

FROM THE
WARZONE
OF NORTH
KURDISTAN

Alp Kayserilioğlu

might succeed in “cleansing” the autonomous cities and districts from militants. But that will not solve the “Kurdish question” and it surely will not deescalate the conflict in the long run. On the contrary, the Turkish state’s extremely brutal and indiscriminate operational procedure already leaves estranged more and more Kurds as I witnessed myself in the region. And many of the youth will radicalize and will – and, as some reports suggest, already have – “go into the mountains”, i.e. join the PKK to become guerilla fighters. The killing of hundreds of militants today will most likely generate thousands of militants tomorrow. Similar things can be said regarding the Kurdish people in general and their political and ideological outlook. In general the people in North Kurdistan have a very humanist and moderate approach demanding peace, seeing self-defence only as a last option against state oppression. However, people were increasingly accusing the West – of Turkey and outside of Turkey. In some instances voices turned bitter and aggressive. Nobody should wonder if Kurds run out of patience one day, turn away from the perspective of any possible common democratic project with the West of Turkey and begin to see the so-called international community merely as a community of power and economic interests.

Turkey is about to completely descend into chaos and all-encompassing warfare. Kurdish forces have repeatedly warned the Turkish state to back off or otherwise they would escalate the war in the whole of Turkey once Spring begins and the guerilla forces can operate more freely. But the Turkish state in its madness could very well extend the current war further by provoking the PKK to intervene on a much larger scale or by invading Rojava/North Syria. Either way would trigger a turmoil and bloodbath neither the Turkish state nor anybody else will be able to control any longer.

Alp Kayserilioğlu

All photographs by O-Young Kwon

Lower Class Magazine
<http://lowerclassmag.com/>

The friends group consisted of what I would call leftist Kurdish bohemians, something I would not have expected to encounter, surely not in a war region. As they see that I can barely hide my amazement, one guy tells me: “You know, everybody is asking us ‘what on earth are guys like you doing here in Şırnak? You should be in Europe or somewhere else’. You know we are relaxed and laid-back. But then again that’s something we create on our own. The surroundings here are hardly relaxed and laid-back. So it’s an extra effort to create a relaxed, laid-back atmosphere. If we would go to Europe everything is that way in the first place. Then it wouldn’t be fun anymore for us to be like that. And that’s why we have never left Şırnak and never will leave Şırnak.”

And while they were fooling around and having fun all the time, they were dead serious once we talked about politics. For two hours we drank beer and discussed politics in “Las Vegas”. But that night, Şırnak was not at all like Las Vegas and hardly any lights were shining. Many people fled in fear of a potential curfew.

The night passes with gunfire from all around the flat of the friends I was staying at, although the house wasn’t located in an autonomous quarter. But by now, I’m accustomed to it and don’t care too much anymore. Early in the morning the next day a friend took me to the minibus to Diyarbakır. The minibus is overcrowded, hardly any room is left, multiple people even sit on the floor of the bus. There at the bus station, my friend saw another friend of him who was also taking a bus out of the city.

“Why on earth are you leaving? Everybody is leaving but I didn’t expect you to.” “Well what can I say... there is nobody left here anymore.” “Well, I am, ain’t I!” My friend seemed to have lost some morale. “Everybody is leaving the town. I am not going to leave the town. Never ever.”

« IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION » « TURKEY DESCENDING INTO CHAOS »

As the siege in Cizre is officially ended on February 11, interior minister Efkân Elâ celebrates a “successful end of the operations” and announces that there will be new curfews in the other cities in which there are trenches and barricades. Consequently, on February 16, a curfew is proclaimed in Idil. Curfews in Nusaybin, Şırnak and Yüksekova followed shortly thereafter.

However, the Turkish state has already failed to achieve its own aims. It

« FROM THE WARZONE » « OF NORTH KURDISTAN »

At the beginning of 2015, tensions between the ruling AKP and the pro-Kurdish, leftist HDP were rising, President Erdoğan had terminated the peace process and declared that there is no more “Kurdish question”. After AKP’s massive loss of votes and HDP’s rapid rise in the June 7 elections, the AKP chose to opt for war and snap elections to regain power. Since the end of July 2015, the South East of Turkey (North Kurdistan) has yet again descended into an escalating war. What began as a targeted campaign of the armed forces against PKK camps in the Qandil mountains in Northern Iraq accompanied by limited clashes in mostly rural areas in summer, has turned into open urban warfare with forces of the police and by now also the military literally besieging cities and neighborhoods. In the months following the de facto annulment of the results of the June 7 elections, a manifold of Kurdish cities and neighborhoods had declared their autonomy meaning that they would begin to govern (and, eventually, defend) themselves since from their point of view the Turkish state was not respecting their call for more democracy. The escalation of the war has occurred particularly after the electoral triumph of the AKP on November 1. During this escalation, entire towns have been transformed into ruins while the humanitarian situation deteriorated rapidly at the same time. By now the situation is critical and ready to spiral out of control completely.

