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**THE ETHNIC LIMITS OF GENTRIFICATION: THE  
KURDS AND BATTLE IN KURDISTAN**

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## **THE ETHNIC LIMITS OF GENTRIFICATION: THE KURDS AND BATTLE IN KURDISTAN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The concept of Gentrification has been used extensively in recent years to examine issues of working class displacement and the rising effect of the middle classes on urban areas. But nowadays the gentrification projects are being used as the main tools to ensure the “security of the public” in the part of Kurdistan which is within Turkey.

This paper will illustrate how the expansion of gentrification projects as a result of neoliberal revanchist urban politics Kurdish issue as a “terror case” in Turkey.

The paper is based on the analyzing of the Sur Urban Transformation Project which was declared while the Kurdish battle was ongoing. The project's common point is to reconstruct and renovate the destroyed and abandoned historical and residential areas of the city.

In that regard, three questions will be answered:

Why gentrification and revanchist urban policy has become the main tool to end the Kurdish political movement (PKK)?

-What is the importance of the political economy of gentrification projects on the social and ethnic texture of Kurdish geography?

-Could PKK's autonomic policy be an alternative to gentrification projects?

The research will analyze the gentrification projects which were declared by the government and the reports which were conducted by NGO's to show the results of destructive military operations in Kurdish cities. Additionally, the relevant documents will be analyzed and the national-international press of the time will be scanned.

**KEYWORDS:** Gentrification, Kurdish Issue, Revanchist

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Immediately after the general election of 7 June 2015 The ruling the Justice and Development Party (JDP), interrupted the peace process, and the Turkish military launched air strikes on PKK positions following up with a brutal urban battle against the PKK which continues today. During that period, the PKK and the HDP declared their intention to establish a loyal, canton-like government in the south east of Turkey in other words in Kurdistan of Turkey. The last PKK congress considered the attacks on the cities as attacks against the Turkish state. According to PKK members the entrenchments and barricades were done to help neighborhood residents.

The current military operations and curfews in the south-east of Turkey have been described as a “collective punishment” by human rights organization Amnesty International. Some 220 civilians have been killed in these urban clashes, along with nearly 260 police and soldiers, according to an International Crisis Group researcher. In that time Ankara says it has killed nearly 600 fighters from the PKK.<sup>1</sup> Extreme curfews were imposed – even more severe than the crackdowns of the heavily oppressive military restrictions of the 1980’s. When curfew was declared in Sur, and other cities in the following 10 months, most of the residents (40,000) fled with whatever they could carry. Then the Kurdistan Workers Party’ attack has turned into a siege by Turkish troops. Kurdish people reaction is; “The ballots we’ve cast for Erdogan have returned as bullets”

There has been more progress related to the ongoing peace process between government and the PKK and HDP.

Kurdish people had big expectations from that process which was committed to cultural and political rights for Kurdish citizens. However the revanchist foreign policy on Syria and Kobani incidents gave the government an excuse to interrupt the peace process. . In addition to the constitution in line authoritarian Islamist regime with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s ambition, whole peace process has interrupted. Turkish state has converted the peaceful policy and started “a revanchist urban policy” in Kurdish city center to fight against the PKKs forces.

The state’s propaganda has “zero tolerance” to Kurdish people and PKK, such as “clearing each house,” “clearing the region from terrorists,” and “continuing the fight until the last terrorist is killed”.

Ruling Party JDP insists that gentrification is a unique way to end up the terror. Turkey has been fighting with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party for more than three decades to end the terror. Both sides have shifted their political approach being revanchist to each other. The rhetoric from Turkish government officials about the Kurdish issue has also escalated recently in the wake of a number of bombing attacks across a number of Turkish cities and some of which were claimed by Kurdish militant groups, particularly the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), an offshoot of the PKK.

The HDP was a bridge between the government and the PKK. But this bridge was destroyed by President Erdogan. HDP holds political power although it has been weakened since July2015 in Kurdish cities.

The Kurdish issue has been an issue since the establishment of the Turkish Republic and Turkish state has implemented extensive assimilation policies and military operations

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/feb/09/destruction-sur-turkey-historic-district-gentrification-kurdish>

opposed Kurdish uprising. The urbanization has been seen an important tool to assimilate the Kurds (1939 CHP-Republic of Popular Party-Reports). The official line was that the Kurdish people will be assimilated by the rising urbanization in Kurdistan region.

