

# **Diyarbakır’s Objects of Memory: “Restoration” of the Kurdish City into a *Biblokent*<sup>1</sup>**

Ceylan Begüm Yıldız

Turkey’s military take-over between August 2015 and April 2016 of Diyarbakır —the unofficial Kurdish capital of Southeastern Turkey — caused the deaths of several hundred people, the eviction of 50,000 more and the destruction of countless houses and monuments in its historic heart known as the Sur district. This article examines two speeches given in Diyarbakır at the time, which offer contrasting views not only on the recent conflict, but also on the city’s identity and Turkey’s so-called “Kurdish question” more generally. This paper investigates how the landmarks and monuments of the historical city have become bearers of those two contesting political positions through their significance as the city’s objects of memory.

The first speech was delivered by Tahir Elçi, a prominent Kurdish human rights lawyer, on 28 November 2015 in front of a damaged four-footed minaret. It was a call to end the violence which the minaret represented for Kurdish citizens under military operations. On the contrary, the second speech delivered by then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, on 1 April 2016 after the intensified military intervention in the historical district of Diyarbakır, reflected the government’s policies to wipe the spatial presence of the Kurdish identity, politics and resistance from the city through its “restoration” into a *biblokent*, or a “souvenir city” cleansed of the Kurdish identity for the consumption of tourists.

This article, in conversation with two other articles in this collection, exposes how landmarks and monuments obtain political meanings and become objects of contestation in relation to identity and memory.

---

<sup>1</sup>In memory of Tahir Elçi. I am indebted to Laurent Dissard for his invaluable contributions to this piece.

### Violence Resurrecting

The results of Turkey's general elections on 7 June 2015 dealt a significant blow to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, hereafter AKP) and resulted in AKP losing the Grand National Assembly's majority, due in part to an increase in the popularity of the Kurdish party-led leftist coalition party the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, hereafter HDP). This defeat would bring forth the end of an already shaky peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, hereafter PKK), which began in early 2013 and was mediated by the HDP.

After the June elections, Turkey's Southeastern<sup>2</sup> Kurdish regions quickly plunged into a spiral of violence. Officially ended in August 2015, the peace negotiations were quickly replaced by round-the-clock curfews and operations by the Turkish military in the Kurdish-majority cities. In the meantime, neither the AKP nor other parties succeeded in forming a government. As a result, general elections were repeated on 1 November, in the run-up to which repression of other parties' campaigns was intensified. In line with targeting the representatives of local government in Kurdish-majority cities of the Southeast, the HDP's campaign was targeted across Turkey with police raids on the party's offices and the detention of its members. In the November re-elections, the AKP came out as a clear winner by regaining the majority in parliament. While the Erdoğan-led AKP government had rekindled anti-Kurdish sentiments and policies after the first election through curfews and operations, the new regime of violence expanded rapidly across Kurdish-majority cities of Southeastern Turkey after the second.<sup>3</sup>

Zeynep Gambetti and Joost Jongerden in their recent work invited scholars to “shift the attention from outcome-oriented analysis of transformation in time towards a spatial analysis” in regard to

---

<sup>2</sup> The region's name changes according to one's political projection. While for some the geographic location is Southeastern Turkey, for others it is Northern Kurdistan. In this paper the region will be referred to as Southeastern Turkey with the aim of underlining the power of the Turkish state over the geography.

<sup>3</sup> For statistical data of violations that occurred before and after the second election see: Human Rights Association, “Violations of the Right to Live During the Curfews Between the Dates of 16 August 2015 – 11 February 2016: Statistical Data”, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://www.ihddiyarbakir.org/en>

Turkey's so called "Kurdish question".<sup>4</sup> This paper discloses some of the links existing between the recent social and political changes in state policies towards Kurds and the spatial transformations taking place in the region, with both indicating different aspects of state violence that are projected onto Diyarbakır's iconic artefact: the four-footed minaret.

