

Performative Rebel Governance and Legibility: Evidence from Rebel Recruitment in Southeast Turkey*

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Abstract

Rebel groups engage in performative governance acts that mimic the symbolic repertoires of sovereign states, such as martyr funerals or mass demonstrations. How do these acts shape civilian participation in rebellion? I conceptualize performative rebel governance as a legibility-oriented strategy through which rebels map civilian loyalties beyond their immediate networks. Voluntary participation in public acts allows rebels to identify potential supporters who might otherwise remain outside the movement, including women and politically inactive individuals. At the same time, these acts increase the visibility of rebellion to the state, exposing participants to surveillance and raising the costs of mobilization. Using a difference-in-differences design that combines original data on PKK fighter funerals in Southeast Turkey with individual-level recruitment data, I show that rebel funerals expand recruitment among harder-to-reach groups while reducing overall mobilization. Rebel governance in contested spaces thus entails a dilemma: efforts to increase legibility also increase legibility to the state.

Keywords: rebel recruitment, rebel governance, mobilization in civil war

11,620 Words

*I thank Hyeran Jo, Matthew Fuhrmann, Reyko Huang, Ahmer Tarar, Matt Malis, John Schuessler, and Gabriella Levy for detailed comments, and the participants of 2025 Peace Science Society (International) Conference, Texas A&M Political Science Department Speaker Series, and University of Houston New Frontiers in Research on Terrorism and Civil Wars workshop for helpful feedback.

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“The inability to tell friend from enemy is a recurring element of irregular war.”
—Kalyvas (2006, p. 89)

Introduction

Rebel groups worldwide engage in public acts that mimic the performative repertoires of sovereign states, including public commemorations, funerals or vigils for fallen fighters, and mass demonstrations (Mampilly 2011). While symbolic, these acts can perform core governance functions by regulating the social and political life of civilians, consistent with Arjona’s (2015, p. 3) definition of rebel governance. Groups as diverse as the PKK in Turkey, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, FARC in Colombia, and FAFN in Côte d’Ivoire have employed similar forms of “performative governance” (Förster 2015; Mampilly 2015). Yet despite their prevalence, we know little about how such public performances shape rebel-constituency ties and civilian participation in rebellion.

Scholars of rebel governance increasingly recognize that non-state actors do not require territorial control to govern (Loyle et al. 2021). Existing literature offers a straightforward rationale for rebels’ use of performative public acts: to survive, rebels require a degree of local support and typically secure civilian compliance through coercion or service provision. By mimicking the symbolic repertoires of sovereign states, however, rebels can project power, reinforce their presence in contested spaces, and foster identification between the movement and civilian constituencies. This, in turn, legitimizes political authority and reduces reliance on coercion to facilitate compliance (Mampilly 2015). This strategic logic underpins canonical theories of insurgent collective action (Wood 2003; Weinstein 2006), wartime civilian victimization in contested spaces (Kalyvas 2006), and institutionalized forms of rebel governance involving social service provision, justice provision, or law enforcement (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016; Stewart 2021).

Yet while studies of rebel-led civilian victimization and rebel social service provision are abundant, research on performative rebel governance remains underdeveloped. We lack systematic evidence linking rebels’ performative acts to strengthened rebel–civilian relations or increased civilian support for rebellion. Moreover, recent findings challenge long-held assumptions about the legitimacy-building effects of rebel rule-making by documenting civilian resistance to rebel governing efforts (Gowrinathan and Mampilly 2019; Rubin 2019; van Baalen 2021), suggesting that the consequences of rebel governance vis-à-vis rebel–constituency ties warrant closer scrutiny. In this paper, I examine how performative aspects of rebel governance, through public acts that

mimic the symbolic repertoires of sovereign states, shape rebel-constituency relations and civilian participation in rebellion.

Extending social ties- and networks-centric theories of collective action, mobilization, and rebellion (Olson 1965; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Siegel 2009; Staniland 2012; Parkinson 2013; Staniland 2014; Shesterinina 2016; Lewis 2017; Larson and Lewis 2018; Edgerton 2022; Nussio 2024), I conceptualize performative rebel governance as a legibility-oriented strategy for mapping civilian loyalties in “harder-to-reach” communities: those beyond rebels’ immediate networks. Participation in symbolic public acts entails risk, making it a credible signal of loyalty that allows rebels to distinguish between civilians providing costly behavioral support to rebellion and those offering mere attitudinal sympathy. Building on existing frameworks that emphasize identification problems (Kalyvas 2006) and informational deficiencies (Obayashi 2018) in civil war mobilization, I argue that voluntary participation in these acts serves a screening function, helping rebels identify potential supporters who might not otherwise mobilize, including women, non-activists, and individuals without familial ties to the rebel movement.

At the same time, the theory advances a more novel claim about the unintended consequences of rebel governance strategies. By increasing the legibility of rebellion, performative acts also expose pro-rebel civilians to state surveillance and repression. As authorities monitor symbolic participation, they raise the personal costs of radicalization, deterring individuals who might have mobilized in a lower-risk environment. The core contribution of the theory, therefore, is to identify a central dilemma of performative rebel governance: while such acts expand the mobilization base beyond traditional networks, they simultaneously provoke intensified state repression, ultimately producing an overall decline in mobilization.

This theory applies most directly to rebel groups that rely on voluntary or semi-voluntary recruitment, since coerced mobilization undermines the signaling function of public acts and thus the legibility mechanism at the core of the argument. It is most relevant in contested spaces, where neither rebels nor the state exercises full territorial control. In such environments, rebels lack the capacity to govern primarily through formal administrative structures yet remain sufficiently organized to stage public performances. Finally, the argument presumes a political context in which the state tolerates a public sphere, allowing public rebel acts to occur at least intermittently, with repression and surveillance operating largely *ex post*. This condition is more likely in electoral democracies, hybrid regimes, and some autocracies that permit limited public contention, but

unlikely in highly repressive authoritarian regimes.

Despite these scope conditions, the argument applies broadly. Over 70–75 percent of rebel groups have not engaged in systematic forced recruitment (Walsh, Conrad and Whitaker 2023), uncontested rebel territorial control is rare and most rebel governance occurs in contested environments (Loyle et al. 2021), and civil wars disproportionately occur in flawed democracies and hybrid regimes rather than fully repressive autocracies (Hegre et al. 2001; Fearon and Laitin 2003).

I provide evidence for this theory by combining original spatial event data on the funeral rites of PKK fighters (2012–2022) with granular microdata on PKK mobilization (2001–2022) in Southeast Turkey. Funeral rite data were collected from news sources affiliated with the rebel group. Mobilization data were sourced from the PKK’s official website dedicated to fallen fighters, providing individual-level records of birthplaces and recruitment dates. I cross-referenced obituaries of fallen fighters to extract demographic information on their backgrounds and pre-recruitment lives. Leveraging the plausibly random location and the staggered, often delayed timing of funeral rites within a difference-in-differences framework, I substantiate the theorized dual effect of symbolic governing acts on civilian mobilization into rebellion.

Consistent with the theory, rebel funeral rites increased the mobilization of women and individuals without prior political activism or family ties to the rebel movement in communities where these rites were held. Performative public acts thus allowed rebels to expand their mobilization base beyond traditional networks, typically composed of men, highly politicized activists, and individuals from families with prior “rebel martyrs.” At the same time, overall mobilization from communities where these rites were held declined, consistent with the idea that the same acts generate countervailing effects through increased state surveillance and repression alongside their selective mobilizing consequences.

Several additional analyses further support the theory. Text analysis of propaganda materials surrounding fighter funerals shows that the PKK explicitly framed these public performances as mobilization tools. Obituaries of fallen fighters indicate that funeral attendance constituted an important pathway to recruitment. Data on government-perpetrated civilian deaths during the state-imposed curfews of 2015 indicate that the Turkish government responded to performative rebel governance with punitive responses against pro-PKK civilians in affected communities. Finally, I address alternative explanations and threats to causal inference by examining selection into funeral locations and competing mobilization mechanisms. Across instrument-based reconstruc-

tions of the treatment indicator, multiple placebo tests designed to rule out affective emotional mobilization, and analyses incorporating measures of logistical constraints on funeral organization as well as survey-based indicators of rebel strength, territorial control, and state repression, the results consistently fail to support plausible alternative explanations.

This study makes several important contributions. The theory highlights how performative rebel governance enables rebels to elicit costly signals of allegiance from civilians they seek to mobilize. By foregrounding the strategic utility of “performing the nation-state” (Mampilly 2015), the argument moves beyond macro-level accounts of rebel legitimacy to uncover the micro-level mechanisms through which public performances expand the rebel base. Bridging research on rebel governance and civilian mobilization, I show that symbolic governance is not merely an assertion of authority but a war-making strategy that, like any other, entails trade-offs. By shifting attention to how rebels symbolically govern without territorial control, this study advances theoretical debates on insurgent strategies in contested conflict zones. The findings refine existing theories of rebel governance by demonstrating that governance operates not only through service provision or coercion, but also through the production of political legibility. Where territorial control is tenuous, symbolic governance enables rebels to identify and mobilize supporters beyond their immediate networks. At the same time, the study challenges the assumption that rebel legitimacy-building necessarily enhances civilian support, revealing instead that governance efforts can expand access to new constituencies while simultaneously exposing civilians to state surveillance and repression.

