas.

The Turkish government plans to issue a tender for commercial companies to demine areas along the Syrian border.¹⁰ Clearance of all mined areas on the Syrian border would cost around US\$600 million and would be undertaken by companies that would use the land for agriculture in order to create new employment opportunities in the region. Should this plan work out, it would confiscate a 510-kilometre-long (317-mile-long) stretch of mostly fertile land and grant it to big companies, potentially hindering the small farmers from going back to their villages, unless they become low-paid wage workers.

Iraq: Unifying Mine Action

Some 5.5 million people live in the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq, of which four million are Kurds. The *Landmine Monitor* puts it clearly: “The Kurdish governorates, some of the most contaminated areas of the world with 1,428 affected communities, contend with thousands of tactical minefields on the borders with Iran and Turkey and further contamination along the Green Line, the former frontline between Kurdish forces and Saddam Hussein’s Army, as well as UXO across all three governorates.”¹¹ Four thousand out of 5,000 villages were destroyed during the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988,

and many of them were mined after the evacuation. Between 1991 and 2000 alone, 10,997 mine/UXO casualties were reported in six governorates of northern Iraq; 3,697 people were killed and 7,300 injured.

The first Kurdish rebellion in modern Iraq started in 1961 under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani, the father of today’s Regional President Masud Barzani. In 1970, the autonomous Kurdistan region was established for the first time in an agreement with the central government in Baghdad. But from then until 1991, its status was disputed and subject to violent conflicts. The most infamous event in this series of conflicts was the “Anfal” campaign by Saddam Hussein’s forces with the use of chemical weapons and a poison-gas attack against the Kurdish town of Halabja.

Following an insurgency, in the aftermath of the first Iraq conflict, and with military support by the United States and its allies, the Kurdish parties Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Kurdistan Democratic Party took control of the region in October 1991. After the start of the Iraq War in 2003, the Kurdistan region became a semi-autonomous, federally recognised, political entity. However, the Kurdistan region remains part of the Federal Republic of Iraq, and PUK leader Jalal Talabani is the President of Iraq. Both the PUK and the KDP, forming a coalition now in the region, are committed to mine action. Even before the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003, as *de facto* authorities in northern Iraq, they signed and implemented Geneva Call’s Deed of Commitment in 2002. The two existing mine-action centres in Arbil and Suleymaniya are conducting demining and MRE programmes on a large scale. Mines Advisory Group, since 1992, and Norwegian People’s Aid, since 1997, have been conducting such programmes, too. On a small scale, the PPK is also demining for humanitarian purposes and carries out *ad hoc* MRE in the Qandeel Mountains.

The Kurdish Parliament passed a law unifying the two existing mine-action centres into the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency, something it had done even before Iraq recently

joined the Ottawa Convention. A unified mine-action agency for the whole region is a big step toward further strengthening of mine action and toward a mine-free Kurdistan.

Conclusion

While the situation varies in each of the four states with Kurdish populations—Syria, Iran, Turkey and Iraq—Kurds are demanding rights on every level in the midst of local and global conflicts. These conflicts create the need for organised mine action and Kurdish regional legislation to protect the local populations from UXO and landmines. ♦

See *Endnotes*, page 110



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