

# Urban Destruction and Redevelopment as Counterinsurgency: The Void, The Limbo and New Face of Sur

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## Abstract

*This commentary<sup>2</sup> explores the relationship between counterinsurgency strategies, urban destruction, and redevelopment via their impacts and manifestations on urban space through an ethnographic case study in Sur, the old town of Diyarbakır. Sur has been home to working class, marginalized and low-income Kurdish families, thousands of which have been displaced during and after the urban warfare between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2015-16. I discuss how urban destruction and redevelopment are used as counterinsurgency strategies under the AKP regime to subjugate the Kurdish cities, which have been the center of collective resistance and grassroots opposition.*

*My grounded conceptualization follows the physical fractions in Sur: The void focuses on flattened and emptied areas of Sur. The tools for emptying involve curfews, deliberate destruction of the built environment, depopulation of the area, urgent expropriations, and*

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**Acknowledgement:** This research was funded by The Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna.

<sup>2</sup> This commentary is based on my master's thesis submitted to the Central European University (CEU), entitled 'Urbanism as Counterinsurgency: Subjugation Through Urban Destruction and Redevelopment in Sur, Diyarbakır' (Tas, A., 2022, Master's thesis, CEU).

*the extension of horizontal and vertical visibility in the redevelopment process for security purposes. The limbo focuses on parts of Sur where all land and properties are urgently expropriated but not demolished yet and unveils the temporality of displacement as a constant threat for the residents. It also discusses the everyday life of the displaced people who still couldn't be able to establish a stable life. Lastly, New Face focuses on the newly built environment in Sur and exposes the tools of state-led tourism/commercial gentrification; securitization; and depopulation during the neoliberal redevelopment process.*

## Introduction

In August 2015, following the collapse of the tentative Peace Process -between the Turkish state, the Kurdish politicians (mainly members/MPs of HDP) and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)- to resolve the Kurdish Question, armed conflicts erupted between the Turkish armed forces and the PKK in Diyarbakır, among other Kurdish cities. Diyarbakır, the unofficial capital of Kurdistan, is located in Southeastern Turkey, currently covering an area of 15,355 km<sup>2</sup>, with 17 districts and 1.8 million inhabitants. The long-lasting rural warfare between the Turkish state and the PKK transformed into urban warfare in 2015, with districts of Kurdish cities -Sur of Diyarbakır- turning into urban fronts of the war. During and after the clashes, the Turkish state forces bulldozed houses -even entire neighborhoods- and forcefully displaced nearly half a million people. There has been growing attention to these processes in Diyarbakır and other Kurdish cities. Tas<sup>3</sup> evaluates the urban transformation in Sur, Diyarbakır as military urbanism and colonial architecture; Genc<sup>4</sup> considers the rehabilitation of Sur as a part of the post-conflict urban regime; and Saadi<sup>5</sup> focuses more on the temporality of displacement through the experiences of Sur's residences. This commentary aims to contribute to the emerging literature by bringing counterinsurgency into focus to broaden our understanding of the

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<sup>3</sup> Tas, D. (2022). Turkey's Military Urbanism and Neocolonial Architecture in Kurdish Cities. *The Commentaries*, 2(1), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.33182/tc.v2i1.2100>

<sup>4</sup> Genc, F. (2021). Governing the Contested City: Geographies of Displacement in Diyarbakır, Turkey. *Antipode*, 53, 1682-1703. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12753>

<sup>5</sup> Saadi, S. (2021). Waiting for justice amidst the remnants: urban development, displacement and resistance in Diyarbakır. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 29(3), 847-861.



urban destruction and redevelopment processes in Kurdish cities since 2015. By focusing on the old town of Diyarbakır, Sur, I expose the relationship between counterinsurgency strategies<sup>6</sup>, urban destruction, and urban redevelopment via their impacts and manifestations on urban space.

Counterinsurgency, as a concept, was conceptualized as early as the 18th century by Santa Cruz de Marcenado to understand early signs of an insurgency and to develop strategies to prevent and counter such insurgencies<sup>7</sup>. Contemporarily, it is defined as “the blends of comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously contain insurgency and address its root causes,” whereas “unlike conventional warfare, non-military means are often the most effective elements, with military forces playing an enabling role”<sup>8</sup>. Graham<sup>9</sup> argues that in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 world, both insurgent and state violence are constituted by “*the systematic and planned targeting of cities and urban places*”<sup>10</sup>. Correspondingly, counterinsurgency tactics are also adapted to urban settings. However, the contemporary counterinsurgency strategies in urban destruction and reconstruction date much earlier than 1991. I argue that the tactics of flattening and annihilation of urban areas, widening streets, and depopulating groups that are deemed dangerous to prevent insurgencies during the French invasion of Algiers in the 1840s<sup>11</sup> and the Haussmanization of Paris between 1853 and 1870<sup>12</sup> are still prevalent in contemporary Middle East, Sur being one of the examples. I use the term counterinsurgency to refer to any kind of (military or non-military, such as urban) strategies to contain

