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**COLLUSION, CONSPIRACY & CORRUPTION:  
AN “ON THE GROUND” REPORT INTO  
TURKISH WAR CRIMES AND USE OF  
CHEMICAL WEAPONS**

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Steve Sweeney

**PEACE IN KURDISTAN**  
[peaceinkurdistancampaign.com](http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Steve Sweeney is a journalist from Britain's Morning Star newspaper and spent more than a year living in Slemani in Iraqi Kurdistan. He is working on a book titled Bashur: Kurdish resistance movements in Iraqi Kurdistan.

This report was compiled using information gained from numerous meetings and trips across the region over a two year period including the Qandil mountains, Ranya, Kuna Masi, Makhmour refugee camp, Shengal, Dukan, Kalar, Halabja, Duhok, Erbil and the Medya Defence Zones.

Steve was able to meet with local politicians, journalists, medical staff, NGOs, activists and security officials along with military commanders, peshmerga forces and guerrilla fighters along with local residents of the many towns and villages he visited.

He does not claim to be an expert on Kurdish issues however has reported extensively from the ground on the impact of Turkey's invasion and occupation and the intolerance of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to any form of dissent.

### Summary

Turkey has bombarded Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok province for more than a year to global silence. The main victims of Operation Claw Lightning are civilians.

It has been accused of hundreds of chemical attacks yet the OPCW and world bodies have so far refused to send a fact-finding team to the area.

Medics, peshmerga, NGOs, Kurdish officials and villagers all state clearly their belief that chemicals have been used.

Testimonies from health officials claim they have been threatened and forced to change medical reports that said they treated patients for exposure to chemicals.

Samples of soil, clothing and hair have been collected from the affected areas, but there has been a refusal to test them for the presence of chemicals.

Turkey's military operation has seen the construction of many new military bases linked by a network of roads that also lead across the border. The expansion has led to charges of a de facto occupation.

Air strikes have targeted hospitals, civilians and political leaders in Shengal, Qandil and Makhmour Refugee Camp. These are war crimes yet the international community has remained silent.

All three areas operate a system of self-administration that follows the principles of Democratic Confederalism.

The KDP and Turkish intelligence are said to be colluding, with accusations that civilians have been threatened and pressured into becoming spies.

Security officials accuse Turkey and the US of being behind the resurgence of Isis in the region, the former to attack Kurds and the latter as an auxiliary militia against Iranian-backed forces.

## BACKGROUND

Turkey launched Operation Claw Lightning on April 23 2021, the date that marks the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. It claims its latest military intervention is aimed at bringing about the final defeat of the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK).

Attacks by fighter jets and military helicopters were followed by a ground invasion near the Kurdish villages of Kesta and Hirure in Duhok province where Turkey claims to operate a "security zone" but in fact is expanding rapidly and resembles a de facto military occupation.

The Turkish state is also targeting the last strongholds of the PKK, particularly Avasin where the village of Ars Fars has borne the brunt of the alleged chemical attacks that have taken place in sites across Iraqi Kurdistan.

While the Turkish state anticipated a swift victory this did not come about due to the resistance of the PKK guerrilla [the armed-wing of the movement, the HPG] in the area known as the Medya Defence Zones.

It is not clear how many Turkish troops are inside Kurdistan, but it is believed to be at least two thousand. These forces are bolstered by mercenaries that have been shipped in from the battlefields of Syria and training camps in southern Turkey.

This claim has been made by PKK commander Cemil Bayik who said that Turkey was operating training camps in Cizre province close to its border with Iraqi Kurdistan. This has also been confirmed with myself by a senior KDP peshmerga official and senior PUK security official.

The main victims of Turkey's military operation is however not the PKK, but the Kurdish people, thousands of whom have been forced to flee their homes, possibly never to return. Their land has been confiscated while thousands of acres of forestry has been destroyed.

According to the Christian Peacemakers Team, which has monitored the impact of Turkey's bombing for a number of years 1,300 beehives have been destroyed, a major source of income for families in the affected areas.

Illegal oil drilling has also been reported in the Qaradagh Mountains region of Slemani province and a recent visit to London by regional Prime Minister Masrour Barzani sought to strike a deal to provide oil to Europe to reduce dependence on Russian imports.

## CHEMICAL ATTACKS

The first reports of chemical attacks appeared in a Morning Star news article in April just days after the launch of Operation Claw Lightning.

"They used chemical weapons in the Mamresho hills overlooking Basyan river, and Marvanos hills overlooking the Avashin river," Kurdistan National Congress spokesman Zagros Hiwa told me as I was in Iraqi Kurdistan.

"They have used the chemicals against the tunnels there," he added, referring to the underground system used by PKK guerrilla fighters.

Some 76 villages in Amedi district were cut off from electricity due to the Turkish bombing which also destroyed acres of forest land.

In May the Morning Star published details of a chemical attack in the Avashin mountains accompanied by video footage of the incident in a tunnel used by Kurdish resistance fighters, a number of whom were killed.

The report went viral leading to calls from Turkey's opposition People's Democratic Party (HDP) for the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry to investigate. Predictably the request was refused with the Speaker of the House branding such accusations insulting.

But reports of chemical attacks continued.

Some incidents that were clearly not chemical attacks - including the use of green military grade flares - were unfortunately however presented as evidence, leading to the allegations being easily brushed off by the German government for example.

Similarly the British government has been able to dismiss the claims as propaganda of the PKK when letters have cited the movement's reports as the only source of evidence. Of course this gives the government an easy way out allowing it to continue support for its key regional ally.

Similarly citing Kurdish media organisations has also led to claims of chemical attacks being dismissed as they are not considered reliable or independent sources. This is clearly a problem as no other media organisations - with the exception of the Morning Star - are reporting on either the alleged use of chemicals or Turkey's year long war.

It is also apparent that Britain does not want its potential role in the supply of arms and weapons to Turkey to come under the spotlight.

As detailed later in the report some £77 million in arms sales has taken place since Boris Johnson came to power in June 2019. And the same year it was revealed that Britain issued 70 licences for munitions which phosphorus can be used with to Turkey.

Britain has also been involved in a six year secretive drone deal which has seen the licensing of the Hornet Bomb Rack used to fire precision missiles to deadly effect by the Bayraktar TB2. So it cannot be seen as an impartial bystander. Britain is very much involved in the war on Kurds.

The PKK claims that 40 of its fighters have been killed as a result of chemical attacks during the last 12-months of war. The group also claims more than 300 attacks have taken place, although this has not been independently verified.

It also claimed in October 2021 that 548 people living close to the site of Turkish attacks were affected with blurred vision, tearing of the eyes, headaches, nosebleeds and a rash with those treated issued with threats from the Kurdistan Democratic Party against speaking out.

In November 2021 PKK commander Murat Karayilan listed the chemicals he says have been used during the war. These were the nerve gas Tabun; chloropicrin gas also known as Green Cross, Sulphur Mustard known as Yellow Cross; Pepper Spray - which Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar previously admitted to; and an unnamed noxious gas that causes paralysis.

It is important to note that there has been no evidence to back these assertions and it remains unclear as to how these conclusions were made. Powerful testimonies from guerrilla fighters seem to indicate chemicals have been used in attacks on guerrilla tunnels.

My investigations have however drawn similar conclusions, although I must stress that I am not a chemical weapons expert and am merely a journalist that has been to the affected areas and can only report what I have witnessed and make a judgement based on the testimonies of the people I spoke with, including medics, peshmerga and local officials.

Most of the attacks are either underreported or simply dismissed. The region's media is on the whole owned by the ruling Barzani family and western reporters based in Iraqi Kurdistan merely amplify their voices and rarely conduct any journalism independent of them or US/British forces.

Others that come to Kurdistan often do so without an understanding of the politics of the region and produce reports that are riddled with inaccuracies and reflect western government views of the PKK as a terrorist organisation and portray Turkey's war in those terms.

In one exception last September, the Rudaw news agency did report on such an attack in the village of Hirure, which is on the frontline of Turkey's war. 76-year old former peshmerga Abdullah Hassan was hit along with his wife and daughter. They reported symptoms of coughing, difficulty breathing, burning and watering eyes.

They said the village was struck by at least six bombs which emitted a thick black smoke and others which emitted a yellow smoke.

The family was treated at the Zakho health centre with Mr Hassan saying that he knew it was a chemical attack as he had completed training in dealing with noxious substances while serving as a peshmerga. I have since verified this report and have been in contact with medics and health professionals.

This is detailed in the testimonies below. The names have been omitted for security reasons as many of those that spoke to me have already been threatened by security forces and did so at great risk to their lives.

The Morning Star has continued to document the use of chemicals by the Turkish state and has raised the allegations with the OPCW, United Nations and other bodies, although has been met with a wall of silence and denials.

In September missiles loaded with chemicals struck Berwari Bala village in Duhok province. Resident Cihad Hirure said that Turkish fighter jets had bombed the village: "A white chemical gas has spread many kilometres wide in the area. We think that this was a chemical bomb."

He was told by health professionals that the effects of the attack could be permanent.

Serbest Sabri, an official in the district of Kani Masi, said: "After the bombardments an unidentified gas has spread around the area. We estimate that this was tear gas and deployed medical teams to the area."

Doctor Rasul Mohammed, head of the medical centre in Kani Masi said: "The situation of one of the wounded is unstable. This person suffers from severe breathing problems. Also a 70-year old woman has severe difficulties with breathing and suffers from vomiting.

It was alleged that 17 chemical weapons attacks by drones, artillery fire and air strikes were launched at PKK tunnels and guerrilla bases over the course of that weekend, one of the most intensive bombardments of the illegal war.

