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Assessing the Fatalities in Turkey’s PKK Conflict

Turkey’s ruling party sees recent battlefield and electoral gains as vindicating its hardline policies toward the PKK. But these same policies fuel the Kurdish grievances that keep the fighting going. Ankara would thus be wise to consider exploring ways of winding down the destructive conflict.

Since July 2015, the conflict between Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) – which Ankara, Brussels and Washington designate a terrorist organisation – has taken more than 4,600 lives in Turkey and northern Iraq. But if the conflict is long-running, open-source data on fatalities collected by Crisis Group and presented in a unique visual conflict explainer (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkeys-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer>) show that battlefield dynamics are changing.

For one thing, fighting has moved out of the cities. Over the last two years, neither the PKK nor its affiliate the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks has carried out attacks in metropolitan areas. Fatalities – Crisis Group could confirm an average of 40 per month in 2019 – have been concentrated in the rural areas of Turkey’s Kurdish-majority south east. Over the past year, the death rate among PKK militants, and particularly in northern Iraq, has risen. Ankara’s stepped-up operations, involving curfews, drone strikes and more state security forces, have killed higher numbers of seasoned PKK figures in 2019 than in any of the previous three years of escalation. Killing more PKK militants, however, is not translating into victory for Ankara as the PKK draws on fighters from outside Turkey and capitalises on pent up anti-state resentment among some Kurds.

Quantitative analysis of fatality and election data since 2014 shows that in the last four years, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and its alliance partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), mostly consolidated electoral support in conflict-ridden south-eastern districts, while the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) largely maintained support in the Kurdish movement’s traditional urban strongholds despite an immense state crackdown. While to Ankara it might seem like hardline policies are paying off, on the battlefield and at the ballot box, those same policies continue to fuel the grievances and anger of a segment of Turkey’s Kurds that sustain the conflict with the PKK.

Reliable polls show that support for the AK Party and MHP has fallen below the critical 50 per cent mark, mostly because the ruling party has lost nearly half of its conservative Kurdish backers. It is unclear whether the political leadership in Ankara will be able to make up for lost conservative Kurdish support by garnering more votes from Turkish nationalists moving forward.

At a time when Turkey faces a serious economic downturn and sanctions from its Western allies, the leadership in Ankara – as the centenary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey nears – might consider exploring avenues of accommodation with a now considerably weakened PKK and seek to pave the way to resolving a conflict that, for over 35 years, has taken a great toll on civilians, drained Turkey’s resources and continues to curb its strategic potential.

Conflict Fatalities

Crisis Group’s data shows that 4,686 individuals have been killed since July 2015. Of those individuals, more than half are PKK militants (2,758), 22.4 per cent of whom are female. Around a quarter (1,215) consist of State Security Force members (including soldiers, police and village guards). There have been 490 civilians confirmed dead (the remaining 223 are “individuals of unknown affiliation”, a category Crisis Group uses for those killed in urban centres – almost all between December 2015 and June 2016 – about whom it is not known if they are civilians or PKK militants).

Ankara’s tactics in the last three years – imposing curfews in rural areas to clear out PKK members, calling in drone strikes, deploying soldiers in high numbers, killing experienced militants and stifling recruitment – appear to have significantly narrowed the PKK’s space for manoeuvre in the rural south east.

The militant-to-state security force member fatality ratio provides some indication of the Turkish campaign’s impact. Since fighting shifted back into rural areas in July 2016 (after a deadly urban phase between December 2015 and June 2016), the Turkish military has been on the offensive. In the first year, 1.65 PKK militants were killed for each soldier, police officer or village guard; this figure rose to 2.22 in the second year and then to 3.22 in the third. In the last year, from July 2018 to July 2019, 3.36 PKK militants were killed for each state security force member.

Three reasons likely explain the PKK’s higher fatality rate over the last year. First, the PKK is having a harder time sheltering among and securing supplies from core supporters in south-eastern villages, who are usually intimidated by Turkish forces’ curfews and security cordons. Secondly, drones and other new military technology have helped Ankara clear militants from mountain strongholds. Thirdly, U.S. pressure on the PKK to rein in attacks in Turkey has meant that it remains largely in a defensive posture. On the U.S.’s part this pressure was mostly an effort to avert further Turkish backlash against Washington’s partnership in Syria with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)/People’s Protection Units (YPG), closely affiliated with the PKK. While the impact in Turkey itself of Ankara’s military incursion into north east Syria against the SDF/YPG that began on 9 October remains unclear, it could fuel the PKK’s insurgency against Turkey.