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<sup>6</sup> For conceptualization of the relationship between urban and warfare, and militarization of urban space, see; Graham, S. (2004b). *Constructing Urbicide by Bulldoze in the Occupied Territories*. In S. Graham (Ed.). *Cities War and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics* (pp. 198-214). Oxford: Blackwell;

<sup>7</sup> Heuser, B. (2010). *The Strategy Makers: Thoughts on War and Society from Machiavelli to Clausewitz*. Santa Monica, CA: Greenwood/Praeger.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide. (2009, January). *United States Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative*. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Graham, S. (2004). Postmortem city. *City*, 8(2), 165-196.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 170, emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> See Graham (2004).

<sup>12</sup> See Misselwitz, P. & Weizman, E. (2013, August). *Military Operation as Urban Planning*. *Mute*. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/military-operations-urban-planning>

insurgencies, prevent them before happening or eliminate any possible condition that may provide a basis for future insurgencies. Counterinsurgency, in this sense, involves much more than active warfare or direct intervention. It is also combined with and mostly masked by economic (re)development policies and claims.

After providing a brief background of Sur and how it turned into one of the urban warfare fronts, I exhibit the ineluctable relationship between urban and counterinsurgency strategies through my ethnographic case study with the concepts of void, limbo and new face. My ethnographic case study is based on (1) quantitative and qualitative data collected from different sources, (2) visualization of Sur through maps and satellite images, and (3) two and a half months of fieldwork (between January-March 2022) in Diyarbakır. I conducted two expert interviews and nine semi-structured interviews with the displaced people/families and the small shopkeepers of Sur, in addition to two field tours with informants and countless observation walks in Sur. During these ethnographic field tours and walks, I took more than a thousand photos (some of which are used in this commentary), which reflect the war in Kurdish cities, destruction, reconstruction, emptiness, and the traces of the old and ongoing everyday life in Sur.

### **Sur turning into an urban warfare front**

Surrounded by the thousands of years old city walls, with its labyrinthine narrow streets and dense urban fabric, the old town of Diyarbakır, Sur was officially accommodating over 50.000<sup>13</sup> people before the clashes started.

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<sup>13</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK). (2015). Adrese Dayalı Nüfus Kayıt Sistemi Sonuçları. Merkezi Dağıtım Sistemi. <https://biruni.tuik.gov.tr/medas/?locale=tr>



Images 1&2. Central Diyarbakır and Sur before clashes, 2015<sup>14</sup>



The socio-economic conditions of the families were marked by being low-income Kurdish families who live off precarious jobs<sup>15</sup>. Most of the families lived in *gecekondu* houses which had been densely built with the migration to the city during the forest and village burnings

<sup>14</sup> Google Earth Pro (2022); the border of Sur added by the author.

<sup>15</sup> Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). (2016, September). Sur Raporu. <https://hdp.org.tr/Images/UserFiles/Documents/Editor/Surraporu.pdf>



in rural Kurdistan by the Turkish military forces in the 1990s<sup>16</sup>. The effects of the rural warfare between the PKK and the Turkish forces in the 1990s reflected on Diyarbakır in the shape of torture in the prison cells, high pressure on civil society and constant fear on the streets. However, at the beginning of the 2000s, with the effects of the unilateral ceasefire in 1998, the election of the pro-Kurdish party HADEP-DEHAP in 1999, and the December 1999 Helsinki Summit, the city had been immensely transformed into a fertile place for civil society activists. The immediate impact of the forced displacement of the 1990s, unemployment, and neglect of the state in terms of infrastructure was heightened political consciousness, which partially explains the overwhelming support given to the municipality in the election of 1999<sup>17</sup> and the further elections (by votes between 54,5 to 81,5%). The neighborhoods of Sur have become the backbone for Kurdish resistance in the city as counter spaces not only because they became the fortresses in every protest as the police were unable to enter with the heavy vehicles to the narrow streets; but also because the support to the pro-Kurdish party in elections guaranteed the control over local governance in the city. The pro-Kurdish party holding the local governance legitimized the existence of Kurdish identity and provided the opportunities to regulate local economic relations thanks to the 2008 Metropolitan Municipality Law.

