

Caught in the Crossfire: Assyrians and the Turkey-PKK Conflict in Iraq

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Every Assyrian in Barwar knows
the difference between the sound of fighter jets
and the sound of civilian planes.”

*Assyrian eyewitness interviewed by the
Assyrian Policy Institute*

ABOUT ASSYRIANS

An estimated 3.5 million people globally comprise a distinct, indigenous ethnic group. Tracing their heritage to ancient Assyria, Assyrians speak an ancient language referred to as Assyrian, Syriac, Aramaic, or Neo-Aramaic.

The contiguous territory that forms the traditional Assyrian homeland includes parts of southern and southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria. The Assyrian population in Iraq, estimated at approximately 200,000, constitutes the largest remaining concentration of the ethnic group in the Middle East. The majority of these reside in their ancestral homeland located in the Nineveh Plain and within today’s Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Assyrians are predominantly Christian. Some ethnic Assyrians self-identify as Chaldeans or Syriacs, depending on church denomination. Assyrians have founded five Eastern Churches at different points during their long history: the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. The majority of Assyrians who remain in Iraq today belong to the Chaldean and Syriac churches.

Assyrians represent one of the most consistently persecuted communities in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

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ABOUT THE ASSYRIAN POLICY INSTITUTE

Founded in May 2018, the Assyrian Policy Institute works to support Assyrians as they struggle to maintain their rights to the lands they have inhabited for thousands of years, their ancient language, equal opportunities in education and employment, and to full participation in public life.

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CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE: ASSYRIANS AND THE TURKEY-PKK CONFLICT IN IRAQ

January 11, 2021

COVER IMAGE

An eyewitness photo provided to the API depicting shelling on the outskirts of the village of Chalik, Barwar, in Amediya District of Duhok Governorate. (August 19, 2020)

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Full Smile Family Dentist



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Part I: Introduction



Eyewitness photo of shelling near the Assyrian town of Cham Rabatke in Nahla Valley, (Oct. 4, 2019)

Turkey has consistently pursued the PKK in northern Iraq with little regard for the negative consequences for civilian populations who inhabit the same areas occupied by the militant group.

Over the course of the past year, the Turkish government has intensified its military operations targeting the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) positions along the Iraqi-Turkish border on the grounds of domestic security.¹ The recent interventions are part of a decades-long campaign which began in the early 1990s when the PKK set up its main command centers in the mountainous regions of today's Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).² Turkey's conflict with the PKK—recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union³—continues throughout the region, including in southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, and northern Iraq. The operations in northern Iraq increased in June 2020, when Turkey launched Operations Claw-Eagle and Claw-Tiger—its most aggressive offensive targeting PKK strongholds in the country since 2015.⁴ Operation Claw-Eagle comprises Turkey's aerial campaign,⁵ while Operation Claw-Tiger encompasses the attacks launched by the military's ground operations in northern Iraq.⁶

The PKK's presence in these areas effectively transfers its decades-long conflict with Turkey to northern Iraq. The PKK continues to endanger civilian populations by operating from or near civilian areas, carrying out attacks on Turkey and Turkish military bases in the KRI.⁷

Turkey has consistently pursued the PKK in northern Iraq with little regard for the negative consequences for civilian populations who inhabit the same areas occupied by the militant group. The airborne attacks often occur in close proximity to areas mainly inhabited by Assyrian, Yazidi, and/or Kurdish civilians, posing significant risks including: endangerment of civilian life, displacement, traumatization, destruction of property and agricultural lands, and threats to livelihoods.

Though Assyrians do not take part in the hostilities, they experience the direct consequences of this conflict.



Eyewitness photo of a mountain ablaze on the outskirts of the Assyrian town of Chalik in the Barwar region after shelling. (Sept. 17, 2020)

Ultimately, those set to suffer most in the ongoing hostilities are vulnerable peoples like Assyrians and Yazidis—many of whom have been displaced multiple times, with smaller numbers who now live in temporary accommodation as a result of recent strikes. The rapid deterioration of security in Iraq after 2003 brought forward the largest exodus of its Assyrian population, including in the KRI, and Turkey’s pursuit of the PKK in Iraq has only exacerbated the situation. Three principal areas inhabited by Assyrians in Duhok Governorate are affected by the Turkey-PKK conflict in Iraq: the Barwar region and Sapna Valley in Amediya District; Zakho District; and Nahla Valley in Akre District.

Though Assyrians do not take part in the hostilities, they experience the direct consequences of this conflict. For decades, Assyrians have been caught in the crossfire of the wider Turkey-PKK conflict, including in neighboring Turkey where Assyrian villages in Mardin Province and Şırnak Province were emptied of their indigenous inhabitants as a result of the heightened conflict in the 1980s.⁸ More recently in Syria, Turkey has targeted the People’s Protection Units (YPG), a PKK-affiliated militia, in parts of the Khabour Region—further diminishing any prospects for return for Assyrians displaced by ISIS.⁹ Fared Yacoob, an Assyrian parliamentarian serving in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, told the Assyrian Policy Institute: “Assyrians always end up paying the biggest price for conflicts they want no part in.”¹⁰

Indeed, Iraq’s Assyrians have been witnesses to and victims of war, ethno-religious persecution, forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. While many have, to some extent, become accustomed to violence, the destructive and highly visible nature of the strikes often cause a re-traumatization of these experiences, leading to increased feelings of insecurity and uncertainty.

Despite mounting pressure against Turkey’s operations in the region, the airstrikes continue. Prospects for nonviolent ways forward look bleak. Turkey has consolidated its presence on the ground in the KRI, establishing additional military bases in Duhok and Erbil Governorates.¹¹ The PKK shows no signs of withdrawal from their current positions near Assyrian villages in the KRI. Tensions between the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PKK have risen in recent months over control of strategic territories.¹² Inaction from the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has left locals unconvinced of the government’s ability to maintain control and resolve the conflict.

The ongoing Turkey-PKK conflict must be seen both within the microcosm of regional geopolitics and within the context of heightening risks for threatened groups like Assyrians. This report focuses exclusively on the situation for the Assyrian people in the context of the Turkey-PKK conflict in northern Iraq. It documents the consistent challenges to their security and livelihoods as a result of this conflict, and conveys recommendations drafted out of concern for Assyrian human rights and longevity in Iraq.

The report is divided into five parts. Part I provides an introduction and offers context on the Turkey-PKK conflict in relation to Assyrian communities in the region. Part II presents data collected by the API on reported Turkish airstrikes

which occurred in close proximity to Assyrian villages over the course of the past year. Part III elaborates on the harm caused to Assyrians as a result of the airstrikes. Part IV addresses the possible violations of international law and examines the international community's response. Part V provides concluding remarks and broad recommendations for solutions moving forward.

Key Findings

- The API has obtained information in regard to 52 incidents in 2020 during which airstrikes occurred in areas inhabited by Assyrians, but has concluded that the actual number is higher. Turkish jets and drones have been bombing suspected PKK positions in northern Iraq since the 1990s and are likely to continue beyond 2020. The data collected by API researchers shows that the regions most frequently targeted are those situated along the Iraqi-Turkish border, including Assyrian villages in the Barwar region and Sapna Valley in Amediya District; Zakho District; and—to a lesser extent—Nahla Valley in Akre District.
- The Turkey-PKK conflict in northern Iraq has made life unsustainable for civilian populations in targeted areas. When pursuing the PKK in Iraq, Turkey has consistently failed to take adequate precautions to minimize incidental and/or collateral damage to civilians and civilian objects. By operating from or near civilian areas, the PKK endangers civilian populations, including Kurds, Yazidis, and Assyrians.
- Turkey's military operations against the PKK pose considerable risk to civilian life outside the apparent target areas. While Turkey claims to be targeting the PKK, these airstrikes have resulted in numerous civilian casualties and injuries. To date, the airstrikes have not resulted in civilian deaths among the Assyrian population in Iraq. Similarly, the API has not been able to confirm that the strikes have resulted in injuries among Assyrians. However, the threat to civilian life persists. In addition to the threat of deadly physical harm caused by the Turkish strikes, witnesses often experience psychological distress. Fears of future attacks cause stress, interfere with daily life, and reignite past traumas. Though many Assyrians have grown accustomed to violent events, exposure to bombings often leads to periods of agitation, as well as anxiety, depression, and traumatic stress disorders.
- Another serious consequence of the Turkey-PKK conflict is the forced displacement of civilian populations. The API has documented accounts of Assyrians evacuating their homes during attacks and returning when military operations have presumably ceased. At the time of writing, at least 26 Assyrian families from the village of Sharanish remain unable to return to their village since June 2020, with the majority now living in temporary accommodation in the cities of Zakho or Duhok. The Turkey-PKK conflict has thus exacerbated the situation for Assyrians living in the KRI, and is one of the many factors driving Assyrians to leave Iraq altogether. Sustained declines in the Assyrian population of the Barwar region have left some villages with only a fraction of their inhabitants. For example, the number of households in the village of Chalik has decreased from 70 households to six households in recent years.

