

FPC Briefing: The Battle for Şemdinli – An Analysis of Turkey’s Latest Violence

Alex Jackson¹

Since late July southeastern Turkey has seen an explosion of violence, as security forces and Kurdish militants engage in the fiercest combat the region has seen in years. The fighting with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has refocused political attention on the ‘Kurdish question’ and has highlighted deep divisions between Turkey’s main parties on one of the country’s most complex issues.

The spike in violence takes place in an increasingly tangled regional context. As the civil war in Syria intensifies, Syria’s Kurds have begun claiming de facto control over the northeast; meanwhile northern Iraq’s Kurdish government has sought to play a delicate balancing act, deepening its relationship with Syrian Kurdish groups even whilst maintaining close ties with Turkey as a backer in its political battle with Baghdad. Further east, worsening Iranian-Turkish relations has led to accusations that Tehran is backing the PKK.

This turbulent environment means that the struggle between the PKK and the Turkish state is, more than ever, about more than Turkey itself. The latest violence is closely affected by the regional situation, although it remains driven by Turkey’s own complex political landscape and the lack of progress on the Kurdish issue. Closer analysis of the violence reveals the continuities and the change seen in the battle for Şemdinli.

28 Years of Struggle

Although the PKK was founded in 1978, its violent campaign for an independent Kurdish state is dated to 15 August 1984. On that day guerrillas loyal to the PKK’s Syria-based head Abdullah Öcalan attacked police posts in southeastern Turkey, sparking a cycle of violence. Thousands died as the conflict raged during the 1990s². In Turkey’s cities thousands of Kurds took to the streets to demonstrate, often leading to bloodshed; abroad, PKK members staged terrorist attacks to raise the international profile of their cause.

Öcalan fled Syria in 1998, after Turkey threatened to invade if President Hafez Al-Assad did not surrender him. After the PKK chief was seized by Turkish agents in Kenya in 1999, violence declined somewhat. In 2002 Turkish politics underwent a sea change with the accession of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Driven by the AKP’s pursuit of EU membership and its struggle against the military establishment, Turkey began to shift towards a solution to the Kurdish issue based on civil democratic methods rather than violence.

A space for cultural autonomy has gradually opened up; efforts have been made to improve the south-east’s socio-economic prospects; and the main pro-Kurdish party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), has not been shut down like its predecessors. All of this painstakingly slow progress is inseparable from Turkey’s difficult path towards greater democracy and the curbing of the army.

This new approach culminated in a ‘Democratic Opening’ towards the Kurds in 2009, a cautious step towards dialogue which collapsed amid provocations by hardliners and recriminations on both sides. The conflict has continued.

Although Öcalan remains supreme in the PKK and has the final word, some senior PKK leaders seem to reject the more accommodative tone which he has taken since his capture; meanwhile elements of the Turkish state, from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the military and judiciary,

¹ Alex Jackson is a political analyst working in London. His work covers politics, security and energy issues in Eurasia and the wider Caspian

² Around 40,000 are estimated to have died in the conflict since 1984.



continue to fall back on uncompromising approaches, often accusing anyone who suggests negotiations of being a terrorist sympathiser. This is despite the fact that the AKP, and even the military, have acknowledged that a more inclusive solution is needed. Meanwhile sweeping arrests against those – including lawyers, intellectuals and journalists – suspected of supporting the PKK, often on flimsy evidence, has caused serious concerns among human-rights advocates.

The Regional Context

As a trans-national people the Kurdish issue has never been within Turkey's borders alone. Ankara's relations with Iran have been deeply complex on the subject; during the 1980s and 1990s both sides backed Kurdish militants on the others' territory as a proxy force; as their relationship thawed after 2002, they have cooperated against the PKK and its Iranian wing (although allegations of Iranian support persist).

With the full establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq after 2003, Turkey was faced with a legally recognised autonomous Kurdish statelet on its southern border. The KRG's rulers had a complex history with the PKK, viewing them as an asset against interference by Baghdad but also as a liability. Turkey sought to get the KRG on its side, and has built a remarkable economic and political relationship with the Kurdish government.

Energy exports are tying the two sides closer together than ever, and the KRG is increasingly looking to Ankara as a patron in its festering political and economic disputes over autonomy with Baghdad. This close relationship has enabled Turkey to pressure the KRG into trying to talk the PKK into disarming and leaving its mountain bases, to little avail.

Syria allowed the PKK safe havens for years as leverage against Turkey, but relations with Ankara thawed in the first decade of the millennium. The PKK's Syrian cousin, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) had been kept down by Bashar al-Assad. But with the regime in Damascus now losing its grip over the country's periphery, and Turkey accusing Syria of renewed support for the PKK³, this has changed. Syrian Kurds have begun exercising control in towns near the Turkish border, raising the all-too real prospect of an autonomous Kurdish region running across northeastern Syria and northern Iraq.

The Summer Fighting

It is in this context that, on 23 July, the Turkish government announced that a major operation was underway in Hakkari province's Şemdinli district, after PKK militants began setting up checkpoints and distributing propaganda.

The PKK deployment and the military response did not take place in a vacuum. The spring and summer has seen a steady flow of violence – ambushes, landmines, and kidnappings – in common with previous years. Analysis of PKK operations, as in other insurgencies in mountainous regions, indicates that the level of militant-initiated activity rises during the summer when mountain passes and escape routes become clear of snow⁴. Summer 2011, for instance, saw a significant rise in PKK activity⁵. In mid-July Turkey carried out a large-scale police and military operation against PKK drug operations including production and storage facilities, as well as individuals involved in the trade.

However the PKK's move into Şemdinli marked a qualitative change in the summer's activities. The group's acting leader, Murat Karayılan, said in an interview after the start of operations that the PKK

³ 'Turkey: Assad supplying arms to Turkish Kurd militants' *Reuters* 9/8/12 <http://goo.gl/tPLJa>

⁴ Karaca, A (2010) *Disrupting Terrorist Networks: An Analysis Of The PKK Terrorist Organization* p100. Naval Postgraduate School. <http://goo.gl/lni1Q>

⁵ International Crisis Group (2011) *Ending The PKK Insurgency* p3. Europe Report No.213. <http://goo.gl/uvGDM>



was changing tactics. The Şemdinli operation, he told Kurdish media, was about holding territory, not about hit-and-run operations. He said that the idea of borders was “history”⁶.

