

## **A TALE OF TWO CITIES: SUR BEFORE AND AFTER**

Anna Rebrii  
Independent Researcher

Idil Onen  
Independent Researcher

William Scarfone  
Goldsmith University

### **Abstract**

While human rights violations committed by the Turkish state during and after the 2015-2016 military operation in Sur have been well documented and severely criticized, there has been no comprehensive field research to establish the continuity between the destruction of the city's built environment and the displacement of the population by military means and by means of the subsequent urban renovation. This continuity will be established by examining how these two interconnected aspects of state violence are employed for the purposes of ethnic governance. To this end, this research will identify the convergence of the state's political goals of maintaining hegemonic power and economic interests behind the state's construction plans through a) examination of the demographic profile and urban planning before and after the conflicts, b) analysis of the key beneficiaries of the developments in Sur and c) analysis of the continuity between discursive strategies of war on terrorism and urban renovation employed by the state. As victims affected by these developments have still not been compensated for their losses and continue to be subjected to rights violations by the state, not only in Sur, but also in other cities of Turkey's southeast where the military operations took place, it is urgent to uncover the full extent of devastation brought about by both processes of military intervention and urban renovation and to identify the key beneficiaries who should be held accountable.

### **Background**

The monumental disruption of the Kurdish population came about after the 1980 coup in Turkey when state violence against Kurdish communities caused the displacement and dispersion of hundreds of thousands of people. The evacuations and burning of more than 3 thousands of villages in the predominantly Kurdish southeast by the Turkish military forced up to a million to flee and settle in the big cities, such as Diyarbakir's historic city district Sur. In 2013, after the long history of violence, peace talks began between the Kurdish opposition, represented by its military wing, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the Turkish government. This shifted once again after the 2015 parliamentary elections when the People's Democratic Party (HDP) of the

Kurdish movement entered the parliament challenging the majority of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP). As the peaceful discourse of the Turkish state changed to designate the Kurdish opposition as ‘terrorist,’ military operations resumed in December 2015 to suppress uprisings in majority-Kurdish cities, causing once again the displacement of the population. Unlike the past conflicts which displaced rural communities to urban areas, these operations demolished urban landscapes and turned them into warzones. Sur, despite being a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was subjected to a destruction that left several of its neighborhoods leveled and their residents brutally evicted.

To understand the full range of tools of violence used by the state in the erasure of Sur’s social and built environment and to counter the state’s obfuscating narrative that puts the blame for this destruction on the Kurdish opposition -- which we attempt to do within the framework of our project -- it is crucial to look beyond the urban warfare and recognize the continuity between various developments that have taken place in Sur before, during and after the 2015-2016 military operations. Before introducing the method of countersurvey that we use to document the destruction, we will examine the continuity of three forms of state violence which we identify as urban regeneration, warfare destruction and post-war reconstruction.

### **Urban Regeneration of Sur**

The project of urban regeneration of two neighborhoods in the eastern Sur was initiated in 2008 -- seven years before the conflict -- by state actors: the centrally appointed governorship and the public housing agency TOKI. Their proclaimed objective was to turn Sur into a trade and tourism center by demolishing informal housing -- constructed primarily by the rural Kurds displaced in the 1990s -- and replacing it with standard TOKI multi-storey buildings, thus completely transforming the traditional face of the city and evicting its poor population (Bakan 2018, 94-95). While claiming a commitment to the preservation of Sur’s heritage -- which is of a great symbolic importance to the Kurdish population -- the state in fact intended to foster tourism- and construction-based profit by capitalizing on Sur’s history (Genç 2014, 166). The project was contested, however, by Diyarbakır Metropolitan and Sur municipalities that had been under the control of the Kurdish movement’s political parties since 1999 and entered the project with the hope of minimizing the detrimental effects of displacement and ensuring that construction comply with Sur’s traditional architecture and urban design. The state responded with top-down measures and declared the entire Sur a natural disaster ‘risk area,’ followed by an ‘urgent expropriation decision’ for several neighborhoods where urban transformation was taking place. Local actors interpret both decisions as the state’s justification for the use of centralized methods of coercion to enforce its way. Even as the state was not able to bring its plan to fruition at this stage -- partially due to the residents’ opposition against being evicted and moved out outside Sur -- the destruction was resumed with the beginning of the military operations in the fall of 2015.

## **Sur as a Warzone**

Under the pretext of neutralizing the Kurdish “terrorists,” the Turkish state declared the total of more than 300 curfews -- in effect round-the-clock blockades, in some cases lasting months -- between August 2015 and May 2018 throughout the majority-Kurdish southeast. Sur was placed under a 103-day-long curfew, which is still in effect in some parts of the city. Like in other cities where the operations were carried out, the destruction of the built environment by heavy artillery and tanks went hand in hand with the forced displacement of the residents, totalling up to 40,000 people in Sur alone.

The destruction of the civilian structures was carried out both by the state security forces who targeted civilians and civilian objects, and by bulldozers that entered the area already during the operations. It can be seen from satellite imagery, collected by the local opposition, that by the end of the operations the state forces razed to the ground an area where the conflicts took place and created wide roads to enable the passage of military vehicles, destroying registered historical buildings in the process (Soyukaya 2016, 7).

## **After the Conflict: War through Other Means**

Yet, most of the destruction took place after the military operations ended. While the state blamed the “terrorists” for the devastation inflicted during the war, a new line of justification was produced for the continuation of demolitions afterwards. Just days after the official termination of the operations, the state issued an ‘urgent expropriation decision’ for the territory which had not yet been in its possession -- thus completing the process of expropriation started before the conflict -- in order to give the appearance of legality to the process of violent eviction and dispossession of residents (TMMOB 2019, 46).