We have argued elsewhere¹ at length why the war in Kurdistan escalated anew, as well as why the current situation differs fundamentally from the 1990s and what potential scenarios could unfold in the near future. In this text, however, I want to give a brief overview of the situation from inside the war zone of North Kurdistan where we travelled to as *lower class magazine*.

1. Turkey’s Decisive Year, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/turkey-erdogan-akp-pkk-kurdistan-syria-ankara-bombing/>

« THE WAR IN NUMBERS »

Let's take a quick look at the dimension of this war, especially the urban war. On September 4, the first in a series of "curfews" on Kurdish cities was declared in Cizre and continued for eight days. What was named "curfew" back then was something much more like a military siege – and so are all "curfews" declared since then. The process of literally besieging entire cities intensified with the restoration of AKP power on November 1. While still in October the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) declared that "tanks are not to be sent into cities", by December 15 the army had entered the scene again. Since then, at least 10.000 units of police, gendarmerie and the military are waging the war in North Kurdistan. (This number has at least doubled by now.) Heavy artillery and tanks have been moved into densely populated urban areas, army special forces such as the anti-sniper commandos of the Bordo Bereliler ("Purple Hats") and even of SAT and SAS, that is commandos specialized in underwater warfare, are active in the most heavily contested areas. As state forces act in an indiscriminate manner, civilian casualties, forced migration and destruction of civilian infrastructure was and still is prevalent in war-torn areas. In a few basic numbers: According to the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV), at least 63 curfews in 7 provinces and 22 provincial districts had been declared between August 16 and March 18 affecting a population of at least 1 million 642 thousand people forcing at least 355.000 persons to migrate. At least 310 civilians were killed, while at least 180 of them died in their own houses due to shelling by heavy artillery or sniper fire and 76 civilians died as a consequence of ambulances being blocked by state forces from helping the wounded. On top of it, another 79 dead bodies either couldn't be identified or were forcibly buried by the authorities without disclosing their identities.

« THE TWO SIDES OF DIYARBAKIR »

As we landed in Diyarbakir on January 15, the center of the city called Sur had been under siege for over than 40 days. A couple of days before our arrival in Diyarbakir, Prime Minister Davutoğlu pointed out that "operations will end within one week". That, obviously, proved to be wrong.

Sur, the age-old historical district of Diyarbakir (or, in Kurdish, Amed), the 'inofficial capital' of North Kurdistan, had been under constant heavy siege for more than 100 days with the exception only of 17 hours on De-

« THE LAS VEGAS OF CUDI » « AND BOHEMIANS OF THE FRONT LINE »

Back in Şırnak again, I decided to stay for a day in Şırnak, before going to Diyarbakır for the last couple of days of my trip. Contrary to what I normally did – go into the barricaded quarters, talk with the people there, get an idea of the scope of the conflict in the city and the like – I decided to stay with friends of our photographer. They owned a tea garden in a park – both completely destroyed by now – and as it becomes evening they say: "Come, let's take a walk. We don't care much about any curfew."

There was no curfew in Şırnak back then, but there were trenches and barricades. The streets were also patrolled by armored vehicles, especially at night. And there was gunfire. In other words, there was a de facto curfew. But the guys didn't care so we got in the car, grabbed a couple of beers and headed out of the city, chatting and drinking. "You know that's how we like to hang around." As we strolled around in the vicinity of Şırnak they showed me the main roads and where which military or police checkpoint was located. With their expertise they succeeded in dodging every single checkpoint and we arrived at a marvelous point they called the Las Vegas of Şırnak.



Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire – whenever they were attacking and shouted *allahu akbar* once an explosion rocked a building. We were told that soldiers were celebrating their victory by shooting in the sky by night. Many of the residents told us that they saved money for over 20 years until they could build their houses. Most of the houses were not inhabitable anymore and the damages were so huge they can hardly be repaired at all. Whatever will happen to those people that is still unclear. The residents however blamed the state for this war. We asked an elderly man about what he thought why this was happening. “Because we are Kurds”, he answers. “Allah has given us a language and it is the state that forbids it.”