This approach was the first revanchist urban policy as raising urbanization in the Kurdistan. But nowadays that policy has become a neo-liberal and revanchist gentrification policies. So, that second urban period in Kurdistan is part of the global urban strategy. Global neoliberal urban politics and military fighting have become the most important tools to overcome “terror” and the “Kurdish Issue” and to enhance political and economic stability in region.

The battle has started in historical Kurdish city centers such as Sur, Cizre, Nusaybin, Şırnak, Silopi, Diyarbakır, Mardin on December 2015. Just after that, the government declared some gentrification projects in this Kurdish region in February 2016. On the other hand, the battle became very brutal after the declarations of autonomy to Kurdish region by PKK.

PKK forces have started to defend Kurdish city centers with entrenchments and barricades in narrow alleyways. All those barricades have isolated the Kurdish people into narrow spaces. More than 300,000 people have fled and 3600 commercial shops have affected until now. There have also been dozens of civilian deaths during the military operations. Turkish government has denied suggestions that it is has been deliberately targeting residents.<sup>2</sup>

These new military operations and urban strategy also aim to replace the some historical city center as Yuksekova (Hakkari). All these projects might be possible with the intention of having a Turkish capital class. The scope of Sur Regeneration Project<sup>3</sup> is related to the literature on state led gentrification. The transformation of central historical districts of Sur will be directly facilitated by the state. The “Ethnic evacuation” and “disproportionation” are being implemented with the destruction of cities and military operations against PKK. Latest outbreak of fighting between the PKK and Turkish forces is one of the bloodiest since the 1990s, and came after the breakdown of a fragile peace. However, ongoing battle and new urbanization have brought millions of Kurds to Turkey’s metropole areas such as Istanbul, Mersin, Adana, Izmir, Bursa, Izmit, and Ankara which have already gone through gentrification processes themselves. . So the Kurdish people stuck between two gentrification sites in Kurdistan and in Turkish metropolitan districts. After massive forced (evictions and) migration to Istanbul, it became the city with the largest Kurdish population in the world. Around three million Kurdish people<sup>4</sup> live in the city today.

Smith (1996) identified similarity between the revanchism of the late 19th century Paris and the political climate of late 20th. Smith (2002) identified gentrification as a tool of a global strategy to restructure the cities in terms of class, space and culture. Nowadays, gentrification is becoming a global strategy to restructure ruined cities due to the deepening war in the Middle East.

2 <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/feb/09/destruction-sur-turkey-historic-district-gentrification-kurdish>

3 In this study, the “urban transformation project” refers to the gentrification project.

4 Approximately 13 million Kurds reside in Turkey today, constituting about 18% of the population. Historically, most Turkish Kurds have lived in southeastern Anatolia, close to the Syrian and Iraqi borders. In a 2010–2013 survey, Turkish public opinion research company Konda found that 56 percent of children born in this region were Kurdish.

## 1.1 State Led Gentrification: Sur Regeneration Project

Sur Regeneration Urban Project as a state-led gentrification project was announced by Prime Minister during the Kurdish battle. So this project also aims to end the fighting against PKK.

So state led gentrification serves a vehicle to re-scale of Kurdish region-Kurdistan. Turkish State itself significance to Kurdish political movement and civilians. The Turkish state which has been becoming more authoritarian will seek to normalize the daily life in Kurdish cities via urban regeneration projects. Sur gentrification project is being explained in this paper as a re-scale of Turkish State in Kurdish region.

Gentrification projects attract the capital movement, investment, and tourists to the cities as Smith (1979) stated 'movement of capital rather than people'. Smith (2002) explained the gentrification as a global strategy.

This global strategy has a content in real estate profit opportunities, transformation of slum areas, low-income housing areas to middle class neighborhoods or high land value areas. In addition, the significant gentrification projects replaced the low income city centers and working class neighborhoods in inner cities with the commercial, business and tourism zones. Generally all these projects impact on an uneven development of cities and drain the public resources away from social policies.

Now gentrification is being a urban case in global south (Lees, 2014). Urban areas in the global south have been perceived as places of threats, disorder, danger and disaster. The gentrification discourse of global south rely on the recovery of social, economic and spatial disasters caused by the economic crises or battle. So gentrification is becoming a tool of managing "dangerous" places.

State-led gentrification urges us to shift the definition of gentrification analyzing tools. Therefore the institutionalization of gentrification within regeneration policies create new impacts on neighborhoods. The reproduction of space by state led gentrification is lacking of consensus (Kirsteen Paton, 2010) and highly institutionalized by local and national governments as a part of renewal strategies (Uitermark, 2007).