The attacks came days after the bombing of the Makhmour Refugee Camp, which is dealt with in a separate section of the report. Officials at the time called for war crimes investigations to be opened, but world bodies remained silent and no probe has taken place.

Later that month residents of Berwari Bala were forced to flee their homes due to the intensity of the artillery fire and cattle were slaughtered by the invaders, which one agricultural worker told me included members of jihadist groups wearing Turkish army uniforms.

As reported in the Morning Star, air strikes were reported to have targeted agricultural land — Turkey has already destroyed thousands of acres of forest and green land that Kurdish villagers rely on for food.

“Intense bombings carried out by the invading Turkish army caused serious material damage in the settlements, vineyards and gardens belonging to our people,” officials told me at the time. “Houses were destroyed by Turkish shelling, electricity cut and infrastructure was damaged.”

I was able to enter the affected area and the villages under attack including Hirure, Kesta Chalke Kani Masi and Bewari Bala. It must be stressed that the areas were under tight control and teeming with both Turkish intelligence services and KDP Parastin intelligence services. Both are unofficially working together in the area and residents say they are regularly threatened.

Access is very difficult and there is a general reluctance to allow foreigners, particularly journalists to enter unless they are embedded with government officials. Of course this gives a skewed narrative and these kind of visits are very tightly controlled.

I was told very clearly that I would not be allowed to enter by official means and would be blocked and most likely detained if I was caught. But, thanks to connections, I was able to make my way into the so-called red zone and meet with villagers, medics and others.

## TESTIMONIES

Most taken in December 2021 with an interpreter.

### A

“Please Steve, thank you so much for coming. It is important the world hears our story. We are very frightened. We are being killed and attacked every day.

If they find you here they will kill you. And if they know we have spoken to you they will kill us.

*Who will kill you? Who do you mean?*

Barazani. He is helping Turkey. PDK [Kurdistan Democratic Party] will kill us or Turkey will kill us. They are the same. There are many intelligence services here. They sometimes stay in the bases together.

*Can you tell me what has happened since April?*

“Turkey has been dropping bombs on our villages and on our land every day. They [soldiers] come and threaten us. They say we are PKK and that we are helping guerrilla. But they are not here. There are no PKK in the village.

“I am a teacher but now most of the people here have left. There are only a few of us that stayed. Most went to Duhok with family. My neighbours went to Slemani. But we could not leave.

“It is like a living hell. The bombs start at night time and shooting. But it happens in the day time too. I was affected by gas. It came in the field after Turkey bombed us.

*What kind of bombing, from a plane or drone?*

“No, it was from the ground. I don’t know what it was. But afterwards I could not breathe. My lungs felt like fire. I am still coughing because of it today.

*When did this happen?*

“I remember it was August and I had been collecting some things [?] from the field

when a bomb or something landed close to where I was. There was some strange smoke and a smell.

*What do you think it was?*

“I know Turkey is using chemical substances. They are doing this because they want to kill the Kurdish people. They want to Anfal us [term used to describe martyrs from Saddam Hussein’s Arabisation campaign in the 1980s].

**B**

“Look at my arms. They are red and still burning. Touch them, it is ok. Can you feel? [his arms felt very warm and appeared to emanate heat.]

“This was after a Turkish attack on the village. There were many bombs and explosions. Many homes were damaged and our land has many problems for animals. They killed livestock too.

“They are like Saddam Hussein. He was killing us and now Turkey and Barzani is too. He is jash [insult directed at Kurds who collaborate]

“I came outside because I was worrying about my family. I wanted them to come inside. They were safe in my brother’s house but I did not know this.

“Turkish soldiers said they would treat us like terrorists if they saw us. We are not allowed to go to our own fields. But how can we survive? How can they tell us this. It is our land but they use it for the army.

“There was a big bang and a light that hurt my eyes. I was on the floor and coughing. I could not breathe and was burning so much. I came to home and put cold water but it did not work.

“I went to medical centre and they gave me cream but could not put bandages on it because it was too hot. They said it was bad burns.

*What do you think it was?*

“I do not know, but it was like a chemical attack. We know about this very well in here. We have been gassed many times. It was like those days again. Everyone is scared.

*What did the doctors say?*

“I was a peshmerga and we are taught about chemical attacks in our training. I believe it was this. The doctors were not sure and were afraid because of PDK. They are telling people to be quiet about the attacks.

*In what way? Are they threatening people?*

“Yes. They say that bad things will happen if we speak and that nobody will believe us. It is not just PDK, the whole world is against us [Kurdish people].

“We are just village people. We want to live in peace. We are not terrorists. Why do they do this to us? Thank you for hearing us. But please tell the world what is happening to Kurdish people.”

**C**

“Thank you Steve. This is an important thing because nobody is telling the truth. We have liars Rudaw and K24. They are Barzani belonging [controlled by the ruling family].

“I have not been exposed to it myself but my husband has. He was too afraid to come today but knows that I came here and was happy.

“He is still sick for months now. He has trouble breathing and cannot move too far. He stays resting for a long time. Before he would work in the field for hours. He is a strong man.

“Now he is sad and cries a lot. The children lost their father, it is like this. Sometimes he talks to me but he is nervous.

“He was in the field collecting some wood for us when Turkey shot something. When he came back he could not see. His eyes hurt and were watering and he needed drink.

“We saw the Mukhtar and he told us that PDK says we can do nothing. They said it is up to Iraq [federal government] but this is not true. Turkey is in our home, they are invading us.

*What does the Mukhtar think?*

“We know him for many years. He is a good man and has a good heart. But he is not strong against PDK. I think they threaten to him. He says he will speak to them but nothing happens.

“Turkey is killing us. They want to come and take much of our land and steal our homes and given them to people.

“Every day there is bombings and shooting. At night the sky lights up red. We are afraid of the night. Please Steve, help make it stop. Tell your government to help the Kurdish people.

“We are good people and we like peace and freedom. We deserve this. It is not fair.”

#### **D**

“I am a doctor and I have treated people for the effects of chemical weapons. Many people have come to us after Turkey’s attacks with burns, breathing difficulties and marks on their bodies.

“But we are told by PDK [meaning KDP] that we are not allowed to say it is a chemical attack because this will cause problems.

*Are you sure that these people have been exposed to chemicals? How many have you treated?*

“I do not know exactly. I think maybe 20 people, something like this. Others have treated more than this.

“But I am sure that chemicals have been used. I have seen it many times before and it is an important part of the medical training. I have worked as an army medic and treated many soldiers. This is the same. It is like Sardasht and Halabja. You know these attacks?

*Yes, I have visited Halabja many times. What about the hospital or medical centre bosses, what are they saying?*

“Steve, we are threatened by security forces. They came to the medical centre after we treated some people for chemicals. They took the report away and made us change it.

*What happened? Did anyone complain?*

“Yes because it was saying we did not know what we were doing. It doubted our diagnosis and treatment. We said we know it is chemicals and it is what we treated them for. Our report said this.

“But then we were told it is a problem and bosses were frightened and we were made to change the report and say we made a mistake. But we hadn’t.

*What would have happened if you refused to change the report?*

“We know we would have been kicked out of the job and maybe even arrested or tortured. This is what Parastin [KDP-affiliated security forces] do. And they make people disappear. It was not said like this exactly, but we know.”

#### **E**

“Turkey is humiliating us.

“Soldiers made us get out of the car and stand facing against the side of mountain. My children were crying but they shouted at them to be quiet. They wanted to hold my hand but were not allowed.

“They kept saying the word terrorist and pointed machine guns at us. They said Turkey can do what it wants and we are deserving this.

“We had some things in the car and soldiers threw them onto the road. It was dark and we couldn’t see everything. They were around my husband and told him they know he is PKK.

“But he is a shepherd. We do not know any guerrilla. They are not even in this area. We told them this but they said we are lying.

“Soldiers were laughing and smoking cigarette as they watched us on the ground. They kicked our things so we could not pick them up. This is not nice way to treat people. We are human beings.



*Why did they do this? Was it a checkpoint?*

“Yes, yes. They now have their checkpoints. This is a military occupation. This is now under the control of Turkey. How can this be? They have stolen so much land and building many, many bases and roads here. They steal our produce and take it to Turkey.

*What is the government saying?*

“They are being quiet [puts finger to lips]. We know they are working with Turkey. Barzani is like them. He lives in rich palace and has many houses. He gave our oil to Turkey but we have no electricity, not paid for months.

“We want to stay on our land, but many people are leaving. I am from another village but nobody is there any more. It is too dangerous. We think our houses have been given to soldiers who are living there.

*Turkish soldiers?*

“Yes and there are some from Syria from the war there. They are speaking in Arabic. Sometimes they are wearing Turkey’s uniforms, but they are not Turkish. They are Daesh, terrorist people.

“Barzani is killing us too. His people are like Saddam’s. He is dictator. We cannot be free under Barzani.”

**F**

“Thank you for coming Steven. I am peshmerga and my family were peshmerga. My father was tortured many times by Saddam Hussein. He was taken to prison and for three years he was electrocuted and beaten. He is martyr [killed in action].

“I was fighting against Isis. We had many battles in Kirkuk and other places too. They were strong but we beat them. Some PKK fighters joined with us, but not many. They were brave too. They are our brothers.

“Barzani makes us fight with them. He says they should go back to Turkey. But they are Kurdish. This land belongs to all Kurds.

*Yes, I heard him say this many times. What do other peshmerga think?*

“Some of them hate PKK. They love Barzani. But for many they are our brothers. It hurts us to fight with them. But some give the locations and we get information from US and Turkey.

“US is helping Turkey. I heard this is special operations room [unclear on the exact translation]. They are bringing Turkey weapons and help to fight with PKK.”