- Turkish strikes in northern Iraq have caused irreparable and costly damage to civilian properties and agricultural lands. The API has documented accounts of property destruction to infrastructure, homes, cemeteries, farmlands, and motor vehicles due to shrapnel projectiles. In rare cases, homes or properties have been partially or totally destroyed. Orchards and other agricultural lands are frequently burned in fires ensuing from the strikes. This particular destruction leads to a negative impact on the livelihoods of many Assyrians in the region, who primarily work in the agricultural sector. The destruction to private property and farmland caused by Turkish airstrikes effectively robs Assyrian farmers of their livelihoods and immediately threatens their ability to stay in their homes and villages. Both the threat of Turkish airstrikes and the PKK presence severely hinder movement in northern Iraq. Assyrian farmers are sometimes unable to access their farmlands, both for their personal and commercial use. They are either forcibly stopped by PKK road closures, or they avoid maintaining their farmlands out of fear of possible strikes.
- Despite mounting criticism of the Turkish government's military intervention in northern Iraq, Iraqi and KRG authorities have failed to take concrete steps to protect civilian life and minimize material losses to civilians caught in the middle of the Turkey-PKK conflict. Due to the long-term nature of this conflict and the inaction from government authorities, many Assyrians in affected villages have resigned themselves to the idea that change is unlikely. In general, Assyrians are also critical of the KRG's capacity to provide fire and emergency services to affected populations. Assyrian communities threatened by fires resulting from the strikes are left to fend for themselves. Locals often take it upon themselves to respond to fires that pose risks to life and property.

Figure 1 on the following page displays areas inhabited by Assyrians which are routinely affected and/or threatened by Turkish airstrikes targeting suspected PKK positions. See page 14 for data collected pertaining to the dates and locations of reported strikes.

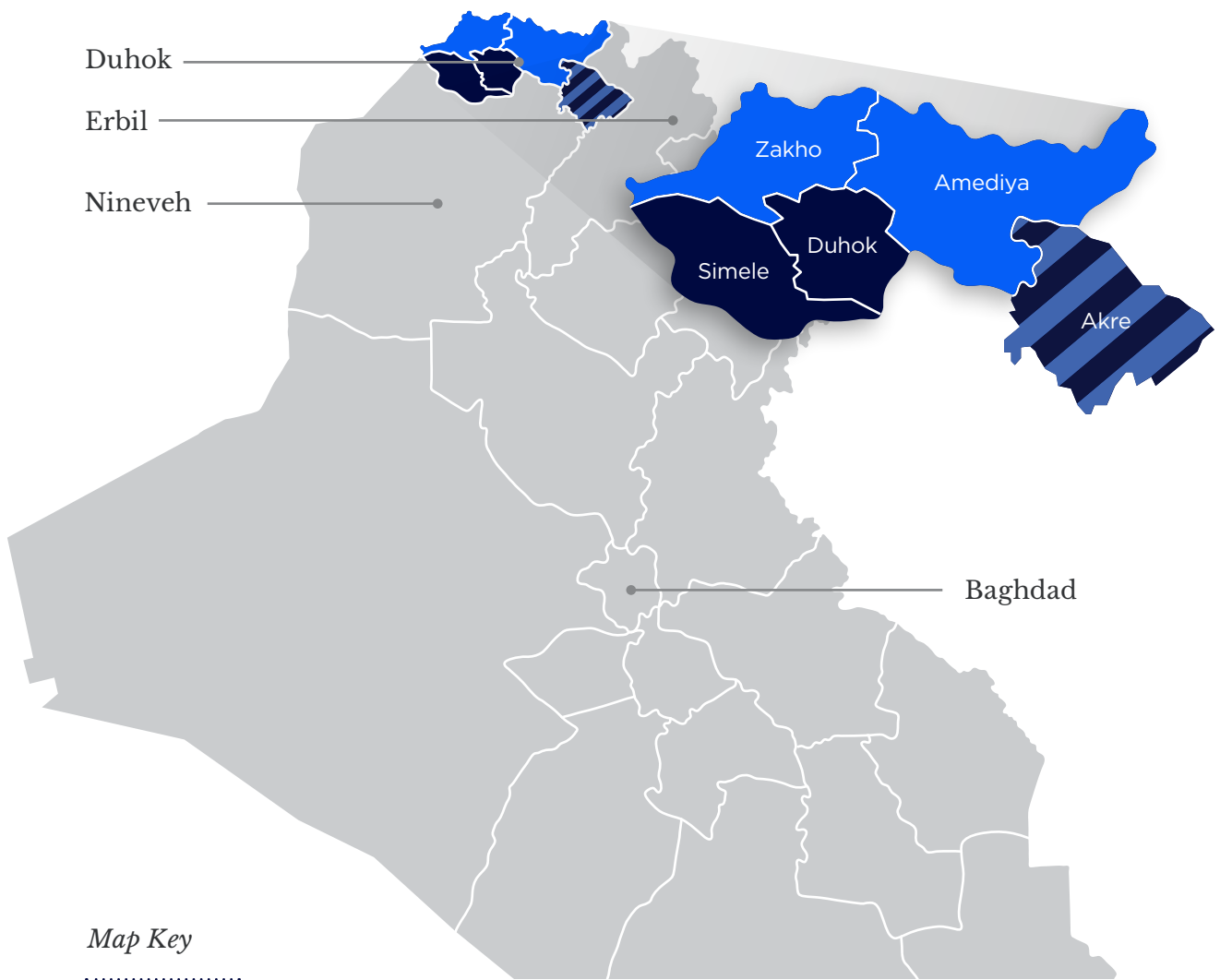
Methodology

In November and December 2020, the Assyrian Policy Institute (API) interviewed 17 ethnic Assyrian families who were exposed to airstrikes and shelling in 2020 due to the Turkey-PKK conflict in Duhok Governorate, as well as relevant government officials and Assyrian civil society representatives. Most interviews took place by phone. In some cases, interviews were conducted via Zoom Meeting. In addition, the API reviewed and verified video footage of multiple strikes conducted at various points during the past year, as well as photographic evidence documenting material damage.¹³ This report conveys and contextualizes findings made by API researchers.



All individuals interviewed were informed of the purpose of the interview, and verbally consented to the use of information provided in this report. Names

and identifying information of interviewees have been withheld to protect their identities. The individuals interviewed for this report are inhabitants of various Assyrian villages located in the Barwar region, Nahla Valley, Sapna Valley, and Zakho District. Information about specific locations of respondents has been withheld in the interest of their personal safety and security.

Figure 1. Mapping High-Risk Areas Inhabited by Assyrians in Duhok Governorate.



Map Key

-  Districts inhabited by Assyrians threatened by airstrikes
-  Disputed territory under *de-facto* KRG jurisdiction

NOTE: The boundaries shown and designations used on this map may not be exact and do not imply official acceptance by the Iraqi Government.

Background

The PKK is a Kurdish militant and political organization founded by Kurdish nationalist Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey in 1978. The PKK's stated objective is to secure the cultural and political rights of Turkey's nearly 15 million Kurds. To this end, the PKK has been involved in an openly armed conflict with Turkey since 1984, which only recently drew to a brief close in the last decade. Abdullah Öcalan, currently serving a life sentence in Turkey for treason and sedition, negotiated a truce in March 2013¹⁴ and ordered the complete disarmament and withdrawal of all remaining PKK troops from Turkey in a long fought effort to end three decades of armed conflict. This truce dissolved in July 2015 when two Turkish police officers were killed by unidentified gunmen. The Turkish government accused the PKK of being behind the attack, for which the latter did claim responsibility but later recanted.¹⁵ The Ceylanpinar incident, as it was later called, led to the full scale resumption of the Turkey-PKK conflict that continues to the present with deleterious effects on local civilian populations. One such affected population is the Assyrians, who have been caught in the decades of crossfire between Turkey and the PKK.

Assyrians have routinely felt the consequences of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK, most notably in southeastern Turkey.

Assyrians have routinely felt the consequences of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK, most notably in southeastern Turkey, where a majority of the state's Assyrian and Kurdish populations were concentrated prior to the start of the conflict. Both the Turkish government and the PKK dragged Assyrians into the fold, forcing Assyrians to take part in a conflict, as historian Aryo Makko stated, "...that offered nothing to them but punishment from one party or the other."¹⁶ On the one hand, the Turkish government expected loyalty and information on the PKK's locations and operations, while the PKK demanded shelter and assistance in the fight against the tyranny of Turkey. This dynamic is captured perfectly in eyewitness testimony provided to anthropologist Naures Atto:

Bnebil was a Christian village. There were no Muslims in the village... The authorities requested the *Suryoye*¹⁷ [Assyrians] to accept their weapons to keep the PKK out of their village. The *Suryoye* did not acquiesce in that request. Whereupon, the authorities accused the *Suryoye* of being allied with the PKK. This accusation made the villagers decide to accept the weapons in order to show that they wanted nothing at all to do with the PKK. When the PKK found out, its representatives paid a visit to the villagers and showed their displeasure with the fact that the *Suryoye* had accepted the weapons. The *Suryoye* said to the PKK: "We took the weapons of the authorities into our houses, but we will not fight you." ...The PKK issued an ultimatum to the *Suryoye* to give the weapons back to the authorities or else they would be killed. On a certain day they attacked the house of the mayor [*mukhtar*]. They collected the *mukhtar*, the two *aza*, and the *bakçi* in his house and killed them... They killed the four most important people in the village in official positions. Later the PKK declared that it dispatched them for having accepted weapons from the authorities.¹⁸

All of this was set against the backdrop of constant bombardment and attacks that drove entire villages of Assyrians from southeastern Turkey, particularly in the villages surrounding Tur Abdin, to flee and relocate.