Beyond the case of the PKK, the study has broader implications for civilian participation in rebellion, insurgent mobilization, and rebel social networks. Traditional explanations of rebel-civilian alignment emphasize preexisting social ties, material incentives, or coercion (Weinstein 2006; Staniland 2014; Parkinson 2013; Lewis 2017). My findings suggest that the very visibility of rebellion itself can generate mobilization opportunities, even in the absence of these factors. More broadly, the study sheds light on how non-state actors cultivate support in contested environments, with relevance extending beyond insurgencies to nonviolent social movements. Finally, the study has implications for counterinsurgency strategies and state efforts to “win hearts and minds” in conflict zones. The findings underscore the importance of accounting for the symbolic and performative dimensions of insurgency when designing policies aimed at undermining rebel influence or fostering civilian cooperation with the state.

Identification (or Information) Problems

Rebel groups face a key challenge in mobilization; what Kalyvas (2006) terms the *identification problem*. In targeting civilian communities for recruitment, rebels must navigate the risk that these populations include not only potential supporters but also informants, hostile individuals, or government agents. Obayashi (2018) calls this challenge an *information problem*, emphasizing rebels' limited ability to assess an individual's commitment once recruited. Absent screening mechanisms, rebels risk recruiting individuals with diverging interests or a high likelihood of desertion.

This challenge is particularly acute in what I refer to throughout the paper as "harder-to-reach" communities: those beyond rebels' immediate social networks. Mobilization often begins in familiar circles, where familial, communal, or institutional ties facilitate recruitment (Staniland 2014; Parkinson 2013; Shesterinina 2016). Militancy frequently spreads through extended families and everyday social networks, where trust is already established, while political or religious organizations provide additional mobilization channels that allow rebels to observe potential recruits prior to enlistment. By contrast, communities outside these networks lack clear markers of loyalty, which intensifies the identification dilemma (Obayashi 2018).

The privacy of political allegiances (Fjelde and Hultman 2014) further complicates identification challenges. Rebels may rely on heuristics; for instance, use ethnicity as a proxy (Posen 1993) or draw on patterns of political mobilization such as election outcomes (Steele 2011; Balcells and Steele 2016; Onder 2024). Yet ethnicity is an unreliable indicator of allegiance (Hägerdal 2019), and voting behavior, while informative, remains an imperfect signal. Support for a political party sympathetic to the rebels' political goals does not necessarily imply commitment to violent action as many individuals may endorse the movement's political goals while rejecting its methods. Voting patterns therefore cannot distinguish between passive sympathizers, reluctant supporters, and committed rebel loyalists. While established social networks generate ongoing behavioral cues, communities beyond these networks remain largely illegible to rebels.

I argue that, in response to these identification challenges, rebels strategically deploy performative acts to render hidden political allegiances visible within populations they seek to mobilize. By prompting civilians to convert latent, private pro-rebel sympathies into overt, observable behaviors, such acts enhance legibility, allowing rebels to read and map the political terrain of "harder-to-reach" communities.

Performative Governance as a Strategy of Legibility

Rebel groups engage in highly visible forms of performative governance that mimic rituals and symbols traditionally associated with sovereign authority (Mampilly 2015), including holding funerals, organizing commemorations for fallen fighters or key milestones in the struggle, or staging parades. These practices are distinct from institutionalized forms of rebel governance, such as social service provision, justice administration, law enforcement, or taxation (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016; Huang 2016; Stewart 2018; Revkin 2020; Stewart 2021; Loyle 2021; Gilbert 2022; Loyle and Onder 2024). Institutionalized governance relies on bureaucratic processes that provide tangible benefits and administrative structures, even when informal or ad hoc (Loyle et al. 2021). Performative governance, by contrast, is primarily symbolic. It prioritizes spectacle over function, allowing rebels to engage with civilians without incurring the resource demands of administrative tasks.

Although these symbolic displays often draw on imagery of violent struggle, such as honoring militants or displaying combat-related symbols, they are non-violent in execution. They are also deliberately staged as public spectacles. By occupying public spaces, rebels maintain visibility and distinguish these acts from the largely clandestine rebel-civilian interactions that characterize recruitment within immediate social networks. Their public and accessible nature invites participation from individuals outside the movement's intimate networks. By soliciting mass participation, rebels can extend outreach beyond established circles and engage civilians who might otherwise remain disengaged or ambivalent to rebels' cause. I argue that observing voluntary participation in such symbolic public acts allows rebels to better read "harder-to-reach" communities by distinguishing those who merely sympathize with the movement from those willing to demonstrate costly behavioral support for rebellion.

Attitudinal sympathy for rebels typically reflects favorable views of their goals (Lyall, Blair and Imai 2013; Hirose, Imai and Lyall 2017) or endorsement of political violence (Moskalenko and McCauley 2009; Kruglanski et al. 2014; Khalil, Horgan and Zeuthen 2022). Sympathy, however, does not always translate into action. Individuals who share a movement's objectives may refrain from dissident mobilization due to weak political preferences (Kilcullen 2009) or risk aversion (Mosinger 2018). This gap between attitudes and behavior complicates rebels' efforts to assess loyalty among potential recruits. As Kalyvas (2006, p. 93) notes, behavior itself can also be misleading when it is not costly. Civilians may engage in ostensibly pro-rebel actions, such as providing intelligence (Fjelde and Hultman 2014; Condra and Wright 2019) or paying rebel-imposed

taxes (Gilbert 2022), out of fear or coercion rather than genuine allegiance.

I argue that performative governance helps resolve these identification challenges by ensuring that participation more credibly signals pro-rebel allegiance. Voluntary participation in highly visible public events is inherently costly, as it exposes civilians to the risk of state repression, including arrest, detention, torture, or even execution. When rebels solicit but do not compel participation in these performances, civilian participation reflects choice rather than coercion. Only individuals with strong pro-rebel loyalties are likely to incur such risks, allowing rebels to map civilian support within “harder-to-reach” communities with greater precision.

Institutionalized forms of rebel governance, including social service provision, rebel courts, and taxation, can also generate information about civilian populations, but they are less effective at producing the kind of legibility required to resolve identification problems in contested environments. For one, institutional governance may hinge on administrative capacity and repeated interactions to operate as expected, and these conditions may be absent where state interference is persistent. Moreover, civilian engagement with institutional rebel governance often reflects necessity, perceived effectiveness, or coercion (Revkin 2021) rather than voluntary allegiance. Paying rebel taxes, or accessing rebel-provided services may reveal who interacts with rebel authorities, but not whose support is freely given. Performative governance is distinct in this respect. By eliciting voluntary and public participation, it allows rebels to observe costly behavioral expressions of allegiance and thereby improve their ability to read civilian loyalties under uncertainty.

Expanding Rebel Mobilization Base

By observing patterns of civilian participation in performative acts, such as frequency, intensity, and diversity of engagement, rebels can map support beyond their immediate reach and identify pockets of latent support for future mobilization. Armed with a more refined profile of civilian loyalties, rebels can strategically extend recruitment efforts beyond traditional networks¹. In discussing this expansion, I focus on two groups: women and “harder-to-reach” individuals, by which I mean civilians without preexisting familial ties to the rebel movement or strong political activist roots.

Rebel recruitment has traditionally centered on male-dominated networks. Although a grow-

¹I do not argue that performative acts substitute for traditional recruitment strategies; rather, they function as a supplementary mechanism that extends recruitment beyond established channels.

ing literature documents women's participation in militancy (Manekin and Wood 2020), cross-national evidence indicates that only about one-third of armed movements include female combatants (Henshaw 2017; Thomas and Bond 2015; Wood and Thomas 2017). This pattern suggests that women often remain outside conventional rebel circles, either because groups are reluctant to recruit them or because women face barriers to participation, limiting their exposure to clandestine mobilization efforts.

The public nature of performative rebel acts offers a more inclusive mobilization arena by lowering barriers inherent in covert recruitment. Unlike secretive and male-dominated covert rebel-civilian interactions, these public performances are open and accessible, enabling broader participation. In this setting, women can engage with the rebel movement in ways that are less constrained by existing network structures. By shifting recruitment from hidden, network-based interactions to visible and participatory events, performative governance can facilitate greater female mobilization than traditional covert methods.