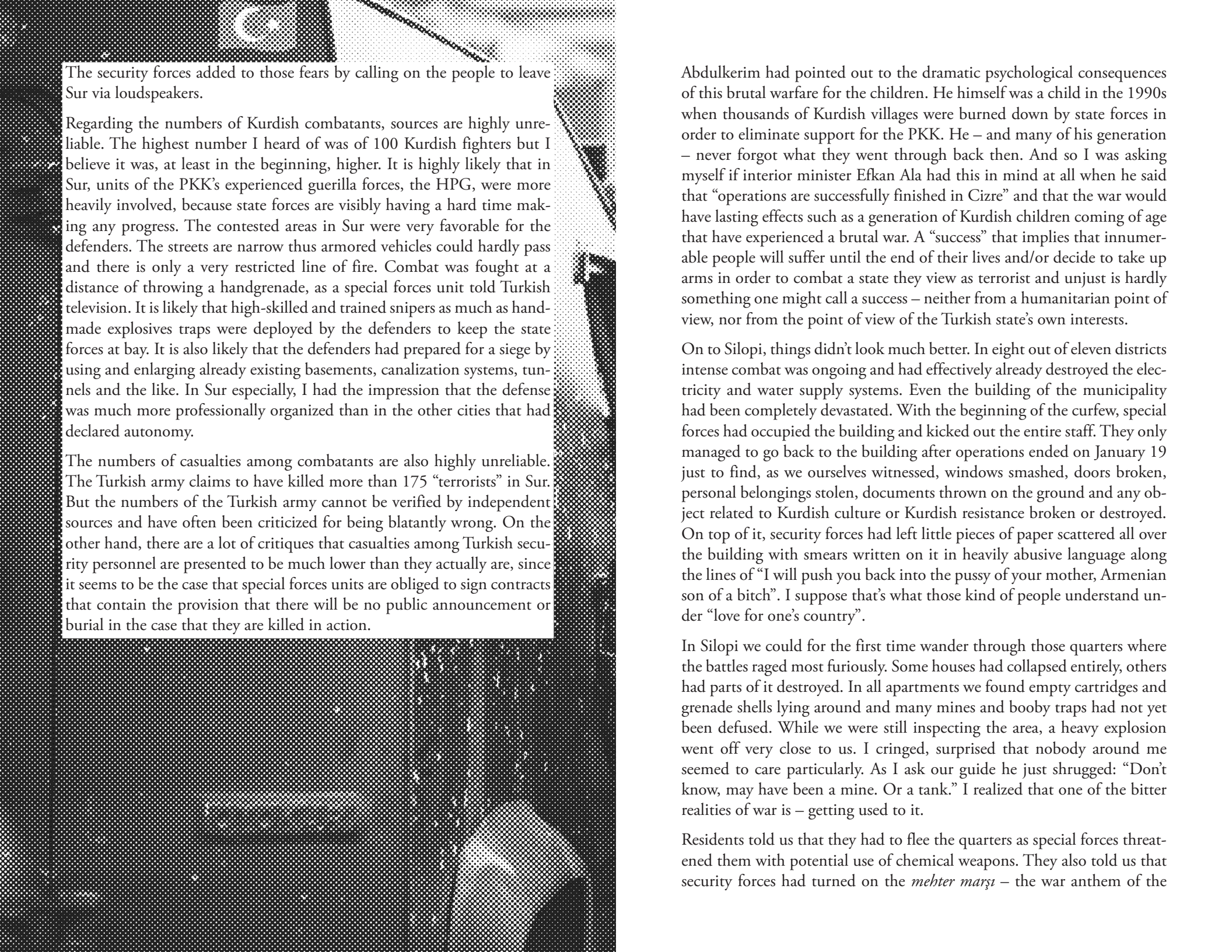


ember 10-11. But still most of the areas of Sur are not accessible and literally the entire district has been “nationalized” in order to engage in a “reconstruction process” which many deem to be purely a gentrification program.

In Diyarbakır the state managed to contain the conflict in a specific area, Sur. Albeit it was reported that now and then bullets from the fighting area also hit and at times even severely wounded civilians outside of Sur, compared to other cities Diyarbakır almost appears like a “safe zone”. Life in the city’s vivid Ofis quarter still goes on as if there was no war at all.

The keyword here, however, is “almost”. The city’s main streets were still dominated by armored vehicles and repression of the free press is a normality. Already on our first day we were the subject of a police control at a press conference in front of the main court and we were not exactly treated in a polite manner. They neither accepted our press cards nor our confirmatory letters from the newspapers we are working for and threatened to take us into custody if they would ever see us again without a special permission of the province governor. The day after things got even wilder: while we still found ourselves in an area outside of the curfew zone, we faced a police barricade and decided to turn back again. Obviously, we would not be able to pass. Yet, as we turned back and walked away from the police forces, they opened fire on us with live ammunition. For one and a half hours we were interrogated in harsh manner, asked for which intelligence agencies we were working for. All the while, just a couple of hundreds meters from us, heavy battles were raging. We were lucky this time and able to get away from the scene as the police unit that had dealt with us was commandeered to a special operation. As we are about to leave, the police officer who had been most hateful and aggressive towards us, set out to deliver his final speech: “The Turkish people and the Turkish state are awakening! There are traitors everywhere, inside and outside of Turkey. We’re going to crush all their heads just like we are crushing their heads right now here in Sur. Tell this to the German press!”

The repression of the freedom of the press aside, the general situation in Sur is devastating and everyone’s life is potentially in danger. The state’s actions are not restricted to the curfew areas of Sur. Residents told us that non-curfew areas have been under attack as well with the state shooting into those area to force the people to abandon it. That was seemingly the aim of the expansion of the zone under curfew for a short period of time which took place the day I left the region. The extension of the curfew area made people fear that the war will also soon arrive in those areas as well.



The security forces added to those fears by calling on the people to leave Sur via loudspeakers.

