The continuation of war by other means

Narrations of violence and coercive urbanism in Sur, Diyarbakır

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When on November 28, 2015 the lawyer and human rights activist Tahir Elçi was lying shot on the ground, his lifeless body seemed to illustrate the opening lines of a famous song by Ahmet Kaya, written two decades earlier: "I lie down in the middle of Diyarbakır, shot to death. I'd recognize anywhere the sound of this bullet".[1] His corpse, prone on the basalt stone of the ancient walled town, thus recalled to many Kaya's lyrics about the violence that had ravaged the city in the '80s and '90s. As many other local prominent figures of political activism, journalism and culture before him, Elçi was gunned down in the street. The location and timing of his killing anticipated the rampage of violence unleashed on the city's body in the following months. At that time, amidst heightening tension between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish State, youth armed groups affiliated to the PKK were barricading themselves in the alleys of Sur, Diyarbakır's historical core, against the pressuring Turkish army. That morning, Elçi had just released a press-conference next to the 16th-century four-legged Minaret, calling for an end to clashes in order to save the city's architectural heritage. A bullet – which, later investigations concluded, might have come from a police officer's gun[2] – put an end to his life, inaugurating a spell of conflict during which both the population and the architectural heritage suffered long-lasting devastation. Retracing Diyarbakır's historical evolution and contested representations, here we analyse urban conflict and violence as omnipresent in the material and symbolic dimensions of the urban experience.

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Diyarbakır. Historical and cultural background

Diyarbakır, it could be argued, has historically embodied a space-time of conflict. The stone walls of this fortress city, guarding a disputed borderland over the Tigris, are a threshold between different worlds. Ever since the Assyrian conquest in the 9th Century B.C., up to the recent destruction at the hands of Turkish special security forces, chronicles are replete with ominous accounts of death and sorrow, war and blood. Western travellers in different epochs underlined Diyarbakır's dim and violent nature, where the sombre black basalt stones seem to naturally evoke mournful atmospheres. The British intellectual and political officer Gertrude Bell, in her notes penned in 1909, recalls a proverb: "Black are the dogs and black are the walls and black are the hearts of black Amid".[3] She imagines a

1 "Diyarbakır ortasında vurulmuş uzanırım. Ben bu kurşun sesini nerde olsa tanırım", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l--Vb7Vy36c&ab_channel=byahmetxan.

2 See Forensic Architecture: https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-tahir-elci, accessed 31/03/2021.

3 Diyarbakır had many names during its history, reflecting the contested nature of this city. The ancient Aramean Amid transposed into the Greek and then Latin Amida. By the Armenians it was known as Dikranagerd. After the Arab conquest, the city's name was turned into Diyar-i Bekr, later on ottomanized in Diyarbekir. In the early republican effort to turkify the toponymy of the region, the name was transformed according to the Turkish language vowel harmony in the actual Diyarbakır. Currently, many Kurds refer to it as Amed.

historical continuity of conflict: since the 4th century C.E. "the din of battle has never been far from Diyarbekir". At the time, memories of massacres of the Christian population by the Kurdish-Turkish Hamidian Cavalry (1894-96) were fresh: "There is no peace for the lawless capital of Kurdistan [...] The heavy air, lying stagnant between the high walls, is charged with memories of the massacres of 1895 . . . " (Johnson, 2007). Such slaughters foreboded the even larger Armenian genocide, through which the Christian population was almost entirely eliminated (Jongerden & Vereji, 2012). Ghostlike memories and the ruining architectural heritage of the Armenians have haunted the city throughout the 20th century, and beyond.

Since the early days of the Turkish Republic, founded in 1923, Diyarbakır became the main urban stage for the confrontation between the State and its sizable Kurdish minority. The freshly established Turkish army crushed in blood the Sheikh Said Revolt, a Kurdish rebellion that threatened to take over the city. Established Turkish writers and intellectuals, such as Halide Edib Adıvar and Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, fabricated a narrative about Diyarbakır that accentuated notions of backwardness and underdevelopment, whilst also highlighting exotic elements: they depicted the city as Turkey's inner orient (Öncü, 2011) in need of a *mission civilisatrice*. The city expansion was planned in modernist fashion (Bozdoğan, 2001): with its regular grid, green expanses, institutional buildings and official effigies, Yenişehir (the New City) embodies the Kemalist rhetoric of progress and modernity, set in sharp opposition to the "backward" neighbourhoods within the walls. The demolition of part of the walls in 1931 – purportedly to allow better ventilation (Beysanoğlu and Diken, in Gambetti, 2008) – effaced the physical boundary between the archaic, Ottoman Sur and the forward-looking, Turkish Yenişehir (Öktem, 2004). Again in the early '50s, the famous writer Yaşar Kemal describes two cities lying next to each other: "An old one inside the walls; and a new one outside [. . .] An oriental city and a modern one. A city of contradictions" (Kemal, 2011).