Sur Urban Regeneration Project is the second regeneration project which has ethnic targeting (agenda?) following the Sulukule project (İslam and Sakızlıoğlu, 2015). Tarlabasi (Istanbul) project (Sakızlıoğlu, 2014; Unsal O., 2015) is also another state led project which caused the displacement of Kurdish population who had moved to Tarlabasi after forced Kurdish migration during 1990s.

As we know, Turkish State has formulated a fear discourse on Kurdish riots since 1990s. The fear was reinforced by the separatist imagery of PKK. So all these projects were presented as a fight against PKK.

The forced displacement has been implemented in Sur under fighting between Turkish military and PKK guerrillas. This form of displacement is related to the fighting against PKK and explains us how "state led gentrification" has become a hegemonic power. The ruling party JDP declared that these projects aim to end the "terror" namely PKK. So the battle within the Kurdish cities shows us how the city can become the pivot on the future of the Kurdish issue. The new strategy of the PKK and the state that made the city a hotbed of political action.

JDPs gentrification projects have given political cover to the current authoritarian regime in Diyarbakır. Furthermore, understanding the class relations on a neighborhood level has

shaded through the raised military control during the battle as every household has forced to move from district due to the conditions of the battle. Battle conditions were indifferent to all classes in the district. Living longer in Sur was impossible.

## 1.2. JDP and Neoliberal Urban Policy

Neo-liberal urban policies are not a new strategy in Kurdistan. But now, this urban projects are transformed as an implementation of the new revanchist policy to end up the “terror”. The Kurdish-dominated People’s Democracy Party (HDP) and JDP both was sharing the implementation of urban projects in Kurdish cities before July of 2015. But JDP decided to operate the urban projects without the Kurdish municipality after the battle opposed to PKK.

The economic discourse is gained importance during JDP. Because the growth of economy was raised during JDP government and neo-liberal urban policy alongside urban regeneration urban projects gained more importance. Space of city became of primary investment sector meanwhile to settle of peaceful Kurdish policy until 2015 general election. Because Erdogan did not meet his presidency expectations.

Diyarbakır was under influenced of neo liberal urban policy much higher during JDP government period than the other Kurdish cities. The mega urban projects has raised in Diyarbakır such as Istanbul and other big cities. Therefore, Diyarbakır has gained a profound population potential in addition economic growth until 2000s:

“...cities have become the incubators for many of the major political and ideological strategies through which the dominance of neoliberalism is being maintained’ (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 375–6)

JDP and PKK both has shifted political strategy for Kurdish region. PKK has launched to fight in cities against to Turkish military force. PKK is fighting for the first time in the city. PKK fighters to create trenches and dig in within a number of areas. The civilians are in danger because of that new strategy of PKK and Turkish military force has launched a brutal war in the Kurdish region.<sup>5</sup>

This process has based binary opposition between PDP and ruling party JDP. After that process a serious pressure has emerged on housing construction in Diyarbakır which was faced with the necessity of housing provision for forced immigrant people and middle classes.

The high population growth started in Diyarbakır after 1995 due to forced migration related to Kurdish battle. During early of 1990s a comprehensive battle had been held between PKK and Turkish military force in a fragile economic conditions. After that process Kurdish political movement has become strengthened and HDP has hold political power since 1999 in Diyarbakır.<sup>6</sup>

5 Approximately 13 million Kurds reside in Turkey today, constituting about 18% of the population. Historically, most Turkish Kurds have lived in southeastern Anatolia, close to the Syrian and Iraqi borders. In a 2010–2013 survey, Turkish public opinion research company Konda found that 56 percent of children born in this region were Kurdish.

6 1999-2004: Ferudun Çelik; 2004-2014: Osman Baydemir; 2014: Gülten Kışanak-Fırat Anlı

Turkey's economic growth has also raised during meanwhile the social and economic implications arising from the regeneration urban projects and rehabilitation of central urban districts. Economic Growth in Turkey is as indicated below:

1995-2002: %2.9; 2002-2011: %5.2; 2013-2014: %4.7

Economic growth<sup>7</sup> and construction sector also has raised as well as sum of privatization which consist investment of health, education, social security and national defenses raised as indicated below:

1986-2003: 8 billion dollar

2004-2015: 58 billion dollar

## 2. ANALYSIS OF SUR GENRTIFICATION PROJECT

This paper aims to review not only the effect of gentrification on urban neighborhoods but also to show how Kurdish political movement will be effected through this gentrification process. It is not clear whether gentrification projects will continue in the light of resumption of peace process or under authoritarian political conditions. And who will conduct the gentrification process; Kurdish municipalities or Turkish central authority?