Regarding the numbers of Kurdish combatants, sources are highly unreliable. The highest number I heard of was of 100 Kurdish fighters but I believe it was, at least in the beginning, higher. It is highly likely that in Sur, units of the PKK's experienced guerilla forces, the HPG, were more heavily involved, because state forces are visibly having a hard time making any progress. The contested areas in Sur were very favorable for the defenders. The streets are narrow thus armored vehicles could hardly pass and there is only a very restricted line of fire. Combat was fought at a distance of throwing a handgrenade, as a special forces unit told Turkish television. It is likely that high-skilled and trained snipers as much as hand-made explosives traps were deployed by the defenders to keep the state forces at bay. It is also likely that the defenders had prepared for a siege by using and enlarging already existing basements, canalization systems, tunnels and the like. In Sur especially, I had the impression that the defense was much more professionally organized than in the other cities that had declared autonomy.

The numbers of casualties among combatants are also highly unreliable. The Turkish army claims to have killed more than 175 "terrorists" in Sur. But the numbers of the Turkish army cannot be verified by independent sources and have often been criticized for being blatantly wrong. On the other hand, there are a lot of critiques that casualties among Turkish security personnel are presented to be much lower than they actually are, since it seems to be the case that special forces units are obliged to sign contracts that contain the provision that there will be no public announcement or burial in the case that they are killed in action.

Abdulkerim had pointed out to the dramatic psychological consequences of this brutal warfare for the children. He himself was a child in the 1990s when thousands of Kurdish villages were burned down by state forces in order to eliminate support for the PKK. He – and many of his generation – never forgot what they went through back then. And so I was asking myself if interior minister Efsan Ala had this in mind at all when he said that "operations are successfully finished in Cizre" and that the war would have lasting effects such as a generation of Kurdish children coming of age that have experienced a brutal war. A "success" that implies that innumerable people will suffer until the end of their lives and/or decide to take up arms in order to combat a state they view as terrorist and unjust is hardly something one might call a success – neither from a humanitarian point of view, nor from the point of view of the Turkish state's own interests.

On to Silopi, things didn't look much better. In eight out of eleven districts intense combat was ongoing and had effectively already destroyed the electricity and water supply systems. Even the building of the municipality had been completely devastated. With the beginning of the curfew, special forces had occupied the building and kicked out the entire staff. They only managed to go back to the building after operations ended on January 19 just to find, as we ourselves witnessed, windows smashed, doors broken, personal belongings stolen, documents thrown on the ground and any object related to Kurdish culture or Kurdish resistance broken or destroyed. On top of it, security forces had left little pieces of paper scattered all over the building with smears written on it in heavily abusive language along the lines of "I will push you back into the pussy of your mother, Armenian son of a bitch". I suppose that's what those kind of people understand under "love for one's country".

In Silopi we could for the first time wander through those quarters where the battles raged most furiously. Some houses had collapsed entirely, others had parts of it destroyed. In all apartments we found empty cartridges and grenade shells lying around and many mines and booby traps had not yet been defused. While we were still inspecting the area, a heavy explosion went off very close to us. I cringed, surprised that nobody around me seemed to care particularly. As I ask our guide he just shrugged: "Don't know, may have been a mine. Or a tank." I realized that one of the bitter realities of war is – getting used to it.

Residents told us that they had to flee the quarters as special forces threatened them with potential use of chemical weapons. They also told us that security forces had turned on the *mehter marşı* – the war anthem of the

re with a clear line of sight on the city. From here we saw Cizre which lies at the bottom of the valley surrounded by mountains – and lots of tanks on the respective mountain tops. It is difficult to describe the moment in which it feels as if the explosion sounds of tank shellings will knock you off your feet. Smoke rose from the city. It was the same on our way back – skies screaming of artillery fire, smoke rising from the city.

We never made it into Cizre. It's close to impossible to make it and if one did, the chances of being shot by “security” forces were high, no matter if one is a civilian waving a white flag. That happened to our colleague Refik Tekin, a cameraman from IMC TV channel, on January 20, who was accompanying a civilian delegation which tried to transport dead bodies out of the city. He captured the moments² when security forces shot at the delegation wounding 10 people, two of which died on the same day.

Nowhere has the attack of the state been as brutal as in Cizre. Pictures from the city demonstrate the scope of destruction.³ It was the first city in which a curfew had been declared and now it had to endure another curfew. This time, on December 14, the curfew was declared over the entire city. I had a long and detailed talk with my friend Abdulkerim Pusat, who is the Cizre representative of the Turkish Human Rights' Association (IHD). He was, by bad luck, outside of the city when the curfew had been declared. Since then, he had not been able to go back to his hometown and was forced to continuously stay in different places in varying cities. I met him in Diyarbakır on my way back and he gave me more detailed information on the situation in Cizre. Cizre is – or rather was – a city of around 133.000 inhabitants. Back then though more than 100.000 had fled the city.

Apart from the destruction of infrastructure, heavy shelling and combat lead to high numbers of civilian casualties. At the time I had met with Abdulkerim, there had already been 65 civilian casualties reported. However, it is likely that terrible massacres of civilians had been carried out in Cizre on the last days of the operations, leading to the death of dozens of civilians. Those included 28 wounded civilians that had fled into a basement and reported that artillery fire had intensified after they called authorities to ask for help and giving them the exact coordinates of the basement they were hiding in.