*What kind of weapons are they bringing?*

“Machine guns but also rocket launchers and other equipment like radar and tracking systems. We think it is supplying chemicals, white phosphorus too.’

*Have you seen this yourself?*

“I have seen vehicles. I have not seen inside. But they are going to the Turkish military bases. They are taking things to help them build new bases. The US is supporting occupation because it is good for them.’

*In what way?*

“US want to stay in Iraq. They do not like PMF and Iranian’s in here. They want to fight them and PKK. They want to divide Kurds in here and Syria too. One another way they do this is bringing Isis here.

*This is a pretty big claim. Are you sure?*

“We are all sure, of course [laughing]. Why, don’t you believe us? This is well known that US is controlling Isis. They bring them and others in from Syria and Turkey and make them attack PMF and villages.

*How are they doing this?*

“We know there are tunnels. But also they control roads and crossings from Syria and Turkey. In Turkey they have camps...”

*You mean in Cizre? Cemil Bayik said this.*

“Yes, but in other places too. You know how many Turkish bases there are here now?

*Around 60 I heard, something like this.*

“There are much more. I think something like 85. They are far into Kurdistan, they even have a base in Mosul now too. This is a big occupation. They are building roads and planning to stay here...

*Like in Idlib. Are they using Turkish currency, that kind of thing?*

“No, they are not using this yet. But maybe they will. 2023 is a big year. Turkey is preparing for this.

*You mean Treaty of Lausanne anniversary?*

“Yes. It is one hundred years since. Turkey says it will expire and it can take land. Erdogan wants Mosul. He might try and take Kirkuk too and other places. This is why they are here.

*Why is nothing being said about Turkey's war here?*

“Barzani likes Turkey. He sells it oil. Turkey makes him and his family rich. They are corrupt and do not care about Kurdish people.

“But same for US and Nato and UN. Britain too. They sell Turkey weapons and Erdogan does what they want too. It is part of an international conspiracy against Kurds. They want our oil and land.

*What about chemical weapons? Are they being used?*

“Yes, Turkey is using them on guerrilla fighters. PKK tunnels especially. They did this many times and they know that nobody will say anything. PKK is a terrorist group so it is easy.

*You think more than 400 times they have done this?*

“No, I do not think this. It could be, but I think this number is too high. I do not know how many times, but it is a lot.

*What about KDP field hospitals that PKK says have been set up to treat people and then telling them to be quiet about it? Something like 500 people?*

“I do not know about this. It does not seem to be likely. This cannot happen. When did they say this and where did it happen?”

*Last year.*

“I don't think so.”

## **G**

“I am a shepherd. My animals have been killed in Turkey attacks. They just killed them for no reason. What did they do? Why did they do this?”

“I am a good Muslim man. I pray every day and go to mosque. Sometime their people come there and tell us things about PKK. I don't know about PKK. I never saw them, I swear this.

“I pray and thank God for my life. But I ask him why he sent these people to terrorise us. Why did this happen?”

“I think they used chemicals on animals. I went to see them and they were dead. But there was burning near to them. It lasted many days and I could not put it out. I could not go near the cows.

“I just want to live in peace. I want Turkish soldiers to leave. I do not hate Turkey. But why they keep killing us?”

## **H**

“I am very afraid. I am scared that they [Barzani] will catch me and torture me. They are bad people. Thank you for coming. Please tell world about the Kurds. We don't want to die.

“Tell your government and make it stop. We love England [meaning Britain] and Kurds are good people. We are helping people and do not hurt others.”

**I**

"I was outside and I heard warplanes fly. They seemed to be very low and the noise was so loud. It made me afraid. I did not know what to do and I was looking for my family. My son was inside but I could not see my wife and my daughters.

"The I heard an explosion. It was like the earth was on fire. Things were flying everywhere. I fell over and could not breathe. There was smoke, it was yellow and then I could not see.

"My eyes were streaming and I could not breathe. But I wanted to find my family. I was trying to shout their names [names omitted] but the words could not leave my mouth.

"I thought it was the end of the world and it was like a kind of dream. But it was not. Soon I hear my wife. She was crying because she thought I was dead.

"We went to the house and she bathed my eyes and I took my clothes off. They were burning and torn. I was hurting a lot and coughing. I still cough now and find it hard to breathe.

"Nobody wanted to say it was a chemical attack. They were afraid. But they knew it was. We all know. But what can we do. Nobody cares because we are Kurds.

"Please do something to help us. People come but they don't do anything. I am just a shopkeeper. I sell small things. I am not a bad man. I do not support PKK. They are not here."

**J**

"I can tell you something. This is a bad situation and I think we are going to be killed in this time. I have never known it as bad as now.

"You can see Turkey is building new bases. There is one very close to us. They have been building big towers and have many soldiers there.

"Some of the tribes here invite them to mosque. They come there and tell us bad things about PKK. They say if we help them [Turkey] then we can live. If we do what they tell us they will not hurt us.

"But they say if we are PKK we will be killed like dogs. They say they know who is helping them. We are being watched and in the villages there are many spies. KDP is helping them too.

"One day a man came to house and said I could be a spy. He did not say this word. But said I could give him information. He said if I did not do this then it would be difficult for my family.

"I was very scared. My wife was crying and we wanted to leave and stay with her family in Duhok. But this is my home. We lived here for many years. We know if we leave we are never coming back.

*What about the bombing? Is it continuing?*

"Yes, every night. It is worst at night time. I used to stay awake so I could help my family and my neighbours if a bomb came. But now I don't. I hope a bomb kills me. I do not want this life any more [crying].

*Is Turkey using chemicals?*

"I do not know but I think yes. There are many attacks. But they think we can be gassed as not human. This is Turkey. We like the people of Turkey. But its rulers hate us because we are Kurds."

**K**

"I am very old [he thinks he is 80 but is not sure] I was a peshmerga and fought against Saddam Hussein. He was a bad man. I was in the prison for some years and tortured. They electrocuted me and beaten me.

"They kept asking me for information about my brother. They said if I didn't tell them where he was they would kill me. They broke my leg but I did not say.

"Turkey is like Saddam. But we cannot fight. We have nothing. The only fighters are PKK. They are not here. But I wish they were.

**L**

"My family have left and gone to the city [Duhok?]. We used to live there a long time ago. We came to [the village] maybe ten years ago. We moved to be with family when we had children.

“But it was not safe to be here anymore. I made them go. I will join them soon when I have got things ready.

“Most of my animals have been destroyed. I think chemicals have been used here. Turkey is fighting a dirty war. They cannot win. But they want to kill civilians. They do this because they hate all Kurds.

“My brother lived in Turkey and they were very bad. Bullying him and spitting [makes noise]. He was working as a cleaner in a hotel.

“Life is very bad here. We have nobody speaking about the Kurdish people. All we want is peace. We never attacked anyone.

“Barzani should fight Turkey. He should be like his grandfather, a great warrior. Now all he cares about is rich and money. He is a shame to the Barzani family.”

## ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS (OPCW)

The OPCW is the body that monitors compliance with the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention. Turkey is among the 193 member states that make up its signatories and claims it is not in possession of a chemical stockpile.

This remains up for debate however.

Turkey has a long and chequered history when it comes to chemical weapons which can be traced back as far as the Second World War when it is alleged to have bought Zyklon B - the gas used to kill six million Jews - from the Nazis to use against Kurds in Dersim.

More recently in June 2014 a classified document issued by the US Defence Intelligence Agency said that the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front rebels in Syria maintained a sarin-gas production cell that constituted “the most advanced sarin plot since al-Qaida’s pre-9/11 effort.”

It said that, “chemical facilitators” based in Turkey and Saudi Arabia “were attempting to obtain sarin precursors in bulk, tens of kilograms, likely for the anticipated large scale production effort in Syria.”

The claims have of course been dismissed by Turkey as “slanders and lies” with a number of US officials unsurprisingly quick to say that the Assad government is responsible for chemical attacks in Syria.

Yet in March 2018 during Operation Olive Branch, Turkey’s illegal invasion of Afrin in northern Syria it was once more accused of using chemical weapons against Kurds.

As reported in the Morning Star at the time, Dr Jiwan Mohammed said six people arrived from the village of Arandi after it was attacked by Turkish troops. And Dr Nouri Qenber said the victims suffered shortness of breath, vomiting and skin rashes. One of the victims had dilated pupils, he said, quoting one of the rescuers.

The Afrin Health Council published video footage of what it said were the victims of a chemical attack and invited the international community to come and investigate. Their pleas were however ignored while the White House simply brushed it off and said Turkey probably didn’t do it.

There are many other cases in which Turkey is accused of chemical weapons. In 2011 Erdogan dismissed claims that chemicals had been used against PKK fighters killed in air attacks in Kazan Valley as “slander”.

German magazine Der Spiegel claimed experts who saw photographs of scorched bodies from a similar 2009 air strike concluded it was “highly probable” that chemical substances were used in the attack.

When I visited the town of Cizre I met with the family of a young man, Yakup Dadak, who was missing believed killed during the Basement Massacre of February 2016.

His mother Halim told me that she had been asked to identify the body of her son. However, she described being shown torso’s, bodies with heads and other limbs having been dismembered. She said the bodies were unrecognisable and looked as though chemicals had been used.

In November 2019 the whole world watched in horror as 13-year-old Mohammed

Hamid Mohammed's skin was peeling from his torso as he screamed in pain after a Turkish missile attack.

The attack led to claims of war crimes and accusations that Turkey had used munitions loaded with white phosphorus. This was confirmed by British chemical weapons expert Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, who also investigated the attack on Halabja.

While the use of incendiary weapons against civilian targets is banned by the Geneva and Chemical Weapons conventions white phosphorous is used in a great variety of munitions and devices for a number of purposes.