In the following decades, the tension between the State and the local population escalated. The expansion reflected, and was deeply influenced by, the conflict: massive waves of migrants were driven there first by economic needs, then fleeing violence in rural areas (Barut, in Gambetti, 2008) – and became the largest Kurdish urban centre and the epicentre of Kurdish politics. After a certain democratic development of the public sphere through 1960s and '70s, the 1980 military coup kicked-off a season of widespread violence characterized by extrajudicial killings and clashes: the infamous "Hell of Diyarbakır". During those years, Diyarbakır's prison acquired a notorious reputation as site of torture and ethnic annihilation that bequeathed cumbersome memories (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2009; Çaylı, 2015) and a highly politicized generation. In 1984, the conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK erupted, resulting in more than 40,000 deaths, half of which civilians (Gambetti, 2008), and in the displacement of about 3 million people (Jongerden, 2009). In those years, while the Kurdish region was legally defined and ruled as a space of exception under the OHAL Emergency Law (Watts, 2009), Diyarbakır's population almost tripled (Gambetti, 2008) and the city expanded dramatically, wedged between a vast military base and the military airport, as in a spatial rendering of the chokehold imposed over the Kurdish population. The inflow of refugees has resulted in sprawling shantytowns, by now consolidated neighbourhoods, yet still exhibiting a crammed urban fabric of unrefined apartment blocks. Deriving from the brutal uprooting of hundreds thousands of people, these neighbourhoods are a breeding ground for resistance against the State: their narrow alleys and maze-like structure are sites of periodical clashes with security forces.

Travelling through Diyarbakır in the late 1990s, William Darlymple (1998) described its "bloody reputation" and the "ruthless attempt" of the Turkish military to crush the Kurdish insurgency. Those were times in which Turkey's South-East in general was commonly equated to an area of terrorism and disorder in the public opinion, with the media diffusing depictions of Diyarbakır as a dangerous and disreputable place. The cultural industry reinforced an atmosphere of spatial, temporal and

political "otherness" around the city. In 1999, Orhan Pamuk called it "the center of the Kurdish Revolt and its biggest prison" (Pamuk, 1999). Novels characterized the city with orientalizing overtones, and TV-series contributed in constructing an image of savagery and threat. Some films told the suffering of the city from the local's perspective, such as Yılmaz Güney's *Yol,* showing a Diyarbakır tormented by poverty, honor code and tribal violence. Kurdish productions, such as *Min Dît* (2009) or *Press* (2011), recounted the memories of the violent 1990s. Throughout the past decades, Diyarbakır has thus been shaped by material coercion, framed in a narrative of insecurity and disorder which has, in turn, justified oppressive measures. The recent siege, destruction, and ongoing restructuring are the latest developments in a long lineage of physical and discursive violence.

Sur. Destruction and reconstruction of the historical neighbourhoods

In the 1980s, Diyarbakır is described as a colonized city by the prominent Kurdish writer Mehmed Uzun: the basalt walls are recast as the defenders of the local population, besieged by the intruding Turkish State, and the enceinte is seen as the emblem of Kurdish sufferings, but also as a bastion of pride, courage and resistance, its centuries-old stones imaginatively protecting its authenticity. Pro-Kurdish parties (in power at local level since 1999) have embarked in an ambitious process of urban redesign and cultural redefinition, seeking for a far-reaching "decolonization" (Gambetti, 2008). This endeavor, now abruptly interrupted, countered the State narrative and stereotypical cultural constructions. The municipality-led process of rediscovery and valorization of the city's multicultural heritage focused in particular on Sur, the ancient walled city still holding the traces of a pluralistic past and of its violent wipe-out, and led to the inscription of Sur and the Hevsel Gardens into UNESCO's world heritage list.

Only a few months later, armed conflict broke out in Sur. The escalation started in October 2014, when more than thirty died during widespread protests against the Government's idleness in front of Kobani's siege by the ISIS just across the border. During the final pro-Kurdish rally in the run-up for the parliamentary elections, an explosive attack killed two, leaving more than a hundred injured. Following the contested vote of June 2015,[4] youth groups affiliated to the PKK announced the creation of "autonomous zones" inside neighbourhoods across Turkey's South-Eastern cities. In Diyarbakır, they concentrated in Sur's Eastern quadrant (Genç, 2016). During the ensuing 103 days of urban warfare, in which guerrilla fighters confronted State security forces, large swathes of the walled city have been damaged. Much of the local population – about 23,000 – has fled the clashes, never to return. Those who remained were placed under curfew.