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6bKXZ5E0II>

3. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=447&GalleryID=2716>



At one point I made it onto Gazi Caddesi, the main street that divides Sur in the middle from North to South. Access to Gazi Caddesi was and still is limited, as the war zone with regular heavy battles began immediately to the East of it. The eastern roadside was demolished and every corner turned into a fortification of the security forces. As we walked down the main street with gunfire and artillery to the East of us, I took a glance into the side streets that lead to the eastern districts. There, everything was in ruins, houses riddled by bullets and heavy artillery, and streets blocked with debris from the destroyed buildings and infrastructure. The Kurdish defenders – other than simple RPGs or hand-made explosives – hardly possessed the hardware to wreak such havoc.

In Sur, as well as in all other besieged areas and towns, security forces have covered the walls with writings such as “The Turkish Republic is back, traitors” and “Armenian sons of bitches”. Members of special forces have posed in destroyed classrooms in front of a blackboard with “Now it’s our time to educate” written on it, signed with “JÖH” (the abbreviation for Jandarma Özel Harekat, which translates as Gendarmerie Special Forces). It is also widely reported from residents of the contested quarters that Arabic speaking (and actually shouting) people and people of color are among the security personnel. Children even told me of “Japanese” fighters, by which they most probably meant Turkmen. Take this together with numerous eyewitness reports that in Sur and other contested areas a common writing on the wall is “Esedullah” (Lion of Allah). The so-called “Esedullah Team” is rumoured to be a special unit consisting of former ISIS members. Overall, these reports suggest strongly that members of various Islamist gangs supported by Turkey in Syria have been recruited for the most extreme and brutal military operations within Turkey as well.

As part of the indiscriminate military conduct of the state, electricity had been cut off in the area of Sur under curfew, most of the shops and bakeries were closed and water and food supplies were running out. Similar things, even graver, were reported from all other cities where curfews were declared. Quite obviously, the goal of the state was a depopulation of those quarters. While some highlight the fact that this is due to gentrification and reconstruction plans of the Turkish state and capitalist groups close to the government, the real reason is a political one: the state wants to sever the ties between the militants and the people in a physical as much as in a political and ideological way. And indeed, many people had left the embattled quarters because their houses were shelled and essentially made uninhabitable or, more directly, been turned into bases for state forces, or

where as it got dark and were suspiciously eyed by everybody as the strangers we obviously were. It took some time as I tried to organize the number of a journalist colleague and of course we were taken in custody again as we walked down the main road to meet up with that colleague – because we looked “suspicious”. This time it took around 5-6 hours and they literally searched through everything including my shoe polish and my packet of grounded coffee. “What’s this? What is it good for? Oh, this coffee smells really good...” And since we had so much fun together they called in some superior either from the anti-terrorism unit or the secret service or whatever. Things got more unpleasant as that higher ranked officer began to interrogate us. I suppose he thought I was some kind of an agent of sorts. I was not able to convince him that I was a journalist and interestingly enough he freaked out the most when the interrogation touched upon the topic of money. He could not believe me that our journalistic trip would likely not be profitable at all. “That’s not possible, you do this kind of stuff either for money or for an aim, an organization. Though it doesn’t have to be the terror organization [*the* terror organization always means the PKK in Turkey] if you know what I mean.” I’m not sure if that was supposed to mean something along the lines of “hey, just tell me if you’re an agent, that’s not that bad, that doesn’t make you a terrorist” or whatever else he was aiming at. But the whole story got even more absurd. “Look, I’m a police officer. Why does one become a police officer? Either out of love for one’s country or because of the money. And, to be honest, money is the more important aspect for me.” A policeman from the station must have thought that now is the moment to say something very clever and interjected: “Dear officer, all due respect for the love of one’s country, but does it pay off credit card debts?” As they, obviously, could not find anything “criminal”, they went for my small notebook in which I had kept my notes, mostly in German. It took hours before the policemen came again and told me that they had in fact called in a German teacher – I doubt there is one in Dargeçit, but oh well – to translate the entire notebook just to find out that there is nothing criminal in it, only journalistic notes.

The next day we took a long detour via Batman, Siirt and Şırnak. From Şırnak there was a minibus to Silopi over and at times through the famous Cudi mountains on streets that are barely worth being referred to as streets. But that was our only way because the main road again lead via Cizre and was completely blocked. There was one military checkpoint in a village which lies on the mountain path’s way from where it descends into the valley again. The checkpoint was just around two kilometers from Ciz-

Regarding the militant formations, I was less convinced that they formed purely as spontaneous as people would claim it to be. Kalashnikovs and RPGs and tactics of urban guerrilla warfare against a technically superior enemy don't just materialize over night. However, I also didn't have the impression that it were PKK guerrillas who had hoarded weapons in the period of the peace/solution process and now just went "overground" to spread "terror". It is the case that most of the members of the YPS whom I saw were very young and surely mostly youth from the neighborhoods they were defending. Their weaponry consisted of mostly light and some medium (simple RPGs, hand-made mines) arms and the majority of them clearly were not "professionals" albeit some of them surely had some combat experiences and/or training. They all had a clear political stance regarding the current developments and were very committed. Thus, I suppose that it is the youth of the urban quarters which had taken the initiative, while at the same time they were indeed supported by the PKK in preparing and forming their units.