It was during the 1980s and 90s that a majority of Turkey's Assyrians fled for Europe, primarily in an attempt to escape the impossible position that the Turkish military and PKK were imposing on them, but also to secure their physical safety. The PKK often squatted and occupied Assyrian villages, monasteries, and other important sites during fighting with the Turkish military. In 1980s and 90s Turkey, the PKK's reliance on Assyrian villages as disposable battlegrounds would mirror how the PKK uses Assyrian villages in northern Iraq. One such instance of this occurred in 1993 when the Assyrian village of Hassana in Şırnak Province in Turkey suffered constant bombardment from the Turkish military, leading to the wholesale exodus of Hassana's inhabitants to the Belgian town of Melechen.¹⁹

The PKK in Northern Iraq and Tensions with the KRG

The Turkey-PKK conflict in Iraq is marked primarily by the KRG's diplomatic and economic relationship with Ankara. Turkey's relationship-building efforts with the KRG started in the 1990s when it assisted in implementing the UN-sanctioned no-fly zone after the first Gulf War. Turkey also supported the KRI in the humanitarian crisis that followed. The subsequent birth of the Kurdistan Regional Government created space for Turkish-Kurdish political cooperation that continues to the present. The KRG's relationship with Turkey is a constant source of ire between the KRG (more specifically, the KDP, led by the Barzani family) and the PKK. Though the most notable point of contention is the KRG's strong trading relationship with Turkey, the two parties have long been at odds. According to reports, "Turkey's operation has only reinforced views in the PKK that the KDP sees this operation as an opportunity for getting rid of the PKK."²⁰

Since the start of open hostilities between Turkey and the PKK in 1984, an estimated 30-40,000 people have died.²¹ Following the withdrawal of Iraqi Kurdish forces in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, the PKK settled in the Qandil Mountains near the Iraq-Iran border in the early 1990s, where they still maintain a powerful presence.²² It has since expanded its footprint in KRG-administered territory, occupying remote Assyrian villages and squatting in empty homes and other properties owned by Assyrians.²³ The PKK's presence in these areas has made them consistent targets for Turkish offensives. Various Assyrian villages located in Duhok Governorate (see page 37 for data) are regularly affected by airstrikes targeting the PKK. The PKK presence has other negative consequences for local Assyrians such as confiscation of Assyrian lands and properties, restrictions on movement, increased feelings of insecurity, and shortages of food and supplies. Some Assyrians say that barring the airstrikes, the PKK presence has little effect on day-to-day life, but has contributed to a

and properties, restrictions on movement, increased feelings of insecurity, and perpetual sense of uncertainty of what is to come. One Assyrian interviewed by the API said: “We do not want the PKK here in our villages, but we are in no position to get them to leave. The authorities cannot do anything about it. We are tired of our lands being used for other peoples’ wars.”²⁴

Some Assyrian villages in the KRI are fully under the *de facto* control of the PKK.

Some Assyrian villages in the KRI are fully under the *de facto* control of the PKK. The PKK maintains its own checkpoints in Duhok Governorate where PKK flags and portraits of Abdullah Öcalan are put on display. The area dividing KRG-controlled territory and PKK-controlled territory often stretches miles in length and effectively serves as a buffer zone. Though these PKK-controlled territories are officially part of Duhok Governorate, the KRG has not had full control of the area for upwards of two decades. The areas are thus neglected by KRG authorities. For example, the roads leading to and within the Nahla Valley are in very poor condition, creating hazardous conditions for residents to travel and seek necessities such as food and supplies. Not only are the roads unsafe, but they create serious obstacles for those who work (or who are seeking employment) in other villages and cities, as they do not provide easy access when commuting to other areas. According to local officials, complaints to KRG officials about such deficiencies have resulted in no action to address them, and often point to the PKK presence as a deterrence. Local Assyrians do not expect any change.

Part II: Reported Turkish Airstrikes Near Assyrian Villages in 2020



Eyewitness photo of a bomb exploding in the Barwar region near the Assyrian village of Chalik. (Aug. 19, 2020)

The API has obtained information in regard to 53 incidents that occurred in 2020, but has concluded that the actual number is likely higher.

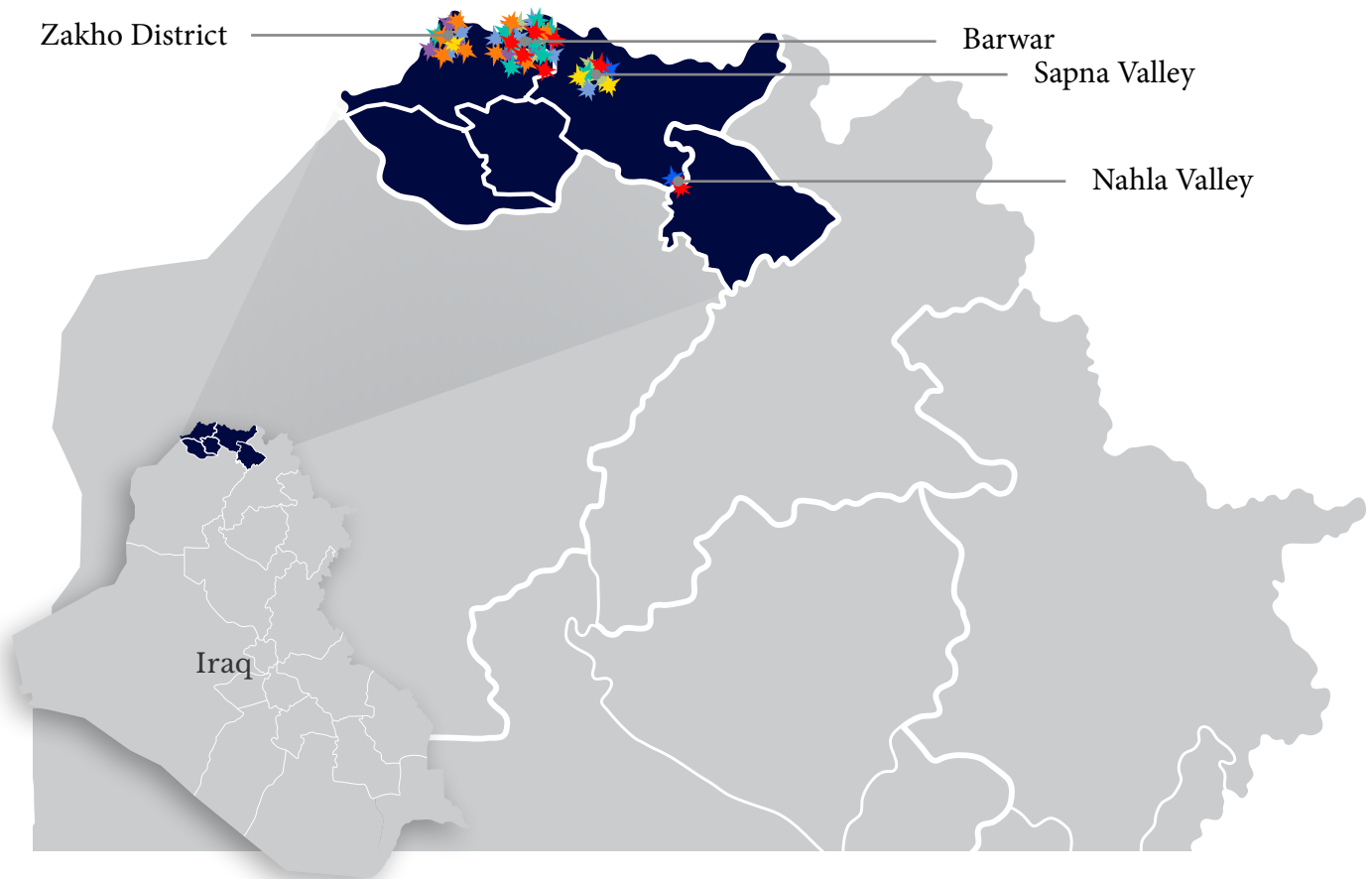
The Assyrian Policy Institute has tracked reported Turkish military airstrikes in areas inhabited by Assyrians in Duhok Governorate in 2020. Figure 2 on page 14 depicts the locations of reported strikes which took place in 2020 in close proximity to Assyrian villages. This number includes strikes that were visible or audible to inhabitants of Assyrian villages. Our data is drawn from a wide range of sources, including interviews with eyewitnesses, credible open source reports, international and local NGOs, footage and photographs of incidents, and social media pages (i.e. local residents' groups on Facebook). Claims were cross-referenced and verified wherever possible.

The list of reported airstrikes is indicative only and should not be considered an exhaustive list. The API has obtained information in regard to 52 events that occurred in 2020, but has concluded that the actual number is likely higher.²⁵ Turkish jets and drones have been bombing suspected PKK positions in northern Iraq since the 1990s and are likely to continue beyond 2020. The strikes in Iraq are under the ultimate command of the Turkish Defense Ministry, and have been conducted by the Turkish government under two broad policies: domestic security and counter-terrorism.

The data presented in Figure 2 (see Appendix 1 for data in table form) reflects the dates and locations where shelling is believed to have occurred in close proximity to Assyrian villages. It does not reflect that number of individual strikes that took place on a specific date. Due to large variations in the quality of reporting, accurate information regarding the number of strikes in a specified period was difficult to come by. The number and frequency of strikes in a given period varies significantly. One respondent from the Barwar region reported 17 strikes in a period of several hours. Another from Nahla Valley reported 11 strikes over a period of two days. In a few cases, a singular airstrike was reported for a particular date. The strikes occur at all times of the day.