Rebels also commonly rely on familial ties to recruit fighters, a pattern documented across a wide range of cases, including FARC, ELN, EPL, and M-19 in Colombia (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011), Fatah, the PFLP, and the DFLP in Lebanon (Parkinson 2013), the PKK in Turkey (Özeren et al. 2014; Tezcur 2016), and rebel groups in El Salvador and Peru (Ortega 2011). These kinship-based recruitment strategies leave individuals without family connections to the movement less integrated and less visible to rebel recruiters. Public performative governance acts, conducted in open and observable spaces, can reduce reliance on kinship networks by allowing individuals to signal pro-rebel loyalties independently. Increased legibility in turn can enable rebels to identify and mobilize supporters who might otherwise be overlooked.

Similarly, individuals without strong political activist roots often remain peripheral to rebel recruitment networks. Some groups maintain close ties to civilian-led political organizations, which they, in Staniland's (2014) terms, "repurpose" for violent mobilization (p. 17). For example, the ELN in Colombia leveraged civil society organizations to access new militants (Sanin 2011, p. 188). The PKK in Turkey likewise recruits through legal political organizations (Özeren et al. 2014). Prior activist engagement serves as a key pathway into rebellion by fostering ideological commitment (Tezcur 2016) and social contagion effects (Özeren et al. 2014). While this traditional activist-based mobilization often excludes individuals with minimal or sporadic political engagement, public symbolic events lower the threshold for participation by offering accessible opportunities

for engagement that do not require prior organizational embeddedness. Voluntary participation in these performances can therefore function as a bridge into the rebel network, enabling rebels to identify and mobilize previously politically disengaged supporters. Hence;

Hypothesis 1. Rebel performative governance acts will increase the mobilization of women and “harder-to-reach” individuals.

The Legibility Dilemma

I argue that while performative acts of rebel governance enhance insurgents’ ability to read and map civilian loyalties, they simultaneously expose pro-rebel civilians to heightened state scrutiny. This unintended consequence constitutes what I term the *legibility dilemma*. On the one hand, these public acts help overcome identification problems by converting private sympathies into observable behavior. Voluntary participation signals a willingness to bear personal risk, allowing rebels to distinguish mere attitudinal support from costly commitment and to identify potential recruits beyond their immediate networks.

On the other hand, the same visibility increases participants’ exposure to state surveillance and repression. For one, rebel-aligned public events attract security forces, enabling authorities to concentrate surveillance resources more effectively (Earl, Soule and McCarthy 2003; Davenport, Soule and David A. Armstrong 2011). Instead of dispersing efforts across a broad landscape, the state can deploy police contingents directly to event venues. Such concentration facilitates systematic data collection, including visual documentation and the mapping of social interactions during events, enhancing the state’s capacity to identify, track, monitor, and repress civilians displaying overt pro-rebel sympathies (Liu and Sullivan 2021; Xu 2021).

Although research on mass protest suggests that dissident mobilization can become safer as numbers grow (Kuran 1991; Karklins and Petersen 1993), this logic does not straightforwardly apply here. Surveillance and repression associated with performative rebel governance often operate *ex post* rather than at the moment of participation. Public events facilitate identification and network mapping that enable later arrests, interrogations, and targeted repression. Large-scale participation may therefore increase rather than reduce individual risk by expanding the state’s capacity to sanction civilians after the event.

For one, public events concentrate individuals in a single location, making each participant

visible while allowing state security forces to observe and map social interactions in real time. Authorities can thus infer social networks and identify key influencers within rebel-supporting communities. This spatial concentration facilitates targeted repression, as individuals occupying central positions in these informal networks become priority targets for subsequent surveillance or crackdown (Sullivan 2016).

Moreover, the publicity of these events ensures that participation is documented beyond the immediate setting. Local, national, whether pro- or anti-rebel, and international media, as well as social media platforms, contribute to creating a lasting public record of attendance (Sobolev et al. 2020). These records, readily accessible to state authorities, can transform what might otherwise be fleeting expressions of solidarity into verifiable evidence of political allegiance.

Finally, in the aftermath of high-profile public events, state authorities can undertake targeted investigative measures, including arrests and interrogations of organizers and participants (Liu and Sullivan 2021). Such inquiries serve as additional mechanisms for uncovering political allegiances, enhancing the state's capacity to compile profiles of known rebel sympathizers. This extends the reach and precision of state monitoring and covert repressive actions well beyond the temporal boundaries of the event itself (Davenport 2005).

The expansion of state surveillance raises the personal costs of rebellion. Prospective recruits, now more easily identifiable and subject to repression, must weigh the risks of arrest or harassment against the potential benefits of participation (Demirel-Pegg and Rasler 2021). As these risks escalate, individuals may reconsider active involvement even when underlying grievances persist. Ultimately, heightened repression can constrain the mobilization base, deterring participation despite existing political discontent (Lacina 2014; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan and Joo 2022). Hence;

Hypothesis 2. Rebel performative governance acts will decrease the overall mobilization into the rebel group.

The legibility dilemma thus captures a trade-off in which performative governance can expand recruitment at the margins by drawing in atypical mobilizers previously outside rebels' immediate networks, while simultaneously deterring a larger pool of potential recruits by raising the costs of participation through increased visibility and repression. Because baseline recruitment is dominated by more typical mobilizers, such as men or political activists, even modest deterrent effects

among this larger group can outweigh gains among smaller, atypical constituencies. The result is an overall decline in recruitment alongside a shift in the composition of who mobilizes.

The legibility dilemma is likely most acute where governments possess greater capacity to monitor and repress. Where the state maintains a persistent security presence that enables surveillance and repression, the risks associated with participation in performative governance are higher, strengthening both the informational value of participation for rebels and the deterrent effects for civilians. An important scope condition of the theory is thus that these dynamics unfold not in exclusively insurgent-controlled spaces, but in contested spaces, where neither rebels nor the state exercise full territorial or social control. In such environments, rebels remain sufficiently organized to stage public performances, while the state retains the ability to monitor, identify participants, and impose penalties after the event.

Variation in government capacity to repress can also inform which side of the legibility dilemma dominates. In contested environments where the state is marginally more powerful, the government's ability to act on the information revealed by performative acts is likely sufficient that the deterrent effects of repression outweigh the benefits of performative governance in expanding the rebel mobilization base. By contrast, in contested spaces where rebels are marginally more powerful, the state's ability to translate visibility into effective repression may be more limited, allowing the effects of performative acts in expanding the rebel mobilization base to outweigh their deterrent consequences. Crucially, even in the former case, rebels may still experience net gains through improved recruitment screening: participation in costly public acts yields fewer but more committed recruits, increasing recruit quality even as overall mobilization declines.

Research Design

I test my theory of performative rebel governance in the context of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey by examining how its public, symbolic governing acts shape civilian recruitment into the insurgency under conditions of contested rule. Founded in 1978 and launching an armed campaign against the Turkish state in 1984 in primarily the southeastern part of the country, the PKK is among the longest-running insurgent organizations in the contemporary era. Over the course of the conflict, the group has pursued a broad repertoire of governance practices, ranging from institutionalized efforts such as justice provision (Loyle and Onder 2024) to highly visible, symbolic acts designed to engage civilian audiences. This makes the PKK a particularly well-

suited case for evaluating the theory advanced in this paper.

First, the duration and intensity of the conflict generate substantial temporal and spatial variation in both rebel governance practices and recruitment, enabling systematic analysis. Second, the PKK's operations in Turkey exemplify contested governance: although the organization sought to exercise political authority across southeastern Turkey, it never displaced the Turkish state, which maintained a functioning administrative and security presence throughout the conflict (Marcus 2007). This coexistence of sustained rebel activity and enduring state capacity situates the PKK case within the scope conditions of the theory, while leaving open whether performative governance in such settings actually expands the rebel mobilization base or generates a legibility dilemma in which state surveillance and repression become consequential.

Rebel Funeral Rites in Southeast Turkey

Data on rebel funeral rites in Southeast Turkey were collected through large-scale web scraping of ANF News, a PKK-affiliated media outlet that extensively covers the funerals of PKK militants. ANF News has been documented as closely affiliated with the PKK. The German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, for example, explicitly describes ANF as “PKK-affiliated”, noting in a February 2019 report that “a cornerstone of [PKK’s propaganda] policy is the PKK-affiliated news agency Firat News Agency (ANF), based in the Netherlands. Its goal is to establish a presence for Kurdish media through a network of correspondents in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and European countries” (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2019, p. 22).

A key advantage of relying on PKK-affiliated media is the systematic and comprehensive coverage it provides of rebel funeral rites across provinces and over time, particularly given that Turkish mainstream media ignores these events. One potential concern is whether funeral reporting functions as propaganda, for instance through exaggeration of civilian turnout. This concern is mitigated by the fact that the dataset includes hundreds of cases in which PKK-affiliated media reported attendance as limited to hundreds, rather than portraying all funerals as mass events.

