

## Farming in the Mountains of Kudistan

March 7, 2011

While visiting farms near the border with Iran we stayed in Choman, a town of about 12,000 people twenty kilometres from Iran. At this time in early March the town is surrounded by snow covered mountains. While there we visited with Makmoud, a farmer that CPT has got to know well in the past few years. He and his family live in Choman during the winter but move to their farm higher in the mountains for the summer cropping season. We met him in Choman because planting season on his farm does not begin until May 15, at which time he and his family will move to the farm where they have another house. They farm close enough to Choman that his children can still complete their school terms which run from September until June.

In these mountains there are small pockets of fertile soil surrounded by large areas of grazing lands, some quite steep. Large areas of the grazing lands are covered with land mines but some of the mined areas have been cleared of mines and can be safely used to graze sheep and goats.

Makmoud does not own sheep and goats. He is a fruit and vegetable farmer on one of the more fertile plots of land. He produces fruits like apples, apricots, cherries and peaches. Many of the vegetables we know grow on his farm, tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, eggplant, and cauliflower to name a few. His vegetable harvest comes late in the season when farmers at lower levels have finished theirs. So there are good market conditions for his late season produce in the cities of Erbil and Sulemaniya. He also gets premium prices because the vegetables he produces in the cool mountain area require far less chemicals and fertilizers. Makmoud and his family finish their harvest and move back to Choman about the end of November.

We had been hearing about so called nomadic farmers who also raised sheep and goats in the area around Choman. These are the people in particular who are threatened by artillery fire from the Iranian outpost because they tend to be higher in the mountains than the crop growing farmers. We asked Makmoud if he knew any of these livestock farmers. Yes, he said, several of my brothers do this sort of farming and one of them, Osa, winters his livestock very near your route on the way back to Sulemaniya. He would be pleased to talk with you. So Makmoud called his brother on his cell phone and arranged for us to visit on our way back to Sulemaniya the next day.

These farmers, called nomadic in English translation, are not really nomads. They simply have two farming areas, the higher mountains in summer have green pastures and water for the goats and sheep while the lower lands are hot and dry from the searing desert winds. In winter, the livestock are moved to lower mountain slopes where winter rains provide good grazing. Osa's winter farm is located about three hours by car from his summer farm near Choman. His home overlooks a valley where we could see his flock of several hundred sheep and goats. Like his brother Makmoud, Osa begins in mid May to move his flock to the mountains. This will be a trek of between 100 and 200 kilometres through the mountains. The sheep and goats will spend ten days walking to their summer homes, grazing as they go. They will be guided and protected on their journey by several shepherds. The rest of family will pack

household goods and tents in trucks and drive to the mountains. These farmers and their families live in tents for the summer. Clearly these livestock farmers have to move much further between their summer and winter farms than crop growing farmers because they need extensive grazing areas for their flocks that are not available close to nearby towns like Choman. Because of the distances these livestock farmers move it is not possible for their children to attend school.

Winter wheat is a major crop grown here in the Kurdish area. It is grown in large fields in the wide lowland valleys, and in small plots high in the mountains. At this time of year, early March, the winter wheat in the lower land has already turned green and is growing quickly. I have been told that small plots of wheat are cut with scythes, put through some sort of threshing unit attached to a tractor PTO. Then another machine is used to separate the chaff from the wheat. On the large fields in the lower lands combines are said to be used in the harvest. I have not seen a single combine that was anything more than a burned out hulk but given the size of the wheat fields I expect combines must be used for the harvest. Love to all, Allan