The data collected by API researchers shows that the regions most frequently targeted are those situated along the Iraqi-Turkish border, including Assyrian villages in the Amediya and Zakho Districts in Duhok Governorate. Of the 52 incidents known to the API, 31 took place in the Barwar region in Amediya District. More specifically, the mountains surrounding Chalik, the westernmost Assyrian village in Barwar, are the most frequent sites of shelling. Other Assyrian villages in the region, including Ain Nune (Kani Masi), Baz, and Dure, are routinely affected by the shelling.

Figure 2. Mapping Airstrikes Impacting Assyrians in Duhok Governorate.



Map Key

- ★ *Reported airstrike incident.*
- ★ May 2020
- ★ June 2020
- ★ July 2020
- ★ Aug 2020
- ★ Sept 2020
- ★ Oct 2020
- ★ Nov 2020
- ★ Dec 2020

NOTE: The data presented in the Figure 2 is indicative only and should not be considered exhaustive. It does not reflect that number of individual strikes that took place on a specific incident. Please note that the geographical locations and locations of airstrikes shown on this map are approximations. This map is intended to provide a sense of the frequency of the attacks. For more details about the individual attacks, see Appendix 1.

Northeast of the city of Zakho are the Assyrian villages of Sharanish and Bersiveh, both of which were targeted on multiple dates in 2020. Sharanish and Bersiveh are believed to have sustained the most significant level of destruction as a result of Turkey's military interventions in 2020 when compared to the damage in other Assyrian villages. Smaller Assyrian villages in Batifa subdistrict were also impacted by the strikes.

In Amediya District, the Assyrian villages of Sapna Valley, including Araden, Deralok, and Komany, are often affected by the bombings. For example, on August 14, 2020, Turkish drones targeted a vehicle in Araden which was allegedly transporting PKK members.²⁶ A total of nine of the reported airstrikes documented in Figure 2 occurred in the Sapna Valley.

Figure 2 accounts for only two reported airstrikes in Nahla Valley, which is located deeper in the KRI but is under the *de facto* control of the PKK. Respondents from villages located in Nahla indicated that the number of strikes which occurred in 2020 was higher; however, the API was unable to confirm additional dates that airstrikes were believed to have occurred in Nahla Valley. Many villagers have become accustomed to the strikes and do not track them as noteworthy occurrences. Most respondents estimated the number was less than ten such dates for 2020, noting that the frequency of strikes in Nahla Valley was lower in 2020 than in previous years. In October 2019, for example, locals report the region was bombed 11 times over the course of three days.

Part III: Consequences for Assyrians

The Turkey-PKK conflict in northern Iraq has made life unsustainable for civilian populations in targeted areas.

The Turkey-PKK conflict in northern Iraq has made life unsustainable for civilian populations in targeted areas. When pursuing the PKK in Iraq, Turkey has consistently failed to take adequate precautions to minimize incidental and/or collateral damage to civilians and civilian objects. The strikes have killed and injured civilians, displaced civilian populations, caused significant damage to homes, infrastructure, agricultural lands, and livestock, and has harmed livelihoods. By operating from or near civilian areas, the PKK endangers civilian populations, including Kurds, Yazidis, and Assyrians.



Flames billowing in the mountains outside the Assyrian village of Bersiveh. (June 21, 2020)

The Assyrians of northern Iraq have, much like their counterparts in southeastern Turkey, found themselves in the crossfire between two powerful actors embroiled in a conflict in which Assyrians have no part. Not only are Assyrians severely impacted by Turkey’s attacks on the PKK, the Kurdish regional authorities are unreliable to those who need their security and support the most. Despite regular self-praises from leaders on the diversity and inclusivity of Kurdish governance,²⁷ Assyrians do not feel protected.

To date, the airstrikes have not resulted in civilian deaths among the Assyrian population. Similarly, the API has not been able to confirm that the strikes have resulted in injuries among Assyrians. However, the threat to civilian life persists. For many Assyrians, the attacks are retraumatizing.²⁸

While Assyrians have not comprised any of the civilian casualties from Turkey’s airstrikes, there are several factors that threaten their safety in northern Iraq. At the height of the conflict in summer 2020, several Assyrian villages were temporarily evacuated as a result of a Turkish air offensive. Many Assyrians remain internally displaced. Apart from concerns about security, the strikes have harmed livelihoods, damaged properties, and destroyed farmlands. The ongoing conflict also poses threats to Assyrian heritage sites in the region.

A great number of factors have consistently forced Assyrians to flee Iraq—including from the KRI—since 2003. The ongoing conflict between Turkey and the PKK has only exacerbated the situation for Assyrians. The following section will elaborate on the consequences Assyrians face as a result of the strikes. It is important to recognize that these consequences have a disproportionate effect on vulnerable communities and increase the likelihood of forced migration.

“Even when no one is killed and there is no extensive damage, you’re still scared,” a man from Nahla Valley told API researchers. “And that’s enough — the anticipation [of future attacks] and the uncertainty is enough to push people to leave.”²⁹

Threats to Civilian Life and Exposure to Trauma

Turkey’s military operations against the PKK pose considerable risk to civilian life outside the apparent target areas. While Turkey claims to be targeting the PKK, these airstrikes have resulted in numerous civilian casualties and injuries.³⁰

In addition to the initial explosion, shrapnel (bomb fragments) projectiles can severely injure or kill as fragments hit a body.³¹

In addition to the threat of deadly physical harm caused by the Turkish strikes, witnesses often experience psychological distress. Fears of future attacks cause stress, interfere with daily life, and reignite past traumas. Though many Assyrians have grown accustomed to violent events, exposure to bombings



Fears of future attacks cause stress, interfere with daily life, and reignite past traumas.



Shrapnel recovered in the village of Chalik following nearby shelling. (Sept. 20, 2020)

often leads to periods of agitation, as well as anxiety, depression, and traumatic stress disorders. API researchers interviewed a man from an Assyrian village in Barwar, who stated: “Assyrians have lived in constant fear in Iraq. We have lived in fear for so long that we think it’s normal to live this way. This might be the norm, but it is not normal.”³²

A man from an Assyrian village in the Nahla Valley likened the Turkish military interventions to his experiences as a child, telling API researchers, “I was born in 1979 and grew up in the midst of the Iran-Iraq War. I still remember the terror we experienced when Iranian planes flew over our heads in Duhok. We still haven’t recovered from that trauma, and now we have Turkish jets constantly overhead.”³³ One woman claimed to have suffered a miscarriage which she blamed on exposure to trauma and stress due to bombings in 2018.³⁴

As a result of repeated exposure to explosions from Turkey’s strikes, some Assyrian children in affected villages have exhibited signs of early trauma. The API reviewed and verified video footage from June 2020 which showed Assyrian children in their home screaming and crying in reaction to nearby shelling in the Barwar region.³⁵ A man from Nahla Valley recounted an incident which took place in October 2019 when his daughter brought his young grandson to his village for a visit. Turkish jets began shelling the neighboring mountains, and his grandson curled up onto the floor, shaking and covering his ears.³⁶

Another witness from Nahla Valley told API researchers: “Everyone reacts differently to the bombings. My daughter is terrified. Anytime she hears the bombings, she is really shaken and sometimes won’t be able to sleep for days. There is a lot of fear instilled in the hearts of the people here, all the time. There is a constant sense of unease, and uncertainty about what might happen.”³⁷

When ISIS took over northern Iraq in 2014, some Assyrian families who fled their homes in Mosul and the Nineveh Plain took up residence in Assyrian villages located in the Barwar region and Zakho District. These IDPs have already suffered immeasurable trauma in recent years, and are now revictimized by the threat of Turkey’s cross-border strikes.

“The [June 2020] bombings were so loud they shook our house,” said a woman from Zakho District. “I ran outside and found that there was a fire just two kilometers away. We were terrified that the attacks were so close. No one dared to be outdoors until it was over the next day.”³⁸

Another resident from Zakho District shared similar reflections with the API: “The sound of the [June 2020] bombings was so loud, we were sure the village must have been hit directly. Our windows were smashed and my family thought we were going to be killed. We didn’t know if we should stay inside or try to flee. That’s not a feeling that you can just dismiss easily. It stays with you.”³⁹

Forced Displacement and Increased Pressure to Emigrate

Another serious consequence of the Turkey-PKK conflict is the forced displacement of civilian populations.

Another serious consequence of the Turkey-PKK conflict is the forced displacement of civilian populations. The API has documented accounts of Assyrians evacuating their homes during attacks and returning when military operations have presumably ceased. At least 26 Assyrian families from the village of Sharanish remain unable to return to their village since June 2020, with the majority now living in temporary accommodation in the cities of Zakho or Duhok. They remain hesitant to return due to increased feelings of insecurity given the magnitude and frequency of recent strikes.



Scorched land in the village of Sharanish following shelling. (Sept. 10, 2020)

A man from Sharanish who remains displaced in nearby Zakho told the API: “Look at what [Turkey] has done. Our village is now emptied. Our farms have been burned and our houses destroyed. We had no choice but to flee, as the bombings were too close to our village.”⁴⁰

Some of those Assyrians who have been displaced as a result of the bombings have been displaced multiple times before—including in response to other conflicts—escalating the trauma and hardship. As mentioned, many of those Assyrians residing in affected villages were displaced by ISIS in 2014. The API interviewed a man whose family fled violence and persecution targeting Christians in Baghdad. “We came here [to Sharanish] after fleeing from Baghdad.