In total, 569 unique news articles reporting on funeral ceremonies were retrieved and manually coded, yielding a dataset of 481 distinct funeral rites within the study period. Each entry records the precise location of the ceremony², along with key contextual details, including the presence of

²These funerals occurred across 20 provinces in Southeast Turkey, including Adıyaman, Ağrı, Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Erzurum, Gaziantep, Hakkari, Iğdır, Kars, Malatya, Kahramanmaraş, Mardin, Muş, Şanlıurfa, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van.

politicians and NGO representatives, as well as estimated attendance. The dataset also documents state responses by recording police presence, whether confrontations occurred between attendees and security forces, and whether arrests were reported during the event.

Rebel funeral rites in Southeast Turkey typically begin with the retrieval of the deceased fighter's body from a state-owned morgue, most often in Malatya, where the Turkish military's Second Army is headquartered. The body is then transported to the fighter's hometown in the southeast, often accompanied by a convoy. Upon arrival, a public march commonly proceeds from the family home to the cemetery. These events frequently include political chants and expressions of solidarity with the PKK, followed by religious rites and burial. In many cases, funeral days involve widespread community participation, with shops and businesses closing in commemoration.

Reported public attendance varies substantially, ranging from a few hundred to tens of thousands. Political figures, particularly from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), are prominent participants, with local politicians and, in some cases, national parliamentarians attending approximately 75 percent of the recorded funerals. Pro-Kurdish civil society organizations are also frequently involved, most notably MEYA-DER (Mesopotamian Aid, Solidarity, and Cultural Association for Those Who Have Lost Their Relatives).

The official organizer of these funerals is MEYA-DER, an NGO that played a crucial role in repatriating the bodies of PKK militants. MEYA-DER representatives have openly acknowledged their continued communication with the PKK, now headquartered in Iraq, to facilitate these funerals (Aydın 2018; Düzel 2024). While the PKK's involvement in organizing funeral rites remains tacit, it is also evident through the group's public statements. The PKK regularly calls for participation in these commemorations through its official website, *hezaparastin.com*. For example, on December 2, 2012, the PKK published a statement titled "Funeral Rites", urging the public to attend ongoing ceremonies in Diyarbakır's Yeniköy district (Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) 2012). Similarly, on October 6, 2015, the PKK issued a public call for mass participation in a statement titled "The Honor of the Kurdish People Has Been Dragged on the Ground" (Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) 2016). Referring to the death of senior PKK commander Baran Dersim, the statement declared:

"The brave son of the Kurdish people, raised in the heart of Dersim, and the Apoist militant follower of the will of Alişer and Seyit Rıza, our Leading Commander Baran Dersim, was martyred on September 16 after two days of intense attacks by the Turkish army. Our patriotic people and revolutionary-socialist forces must attend his funeral with great honor and enthusiasm, embracing it fully."

Turkish state security forces maintain a visible presence at a substantial number of rebel funeral rites, though direct police intervention, such as dispersal or mass arrests, in these events is rare. Approximately one third of the recorded funerals involved a significant police presence, indicating that authorities actively monitor these gatherings. However, only 3 percent of funerals resulted in arrests of attendees, suggesting that while the state forces remain vigilant, systematic suppression of funeral rites is very uncommon.

These patterns point to two important dynamics. First, the Turkish state rarely engages in overt crackdowns on funeral rites, implying that civilians are formally able to attend. This feature is central to understanding funerals as a legibility oriented mechanism of performative rebel governance. Because participation is voluntary rather than forced, attendance functions as a credible signal of allegiance. If the state had consistently banned or violently repressed these ceremonies, many loyal civilians would likely refrain from attending, weakening the informational value of participation. Second, although overt repression is rare, surveillance is common, making participation a costly political act. The presence of security forces exposes attendees to monitoring and increases their risk of future investigation. By rendering civilian allegiances publicly visible, these symbolic acts can enable the state to map and track potential rebel recruits even as they allow rebels to do the same.

Taken together, funeral rites for PKK militants constitute an important form of performative rebel governance. These ceremonies are public and highly locally visible, creating opportunities for rebels to engage with local communities outside clandestine organizational channels. Civilian participation through attendance, chanting, or other symbolic acts signals alignment with the movement in ways that are observable to both rebels and the state. The public nature of these events allows rebels to distinguish between those willing to take visible risks on behalf of the movement and those who remain passive or disengaged, while simultaneously raising the costs of civilian engagement with rebel-organized events through heightened state scrutiny.

PKK funeral rites also offer a valuable opportunity for causal inference due to their quasi-random nature. Although funerals are always held in the hometowns of fallen fighters, their timing and precise occurrence vary in ways that are plausibly exogenous to local mobilization dynamics. While a province must have previously contributed fighters to the PKK to be eligible for a funeral, not all such communities experience one. Many fallen fighters do not receive public funerals because of tough battlefield conditions, the inability of their families to claim their bodies,

or logistical barriers to repatriation. As a result, while recruitment patterns determine eligibility, the realization of a funeral in a given community is not predictable.

A potential concern is that the PKK may strategically stage funerals only when high turnout is anticipated, introducing selection bias. While this possibility cannot be fully ruled out, it is constrained in the PKK context because funeral timing is not easily manipulated. The timing of a fighter’s death is unlikely to be systematically related to the political conditions or recruitment dynamics of their hometown. Armed conflict introduces substantial uncertainty, meaning fighters from the same region may die at very different times. Moreover, delays between death and burial are often driven by the state’s control over body release. Turkish authorities determine when a militant’s body is returned to their family, generating additional variation in funeral timing that lies outside the control of either the PKK or the affected local community. Together, these factors introduce exogenous variation in the occurrence and timing of funerals, making them a useful setting for identifying the effects of performative governance on rebel recruitment.

In the primary analysis, I focus exclusively on funeral rites with reported *police presence*, as documented by PKK-affiliated media, because visible state monitoring is a central condition for both the informational value of attendance and the legibility dilemma at the core of the theory. The geographic distribution of these funerals is shown in Figure 1. As a robustness check, I replicate the analysis using only funerals reported to have attendance exceeding 10,000 participants. Large-scale attendance plausibly strengthens the recruitment-expansion mechanism by widening the pool of observable participants and lowering barriers to entry for individuals outside established rebel networks. The results are substantively similar (see Appendix 2).

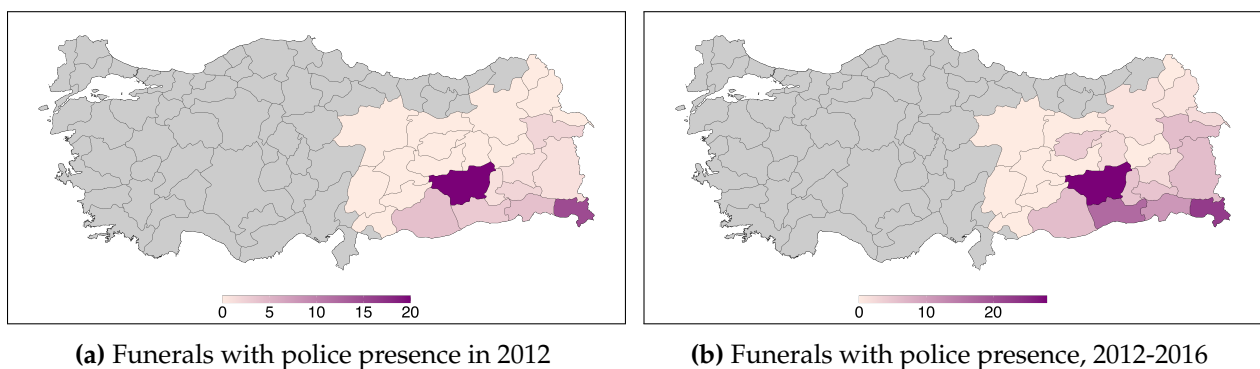


Figure 1. Province-Level Rebel Funeral Rites with Police Presence, 2012-2016
Note: Darker shades indicate more rebel funeral rites.

Rebel Recruitment in Southeast Turkey

Individual-level records of PKK mobilization are drawn directly from the group's public listings of fallen fighters. The primary dataset is constructed through large-scale web scraping of the PKK's official website dedicated to fallen fighters, *hpgsehit.com*, which has maintained public records since 2001. Each fallen fighter is profiled with personal information, including full name, code name, birthdate, birthplace, recruitment date, date of death, and place of death. These records allow for identification of where and when recruits originated, although the level of spatial and temporal granularity is limited to province and year due to data availability³.

The PKK recruitment dataset spans from 2001 to 2022, covering both pre- and post-funeral rite periods and providing a long temporal scope for analysis. In total, 5,822 fallen fighters were identified. To enrich this dataset, each fighter's name was cross-referenced with reports from ANF News, which publishes obituaries for PKK fighters alongside its funeral coverage. These obituaries are provided directly by the *PKK Basın İrtibat Merkezi* (Press Liaison Center), as openly acknowledged by ANF. A systematic manual coding process was used to extract additional demographic information, including gender, prior political activism before joining the PKK, and whether the fighter had family members in the PKK prior to recruitment.