Yet, the atmosphere of the city and the region changed radically after the collapse of the Peace Process. On 12 August 2015, under the gradually increasing state violence and oppression, the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) stated, "For the people of Kurdistan, there has been no option left but self-governance"<sup>18</sup>. The local municipalities of the Kurdish cities ruled by the pro-Kurdish party, DBP (Democratic Regions Party), started to declare self-

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<sup>16</sup> See Jongerden, J. et al. (2007). Forest Burning as Counterinsurgency in Turkish-Kurdistan: An analysis from space. *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 21(1&2).

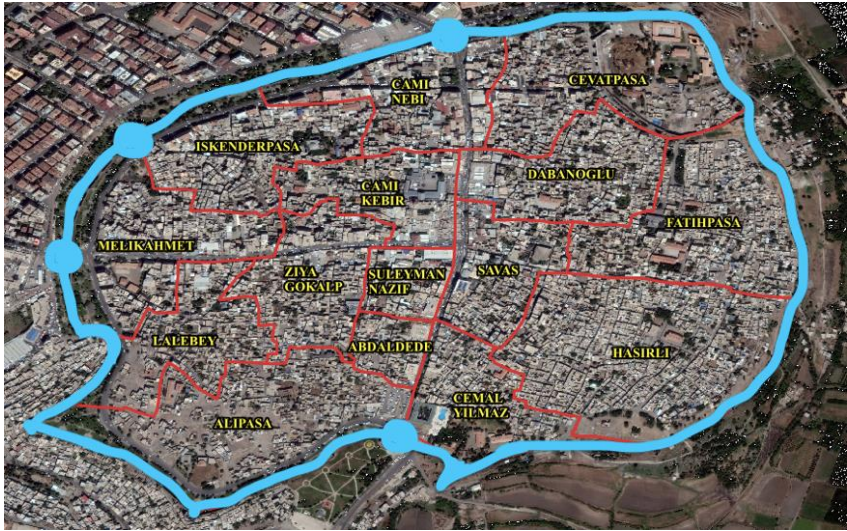
<sup>17</sup> Gambetti, Z. (2005). The Conflictual (Trans)formation of the Public Sphere in Urban Space: The case of Diyarbakır. *New Perspective on Turkey*, 32, 43-71.

<sup>18</sup> Oz yönetim ilan edilen merkez sayisi 16'ya yükseldi. (2015, August 20). T24 Independent Online News. <https://t24.com.tr/haber/oz-yonetim-ilan-edilen-merkez-sayisi-16ya-yukseldi,306949>



governance -including the Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality and the Sur Municipality-. The insurgents built barricades, backed up by ditches to make the movement of armored vehicles harder, in dense neighborhoods of Sur.

**Map 1.** *Neighborhoods of Sur, 2015*<sup>19</sup>



Blue lines: the city walls / Blue circles: the main gates / Red lines: the neighborhood borders

The clashes concentrated on the eastern half of Sur, covering the neighborhoods of Hasırlı, Cevatpaşa, Fatihpaşa, Dabanoğlu, Cemal Yılmaz, and Savaş<sup>20</sup>. The Turkish state declared these actions terrorist activities which threatened the nation's unity; the operation to oppress the “terrorism” was named “Operation Ditch.” The governor declared round-the-clock curfews in different parts of Sur. The Turkish military and special police forces blockaded the gates of the city walls while setting up checkpoints to cut the flow of people and communication with the rest of the city and the world.

During the last curfew (declared in neighborhoods listed above), between 2 December 2015 and March 2016, nearly all the inhabitants

<sup>19</sup> Google Earth Pro (2022); the map designed by the author.

<sup>20</sup> Before the clashes, the total population of these neighborhoods was over 22.000 (TUIK, 2015).

of the area were forced to leave under heavy physical and psychological interventions by the state forces.

**Image 3.** *Urban annihilation, 2017*<sup>21</sup>



The AKP-ruled Turkish state showed no intention of saving what was left after the clashes were officially declared over on 9 March 2016. Followingly, the ministerial cabinet declared urgent expropriation for all Sur on 21 March 2016. Shortly after, the state dismissed the elected (pro-Kurdish) mayors of Sur and Metropolitan Municipalities with decree laws and appointed trustees (*kayyum*) who approved every state decision for the area. Meanwhile, the state-led project of renewing Sur was presented as an urban restoration project which would clean the area from unlicensed construction, make the old city walls visible and prosper economic development, a narrative that was adopted from the failed urban renewal project of 2008. One can't stop asking herself what economic development means in a space where houses were flattened with bodies still on the streets, the smell of blood didn't go away for months, representatives who people rightfully elected are disregarded, and prison-like structures or emptied lands replace gorgeous streets and buildings. All this

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<sup>21</sup> Google Earth Pro (2022).