It is not illegal in all circumstances, but many countries have banned its use in civilian areas. Because of this not all such devices can be considered chemical weapons. It was under this pretence that the OPCW reversed a decision to carry out investigations.

In a statement justifying its backtracking the body said it would not examine tissue samples from victims of the attack because white phosphorus injuries are produced by thermal, rather than chemical, properties, therefore it was outside its remit.

“The OPCW has not initiated an investigation regarding recent developments in northern Syria.

“White phosphorus is commonly used in military operations to produce smoke or provide illumination. When white phosphorus is used as smoke, illumination or as an incendiary weapon, its use does not fall under the purview of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

“In such instances, the intended effects are due to white phosphorus’ thermal properties, rather than its chemical (toxic) properties.”

The move was a controversial one, coming soon after Turkey made a €30,000 (£26,000) donation to the Future OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology. Both parties insisted the timing was merely coincidental.

The OPCW has however become politicised with critics saying it is no longer the independent body it was originally set up as. In 2018 it was granted powers to

attribute blame for alleged attacks, rather than simply establish whether or not chemical weapons had been used.

Since then it has been accused of focusing solely on those country’s where the US and other imperialist powers seek either regime change or threaten their interests. The claims certainly appear to have some validity given the OPCW’s work is fixated on Syria and Russia while ignoring other areas where credible allegations have been made.

This is perhaps unsurprising when the list of donors is known. The US has made large donations and Britain gave some £750,000 to the OPCW last year, £100,000 of which was specifically dedicated to “identifying those responsible for the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic.”

But in 2021 Germany made an eye-watering €1 million (£850,000) donation believed to be the biggest single voluntary contribution in the chemical watchdog’s history. Its permanent representative to the OPCW, Gudrun Ligner, said that the cash would boost the training of inspectors and enable investigations and technical visits.

“The OPCW must rise to the challenge of a new era of chemical weapons threats,” the ambassador said, which would surely mean that the actions of Turkey should come under the spotlight. Except of course it hasn’t.

The old saying “he who pays the piper plays the tune” certainly has an element of truth to it. The donors have a vested interest in keeping the OPCW focused on both Syria and Russia. In the case of the former, the world powers want to see regime change. With regard the latter, the fear of Russia’s growing influence is the driving factor.

Coincidentally it may be, but all of the main donors to the OPCW are also those that are the major sellers of weapons and arms to Turkey. Perhaps they fear that investigations may lead a trail right back to their own doorsteps.

In the case of Britain, we do know that at least 70 export licenses for military products that can contain phosphorus have been issued for sales to Turkey in the past two decades. Freedom of Information requests issued last year have drawn

a blank with the government refusing to elaborate. Further requests have been submitted and will be added to this report as they are received.

It cannot simply be put down to ignorance that the OPCW has continued to ignore the countless accusations chemical attacks by Turkey. It is clearly something deeper than that. It is also probably no mere coincidence that the head of the OPCW for a number of years was Ahmet Üzümcü, a Turkish career diplomat who held many meetings with government officials.

Unusually for an official body it ignores requests for comment on Turkey's alleged use of chemical weapons, of which I have made numerous requests over the years. It is the only organisation that consistently does so maintaining a cloak of secrecy that damages the credibility of the organisation.

My media accreditation was declined for the OPCW annual conference which took place...it was judged by a panel, the composition of which is unknown with no appeals process. No reason was given for the refusal, although I strongly suspect it was a political decision.

I am one of only two journalists writing in British newspapers - the other being Peter Hitchens of the Mail on Sunday - to regularly report on the OPCW, particularly the controversial report and alleged cover-up into the alleged chemical attack in Douma which led to British, French and US airstrikes.

The OPCW continues to ignore appeals from political figures, Kurdish officials and most disturbingly the victims of Turkey's alleged chemical attacks. It has been invited on many an occasion to send a fact-finding team to the region to carry out investigations. Those on the ground simply do not have the necessary equipment to carry out such tests, meaning external support is vital.

Last year I managed to obtain soil samples from the site of a chemical attack, along with clothing and hair samples. Unfortunately there has been a lack of will to test them for chemicals. I am not a scientist, I have no idea what the samples will show. But I do know it has the potential to clarify whether chemicals have been used.

A number of Kurds have been arrested for protesting at the OPCW annual conference held last December at the Hague. Instead of listening to and acting on

their concerns the authorities have responded in a heavy-handed way, keeping some of them in prison and deporting another from the Netherlands.

That they will appear in court while Turkey continues to operate with impunity is a perverse travesty and endemic of the treatment of Kurds at the hands of powerful institutions.

For the OPCW to maintain any of its already significantly damaged reputation, and accusations of corruption and political bias, it must not only focus on those countries that its major donors insist on investigating, but it must listen to the voices of the victims.

The world turned and looked away when chemicals were being sold to Saddam Hussein. Five thousand Kurds were gassed at Halabja as a result. We have the power to stop this. It must never happen again.

## RESPONSES

Other bodies have been similarly dismissive of the repeated allegations of chemical attacks. In brief these are captured below.

### The European Union

In a written response to a question tabled by Swedish MEP Malin Björk, the EU foreign policy spokesman Josep Borrell said:

“The EU supports Iraq's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and its efforts to develop a balanced foreign policy, maintaining good relations with regional and international partners.

As noted in the March 2021 Joint Communication from the Commission and the High Representative to the European Council. Turkey is militarily active in northern Iraq where it carries out strikes against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). No reports of confirmed chemical attacks have, however, been presented. While the EU considers the PKK to be a group involved in terrorist acts under EU restrictive measures countries in the region are encouraged to coordinate anti-terrorist activities bilaterally. The EU also expects all countries in the region to act in full respect of international law, including international human rights and humanitarian law.

In line with the shared interest of the EU and Turkey in regional peace and stability, the European Council has made clear in March and June 2021 that it expects Turkey and all actors to contribute positively to the resolution of regional crises.

The EU encourages Iraq and Turkey to continue on the path of dialogue and friendly neighbourly relations, as demonstrated by regular high-level bilateral visits. In parallel, the EU encourages the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government to make progress in the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement of 9 October 2020 which inter alia foresees the removal of the PKK and other destabilising groups from this area and the establishment of a new security force.

This amounted to a tacit approval of Turkey's war in Iraqi Kurdistan and its insistence that the PKK is a terrorist organisation implies that it is a legitimate target. That the main victims of Turkey's war are not in fact PKK fighters, but Kurdish villagers and citizens is not mentioned.

This underlines the need for the PKK to be delisted as a terrorist organisation. Its continued designation as such is used to justify attacks on Kurds as a whole. This issue has also been dealt with by Belgium's Supreme Court which has found the PKK is a party in a non-international armed conflict or civil war where the use of legitimate military force is allowed.

### **Britain**

Responding on behalf of the British government to a question raised by Lord Hylton in November 2021, Baroness Goldie, who represents Britain on the OPCW said that the United Kingdom takes the issue of chemical weapons very seriously. Use of any weapon must comply with international law, she wrote.

But she said that "none of the allegations have been substantiated" and from the description given from Lord Hylton "it is also questionable whether in this case chemical weapons have been used"

Baroness Goldie said the description of "powerful explosives" is not consistent with a chemical weapon which uses a smaller explosive charge. She said the smell of burnt sugar and the dissolution of human flesh was not consistent with a chemical attack.

Similar responses from individual MPs have stressed the important role of Turkey as a Nato ally and supported its fight against the PKK, while deploring the use of chemical weapons. All have said the allegations were unsubstantiated.

### **Germany**

Gökay Akbulut of Die Linke raised the issue of Turkey's alleged chemical attacks in the Bundestag in October 2021 asking: "What information the federal government has on this issue and from where the chemical weapons came from."

The evidence provided however was simply video footage of military grade flares, which was easily identifiable before the question was submitted. While this was circulating in the press I raised concerns with Kurdish officials as it was clear that it would be used to dismissed allegations of chemical attacks.

She also cited reports of 548 villagers treated for a chemical attack in a village in Kani Masi, however only presented the reports found in media organisations close to the PKK and Kurdish movement.

The German government predictably denied this was verifiable evidence of the use of chemical weapons. It has of course continued its support for Turkey both politically and militarily, with no signs of any drastic change under new Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

### **Italy**

Also in October Italian lawmaker Erasmo Palazzotto raised the issue of Turkey's use of chemical weapons in a parliamentary question.

He said chemical weapons were widely used in Metina, Zap, and Avaşin in the invasion attacks that have been ongoing in Southern Kurdistan since April 23, 2021 and added that this now "emphasises the danger of an unsustainable scenario" in Kurdistan.

"The Turkish government is responsible for the systematic breach of international treaties," he said and asked what measures the European institutions would be taking. Palazzotto said and asked what kind of steps the European institutions plan to take in this regard.

His question was also dismissed by the Italian government.

## RESURGENCE OF ISIS/DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Turkey is forcing a demographic change in villages in Iraqi Kurdistan where Kurds have been driven out of their homes with a number telling me that they have been replaced by jihadists that have been shipped in from the battle fields of Syria and Libya.

This is straight out of the Turkish copybook, having mobilised its mercenaries in both Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh as well as using them against Kurds, particularly in Afrin. It stands to reason that the Turkish army would use the Islamists as an auxiliary force in Iraqi Kurdistan.

A number of reliable sources told me that they are being shipped in via ratlines from both Syria and Turkey, with the military bases and roads constructed across the region enabling the movement of jihadists unhindered. Tunnels are also being used to ship in fighters and arms undetected.

Security forces claimed that the US has also aided Turkey, with accusations that both parties are also behind the resurgence of Isis, particularly in the areas contested between the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdish Regional Government where the jihadists are believed to be used as part of US operations against the Iranian-backed PMF which is working alongside the Iraqi armed forces.