« CIZRE AND SILOPI IN RUINS »

Trying to get to Silopi was an adventure in itself. While we were still in Idil, on January 19, military operations in Silopi ended and the governor declared that the curfew would remain in place only at night from then onwards. The clashes essentially ceased. Local sources told us that the Turkish state was successful in infiltrating the ranks of the Kurdish forces in Silopi and sabotaged the mines that were planted in order to stop armored vehicles from entering the autonomous areas. Once the tanks and APCs were able to enter the neighborhoods due to the mines not going off, Silopi fell rather quickly.

Thus, we tried to get to Silopi. The main road between Nusaybin, Idil and Cizre was permanently blocked. Trucks could not even make it from Nusaybin to Idil. We got stuck in a checkpoint since the military's electronic systems for checking IDs had broken down. Since our taxi driver got nervous that we might be stuck there or arrive in Silopi only by night when the curfew would be active again, we had to return.

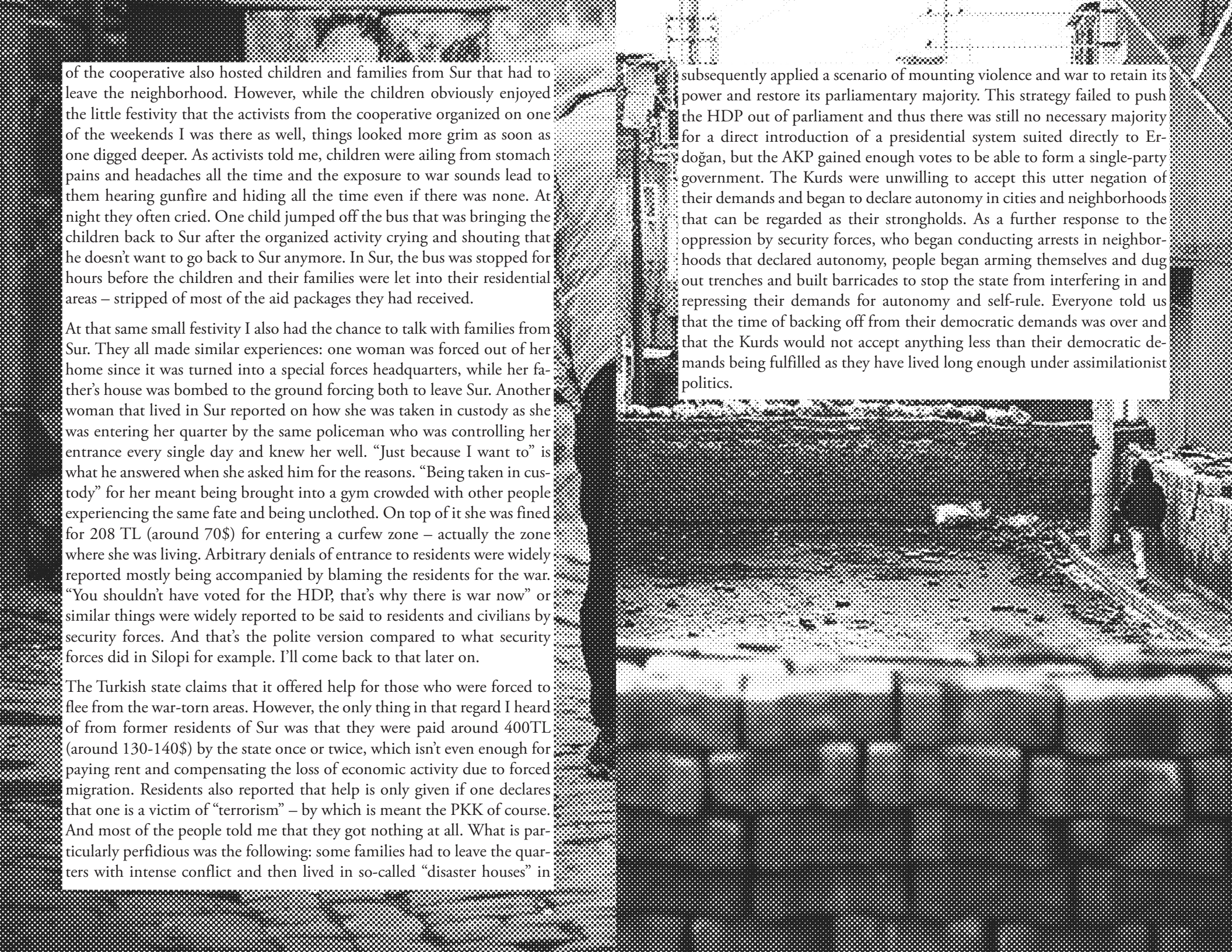
We then tried to go to Silopi via the mountain city of Dargeçit – rather a larger village than a city with its around 15.000 inhabitants. I really do not know why and how we came up with that idea and it wasn't a very good one for sure. There were no means of mass transportation from Dargeçit any longer, neither back nor forth. So we got stuck in the middle of no-

not least because they were running out of food and water.