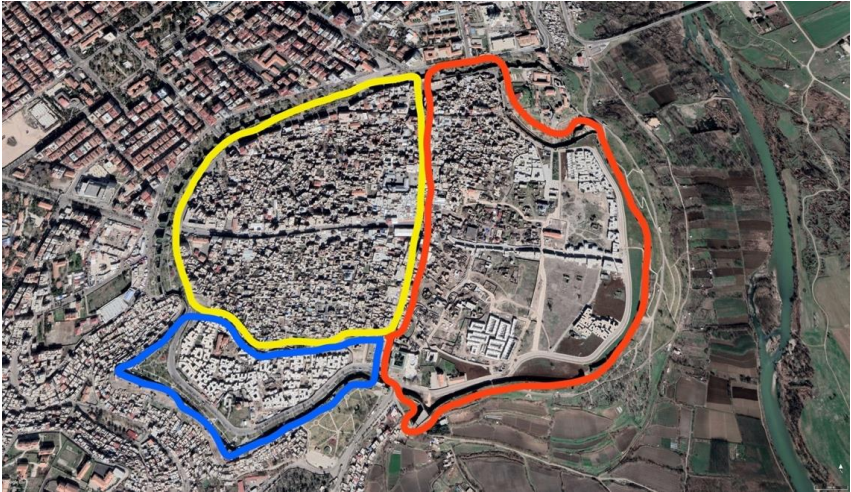


brings us to face that urban (re)development is much more than economic growth; I argue it is a counterinsurgency tool.

### **The case of Sur: The Void, The Limbo and New Face**

After my fieldwork, I decided to structure my analysis and theorization through Sur's physical area, which is already fractured within. My observations in these different areas -emptied/in the process of demolition/partially reconstructed (marked red), not yet demolished (marked yellow), completely reconstructed (marked blue)- varied while shifting from one to another, each of them unrevealing a different aspect in understanding the mechanisms of counterinsurgency in Sur. I conceptualize these (intertwined) fractions through the concepts of *The Void*, *The Limbo* and *New Face*.

**Image 4.** *Fractured Sur*, 2021<sup>22</sup>



<sup>22</sup> Google Earth Pro (2022); the borders added by the author.

## *The Void*

The void refers to the emptied half of Sur, complete annihilation<sup>23</sup>, flattening of urban space and keeping space empty<sup>24</sup> in the restructuring process. What is being emptied is not only the built environment but also the social life by forcefully depopulating the area. This area, of intense clashes in 2015-16, was a space of confrontation, and now it is turned into a space of defeat by the state.

**Image 5,6&7.** *Emptying*, 2015, 2017, and 2021<sup>25</sup>



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<sup>23</sup> See Hewitt, H. (1983). Place Annihilation: Area Bombing and the Fate of Urban Places. *Annals of the Association of American Geography*, 73(2), 257-284.

<sup>24</sup> Pamela Colombo (2014) argues that -as much as confrontation- defeat is also spatialized via emptying the space of confrontation by the state. In other words, the state is also constructed in spaces that it leaves unoccupied on purpose (p. 58). See Colombo, P. (2014). Spaces of Confrontation and Defeat: The Spatial Dispossession of the Revolution in Tucuman, Argentina. In E. Schindel & P. Colombo (Eds.). *Space and the Memories of Violence: Landscapes of Erasure, Disappearance and Exception* (pp. 48-60). Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>25</sup> Google Earth Pro (2022).





Emptying, creating the void, plays a vital role as a counterinsurgency strategy, as displacing the “insurgent” population from space makes it easier for the state to take control. On the other hand, keeping/designing the space empty reassures that the control will stay in the hands of the state, making sure that no further insurgencies can take place within this space. Simply put, no insurgent population is equal to no insurgencies. I argue that neither



such an urbicide<sup>26</sup> nor emptying could occur without one of the primary tools of the counterinsurgency in Sur: the curfews. Under the last curfew -covering this area-, it was forbidden to leave the house under any condition unless the inhabitants asked permission from the authorities to flee. The curfew accompanied the widening of the narrow streets of Sur via bulldozing the houses to open ways for tanks and artilleries. Consequently, and purposefully, the intense destruction depopulated the area.