“Put it this way Steve, everyone here and across the Middle East knows full well that the US is behind Isis. It is not a secret. We are surprised that anybody believes they are fighting them.

“Here they use Isis against the Iranians but also so they can say Iraq is unstable and they need to stay. Then they can get the oil, which is what they really want,” one official told me close to the frontline.

In December 2021 the situation deteriorated to the point that the village of Liheban northwest of Kirkuk had to be evacuated for their own safety as they were unable to hold off Isis, who had launched three night time attacks in less than a week.

The village lies in one of the contested areas in Makhmur district, 45 km southwest of Erbil which has become something of a security vacuum. One of the villagers said that the jihadists had killed cattle and caused huge amounts of damage, but

they had been unable to hold them off as neither the Iraqi army nor the Kurdish peshmerga came to their aid.

A PUK official said that the death cult was posing more of a threat in the disputed territories and said the instability benefited those that wanted to cause division, not only in Iraq and Kurdistan, but also Syria. He believed that the US was one of those that would be the main beneficiaries of such a scenario as well as Turkey.

## GHOST VILLAGES

The village of Hirure, which along with Kesta was where Operation Claw Lighting began, was once home to some 300 people. Now less than 50 remain due to the incessant bombing by the Turkish state. I was able to see many ghost villages where all the residents have fled, many to the towns and cities nearby, some to Duhok.

It is estimated that close to 2,000 villagers have left their homes due to the violence since April 2021. Many, including those I spoke to, believe that they will never be able to return. Some of the houses and land is believed to have been given away to jihadist groups and their families as part of Turkish efforts at demographic change.

An agricultural worker from Barwari Bala in Duhok province told me in May just weeks after Operation Claw Lightning started that he had abandoned his land and home due to the intensity of the aerial bombardment.

“Every day, every night, for the past weeks we are being bombed. Our lands are being destroyed: we cannot grow our crops,” he said.

“Nearly all of us have left — there is nothing for us. Our future is being destroyed, and they give our homes to Daesh [Isis].”

“We are civilians: farmers, children. Why are they doing this? The world does nothing to help because we are Kurds. Everyone wants to kill us.”

The village is now under Turkish occupation and hundreds have been forced to flee their homes. But the worker told me that there were no PKK guerrilla fighters in the area and had not been for as long as he could remember.

PKK fighters are mainly concentrated in the Avashin mountain range around



80 km to the east of Kesta, Hirure and Miska which have come under intense bombardment by Turkish forces. It is Turkey's aim to gain control of this region and crush the movement.

In this respect the village of Ars Fars is critical and has been one of the main sites of Turkey's alleged use of chemical weapons. Some 85 villages have been emptied from Avashin alone since the Turkey began its bombardment of the area in the 1990s, according to government sources

Not only are homes and land destroyed, but the regions natural resources are being taken out of Iraqi Kurdistan and taken across the border into Turkey, in a similar way to its plunder of olives in the northern Syrian city of Afrin. In Iraqi Kurdistan this has mainly been in the form of trees, with the wood sold to Turkish furniture companies.

## MILITARY OCCUPATION

Turkey's military occupation has grown rapidly since the invasion in April 2021. Bases were built near Hirure and Kesta where Turkish forces first landed by helicopter after some 80 sites were attacked by missile.

The construction of a telecommunications tower indicates a longer term plan to occupy the region. Research with forensic archaeologists is ongoing but points to large areas of deforestation and the construction of a large number of buildings, supported by similar towers.

I have seen at least two bases under construction with roads linking them together to make the transport of troops, weapons and military vehicles easier to facilitate. In May 2021 Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar visited the Bilic Tepe Base Area in Duhok province, a clear breach of protocol and Iraqi sovereignty.

He announced the planned construction of a new Turkish base in the Metina mountain area which he said would cut off PKK fighters from Syria and elsewhere in Iraqi Kurdistan. But his visit took Iraq's foreign ministry by surprise.

Turkey at that time said it had almost 40 "military points" across the border region. This figure is believed to have doubled in that time as its military occupation continues to spread. Turkish forces now occupy a large strip of land about

30 to 40 kilometres wide and some 30 to 40 kilometres deep inside Iraqi sovereign territory.

Turkish forces are carrying out military exercises on agricultural land owned by Kurdish farmers and has issued frequent threats against them, saying if they try and return they will be deemed PKK terrorists and shot.

Last year Turkey imposed a strict curfew in Hirure village. It is unclear under what authority they are operating and how this can be legally enforced. Locals fear that the area is becoming like Afrin and that soon Turkish currency and language will be used there.

Barmani military airbase has been operated by Turkey since 1996 under an agreement with the Kurdistan Democratic Party during the devastating intra-Kurdish war with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. It has expanded significantly since then and currently houses some 60 Turkish tanks, a commando battalion and personnel carriers.

It is used as a base from which Turkey launches airstrikes and drone attacks which terrorise the local population. They frequently fly and hover over local homes and shops and were constantly overhead during my time in Makhmour Camp.

Turkey also has the Zerkan military base in Mosul, in Iraq's Nineveh province. It is from here that it is believed that Turkish drones - the parts of which are sold by Britain and other western countries - are launched against the Makhmour Refugee camp and other targets.

An attack on the base in February 2022 was believed to be revenge for Turkish airstrikes that targeted Shengal and Makhmour in the same month, with at least five people killed in the twin attacks.

Recent movements, including the digging of tunnels close to Shengal and the construction of a "security wall," point to a possible ground invasion in the Yazidi territory. In May 2022 the Iraqi armed forces moved in to attack Yazidi positions as part of a bid to enforce a security deal which many believe is being imposed at the behest of both Turkey and western countries.

## MAKHMOUR

I spent two weeks at the Makhmour camp where I stayed in the guest facilities and was able to meet with and interview officials and workers in education, health, Ishtar women's organisation, the local municipality, arts and culture, the martyr's commission and ordinary people.

The camp has a long history which I have written about in greater detail elsewhere and will feature in my forthcoming book. But for the purpose of this report a brief overview would be useful for background purposes.

It was founded in 1998 under the auspices of the United Nations as thousands of Kurdish refugees fled from forced assimilation operations in Turkey which saw more than 3,000 villages burned to the ground and tens of thousands killed and buried in mass graves.

Many of the residents of the camp recalled seeing relatives shot dead, beaten and brutally tortured and many have survived traumatic experiences they still understandably bear the scars of today.

The camp - originally known as Artrush - moved a number of times before finally settling in Makhmour, which lies in one of the areas contested between the Iraqi Federal Government in Baghdad and the and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Some 12,000 men, women and children live and work in Makhmour Camp which operates as a small town with shops, a medical centre and other amenities and an education system that has developed its own curriculum, although is accredited by the Iraqi authorities.

It operates according to the principles of Democratic Confederalism, the political ideology developed by jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. It is under this system, which places the primacy of women at its core, that the camp is run.

Makhmour has 11 schools - five primary schools with some 600 pupils and a secondary school with more than 800 pupils. There is a specialist school for children with learning difficulties which is unique for the region and attracts pupils from outside the camp.

Education is delivered mainly by teachers that also live in the camp and includes classes on "jineology," the science of women. The schools were built by the camp residents supported by international volunteers. During my visit I was able to meet with the staff and see the work they were doing there under difficult circumstances.

Erdogan calls Makhmour Camp "an incubator of terrorism" linked to the PKK. He wants it shut down and threatens regularly to do it by force. He threatened last year that if the United Nations did not act to "clean up the camp" then Turkey - as a UN member state - would do so. In other words, any action taken by him would be carried out under the UN name.

Just days later missiles were fired at the UN-administered camp killing at least three people. By any measure this is a war crime. Refugees are protected under international law and the deliberate bombing of a vulnerable population is a war crime.

Yet while the UN, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty and others were quick to condemn the 2016 bombing of a refugee camp in Syria which they condemned as a war crime, human rights groups and world bodies have largely ignored attacks on Makhmour Camp.

The UNHCR, which nominally administers the camp, fled in 2014 when Isis took over the camp. Thanks to the PKK which warned officials that the jihadists were closing in, residents were able to evacuate. Isis only managed to hold on for a few weeks before they were defeated by the PKK, a fact recognised by Barzani who thanked his "Kurdish brothers" for their efforts as he sat with their commanders in the aftermath.

But they have all but abandoned the residents of Makhmour. My efforts to elicit comment from them following bombing attacks are usually ignored. Finally, after two weeks of persistent haranguing by me, they responded to a list of questions about the missile strikes and also the KRG-imposed blockade.

This has been in place for almost two years and was first imposed after the killing of a Turkish intelligence agent in the regional capital Erbil. Despite no evidence linking the shooting to the camp, authorities restricted movements in and out, meaning Kurdish residents are unable to access jobs and education.

The blockade was in place when I arrived there and the impact was obvious. Schools issued appeals for help with materials and supplies to British trade unions. The health centre had extreme shortages and the Covid supplies amounted to just a few boxes for the whole camp.