Through the curfews and military operations of 2015, the region seemed to have returned to the infamous 1990s, during which the very same geography was subjected to a double regime of state of emergency rule and counter-terror law. However, what constitutes the main difference between the 1990s and 2015/16 is the spatial shift from rural to urban, which also determines the means of political contestation. As Joost Jongerden points out, although it had effects in the cities, the armed conflict of the 1990s was carried out in the rural spaces around Southeastern cities where Turkish military forces and PKK guerrillas fought to control the geography by establishing checkpoints in the rural space.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, by 2015 clashes had moved from a rural to an urban context, due in part to the forced migration triggered by the rural contestation of the 1990s. This spatial movement re-shaped the form of politicisation. Cities being the new battleground presented both new challenges and possibilities and had transformed the playbook of the Turkish state forces and of the Kurdish movement. While the role of the Turkish military and its rural extension through village guards (known as *korucular*) had slowly been reduced, the police and its expanding Special Operation Teams (*Polis Özel Hareket – PÖH*)<sup>6</sup> became the main forces conducting the operations of 2015. In response, the Kurdish movement began to use

---

<sup>4</sup> Zeynep Gambetti and Joost Jongerden, "Introduction: the Kurdish issue in Turkey from a spatial perspective" in *The Kurdish Issue in Turkey*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Joost Jongerden, "Looking beyond the state: transitional justice and the Kurdish issue in Turkey" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41(2018): 721-738.

<sup>6</sup> The government expressed plans to expand Special Operation Teams to combat terrorism in 2011 ; Bianet, "Özel Harekatçılar "Çoğalarak" Geliyor" *Bianet*, July 23, 2011, accessed December 28, 2017, <http://bianet.org/bianet/toplum/131680-ozel-harekatcilar-cogalarak-geliyor> The most recent amendment regarding the Special Operation Teams was made on 3 October 2016 by emergency decree no. 676 to ease the criteria for applicants. See, Resmi Gazete, "Olağanüstü hal kapsamında bazı düzenlemeler yapılması hakkında kanun hükmünde kararname" Resmi Gazete, October 29, 2016, accessed December 28, 2017, <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/10/20161029-5.htm>

new in-city tactics such as digging ditches, building barricades, and covering narrow streets with bed sheets to disable the movement and vision of armoured vehicles.<sup>7</sup> As Haydar Darıcı also observes: “[t]he curfews in Kurdish-populated towns have made it clear that the war is now taking place in cities rather than in the mountains”.<sup>8</sup>

A further element of dissimilarity is worth mentioning. Over the last decade, the AKP-led government’s discourse towards the Kurdish minority changed drastically. Unlike the persistent denial of the 1990s, the official state narrative of 2015 was acknowledging the existence of Kurds but preserved its opposition against the politicisation of Kurdish identity. However, the climate of peace and normalisation in Kurdish-majority cities also enabled an active political engagement and a flourishing civil society, which impacted on the dominant identity of the public space in Diyarbakır.<sup>9</sup>

In the introduction to this collection, Kanika Sharma and Federica Rossi highlight the importance of the creators of memorials in giving a form to the communication that objects of memories generate. Sharma and Rossi mention that, while natural and cultural memorials are often created by the state, such objects of memory can also be created as a reaction by people, spontaneously and on personal level. Furthermore, they add, while the former generates more of a nationalist message signifying ‘the unity of a society’, the latter challenges this portrayal. In the case of Diyarbakır, this emphasis on “the creator” takes another form. The creator of the memorial and the city’s objects of memory is also the author, who determines the form and terms of the conversation taking place in the public space; in other words, its dominant narrative. During the peace process, the Turkish state narrative of the 1990s, which was dominating the public space through military presence, was transformed into a lively discussion over Kurdish politics. The sudden reignition of violence in 2015 was not only a punishment for the June elections but also an

---

<sup>7</sup> Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK) Executive Board Co-Chairpersonship made a statement on 23 December 2015 on carrying out the struggle in cities; Bianet, “KCK: Resistance to be Carried Out to the End” *Bianet*, December 24, 2015, accessed December 28, 2017,

<http://bianet.org/english/politics/170470-kck-resistance-to-be-carried-out-to-the-end>

<sup>8</sup> Haydar Darıcı, “Of Kurdish Youth and Ditches”, *Theory & Event* 19 (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Zeynep Gambetti, “The Conflictual (Trans)formation of the Public Sphere in Urban Space: The case of Diyarbakır” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 32 (2005): 43-71.

attempt of the Turkish state to re-gain control over the city's dominant narrative through a systematic cleansing of Kurdish identity and politics.

This contestation over public space was first authored by Tahir Elçi, and later by then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, through the four-footed minaret. It is contestation over narration of the curfews, whether it is destructive or constructive, which holds the power of controlling the city's memory and thus to carve its future. In this regard, the manipulation of the memory and history of the minaret becomes yet another battleground between the Turkish state and the resisting Kurdish identity.