The curfew created an area of state of exception where there are no rules but the rules of the military forces while no observation from outside was available. No one was left in the area when the clashes officially ended in March 2016. In less than two weeks, all of Sur was urgently expropriated by the cabinet and the full authority of the area was given to the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning and the Bank of Provinces. Juristically taking control of the area neutralized the local governances. Since then, neither Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality nor the Sur Municipality has had any control over this exceptional space. As the municipalities had a major role in the events of 2015-2016, this decision was also a counterinsurgency strategy to be sure that even if the pro-Kurdish party wins the upcoming local elections, they cannot control the area, thus not leading any other insurgency. Yet, although the full authority of Sur was already given to the central government offices, the last declared curfew stayed in place for another six years -until 1 January 2022- for an already emptied and depopulated space. The area was entirely blockaded by concrete blocks put at every possible entrance point. The curfew eventually transformed into a prohibition of entrance to the area, ensuring no one could ever return.

The enclosed area was quickly flattened in this exceptional space. However, it was not quickly rebuilt. The redevelopment process has been slow; the area was kept empty for a long time. No detailed information about the area's future had been available to the public. Only one thing was sure about this void: the Turkish state owns it. It represented the Turkish state's victory, the state's power, and the

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<sup>26</sup> An element of a genocidal war that aims to dissolve clustered ethnic homogeneities from urban space. See Shaw, M. (2004). *New Wars of the City: 'Urbicide' and 'Genocide'* In S. Graham (Ed.). *Cities, War and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics* (pp. 141-153). Oxford: Blackwell.





state's presence in the heart of the unofficial capital of Kurdistan. The lifting of the curfew in 2022 allowed people to observe the void. It is a space where the Turkish state agonizingly imposes its existence.

**Picture 1.** *Erdogan posters at the entrance of New Sur*<sup>27</sup>



The main entrance point to the area is laid out with posters of president Erdogan. In the center of the void, one finds herself in the middle of a striking emptiness, surrounded by new two-store buildings guarded by the new Governor's Office (formerly a school building) and the Kurşunlu Mosque.

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<sup>27</sup> February 2022, taken by the author.

**Pictures 2,3&4.** *Striking emptiness*, the Governor's Office and the Kurşunlu Mosque on the right<sup>28</sup>



Right next to the Mosque, more posters, put on the barriers to divide the void from the continuing demolition area, appear. The statements center around making Sur alive through restoration.

<sup>28</sup> February 2022, taken by the author.



**Picture 5.** *Dividing posters*<sup>29</sup>



However, not only the vast empty spaces create the void. It is also the widened streets and the new urban layout. As my interviewee A.<sup>30</sup>, a local architect and member of TMMOB<sup>31</sup>, emphasized, The Zoning Plan for Protection Purposes (ZPPP) for Sur was revised in 2016, adding six new police stations and widened roads to connect the police stations. These new plans, I argue, indicate that the Turkish state anticipates upcoming clashes in the area, thus using urban redevelopment to control the space as a counterinsurgency tool. Besides, all the new buildings in Sur are designed to be two-store, allowing a long visibility range from the top of any building. These restructurings extend the scope of the void in Sur -both horizontally and vertically- by designing an urban space where observation and intervention are possible from all angles. The possibility of such observation and intervention was not available at all in Sur, which was a cause of frustration with the area for the state forces. The creation of such void serves as a counterinsurgency strategy by restructuring the space so that intervention is possible at all times or simply inflicting the feeling of being watched or being able to be watched at all times. In this void, marked by emptiness and

<sup>29</sup> February 2022, taken by the author.

<sup>30</sup> Names of all the interviewees are replaced with random initials.

<sup>31</sup> Union Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects. For a detailed data collection of urban destruction in Kurdish cities in 2015-2016, see TMMOB (2019). *2015-2016 Destroyed Cities Report*. Ankara.

securitization, the people of Sur lose their sense of belonging to the space; they lose their sense of having the right to claim the space. Unsettlingly, the void is yet to reach its boundaries.

### ***The Limbo***

The limbo refers to the temporality of displacement<sup>32</sup> in the senses of being displaced but unable to establish a stable life afterwards and/or living under the threat of displacement. The temporality of displacement functions as a counterinsurgency tool by putting subjects in constant fear of displacement, which blunts the sense of belonging to the space. Once the sense of belonging is blunted/lost, the subjects lose their sense of claiming/protecting the space or revolting for it. The limbo is mainly constituted under the urgent expropriation of Sur, how land expropriation has been functioning and how it has affected Sur's displaced/current inhabitants. The words of one of my interviewees, an old small shop owner in the not-yet-demolished parts of Sur, capture the common feeling of the residents of Sur:

*If the state wants to expropriate, it expropriates. It is that simple. In exchange, it gives you money. You either accept that money or go to the court to say that this money is not enough. The court lasts three months, five months, five years. In the end, the court determines a value that you have to accept. One way or another, the state eventually expropriates whatever it wants.*

To understand the state's unbounded power over expropriating the space and how it has counteracted the locals, it is important to analyze the process of urgent expropriation in Sur.