This plan of holding territory and defending Kurdish villages can be seen as the violent application of the PKK’s idea of ‘democratic autonomy’. This was announced in July 2011 by the KCK, which functions as both the PKK’s civic arm and the umbrella organisation for Kurdish nationalist groups across Turkey and the region. ‘Democratic autonomy’ is an ambiguous term. In most readings it is a step short of independence, presupposing Kurdish civic and political control over Kurdish areas: in short, a step towards a federal system⁷. The concept is complemented by the PKK’s emphasis on a stance of ‘active defence’, also declared in 2011, under which PKK units would defend themselves and their communities if attacked but would not actively attack the Turkish army.

Even if the idea of ‘active defence’ has been more honoured in the breach than the observance recently, the concepts provide an operating framework for the Kurdish national movement which holds open the door for negotiating with the Turkish state, whilst promoting the idea of the KCK as a kind of ‘authority in waiting’ and the PKK as its civic defence force. The echoes with the situation in Kurdish Syria, in which local self-appointed councils govern towns in cooperation with PYD militias, are unmistakable.

Karayilan’s statements, then, suggest that the PKK’s latest offensive was designed to carve out areas of nominal Kurdish control which could be used as a basis for an autonomous territorial unit and as leverage in future negotiations with the Turkish state (as well as a demonstration of the PKK’s sheer determination to fight against the military).

Specifically, Turkish officials have indicated that the PKK has been attempting to seize Şemdinli town itself, forcing the military to engage in bloody street-to-street fighting and provoking the local Kurds into fighting against the state. However as the battle for Şemdinli waned at the end of August, fighting has flared in other parts of Hakkari and the wider region.

The Turkish Military Response

The militants may have underestimated the willingness of the Turkish military to respond with overwhelming force. The exact number of troops and military assets deployed to the southeast is unclear but at least 2,000 troops⁸, backed up by substantial numbers of gendarmes, police, and paramilitary village guards (who operate as a static defence force in their villages), have been deployed around Şemdinli itself. The number for the surrounding region is probably around 10,000, supported by an extensive range of military hardware.

The deployment takes place within the context of a much wider shift of Turkish forces to the border with Syria amid the rising tensions there. Reports indicate that all 100,000 troops of the 2nd Army, which focuses on the southern borders and Anatolia, have been put on standby⁹; although most of this is precautionary and is stretched across the Syrian border, allocation of additional assets to the sudden fighting with the PKK is likely to have taken place.

The Turkish military has used all of the assets at its disposal in the military campaign. Public reports indicate that attack helicopters, artillery, and tanks have been used in support of ground forces. Special forces were deployed via helicopter to seal PKK escape routes among the mountainous paths, and fighter jets have been used to bomb PKK hideouts in northern Iraq.

⁶ ‘Murat Karayilan: Our Guerrillas Want to Expand Their Territory’ *Rudaw* 9/8/12. <http://goo.gl/I9liw>

⁷ International Crisis Group (2011) *Ending The PKK Insurgency* p22. <http://goo.gl/pWH6z>

⁸ ‘Kurd clashes with Turkish army escalate’ *Financial Times* 5/8/12. <http://goo.gl/8iiAD>

⁹ ‘As Syrian Tensions Grow, Turks Put 100,000 Troops on Standby’ *Haberturk* 30/7/12 <http://goo.gl/78FFE>



This campaign has also seen a significant deployment of Turkey's unmanned drones, one of the centrepieces of the military's modernisation programme. Reports from Şemdinli note that Turkish tactics have often been to use drones to spot insurgents (or suspected insurgent) and then pound them with long-distance artillery¹⁰.

Drones, and the intelligence capabilities required to use them, came under heavy political attack in December after they misidentified a group of smugglers as PKK militants, leading to an airstrike in which 34 – many of them teenagers – died. Opposition parties and activists slammed the government, military, and National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) for the attack.

Given this climate, the military's latest deployment of drones is likely to attract attention once the dust settles. Their inability to provide actionable intelligence on PKK raids against isolated bases has already prompted criticism from the political opposition¹¹. Civil society groups are also likely to ask whether using drones to coordinate artillery and airstrikes has led to civilian deaths or property damage.

Indeed even apart from the issue of drones, military tactics are in the spotlight. The failure to spot hundreds of PKK fighters as they prepared for coordinated attacks against military outposts has caused anger among some sections of the media and public. This is particularly the case since many static positions are defended by poorly-trained conscripts rather than professional soldiers. Although the General Staff has insisted that professional soldiers conduct military operations whilst conscripts are used for "non-operational missions", there are no clear front lines in this kind of warfare¹². Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç acknowledged the difficulties facing the military in June when he conceded that eight soldiers killed in an attack on their outpost in Hakkari were outnumbered and outgunned¹³.

In response to these perceived shortcomings and the stubbornness of the PKK, the military announced in early September that experienced counter-terror commanders would be sent to the southeast, particularly Şırnak and Hakkari provinces. It also said that more special forces would be deployed and that air and ground operations would be ramped up¹⁴.

PKK Tactics and Strategy

The summer's fighting marks a shift in the PKK's tactics which mirrors the shift in its strategic goals for the operation: the tactics have been calibrated to fulfil the strategy.

Ever since the end of large-scale warfare around the turn of the millennium, the PKK has made a move away from attempting to seize and hold territory, relying instead on a combination of guerrilla attacks in the southeast (ambushes, landmines, sabotage, kidnappings) and terrorist attacks conducted 'out of area', usually consisting of car bombs or suicide bombings.

The guerrilla warfare was intended to bleed the Turkish military and to inspire local Kurds into joining the PKK; the terrorism functioned as 'propaganda of the deed' and as a way to goad the Turkish establishment into an overreaction in the southeast (which aids PKK recruitment). Despite the switch to 'stand and fight' rather than 'hit and run' tactics, the group has not abandoned terrorist attacks as a plank of its operational strategy.

¹⁰ 'Kurdish Offensive in Turkey has indirect Syrian backing' *McClatchy* 16/8/12. <http://goo.gl/m86jt>

¹¹ "Where were UAVs during today's attack?" Turkish opposition asks' *Hurriyet* 19/6/12. <http://goo.gl/e3zAw>

¹² 'Bitter Cost of Fighting Between PKK, Military' *Hurriyet Daily News* 11/9/2012. <http://goo.gl/1wyj>

¹³ 'Turkish soldiers outnumbered, outgunned: Deputy prime minister' *Hurriyet Daily News* 19/6/12 <http://goo.gl/gHcVe>

¹⁴ Turkish government toughens measures for terrorism fight *Hurriyet Daily News* 9/9/12. <http://goo.gl/nkerf>



The bombing of a military bus in Izmir on 9 August and a car bombing in Gaziantep on 20 August were attributed to the PKK, or rather to the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK)¹⁵. Comparatively little is known about the TAK and its relationship with the PKK: some reports suggest it is a radical splinter group of the PKK¹⁶, whilst others claim that it is merely a front organisation which gives plausible deniability for the PKK when conducting terrorist outrages.

