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Turkey Moves Forward to Demine Upper Mesopotamia

History

The Turkish-Syrian border was first drawn in 1921, altered in 1938, and finally demarcated once again in 1956. Between 1991 and 1993, portions of the border were further demarcated, bringing the border deeper into Turkish territory. Most of the land in near the Turkish-Syrian border falls under the legal category of "Forbidden Military Zone in the First and Second Degrees" (i.e., public land administered by the Turkish military). Some of it is formerly privately-owned farmland nationalized during the 1956 demarcation.

Following a high-profile incident in 1956 when smugglers shot two Turkish customs agents dead, the Turkish army laid landmines along Turkey's border with Syria. The anti-personnel landmines were meant to discourage the smuggling activity between the two countries. After the beginning of the insurgency of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in 1984, the Turkish-Syrian border was utilized by the insurgents also, which prompted the Turkish army to lay more anti-personnel landmines between 1989 and 1998. Under its Ottawa obligations, Turkey has not laid any more anti-personnel landmines since 1998.

In the 1998–2002 period, as the relations between Turkey and Syria warmed up, and as the insurgency subsided, Turkey and Syria held talks to demine the border zone, and finally made a formal agreement in 2003 to that effect. Almost all the landmines are planted on the Turkish side of the border, and Syria has undertaken efforts to clear the landmines on its side for years. As a matter of fact, Syrians have cleared minefields on the Turkish side of the border and in the buffer zone totaling 250 million square meters, where they have planted cotton and olive trees.

There have been pronouncements by Turkish authorities since 1996 about the government taking initiatives to demine the border; however, only early in 2004 did the rele-

*...Kacinci asrini yasamakta
Harran 'da toprak? (How many
centuries old is the land of
Harran?)*

*Bu kenti terkediyeim Zilan. (I am
leaving this town, Zilan)*

*Anzilha 'da kutsal baliklar
sahidim olsun ki (Let the sacred
fish of Anzilha bear witness)*

*Bu kenti terkediyeim (I am leav-
ing this town)*

*Yasak mayin tarlalarini (The
forbidden minefields)*

*Kacakda kol verenleri (Those
who lost their arm to smug-
gling)*

*Can verenleri terkediyeim...
(Those who lost their lives, I am
leaving)*

*- Excerpt from a poem by Anonymous about
the city of Urfa, near the Turkish-Syrian bor-
der's minefields*

vant government agencies reach an agreement for this purpose.

Area

The area affected by landmines is along Turkey's longest land border (877 kilometers), stretching from the province of Hatay on the Mediterranean Coast all the way to the province of Sirnak in the southeast, where the Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi borders meet. The 700-kilometer mined section of the 877-kilometer-long border varies in width between 300 and 1,000 meters.

The no-man's-land is in fact 3.5 billion square meters (a 700-kilometer x 5-kilometer buffer zone on the Turkish side of the border). But it is not clear at this point if the entire no-man's-land is to be screened or just the designated minefields. Five hundred kilometers of the 700-kilometer mined section is the most landmine-contaminated portion, which is a demining priority. Out of this priority zone, a 350-kilometer stretch has been designated as the first project, i.e., approximately 175 million square meters (175 square kilometers).

The terrain is mostly flat topsoil with light vegetation, with rocks and boulders sprinkled on the surface. There are also some elevations. A major highway and a railroad run alongside the border.

Number and Types of Mines

Out of the 900,094 anti-personnel landmines that the Turkish army laid in the country, 615,419 were laid along the Syrian border.

Between 1989 and 1998, the Turkish army laid further 39,569 anti-personnel landmines, at least half of which can be assumed to have been laid along the Syrian border, bringing the total number of anti-personnel landmines along the border to at least 660,000 (inside 350 million square meters¹). This means that at least one landmine per 500 square meters (or 2,000 landmines per square kilometer) can be expected.

The Turkish army initially maintained maps of the landmines it laid. However, in 1996–1997 a parliamentary commission of inquiry was unable to access those maps. The Turkish army maintains that the maps are on file and that the Army Mapping Command is currently digitizing them. Once the clearance is complete, the borderline will be re-drawn. Turkish farmland currently occupied by

Syrian farmers will be reclaimed, and then the currently nationalized land will be distributed to local Turkish farmers.