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<sup>32</sup> See Sakizlioglu, B. (2013). Inserting Temporality Into The Analysis of Displacement: Living Under The Threat of Displacement. Royal Dutch Geographical Society KNAG.





**Picture 6.** *Half building*, at one of the passage points from emptied Sur to old Sur<sup>33</sup>



The first urban renewal project in Diyarbakır was declared in 2008 by TOKI<sup>34</sup> (Housing Development Administration of the Republic of Turkey) in cooperation with the local governorship and local municipalities, expropriating three neighborhoods of Sur -Alipasa, Lalebey, and Cevatpaşa-. The project was practically stopped in 2012 due to the locals' refusal to make deals with TOKI, resistance against evacuations, and the municipalities' withdrawal from the project. Yet, although Sur is not a first-degree area of any natural disaster, the ministerial cabinet declared Sur a “risk area” on 4 November 2012 based upon Law No. 6306, “Law on Restructuring Areas Under Risk of Natural Disaster”<sup>35</sup>, which provides direct authority to the state administrative offices to execute transformation projects in any desired area. On 21 March 2016, the urgent expropriation decision for all Sur was declared directly based upon the 2012 declaration of

<sup>33</sup> March 2022, taken by the author.

<sup>34</sup> TOKI is a sub-department of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization.

<sup>35</sup> T. C. Official Gazette. (2012). Bakanlar Kurulu Kararı, Karar Sayısı: 2012/3900. No:28457 <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2012/11/20121104-8.htm>

the risk area. A. explains the difference between expropriation and urgent expropriation as follows:

*What is being done for the first time through urgent expropriation is that you have no right to object. In the history of Turkey, Sur was the first case where urgent expropriation was applied. You have no right to decide on staying, leaving, or questioning the decision.*

In the most straightforward sense, through urgent expropriation, the state has had full and unobjectionable authority in terms of expropriation and the aftermath of it. The urgent expropriation decision looked very sharp but has not functioned smoothly. As a result of the ambiguous and various land title statuses in Sur (possessing the land title of a historic or non-historic house, possessing title deed<sup>36</sup> of a plot and/or a house), it was chaos to figure out whose land or house was worth how much. Overall, no one was treated economically, ethically, or legally justly. Nevertheless, possessing any land or house was still advantageous as the tenants were given almost nothing. Very few were eligible to get a new house in the redeveloped Sur at the cost of being massively indebted to TOKI. Others were either proposed an apartment in the newly built TOKI in the periphery (and again being in debt to TOKI) and/or ridiculously low monetary compensations. The state officials have simply valued things how much ever they want. There was no reference point for anyone to object to anyway.

Nearly all of my interviewees had lived in Sur since they were born or after their parents migrated to Sur in the 1990s. They were not living in prosperity but had stable lives. All, except the ones who moved to the TOKI apartments, have moved more than once since their displacement. They have been so traumatized and paralyzed by such long-lasting oppression and apathy that none dares to claim that the Turkish state obliges them as its citizens. The insurgencies can emerge based on asking or claiming for a right. When the state turns the citizens into individuals who do not dare to ask for anything, even their given rights, it neutralizes the people and prevents them from

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<sup>36</sup> In the Turkish land registry cadaster system, a land title refers to officially registered property ownership granting full ownership rights. Whereas, a title deed refers to ownership without official registration in the system.



further insurgencies. Thus, I insist that creating a limbo, where ambiguity and constant fear of the future rules the space, is a tool of counterinsurgency. What is more worrisome is that everyone is aware that the urgent expropriation will be applied likewise for the rest of the Sur, which has already started in the Alipasa-Lalebey neighborhoods in 2017.

The population started dropping in the not-yet-demolished parts of Sur as well, places under the constant threat of displacement. I can only describe this area of limbo, *alive but not alive, not demolished but yet-to-be-demolished*, as heartbreaking.

**Pictures 7&.** *Abandoned buildings and empty lots*, in not-yet-demolished neighborhoods of Sur<sup>37</sup>



In this temporality, in this limbo, people have no sense of owning anything. Some decided to move out of Sur and try to establish a new life before the displacement hits them. The ones who stay only have a temporary sense of ownership. It is a fact that besides its gorgeous historic houses, Sur was also filled with slum houses that have not provided safe and healthy living conditions. After the clashes, the conditions worsened as bullets and cannons hit many buildings.

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<sup>37</sup> February 2022, taken by the author.