We thought that we would be safe. We bought a house and furnished it, thinking that this would be our new home. But now the conflict between Turkey and the PKK has forced us to flee again. We are now living in Zakho. I checked on our home a couple of months ago only to find so much damage. It's still not safe enough to return.”⁴¹

There are several factors that have led to the steady decline of the population of rural Assyrian villages in the KRI, including the systematic encroachment of Assyrian land, as well as the KRG's harmful policies, discriminatory practices, and consistent economical and infrastructural neglect of Assyrian villages under its jurisdiction. The Turkey-PKK conflict has thus exacerbated the situation for Assyrians living in the KRI, and is one of the many factors driving Assyrians to leave Iraq altogether. Forced migration is one of the most unfortunate and likely irreversible byproducts of the conflict. Sustained declines in the Assyrian population of the Barwar region have left some villages with only a fraction of their inhabitants. For example, the number of households in the village of Chalik has decreased from 70 households to six households in recent years.

Due to the long-term nature of this conflict and the inaction from government authorities, many Assyrians in affected villages have resigned themselves to the idea that change is unlikely. Some have adopted the idea that in time, they will be forced to migrate, as well.

A man from an Assyrian village in the Barwar region said, “We are hoping for a peaceful resolution to this problem. We want our people to have the opportunity to return. The more time that passes [without a resolution], the less likely they are to return.”⁴²

An Assyrian man from Nahla Valley interviewed for this report stated: “Obviously, we are not happy about what is happening, but we have just learned to live with it. We accept the reality of the situation as it is, because we know that prospects for change are low. There is not much we can do. We have two choices: Leave our lands or accept the situation as it is. So, our daily lives continue. We are here to the end.”⁴³

As in past years, aid organizations such as the Assyrian Aid Society (AAS) have worked to meet the basic needs of Assyrian families in their displacement in the absence of support from the governing authorities, but the humanitarian assistance provided by NGOs cannot work as reliable support in the long-term.

Damage to Property, Infrastructure, and Agricultural Lands

Turkish strikes in northern Iraq have caused irreparable and costly damage to civilian properties and agricultural lands.

Turkish strikes in northern Iraq have caused irreparable and costly damage to civilian properties and agricultural lands. The API has documented accounts of property destruction to infrastructure, homes, cemeteries, farmlands, and motor vehicles due to shrapnel projectiles. In rare cases, homes or properties have been partially or totally destroyed.



A damaged home in Sharanish following shelling near the village. (Sept. 10, 2020)

Verified photographs and video footage reviewed by API researchers show damage to homes caused by airstrikes that occurred between June to November 2020 in the villages of Chalik, Bersiveh, and Sharanish, including wall cracks, broken windows, collapsed ceiling tiles, and other damage.⁴⁴ Several witnesses interviewed for this report explained the bombings have also resulted in sinking foundations.



Damage to property following shelling between Sept. 17-18 in the village of Chalik, including cracks to exterior and interior walls, a displaced wall fan and ceiling tiles, and broken windows.

A witness from a village in Zakho District told the API: “Not only was there damage to my house, but my car was damaged. How long are we going to be dealing with this nightmare? When does it end?”

Airstrikes conducted on June 14, 2020 near Sharanish destroyed the village’s electric and water distributors, as well as a meeting hall.⁴⁵ A local cemetery was scorched by fires resulting from the bombings; however, the API did not find evidence of disturbed graves from the photographs provided. Respondents stated electricity transmission lines are often affected by the strikes, causing power outages that can last for several days. One woman said her village once lost power for over one week as a result of the shelling.

Orchards and other agricultural lands are frequently burned in fires ensuing from the strikes. API researchers reviewed photographs of the charred remains of farmlands and orchards in the Barwar region and Nahla Valley. This particular destruction leads to a negative impact on livelihoods, which will be discussed in the next section. Assyrians affected by the strikes rely on their own savings as well as support from aid groups like the AAS to repair damaged homes and other properties, including agricultural lands.



Assyrians from rural villages in the KRI have consistently bemoaned local Kurdish authorities for their inability or unwillingness to provide fire and emergency services in their areas. This negligence from the KRG cannot be understated. Assyrian communities threatened by fires resulting from the

strikes are left to fend for themselves. Locals often take it upon themselves to respond to fires that pose risks to life and property. For example, one man said he joined a group of men from his village in Nahla Valley in responding to a local fire. He said the locals cut down tree branches and used them to put out the fire. Respondents from the Barwar region explained that they are able to put out smaller fires using water hoses and/or buckets of water, a solution to which the inhabitants of this village have had to resort in the absence of relief services.



Residents of an Assyrian village in the Barwar region put out a fire following airstrikes. (Sept. 17, 2020)

Harm to Livelihoods

The airstrikes negatively impact livelihoods of many Assyrians, who primarily work in the agricultural sector. The subsistence lifestyle practiced by many Assyrians in the Nahla Valley, a village in Duhok Governorate, relies heavily on farming and hunting animals in the surrounding mountains. The destruction of private property and farmland caused by Turkish airstrikes effectively robs Assyrian farmers of their livelihoods and immediately threatens their ability to stay in their homes and villages. Assyrians from the Barwar region estimate that crops valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars have been destroyed in recent years. An orchard farmer in the Barwar region reported that his apple orchard was completely scorched in airstrikes earlier this year, destroying the year's harvest. Multiple respondents reported they lost livestock as a result of the shelling. A man from Nahla Valley told API researchers he lost three cows in bombings earlier this year.⁴⁶

The destruction of private property and farmland caused by Turkish airstrikes effectively robs Assyrian farmers of their livelihoods and immediately threatens their ability to stay in their homes and villages.

Both the threat of Turkish airstrikes and the PKK presence severely hinder movement in northern Iraq. Assyrian farmers are sometimes unable to access their farmlands, both for their personal and commercial use. They are either forcibly stopped by PKK road closures, or they avoid maintaining their

farmlands out of fear for their safety. Some farmers have even reported having to abandon their farmlands completely, fearing that they will be spotted by Turkish jets and mistaken for a PKK combatant. Similarly, Assyrian hunters report that the practice of hunting in areas with a PKK presence is a risk. This fear is undoubtedly stoked by reports that even in areas seemingly miles away from any potential military units, shepherds and farmers have been killed by Turkish airstrikes while working.⁴⁷



Charred agricultural lands in Sharanish following fires caused by airstrikes photographed on July 29, 2020.



Scorched farmland in Komany in Sapna Valley following a fire resulting from nearby strikes.

One man from the Barwar region told API researchers, “Many Assyrians are tired. They are burning our mountains and our agricultural lands. All of our people from the village are leaving because there is nothing left for them here. They can’t work here. They can’t farm here. This [the airstrikes] has been going on for more than ten years, but recently it got much worse. We have communal farmlands here [in my village] where I used to plant rice and wheat. I cannot do that anymore. We don’t dare to go there [to the farmlands], because it’s too dangerous.”⁴⁸

Another man from the same village said, “What kind of life is there for Assyrians in their villages when they don’t feel safe? When we are surrounded by hostile actors? When we can’t sell our crops? When you constantly have planes hovering over you in the sky? It’s no life at all.”⁴⁹

Threats to Assyrian Cultural Heritage

Among the many threats posed by the Turkey-PKK conflict is the ever-present threat to Assyrian cultural heritage sites.

Among the many threats posed by the Turkey-PKK conflict is the ever-present threat to Assyrian cultural heritage sites. There are particular concerns about heritage sites located in the historical Barwar region in Duhok Governorate. The area contains many important Assyrian religious sites, including Mar Qayoma Monastery, Mar Gewargis Church, Mar Shmooni Church, and Mar Sawa Church.⁵⁰ These religious sites are prominent structures belonging to the [Assyrian] Church of the East and are not only integral to maintaining Iraq’s rich ethnic and religious diversity, but are sites of important pilgrimages and tourism for Assyrians throughout Iraq.



Mar Qoryakos Chaldean Catholic Church in the village of Sharanish threatened by ensuing fires following nearby strikes. (Sept. 10, 2020)

Local residents have informed the API that PKK militants operating in the region frequently occupy Mar Qayoma Monastery, which consequently puts the site under direct threat of attack. Mar Qayoma Monastery is situated atop a mountain on the outskirts of the Assyrian villages of Barwar. The ancient monastery is believed to have been built approximately 1,400 years ago and relies on local parishioners to preserve and maintain its fragile foundation. Assyrians who live in nearby villages say they no longer have access to the monastery, as it is reportedly used by the PKK as a meeting point for military operations and a place to take refuge. Individuals interviewed in preparation of this report also claim that PKK militants have damaged the monastery's interior, including allegedly burning holy books for warmth. In January 2019, Turkish airstrikes targeted locations in close proximity to the monastery.⁵¹

For decades, the central and regional governments have continuously made impassioned commitments to preserving Iraq's cultural heritage sites, especially those belonging to the indigenous Assyrian community. Their inability to protect these sacred sites remained unchanged from the early days of the Iraq war, to the caliphate of ISIS, to the ever-escalating conflict between Turkey and the PKK. The destruction, negligence, and mismanagement of these sites severely threaten the preservation of ancient world heritage and causes irreparable damage to Assyrian collective cultural memory. Further, it sends a clear message to Assyrians that they are not safe in their ancestral homeland.



