# Turkish military expansion reshapes life and landscape in Iraqi Kurdistan's Sergele



Nestled in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan lies the village of Sergele, a place where generations have lived off the land by growing pomegranates, almonds, and peaches, alongside foraging for wild fruits and spices in surrounding forests. However, Sergele, situated roughly 16 kilometres from the Turkish border, has witnessed a significant shift in its landscape and daily life due to the increasing presence of Turkish military forces.

Over the past two years, at least seven Turkish military bases have been established around Sergele, including one adjacent to a dam that regulates the village's water supply, putting it off limits for villagers. One Turkish base looms on a western ridge overlooking the village, while another is under construction on the eastern side. Farmer Sherwan Sergeli, aged 50, whose family has farmed the land for generations, describes this incursion as "100% a form of occupation of Kurdish [Iraqi Kurdistan] lands," adding that "The Turks ruined it."

Sergele finds itself on the frontline of Turkey's conflict with the Kurdish militant group PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which began an insurgency in southern Turkey in 1984. The area, known locally as the "Forbidden Zone," spans nearly the entire northern Iraqi border with Turkey, extending up to 40 kilometres deep in some areas. According to Community Peacemaker Teams, a human rights organisation based in Iraqi Kurdistan, hundreds of civilians have died from drone and air strikes in and around this zone. A 2020 Kurdish parliamentary report noted that thousands have been displaced, with entire villages depopulated as a result of ongoing conflict.

The Turkish military's footprint in northern Iraq has expanded rapidly, with BBC analysis confirming the construction of at least 136 fixed military sites as of December 2024. Satellite imagery reveals a network of 660 kilometres of roads connecting these bases, causing notable deforestation and changes to the mountain terrain. While some bases date back to the 1990s, 89% have been developed since 2018, corresponding with Turkey's intensified military presence. The Turkish government, when approached by the BBC, did not respond directly but has previously stated that these bases are essential for countering the PKK, which it designates a terrorist organisation.

The nearby sub-district capital of Kani Masi illustrates the broader impact of the Turkish military presence. Only 4 kilometres from the Iraqi-Turkish border and partially within the Forbidden Zone, Kani Masi was once renowned for apple production but now has very few residents. Salam Saeed, a local farmer unable to cultivate his vineyard for three years due to the military presence, told the BBC, "The moment you get here, you will have a drone hover over you. They will shoot you if you stay." The main Turkish base in Kani Masi features concrete blast walls, communication towers, and facilities for armoured personnel carriers. Saeed expressed the belief that Turkey aims to claim this territory, saying, "All they want is for us to leave these areas."

The Turkish military's expansion has also pushed back the Iraqi border guards from areas close to the official frontier. General Farhad Mahmoud pointed out Turkish posts positioned about 10 kilometres inside Iraqi territory, explaining that Iraqi guards cannot reach the border to determine the number of Turkish posts, highlighting the limited enforcement ability of Iraq's forces.

Turkey's military build-up in Iraqi Kurdistan aligns with a broader foreign policy shift towards interventionism in the region. Besides Iraq, Turkey has sought to establish similar buffer zones along its border with Syria to contain groups allied with the PKK. Publicly, Iraq's national government condemns Turkey's military presence but has made accommodations behind closed doors. In 2024, Iraq and Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding to jointly combat the PKK, which did not restrict Turkish forces within Iraqi borders. Iraq's dependency on Turkey for trade, investment, and water security, coupled with its complex internal politics, has limited its leverage.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), led primarily by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), maintains close ties with Ankara based on mutual interests and has often downplayed civilian harm from Turkish military actions. Hoshyar Zebari, a senior KDP political figure, told the BBC, "They [the Turkish military] are not harming our people. They are not detaining them. They are not interfering in them going about their business. Their focus, their sole goal is the PKK."

Despite calls from the PKK's incarcerated leader, Abdulla Ocalan, earlier this year to disband and lay down arms, hostilities continue. Turkish forces persist in shelling Kurdish targets while the PKK claims to have downed a Turkish drone recently. Civilians in the border region increasingly face threats of death and displacement.

One tragic incident involved 24-year-old Alan Ismail, a stage-four cancer patient killed by an air strike in August 2023 while visiting the mountains with his cousin, Hashem Shaker. Although the Turkish military denied involvement, a police report seen by the BBC attributed the strike to a Turkish drone. Following his complaint to a local court, Shaker was detained by Kurdish security forces and held for eight months on suspicion of supporting the PKK, charges both he and his family deny. Alan's father, Ismail Chichu, expressed the family's grief, stating, "It has destroyed us. It's like killing the whole family," and added, "They [the Turks] have no rights to kill people in their own country on their own land." He also expressed a desire for the Kurdish authorities to acknowledge his son's death and offer condolences.

The Turkish Defence Ministry did not respond to BBC inquiries but has previously stated that its armed forces operate within international law and targeted only terrorist elements while seeking to minimise civilian harm.

The situation in northern Iraqi Kurdistan reflects a complex interplay of military strategy, geopolitical interests, and the impact on local communities living under the shadow of escalating conflict and territorial control.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/reports-indicate-turkish-military-building-new-bases-in-northern-iraq-31915/> - This article reports that the Turkish military has established a checkpoint in the village of Banke and is constructing seven new bases in the area, including on Bradost Mountain and Zirara Hill, corroborating the claim of Turkish military expansion in northern Iraq.
* <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-has-11-regional-bases-in-northern-iraq-pm-yildirim-132762> - Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım's statement that Turkey has set up 11 regional bases in northern Iraq supports the assertion of a significant Turkish military presence in the region.
* <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/reports-indicate-turkish-military-building-new-bases-in-northern-iraq-31915/> - The article mentions that Turkish military operations are expected to encircle and tighten the eastern flank of Bahar Tepe, aligning with the claim of Turkish military activities affecting local communities.
* <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/reports-indicate-turkish-military-building-new-bases-in-northern-iraq-31915/> - The construction of a new base on Bradost Mountain and the establishment of a base on Zirara Hill are part of Turkey's strategy to strengthen its presence in northern Iraq, corroborating the claim of Turkish military expansion.
* <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/reports-indicate-turkish-military-building-new-bases-in-northern-iraq-31915/> - The article discusses Turkey's military operations targeting Gara Mountain, aiming to control the area and disrupt PKK activities, supporting the claim of Turkish military operations in the region.
* <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/reports-indicate-turkish-military-building-new-bases-in-northern-iraq-31915/> - The report highlights the construction of military routes and bases in areas like Resava Valley and Zirara Hill, indicating the Turkish military's strategic positioning in northern Iraq.
* <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c985lw7lywlo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data