Correspondingly, neither the experts nor the people I talked with were against urban renewal as a concept. However, they were/are against displacement. They want(ed) to stay in Sur.

### ***New Face***

Shortly after his famous statement about turning Sur into Toledo<sup>38</sup>, prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu gave another public speech in Sur on April 2016, stating that (1) there will be no step taken without the consent of the people of Sur, (2) the architectural fabric of Sur will be protected per UNESCO standards and the 2012 ZPPP, (3) the urgent expropriation will not danger property rights, and (4) *none of the citizens* who left Sur will be homeless<sup>39</sup>. Frankly, none of these promises came true. The early revisions in the ZPPP to securitize the area were already discussed in *The Void*. The later revisions in the plan followed a different logic: first doing it, then reasoning the action through revising the plan, as architect A. stated.

Apart from making up architectural revisions in the ZPPP, in my interviews with them, both A. and civil engineer/private contractor C. stated that the plans for the new Sur were drawn in Ankara by people who had never even seen Sur before. The plans were later sent to Diyarbakır and given to the private contractors for execution by TOKI via invitee-only bids. Soon, it became apparent that the redevelopment plan was oriented toward tourism and not accommodating people. A. emphasized that, in total, 3900 residential buildings had been demolished in Sur, displacing over 25.000 people. Yet, only 600 houses are built in their place. At its simplest, depopulating the space and later planning it in a quantitatively impossible way to accommodate the previous population again is a direct act of counterinsurgency. Yet, it is not simply a matter of numbers but also the population's demographical characteristics that determine future insurgencies. Thus, the Turkish state not only built fewer accommodations but also ensured that the prospective population is different.

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<sup>38</sup> Sur'u Toledo gibi yapacagiz. (2016, February 1). Sozcu. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2016/gundem/suru-toledo-gibi-yapacagiz-1069462/>

<sup>39</sup> Basbakan Davutoglu Sur planini acikladi! (2016, April 1). Hurriyet. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/basbakan-davutoglu-sur-planini-acikladi-40079579>





When the new buildings are ready, TOKI has exclusive rights over the buildings, responsible for selling or renting the units. The housing units in Alipasa-Lalebey were the first ones ready to sell. Nearly none of the old inhabitants could get a house here because of unaffordable debts. The prices were between 3-5 million TL. Such abnormally high level of prices unsurprisingly made it impossible for the displaced residents of Sur to come back and resettle in their old neighborhoods. Although most houses passed into the private property via an invite-only auction, no one lives in Alipasa-Lalebey. I cannot describe this area other than calling it a ghost town with nothing but empty houses and private real estate advertisements for renting or selling each house.

**Pictures 9,10,11&12.** *A ghost town, Alipasa-Lalebey*<sup>40</sup>



<sup>40</sup> February 2022, taken by the author.

On the other hand, another significant change in the new face of Sur is the restructuring/annihilation of public space. By public space, I refer to spaces where the residents of Sur interacted with each other, which was/is *the street*. Sur's narrow and labyrinth-style streets prevented any outsider from entering or observing the streets, providing a safe space for inhabitants to utilize. Whereas, in the new planning of Sur, all back streets are widened. It is even plausible to say that there is no back street left in the new face of Sur, only side streets. All streets are accessible to any observer (either by walking or driving) very easily.

**Picture 13.** *Side streets of new Sur*<sup>41</sup>



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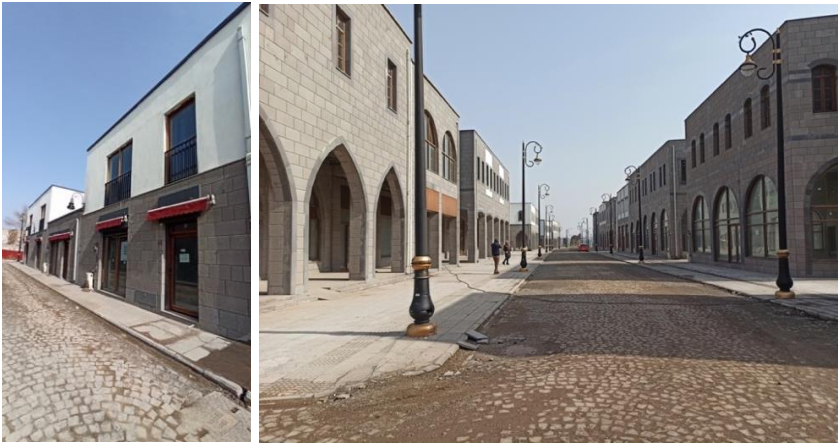
<sup>41</sup> February 2022, taken by the author.