This is part of the general approach healthcare workers describe as a denial of the right to life and health. In front of the Diyarbakır municipality, healthcare workers from different sectors came together and staged a permanent picket since December because of the deteriorating health and living conditions throughout Kurdistan as a result of the current war. Barış, who was responsible for organizing the picket when I visited the healthcare workers, told me that by now healthcare workers no longer dare to work even in the non-curfew areas of Sur for security reasons, which in turn lead to constantly deteriorating health conditions in Sur. They were blocked from transporting the wounded or dead so regularly, he told me, that they could no longer practice their duties. In cities other than Diyarbakır the situation was even worse. In Cizre, the two only open pharmacies had been forced to close down because they were shelled. Aziz Vural, a healthcare worker in the emergency aid sector of the hospital in Cizre, was killed by a sniper with a shot to his head as he was trying to help an elderly woman who was wounded by gunfire. In Cizre, Silopi and Nusaybin hospital courts had been transformed into emplacements for artillery and tanks.

It is mostly civil society organizations that provided for the most basic needs of the population that was forced to migrate from Sur. A friend of us from a civil society organization named Umut Işığ Kadın Kooperatifi [Light of Hope Women's Cooperative] told us that according to the numbers provided by the municipality, over 25.000 of the 50.000 inhabitants of Sur had been forced to flee and understandably the quarters with the most intense fighting were also the ones with the highest number of forced migration. Back then, the municipality claimed that they and other civil organizations could only reach out to 10.000 of those who had fled. From Ramazan Karabal of the Rojava Association – an organization that coordinates humanitarian aid – we learned that the state not only did next to nothing for the victims of the war, but also actively blocked aid from civil society organizations. No aid packages could be delivered to Sur or Cizre. As some families from Sur later on told us, the reason for this is the claim of security forces that food and other aid packages would immediately go to the "terrorists".

The civil society organization Umut Işığ Kadın Kooperatifi could not use its branch in Sur any longer since it was located directly in the area under curfew and was hit by gunfire. Instead, they organized activities for families from Sur outside of Sur, especially for the children, to give them a chance to live a life without war, at least for a couple of hours. Activists




of the cooperative also hosted children and families from Sur that had to leave the neighborhood. However, while the children obviously enjoyed the little festivity that the activists from the cooperative organized on one of the weekends I was there as well, things looked more grim as soon as one digged deeper. As activists told me, children were ailing from stomach pains and headaches all the time and the exposure to war sounds led to them hearing gunfire and hiding all the time even if there was none. At night they often cried. One child jumped off the bus that was bringing the children back to Sur after the organized activity crying and shouting that he doesn't want to go back to Sur anymore. In Sur, the bus was stopped for hours before the children and their families were let into their residential areas – stripped of most of the aid packages they had received.

At that same small festivity I also had the chance to talk with families from Sur. They all made similar experiences: one woman was forced out of her home since it was turned into a special forces headquarters, while her father's house was bombed to the ground forcing both to leave Sur. Another woman that lived in Sur reported on how she was taken in custody as she was entering her quarter by the same policeman who was controlling her entrance every single day and knew her well. "Just because I want to" is what he answered when she asked him for the reasons. "Being taken in custody" for her meant being brought into a gym crowded with other people experiencing the same fate and being unclothed. On top of it she was fined for 208 TL (around 70\$) for entering a curfew zone – actually the zone where she was living. Arbitrary denials of entrance to residents were widely reported mostly being accompanied by blaming the residents for the war. "You shouldn't have voted for the HDP, that's why there is war now" or similar things were widely reported to be said to residents and civilians by security forces. And that's the polite version compared to what security forces did in Silopi for example. I'll come back to that later on.

The Turkish state claims that it offered help for those who were forced to flee from the war-torn areas. However, the only thing in that regard I heard of from former residents of Sur was that they were paid around 400TL (around 130-140\$) by the state once or twice, which isn't even enough for paying rent and compensating the loss of economic activity due to forced migration. Residents also reported that help is only given if one declares that one is a victim of "terrorism" – by which is meant the PKK of course. And most of the people told me that they got nothing at all. What is particularly perfidious was the following: some families had to leave the quarters with intense conflict and then lived in so-called "disaster houses" in

subsequently applied a scenario of mounting violence and war to retain its power and restore its parliamentary majority. This strategy failed to push the HDP out of parliament and thus there was still no necessary majority for a direct introduction of a presidential system suited directly to Erdoğan, but the AKP gained enough votes to be able to form a single-party government. The Kurds were unwilling to accept this utter negation of their demands and began to declare autonomy in cities and neighborhoods that can be regarded as their strongholds. As a further response to the oppression by security forces, who began conducting arrests in neighborhoods that declared autonomy, people began arming themselves and dug out trenches and built barricades to stop the state from interfering in and repressing their demands for autonomy and self-rule. Everyone told us that the time of backing off from their democratic demands was over and that the Kurds would not accept anything less than their democratic demands being fulfilled as they have lived long enough under assimilationist politics.



gut Ozal neighborhood in Idil to interview people on the streets, did we make a somewhat different experience. As I told one man and a woman that we were from Europe and wanted to report on the war and the people's interpretations of the current conflict, they began to curse. "We don't care about what Europe does. You haven't been doing anything up to now, what sense does it make now after the war already killed our children? It was the same with Kobane. Nobody cared for it until it was destroyed."