Scorched lands in the village of Sharanish following bombings in the area. (Sept. 10, 2020)

Part IV: International Response and Accountability

Apparent Violations of International Law

The Turkish government is accused by many human rights groups of exhibiting wanton disregard for fundamental conventions of international law by which all actors must abide in times of war. In reference to a July 2020 airstrike, Human Rights Watch wrote:

The Turkish military appears not to have taken adequate precautions in this [July 2020] attack to minimize civilian harm, nor to have established whether predictable civilian harm would outweigh the concrete and direct military advance it anticipated from the attack, making the attack unlawfully disproportionate.⁵²

The laws of war, enshrined in the various Geneva Conventions drafted in the aftermath of World War II, require militaries to take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects.⁵³ Such precautions include the critical task of verifying that the objects of attack are indeed military objects, especially when these military objects appear to be co-located in what are considered to be civilian sites. The API spoke with several individuals who confirmed that PKK militants regularly co-mingle in civilian spaces, which some locals perceive to be an attempt to avoid an attack that the Turkish military would consider too costly to pursue. Regardless, the laws of war still place the onus on the Turkish military to carefully assess each potential strike such that the civilian loss does not

exceed military gain. On August 19, 2020, a Turkish strike in the Ain Nune (Kani Masi) subdistrict of Duhok killed 60-year old Khalid Abdulrahman as he was herding his livestock.⁵⁴ In June 2020, a Kurdish shepherd was killed in Bradost, Erbil Governorate and three more civilians were killed in Chiladze, Duhok.⁵⁵ The International Crisis Group (ICG) estimates that since July 2015, following the Ceylanpinar incident which spurred the resumption of active hostilities between Turkey and the PKK, an estimated 535 civilians have been killed.⁵⁶ The Turkish military must take greater and more precise measures to ensure that they are striking military objectives with minimal, if any, loss of civilian life. At present, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Turkish government may be striking indiscriminately in northern Iraq.

Appeals from Assyrian Representatives

For years, Assyrian representatives in Iraq—at the federal, regional, provincial, and municipal levels—have repeatedly condemned these airstrikes and continue to appeal to Iraqi and KRG authorities for meaningful intervention.⁵⁷ They have also called on Turkish authorities to end military operations in areas with civilian populations, and for PKK forces to withdraw from civilian areas.

On June 26, 2020, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), the preeminent Assyrian political party in Iraq,⁵⁸ condemned the attacks and called on Iraqi and KRG authorities to “assume their responsibilities in preserving the sovereignty of the country and protecting the lives and property of innocent citizens along the Turkish and Iranian borders” and to “take urgent measures to compensate citizens for the damage caused.”⁵⁹ Following September 2018 bombings which occurred near Nahla Valley, the ADM published a statement which read:

The Iraqi Government is incapable of curbing Turkish aggression on Iraqi soil. The issue of encroachment on Iraqi soil and its territory has become routine for Turkey and Iran. At the same time, the Kurdistan Regional Government has shown no regard for the matter due to its inability to impose law and order in the areas under its jurisdiction, and claims they are unable to expel elements of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in our villages.⁶⁰

In a virtual meeting with API researchers held on December 4, 2020, Fared Yacoob, an Assyrian representative currently serving in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, said he recently met with constituents affected by the airstrikes who expressed grievances related to displacement, feelings of insecurity, damage to property, and harm to livelihoods. “The government has a responsibility to protect the lives and the properties of Assyrians and other civilians living along the [Iraqi-Turkish] border,” he told the API. “They also have the responsibility of compensating locals for their losses and creating an environment which will enable the safe return of displaced Assyrians.”⁶¹

He added, “These strikes have sown terror in the hearts of local populations for years. Assyrian villages cannot be used as a place to fight other people’s

wars.” Yacoob believes the removal from PKK elements from civilian areas is a necessary step towards stabilizing security in the region and preventing further loss and displacement.

Response from the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government

Despite mounting criticism of the Turkish government’s military intervention in northern Iraq, Iraqi and KRG authorities have failed to take concrete steps to protect civilian life and minimize material losses to civilians caught in the middle of the Turkey-PKK conflict. The following sections will elaborate on recent measures undertaken by authorities at both the federal and regional level in recent months to address this long standing conflict.

Assyrians impacted by the strikes in northern Iraq have also criticized the silence of the international community on this issue, particularly the United States.

Assyrians impacted by the strikes in northern Iraq have also criticized the silence of the international community on this issue, particularly that of the United States. Many Assyrians in Iraq perceive the role of the U.S. in Iraq to be critical to their survival. To date, the U.S. has not condemned Turkey’s operations in northern Iraq, though the State Department’s 2019 Iraq Country Report on Human Rights Practices acknowledged civilian casualties resulting from the strikes.⁶² In a special briefing held virtually on August 25, 2020, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq Affairs David Copley addressed this issue:

“[W]e’d like to see Turkey and Iraq work closely together to address concerns about the PKK’s presence in northern Iraq. It’s important to respect Iraqi sovereignty. It’s also important to recognize that Turkey has legitimate security interests. We think the best way to solve these problems is for both parties to work together and hopefully maybe we can play a role in potentially making this happen in a way that’s good for stability and for both parties.”⁶³

Baghdad’s Response

The Iraqi Ministry of Defense condemned the Operations Claw-Tiger and Claw-Eagle in June 2020, describing them as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty: “We call on Turkey to halt these violations and avoid repeating them and respect the bilateral relations between the two countries.”⁶⁴ In addition, on June 16, Iraqi authorities summoned the Turkish Ambassador to protest against the aerial offensive. This symbolic diplomatic decision aside, Assyrians affected by the attacks do not believe that the Iraqi government is responding in such a way to effectuate a change in Turkey’s policy. Turkish authorities show no signs of heeding Baghdad’s calls, most notably to withdraw several hundred Turkish forces based in northern Iraq, as the airstrikes targeting locations in Duhok continue to the present.

Due to government inaction on this long standing issue, many Assyrians lack confidence in the authorities. This sentiment is reflected in a statement made by a resident of an Assyrian village in Nahla, who told the API: “We do not trust the government. After all these years, we do not have any hope that there will be meaningful intervention from the regional or federal authorities. They have done nothing to help us through this conflict.”⁶⁵

In July, Iraqi troops reportedly set up and enforced border positions along the border with Turkey in order to prevent Turkish forces from advancing deeper into Iraqi territory.⁶⁶ However, the new positions have done little to deter the offensive, and the airstrikes have continued into at least December 2020 at the time of writing.

Erbil’s Response

Though Turkey’s presence in the KRI is considered illegal by the central government in Baghdad, the establishment of Turkish military bases in the KRI took place with effectively no opposition from the KRG’s ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). In addition to airborne attacks, the Turkish military relies on these military bases to complicate the movements of PKK militants. Senior KRG officials, including KRG President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani have been largely silent on the repeated bombings, despite dozens of civilian casualties and outcries from local populations.

The KRG has often shifted responsibility for addressing this conflict to the central government. In comments made to the Human Rights Watch, Dindar Zebari, the KRG coordinator for international advocacy, stated that “The KRG Ministry of Peshmerga consistently reports on the consequences of the attacks to the Iraqi federal government and has called on the federal government to push for an end to the attacks.”⁶⁷

While the KRG has taken a firm stance against the PKK’s presence in northern Iraq, there remain critical steps that the regional government must take to meaningfully protect the various ethnic communities within the KRI from Turkey’s pursuit of the PKK. The KRG has in recent months deployed its security forces, the Peshmerga, to fend off the PKK’s positions, but it has failed to adopt a multi-pronged approach to deal with the several byproducts of the PKK’s presence and the Turkish strikes that have followed. On the ground, relief services such as fire and police refuse to field requests in certain villages. Diplomatically, much more can be done on the side of the KRG to hold Turkey accountable for its actions.

In April 2020, KRG President Nechirvan Barzani called the PKK’s presence in the KRI illegitimate and stated: “The PKK should stay away from creating problems for the Kurdistan region. The Kurdistan region is not PKK’s area of activity, has never been, and should not be. We are part of Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region, within this framework, will never accept another power to create problems for its neighbors.”⁶⁸

In response to Operations Claw-Eagle and Claw-Tiger, KRG Spokesperson Jotiar Adil issued the following statement on June 20, 2020:

“We are watching today’s incident, as well as others in recent days in border areas, with grave concern. These attacks have tragically killed civilians, and caused significant damage to villages in the areas concerned. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) condemns the killing of civilians unreservedly. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims, and wish the wounded a speedy recovery.