For example, one obituary describes a fallen fighter as follows:

"Comrade Şahin was born into a patriotic family belonging to the Sipêrtî tribe in the Silopi district of Şırnak ... Aware of the Kurdish people's existential and liberation struggle, Comrade Şahin sought ways to contribute to the movement and fulfill his responsibilities as a young Kurd. He became involved in revolutionary youth activities, participating in numerous youth actions with great courage. Experiencing state oppression firsthand, his anger toward the enemy intensified, especially after the martyrdom of his cousin in PKK ranks, leading him to a decisive turning point. Realizing that the strongest way to avenge the martyrs and the suffering inflicted upon his people was to join the guerrilla forces in the mountains of Kurdistan, he made the decision to become a guerrilla fighter in the Botan region."

³Recruitment dates are missing for a subset of fighters, although death years are observed for all individuals. To impute missing recruitment years, I exploit the fact that recruitment to death duration is directly observable for fighters with known recruitment dates. Among these fighters, the median lifespan within the organization is six years, with more than half surviving between four and eight years. This relatively tight distribution indicates substantial regularity in fighters' lifespans, making the median a reasonable and conservative basis for imputation. Accordingly, for fighters with missing recruitment dates, I subtract six years from the observed year of death to estimate the recruitment year. To assess sensitivity, I also estimated an alternative imputation model in which fighters' lifespans were predicted using available demographic characteristics, including gender and pre-recruitment activities. The resulting recruitment year estimates closely mirror those generated by the median-lifespan approach. A smaller degree of missingness affects recruitment location. When recruitment place is unobserved, I assume that fighters were recruited from their hometown. This assumption is supported by the observed data, as recruitment location and birthplace coincide in the majority of cases where both are recorded.

By systematically coding fighter obituaries, the dataset captures key individual-level attributes, enabling an assessment of mobilization trends among women and “harder-to-reach” individuals (e.g., those without prior activism or familial ties to the rebel group) across provinces and over time.

While fallen fighters do not represent the entirety of PKK recruits, potential bias in this dataset is unlikely to pose a significant concern for this study. First, the composition of fighters closely matches known characteristics of the PKK’s broader fighter base. For example, women constitute approximately 30 percent of the dataset, consistent with external estimates of the PKK’s gender composition. Second, it is unlikely that fighters who remain alive are systematically different from those who have died in ways that would bias the analysis. The PKK does not deploy fighters primarily in their home regions. For instance, although most PKK fighters are Turkish-born, the majority of combat deaths recorded in the dataset occurred in Iraq, indicating that fighters are often stationed far from their places of origin. Moreover, PKK members frequently rotate across fronts, sometimes moving to high-intensity conflict zones, such as Syria during battles against ISIS, and at other times to lower-risk areas. As a result, a fighter’s place of origin is unlikely to systematically shape their likelihood of dying in combat.

To empirically test the relationship between performative rebel governance and recruitment patterns, I construct two sets of dependent variables corresponding to the two core hypotheses. To test H1, which posits that rebel funerals increase the mobilization of women and “harder-to-reach” individuals, I use the following dependent variables:

1. The *percentage of female recruits* measured as the ratio of women to the total number of recruits in a given province in a given year.
2. The *percentage of “hard-to-reach” recruits*, calculated as the ratio of recruits without prior activism or preexisting familial ties to the PKK to the total number of recruits in a given province in a given year.

In complementary analyses, I further disaggregate these measures into the *percentage of female non-activist recruits* and the *percentage of female recruits without family ties*.

The use of ratios rather than crude counts is motivated by the need to account for variation in overall recruitment levels across time and space. By capturing changes in the composition of recruits rather than absolute recruitment levels, these dependent variables allow for a more precise test of whether rebel funerals facilitate the entry of new social groups into the insurgency.

To test H2, which posits that rebel funerals reduce overall recruitment into the PKK, I use the *number of new recruits per 100,000 population* in a given province and year as the dependent variable. This measure adjusts for differences in provincial population size, so that recruitment is assessed relative to the available recruitment pool rather than in absolute terms. Using crude recruitment counts may introduce bias, as larger provinces would generate more recruits even if per capita mobilization rates were unchanged. As a robustness check, I also estimate models using the crude number of recruits per province and year, which yield even larger and more statistically significant declines in recruitment (see Appendix 1). Province-level recruitment patterns are visualized in Figure 2.

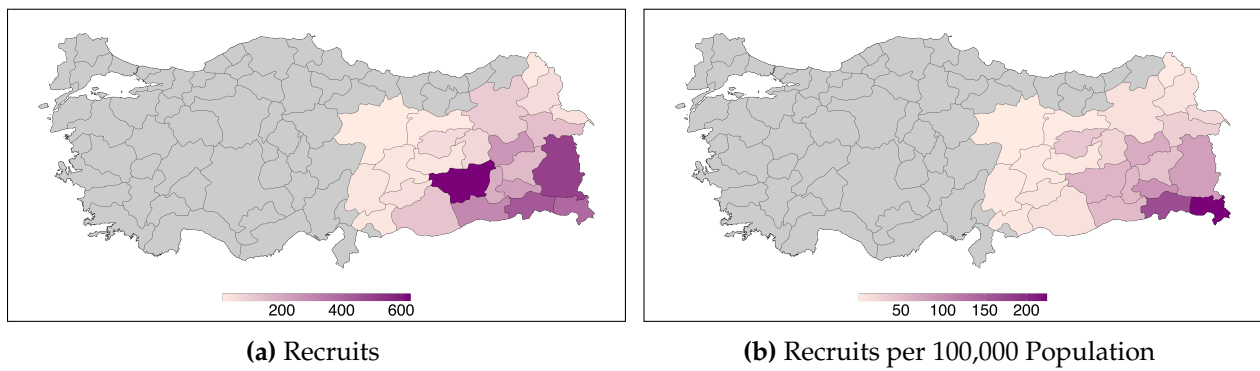


Figure 2. Province-Level Rebel Recruitment, 2001-2020
 Note: Darker shades indicate more rebel recruits.

Difference-in-Differences Design

To estimate the effect of performative rebel governance, measured through PKK funeral rites with police presence, on civilian mobilization, I employ a difference in differences (DiD) design. Funeral rites occur at different times and in different locations, generating staggered treatment exposure that allows for causal inference. Variation in the timing and location of funerals enables comparisons between provinces that experience these events and those that do not, before and after funerals take place.

A key advantage of the DiD framework is that it accounts for time invariant differences between provinces as well as temporal shocks that might otherwise confound estimates. Funerals are held in the hometowns of fallen fighters, but their precise timing is largely outside the control of local civilian populations. Fighters die under uncertain combat conditions, and delays in state controlled repatriation further introduce variation in when a funeral occurs. As a result, while recruitment patterns determine which provinces are eligible to host funerals, the occurrence and

timing of funerals are plausibly exogenous to contemporaneous mobilization dynamics.

Moreover, not all PKK fighters receive public funerals, often because bodies cannot be recovered from the battlefield. This generates variation in treatment, as some communities with prior PKK ties never experience funerals despite having contributed militants in the past. Comparing provinces that do and do not experience funerals with police presence over time, while controlling for preexisting recruitment trends, allows the DiD framework to approximate a counterfactual scenario in which no funeral occurred.

The *treatment group* consists of provinces that experienced PKK funeral rites with police presence. The *control group* includes Southeastern provinces that had PKK fighters prior to 2012 but did not experience funerals, as well as provinces that hosted funerals with smaller attendance and no police presence. Importantly, many provinces that contributed fighters throughout the insurgency never hosted funerals, plausibly because fallen militants' bodies were not repatriated. These provinces provide a credible counterfactual, as they share a history of PKK recruitment but lack exposure to the treatment.

This comparison allows estimation of how funerals with police presence affect both the composition and the overall level of recruitment, independent of broader province level characteristics. Because funerals are not systematically assigned, and because their timing is subject to battlefield uncertainty and administrative delay, treatment and control provinces are unlikely to differ in unobserved ways that would bias the estimates. Divergent recruitment trajectories following funerals in treated provinces therefore provide evidence that observed changes are attributable to these symbolic public acts rather than to preexisting differences in rebel support.

To estimate the effects of funerals under staggered treatment timing, I adopt the difference in differences estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021). Unlike traditional two-way fixed effects (TWFE) models, which impose constant treatment effects across units and time, this approach estimates group time average treatment effects separately for each treated cohort and then aggregates these effects into an overall average treatment effect.

