

World Heritage (WH) site Diyarbakir Fortress and Hevsel Gardens Cultural Landscape

Diyarbakir - How a WH site is destroyed deliberately by Turkey and the UNESCO keeps silent

Platform No to the Destruction of Sur, Diyarbakir/Turkey

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The urban site of Diyarbakir, situated in the mainly Kurdish populated Southeast of Turkey, has housed over 4000 years numerous civilizations of the East and West as well as functioned as a political-economical center thanks to its geopolitical importance. The first fortress is assumed to have been built by the Hurritaens in the 3rd century BC. With its multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-layered character the city hosts various cultural properties in the urban archaeological site, which include distinctive civil architecture, religious architecture comprising mosque and church structures and public structures.

A strong civil society in Diyarbakir took the initiative, created a coordination with the municipalities of Diyarbakir and revised for the old fortified city, called Sur or Suriçi, the "Suriçi Urban Conservation Plan" in 2012 based on high social-cultural-ecological principles. This local coalition convinced even the Turkish Government which applied to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee (WHC). In 2015 the "Diyarbakir Fortress and Hevsel Gardens Cultural Landscape" has been inscribed as a World Heritage (WH) Site.

Conflict period and start of destruction

After the end of the 2,5 years ceasefire and negotiations between Turkish government and the Kurdish opposition in order to solve the Kurdish question, the restarted civil war has reached quickly several Kurdish cities. The Turkish police started also operations in "Sur" in September 2015 where local young people have armed themselves *against the increasing political repression*, but did not attack the state. As part of the operations several times 24 hour lasting curfews have been declared by the Turkish government which de-facto are a full blockade and did not allow the population to leave its houses. With the use of the military and heavy military equipment like tanks and mortars the 6th curfew and state operation started on December 11, 2015, on the Eastern Half of Sur.

The armed conflict ended officially on March 10, 2016, and led to the death of some hundred people. Until nowadays the curfew still continues in five of six affected neighborhoods: Dabanoğlu, Fatih Paşa, Hasırlı, Cemal Yılmaz and Savaş.

It is estimated that during the armed conflict around 400-500 buildings have been destroyed completely or mostly. About that is no information published by the Turkish government. The fortress, directly WH propriety, has been used by Turkish military for its operations and experienced some damages.

Systematic destruction after the armed conflict

What moves the society is that the main physical destruction in Sur has happened after March 10, 2016. In the blockaded areas teams from the Ministry for Environment and Urban Planning have started to destroy deliberately also not damaged buildings, including monuments under conservation. Firstly the narrow roads have been broadened and secondly complete parcels have started to disappear. In East Sur the use of heavy equipment has never ceased to work until June 2017 and debris has been continuously excavated from Sur to different deposit sites. During the destruction the Turkish government did not show any serious effort to rescue any authentic elements of historical buildings and monuments among the debris which has

been excavated quickly and roughly. All this demolition and debris actions have violated existing Turkish laws and regulations.

Parallel to the ongoing destruction the Turkish government issued an expropriation order of all Sur on March 21, 2016. The decision, which includes mosques and churches, aims the transferring of whole Suriçi to the Turkish government. Up to date the expropriation has been done for a major part of the destroyed parts of East Suriçi. For people in rent from the destroyed areas the government has offered with delay almost no financial support.

After all municipalities in Diyarbakir city, which have been ruled by the oppositional party HDP and criticized the governments policy on Sur, have been seized with a state appointed commissioner in November 2016, based on a decree possible under state of emergency, and the co-mayors have been arrested, the Urban Conservation Plan of Sur has been revised immediately in order to give a legal basis for the destruction in progress. This act is based on the long expressed purpose to implement gentrification and commercialization in Sur. In the revised plan, for instance, areas around military/police stations and streets connecting these stations have been widened so much allowing the passage of military vehicles, including tanks. Or schools have been turned into military/police stations, but no alternative educational areas have been determined.