The UNHCR response was notable and puzzled camp officials with whom I shared it. The exchange is worth reading in full:

*I am working on a story about an alleged chemical attack by Turkish forces during the bombing of the Makhmur refugee camp in northern Iraq on Monday which comes under UNHCR assistance.*

*The footage is shown here: <https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/were-chemical-bombs-used-in-maxmur-44608>*

- 1. Has UNHCR commented on Turkey's attacks on Monday and will you demand that it refrains from such actions?*
- 2. Will UNHCR investigate the claims of chemical weapons attacks?*
- 3. What action is being taken to ensure the safety of residents and access to medicine, food and education in terms of the KRG-imposed blockade?*

*I would be grateful for any update or comments.*

*Almost two weeks later I received this reply*

*Dear Steve,*

*Sorry about the delay, please find below highlighted answers to your questions.*

*Best regards,  
Firas Al-Khateeb*

*UNHCR has not recently received any reports of attacks on Makhmour camp [I have seen the report sent to the UNHCR after the attack. Officials denounced this as untrue]*

*UNHCR is not involved in the management of Makhmour camp. The camp is under the responsibility of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and you may want to get in touch with their press department for further information. [This came as a surprise to camp officials]*

*UNHCR condemns attacks on civilians. [A notable refusal to condemn Turkey - but also indicates a belief that the residents in the camp aren't civilians]*

*UNHCR is a humanitarian agency concerned with the protection and welfare of refugees and displaced people and is not in any way involved in investigating alleged war crimes or military actions.*

*We have not heard or received any information or reports to substantiate any chemical attacks affecting the Makhmour camp. We became aware of some displacement of 35 families that were living in villages north of Zakho near the border area and they moved away from the area of conflict. [While on the surface this is of course correct, the UNHCR has a duty to the refugees living in Makhmour yet had not even responded to or contacted camp officials in the aftermath of the airstrikes, details of which had been published on the Turkish Armed Forces website]*

*UNHCR is not aware of a KRG imposed blockade aside from the travel restrictions imposed in the context of Covid-19 [an astonishingly dishonest claim given the protests outside UNHCR offices over both the bombings and the blockade and the letters and communications from camp officials]*

At the time the Arab League's secretary-general, Ahmed Aboul-Gheit, described Turkey's Operation Claw Eagle offensive as "a cause for concern" with Makhmour one of 80 sites targeted in missile strikes, the others being in Qandil and Shengal.

"The strikes represent an attack on Iraqi sovereignty and are taking place without co-ordination with the government in Baghdad," he said, warning that Ankara was violating international law.

During my time in the camp drones flew overhead every day. In particular they hovered overhead at around 3am each night in a bid to strike fear into the camp residents. It has achieved some levels of success in that people constantly fear an imminent attack

The silence of the UNHCR has continued regarding future attacks on Makhmour. During the latest air strikes in February 2022 it told me that its people on the ground were carrying out investigations and they would get back to me with a comment.

Quite what they were investigating is unclear. The facts were widely known and camp officials had confirmed that two members of the civilian defence force that guard from attacks from Isis and others had been killed. It took me weeks of constant emails to get a response.

I was finally told that the UNHCR had decided not to comment as the UN in Iraq had already released a statement. It was notable for its blandness and refusal to condemn Turkey for what are clearly war crimes.

“Following airstrikes in Ninewa with civilian casualties reported, we reiterate that Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected at all times. Local populations must be protected, disputes should be addressed through dialogue and cooperation,” the nondescript statement said.

In my last communications with the UNHCR I have been offered an “off the record chat” about Makhmour, which will take place after the publication of this report. It remains to be seen what will be said and how the body will justify its abandonment of the residents of Makhmour.

Camp officials however accuse the UNHCR and world bodies of collusion with Turkey and imperialist powers in a bid to close the camp down and return its 13,000 residents.

“Never forget that the UN has been working with the US, Turkey, Iraq and the KRG to send the people of Makhmour refugee camp back to Turkey for decades now, misrepresenting the conditions they would have to return to,” a Makhmour office told me,

These suspicions are well-founded. A 2006 Wikileaks cable revealed that UNHCR representative Gesche Karrenbrock was working with both US and Turkish officials to repatriate people from Makhmour. A number of other leaked cables suggest that the collusion has continued for a number of years.

While the UNHCR and certainly Turkey see the camp as a PKK base, this is far from the reality of the thriving community described above. I was able to participate in the cultural life of the camp, attending - and singing - at an evening of traditional Kurdish music and song, watching a girls football tournament and playing pool.

There is a high-level of support for the PKK and the flags of its jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan are displayed around the camp. But there were no PKK fighters there and support for the Kurdish resistance organisation and the adherence to the principles of its political philosophy are not reason to bomb it or close it down.

The blockade, which has been in place since 2018 is having a serious negative impact on the camp residents. Many are unable to travel to work in Iraqi Kurdistan and students have been excluded from taking places at Erbil University and other education institutions.

Medics told me of a pregnant woman in a serious medical emergency who was held at a checkpoint by KDP forces who accused her of faking illness, and the doctor accompanying her of lying. She was losing blood and there was a serious risk to her and her babies life. It took nine hours for her to receive treatment as a result.

Others are unable to receive treatment for cancer and other serious illnesses while the camp's resources remain stretched, a hospital that was being built there having run out of cash remains in a state of disrepair.

During my time in the camp I was told that it was surrounded by as many as 80 Isis cells that were hiding in the mountains. They launch sporadic attacks and in the weeks prior to my arrival had attacked and killed a shepherd. It is suspected that the arms and food are supplied to them by Turkey and possibly the US.

It is clear that there is a level of collusion between the UNHCR, Turkey, Nato and other imperialist powers against the residents of Makhmour who are struggling for their survival against an inhumane blockade, the threat of Isis and Turkish airstrikes.

A string of war crimes have been committed and unless those responsible are brought to account they will continue. The only crime of the people of Makhmour is their desire for self-administration and support for the PKK.

## SHENGAL

Nowhere in Kurdistan is the collusion of world powers against a local population more apparent than Shengal. Most will know the region as the site of a 2014 genocide at the hands of Isis, when around 5,000 men and boys were massacred and more than 3,000 women and girls sold into sexual slavery.

As the jihadists swept across the region, the KDP peshmerga fled with Barzani favouring the protection of the Kirkuk oilfields over the lives of the Yazidi people. They were left to their fate, something which the local population has never forgotten.

The eventual liberation of the Yazidi people that were held under siege in Sinjar mountain where they were in hiding came at the hands of the PKK, which created a humanitarian corridor allowing them to escape.

Many are living in around 13 camps across Iraqi Kurdistan and are slowly returning home. But this is being hindered by constant Turkish bombing which deems Shengal a terrorist stronghold of the PKK. This is not true. PKK fighters left the area long ago with the region under the protection of the Shengal Resistance Units (YBS).

The YBS was formed in 2007 and led the fight against Isis in the region as the murderous Islamist group swept across whole swathes of Syria and Iraq. Part of the Yazidi militia joined the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) earlier this year, forming the 80th Regiment as a step toward integration into the Iraqi armed forces.

Its women's militia, the YJS, was formed in January 2015, five months after the genocide at the hands of the jihadists had begun.

The YBS forces insist their fight is not merely defensive in nature, arguing that Yazidi self-governance is necessary to prevent another massacre. The militia has promised to step up efforts to "establish a democratic, free, autonomous Shengal and defend our people."

This has put it at odds with regional powers. In October a so-called security deal was struck between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government aimed at disarming local militia - meaning the PKK - and reasserting KDP authority.

But the agreement, and the imposition of an unelected KDP mayor, has been rejected by the Yazidi community, who were not involved in the discussions. They say that the so-called Sinjar Agreement - which was agreed with the support of the US, Nato, the EU and other imperialist is evidence of collusion against the Yazidi people.

Rihem Hassan, chair of the autonomous administration told me that she believed that the plans were designed to smash the system of self-administration there.

Hassan, a Yazidi from Shengal told me: "We cannot return home because Turkey is bombing us. We are prisoners outside our own land. They are like Isis and continuing the Yazidi genocide.

"Some people came to the camp. I immediately knew they were Turkish. They asked me to be a spy and if I did I could return and would be paid. If not I would have to stay here.

Similar stories were relayed to me in both Sulaymaniyah and Duhok, as well as in Shengal itself.

Hassan claimed he was told if he did not spy that he would be killed. He insisted that he hasn't and that it was a threat made to intimidate him. But he said that others are giving information to the Turkish intelligence services.

"Local officials are corrupt. They are working with the Turkish state, we know this. They have big houses and new cars. They are giving the co-ordinates for Turkey to bomb.

"This is what happened with Heval Seid Hesén, this is how they killed him."

Seid Hesén was a commander with the YBS and was on his way to meet Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, in August, the first time such a meeting was planned to take place for decades. It also coincided with the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron, who cancelled his visit to the region in the aftermath of the strike.

The convoy he was in was targeted in a drone strike near a busy market place killing him and his driver instantly. This amounts to an extra-judicial execution and a war

crime by the Turkish state. Yet it was met with virtual silence from world bodies.

Just days later Turkish jets struck a Yazidi hospital in a deliberate attack. Four health workers were killed and four security staff also died, while missiles also targeted both those fleeing and emergency services that arrived to attend to the wounded.

This is a war crime and again was met with a virtual silence from world bodies and the western media.

Turkey's continued impunity saw it launch further attacks on Shengal. In December the co-chairman of the Executive Council of the Shengal Democratic Autonomous Administration Merwan Bedel was killed in a drone strike close to his home. His two young children were travelling in the car alongside him.

It received minimal coverage in the western media, but where it was reported he was described as a YBS commander. While he had previously held such a role, it is important to make the distinction that he was in fact an elected politician. Attempts to muddy the waters were deliberate, with the implication that he was a legitimate military target.

This again is a war crime, yet once again it was met with a virtual silence by the international community, despite Turkey's status as a Nato member state.

Later the same month another political institution was targeted in a Turkish airstrike, emboldened by the lack of will to condemn its actions enabling it to act with impunity.

"Why are people like Marwan Bedel, Seid Hesên and Zerdest Sengali targeted by the Turkish state? Of course this is Isis's revenge."

"Achieving the rights of our people, which is also the autonomy of Sinjar, is our aim," Rihem Hesên said.