The PKK has occasionally condemned TAK violence, suggesting that coordination is vague, and it seems likely that the group is largely autonomous. However most of its attacks seem to be in line with PKK objectives and are broadly coordinated with PKK spikes in violence. The out-of-area attacks in Gaziantep and Izmir should therefore be seen within the context of both the Şemdinli fighting and as part of a continuum of urban terrorist attacks coordinated with the PKK.

In the southeast, the PKK has also been operating rather differently than previously. Although the core tactics of the insurgents – landmines, ambushes of military patrols, mortar attacks on gendarmerie posts – remain, and their weaponry remains limited¹⁷ they have been harnessed to a determination to remain in certain geographic zones, rather than immediately melting away into the mountains or over the borders.

As well as Karayılan's statement, the Turkish military and pro-PKK politicians have also stated that the militant's aim was to hold territory, focused on the urban centre of Şemdinli but also encompassing the surrounding area. According to one report by PKK deserters, they were told during training that there would be no retreat and that the mission would continue until accomplished¹⁸.

Indeed the sheer volume and scale of fighting within a fairly concentrated geographical area, over the course of around two months, shows that the PKK and the military are engaged in high-intensity warfare with significant numbers of combatants on both sides. PKK websites claim that "the area of Şemdinli is an area of war where thousands of enemy soldiers and hundreds of Guerrilla Forces" are engaged in fierce fighting¹⁹; casualty figures for both sides also suggest major battles.

Incident Analysis

Based on publicly available reports between 30 June and 16 September, a [database](#) has been compiled which tracks insurgency-related incidents in Turkey. The location (province and district), casualties on both sides, and type of incident have been recorded. Narrative notes have indicated details of each incident, such as whether an attack was a response to a previous incident.

The [database](#) does not claim to be comprehensive: the information used is from public sources and is therefore somewhat incomplete. There is a distinct difference between the figures in the database and figures given in occasional government statements. Full information on the database, including the methodological challenges faced, is found in the Appendix to this report.

¹⁵ Although the TAK claimed the Izmir bomb, the Gaziantep bomb was unclaimed and the Istanbul bombing attributed to a leftist militant group. However Turkish security analysts tend to believe that the latter two attacks were also the work of Kurdish rebels.

¹⁶ According to a 2008 analysis by the Jamestown Foundation, TAK sought to attract recruits who believed that the PKK was 'too soft'. 'U.S. Applies Terrorist Designation to Kurdistan Freedom Falcons' *Jamestown Terrorism Focus* 22/1/2008. <http://goo.gl/9QweC>

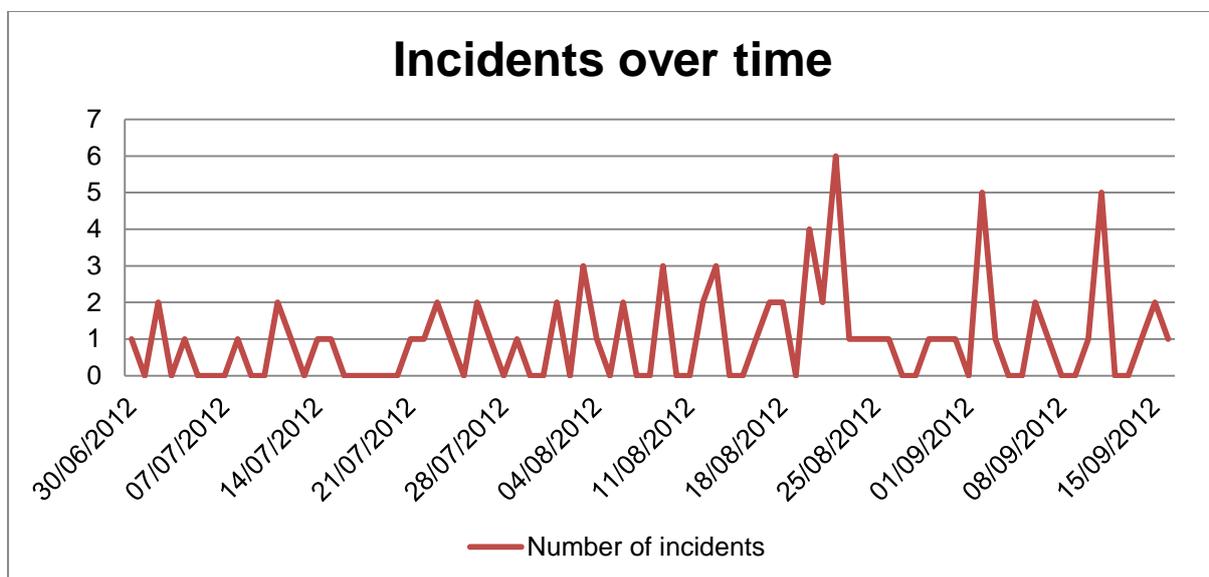
¹⁷ Assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns, mortars, landmines, and improvised explosive devices are all in the PKK arsenal. Reports that portable surface-to-air missiles have been supplied to the PKK by Damascus have not been verified and the group has not yet shot down any Turkish air assets, despite their extensive use in mountainous surroundings

¹⁸ 'Turkey Launches Biggest Military Operation in Years against PKK' *Al-Monitor* 1/8/12. <http://goo.gl/8pfRG>

¹⁹ 'Information In Regard to Guerrilla Military Manoeuvres of Semdinli' *HPG* 27/7/12. <http://goo.gl/yo66G>

Overall, 64 security personnel (police, soldiers and paramilitary village guards) have died in the fighting, with 153 wounded; 223 PKK guerrillas are reported to have died. The number of dead insurgents is almost certainly an under-estimate: on 17 September Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claimed that 500 insurgents had been killed within a month although this does not correspond to publicly available reports²⁰.