Such accessibility, I argue, decreases the security feeling on a personal and small group level but increases the securitization on the state (forces) level. Thus, widening the streets and erasing the labyrinth-style street structure of Sur aims to control the public space, preventing the possibility of further insurgencies that could emerge in former public spaces. The annihilation and restructuring of the public space are very crucial in counterinsurgency. The public spaces, more precisely the streets, have been *the* space of mobilization and insurgencies in Sur since the beginning of the Kurdish struggle. Dissolving this public space, which has also been the symbol of resistance, aims to dissolve the chances of further mobilization and insurgencies, thus functioning as a counterinsurgency tool.

Furthermore, the public space in old Sur also heavily depended on the tiny neighborhood shops (*bakkaal*) in the back streets and several historical bazaars for low-income and middle-income families to shop for almost every need. The replanning of the emptied Sur does not provide space for such shops in the residential areas. What is built, on the contrary, are units for touristic shops, big restaurants and cafés in a separate zone in the replanned small street of Yenikapı, which has turned into a boulevard now. Depopulating and repopulating the area with fewer people and a wealthier population was still not enough to make the area “safe” from the state’s perspective. After all, Diyarbakır *is* a Kurdish city. Replacing the low-income Kurdish families of Sur with another class in the city, who will also be inevitably Kurdish, would not necessarily prevent further insurgencies. Thus, the securitization of Sur necessitated not only depopulation but also restructuring the area by transforming it from a residential area to a commercial one. The commercial gentrification of the area was directly forced by the state.

**Pictures 14,15&16.** *New units of touristic shops, cafes, and restaurants on Yenikapı Boulevard<sup>42</sup>*



A. argued that because they failed in Alipasa-Lalebey, TOKI is not planning to sell the houses or shops in the emptied and reconstructed Sur, “They turned Alipasa-Lalebey into an abandoned area, afraid to do the same for the other part of Sur.” May or may not because of such fear, TOKI is not selling the new build units in the emptied Sur. Instead, it rents the units for prices that are radically higher than in the historic bazaars of old Sur, thus, forcefully (commercially and

<sup>42</sup> February 2022, taken by the author.



touristically<sup>43</sup>) gentrifying the area. At the same time, none of the displaced shop owners in this area was given the option of opening a new shop, only very low compensations for the land of their shop and their lost equipment, which is another indicator of commercialization which is multiplied by gentrification.

The TOKI office responsible for renting the commercial units is advertising the new Sur, once home to thousands of Kurdish people, as the “Yenikapı Open-air Life and Culture Center.” In the most basic sense, what we observe in the new face of Sur is accumulation by dispossession<sup>44</sup>. The state forcefully displaced thousands of families and turned the area into a commercial touristic center where the state offices (such as TOKI) and the private businesses (such as construction companies and new shopkeepers) profit. However, this accumulation by dispossession, I persist, is also motivated by the current (yet not so current) state ideology, which is oppressive against the Kurds. Securitizing and depopulating the area as strategies of counterinsurgency are one of the main concerns of the state as much as accumulation.

## Conclusion

Overall, through the void, the limbo, and the new face, the analysis of Sur exhibits that emptying, ambiguating, and replanning Sur is heavily motivated by counterinsurgency. The tools of counterinsurgency have included complete flattening, depopulating, and securitizing the space; designing/restructuring the space empty; lowering the number of accommodations; replacing the low-income families with the upper class; restructuring, commercialization and gentrification of public places. Theoretically, I evaluate urban redevelopment as a phase of continuing urban destruction/urbicide and consider these two phenomena as counterinsurgency mechanisms. What we observe in Sur is the elimination of a particular

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<sup>43</sup> See Pobric, A. & Robinson, G. M. (2019). Recent Urban Development and Gentrification in Post-Dayton Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Cities*, 89, 281-295.

<sup>44</sup> See Harvey, D. (2004). The 'new' imperialism: accumulation by dispossession. *Socialist Register*, 40, 63-87.



and homogenous form of social life<sup>45</sup> from a symbolically critical urban space threatening the Turkish state and its replacement with emptiness, depopulation and commercial gentrification. I lastly argue -and carry out my current research on the subject- that the systematic subjugation of the low-income Kurdish population through forceful displacement and dispossession does not remain limited to the former areas of clashes. The recent urban redevelopment project, also carried out through urgent expropriation, in Bağlar, Diyarbakır, signals that the use of counterinsurgency in urban restructuring is being normalized.

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<sup>45</sup> See Shaw (2004) and Berman, M. (1987, December). Among the Ruins. *New Internationalist*, 178. <https://newint.org/features/1987/12/05/among>