"Whatever the cost, we will continue to follow in the footsteps of our martyrs who gave their lives on the path to autonomous Sinjar."

In January another two Yazidi officials BS Commander Azad Ezdin and YBS fighter Enver Tolhildan. were killed in a drone strike on their vehicle.

"God help us. We'll never be set free," a woman was heard saying in video footage at the scene of the attack.

Just a few weeks later the Turkish air force struck at least 20 sites in the Shengal region, with at least three people killed in the attacks, which many saw as revenge for the defeat of the Isis attempted prison break in Syria's Hasakah province just days beforehand.

That the airstrikes took place soon after a phone call between Turkish and US officials raised eyebrows as did the fact that jets were able to operate in airspace controlled by the Americans.

War crimes are being committed against the people of Shengal. Their only crime is a desire for self-administration.

## QANDIL

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan describes Qandil as a "terrorist swamp" that needs to be drained and refuses to acknowledge the reality that the area is home to a civilian population.

Some 20,000 people live in the hundreds of villages in the rugged terrain which is part of the Zagros mountain range.

It has acted as a refuge and base for Kurdish fighters for decades, including the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) peshmerga forces during Saddam Hussein's rule, the Iranian Komala militia and the PKK which has an estimated 3,000 guerilla fighters in its Qandil bases.

But the area is largely inhabited by agricultural workers, shopkeepers and lots of cattle including sheep, cows and goats that straddle the steep inclines.

Typically producing agricultural goods including honey, yoghurt and olives the area had a lot of natural resources and growth of fresh fruit and vegetables is common for local consumption and sale at the market.

I have visited the area many times and met with villagers, local shop workers, municipal officials and PKK cadres. Last year I was one of thousands to attend

Newroz, the Kurdish new year and was honoured to address the crowds. Later that year I was the only western journalist invited to attend Vejin, the name given to the anniversary of the foundation of the PKK.

It is important to note that despite claims by some media organisations, I was given freedom to speak to anybody I wanted to. There was absolutely no interference and no attempt to control who I met. This is important to underline as many reporters claim either not to have gained access to Qandil or that their entry to the mountains was closely guarded - something not unreasonable in what is a war zone.

In fact the first visit to Qandil was marked by the fact that we were to be denied entry at the last PUK-operated check point. My fixer took me across the mountains so we could get around it, dressing me as a Kurdish farmer. We escaped an apparent ambush by Iranian-backed forces but managed to enter safely.

On my last attempt to enter Qandil I was told that foreigners were banned and that while the peshmerga on duty might let me in, I would face arrest or even be shot as we left. Those controlling the narrative in Qandil are not in my experience the PKK.

What I did however discover was a people under attack from the Turkish state living in constant fear of being bombed. I have written extensively about this for the Morning Star including meetings with a woman who had her entire family wiped out in an aerial bombardment - I held a fragment of the bomb that killed them during Operation Claw Eagle.

Farmer Mohammed Darwesh explained how five of his family members were killed during the same attack.

"The bombing started at about 4am, I was sleeping. We were woken by a great blast. It felt like doomsday. When I got up I saw my mum was dead, split in half and covered in blood."

"I felt like I was in a strange dream, like it wasn't real. But the plane bombed us again. I went to rescue my father who was buried under a pile of rubble. I tried to help him but I couldn't. I was injured and part of the bomb was lodged in my leg and I fainted."

The only people that helped during the rescue operation was the PKK. Nobody else came and the families were left largely to fend for themselves.

My reports from the area also include exclusive insight into how Britain has fuelled Turkey's drone wars through the sale of the Hornet bomb rack, used on the Bayraktar TB2 drones to enable precision missiles to hit their targets. Without this deadly trade, hundreds of people would still be alive today.

I met another of the civilians targeted by Turkish drones on the outskirts of Qandil. I had already seen the bomb-damaged vehicle of Mohammad Abdullah many times on my way into the mountains. He explained that his car was struck by a missile as it made its way up the zig-zag road into Qandil in June 2019. He woke up with body parts around him and desperately tried to find his father and children.

"Dad was beheaded," he told me. His daughter has shrapnel inside her while Mohammad struggles to walk with 149 pieces of shrapnel inside him. His sister died after shrapnel sliced through her body.

"My sister and dad were burning in the car. I couldn't help them," Mohammad said. He found his brother and tried to get him to hospital. But he was told that he had to take him to a PUK hospital and not a KDP hospital. Eventually he made it to Ranya but because of the delays his brother died.

Mohammad holds Turkey responsible and believes they deliberately target civilians to cut off support for the PKK in the hope that villagers and others will demand that they leave and are making the area unsafe.

This is also the refrain of the KDP, which has issued a number of threats to the PKK telling them to return to Turkey. In late 2020 this led to frantic efforts by all parties including the PUK, Kurdistan Communist Party - Iraq, Gorran Movement and New Generation to avert a deadly intra-Kurdish war.

Mohammad is angry with the PKK too, but he has been left without any support or compensation from the Kurdistan Regional Government. When I met him he was struggling to breathe, which he says is something that has impacted him since the bombing.

Before the attack he was studying at university in Slemani and had hoped to become an Islamic preacher. But now his health has deteriorated to the point he cannot study. He wants the world to hear the stories of the ordinary people caught up in Turkey's war and for the bombing to stop.

Again Qandil is run according to the principles of Democratic Confederalism, with a system of self-governance in operation. And once again the victims of Turkish bombing are the ordinary people that live there.

## WAR IN THE CITY

### The execution of Yasan Bulut - bringing the war from the mountains to the city

Yasan Bulut was my friend. When we first met I was told he could speak English. He couldn't and instead greeted me in French, much to our amusement. He was shot dead outside his home in Sulaymaniyah in September last year. Four bullets were pumped into his body at close range

I have spoken to his friends and comrades about what happened among with security officials. It is the worst kept secret that he was assassinated by Turkish intelligence services in the city. This was alluded to by the PKK in the aftermath of his killing and has been subsequently confirmed by two separate sources.

Yasan Bulut was known by a number of pseudonyms, common in the region partly for security reasons. He was 65-years-old and suffering from cancer. First arrested in the 1980 military coup in Turkey he joined the PKK sometime in 1991.

This description was deliberately promoted in the media to conjure up images of a militant, a threat to the state. That somehow he deserved to die and was a major figure in the organisation. But he was in fact a placid and peaceful man, who the children that came to the Tevgara Azadi centre in Sulaymaniyah adored.

He was a member of the martyrs committee, meaning that he liaised with the families of PKK guerrilla that were killed with action, ensuring they received support and arranged services to commemorate the anniversaries of their falling.

Yasin was a kind and gentle man. He was an easy, soft target for whoever killed him. Security officials told me that the killing was a warning that the Turkish state can hunt anybody down and execute them in broad daylight with total impunity.

His killing came during the Turkish onslaught in the mountains, but it also brought that war to the city. The assassination took place amid a power struggle within the PUK and its ruling family, pitting KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani against his cousin Lahur, who is seen as more sympathetic to the PKK.

Yasin's killers - whose names are believed to be known by security forces - have never been found and justice has yet to be served. But if, as believed by many, the Turkish state is involved, then this is an extra-judicial execution and a war crime.

## THE DRONE STRIKE ON KUNA MASI HOLIDAY RESORT

"One minute children were happily splashing about in the water, the next it was a bloodbath. The tranquillity and laughter turned into chaos and screams.

"The whole world turned upside down in an instant. Mums ran into the water to find their children.

The shop was destroyed and a man lay over there, dead," Rezbar Muhammad told me at the site of a 2020 drone strike on Kuna Masi.

Video footage circulated on social media with children paddling in the water at the popular holiday resort about 30 minutes drive from the city of Slemani. It was the last of the holiday season with tourists from as far afield as Basra and Baghdad enjoying the last of the summer sun.

The drone strike - which Turkey claimed was targeting a senior official from the PKK sister organisation in Iranian Kurdistan, the Free Life Party (PJAK) - seriously injured four members of the family that operated a shop there.

I met with Kaywan Kawe Salih and Peyman Talib Tahir who have been forced to give up the shop and live with relatives in Slemani as they require constant hospital treatment. Peyman is covered in scars and in constant pain, having lost a leg in the attack. Kaywan struggles to walk, with hundreds of pieces off shrapnel lodged in his body.



Their six-year-old son has metal from the bomb lodged in his head. Removing it might kill him. Their seven-year-old daughter was thrown 10 feet onto the rocks below their shop and lost her hearing.

“We lost everything that day,” Peyman told me. “One minute we were in the shop. A man asked Kaywan for some eggs and he went to fill a bag. The next thing I remember is waking up in hospital.”

Kaywan also cast doubt on Turkish claims to have killed a senior PKK or PJAK official, saying that while the man who came to the shop was an Iranian Kurd, there is no evidence that he had any political affiliations.

“We gave up everything to build our shop and resort in Kuna Masi. We didn’t earn much money, just enough to survive and live a quiet life. We were happy. We had plans for the future,” Kaywan said.

“All that changed the day we were hit by the missile. What did we do to deserve this?” he continues, becoming increasingly angry. “We don’t belong to any political party, even the PUK. We are just an ordinary family trying to live our lives, to build a family.”

The families lives have been destroyed by Turkey’s drone strike. They are forced to pay for the treatment themselves with no compensation or even an apology from Erdogan. Local PUK officials initially offered to pay for treatment - Peyman needs to fly abroad to have a prosthetic limb fitted. But they backed down after Kaywan criticised them in public.

This is a war crime. And it is a war crime that Britain is complicit in having licensed the Hornet bomb rack that enables Turkey’s drones to fire missiles with precision.