**Map 1.** District Sur Before and After Battle



SUR as seen from the map above is a inner city area of Diyarbakır.

The population of Sur<sup>8</sup> was about 123.000 people and consists of 53 neighborhoods. Age profile of Sur:

0-25 year old: % 56,

<sup>7</sup> Construction sector has raised 322,6 billions dollar within 8693 projects between 1972-2015 years and 19,3 billion dollar in 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Diyarbakır population: 1.607.000 people, 2013

<http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PrefHaberBultenleri.do?id=18616#>

25-65 year old: % 39.8,

65 and over: % 4

Sur's history stretches back millennia, with traces of dozens of civilizations and a much-loaded legacy of pluralism. Jews, Muslims and Christians, Persians, Arabs, Armenians and Turks have all left their mark here.

More than 1,500 of Sur's historic buildings have been listed and protected by law. Some are 500 years old, others many centuries more. Last June, UNESCO named the 40ft-high stone fortifications that encircle Sur, built around 350AD, a World Heritage Site, along with the 8,000-year-old Hevsel Gardens, which lie between the walls and the Tigris River.

## 1.1 Regeneration Project of SUR

Diyarbakır Sur Transformation Project<sup>9</sup> has declared on 21 March 2016 by Minister Council Decision. This Project comprise of 18 neighborhoods, and 16 out of them are in Sur. The first "Diyarbakır Urban Regeneration Project" was declared in February 2015 before the Sur Project. But purpose of that project were planned much earlier:

"With the projects we are planning to implement in Diyarbakir, employment will increase in the province and we will make Diyarbakir an international tourism destination" president Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in 2011, shortly after the state housing body, known as TOKI, had begun demolition works in Sur.<sup>10</sup>

It seems Turkish government is going to create an idea of gentrified historical inner cities after the current brutal war in Middle East. Government has argued that households who have lived multiple deprivations during the fighting will be accessing their former property rights.

"We will launch the reconstruction of Sur as part of the struggle with the terror...We promise to transform Sur like Toledo. I intend to visit East and South East Region every Friday to pray. These cities are developed in an uncontrolled manner and in irregular ways. There was a need to transform these cities regardless of the battle."

Said Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.<sup>11</sup> Armenian Church of Surp, the largest church in the Middle East, has also been expropriated by the Turkish authorities.<sup>12</sup> The Surp Giragos Church was opened to worship in 2012 upon an extensive restoration following the years of abandonment. In addition to that, the officially listed historical "Diyarbakir house", mosques, and churches were also expropriated urgently. On the other hand Syriac, Chaldean, and Protestant churches were also expropriated urgently during the recent battle. Sur district is a unique worship center for non-Muslim people in Diyarbakir.