Throughout the battle, the State employed visual propaganda produced by its forces from within the besieged war zone, replete with sexist messages to display the subjugation as a "rape" of the Kurdish city by the Turkish State (Protner, 2018). This "technique of systematic political violence" (ibid.) overlaid the ongoing brutality with a layer of symbolism of humiliation. Subsequently, the authorities blocked access to the area and bulldozed most of the remaining buildings, preparing the reconstruction process in total secrecy. When visiting Diyarbakır soon after the fight, the then prime minister Davutoğlu declared that Sur will be turned "into a new Toledo", referencing the Spanish town whose historic core, badly damaged during the civil war, is now a well-restored tourist destination. The reconstruction currently underway aims at remodeling the flattened neighborhoods into a sanitized and securitized historical fake, where selected monuments are embedded into a fabric of historicized buildings, branded as "traditional Diyarbakır houses", actually cheap concrete replicas of vernacular typologies covered in thin basalt slabs. In a widely circulated promotional video, the intention to

4 In the elections of June 7, 2015, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) won 13% of the vote and entered parliament for the first time, depriving Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) of its absolute majority.

transform Sur from a living urban space into a sterile touristic product is expressed with the line: "The best future is the one which comes from the past". The city's multicultural and ethnically mixed character is replaced by a selectively crafted historic identity, a generic "Ottoman" fantasy of social cohesion, conservatism and Islamic faith (Öktem, 2020). This way, the "urbicidal" act is not confined to the wartime destruction, but unfolds throughout the reconstruction.

The transformation also extends beyond war-damaged neighbourhoods, targeting the entire Old Town. The central government had plans for redeveloping Sur since long before the armed confrontation, so that the uprooting of PKK is widely believed to be only a secondary objective of the operations, the main purpose being emptying Sur of its inhabitants for an all-out urban transformation drive (HLRN, 2016). In March 2016, caustically in coincidence with the Kurdish festivity of Newroz, the authorities announced the emergency expropriation of the entire walled city. This drastic measure forcibly dispossessed more than 50,000 inhabitants, leaving citizens legally unarmed in front of the government's urban policies and paving the way for a wholesale urban makeover. Soon afterwards, the city's elected HDP co-mayors were arrested for alleged links to the PKK. Ever since, Diyarbakır has been administered by a trustee appointed by Ankara.[5] Activists from Diyarbakır's Chamber of Architects, on the frontline against the redevelopment, have written: "The projects arrive straight from Ankara. No one objects. The heritage protection authority stays silent. Everyone is scared" (interview, 2017). With the main political-administrative obstacle removed, the government has free rein to reshape the city according to its own image.

The effects of this administrative onslaught on the city's fabric are more evident in Lalebey and Alipaşa, two neighbourhoods that were not massively damaged during the conflict, but have been forcibly redeveloped afterwards. An urban renewal project was already underway since 2009, but plodded along slowly, faced with opposition by residents. After the war, it was swiftly pushed forward by brute force. Bulldozers tore down emptied buildings, light and electricity were cut in some areas with the explicit aim to force people out. Residents struggling to resist had to carry in water from outside, relying on generators and candles at night, when the only light was the neon glaze from the new massive police station. Affected families were supported by associations and parties organized in the Sur Support Platform. Despite the concerted effort to hold ground, resistance proved ineffective. In summer 2017, the entire area was emptied and fenced off. The reconstruction is now almost completed with new properties reportedly selling for between 500,000 and 2 million Turkish liras (Doğruhaber, 2020), unaffordable to most former residents.

The overarching aim of this urban transformation is to reengineer Sur's political and ethnic demography, efface local memory and culture, and reap the profits from urban speculation made possible by forced dispossession (SAMER, 2017). In the five years since the war broke out, the process hurriedly moved on, alongside a conspicuous militarization of urban space. Fortified police stations have been installed across Sur, raising concerns that the reconstruction plan will cut through areas that survived the conflict physically unscathed, with straight wide streets replacing the maze of alleys in order to guarantee visual control and, if need be, straight lines of fire. As we write, the old town of Sur is going through a massive project of repossession of urban space by the government, remarking the military conquest at physical and symbolic level. The State is deploying an impressive array of measures, from legal procedures to spatial militarization, from symbolic acts and rhetoric to population management and urban design implementation. In such a radical and comprehensive urban transformation drive, the line between city-making and violence is blurred: spatial restructuring is being carried out as an instrument of coercion; violence – physical and symbolic – is being employed as an urban develop-

5 In March 2019, HDP won the local elections again. However, a few months later, in August 2019, the appointed mayor Zeyyat Ceylan was arrested and removed from office on charges of "terrorism", and replaced by a government-appointed trustee, as has happened in many other cities in the South-East.

ment tool. This is an example of State violence exercised *through* the city, a coercive "post-conflict" urbanism that actually embeds a war-like logic in the urban fabric, amounting to the continuation of war by other means.

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