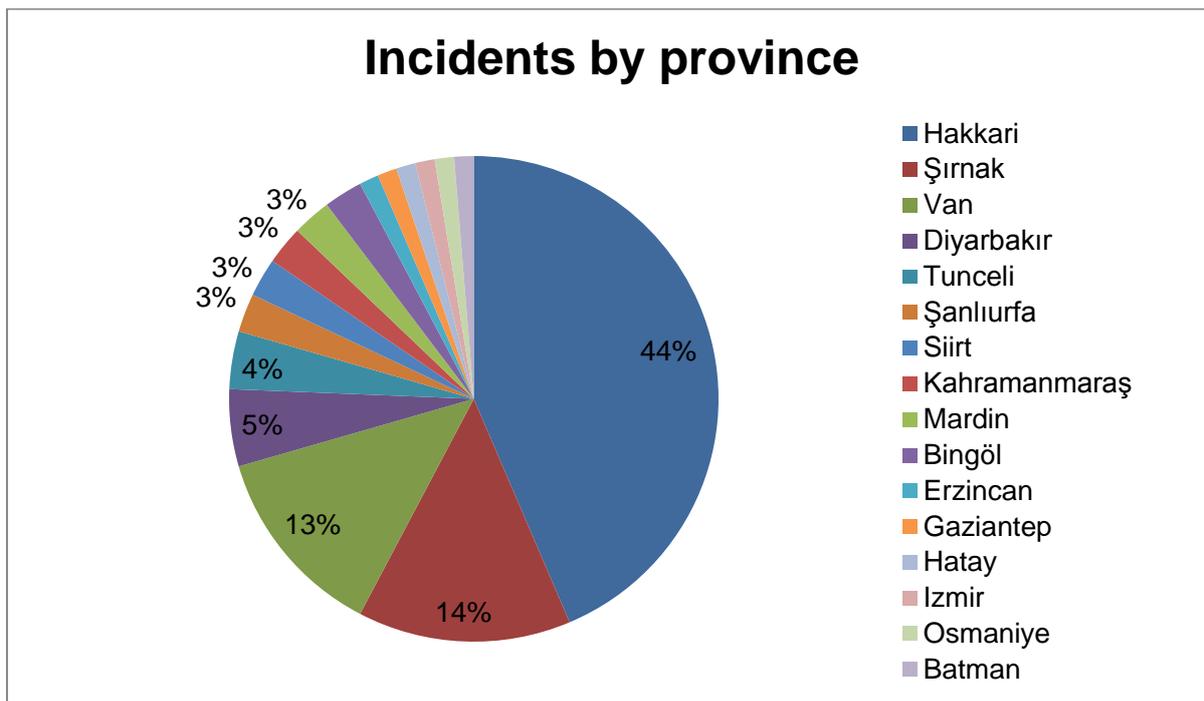
78 incidents took place over the recording period. Although 23 July is marked as the beginning of the fighting, the data shows no noticeable spike immediately after that. PKK activity instead continued at roughly the same pace as it had since late June, until an intensification in early August. This embeds the 'battle for Şemdinli' within a broader context of insurgent activity within the southeast over the summer²¹. It also provides quantifiable evidence that the military's initial decision to 'end' operations on 11 August was premature and meaningless: the number of incidents actually increased after this point.



Fifty-eight percent of attacks took place in just two provinces: Hakkari and Şırnak. This has implications for the supposed relationship between the PYD's control of northeastern Syria and the PKK's campaign. If the PKK was receiving direct assistance (arms, money and fighters) from its Syrian cousin, one could conceivably expect more incidents in the Turkish provinces adjacent to the area of PYD control as the militants attempted to establish a transport corridor to the Şemdinli battlefield. The small number of attacks in Mardin and other provinces on the Syrian border suggests this is not the case.

²⁰ This may indicate that the government is exaggerating its claims, or – more likely – that the full extent of the fighting has not been made public.

²¹ A previous analysis of PKK recruits found that 24% of deaths occurred in August and September: in that regard this year has been exceptional, since the figure for those two months is almost certainly far higher than 24%. Özcan, N and Gürkaynak, H (2012) *Who Are These Armed People On The Mountain?* p45 <http://goo.gl/F0fem>



Therefore it seems that if the PKK is indeed receiving material support from Syrian Kurds, it is moving through northern Iraq rather than straight across the Syrian border into Turkey. This makes tactical sense: the area around the Turkish-Syrian border is flat and easily defended, and crossing through the safe zone of northern Iraq and then through the formidable mountains is a wiser (if longer) choice. The PKK has used this route for decades.

Although the majority of attacks took place in Hakkari and Şırnak on the Iraqi border, there are also clusters of attacks which took place outside that border region. In particular Van, on the Iranian border, saw 13% of incidents during the reporting period, which suggests that supply lines from the Iranian side of the border are also significant. Many of the attacks which took place before the start of the operation on 23 July took place in Van. Scattered incidents, many of them PKK ambushes, also took place in provinces further away from the borders, such as Bingöl, Tunceli, and Siirt.

The fact that the PKK is able to strike in these provinces suggests that the group possesses support and logistical networks stretching away from the border, beyond the safe havens in Iraq and Iran. However as found in a previous analysis of PKK attacks, the small and sporadic nature of violence in these provinces indicates that these networks are weak, and that the PKK lacks support among local communities further from the border²².