The press release in front of the minaret led by the prominent Kurdish human rights lawyer Tahir Elçi on 28 November 2015 and the speech delivered by then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu on 1 April 2016 represent the crystallisation of an identity struggle embodied in spaces and objects. While the discourses offered two different perspectives on Diyarbakır's past, present and future identity, they both nonetheless agreed in selecting objects of memory to transmit their broader political message. Representing the spatial shift from rural to urban that took place in the conflict, the city's historical landmarks, ancient monuments, architectural heritage and artefacts, as objects of memory, also gained heightened political significances at once. Building Diyarbakır's future, whether it is Elçi's vision of peace with Kurdish identity preserved or Davutoğlu's so-called "restoration" project, not only reflects on the city's objects of memory but the half-a-century-old political struggle is also being carried out in a new battlefield to gain authorship over the space through its objects of memory. This article focuses on one of those objects of memory as a starting point to think critically through Diyarbakır's politics of memory and the government's attempt to first destroy and later reconstruct its historic centre according to its identity as envisioned by the state. While the identity struggle of the Kurds took a spatial turn by tying Kurdish identity to the city's streets and monuments, the government's neo-liberal response of rebuilding Diyarbakır as a tourist attraction, a *bibloKent*, aims to erase exactly that identity. The reconstruction project is an attempt to create a new collective memory of the past through narrating its future.

### **Tahir Elçi and the Four-Footed Minaret**

In the midst of this rekindled conflict, on 26 November 2015 the human rights lawyer Elçi, who dedicated his life to defending Kurds within the Turkish legal system, posted a photograph from his Twitter account in opposition to the recent clashes in Kurdish cities (see figure 1). The image Elçi posted is of Diyarbakır's four-footed minaret, one of the city's architectural icons, recently caught in crossfire between Turkish security forces and resisting Kurdish youth, with two of its columns punctured by bullets; an act which Elçi called "an assassination" in his social media post. Two days later, on 28 November 2015, Elçi, accompanied by a group, delivered a press release calling for peace. Concerned with the deteriorating situation in the region, Tahir Elçi in his speech calls to end this resurrection of a regime of violence in Diyarbakır and other Kurdish-majority cities.

However, his call for peace was quickly silenced. Shortly after the end of the speech, gunshots erupted at the back of the crowd and a bullet struck Tahir Elçi in the head, killing him on the spot. After his assassination, people in Diyarbakır and Istanbul gathered in the streets mourning the human rights lawyer's death. Their chants of "We are all Tahir Elçi" echoed the marches organized in January 2007 after the assassination of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in front of his Istanbul office.<sup>10</sup> Like the pavement and the street on which Hrant Dink was found lying dead, the four-footed minaret transformed into an object of memory, a memorial of Tahir Elçi. However, before the minaret was inscribed by his death, it was Elçi himself who had chosen one of the historical icons of the city as a monument of the curfew.

Elçi labelled the damage done to the monument as an assassination; attributing it to an action done by a subject towards another living being. Such subjectification of the minaret inevitably recalls the people killed during the military operations in Kurdish cities under conditions resembling a siege. Here, the minaret is inanimate, silent, but standing tall while bearing the bullet wounds, and transformed into an object of memory of the ones killed during

---

<sup>10</sup> A few days later, Agos (the newspaper co-founded by Hrant Dink), published its headline in Kurdish; *Kevokeke din hate kuştin* or they have killed yet another pigeon. Agos, "Kevokeke din hate kuştin", *Agos*, December 3, 2015, accessed April 30, 2017, <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/13569/kevokeke-din-hate-kustin>

the operations and representing the escalated violence of 2015. Similar to the court cases that Elçi brought to the state's legal institutions, which told a different story to the 1990s, which a decade later led the state to recognise the existence of hundreds of mass graves across the Kurdish landscape,<sup>11</sup> this time the official narrative of the 2015 curfews was being challenged by the counter-archive embodied by the minaret.<sup>12</sup> The minaret standing tall in the middle of the violence and bearing those bullet wounds serves as an archive of the curfews' times.