Here, as elsewhere, answers by civilians as well as militants to our questions as to why the YPS, the Civil Protection Units, were formed, and as to why trenches were dug and barricades built, were for the most part very similar and can be summed up as follows. For them, the AKP had effectively ended the so-called solution or peace process, if not earlier than with the isolation the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, since April 2015 and consequently the AKP began disregarding the Kurdish demand for more democracy and autonomy. People thought that the AKP turned more violent and disrespectful to the democratic demands of the Kurdish people with the de facto annulment of the election results from June 7 and

other quarters of Sur, i.e. public residential spaces designed to house people if natural catastrophes or the like have made people's original residential spaces uninhabitable. But since the state declared that there were close to no civilian casualties and infrastructural damage (other than that done by the PKK of course) because the war proceeded in the most prudent and cautious way possible, it stated that there was no situation of catastrophe. And because of this, people then staying in those disaster houses because their houses were bombed to the ground even had to pay rent.

The situation of the education of the children affected by the curfews was similarly dire. At the end of January, workers from the education sector and their union, Eđitim-Sen, also started a picket against the deteriorating educational and living conditions of the children. Schools were temporarily closed and teachers called back from cities where curfews were declared while school buildings also were transformed into special forces headquarters and artillery emplacements. According to the numbers of the workers of the education sector, at least 90.000 pupils could not attend school anymore and replacement crash courses were by far not enough. However, they also saw the main problem in the war and the psychological damage it caused with the children and they consequently demanded an end to the war as the main stepping stone towards a restoration of the normal educational processes.

« NUSAYBIN AND IDIL »

« NO CURFEW, BUT DANGEROUS ANYWAY »

It was clear that the state was concentrating the war in Sur, Diyarbakır, and Cizre for both were among the places where the Kurdish resistance was and at its strongest. That and possibly a fear of overstressing its own capacities might have been the reasons why the Kurdish cities Nusaybin – after a brief curfew period – and Idil had been spared from the state’s attacks for a long time. There were, however, widely spread rumours claiming that curfews would also be declared in these cities and in Şırnak once the conflict in Cizre and Sur would come to its end. And indeed this was the case. After the end of the conflict in Cizre, on February 16, a curfew had been declared in Idil as well while Nusaybin, Şırnak and Yüksekova would follow up soon.

There was no curfew though when we were in Idil and Nusaybin. Yet, that by no means meant that the cities were “safe”. Quite the contrary, while in Diyarbakır the war was concentrated to specific areas, in the smaller and less lively places, not frequented by foreign tourists and media, the entire city became a war zone with potential danger everywhere.

In both cities, especially in Idil, there was what residents called a “de facto curfew”. Thus, albeit there was no official declaration of a curfew, nobody really went out at night. Because all main streets were patrolled by armored vehicles of the security forces. When night sat in clashes began and the patrolling units shot, mostly arbitrarily, into the barricaded quarters. I

realized that the situation was serious when we engaged in a rather adventurous expedition one night in Idil. We wanted to walk around in one of the barricaded quarters and inquire if we could talk to militants. “Sure, we can” was the blunt answer of our friend from Idil who accompanied us. As we arrived at the neighborhood, though, he pointed towards the higher buildings outside of the neighborhood and advised us to take cover and stay out of the firing line of those buildings, for there likely were snipers positioned in them. I thought he was just joking until he began running from cover to cover. So we found ourselves ducking behind walls and running across streets in the hope that no sniper would have the command to shoot.

Especially at daytime we had a chance to walk around more freely inside the barricaded neighborhoods. Of course there were controls before entering such an area – by Kurdish forces. However, the whole process was much easier than compared with our encounters with the state. Mostly, we entered those areas alongside local journalists anyway and since they were well acquainted with the surroundings and the people, we were able to move rather freely – “just don’t forget to be outside of the neighborhoods or in a house before it gets dark” they kindly reminded us.

What we experienced in those quarters was impressive. We did observe that there was quite some migration since everybody feared curfews would soon be declared in the cities not yet affected as well. Neither those who stayed behind nor the militants seemed to be too happy about people leaving. However, considering the circumstances there were still a lot of people left. They organized everything by themselves according to completely different principles of organizing society with the state being completely absent. Whatever the respective position and function of someone – militant, politician, aid worker, “civilian” – there was no hierarchy among them and they basically spent their life together in an equal way. Once, we were having a talk with militants at one of their security posts and civilians just stopped by to join and brought food we then all ate together. They ate, drank tea and sang together and an hour or so later everyone went about their own ways. Old mothers were proud of the children of the neighborhoods defending them from the Turkish state. “Allah may curse Erdoğan and may he never come back” is what I heard multiple times by elder women and children.

In general the people were very self-confident and happy about the absence of the state and we, as investigative journalists, were mostly welcomed warmly. Only once, when we were walking through the autonomous Tur-