For each province i first treated in year g , the group-time average treatment effect at time t is defined as:

$$ATT(g, t) = \mathbb{E}[Y_{it}(g) - Y_{it}(0) \mid G_i = g], \quad t \geq g,$$

where G_i denotes the first year in which province i receives treatment, $Y_{it}(g)$ is the potential re-

cruitment outcome at time t if province i is first treated in year g , and $Y_{it}(0)$ is the potential outcome if province i remains untreated through time t . Identification relies on using as the comparison group all provinces with $G_i > t$, including both provinces that are never treated and provinces that are treated only in future periods.

Parallel Trends

The central identifying assumption of the difference-in-differences (DiD) design is that treatment and control provinces would have followed similar recruitment trends in the absence of funerals. This parallel trends assumption ensures that any post-treatment divergence in mobilization can be attributed to the funeral event rather than to pre-existing differences in recruitment trajectories. If treatment provinces had exhibited systematically different trends prior to the funeral, the estimated effects would likely reflect underlying differences rather than the impact of funerals.

Figure 3 presents a pre-treatment trends plot that assesses the plausibility of the parallel trends assumption. The x-axis shows time relative to treatment (with 0 being the funeral year), while the y-axis displays the number of new PKK recruits per 100,000 population. The treatment group, consisting of provinces that experienced funerals with police presence, is shown in red, and the control group, consisting of provinces without such funerals, is shown in black. If the parallel trends assumption holds, both groups should exhibit similar recruitment trajectories prior to treatment.

The figure shows that before treatment, from 11 to 1 years prior to the funeral, recruitment trends in treatment and control provinces move closely together, with increases and decreases occurring at similar points in time. Although treatment provinces display higher overall recruitment levels, their trajectories closely track those of the control group. This pattern supports the parallel trends assumption and suggests that post-treatment divergence in recruitment can reasonably be attributed to the occurrence of funeral rites rather than to pre-existing differences in mobilization dynamics. Importantly, the fact that treatment provinces exhibit higher baseline recruitment levels also implies that the data provide a conservative test of H2, which predicts reduced overall mobilization following funerals. Any observed post-treatment decline in recruitment would therefore constitute especially strong evidence in support of H2.

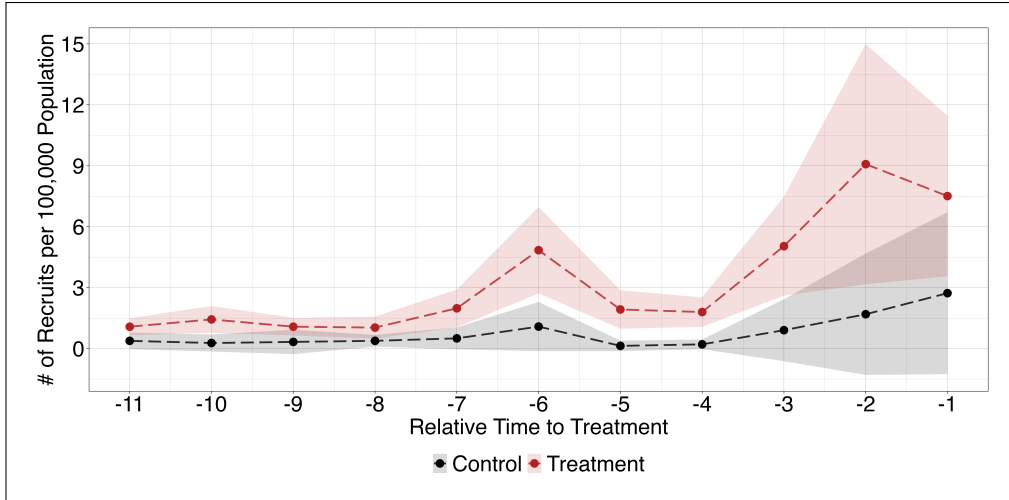


Figure 3. Pre-Treatment Trends in Recruitment

Results

Composition of Recruits

Table 1 reports the average treatment effects on the treated (ATTs) of rebel funeral rites with police presence on the composition of PKK recruits, testing Hypothesis 1. H1 posits that performative rebel governance expands the rebel mobilization base beyond traditional networks by increasing recruitment among women and “harder-to-reach” individuals. Overall, the results provide support for H1.

Models 1, 3, 5, and 7 present naïve specifications that include only province and year fixed effects. Models 2, 4, 6, and 8 introduce a set of controls capturing historical and contemporary security conditions that may shape recruitment patterns. These include the percentage of the rural population, province-level religiosity measured as the number of mosques per 100,000 population, an indicator for border provinces to account for the concentration of PKK activity along Turkey’s borders with Iraq, Syria, and Iran, and historical political dissidence measured by the number of Kurdish tribes that rebelled during the 1920s and 1930s following large-scale secularization reforms. Data on rural populations are drawn from Tezcür (2016), and data on mosques and tribal rebellions come from Belge and Sinanoglu (2022).

Models 1 and 2 estimate the effect of funerals with police presence on the proportion of female recruits. In the baseline specification (Model 1), the estimated effect is positive but small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Once controls are included in Model 2, the effect becomes

Table 1. Rebel Funeral Rites and Selective Recruitment in Southeast Turkey

	<i>DV: Ratio of:</i>			
	<i>Female Recruits</i>		<i>Hard-to-Reach Recruits</i>	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
ATT	0.089 (0.089) [-0.086, 0.264]	0.553* (0.126) [0.305, 0.801]	0.020 (0.134) [-0.242, 0.282]	0.409* (0.098) [0.217, 0.601]
Year-Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Province-Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls		✓		✓
N	480	440	480	440

	<i>DV: Ratio of:</i>			
	<i>Female Non-Activist Recruits</i>		<i>Female Recruits Without Family Ties</i>	
	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
ATT	0.065 (0.091) [-0.113, 0.243]	0.516* (0.135) [0.252, 0.780]	0.081 (0.090) [-0.096, 0.258]	0.542* (0.126) [0.296, 0.789]
Year-Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Province-Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls		✓		✓
N	480	440	480	440

Note 1. * $p < 0.05$

Note 2. Robust standard errors clustered on province in parentheses. 95% confidence intervals in brackets.

Note 3. Models are estimated using Callaway and Sant'Anna's (2021) doubly robust estimation method via the `att_gt` function in the `did` package in R. Both "Never Treated" and "Not Yet Treated" units are considered as the control group.

substantively large and statistically significant. The results from the extended model indicate that funerals with police presence are associated with a statistically significant increase ($p < 0.05$) in the proportion of female recruits over time.

Models 3 and 4 examine recruitment among "harder-to-reach" individuals. As with female recruitment, the naïve estimate in Model 3 is statistically insignificant. In contrast, Model 4 reveals a large and statistically significant effect once controls are included. The estimated ATT of 40.9 percentage points ($p < 0.05$) suggests that funerals with police presence substantially increase recruitment among individuals who are otherwise difficult to mobilize, consistent with the argument that public rituals lower barriers to entry.

The lower panel focuses on more specific subsets of female recruits. Models 5 and 6 assess the effect of funerals with police presence on the proportion of female recruits without prior political

activism. The baseline estimate in Model 5 is positive but not statistically significant, while Model 6 shows a statistically significant effect once controls are introduced. Models 7 and 8 examine recruitment among female recruits without familial ties to the PKK. As in the other outcomes, the effect becomes statistically significant only after the inclusion of controls, with Model 8 indicating a positive and significant association.

To assess the dynamic effects of funerals on recruitment composition, I conduct event-study analyses that trace treatment effects over time. Figure 4 plots ATTs by event time, where negative values correspond to pre-treatment years and positive values denote post-treatment years. Overall, the event-study results closely mirror the DiD estimates reported in Table 1, indicating that funerals expand recruitment among women and previously politically inactive individuals once historical and contemporary security conditions are accounted for.

Panel A of Figure 4 presents estimates for the proportion of female recruits over time. In the pre-treatment period, coefficients are statistically indistinguishable from zero, supporting the parallel trends assumption. In the specification with controls, the treatment effect becomes positive and statistically significant in the funeral year ($t = 0$) and remains elevated for at least eight years thereafter. The persistence of these effects suggests that funerals have a long-term impact on female mobilization, reinforcing the argument that performative governance reshapes the composition of the rebel movement beyond male-dominated militant networks.

Panel B plots effects for the proportion of “harder-to-reach” recruits. As in Panel A, pre-treatment estimates cluster around zero. Post-treatment effects become positive and statistically significant beginning in $t = 3$, indicating a delayed but sustained increase in recruitment among individuals without prior activist or familial ties. Panels C and D examine the proportion of female recruits without an activism background and without family ties to the PKK, respectively. Consistent with the earlier findings, post-treatment estimates in the extended models are positive and statistically significant across time. Together, these results suggest that funerals with police presence increase the recruitment of women who lack pre-existing ties to the rebel movement.