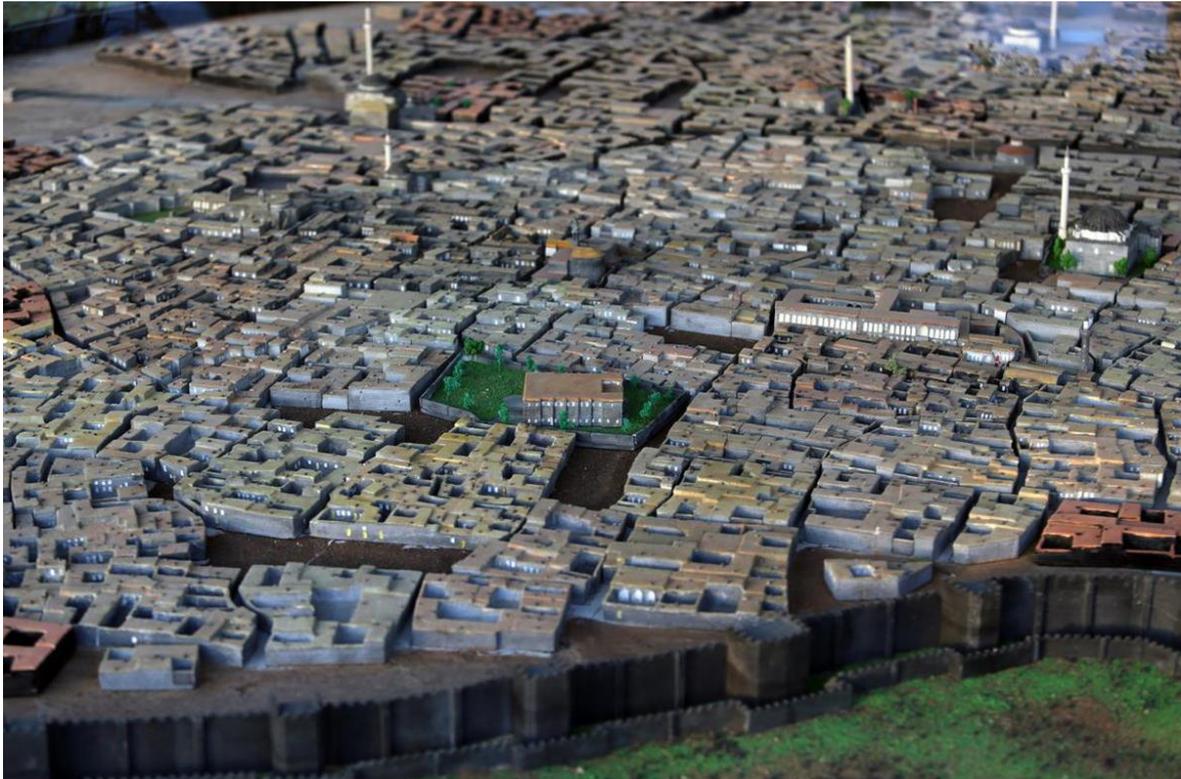
9 The municipality for 2012 'Protection Plan' came together in Diyarbakir 310 institutions and 'Sur has established the Domestic Protection and Sustenance Platform. <http://www.evrensel.net/haber/277280/firat-anli-surda-akplilerin-mulkleri-kamulastirma-disi>

10 <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/feb/09/destruction-sur-turkey-historic-district-gentrification-kurdish>

11 <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/feb/09/destruction-sur-turkey-historic-district-gentrification-kurdish>

12 <http://tasarimdergisi.com/savas-ganimeti-surun-kentsel-donusum-planlari-aciklandi/>

**Figure:** Image of Regeneration Project of SUR



In the above picture renewal area is shown. Sur renewal area consists of 18 neighborhoods and most of the buildings under the project are being demolished because of the battle.

But this gentrification project seems to start the reconstruction of the historical zone (core) as a transformed touristic area.

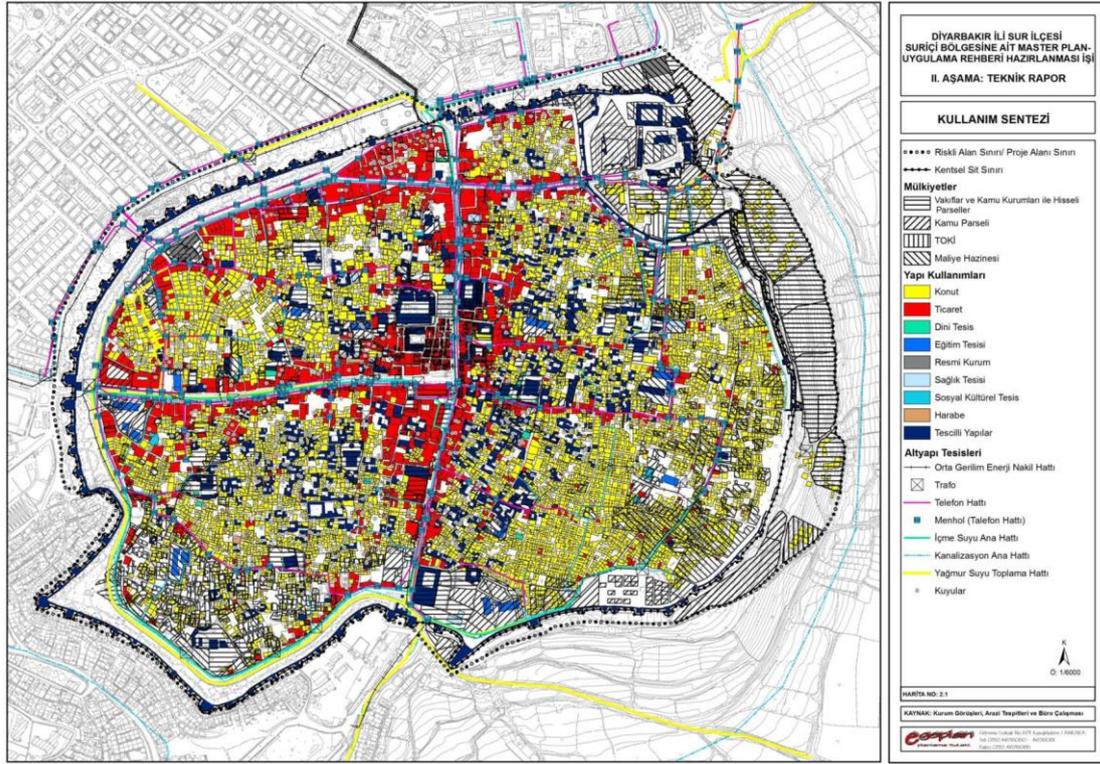
Sur district contains 124 monumental and 410 registered civil architecture buildings. Hevsel Gardens and Sur City Walls have been added to the World Cultural Heritage list in 2015. The 3600 plots of district will be expropriated through gentrification project that means of about 60 percent of the historic district.