Neither during nor after the state operations the WH Site Management, situated in the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality, got the permission to have access to the affected area in Sur. All calls of the Site Management to the Ministry for Tourism and Culture to intervene against the destruction of monuments and buildings in Sur have been ignored. Rather so called „scientific commissions“ have been formed which produced justifications for the ongoing destruction and shortly before the seizing of the municipalities the ministry put the critical WH Site management under its direct control with a decree.

The UNESCO WHC has asked the Turkish government for information on the WH Site Diyarbakir in beginning of 2016 after the WH Site Management sent its reports and news have been published internationally. But the UNESCO WHC kept satisfied with the information of Turkey which downplayed the destruction. The decisions of the UNESCO WHC at the annual sessions in 2016 and 2017 expressed concerned in a superficial way, but never challenged Turkey which meanwhile continued to destroy. UNESCO keeps silent although it is obvious that a state party destroys deliberately a WH site for what is no example in human history.

In May 2017 the Turkish government has started with the complete destruction of the two neighborhoods Lalebey and Ali Paşa in Southwestern Sur where no armed clashes have happened. The inhabitants protested against their forced displacement and have been supported by the civil society, but the after months of pressure with heavy police presence the buildings of 6000 families have been demolished. The justification of the Turkish government was a rehabilitation project in cooperation the municipalities from 2011, but after violation of inhabitants rights by TOKI, the state housing company, the municipalities nullified it in 2013.

Satellite images from May 2016, August 2016 and July 2017 show the progressive destruction of buildings and areas in Sur. While in East Sur the number of completely destroyed and subsequently erased buildings was 832 (10,7 hectares destroyed) in May 2016, this raised to 1519 (20,3 hectares destroyed) in August 2016 and to 3569 in July 2017. This meets a destroyed and erased area of 46,3 hectares.

If we add 806 destroyed buildings from Southwestern Sur, there are 4376 destroyed buildings which meet an area of approx. 58 hectares. Considering the total area of Sur, 148 hectares, this is around 39 % of the whole area of the walled Sur. However in these destroyed buildings lived half of the population of Sur, namely 25.000 people.

Totally 170 monuments, i.e. architecturally registered and conserved civil and public buildings, have been destroyed or damaged in Sur according to the satellite photo dated on August 2016. In detail: 89 monuments of civil and public value have been destroyed completely and 40 partially; 41 monuments have been damaged. Of these 170 registered structures 76 are of civil, 13 of monumental significance and 81 marked as environmentally significant buildings. With the destruction after August 2016 the number of destroyed or damaged monuments may have raised.



Photo 1: Air photos of Sur (a) before, June 2015, and (b) East Sur after the destruction, July 2017

One of the destroyed registered monuments was located in the citadel which is directly WH propriety. After the Regional Board for the Conservation Cultural Assets canceled its conservation status, it has been destroyed in order to build a park in 2017. For the park construction at several locations excavations of two meters have been done. Actually the population has left this area of years ago in order to do excavations because under the ground antique monuments, including a Roman amphitheater, had been detected.



Photo 2: World Heritage propriety "citadel area" where a monument has been destroyed for a park

New Housing projects – Ensuring of displacement

In spring 2017 after a long announcement by the government in the erased East Sur the construction of new 60 buildings has started. They have been built by reinforced concrete, with no typical courtyards and in big distance to each other which is a strong violation of the

historical old city fabric and the traditional Diyarbakir houses. The revised and extremely weakened Urban Conservation Plan opens the door for such new constructions. In the same way, but faster, since end of 2017 hundreds of buildings are in construction in the destroyed parts of Southwest Sur.

For the new housing projects the government has built basements and installed new pipes for water, waste water, electricity for what excavations of three or more meters have been done. As this area has a settlement past of at least 4000 years and in Diyarbakir the houses have no basements, this work is destroying the widespread archaeological layers under the ground. Sur had no serious challenges with supply of water and electricity since 2002 when the municipalities have built carefully new pipers.



