

christian peacemaker teams

“We are unable to go outside freely and without fear”

Civilian Impacts of the New Military Bases on Zine Asterokan

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3- Civilian impacts of the new military bases on Zine Asterokan

Summary

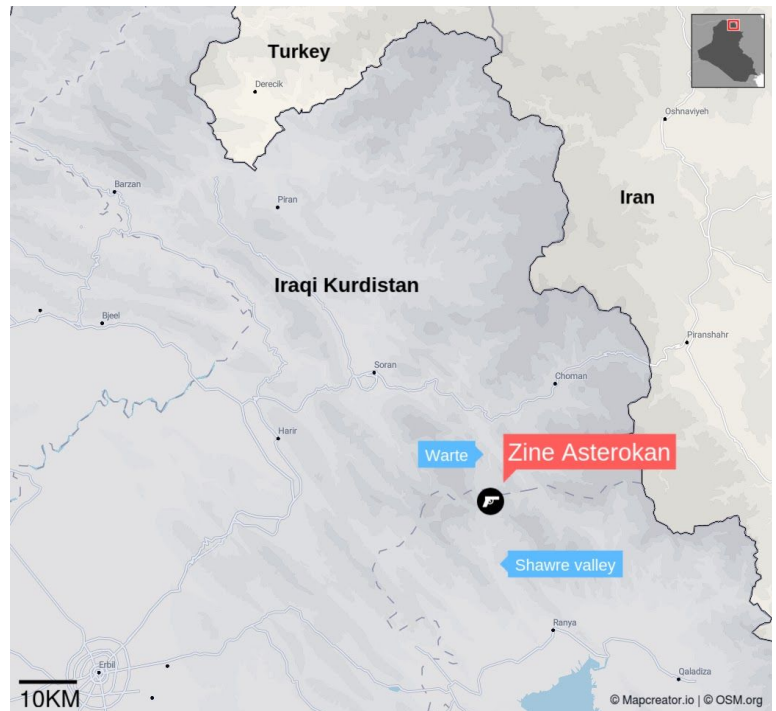
The construction of new military bases by the Kurdistan Peshmerga Forces near the town of Warte in March 2020 and the following Turkish Air Force cross-border bombardments of the area in April and May are escalating local residents' fear of further violence and a possible outbreak of war in the region.

The construction of the bases has led to the deterioration of security for local residents as well as threatened economic stability of the region.

Location and Political and Historical Context

Warte is located in the Rawanduz district of Iraqi Kurdistan, approximately 50 km to the west of the Iranian border and 150 km south of the Turkish border. Warte is surrounded by three mountains: Asterokan, Hallamund, and Karokh.

Due to the landscapes and weather Warte is considered to be among top tourist locations of Iraqi Kurdistan. Tourism contributes significantly to the local economy, in addition to agriculture and animal husbandry. Approximately 500 families live in the Warte area.



Shawre valley, which lies to the south of Warte and falls under the administration of Ranya, is a home to approximately 1,200 families. The main sources of livelihoods of its residents are agriculture, fruit orchards, vineyards and animal husbandry.

4- Civilian impacts of the new military bases on Zine Asterokan

The military bases have been built on the Zine Asterokan mountain range which forms a geographical boundary between Shawre and Warte, as well as a political boundary between Sulaimani and Erbil governorates. An important road, which connects the two governorates and two regions within Iraqi Kurdistan, passes over the Zine Asterokan mountain range.

In the 1970s, Kurdish armed groups used the mountains surrounding Warte as strongholds in their fight against the Iraqi regime. Following the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992, Shawre and Warte regions were battlegrounds of the 1994-1998 civil war between Kurdish factions. Following the war, the border between the spheres of influence of the two main Kurdish political parties, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), was established on Zine Asterokan. The mountain range was left without any military bases, and security checkpoints were established in the valleys on both sides of the mountain range.

Since the 1990s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerilla members have used the Asterokan and surrounding mountains to move between their bases in nearby Qandil mountains and other locations.

Timeline of the Construction of the Military Bases

On 18 March 2020, under the pretext of enforcing the lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19¹ the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga² stationed a sizable military force on Zine Asterokan under PDK leadership.

Two days later a Peshmerga force, under the control of the PUK, established another base on the same mountain two kilometers away.

In response to these two new military bases, the PKK stationed their own fighters in an outpost between the two new Peshmerga bases.

¹ Kurdistan 24, “مزارعتی پێشمه‌رگه: ناردنی فهوجی کی لیوای 7 ی پیاده بوو زینوئی ومرت ئی رێککاری کی کاتی بوو”
<https://www.kurdistan24.net/so/news/981d42e4-81bc-43ad-aff4-a66f910af90a>

² Peshmerga is the military arm of the Kurdistan Regional Government

Immediate Impact of Turkish Airstrikes on Civilians

On April 14, the Turkish Air Force (TAF) started bombing Zine Asterokan mountain. From April to May they bombed the area a total of six times. The local media reported that the bombings were targeting members of the PKK and that they wounded several members of the Peshmerga that were stationed at their base. The surrounding land used by the local community was severely damaged in the bombings. A shepherd³ from Shawre valley told CPT that the warplanes bombed a shelter and the land that their family uses to raise their livestock and thus destroyed the primary source of the family's yearly income.



Smoke rising from a Turkish airstrike on Zine Asterokan mountain.