The situation of the Kurdish/Turkish conflict resonates with the suppression of Chechen-Ingush identity by pro-Russian authorities that is discussed in Cornelia Klocker's contribution to the collection. As Klocker highlights, the struggle over identity is embodied in the monuments and landscapes by which spaces and objects gain a certain political significance and transform into objects of memory. To contribute further to her observations, I would like to emphasise the archival character of those objects of memory. It is this archival character of the objects of memory which transforms them into objects of political contestation. It is a political contestation to be the dominant narrative attached to the archive. As mentioned above, in the case of Diyarbakır during curfews, the identity struggle transformed into not only a struggle over the ownership of the cultural heritage, but also a struggle over the authorship of archive, which dominates the past, present and future through narrating the collective memory. Similar to the archival character of the two memorial plaques in Italy that Federica Rossi discusses in this collection, which generated a clash over their narrative, the situation of Diyarbakır's historical centre where the minaret is located resulted in two opposing narratives of the curfews. Furthermore, as the discussion generated from the opposing narratives of the two plaques in Italy reflects a discussion over shared memory of the 'years of lead',

---

<sup>11</sup> According to Human Rights Association's special report of 2014 on mass graves in Turkey, 49 mass graves were estimated to be in Diyarbakır alone, of which only 8 have been opened, consisting of 77 people. Human Rights Association, "Türkiye'de Toplu Mezarlar Raporu", 2014, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://www.ihddiyarbakir.org/Content/uploads/28148ca9-d128-4b4c-afde-87cec90eef89.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> More on the law as counter-archive see; Stewart Motha and Honni van Rijswijk, "Introduction: A counter-archival sense," in *Law, Memory, Violence: Uncovering the counter-archive*, edited by Stewart Motha and Honni van Rijswijk, 1-15. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016)

in the context of Diyarbakır the struggle over the narrative is a struggle over establishing a collective memory of the 2015 curfews.

In the press release the lawyer gave a voice to the minaret; “They have shot me from my feet, I have seen so many disasters and so many wars, but I have never seen such a betrayal.”<sup>13</sup> Through the minaret’s subjectification, the lawyer alongside his group of activists had approached this specific object of memory as a counter-archive standing against state-legitimised violence and military glorification. But, Tahir Elçi, as the next section exposes, would not be the only one using Diyarbakır’s icon to narrate its memory.

### **Diyarbakır as a *Bibloket***

After Elçi’s assassination, curfews and operations intensified even further in Diyarbakır as more military tanks, assault vehicles and soldiers occupied the city’s historic district of Sur. In addition, the intervention caused the destruction of houses, shops, churches, mosques and numerous other buildings. More than 50,000 people had now been displaced by the conflict in Diyarbakır’s centre between August 2015 and March 2016, while the ones left were facing evictions due to the renewal plans.<sup>14</sup>

On 1 April 2016, Ahmet Davutoğlu, then Prime Minister, delivered a victory speech in the historical district of Sur. In his speech Davutoğlu blamed the city’s destruction on the “terrorists” who put up barricades, dig trenches, break cities apart and “separate Turkish citizens from the Turkish nation.”<sup>15</sup> His government, he claimed, however, was able to overcome these obstacles and was prepared to wage the necessary war “until the day the valleys, mountains, plains of this beautiful country find calm and peace.”

---

<sup>13</sup> This quote and the ones in paragraphs further are taken from the transcript of the press release originally delivered in Turkish by Tahir Elçi. See: Bianet, “Tahir Elçi’nin Sözleri Unutulmasın”, *Bianet*, December 1, 2015, accessed April 30, 2017, <http://bianet.org/bianet/yasam/169777-tahir-elci-nin-sozleri-unutulmasin>

<sup>14</sup> Amnesty International, “Displaced and Dispossessed: Sur Resident’s Right to Return Home”, *Amnesty International*, 2016, accessed March 30, 2017, [http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/displaced\\_and\\_dispossessed\\_-\\_eng5\\_-\\_online\\_version.pdf](http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/displaced_and_dispossessed_-_eng5_-_online_version.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> The quotes in the paragraphs below all refer to Ahmet Davutoğlu’s speech given on 1 April 2016. See; Ak Parti YouTube Chanel, “Başbakan Davutoğlu, Diyarbakır Sur’daki Hasan Paşa Hanı’nda Konuştu”, *YouTube*, 2016, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9g7Vgt6Sa8E>