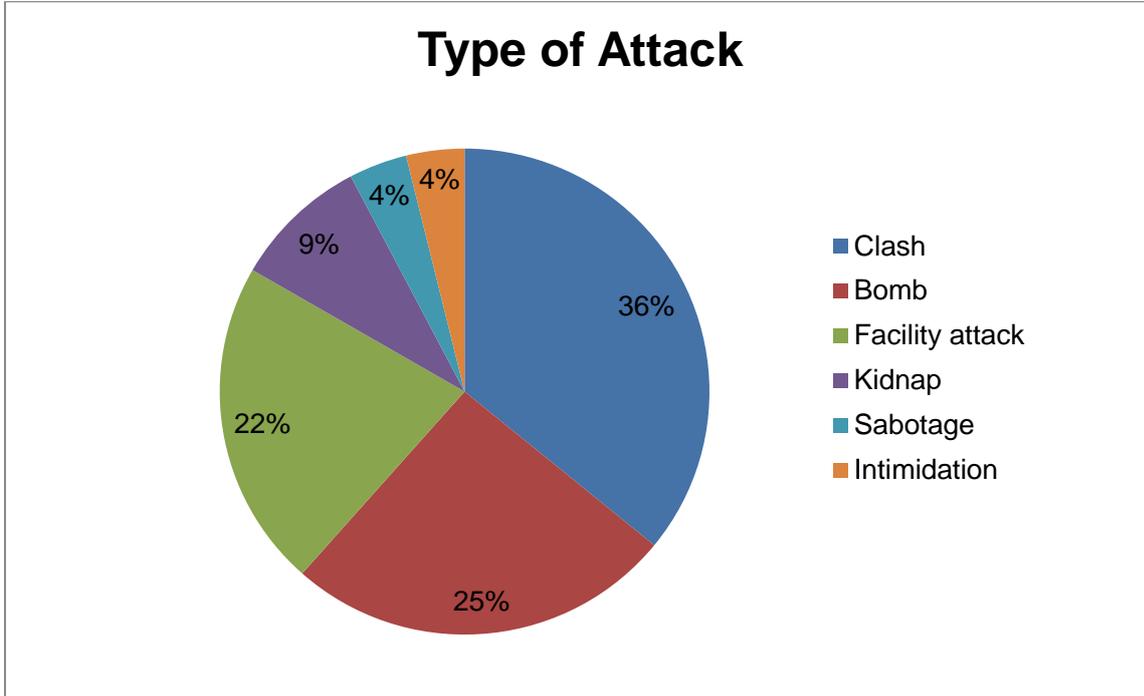
In total, almost a third of the incidents were clashes, in which PKK and security forces engage each other in the open (this includes attacks initiated by both sides), and nearly a quarter were facility attacks. Repeatedly, the PKK carried out attacks on Turkish military facilities: outposts, border bases, and barracks, often to devastating effect. On 2 September the rebels launched a coordinated series of raids on military posts in Şırnak's Beytüşşebap district, killing 10 soldiers. Video footage of one of these attacks illustrates the intensity of the fighting²³.

Of note is the fact that 25% of the incidents involved bomb attacks: usually remotely-triggered landmines or improvised explosive devices. The number of casualties inflicted by these has been relatively low, suggesting that the PKK lacks the expertise to employ the powerful roadside bombs

²² Karaca, A (2010) p99.

²³ 'Deadly clashes in SE Turkey caught on camera' *Hurriyet Daily News* 3/9/12. <http://goo.gl/uhfuB>

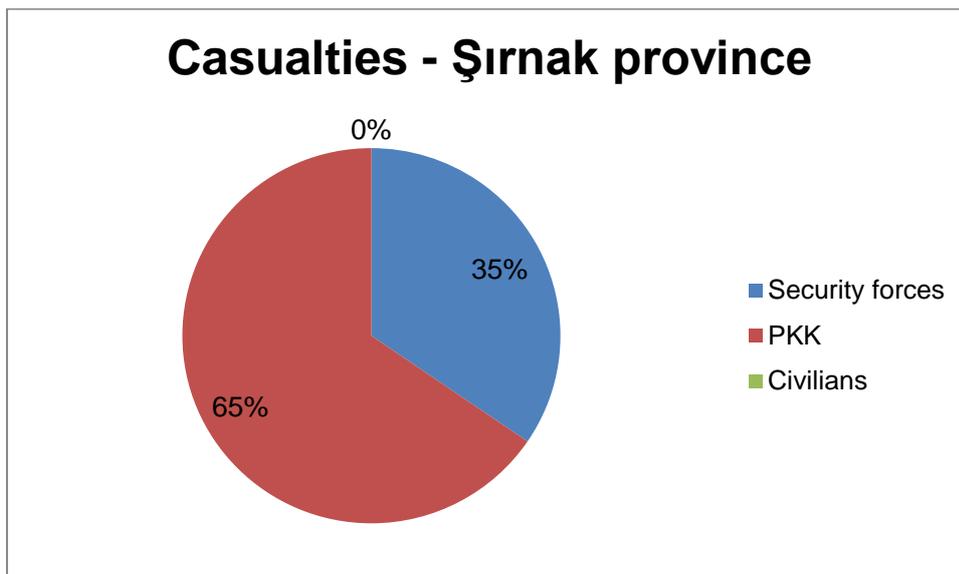
that were so successful against U.S. forces in Iraq. But the substantial number of bombings suggests that the PKK is aware of their utility and is likely to focus more attention on them as time goes on.



The number of kidnappings is relatively small but significant. As well as high-profile abductees (state officials and MPs), soldiers and construction workers have been kidnapped in an attempt to sow fear and undermine the state. Facility attacks involve PKK strikes on military and security facilities – gendarmerie posts, barracks, border checkpoints, and military outposts. Whereas clashes are sometimes initiated by the insurgents and sometimes by the security forces (often this is unclear), facility attacks and bombings are exclusively initiated by the PKK.

The fact that almost half of reported incidents have been offensive actions against the military shows that the PKK is not on the back foot, as some optimists have claimed. The rebels have demonstrated the resilience to withstand attacks and still go on the offensive, using their deep knowledge of the mountainous terrain and ability to blend into the local population.

The result is a fairly even distribution of casualties - allowing, again, for the approximate figures. In both Hakkari and Şırnak, which have seen the heaviest clashes, casualty figures were split around 35%-65% for the security forces and rebels respectively. Given the Turkish army's enormous numerical, logistical, and tactical advantages, this casualty ratio is disconcerting.



Although the incident analysis does not reveal any unexpected findings, it provides a granulated understanding of the intensity of the fighting, the tactical capabilities and resilience of the PKK, and the severity of the casualties inflicted.

Strategy

As noted above and as identified in the incident analysis, the recent fighting has marked a change in approach by the PKK: a sustained attempt to seize and hold territory around Şemdinli through force of arms, backed up by propagandising among the local population, in the face of a massive Turkish military response. The question is why the PKK has made this summer's offensive so much larger and bloodier. There are three plausible reasons, none of which are mutually exclusive.

Regional Inspiration

The first possibility, espoused by many analysts and journalists, is that the PKK has been 'inspired' by the success of their brethren in Syria and, more generally, by the ability of people across the Middle East to rise up against oppressive governments. The early phase of the Arab Spring, in which peaceful change seemed possible, is now over. The war in Syria is demonstrating that armed insurrection is necessary when the state refuses to give ground.

In this view the PYD's sudden control of large swathes of northeastern Syria has allowed it to create the second element of a confederation of 'greater Kurdistan', after the remarkable success of the KRG in northern Iraq. KRG leader Massoud Barzani is presumed to play a critical role: he has admitted to training Syrian Kurds, to Turkey's shock, and some suspect him of ambitions to become the leader of greater Kurdistan²⁴.