Photo 3: New buildings in Southwest Sur, April 2018

The destruction of the WH site is not limited to the old city. In spring 2017 the Ministry for Environment and Urban Planning has put in action the „Tigris Valley Project“ which had been canceled during the UNESCO application process in 2015 after years of protests and critic by civil society and municipalities. Since spring 2017 the government has constructed many buildings in parts of the not settled tampon area within the Tigris Valley and foresees widespread commercial buildings and activities. It has started also to canalize the bed of the river and plans an artificial pond. The whole ecosystem of the river, which was planned to be a wildlife area by the elected municipality administrations, is in danger and endemic species like the endangered Euphrates Soft-shell Turtle or the native 40 bird species are losing their habitat. Even the Hevsel Gardens, directly WH property is under danger.



Photo 4: Tigris River in buffer zone under destruction through canalizing, March 201, and before

In August 2017 the Turkish government decided to do “urban transformation” in the two neighborhoods Feritköşk and Dicle with its 9000 inhabitants situated in the buffer zone of the Tigris Valley. It is justified with poor construction conditions which is partly true. The experience

in Turkey is that all buildings will be expropriated in order to construct new buildings with a complete new plan. As the two neighborhoods lay in the hang of the valley and are of interest of investments, they will be sold for a high price and thus the former inhabitants, mostly poor, will not return. Such plans have not started but are discussed in Diyarbakir. However they violate the Management Plan which has been submitted to the UNESCO WHC in 2014 and was a precondition for the inscription of Diyarbakir at the WH List. It foresees that the population's living conditions will be improved with different measures and technical-financial support and nobody needs to be displaced.

Conclusion

Firstly it needs to be stated that in half of Sur apart from the destroyed buildings, the original street fabric and the insular-parcel integrity have been irreparably lost. The forced exodus and the following expropriation decision by the Turkish government leads to the eradication of the life and trade style and urban memory composed with the accumulation over thousands of years, change of propriety and the change the demographic structure and interrupt the cultural continuity. The ongoing „Tigris Valley Project“ is the second big threat on the WH Site Diyarbakir outside of fortress and actually the whole city which should not underestimated. If all plannings of the Turkish government would be implemented the social and ecological impacts would increase significantly and the WH Site of Diyarbakir would loose its core values and uniqueness. However, through a political campaign there is still the chance to stop the ongoing destruction and gentrification and in a second step to plan the resettlement of displaced people to their original homes and to renaturate the Tigris Valley. Only the restoration of destroyed monuments will be partly possible.

Considering the described developments the following steps are urgently demanded:

- 1) The UNESCO WHC and its Advisory Boards should send immediately a reactive mission to Diyarbakir without waiting for an invitation by the Turkish State Party. This mission should meet also displaced people, people living in Sur and all civil society organizations working on Sur.
- 2) The Turkish government and the municipalities of Diyarbakir have to stop immediately all kind of actions in the WH Site and its buffer zone, particularly the destruction of buildings and other structures, removal of debris, expropriation and displacement of local inhabitants, construction of new housing projects described as „urban transformation“ projects and the „Tigris Valley Project“.
- 3) The Turkish government has to annul the decision to expropriate 82% of Sur dated on March 21, 2016, and the revision of the Urban Conservation Plan by the Ministry for Environment and Urban Planning dated on December 2016.
- 4) All further assessments, documentation and urban design plannings have to be done with the participation of affected people, independent scientists from different fields, broad civil society (chamber of architects, engineers, unions, human rights organizations, cultural associations) and all related municipalities in an open and participative process. The UNESCO WHC should be consulted directly in this process.
- 4) The destroyed parts of Sur should be reconstructed according to the former Urban Conservation Plan (approved in 2012) and the WH Site Management Plan (dated 2014) with a strong participation of civil society and inhabitants of Sur, including the displaced ones. The latter should return to their former neighborhoods without to be charged.
- 5) If the Turkish government rejects the above mentioned requests the WHC should call the UN Security Council based on the UN Security Council resolution 2347 (March 2017) on destruction of cultural heritage.