Ahmet Davutoğlu, in other words, arrived in Diyarbakır as its self-proclaimed saviour. His choice to speak inside a historic building located in the heart of the historical district of Diyarbakır was not a coincidence. Like Elçi four months earlier, the then- PM instrumentalised the city's iconic objects when he announced massive restoration projects in and out of the old city. His speech revealed the neo-liberal future projected by the government onto the Kurdish geography: "we will preserve the Heysel Gardens that are on the UNESCO cultural heritage list and will open it to tourism."<sup>16</sup> D Davutoğlu announced that the historical district of Sur will be transformed into a *bibloket*, or in other words a "souvenir city"; a sanitized place where tourists can freely come to visit. Here, the role of UNESCO is noteworthy. In October, it was the city's UNESCO-listed fortification walls' turn to be heavily damaged. Although the UNESCO cultural heritage list has been considered as recognition and an attempt at the preservation of Kurdish identity, similarly to the Italian case that Rossi highlights in this collection, during the times of clashes UNESCO adopted an objective discourse which disregarded the violence issued by the Turkish government. While UNESCO's report regarding the cultural heritage sites in Diyarbakır acknowledges the violent situation by stating that "[t]he security situation in Diyarbakır remains challenging for heritage preservation," the analysis fails to address the nearly half-a-century-old political contestation over identity that caused the damages done to those cultural sites.<sup>17</sup> However, the Kurdish case reveals an interesting interplay of politicisation/depolicitisation through UNESCO: while being on the UNESCO cultural heritage list itself has a political significance for a minority whose identity has been unrecognised and systematically suppressed, UNESCO's sterile discourse over such politically charged spaces and objects serves to depoliticise and ahistoricise the Kurdish

---

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO added the Diyarbakır Fortress (the outer border of the Sur district) and the adjoining Heysel Gardens to its world heritage list in July 2015, see; UNESCO, "Diyarbakır Fortress and Heysel Gardens Cultural Landscape", *UNESCO*, 2015, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1488>.

<sup>17</sup> Four months after the end of the military operation in Sur, UNESCO held its 40th meeting in Istanbul and released an observation report regarding the damage inflicted. UNESCO, "Reports on the State of Conservation of Properties Inscribed on the World Heritage List", *UNESCO*, 2016, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2016/whc16-40com-7BAdd2-en.pdf>

cities, transforming them into *biblokents*.

Moreover, the then PM not only wished to offer the city newly restored objects, but newly imagined collective memories as well. According to his speech, “the process that we [his government] launched in 2013 was in fact a restoration project to challenge the bad memories...” As Klocker and Rossi highlight in their contributions in reference to Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory is a reconstruction of the past through the lens of the present.<sup>18</sup> D Davutoğlu’s *biblokent* project for Diyarbakır is an attempt at creating a new collective memory through the perversion of the past and a shaping of the future in which a city aligns itself to the state’s dominant vision.

Once over, the military operation had killed multiple birds with the same stone. Supposedly initiated to eradicate terrorism, it had led to the possibility of gentrifying a city not only materially but also to cleanse it of its ethnic identity. The word “restore” is key throughout Davutoğlu’s speech. Allegedly carried out to “restore” order, the intervention would transform Diyarbakır’s urban identity also in terms of a neo-liberal project, by forcibly evicting the poor and later rebuilding to attract rich tourists and wealthier investors to profit from its future “restoration.” The AKP moreover hopes the city’s conversion into a *biblokent* will, in the long run, replace terrorism with tourism.

## Conclusion

Towards the end of his speech, Ahmet Davutoğlu compares the four-footed minaret to the Eiffel Tower, pointing out one major difference between the two monuments. While the Eiffel Tower only conjures up the image of Paris, he argued, the minaret evokes countless emotions, feelings and memories for different people. When declaring that “whoever visits the four-footed minaret sees something within themselves reflected on it,” Davutoğlu, after all, is perceiving the monument like Tahir Elçi did as an object of memory. But, even if the AKP does succeed in creating its *biblokent*, it will nonetheless have a difficult time eradicating the Kurdish identity and politics from the city. As Diyarbakır’s iconic object of memory, the monument has

---

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992).

turned into a *mournament* evoking the memories of Tahir Elçi as well as the other nameless victims of the military operations of 2015/16.

This collection contributes to the literature on how monuments and landmarks obtain political meanings and become objects of contested identity and memory through three distinct cases. Rossi, uncovers the ongoing politicisation and re-politicisation of political memory in Italy. She decrypts the political contestation reflected onto the objects of memory of two plaques which became symbols of political agency. Klocker adds another layer to the discussion and reflects on how a struggle over identity is a struggle over memory. She analyses the contestation embodied in the 'Day of Memory and Grief' in Chechnya and Russia's recent systematic attempts to build a national identity through its perversion. This article contributes to the literature analysing the "Kurdish question" through a spatial lens to expose how landmarks and monuments not only reflect a violent past and present but are also instrumentalised as sites of contestation over memory, history and identity. The objects of memory reveal the struggle between politicisation and depoliticisation, official narrative and counter-narrative, national identity and minority identity. As long as the struggle over political memory and identity continues, political contestations will always be reflected in plaques, monuments, landmarks, commemoration sites and days and they will bear significant meanings capable of inspiring political agency.