The PKK is seeking to create the Turkish element of this confederation, after which only Iranian Kurdistan would remain to be 'liberated'. As one Turkish commentator observed, "How can [Turkish Kurds] be satisfied with chewing gum if they are banqueting next door?"²⁵

For PKK ideologues the Syrian case also provides a test case for 'democratic autonomy'²⁶; local political councils, defended by Kurdish militias, governing urban and rural areas but still within the

²⁴ 'Assad presents Turkey with another dilemma' *Financial Times* 12/8/12.

²⁵ 'Analysts link PKK upsurge to Syrian war' *Financial Times* 22/8/12. <http://goo.gl/3zqD6>

²⁶ Unlike the KRG, which – as a result of its particular political and military history – has existed instead as an essentially independent mini-state.



framework of a unitary state (admittedly on paper, as Syria's existence as a unitary state looks more fragile by the day).

This inspiration is not just theoretical: the power vacuum in the northeast of Syria may have allowed the PKK to solicit material support. This could take the form of training camps to recruit Syrian Kurds for the battle in Turkey, financial aid from local communities, and weaponry from abandoned Syrian army garrisons.

Morally and materially inspired by events to the south, this theory suggests, the PKK is intensifying its campaign in an attempt to replicate the PYD's achievements in Syria and carve out its own autonomous zone free of Turkish state (civil and military) control. This is in spite of the serious differences between Turkey's relative stability and Syria's descent into chaos.

Proxy War

Another theory is that the PKK is not simply inspired by the situation in Syria but is directly benefiting from it as part of a proxy war between Damascus and Ankara. Increased material support is not the result of a power vacuum in the northeast but of a direct policy by Bashar al-Assad to back the PKK in reprisal for Turkey's support of Syrian rebels.

Syria has a long history of supporting the PKK, and hosted the organisation's training camps and political leadership for years²⁷. Syrian backing formally ended in 1998 but the connection was apparently only dormant, not severed. As Turkey began to support the Syrian opposition in mid-2011, first through rhetorical support to protestors and then through safe havens for the Free Syrian Army, relations between Ankara and Damascus deteriorated sharply. Erdoğan has said that Assad is a "dictator" who is "feeding on blood" and leading a "terrorist state". Assad has responded in kind, accusing Turkey of supporting terrorism and being "two-faced".

With Turkish support for Syrian rebels now apparently expanding to include coordination, intelligence, and training, it would hardly be surprising if Damascus retaliated in kind. Turkey has repeatedly accused the Syrian government of backing the PKK in recent months, both publicly and in private intelligence briefings²⁸. In particular Damascus is alleged to have supplied dozens of anti-aircraft missiles and rocket-propelled grenades to the PKK²⁹.

As well as acting as punitive retaliation for Turkey's support for Syrian rebels, some analysts suggest that increased backing for the PKK is intended to bog down the Turkish military and reduce the odds of a Turkish intervention in northern Syria. This seems unlikely given the size of Turkey's armed forces; indeed, by highlighting the links between the PKK and Kurdish rebels in northern Syria it may actually increase the odds of a Turkish incursion.

A more important objection is that it removes the PKK's agency, making it a tool of Damascus able to be activated at will and targeted as Syria sees fit. But there is little reason to doubt that the PKK is willing to dance to Damascus's tune if it coincides with its own interests. Given that the summer is the PKK's traditional fighting season, and given other regional developments, the rebels are probably willing to take advantage of Syria's offer to conduct large-scale operations.

²⁷ Marcus, A (2007) *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* p58-61. NYUP: New York.

²⁸ 'Syria supporting PKK, says intelligence report' *Hurriyet Daily News* 23/3/12. <http://goo.gl/ZLpJS>

²⁹ RPGs are already in the PKK's arsenal but anti-aircraft systems would be a much more serious threat. So far the PKK has not shot down any Turkish helicopters or aircraft in the latest fighting.



The Domestic Context

The third reason for the fighting, and one which is neglected in some analyses of the issue, is the domestic angle. The PKK did not just emerge from the Arab Spring and it is not just a tool of Syria. The group's summer campaign should be placed within a much broader context of activity, both political and military.

The overall strategy of the PKK, or more properly the umbrella KCK, has been shifting for some time, and not in a single, linear direction. The government's 'Democratic Opening' of 2009 brought renewed hopes for peace but soon collapsed as different agencies on both sides – predominantly the judiciary on the side of the state and hardline rejectionists on the Kurdish side – refused to abandon their campaign against the other. Mass arrests of Kurdish activists and provocations by militant Kurds undid the tentative progress that had been made. Both sides have oscillated between openness to dialogue and tough or provocative moves.

As the political process has faltered, violence has generally increased³⁰. The 2010-2012 government clampdown on the KCK, the PKK's political wing, has arguably not destroyed the organisation's ability to conduct financing, propaganda or political activities; instead it has divided the moment³¹ and thereby given greater prominence to the military wing³². With the political, urban parts of the wider organisation in disarray as a result of the government crackdown, launching military operations helps to re-establish organisational cohesion and ideological unity³³. More specifically hardline factions within the PKK can use the opportunity to sideline more moderate and conciliatory elements.

The PKK military command surely knows that launching an enormous 'stand and fight' campaign would never achieve its objective, or secure 'democratic confederalism'; turning the southeast into a warzone serves only to derail chances for a negotiated settlement. Alternatively some members of the PKK command may be genuinely convinced that the current situation and the crackdown on Kurdish political actors has caused such anger among the Kurdish population that a wide-scale uprising is possible. In either case, it illustrates that the strategy behind this campaign has a deep interrelationship with the political process of the 'Kurdish Question' in Turkey – the regional situation has intensified the strategic shift but has not been the sole cause³⁴.

Gauging Success

In a direct military sense, the PKK's operation has been unsuccessful: it was always inconceivable that Turkey would allow the group to raise its flag over Şemdinli. Reports by BDP politicians that the militants controlled nearly 400km² of southeastern Turkey were roundly dismissed by mainstream politicians and analysts³⁵. However at a tactical level there may be a kernel of truth to this, insofar as the insurgents have been able to block roads and interfere with normal life for the region's inhabitants.