The fact that estimated treatment effects become statistically significant only once controls are introduced merits further discussion. While province fixed effects absorb time-invariant differences across provinces, they do not account for differential trends driven by slow-moving structural characteristics that evolve unevenly over time. Factors such as rural settlement patterns, religiosity, and historical political mobilization may shape the pool from which rebels recruit and may



Figure 4. Aggregate Group-Time Average Treatment Effects (Event Study)
Note: The vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

change gradually across provinces in ways not fully captured by fixed effects alone. These characteristics are predetermined with respect to treatment and plausibly unaffected by funerals with police presence, but they can generate substantial residual variance in recruitment outcomes. In-

roducing controls for these features therefore improves the precision with which within-province changes associated with treatment are estimated. Consistent with this interpretation, the direction and timing of the estimated effects are similar in the baseline and controlled specifications, and the event-study analyses continue to show no evidence of differential pre-treatment trends.

Overall Recruitment

Table 2 reports the average treatment effects on the treated (ATTs) of rebel funeral rites with police presence on overall PKK recruitment, testing Hypothesis 2. H2 posits that performative rebel governance ultimately reduces total mobilization as increased visibility exposes pro-rebel civilian communities to state surveillance and repression, deterring some potential recruits from mobilization. The dependent variable is the number of new PKK recruits per 100,000 population at the province level in a given year.

Table 2. Rebel Funeral Rites and Overall Recruitment in Southeast Turkey

	<i>DV: Recruits per 100,000 population</i>	
	Model 1	Model 2
ATT	-4.438*	-6.067*
	(1.710)	(2.681)
	[-7.790, -1.085]	[-11.322, -0.813]
Year-Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Province-Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Controls		✓
N	440	440

Note 1. * $p < 0.05$

Note 2. Robust standard errors clustered on province in parentheses. 95% confidence intervals in brackets.

Note 3. Models are estimated using Callaway and Sant’Anna’s (2021) doubly robust estimation method via the `att_gt` function in the `did` package in R. Both “Never Treated” and “Not Yet Treated” units are considered as the control group.

Model 1 presents a naïve specification, while Model 2 introduces the set of control variables discussed earlier. In both models, the estimated ATT is negative, as expected, and statistically significant at conventional levels. The treatment effect ranges from 4.4 ($p < 0.05$) to 6 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that funerals with police presence lead to a substantial decline in overall recruitment. Substantively, these estimates correspond to a reduction of approximately 4.4 to 6 recruits per 100,000 population following a funeral with police presence. Given that the average recruitment

rate across provinces over the full period is approximately 46 recruits per 100,000 population, these effects represent a 9.5 to 13 percent decline in overall mobilization.

Figure 5 presents event-study estimates of ATTs by event time, where negative values denote pre-treatment years and positive values denote post-treatment years. The results strongly support H2. Prior to the funeral event, recruitment trends in treatment and control provinces are largely statistically indistinguishable from 0, reinforcing the parallel trends assumption. In the funeral year ($t = 0$), the estimated effect begins to turn negative. In the post-treatment period, recruitment declines sharply, with statistically significant negative effects persisting for several years thereafter. This sustained decline supports the argument that performative rebel governance generates a tradeoff between visibility and security. While public rituals broaden participation among select constituencies, they also render rebellion more legible to the state, thereby reducing overall insurgent mobilization.

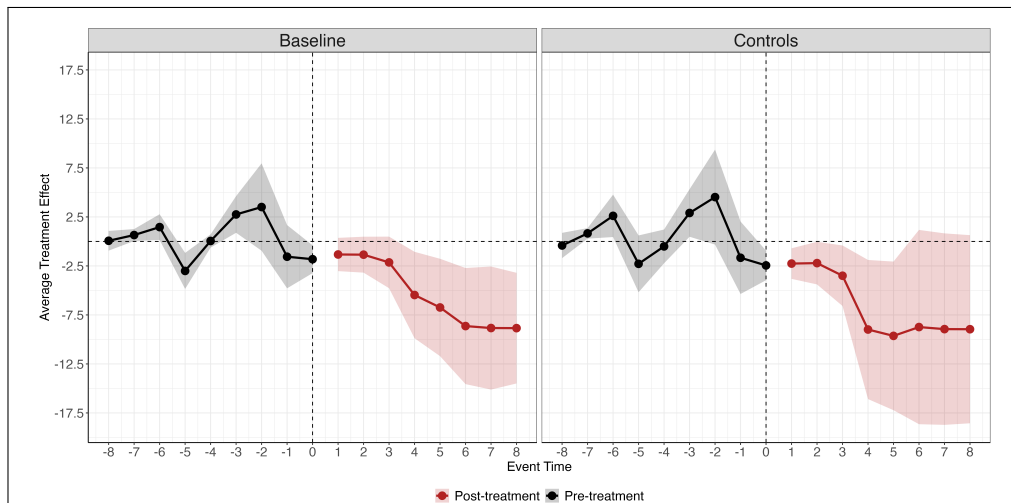


Figure 5. Aggregate Group-Time Average Treatment Effects (Event Study)

Note: The vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

Theory-Driven Extensions

Rebel Propaganda

As a test of the theory's implications, I analyze PKK-affiliated media coverage of funerals to assess whether the group itself frames fighter funerals as tools for mobilization. If performative rebel governance functions as a mechanism for expanding rebel recruitment base, then rebel propaganda should explicitly emphasize mobilization-oriented themes in its coverage of these events.

To evaluate this implication, I conduct a Structural Topic Modeling (STM) analysis of the PKK-affiliated media's news reports covering PKK funerals. The results, presented in Appendix 3, show that funeral coverage is heavily structured around themes of mobilization. One of the most prominent topics, *Mass Mobilization*, explicitly links funeral attendance to political slogans, large-scale participation, and public demonstrations, consistent with the expectation that these events serve not only commemorative but also mobilizational purposes. The topic correlation network further shows that *Mass Mobilization* is closely associated with topics such as *Kurdish Fighters in Kobane* and *ISIS Conflict*, suggesting that the PKK strategically links funerals to ongoing wartime struggles of existing fighters. The framing of funerals as mobilization opportunities rather than as mere memorials provides evidence for a key observable implication of the theory.

Path to Mobilization

If performative rebel governance facilitates mobilization, we should also observe evidence that participation in funerals influences individuals' decisions to join the insurgency. Although systematic individual-level data on how people decide to join the group are unavailable, obituaries of fallen PKK fighters provide qualitative indications that funeral attendance functions as a pathway into militancy. A recurring theme in these obituaries is that individuals who later joined the PKK are described as having attended funerals of fallen fighters, sworn oaths of vengeance, and subsequently entered the PKK ranks. One obituary, for example, states:

"Our comrade [Barış Kartal], who admired the guerrillas who wrote epics of heroism in their clashes with the Turkish state, attended the funeral ceremony of the fallen guerrillas and swore to take revenge on the enemy. He acted with the awareness that the only way to respond to martyrdom was to join the ranks of the struggle. In 2013, he turned his face toward the sacred lands of the guerrilla and joined the ranks in the Botan region." (Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) 2024)

State Repression

A further implication of the theory is that performative rebel governance increases the visibility of civilian participation to the state, thereby exposing pro-rebel communities to heightened repression. If this argument is correct, provinces that hosted funerals with police presence should subsequently experience higher levels of state repression. To test this implication, I collect original data on state-imposed curfews during 2015 as well as on government-perpetrated civilian deaths during these curfews. Using these data, I assess whether provinces that previously hosted PKK

funerals with police presence and mass-attended funerals experienced greater repression during the curfews than comparable provinces that did not.

The results, reported in Appendix 4, show a statistically significant positive association between both the number of curfews imposed and the number of government-perpetrated civilian deaths and the occurrence of funerals with police presence. These findings suggest that performative rebel governance triggered collective repression by the state. By rendering support for the PKK publicly visible, funeral rites inadvertently exposed pro-rebel civilians to heightened state violence, reinforcing the central paradox of performative rebel governance as both a mobilization mechanism and a source of risk.

To probe the underlying mechanism, I consider a counterargument in which increased repression reflects the state's continued inability to distinguish civilians from insurgents rather than improved legibility. Under this view, funerals provoke indiscriminate violence driven by persistent uncertainty rather than enhanced information. Although direct tests of this claim are infeasible, since available data do not indicate whether victims were perceived as rebel sympathizers, I examine whether the effect of funerals on repression varies with the state's prior informational environment. I proxy this environment using the density of village guards, a pro-government militia deployed to combat the PKK.

If funerals do not enhance legibility, repression following funerals should be most severe precisely in areas where the state historically lacked reliable local intelligence. By contrast, my theory does not predict that repression should be conditional on prior informational capacity. The results, presented in Appendix 4, reveal null interaction effects. The relationship between funerals and civilian deaths does not vary systematically with the density of village guards. This pattern is difficult to reconcile with the counterargument.