The reconstruction of Sur, which officially began in January 2017, became a darling project of the highest officials in the Turkish government, with President Erdogan christening it “The Sur Renewal Project.” The official discourse is strikingly reminiscent of the period of urban regeneration before the conflict: the state is reviving and securitizing the city, while at the same time renovating its historical features in order to turn it into an “attraction center.” In addition to the construction taking place in the conflict zone, the process of urban transformation was resumed in eastern Sur. Seizing the opportunity presented by the conflict, the state moved in with full force to implement the plan that was thwarted in 2014. The neighborhoods in question were demolished with the violence that matched that of the military operations just a year earlier. The erection of the first new buildings mimicking the city’s traditional design in neighborhoods

which had been flattened by the state both through the means of warfare and urban regeneration, foreshadows a complete erasure of the city's social, cultural and political identity -- and its replacement with a copy without substance.

### **Methodology: Survey / Countersurvey**

Pursuant to the risk designation of Sur in 2013, a photographic survey was carried out by municipality officers. They walked around the city, methodically photographing every parcel according to the cadastral map, and produced an extensive body of excel sheets cataloguing the ostensible risk of the building stock shown in the photos. This survey was the substantiation of the risk designation, which was eventually cited as a justification for the expropriation and transformation of large swathes of the city. In this case, the photographic survey was instrumentalized to strip inhabitants of their rights to land and home, transferring them to the State as a right to transform the urban landscape.

Ariela Azoullay has argued, in her text *Unlearning Images of Destruction*, that the production of images rests on the same set of rights that have historically enabled colonization. These are “*the right to destroy existing worlds, the right to manufacture a new world in their place, the rights over others whose worlds are destroyed together with the rights they enjoyed in their communities and the right to declare what is new and consequently what is obsolete.*” Her claim is that the imperial devastation of varied lifeworlds is the “pervasive and perspective-changing” device of a long-modernity more significant than any particular technical apparatus, such as the camera. The argument rests on a complex appraisal of the relationship between images and destruction. The lack of documentary images of deep-historical instances of imperial annihilation and forced reorganization-- as in the colonization of the Americas-- and indeed of those more recent instances which constitute the margins of contemporary history, does not evidence their non-occurrence, nor suggest that they occurred differently. Instead it evidences the insufficiency of “documentary protocols,” which often obstruct a historical comprehension of the piling of catastrophe on catastrophe as the ongoing foundation of modern history. Actually, photography does not only document but often facilitates such forms of destruction, as Allan Sekula noted in the context of the impossible history of a Kurdish National image in his review of Susan Meiselas’ *In the Shadow of History*.

The survey form is perhaps the clearest example of the role that image-production serves in colonial process of dispossession, destruction and transformation. In fact, Azoullay cites in her essay a photographic survey conducted during the early stages of the French colonization of Algiers. It's worth noting, in the context of urban transformation, that the Haussmannization of Paris was based on counterinsurgent spatial operations developed by the French in 19th-century Algeria, and that Haussmannization itself involved an extensive, commissioned project of photographic survey.

When we were given the images of Sur, however, we noticed that it functioned in two directions simultaneously. The surveyors' devastating gaze was intensely felt in the images, and, due to the occasional blur caused by the ambulant process of the survey, one could almost feel the "risky" buildings decomposing before their eyes. This wasn't helped, probably, by the fact that when we viewed the images and corresponding excel sheet catalogues we had already visited the architectural mass-grave where the rubble of so many of the buildings shown had been dumped next to the Tigris during and after the conflict. On the other hand, though, the survey, in its indifferent and somewhat pedestrian documentation of minor architectural details of every inch of the urban fabric presented a comprehensive picture of the destroyed texture of the city as the quotidian, habitual living space of thousands. The counter-function of this survey, where it worked as an archive against the grain of its intended purpose, got us thinking.

Ariel Caine's work at Forensic Architecture, who is consulting on this project, deals extensively with the practical and theoretical implications of photogrammetry in the production of counter-forensic images. Given the non-perspectival and distributed character of photogrammetry, and the grounded, ambulant way in which photogrammetric image-space is produced, it might be instrumentalized as a kind of collaborative process that would subvert the stable, unilateral control-perspective of the State to produce a "ground truth" of contested rights claims.

In Sur, we adopted the methodology of the surveyors of destruction, methodically walking, charting and photographing the entirety of a threatened neighborhood, possibly the next to be destroyed, in order to generate a substantial archive of images that could be activated in relation to the built environment. In our case, however, rather than substantiating the State's claim on the right to dispossess and transform, we set out to counter it. The neighborhood in question is indeed at risk of collapse, but by the bulldozers of the State, where it would follow in the wake of four other neighborhoods, completely demolished in the wake of the military operations and since partially reconstructed for control and profit. The Muhtar (local administrator) of the threatened neighborhood, who accompanied and guided us on our survey, has spearheaded an initiative to restore and register the neighborhood's historic buildings in an attempt to bureaucratically block their destruction. In our ongoing project, we are attempting to contribute to this process by producing a scaled, navigable and three-dimensional model of the street pattern and texture of the neighborhood, accompanied by video interviews in its historic courtyards. This is intended to generate a living archive of the neighborhood that would support the claims of its residents to the right to its unique urban memory and ways of life. This is what we are calling a counter-survey.

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