In any case, like all insurgents the PKK's measure of success is less straightforward than this. Simply by standing and fighting against thousands of troops backed by helicopters, artillery, and tanks for over a month, the rebels have shown that they are not a spent force. They retain significant

³⁰ Bilgin, F, ed. (2012) *Resolving Turkey's Kurdish Crisis* p37. Rethink Institute. <http://goo.gl/qXcdp>

³¹ International Crisis Group (2012) *The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement* p22. <http://goo.gl/JJ7BT>

³² "They should not do anything that may be perceived as dividing PKK. This not only creates a climate of mistrust but also provokes the PKK's actions. And the actions of the PKK lead to a vicious circle of escalating violence." Çandar, C (2012) '*Leaving The Mountain: How May the PKK Lay Down Arms?*' P21.

³³ Çandar, C (2012) p77.

³⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the internal Kurdish dynamics behind the fighting, specifically what it says about the goals of Abdullah Öcalan and his relationship with the PKK executive in Qandil.

³⁵ 'PKK control of Şemdinli-Çukurca claims prove to be terror propaganda' *Today's Zaman* 30/8/12. <http://goo.gl/fAeQP>



discipline, will, numbers and weaponry, and their actions are likely to have inspired (or coerced) more local Kurds into joining their ranks. This will go some way to replenishing the losses incurred during the battle for Şemdinli.

Although the local population is likely to feel some anger towards the PKK for using the region as a launching pad for their uprising and bringing down the wrath of the Turkish military. However pro-PKK sentiment in the area is strong and most anger is likely to be directed against the army for its use of heavy weaponry.

Tactical Implications

Both the Turkish army and the PKK will no doubt be analysing the results of the operation. For the Turkish high command there seem to be two clear lessons – that intelligence-gathering needs to be improved, and that control over the border with Iraq needs to be tightened. The Turkish army seemed to be caught off guard by the sudden wave of PKK attacks; subsequently, it has often been hit by surprise attacks on isolated outposts and ambushes. The practice of stationing poorly-trained conscripts in these outposts has also come under heavy political criticism. With the conflict inflicting more and more casualties on the security forces, as noted in the Incident Analysis, public pressure over the deployment of conscripts is likely to grow.

The PKK is likely to conclude that it can indeed engage the Turkish army directly, but at a very high cost in fighters and materiel. Absent the capabilities to attack Turkish air assets (particularly helicopters) and artillery, high-intensity fighting will continue to exact a heavy toll on PKK forces. In the near-term, further attempts to hold territory are unlikely.

Nevertheless the group has shown evidence of extensive preparations for this battle, able to deploy significant numbers of troops and weaponry across Hakkari and the surrounding area. This underlines the need for the rebels to maintain effective supply lines from their bases in Qandil.

The PKK apparently has no difficulty finding recruits from among young Kurds and is likely to replenish its losses fairly easily. According to the study of PKK recruits by Gürkaynak and Özcan, the majority of new insurgents were drawn from Diyarbakir, Istanbul, and Van: relative to the population of those provinces, Diyarbakir, Hakkari and Mardin produced disproportionately high numbers of recruits³⁶. Whether or not this recruitment trend changes will be extremely relevant for understanding the future dynamics of PKK recruitment.

Strategic Implications

The battle for Şemdinli is likely to accelerate the Turkish government's return a more militarised approach to the Kurdish conflict. Although a political, democratic track will be nominally maintained, the summer's fighting has taken the wind out of its sails. Intensified military operations are to be expected, as well as a harsher line against pro-PKK demonstrations in cities across the southeast and elsewhere. Clampdowns on the KCK and pro-Kurdish activists are also likely to be intensified (plans to strip BDP deputies of their parliamentary immunity is a clear sign of this).

Although there may be a current within the Turkish military and the civilian government that the bloody fighting demonstrates the need to reorient the strategy towards negotiations and less pressure, such voices are likely to be in the minority. As in the Kurdish nationalist movement, such flare-ups tend to drown out the exponents of conciliatory strategies.

³⁶ I.e. Diyarbakir produced 17.90% of the 1362 militants studied, despite having only 3.9% of the population of the provinces selected. Özcan, N and Gürkaynak, H (2012) p24.



Insofar as the summer's fighting has shown the PKK to still be a force to be reckoned with, and unified different elements behind the hawkish factions, the PKK leadership may be relatively satisfied. However the failure to actually secure territory will probably lead to a reorientation of strategy, away from large-scale combat and towards a greater emphasis on urban operations – bombings, demonstrations, commercial shutdowns – as a temporary strategic switch towards emphasising the PKK's resilience and its deep roots among the population.

This does not imply an abandonment of guerrilla warfare. Given the ideological and organisational underpinnings of the movement, this is unlikely. And provided that recruits are still available, the PKK has little need to abandon its approach. In one recent assessment it was estimated that 2000 young people from Diyarbakır alone had joined the PKK since 2009³⁷. So the commitment to armed struggle from the mountains will remain even if the PKK's strategy temporarily shifts elsewhere.

Political Implications

The fighting has already made an impact on Turkey's fractious political scene. The current parliamentary environment is marked by threats, overheated rhetoric, conspiracies, and extensive use of judicial and political instruments against other actors. Civility is a rare commodity: Prime Minister Erdoğan regularly accuses his political enemies – at home and abroad – of consorting with terrorists, cooking up plots against him and other wild crimes. His approach to the latest flare-up of the Kurdish issue has been increasingly hawkish.

The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has also been vocal if less aggressive in its criticism of the government over its handling of both the Syria crisis and the military operations in the southeast; broadly speaking the CHP has counselled a more moderate line on both, whilst criticising the government's conduct of diplomacy and security. The two smaller parties in parliament have also weighed in. The right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) has predictably called for a hard line throughout the crisis whilst the BDP has, equally characteristically, criticised government operations.

There are two inter-related trends which the battle for Hakkari has impacted, and which the aftermath of the fighting will continue to affect in the months ahead. The first is the AKP-led political offensive against the BDP; the second is the political manoeuvring surrounding the new constitution.

The BDP has been under pressure ever since it took the Kurdish mantle from the banned Democratic Society Party at the end of 2009. Although the AKP has occasionally acknowledged that it is the popularly elected face of the Kurdish nationalist movement, its deputies and members have been subjected to repeated legal and rhetorical attacks from the government³⁸. The AKP routinely characterises the BDP as terrorist sympathisers who take orders 'from the mountain', i.e. the PKK. This is probably accurate but does not help advance towards a dialogue.