We call on the Republic of Turkey to respect the sovereignty of our homeland. We also call on PKK to leave these areas immediately in order to prevent tension on the borders of the Kurdistan Region and further loss of life. The KRG wishes to have friendly relations with all neighbouring states. Kurdistan Region’s territory should not be used to launch attacks on any country.”⁶⁹

Many Assyrians view these statements as futile, as the KRG has repeatedly failed to take concrete action to address this long-term problem. One man from Nahla Valley told the API: “On paper, the [KRG] is supposedly the governing authority in this area. They offer meaningless statements in the media, but on the ground, they have shown they are unable to address the problem. They have done nothing to help us.”⁷⁰

On September 4, 2020, Nechirvan Barzani met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara. Despite growing discontent from local populations concerning the Turkey-PKK conflict in the KRI, the official meeting release contained no mention of it.⁷¹

Conversely, the KRG has taken an increasingly hard stance against the PKK. The recent agreement between the KRG and the Iraqi government on the status of the Sinjar region (discussed in the next section) was in part aimed at removing the PKK-affiliated YBŞ from the area.⁷² Though the YBŞ (a force composed of Yazidis), has since complied with the agreement, tensions between the KDP and the PKK have risen in the KRI. At the time of writing, three Peshmerga soldiers have been killed in clashes with the PKK between November and December 2020.⁷³

The KRG has established new checkpoints on key access roads leading to PKK-controlled territory in an effort to cut off resources to the militant group.⁷⁴ While increased security measures are long overdue, local Assyrians claim a new checkpoint set up in Nahla Valley has brought unnecessary harm to people’s access to food, water, livelihoods, and other fundamental rights. Residents interviewed for this report told the API that KRG security forces are limiting the amount of food and energy resources (i.e. kerosene fuel) that families can bring into the region. Visitors have reportedly been turned away at the checkpoint.⁷⁵

Respondents from Nahla Valley also expressed a heightened sense of fear of potential clashes between the KDP and PKK in the area.

The Sinjar Agreement

Assyrians are not the only group caught in the middle of the bitter feud between Turkey and the PKK. Turkish airstrikes have repeatedly impacted the Yazidi community of northern Iraq, particularly in Sinjar and its surrounding villages. Turkish airstrikes in Sinjar mainly target the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), a Yazidi militia that is known to be affiliated with the PKK. Although the YBS has not carried out any known attacks against Turkey, Ankara is allegedly concerned that it could pose a future threat as an extension of the PKK. Nonetheless, Yazidi civilians suffer re-traumatization and displacement as a result of Turkey's fight against the PKK. As a result, Yazidis have repeatedly condemned Turkish airstrikes and have appealed to Iraqi and KRG authorities for intervention.

On June 14, 2020, Yazidi genocide survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nadia Murad issued the following statement:

Mount Sinjar is a war zone right now. Turkish fighter jets are bombing multiple locations. Over 150 Yazidi families had just returned to their homes. When will [the Iraqi Government] and the international community apply some courage and political will to resolving security challenges in Sinjar?

Yazidis were abandoned to face genocide, systematic sexual slavery, and six years of forced displacement. The international community has again abdicated its moral responsibility to facilitate a safe and dignified return for Yazidi genocide survivors to their homeland.⁷⁶

Turkish airstrikes in and around Sinjar have been an issue of particular concern because of the current status of the Yazidi people. They have endured a systematic genocide, sexual slavery, and forced displacement in the past decade alone, they struggle to regain a sense of normalcy. Roughly one third of the Yazidi people still live in camps, even nearly two years after the dissolution of the so-called Islamic caliphate of the terror group ISIS. While the YBS's links to the PKK prove problematic given its terror group designation, many Yazidis support the groups as they were integral to helping fight off ISIS.

Following attacks on Mount Sinjar earlier this year, the Iraqi central government and the KRG signed on October 9 what is being called the Sinjar Agreement, which both parties drafted in an alleged attempt to restore security in Sinjar and establish a police force in the region to counter the presence of the PKK and YBS. Many of Sinjar's Yazidis have openly criticized the deal on the grounds that key Yazidi leaders and groups were excluded from the discussions. Some Yazidis view the Sinjar Agreement as a "political deal"⁷⁷ between the KDP and Baghdad rather than a deal with real intentions of helping the people of Sinjar.

In response, the YBS has since handed over several checkpoints to the Iraqi Army, which is now reportedly in full control of security in Sinjar District. However, YBS leadership indicated that the group will remain in the mountains.⁷⁸

For both the Assyrians of northern Iraq and the Yazidis of Sinjar, two marginalized groups still struggling to recover from the catastrophic reign of ISIS, the Turkish strikes have been violent, displacing, and traumatic. Iraqi and Kurdish authorities tasked with securing the region have proven ineffective in their leadership, further demonstrated by their refusal to involve key Yazidi actors in the drafting of the new Sinjar Agreement.

While the Sinjar Agreement appears to have thus far succeeded in diminishing the PKK presence in Sinjar, it does not necessarily give the answer to the challenges faced by Assyrians in parts of Duhok Governorate due to the differing circumstances.

Part V: Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

While the Turkey-PKK conflict affects various communities in northern Iraq, it is wrong to discount the unique suffering of vulnerable peoples such as Assyrians and Yazidis. Systematic discrimination, repeated and targeted violence that has resulted in forced displacement have driven many Assyrians away from their traditional homeland in Iraq. The Turkey-PKK conflict along the Iraqi-Turkish border has magnified threats to Assyrians and other marginalized peoples with long-term implications. The Turkish government's sustained military campaign targeting suspected PKK positions in northern Iraq threatens their safety, livelihoods, properties, and ultimately, their future in the country. The PKK continues to occupy and operate from civilian areas, consequently endangering the lives of Assyrians. The longer the conflict drags on, the greater the danger to the existential security of these threatened groups.

While international attention is largely focused on the political and ideological stakes, it must be recognized that Assyrians have already paid a disproportionate price for a conflict which they have no part but of which they were made victims. The escalation of violence in 2020 has only heightened feelings of insecurity and uncertainty among Assyrians. Turkey has been unrelenting in its pursuit of the PKK in Iraq at the expense of the safety of civilian populations. The PKK presence in historically Assyrian areas have made them a consistent target. Adding to the instability, recent clashes between the KDP and PKK have caused fears of intra-Kurdish violence among Assyrians who would again be caught in the crossfire. More and more, villages historically inhabited entirely by Assyrians now bear no trace of them. This is the human dimension of the conflict that is too often obscured by overarching geostrategic priorities.

Notwithstanding the many hardships faced by Assyrians in Iraq, many wish to remain in their homeland. Absent a solution for this conflict, Assyrians in targeted areas increasingly risk becoming expendable collateral damage. With no legitimate prospects for change, they could be more susceptible to forced internal and external displacement.

The Turkish government's campaign targeting suspected PKK positions in northern Iraq is likely to continue beyond 2020. The international community ought to take into account the unique consequences faced by Assyrians and other minoritized communities, such as the Yazidis, as a result of the violence. Wherever possible, Iraqi and KRG authorities must implement measures to prevent and minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects. The governing authorities should address the impact of the conflict on Assyrians—including displacement, material damage, and harm to livelihoods—in consultation with community leaders. They should approach this conflict as a priority and one that especially affects Assyrians in the region, both for the sake of future statewide stability and for the sake of this long-suffering community.

While this report does not offer solutions to the broader Turkey-PKK conflict, the policy recommendations provided below account for measures necessary to ensure the safety and longevity of Assyrians in these conflict zones. The Iraqi and Kurdish governing authorities must understand the gravity of this conflict and its devastating impact on the Assyrian, Yazidi, and Kurdish civilian communities in northern Iraq who face daily terror in the form of Turkey's campaign against the PKK. Unless the central and regional authorities and their international partners take meaningful action to mitigate Turkey's interventions and remove the PKK from northern Iraq, the unending Turkey-PKK conflict in Iraq will continue to result in the deaths of innocent civilians, damage to properties and agricultural lands, and lead to the irreversible and tragic exodus of Iraq's indigenous and vibrant Assyrian community.

Recommendations

To the Iraqi Government:

- To press Turkish authorities to compensate victims of any unlawful strikes and take all feasible measures to minimize civilian casualties and harm caused to civilians in future military operations;
- To assist the KRG in expelling the PKK from the KRI with financial, military, and diplomatic support;
- To safeguard and protect endangered sites of cultural heritage and to help rebuild and repair damaged and destroyed sites under federal jurisdiction.

To the Kurdistan Regional Government

- To press Turkish authorities to compensate victims of any unlawful strikes and to take all feasible measures to minimize civilian casualties and harm caused to civilians in future military operations;
- To take immediate action in expelling PKK elements from civilian hubs located in the KRI;
- To investigate allegations of negligent behavior from local relief services such as police and fire, and make a concerted effort to improve fundamental protections as expected by regional governing authorities;
- To relocate all newly-established checkpoints, such as those in Nahla Valley, which are causing unnecessary harm to civilian populations;
- To safeguard and protect endangered sites of cultural heritage and to help rebuild and repair damaged and destroyed sites under KRG jurisdiction.

To the Turkish Government:

- To immediately cease all air and ground military operations in civilian areas;
- To conduct transparent and impartial investigations into Kurdish, Yazidi, and Assyrian allegations of civilian casualties and other crimes of war. The Turkish government must compensate victims of any unlawful attacks.

To the International Community:

- To help mediate a peaceful resolution to this conflict and help the various parties find ways to move forward;
- To urge Turkey to implement all feasible measures to minimize and investigate civilian casualties, and to urge Turkish authorities to provide compensation to victims of unlawful attacks;
- To urge Iraqi and KRG authorities to take all possible steps to protect civilian populations and civilian objects from military operations;
- To press KRG authorities for investigations and compensation in the case of material losses resulting from the government's failures to provide fire services in Assyrian villages;
- To provide direct assistance to local NGOs that are proven and highly effective in responding to the needs of Assyrians impacted by this conflict.