Turkey’s Offensive in Northern Iraq

The last year of escalation saw the highest number of fatalities from Turkish air and land operations against the PKK in northern Iraq since July 2015. Crisis Group could confirm 101 fatalities linked to such operations in that area in 2019, of whom 90 were PKK militants and 11 were Turkish soldiers. According to open-source data collected between May and September 2019, the Turkish army has conducted at least 76 cross-border air operations, most of them targeting PKK hideouts and ammunition depots in and around the Qandil mountains where the PKK’s “headquarters” are located as well as in Hakurk, in the north west of Qandil toward the Turkey border (see map below).

With the stated goal of “ending the PKK”, the Turkish military launched air and ground offensives against the militants in northern Iraq (dubbed Operation Claw) on 27 May 2019. In a first since 2008, Turkish ground forces penetrated around 20km deep into Iraqi territory to clear out militants, cut off logistical routes and destroy ammunition depots. The Turkish military also created new security outposts. As of 4 October, Crisis Group could confirm the deaths of 57 PKK militants and nine Turkish soldiers in northern Iraq since Operation Claw began.

Security analysts cite three main objectives for Turkey’s scaled-up cross-border operation in northern Iraq: to disrupt PKK mobilisation in the Hakurk region, which is tactically important as a logistical channel for the PKK insurgency in Turkey and also hosts PKK training camps; to create a buffer zone along the Turkey-Iraq border that could eventually afford the Turkish army access to PKK headquarters in Qandil; and to reduce PKK dominance in Sinjar, the north-eastern Iraqi region that the insurgency uses as a transit route between Iraq and Syria. Warmer relations among Ankara, Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil have facilitated intelligence sharing that aids the cross-border offensive.

Changing Profile of PKK Fatalities

An important component of Ankara’s campaign in the last year has been the targeting of seasoned PKK operatives. The exact number killed is disputed. The Turkish interior minister, Süleyman Soylu, said on 7 August that the army had “neutralised” (which could mean killed or captured) 87 “high-ranking” PKK militants in the first seven months of 2019. Turkish media outlets reported the deaths of twenty in the same period. The PKK has so far only confirmed ten of these militants dead, nine in Turkey and one in northern Iraq.

The showdown in northern Iraq and more Turkish military pressure targeting the PKK’s upper echelons were likely the triggers for an attack on 17 July that killed a Turkish diplomat. That day, an unidentified gunman opened fire in a restaurant in the Deream area in Erbil, killing Osman Köse, who worked at the consulate, and an Iraqi national. The PKK denied direct involvement, but in an interview on 24 July, senior PKK figure Bahoz Erdal praised the attack saying “well done to whoever carried out this activity”. He

also claimed that Köse was no regular diplomat but an intelligence officer in charge of Turkey’s anti-PKK campaign in northern Iraq. Turkish media reported on 20 July that Kurdistan Regional Government security officials had caught the suspected assassin, Mazlum Dağ. The targeting of upper echelons of the PKK and retaliatory assassinations like the one that appears to have taken place in Erbil could further escalate violence.

Besides the higher-ranking PKK militant fatalities, Crisis Group data on PKK militants killed in Turkey and northern Iraq between July 2018 and July 2019 (a total of 361) shows that around 8.5 per cent (31) were from western Iran, around twice the number in the same period of the previous year. The majority were born in Mariwan, Serdesht, Urmia or Khoy (see map above). This data suggests that the PKK is compensating for the manpower shortage in its insurgency against Turkey by bringing in more cadres from Iran. It also means that the pool of recruits the PKK can draw on in its insurgency against Turkey goes beyond Turkey’s borders. In fact, as of 4 October 2019, 9 per cent of all PKK militants killed since July 2015 were from either western Iran (4.7 per cent), northern Syria (3 per cent) or northern Iraq (1.3 per cent).

The Conflict and Votes in Turkey’s South East

The fatalities data, together with data from recent Turkish elections, also reveals a link between voting patterns and levels of violence.

As demonstrated by the 31 March local elections and the 23 June rerun in Istanbul, Kurdish support for the ruling AK Party is dropping, especially among city dwellers in western Turkey. In fact, according to a nationwide poll conducted in June by the Center for American Progress and Metropoll Strategic and Social Research Center, only around 24 per cent of self-identified Kurds said they supported the AK Party, while this figure stood at over 45 per cent before 2015.

The trend in conflict-ridden Kurdish-majority south-eastern districts paints a nuanced picture. Data from three general elections and two local elections since 2014 suggests that the more intense the conflict was in a given district, the more support the AK Party and MHP (or their combined alliance) received in that district. In both general and local polls, the MHP gained most in south-eastern districts with fatalities. In districts with fatalities, the AK Party itself maintained its percentage of votes in general polls and was able to increase its share of votes in local polls. In contrast, its vote share diminished in places where no clashes had occurred in both general and local elections.