Following an incident at the end of August when BDP deputies were seen embracing uniformed PKK militants in the southeast, the government redoubled its crackdown. Erdoğan has called for the deputies to be stripped of their immunity, and the pliant judiciary may oblige. But banning the BDP would play into the hands of PKK hardliners by removing a democratic and relatively moderate voice within the nationalist movement. The space for dialogue would shrink and the PKK/KCK would become increasingly legitimised among Kurds as their only real representatives³⁹. Violence would continue.

³⁷ Crisis Group p12

³⁸ Several deputies remain in jail on often-vague terrorism charges.

³⁹ Uslu, E 'What should the AKP do against the PKK's strategy?' *Today's Zaman* 5/9/12. <http://goo.gl/vVoCh>



It would therefore make sense for the government to avoid banning the BDP and find a way to manage the inevitable reaction from Turkish nationalists. But Erdoğan's deep personal hostility to the BDP may drive him to crush them regardless⁴⁰.

The pressure on the BDP and the government's resumption of a tough line is also likely to complicate the process of drawing up a new constitution. The new charter, originally expected to be finished by December, is to replace the constitution drawn up in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup and is expected to broaden individual rights, strengthen democracy and curb the military. Enhancing rights for Kurds, by removing articles denying Kurdish identity and eliminating restrictions on the Kurdish language (particularly in education and the media) is one of the biggest issues for the cross-parliamentary commission currently working on a draft.

At the time of writing, the BDP remain in the commission, but they have threatened to withdraw if their immunity is lifted or other steps are taken. Even if they remain at the table, the AKP is showing clear signs of moving away from a constitution drafted with equal input from all four parties⁴¹. With the prevailing mood increasingly hawkish and local elections expected next year (paving the way for a presidential vote in 2014), the AKP is believed to be planning a 'nationalist' constitution with the backing of the MHP. The recent fighting and the return to a militarised approach will accelerate this trend, reducing the likelihood of a liberal constitution which opens up a wider political and cultural space for Turkey's Kurds.

Conclusions

The battle for Şemdinli has not taken place in a vacuum. It has come amid a time of increasing regional fragmentation and domestic political deadlock. The clashes are an amplification of existing trends, a more intensive example of the violence which flares up each summer.

But the summer's fighting has been exceptional on several levels. Tactically it has seen the PKK attempting, with considerable energy, to hold territory against a significant Turkish military force. Although unsuccessful, the insurgents' determination and ability to continue launching operations day after day is worthy of note. Although as noted in the Incident Analysis most incidents took place in Şırnak and Hakkari, the ability of the PKK and affiliates to strike outside of this border region – in east-central Turkey and in urban bombings elsewhere – suggests broad if not especially deep support networks further afield. Raids on military outposts have been extremely effective for the PKK, and its use of roadside bombs has also been extensive and deadly. The Turkish military is likely to conduct a thorough reappraisal of its tactics and intelligence capabilities after the fighting is over.

The regional situation has undoubtedly contributed to the upsurge in fighting. The logistical support from the *de facto* Kurdish control in northeastern Syria, direct assistance from the Damascus regime, and the sheer fact of 'inspiration' – a Kurdish Spring motivated and indeed facilitated by the Arab Spring – have all undoubtedly contributed to the summer's violence. But domestic considerations, particularly the government's crackdown on Kurdish political groups, has also probably spurred an increase in fighting.

What next? Violence is likely to continue, albeit at a lower intensity, until the winter snows force the PKK to withdraw back to Qandil. A cross-border operation by the Turkish army, as in late 2008, is possible. If the situation in Syria continues to deteriorate the PKK may also develop a stronger hold there, either directly or through its PYD affiliate. In Iraq, the Kurdish authorities will come under stronger pressure from Ankara to push the PKK into coming down from Qandil and disarming but will have little luck in doing so.

⁴⁰ Schliefer, Y 'Turkey: Solving The PKK Puzzle' *Eurasianet* 16/9/12. <http://goo.gl/kQqoA>

⁴¹ 'Towards an AKP-MHP Constitution?' *Hurriyet Daily News* 10/9/12. <http://goo.gl/wzUaA>



The violence bodes ill for Turkey's faltering attempts at resolving its Kurdish crisis. The violence has put the AKP in no mood for compromise, over the thorny issue of Kurdish rights in the new constitution or over negotiations with moderate nationalist groups. If the BDP is shut down or hounded out of parliament – a very plausible scenario – the space for dialogue will shrink even further. Wide-ranging arrests against Kurds suspected of being in the KCK, with all the implications for human rights that carries, will intensify.

The battle for Şemdinli is not the first bloody campaign in the conflict between the PKK and the state. It is unlikely to be the last. The bleak reality is that violence begets violence, and the scale of the summer's fighting means that the conflict will become even harder to solve in the months and years ahead.



Appendix: Incident Database

This [database](#) is incomplete as a result of the sparse information. Information provided by the Turkish media and government is often fragmentary or contradictory. In some cases the same attack was reported twice at slightly different times, and then casualty figures bundled together. At other times the Turkish military would provide a general figure for the number of dead PKK fighters without giving a breakdown of the incidents in which they were killed. Indeed this is almost impossible as delineating one 'incident' from another in what is clearly multi-sided, ongoing, and high-intensity combat is not an easy task. Where possible, however, incidents were cross-checked through two open sources.

In addition the inevitable reality of the fog of war means that the number of PKK dead, let alone wounded, is only an approximation. And, of course, questions will surface about whether or not all the dead 'militants' were indeed fighters or were in some cases civilians caught in the crossfire.

Figures for dead security personnel and civilians can be considered more reliable. PKK figures⁴² give exceptionally high figures for the number of Turkish casualties whilst glossing over rebel casualties. As a result PKK data has been considered but not used.

The authorities (the central government, the General Staff, and local officials) have regularly notified the media about incidents and it is from this data that incident reports are collected. However the military and government have also offered periodic updates citing large numbers of rebels killed. In general these figures do not tally with publicly available data and the time periods given have been excessively broad. However in one instance an additional 'incident' was included to account for a government figure of 75 PKK deaths between 8 September and 14 September, a relatively narrow time period. Existing data indicated 58 PKK deaths; a new incident was created to log the other 17 deaths, and placed in Şemdinli as the focus of the military operation which was occurring during that period.

The [full database is available here](#). Going forward the author plans to maintain the database and would be interested in collaboration on doing so or on analysing the data.

⁴² From <http://www.hezenparastin.com/eng/>