Appendix 1

Tracking Turkish Airstrikes Near Assyrian Villages in 2020

The Assyrian Policy Institute has tracked reported Turkish military airstrikes in areas inhabited by Assyrians in Duhok Governorate in 2020. This number includes strikes that were visible or audible to inhabitants of Assyrian villages. Our data is drawn from a wide range of sources, including interviews with eyewitnesses, credible open source reports, international and local NGOs, footage and photographs of incidents, and social media pages (i.e. local residents' groups on Facebook). Claims were cross-referenced and verified wherever possible.

The data presented in the table below reflects the dates and locations where shelling is believed to have occurred in close proximity to Assyrian

villages. It does not reflect that number of individual strikes that took place on a specific date. Due to large variations in the quality of reporting, accurate information regarding the number of strikes in a specified period was difficult to come by. The number and frequency of strikes in a given period varies significantly. The strikes occur at all times of the day.

The list of reported airstrikes is indicative only and should not be considered an exhaustive list. The API has obtained information in regard to 53 events that occurred in 2020, but has concluded that the actual number is likely higher. The specific locations of the reported strikes have been withheld in the interest of the safety and security of respondents and local populations.

Date of Reported Airstrike(s)	Location
May 11, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
May 23, 2020	Nahla Valley, Akre District
May 28, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
May 29, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District

May 30, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
May 30, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya District
May 31, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
June 14, 2020	Sharanish, Zakho District
June 17, 2020	Sharanish, Zakho District
June 19, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
June 20, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
June 20, 2020	Bersiveh, Zakho District
June 21, 2020	Bersiveh, Zakho District
June 21, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
June 25, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
July 2, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya
July 3, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya
July 29, 2020	Sharanish, Zakho District
August 11, 2020	Sharanish, Zakho District
August 12, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
August 14, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya District
August 15, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
August 19, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
August 21, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
August 27, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
August 30, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
August 31, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
September 8, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
September 10, 2020	Sharanis, Zakho District
September 17, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
September 18, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
September 26, 2020	Batifa sub-district, Zakho District
September 28, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya District
September 28, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District

October 6, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
October 6, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya District
October 13, 2020	Nahla Valley, Akre District
November 1, 2020	Bersiveh, Zakho District
November 1, 2020	Sharanish, Zakho District
November 10, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
November 12, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
November 14, 2020	Bersiveh, Zakho District
November 14, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
December 4, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
December 5, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
December 5, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya District
December 7, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya District
December 17, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
December 18, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
December 18, 2020	Sapna Valley, Amediya District
December 19, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District
December 30, 2020	Barwar, Amediya District

Appendix 2

Key Terms

- **Amediya District**
Amediya District is a district of Duhok Governorate in Kurdistan Region of Iraq home to a diverse community, including ethnic Kurds and Assyrians. The administrative center is the town of Amediya. It is located just 10.5 miles from the Turkish border across the Beshesh Mountains. Amediya District includes the Assyrian villages located in the Sapna Valley and the Barwar region.
- **Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM)**
Founded in 1979, the Assyrian Democratic Movement is the preeminent Christian Assyrian political party in Iraq. The party is headquartered in Baghdad, with offices in nearly every city and village inhabited by Assyrians throughout Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region.
- **Barwar region**
Barwar is a geographical region located in the Hakkari mountains located alongside the Iraqi-Turkish border, divided between northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. It is primarily inhabited by ethnic Assyrians and Kurds. Barwari Bala is a subdistrict of Amediya District. At present, there are 27 villages inhabited by Assyrians in Barwari Bala, including Chalik, Aine Nune (Kani Masi), Dure, and Baz. The area is routinely targeted by Turkish airstrikes due to alleged PKK positions in the neighboring mountains.
- **Duhok Governorate**
Duhok Governorate is a governorate (or province) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq which borders the Şirnak and Hakkari Provinces of Turkey. Its capital is the city of Duhok. Duhok Governorate contains key geographical locations which are the focus of this report, including the Amediya, Akre, and Zakho Districts.
- **Internally-displaced person (IDP)**
An internally-displaced person is someone who is forced to flee their home due to conflict but remain within their country's borders. They are often referred to as refugees, but they do not meet the legal definition of a refugee.
- **ISIS**
The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as ISIS or by its Arabic acronym *Daesh*) is a jihadist militant group that follows a fundamentalist, Salafi doctrine of Sunni Islam. It has been designated as a terrorist organization internationally by the United Nations and individual countries. ISIS gained global prominence in the summer of 2014 when it claimed territory in Iraq and Syria, and

committed genocide and an ethnic cleansing campaigns against Yazidis, Assyrians, and other ethnic and religious minorities.

- **Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)**
The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is the dominant Kurdish faction in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and holds the senior-most offices in the Kurdistan Regional Government. The KDP has been led by the Barzani family from its earliest years in the mid-1940s. Presently, Nechirvan Barzani serves as KRG President, while his first cousin Masrour Barzani serves as KRG Prime Minister. The party claims that it exists to combine “democratic values and social justice to form a system whereby everyone in Kurdistan can live on an equal basis with great emphasis given to rights of individuals and freedom of expression.” However, the KDP has been described as tribal and autocratic—and as the ruling party in the KRI, is guilty of extensive human rights violations against Assyrians and other marginalized groups.
- **Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)**
The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (also called Iraqi Kurdistan) is an autonomous region located in northern Iraq, comprising four governorates: Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja. The region is governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Its unofficial capital is the city of Erbil. The majority of inhabitants are Kurdish, with a significant population of indigenous Assyrians—primarily in Erbil and Duhok Governorates.
- **Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)**
Established in 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is the official ruling body of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, headquartered in Erbil. The KRG enjoys a high degree of regional autonomy in the KRI and functions very independently of the central government in Baghdad.
- **Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)**
The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partîya Karakerên Kurdistanê, or PKK) is a Kurdish militant organization founded in 1978 by Ab-

dullah Öcalan in Turkey. The PKK’s stated objective is to secure the political and cultural rights of the Kurds living in Turkey. It is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. The PKK has been in an active armed conflict with Turkey since 1984. After the end of the Kurdish civil war in 1997, the PKK moved its camps to northern Iraq in 1998, primarily settling in the Qandil Mountains. For more than a decade, they have been expanding their presence in the KRI, occupying entire towns and villages thus making them targets in the Turkey-PKK conflict.

- **Nahla Valley**
Nahla Valley is a geographical region located between Amediya District and the disputed Akre District of Duhok Governorate, contained by mountain ranges. It is inhabited by Assyrians and Kurds. Whilst in the past there were 23 Assyrian villages in the Nahla Valley, only eight remain today, including Belmand, Chem Rabatke, Upper and Lower Hizany, Kashkawa, Khalilane, Meroke, and Zoly. The western villages of Nahla Valley are linked to Amediya District, while the eastern villages are considered part of Akre District. The area is routinely targeted by Turkish airstrikes due to PKK positions in the surrounding mountains.
- **Operations Claw-Eagle and Claw-Tiger**
Air and ground offensives, respectively, launched in June 2020 by the Turkish government in pursuit of PKK elements in northern Iraq. Most of the airstrikes referenced in this report are associated with Operation Claw-Eagle, but the Turkish military maintains bases in Duhok and Erbil governorates which manage their ground offensives.
- **Peshmerga**
The Peshmerga are the official military forces of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Nominally, the Peshmerga are under the command of the KRG; however, in practice, the forces are highly politicized, largely divided, and controlled separately by the two dominant Kurdish factions: the Kurdistan Democratic Par-

ty (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The Peshmerga forces in Duhok Governorate are affiliated with the KDP.

- **Qandil Mountains**

A mountainous area in northeastern Iraq along the border with Iran. The region belongs to the Zagros mountain range and is difficult to access, with extremely rugged terrain. The area is well known as being the sanctuary and main headquarters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who relocated to the region in the 1990s from Turkey.

- **Sapna Valley**

Sapna Valley is located in the Amediya District of Duhok Governorate, contained by two small mountain ranges which are part of the Zagros mountain range. Assyrian towns such as Araden, Badarash, Bebadî, Deralok, Dere, Enishke, Komany, and Sarsing are located in the Sapna Valley. The area is routinely targeted by Turkish airstrikes due to alleged PKK positions in the surrounding mountains.

- **Sinjar**

Sinjar is a town in the Sinjar District of the Nineveh Governorate in northern Iraq, located about five kilometers south of the Sinjar Mountains near the border with Syria. Sinjar is primarily home to the Yazidi people, an ethnic and religious minority in Iraq. It is one of two major population centers for Yazidis in Iraq. In 2014, Sinjar was captured by ISIS and was the site where the events of the tragic Yazidi Genocide took place. Since 2015, the Turkish military has targeted PKK-affiliated forces in Sinjar, killing civilians and causing harm to local Yazidis.

- **Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ)**

The Sinjar Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê, or YBŞ) is a PKK-affiliated Yazidi militia located primarily in the town of Sinjar in Nineveh Governorate. In November 2015, the YBŞ helped retake the Yazidi town of Sinjar from ISIS militants, and was a *de facto* security and protection force in Sinjar until the recent Sinjar Agreement.

- **Zakho District**

Zakho District is a district in northwestern Duhok Governorate. The city of Zakho is the

administrative center. Zakho District includes the Assyrian villages of Bersiveh and Sharanish. Many Assyrians who were displaced by Turkish airstrikes in the area have taken refuge in the city of Zakho.

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