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Kurdish Landmine Plight Across and Along the Borders

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The Kurdish region lies in one of the centres of ongoing global conflict and has been one of the greatest sites of damage caused by the activities of armed disputants. 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 for the Kurds of Syria with Kurdish parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party—have formed a regional government with their Peshmerga controlling the territory since the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

The Kurdish question tends to be “exported” because there isn’t a common political agenda among Kurdish organisations and the states in which they reside. Civilians have lost, either forcibly or by force, areas of Kurdish resistance, and Kurdish guerrilla and political parties have suffered losses in national territories. 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 alliances and changing allegiances add to the confusion. This part of the world is an area of large and small rivalries and the involvement of major powers in the region.

The region is severely affected by landmines and UXO. 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. Kurdistan 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.

The Iranian authorities have emplaced over 60,000 square kilometres (23,681 square miles) of anti-personnel mines in northern Iraq. Of these, 55,000 square kilometres (21,293 square miles) were mined by the PKK and 10,000 square kilometres (3,889 square miles) were mined by armed forces of the Iranian government. Since the withdrawal of the Iranian forces in 2003, a demining program was initiated by the Iranian government. The latter program was stopped in late 2005.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran has collected statistics on mine casualties. Although this data is not very precise, it is the only data available worldwide. These data have increased since the US occupation of the Iranian government in 1953. According to the data, 22,000 landmines were laid in Iranian territory during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and 15,430 square kilometres (5,963 square miles) are minefields. Iran had mined a total of 28,000 square kilometres (10,879 square miles) between 1988 and 2003.

For more than 25 years, the US, Iran and Iraq have laid landmines and anti-personnel mines in the region and the landmines continue to enter the region from outside. Between 2008 and 2010, there were 920 landmine incidents in Iran.

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 is severely affected by landmines and UXO. During the Iran-Iraq War, some 12–16 million landmines were emplaced in the region, mostly in the 1988–1989 border area. Approximately 10 million mines are still placed as remnants of the Iran-Iraq War. Between 2 million and 4 million unexploded anti-personnel mines are still present in Iran with mines of US origin.

Between 1980 and 2003, there were 6,765 landmine casualties in Iran.

The Kurdish question tends to be exported because there isn’t a common political agenda among Kurdish organisations and the states in which they reside. Civilians have lost, either forcibly or by force, areas of Kurdish resistance, and Kurdish guerrilla and political parties have suffered losses in national territories. 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.

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The first Kurdish rebellion in modern Iraq started in 1961 under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani, the father of today’s Regional President Masoud Barzani. In 1979, the autonomous Kurdish region was established for the first time in an agreement with the central government in Baghdad. 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 regions 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 Kurdish region became a semi-autonomous, federally recognized, political entity. However, the Kurdish 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’s Deeds of Commitment in 2002. The two existing mine action centres in Arbil and Slemani 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 carves out ad hoc MRE in the Qandil Mountains.

The Kurdistan Parliament passed a law unifying the two existing mine action centres, and in 2009, joined the Ottawa Convention. A united mine action agency for the whole region is a big step toward further strengthening of mine action and toward a mine-free Kurdistan.

Conclusion

The situation varies in each of the four states with Kurdish populations—Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Kurds are the autono- mousiwos. Some of the most contaminated areas are south of the Qandil Mountains.

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