

Over the Mountains to Iran

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The Kurdish village of Bashmakh in northeastern Iraq is the last outpost before you reach no-man's land on the frontier with Iran. Living so close to the border, people in this poor and remote area have one major source of income - smuggling. Under Saddam Hussein's rule many villages on the Iraq-Iran border were attacked by government forces. Homes were demolished and residents deported to the interior, all in the name of national security. When the Kurdish region acquired autonomy in 1991, the villagers started to return. But their fields were barren and their livestock dead.

With their traditional income gone, people in Bashmakh and neighbouring villages like Halalawa, Maso and Hargena looked for new ways to earn a living, and found they could make money by smuggling consumer goods to Iran, as well as banned items like alcohol.

Foodstuff, cosmetics, electrical appliances, and sometimes beer and whisky arrive by truck in bulk consignments. The smugglers then load up and carry as much as they can and begin the six-kilometer journey on foot to the border.

They walk five or six hours a day through rough mountainous territory, earning six or seven US dollars for each load. Sometimes they make the trip twice in one day.

Once they reach the border, they have to pay a bribe to avoid arrest or having their contraband seized. On the Iranian side, the merchants are waiting to load the goods back onto trucks and send them off for sale around the country.

This might seem like a trade where Kurdish men would dominate. However, because hundreds of men from villages in this area were killed during Saddam's clearance programme, many families have lost their main breadwinner, and women have taken over. The loads may be heavy, and some merchants pay women less than men, but they have no other way of putting food on the table.

Location: [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)

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