Ruling out Alternative Explanations and Threats to Inference

Instrument-Based Reconstruction of Funeral Exposure

To further address threats to inference about where and when rebels organize funerals, I conduct an instrument-based robustness analysis that reconstructs plausibly exogenous variation in provincial exposure to rebel funerals using individual-level fighter characteristics that shape the logistical feasibility of holding a funeral. Treatment timing is redefined as the first year in which

a province experiences the death of a “funeral-eligible” fighter defined as death within Turkey, non-airstrike death, non-winter timing, and at least median organizational tenure (discussed in more detail in the Appendix). These criteria are exogenous to provincial political or mobilizational conditions. I aggregate funeral-eligible deaths to the province–year level using fighters’ birth provinces and estimate staggered DiD models with this reconstructed treatment. The results (see Appendix 10) are substantively and statistically similar to the primary findings, indicating that the effects do not hinge on local decisions to organize funerals but persist when treatment exposure is defined by a set of exogenous logistical constraints.

Placebo Tests

I conduct a series of placebo tests to rule out alternative explanations by isolating mechanisms that could plausibly shape mobilization but lack the legibility-enhancing properties central to the theory. First, I assess whether emotional responses to militant deaths account for the findings by substituting rebel martyrdom for funerals as the treatment. In this specification, the treatment is not the occurrence of a funeral, but the first year in which a fighter from a given province is killed, under the assumption that news of a fighter’s death circulates within the community and generates emotional reactions. These analyses yield null effects for both selective and overall recruitment (Appendix 11), undermining an affective emotional mobilization explanation. Second, I examine female martyrdom (e.g., the first year in which a female fighter from a province is killed) to test whether gendered recruitment patterns are driven by emotional identification with female fighters. These analyses likewise yield null effects on female recruitment (Appendix 12).

Third, I collect data on the timing and location of “PKK cemeteries” and use the construction of PKK cemeteries as a placebo for commemoration of PKK fighters without the participatory visibility required for legibility. Unlike funerals, cemetery construction memorializes fallen fighters without generating public gatherings. Cemetery establishment has no systematic effect on recruitment composition or levels (see Appendix 13), suggesting that the legibility-generating effects of funerals, rather than commemoration alone, primarily drive the findings, as theorized. Finally, I examine funerals for Turkish police and military personnel held in Kurdish-majority provinces as a placebo for exposure to funerary rituals unrelated to rebel governance. These state-organized funerals also show no effect on recruitment outcomes (Appendix 14).

Taken together, these placebo tests suggest that neither death, commemoration, gender-specific symbolism, nor funerary rituals in the absence of rebels per se reproduce the recruitment patterns

observed following rebel funerals, strengthening the claim that the effects operate through the legibility-generating aspects of performative rebel governance rather than alternative channels.

Rebel Territorial Control

A potential concern is that PKK funerals simply reflect routine governance practices in areas of sustained territorial control. If this were the case, funeral frequency should be strongly correlated with measures of PKK influence. To evaluate this possibility, I construct a province-level index of PKK influence using nationally representative survey data on coercive and governance-related rebel activity. As shown in Appendix 5, the correlation between funeral frequency and PKK territorial control is weak and statistically insignificant, and most funerals occur in provinces with low to moderate rebel presence. This pattern is inconsistent with an interpretation of funerals as routine governance in rebel strongholds.

Funerals-As-Success Signals?

Another concern is that funerals may deter recruitment not through risk or repression, but by signaling that the PKK is already strong, resilient, or broadly supported, thereby reducing the perceived need for additional participation. If this mechanism were at work, funeral frequency should be highest in provinces where residents perceive the PKK as especially strong. To assess this, I construct a province-level index of perceived PKK strength using survey data on how residents compare current PKK activity to its peak in the 1990s. As detailed in Appendix 6, the correlation between funeral frequency and perceived PKK strength is weak, and most funerals occur in provinces where the group is not seen as particularly strong. This pattern casts doubt on the claim that funerals demobilize by signaling rebel organizational strength.

Difficulty in Repatriation

One potential threat to identification is that funerals might be systematically constrained by state's attempts at preventing them from taking place, violating the assumption that their location and timing are plausibly random. If such constraints were operative, funerals would be less likely to occur in provinces farther from Malatya—the military headquarters where bodies are released, where greater distance may exacerbate logistical hurdles to repatriation—or in areas of strong PKK presence. To assess this, I first examine whether distance from Malatya predicts funeral frequency and find no significant relationship. I then test whether funerals are suppressed in PKK

strongholds by analyzing the association between rebel territorial influence and funeral rates. As shown in Appendix 7, this relationship is positive, suggesting that the Turkish state does not systematically prevent funerals from taking place in areas of strong rebel presence.

Preexisting State Surveillance and Repression

To rule out the possibility that funeral locations may reflect areas already under intense state surveillance, rather than generating new visibility and risk, I use survey data to construct a province-level index of perceived state repression, based on residents' agreement with the claim that civilians have been harmed in the fight against the PKK. If funerals merely reflected preexisting state attention, they should be more frequent in provinces with higher levels of perceived repression. As shown in Appendix 8, the relationship between perceived repression and funeral frequency is negative and not statistically significant. This suggests that funerals are not disproportionately held in provinces already targeted by the state, reinforcing the interpretation that they heighten visibility and trigger repression, rather than merely reflect preexisting state attention.

Organizational Strain

I also evaluate an alternative explanation that attributes the post-funeral decline in overall recruitment to organizational strain rather than to changes in civilian behavior. Under this account, the logistical burdens of organizing funerals divert scarce organizational resources away from recruitment, producing a general contraction in the PKK's recruitment capacity. While such internal strain is difficult to observe directly, it generates a clear empirical implication: if recruitment capacity is broadly constrained, recruitment should decline not only domestically but also among foreign-born fighters. By contrast, the legitimacy- and repression-based theory predicts no such effect, as its mechanism operates through localized surveillance and risk affecting civilians in Turkey. To test this implication, I estimate an interrupted time-series model using country-year data on the PKK's foreign recruitment from Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Germany, treating 2016—when funeral activity was most intense—as the breakpoint. The results (see Appendix 15) show no statistically significant change in either the level or trend of foreign recruitment after 2016. This absence of an organization-wide recruitment decline is difficult to reconcile with an organizational strain argument.

Funeral Gender Composition

Finally, a potential alternative explanation for the gendered recruitment effects I present is that they are driven by funerals for female fighters and gender-specific identification rather than by the performative properties of rebel funerals as public acts. If gender-specific role modeling were driving these effects, excluding funerals for female combatants should eliminate the observed increases in female recruitment. To assess this possibility, I redefine the treatment to exclude funerals commemorating female combatants, coding treatment only based on funerals for male fighters with police presence. I then reestimate the staggered DiD models for outcomes capturing the ratio of female recruits, female non-activist recruits, and female recruits without family ties. The results (see Appendix 9) mirror the main findings: exposure to male-fighter funerals is associated with significant increases across all three outcomes once controls are included. These patterns persist despite the absence of female martyrs, undermining an interpretation based on gender-specific role modeling.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that performative rebel governance, through public acts that mimic the symbolic repertoires of sovereign states, shapes both civilian mobilization and state repression. Using original event data on PKK funeral rites in southeast Turkey, I show that these ceremonies expand recruitment beyond traditional militant networks, particularly among women and individuals without activist backgrounds or family ties to the rebel movement. At the same time, they increase state surveillance and repression, leading to an overall decline in mobilization.

These findings contribute to the study of rebel governance and insurgent mobilization in several ways. First, they extend existing theories of rebel governance by showing that rebels do not require formal institutions or territorial control to govern politically; symbolic governance can shape insurgent-civilian relations by eliciting costly, public signals of allegiance. Second, the study provides systematic evidence that performative acts function as recruitment mechanisms by producing legibility that renders otherwise hidden civilian loyalties observable to both rebels and the state. Finally, the findings highlight an inherent dilemma of rebel governance in contested spaces: while public performances help insurgents overcome informational deficiencies by inducing civilians to reveal allegiances, they simultaneously expose these civilians to surveillance and repression, making the social landscape of war more legible to the enemy.

This study opens several avenues for further research. First, future work should examine performative rebel governance cross-nationally to assess when and where rebels rely on public performances rather than institutionalized governance, particularly under constraints on territorial control and administrative capacity. Second, more systematic research is needed on how variation in state surveillance capacity and information technologies conditions the legibility dilemma. Finally, while this study focuses on insurgent performances, governments also engage in symbolic governance during civil war. Future research should examine state-led public performances, such as martyrdom commemorations, counter-mobilization rallies, or military parades, to assess how states and insurgents compete in the symbolic realm to shape civilian behavior. Examining how conflict actors strategically manage visibility, not only violence, offers a promising avenue for understanding political mobilization in civil war.

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