While the minefields are fenced off with barbed wire and marked every three meters along the barbed-wire fence, some landmines have shifted position over the last five decades as a result of floods and soil erosion, and some have been deliberately removed or destroyed in situ as a result of illegal activities of smugglers and terrorists, accidents and stray animal detonations. In the hot summers, when the temperature often exceeds 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the area, random detonations are known to occur.

Types of landmines laid along the Turkish-Syrian border by the Turkish army are M2A1, M16 series, M14, M18 anti-personnel and M19 anti-tank. In the last two decades, Turkish security forces seized over 15,000 landmines from the PKK, most of them in northern Iraq. About 60 percent of those landmines were Italian-made, 30 percent were Russian, and the rest were of Chinese and various North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) origin, all but 10 percent of which were anti-personnel landmines. Due to widespread use by the PKK terrorists in the area, Italian TS50 and VS-50, Russian PMD-6, PMN and POMZ-2, and Chinese T72 landmines can also be expected.

Casualties

In the last 50 years, more than 3,000 people (mostly civilians) are believed to have been killed and about 7,000 maimed by the landmines along the Turkish-Syrian border. These figures may be compared with the country-wide landmine casualty figures of about 900 killed and 1,000 injured in the last two decades, in order to underscore the magnitude of the Syrian border minefield problem.

In December 2003, five Turkish troops were killed and four were wounded when their unarmored patrol vehicle was hit by a PKK-laid command-detonated anti-tank mine in the rural part of Mardin province's Nusaybin county—near the project zone mentioned above. In October 2003, three teenage shepherds had detonated an anti-personnel landmine in the same vicinity of Mardin province's Nusaybin county, which had killed one and injured the other two.

Budget and Investment Made

The demining project has been developed by the Turkish government, which is planning to open the mined areas for organic farming due to their rich and fertile quality as a result of not having been farmed for 50 years. This area, also known as the "Upper Mesopotamia," is home to a variety of cash crops such as cotton, grapes, olives and sesame. Therefore, a key consideration on the part of the Turkish government in awarding contracts for this project will be safety. As the project intends to make land available for organic farming, the government is insisting on the highest quality assurance possible.

The total demining operation is estimated by the Turkish government to cost up to \$50 million (U.S.). Twenty-five million dollars of this money is considered for equipment purchases and the rest for actual operations. An initial budget allocation of \$12 million is under consideration by the government at this time.

In 2003, the Turkish army bought one Bozena flail system from Slovakia and one Aardvark flail unit from the United Kingdom. Despite the fact that the military had initially planned to buy up to 16 demining machines, including "tiller"-type machines in addition to the Bozena and the Aardvark, and considered Croatian and German machines, they have not yet purchased any more machines.

As of late 2002, the Turkish army had only cleared a total of 14,000 landmines in the entire country, at a rate of about 4,000/year. In mid-2002 Turkey completed anti-personnel landmine clearance along the Turkish side of the border with Bulgaria started in 1999, three years ahead of schedule.

Competition

The army's limited clearance effort is ongoing. Although they estimated to complete the task by themselves in two to three years, this obviously is not realistic at their current nationwide rate of 4,000/year, given the 660,000 mines along the Syrian border. Therefore, the government has realized that private-sector and foreign input is absolutely necessary for this project to be completed in

five years, or hopefully before this government is up for re-election in 2007. In any case, the government is planning to make the demined areas immediately available for farming, so as to be able to demonstrate results to their voters.

Presently, the Turkish government is receiving presentations from various domestic and foreign candidates, including those from Israel and the Ukraine. As they do so, they are realizing that they may have to award multiple contracts to multiple demining companies to work simultaneously. Due to its sheer magnitude, the Upper Mesopotamia clearance effort is bound to be one of the largest demining and remediation projects of its kind, and a significant step towards building peace and mutual trust in the troubled Middle East.

Endnotes

1. On average, a one-kilometer-wide section of the "prohibited/military-controlled border zone" is a "no-go area/no-man's land," which means the total area of the demarcated no-go area/no-man's land is: 700,000 meters (long) x 1,000 meters (wide) = 700,000,000 square meters = 700 million square meters. At least half of this area is known to be mined, thus 700 million square meters/2 = 350 million sq m of actual mined land with at least 660,000 landmines inside.

Biography

Ali M. Koknar is the owner of AMK Risk Management, a demining and EOD consultancy with offices in Washington, DC, and Turkey.

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