The experience of the pro-Kurdish HDP, thousands of whose members are in prison for alleged links to the PKK, was for the most part the opposite. In general elections, high fatality rates coincided with weakened electoral support, while in areas outside the southeast that did not experience violence, the party largely maintained its share of votes. In local elections in the conflict-affected southeast it maintained support in urban centres but significantly lost out in rural areas.

Analysis of general election results found that the MHP increased its vote share (2.66 percentage points per district on average) in conflict-ridden districts but lost votes in socially, demographically and economically comparable districts with no conflict. The AK

Party lost a small percentage of vote share in conflict-affected districts but a larger one in comparable districts without conflict. In contrast, the pro-Kurdish HDP lost support to the tune of 2.78 percentage points per conflict-affected district but tended to retain it in other comparable districts. The graphs below depict the change in vote shares for the AK Party, MHP and the HDP across three general elections.

Analysis of local election results shows that across Turkey’s districts with no fatalities, the combined AK Party-MHP vote share dropped by 9.44 percentage points in the 2019 local elections as compared to 2014. But in the same period the alliance increased its vote share by 0.63 percentage points in predominantly Kurdish-speaking districts where deaths occurred (see Graph 4). No firm conclusion could be made regarding changes in the HDP vote in the 2019 local elections because, particularly in western metropolises where it has a large support base, the party chose not to run, so as to boost the votes of other opposition candidates. But a comparison of net vote share changes in south-eastern districts between 2014 and 2019 local polls shows that the HDP lost more votes in rural south-eastern districts (mostly to the benefit of the AK Party) while largely retaining its vote share in urban areas.

Further analysis of 2014 and 2019 local elections suggests a picture similar to national polls: the presence of conflict in a district correlates with an increase in the AK Party and MHP’s combined vote share by an average of 5.35 percentage points. The AK Party’s stand-alone vote share between those two local elections increased along with the conflict’s intensity in a given district. The presence of conflict correlated strongly with an increase in the MHP’s stand-alone vote share (an average increase of 4.73 percentage points), and a decrease in the HDP’s vote share (-1.52 percentage points). While outmigration of HDP-supporting Kurds might partly explain the latter drop, our analysis found that controlling for that factor demonstrated that it alone could not account for the decrease.

The MHP’s vote share in high-fatality districts could have been boosted by the high numbers of state appointees and security personnel deployed to those areas (usually together with their families), as these people are traditionally aligned with nationalist parties. Controlling for this factor, however, revealed that the positive effect of conflict on the MHP vote is so strong that the deployment of state appointees alone cannot account for the increase. Based on our analysis, it was not possible to draw firm conclusions about which voters switched to the MHP or to the AK Party as the conflict raged.

Political parties are aware of these dynamics, and each interprets the results in its own fashion. In public statements, AK Party and MHP representatives say their improved performance in these districts proves the success of their policies. The HDP attributes its loss to these same state policies, which involve large-scale intimidation of HDP supporters.

To understand how fatalities may influence voting behaviour, one must also look at those who do not vote. Crisis Group’s analysis suggests that across three general elections turnout was 1.4 percentage points lower in districts with fatalities than in districts with no fatalities. Lower turnout in conflict-affected districts in national polls could hint at less willingness on the part of Kurdish movement sympathisers to

participate in formal politics. Indeed, Crisis Group’s field research in 2017 and 2018 suggested that, among some segments of the population, an uptick in conflict-related grievances, along with their sense they lacked representation, led to alienation from formal political channels. The appointment of state trustees replacing elected mayors in three Kurdish-majority metropolitan municipalities (Diyarbakır, Van, and Mardin) on 19 August 2019 may have added to such tendencies.

Together, these findings suggest that even though the AK Party is losing support among mostly conservative Kurds living in metropolitan areas nationwide, in the past four years there has been virtually no electoral slippage for the ruling party and its alliance partner in violence-ridden Kurdish-majority south-eastern districts: indeed, their vote shares may even have risen. On the other hand, the pro-Kurdish HDP’s support has dropped off in rural south-eastern localities that are suffering conflict.

None of this means that Ankara’s hardline tactics are working. The government has read its battlefield advantage against the PKK and the south-eastern electoral shifts as vindication of its hardline policies. But while numbers of those killed in fighting can show basic conflict dynamics, they are far from the whole story, particularly when the PKK can draw on militants from further afield. Importantly, the figures reveal nothing about the depth of the grievances among many of Turkey’s Kurds that keep the conflict alive.

The nationalist rallying effect of the conflict that benefited the ruling party will likely not hold indefinitely. At a time when Turkey is grappling with a myriad of security and economic challenges and its relations with the West are in decline, it would be wise for the political leadership in Ankara not to box itself in to the nationalist corner but to keep policy options open, including a potential shift away from its hardline course on the Kurdish front.

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