Residents of the area told CPT that since the airstrikes started, they have observed flights of Turkish warplanes and/or heard drones on a daily basis. Warte, Shawre and the nearby city Ranya are home to many families who fled their villages from the Turkish and Iranian cross-border attacks in the past. Some of them have lost relatives in those attacks. The Warte and Shawre areas were considered to be safe for civilians but the bombings and ongoing patrolling of fighter jets and drones have shattered this felt security.

Lasting Impacts

From the interviews that Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) conducted with residents of both Warte sub-district and Shawre valley, it has become evident that the presence of the new military bases and the Turkish bombardments have severely disrupted the routine life of the local residents. In addition to destroying the previously felt security, they have damaged the economic stability of the region.

³ Names of people who spoke to CPT are not included in the report for safety reasons.

6- Civilian impacts of the new military bases on Zine Asterokan

A resident of the Warte area told CPT,

During summer much wild vegetation, like gundelia, arum, mushroom and rhubarb, grows on the mountains around Warte. Collecting these plants and selling them is one of the important income sources of many families in these areas. Our family has seven members and I am the only one who receives a government salary. Due to the fear of being bombed by the Turkish drones and jets flying over the area, we could not collect any of these plants this year. On top of this, the government has not paid our salaries for four months. This has caused a terrible financial crisis for us. But worse than that, is the fact we are unable to go outside freely and without fear, as we are always expecting to be bombed."

Another important livelihood for the people of Warte and the villages of Shawre valley is raising animals. Annually, in the middle of Spring, villagers take their livestock to the highlands of Zine Asterokan to graze. They stay until the early Autumn due to the favorable weather and presence of grass in the area. This year many of the shepherding families have not been able to take their livestock to the highlands, fearing the bombardment by Turkish warplanes and drones. As a consequence many families have had to sell their animals for much lower prices than the usual market value.

Apart from the extensive agricultural and animal farming livelihood of the region, tourism is another major source of income for the residents of Warte. The spectacular natural views have long brought tens of thousands of tourists from other parts of Iraq to visit the resorts of the area.

A local resident told CPT,

We were living solely on the income of our summer resorts, we did not need any other sources of income. But because of the military bases stationed on Zine Asterokan mountain and the Turkish warplanes flying over the area, even after the lifting of the lockdown imposed because of COVID-19⁴, people have not come here because they do not see the resorts as a safe and secure place for tourism. We are the victims of battles, wars and bombardments. We ask for nothing, just a life away from war and the roaring of fighter jets.

⁴ During a temporary lifting of the lockdown in May

Possibility of Further Military Escalation

A civil society activist told CPT,

Contrary to the KRG's claim that this military base has been established temporarily to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, the base will most likely remain on the mountain permanently. People in the area are watching trucks carrying industrial materials for permanent constructions going up the mountain.

Local residents told CPT that several Turkish agents have been seen around Zine Asterokan and the military base of the Ministry of Peshmerga.

A resident from Warte, who had gone to Zine Asterokan in April to harvest wild plants, told CPT,

My sister-in-law and I were on our way back from the mountain when we saw two men in civilian clothes, both wearing hats. One of them was scanning the mountain with binoculars and the other had a two-way radio in his hand. We greeted them, but they were embarrassed and did not respond. They spoke to each other in Turkish, so we did not understand them. Fearing that we would be arrested and be accused of telling other people about seeing them, we returned to Warte by a different route.

There is a growing suspicion and fear among the residents of the area that the establishment of the military bases on Zine Asterokan is the beginning of a new Turkish offensive against the PKK. Even though the Turkish military operates more than 30 bases and outposts within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, this would have been the first Turkish base in this area and the first one in such close proximity to the PKK's headquarters in Qandil.

Response of Local Residents

According to the local residents, dismantling the bases is the only way for a peaceful life to be restored in Warte and Shawre. The people of Shawre valley, the Warte sub-district, and other civil society activists from the region, organized four peaceful protests demanding that all armed groups, including the KRG military, abandon their bases and leave the area.

8- Civilian impacts of the new military bases on Zine Asterokan

On April 19, representatives of 70 villages, accompanied by civil society activists gathered in front of the military bases and called for peace talks. The commander of the military force met with the protestors in the base. By the end of the meeting the Minister of Peshmerga, who joined the meeting via phone, and the commander were both promising that the military base on Zine Asterokan would be removed soon.

However these promises have not been kept and further attempts at demonstrating against the base were stalled.

In the third protest organised, on April 29, the KRG security forces prevented a group of protesters from meeting and marching together to Zine Asterokan. The father of two people killed in a Turkish bombardment stood in front of the security forces and present media and while shedding tears he spoke, "I lost two children. I don't want the same thing to happen to other families."



Protesters gather on the road and speak with the media after they are stopped by security forces on April 29.

Recommendations

CPT is concerned with the severe risks and disruptions that the establishment of the KRG Peshmerga military bases created for the local residents of Warte and Shawre, who are already struggling to recover from the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is CPT's understanding that the bases, and the consequent PKK and Turkish military operations, pose a serious threat to the lives and livelihoods of local residents and exacerbate the possibility of further escalating violence in the region.

CPT calls on the Kurdistan Regional Government to ensure that local residents' lives and economy are protected and prioritized.

Together with the local residents, CPT calls for the dismantling of the bases and the withdrawal of all military forces from Zine Asterokan.

9- Civilian impacts of the new military bases on Zine Asterokan

CPT calls on the Turkish government to cease all military operations near the Warte area and Shawre valley as they threaten civilian lives and severely disrupt the livelihoods of 1,700 families.

For further reading about the ongoing impacts of the Turkish cross-border operations on civilian population in Iraqi Kurdistan, CPT would like to recommend a collection of relevant reports published on our website www.cptik.org .