The justification of “urgent expropriation” has been made as “cases requiring the national defense and in exceptional circumstances”. In addition to that, Council of Ministers also might decide that in case of an urgency. But the justification of “urgent expropriation” for Sur has not yet been made/announced. .

The determination of project decisions had been taken by Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning Ministry, Interior Ministry and Mass Housing Administration (TOKI)

The goal of the project has been announced as “less housing, more trade”. According to the project, 1000 historical buildings will be taken under protection and 8 thousand houses will be reconstructed in harmony with the historical texture. The antebellum property value will be taken as a basis of current project implementation according to the government statement. The whole project budget is 4b. Turkish liras.

**Map 2:** Master Plan According to Sur Regeneration Project



Turkish authority has promised citizens that will be assisted and paid in valued house prices after the project.

*So who is the new users?*

The Kurdish municipalities and Kurdish political movement have been excluded from the process completely. The government has decided to determine the property rights and property values without any negotiation process. Residents' properties are being valued under the threat of expropriation and it is impossible to defend residents' rights and negotiate with the authorities.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to reflect on Sur project within the context of the literature and related urban policy thinking and give some critical debate points.

What is the explanation of gentrification in Kurdistan? Does it mean to push the Kurdish people out of the city centers to the peripheries and to other Turkish metropolitan areas? Does it mean to strengthen the capital class with a big urban project in Kurdish region?

As we explained above, the economic growth and construction of big urban projects which were programmed under JDP government went hand in hand with the peace process until July 2015.

The state had more control in Kurdistan and more capital were accumulated after the declaration of the self-determination by PKK and HDP was responded with military operations, which then led to a bloody battle.

The central Turkish state is able to create the new spatial and cultural conditions to reshape the ethnic and socio-economic fabric of Sur district. The aim of Turkish state with that project is to strengthen the neo liberal urban policies in Kurdish cities. It is easy to see some of the direct effects, in already abandoned residential areas as well as some trade shops.

When we look at the gentrification project of Sur, what we see is a project that will attract the attention of big capital groups and the middle class. The residential units are hardly upgraded. The goal of “normalization” of Kurdish cities stance might be achieved through this gentrification project. But this paradigm shift is much needed in gentrification research literature.

The poor Kurdish population has been cleared out of the SUR inner city results of battle between PKK and Turkish military force even if it was never directly expressed in those terms.

Before this project the nearly all existing communities and businesses displaced from Sur. So displacement taken place with state-led gentrification about Sur. Turkish state is attempting to redesign social profile base of neighborhood through the restructure of place. Centralization and rescaling of state power will rise up through gentrification project in Diyarbakır.

The discourse of terror has become is an important element to construction of urban areas. JDPs gentrification project have given political cover to the current authoritarian regime in Diyarbakır and understanding class relations at neighborhood level has shaded through raised military control during battle. Because any household has forced to move from district by conditions of battle. Battle conditions has maiden no difference in terms of all classes in district. Living longer in Sur is impossible. These places has been turned to ghost places for those who live in them. Half of the Sur district was still under curfew and the area people lived in it and that is where the heaviest fighting took place. In spite of battle expectations about resurgence of peace process is still vivid.

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