## THE BADINAN ACTIVISTS

At least 81 political prisoners - known collectively as the Badinan activists - are currently on hunger strike in an Erbil prison. Many were jailed after being disappeared by KDP forces and nearly all claim to have been tortured.

One of the most prominent of those behind bars is journalist Sherwan Sherwani. He is a well-known government critic and was sentenced to six years in prison on charges of “spying and organising armed groups” against the government.

He claims to have been tortured while in custody while human rights organisations and press freedom groups said his trial was a sham and did not meet international standards. The spying charges - which have been levelled against a number of those jailed - include meetings and emails with foreign consulates.

Most have to their shame remained silent. In 2020 former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn wrote a letter to Masoud Barzani demanding assurances about his safety and well-being. The activists were denied proper access to lawyers and convicted on flimsy evidence.

Sherwani was detained in October 2020 after a wave of demonstrations in the region last year against corruption and economic pressures, including salary disruptions caused by a years-long dispute over oil and budgets between the KRG and Baghdad which continues today.

Soon after his arrest the situation deteriorated. I was at a demonstration in December during which teachers and civil servants who hadn’t been paid for months were demanding payment. The security forces opened fire with teargas, with an opposition MP knocked unconscious by a canister.

Protests erupted across Slemani, Darbandikhan, Halabja and Said Sidiq with party headquarters set ablaze and roads blocked in frustration over a broken political system. The response was brutal. At least 13 people, including children, were shot dead. As demonstrations continued and the situation became more volatile, the British consulate and members of Britain’s APPG for Kurdistan posted photo’s on social media of themselves posing with pomegranates from Halabja.

Hopes that the new diplomatic mission would bring about change remain to be seen but its actions during the student protests were a cause for concern. Scores were detained and allegedly tortured, with some paraded on state television in orange jumpsuits. The British consulate met with what they said were student leaders, but were in fact linked to the ruling parties and had nothing to do with the protests.

This is a wider problem and will be dealt with outside this report. But the fact that the APPG for Kurdistan receives payment from oil companies to operate a secretariat opens it up to accusations of corruption and a lack of impartiality. Its behaviour and the relationships it has with those in the region certainly warrant closer inspection.

Like everything else, media organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan are owned almost wholly by the ruling Barzani and Talibani families with those that are critical of the government regularly targeted by the state and shut down or blocked. This was the case during the 2020 anti-government protests with NRT TV was shut down and its right to broadcast revoked.

It is frequently targeted by the authorities. In 2011 its offices were burned down and the station's owner Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir survived an assassination attempt in 2013. Last December its website was targeted by millions of cyber attacks after it broadcast an interview with US-based journalist Jack Kopplin who had reported on alleged corruption by the Barzano family.

The Rudaw and Kurdistan 24 channels are however particularly reviled. During both the 2020 anti-government protests and the 2021 student demonstrations, they were jeered and met with chants of "oil channel."

Press freedom is a major issue, and again will be dealt with in more detail outside of this report, but it is an important part of the story as is the internal repression in Iraqi Kurdistan which allows Turkey and the KDP to act with impunity while those that try to hold them to account are marginalised or jailed.

## CONCLUSION

We have to say from the very outset that Turkey has committed a string of war crimes in Iraqi Kurdistan. From the bombing of refugee camps to the targeting of hospitals and residential areas.

The alleged use of chemical weapons is an area that warrants further investigation. As the evidence continues to mount it is simply untenable for bodies such as the OPCW, the UN and Nato to maintain silence.

I am not a chemical expert, nor are those who claim to be the victims of such attacks. But firm action has been taken by world powers on less evidence.

The Kurds are once again victims of the politicisation of the institutes of imperialism. The world looked away when Saddam gassed the Kurds in Halabja. We must not allow this to happen again.

It is clear that the target is not the PKK. It is the system of self-administration and the Kurdish people as a whole. But the designation of the PKK as a terrorist organisation is a problem. It is used as cover for Turkey's genocidal campaign against Kurds and legitimises its war crimes under the guise of "fighting terrorism."

In a way Kurds are prisoners of their own geography and have been subjected to more than a century of manipulation and subjugation by imperialist powers.

We should not fall into the trap however of thinking that Turkey acts as an independent power. It has long-been a US client state and was an important bulwark against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

It is strongly believed the US was involved in the military coups that have plagued Turkey and the crushing of left groups, Kurds, Alevi's and other minorities, most notably using far-right paramilitary groups such as the Grey Wolves as part of Operation Gladio.

Similarly today it is providing both political and military support to Turkey, something underlined in recent remarks made by the US Ambassador Jeffrey Flake who described Ankara as "an indispensable ally of the United States.

"Turkey, as a 70-year NATO member, is a critical country at a very important time for us.

"This is extremely important for us, for regional and world security ... Turkey is increasingly taking its place on the world stage as a bigger player."

More worryingly the United States is accused of facilitating the resurgence of Isis both in Iraq and Syria. While those claims have been made by Damascus and various groups in Iraq, of Washington denies such allegations.

But its nurturing of such groups via Operation Timber Sycamore and the radicalisation of jihadists - including the two former leaders of Isis - cannot simply be ignored. Nor can the claims made to me by at least three credible sources in Kurdistan where the US support for jihadist groups is one of the worst kept secrets.

The truth in this regard is however unlikely to ever come to light with a media tightly controlled by the world imperialist powers and those that get close to exposing

these links written off as cranks. The lack of press freedom and the severe internal oppression in Kurdistan simply compounds this.

There is a blanket silence in the western press, with the exception of the Morning Star, a relatively small national daily newspaper but with links to Britain's 6.5 million-strong trade union movement. This is of course not because they don't know about it. The domiciled Kurdish community are incredibly vocal and often hold lively protests outside the BBC, but to no avail.

This comes down to an issue of media ownership and control, along with a desire for mainstream newspapers to maintain their relationships with the Turkish state, a major source of advertising revenue as well as their role as part of the imperialist system.

Similarly the Kurdish cause has never penetrated into the British movement in the same way that the Palestinian movement has for example. The similarities between the two are striking. Both are national liberation struggles fighting for their freedom to exist as a people. Both had their land stolen by imperialist powers during the carve-up of the Middle East, and both are subjected to genocides by powerful nations.

One of the main reasons given for the lack of broader support for the Kurds is the problematic relationship with the United States in northern Syria. While this is indeed a major issue, it does not of course tell the whole picture.

Yet appeals to the institutes of state power alone are not enough. The UN, Nato, and the EU were deliberately established to entrench the capitalist system and will not be won by force of argument. They are fully behind the dirty war being waged against the Kurds.

It is only through mass collective action and unity with global trade union, progressive and liberation movements that change will be effected. This should of course instruct future strategy.

But there are immediate aims, including stopping arms sales to Turkey and pressing the case for war crimes against Erdogan. This, and highlighting the use of chemical weapons, will help to exert pressure and highlight the ongoing attempted genocide of the Kurdish people.

Similarly work must be done to counter claims that the PKK want a separate state either in Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria. They are not only false, but they are dangerous. This is the claim made by Erdogan, the Iranian government and also by the Baathists under Saddam Hussein. It serves to "other" Kurds and present them as a threat, justifying the attacks and attempted genocide.

The delisting of the PKK as a terrorist organisation is another demand that must be pressed as a way of ending the Turkish-led attacks which also extend far beyond its borders and into the heart of Europe with Kurds and their allies targeted by paramilitary hit squads, the fair right and also intelligence services.

The Belgian Court of Cassation judgement delivered in January 2020 is instructive here in which the PKK it was found to be a party in a non-international armed conflict or civil war where the use of legitimate military force is allowed.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a war criminal but is aided and abetted by world powers who use him as Nato's battering ram in the Middle East. They support the oppression of the HDP as they know it is the only force challenging Erdogan's wars and his crushing of progressive forces.

Similarly the KDPs power rests on the imperialists who use the party to quell internal dissent in Iraqi Kurdistan and hinder the development of democracy. The collusion with Turkey is actively encouraged. As is often the case, oil and resources are a major driving factor as is regional hegemony and the desire to dilute the influence of Iran.

Makhmour, Shengal and Qandil are clearly in the crosshairs of the imperialist powers, which do not merely allow, but support Turkish airstrikes, extra-judicial executions and the terror inflicted on civilian populations. Their only crime is to demand the right to exist and live in peace.

Taken as a whole, the picture is one of collusion, corruption and conspiracy by the world's imperialist powers against the Kurdish people and their desire for self-determination.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Erdogan must be charged with war crimes. Those that continue to sell him weapons must also be held accountable
  2. Turkish forces must immediately withdraw all forces from Kurdish land.
  3. US forces must leave Iraq and Syria.
  4. The PKK must be delisted as a terrorist organisation
  5. Britain must immediately end arms sales to Turkey and consider other trade agreements with Ankara.
  6. The establishment of a mass solidarity campaign in the labour, progressive and anti-war movement to stop the genocide of Kurds.
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Peace in Kurdistan was launched in October 1994 at a meeting in London with Lord Avebury, Harold Pinter, Arthur Miller, John Berger, Noam Chomsky, John Austin MP and Jeremy Corbyn MP with the aim of building a network of politicians, academics, lawyers, writers, trade unionists and activists to work with and in support of the Kurdish freedom movement and achieving a peaceful political solution of the Kurdish question taking inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's ideas and struggles. Since 1999 it worked in support of the International Initiative – Freedom for Öcalan – Peace in Kurdistan and since 2016 the Freedom for Öcalan trade union campaign. It is also a co-founder of the Coalition Against Chemical Weapons in Kurdistan together with Campaign Against Criminalising Communities(CAMPACC) and Defend Kurdistan in March 2022.

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