
THE REMAKING AND
UNMAKING OF MULTI-
ETHNIC SPACES:
DIYARBAKIR AND
SOUTHEAST ANATOLIA IN
THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction

In late 2016, government-appointed trustees removed signs in Armenian, Syriac and Kurdish from municipal buildings in Diyarbakır and across southeast Anatolia.¹ These signs were the initiatives of Kurdish politicians who had only recently attempted to acknowledge the region's multi-ethnic history. Until the early 20th century southeast Anatolia had been an ethnic and religious patchwork. The early republican era saw efforts to "Turkify" the region through the reannotation of the map and the imposition of a national identity project that asserted ethnic – Turkish – unity. The military struggle against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) through the 1980s and 1990s gave urgency to the notion that ethnic uniformity was essential for national cohesion and the survival of the very state, thus discussion of ethnic diversity was quashed. From 1999, however, with the election of Kurdish-run municipalities across the southeast and the ascendance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to government in 2002, the situation

¹ "Kayyım Belediyenin İlk İcraatı: Çok Dilli Tabeladan Ermenice ve Süryanice Çıkarıldı," *Ağos*, December 9, 2016, <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/17211/kayyim-belediyenin-ilk-icraati-cokdilli-tabeladan-ermenice-ve-suryanice-cikarildi>.

changed. As EU accession processes began, the AKP embarked on reforms that allowed greater political space for minorities and spurred broader discussions about ethnic and national identities.

This article examines the circumstances of Turkey's minorities through the theoretical prism of Turkish nationalism and the ways that it has shaped conceptions of Turkey's national identity. Ernest Gellner articulates nationalism as a principle that demands that the "political unit and the national unit should be congruent."² Such a vision accords with the Republic of Turkey, which was premised on the "unity of language, culture and ideal."³ In this formulation Turkish language and culture were the forges for unity, thus there was no space for ethnic diversity and Turkey's minorities were ignored or denied. This article, however, documents Turkey's re-imagining of the national identity in the 2000s away from a narrowly defined ethnic category to acknowledge ethnic and religious diversity. Given southeast Anatolia's multi-ethnic social fabric, and developments that have occurred there as political spaces and debates about ethnicity have vacillated, the region serves as a barometer of the minority experience in Turkey. For a time, it appeared that Turkey would reconcile itself with its multi-ethnic make up. Through the restoration of historic sites and increasing activity from political actors, cultural groups and everyday citizens, southeast Anatolia saw the remaking of multi-ethnic spaces. Following a series of political upheavals from mid-2015, however, the nationalist pendulum has swung back again. When conflict with the PKK re-ignited, the AKP and many within Turkish society resumed long-standing postures. In this milieu, unity is paramount and diversity regarded with suspicion, thus assertions of ethnic distinctiveness again incur hostility. The AKP's electoral alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in 2018 indicates the resurgence of hegemonic nationalism in the political arena and means less space for minority actors.

This article thus analyses the cultural and political spaces for minorities in southeast Anatolia using a mixed, qualitative methodology

² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Maldon: Blackwell, 2006), 1.

³ Başak İnce, *Citizenship and Identity in Turkey: From Atatürk's Republic to the Present Day* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), 39.

including ethnographic observation as well as research in Turkish and English media reports and scholarship. The article first examines the historical background, focusing on the multi-ethnic mosaic of the region and early republican efforts to eradicate diversity in pursuit of ethnic unity. Observing changes in southeast Anatolia during the AKP's early years, the article examines discussions about national identity that arose as diversity in the region's historical and social makeup was acknowledged and spaces were (re)created for minorities. Inevitably, given persistent nationalist undercurrents, this attracted political backlash. The article considers such reactions, then it examines recent contractions in the political arena that have seen resurgent nationalist rhetoric and evaluates the implications for Turkey's minorities. In sum, the article examines the extent to which the experience of southeast Anatolia represents the thorough-going re-imagining of Turkey's national project and the re-embrace of a previously denied multi-ethnic socio-political fabric.

Ethnic diversity in the Republic of Turkey

The Republic of Turkey may have been conceived of as uniformly Turkish, yet Ümit Cizre observes that it inherited from the Ottoman Empire the “ethnic mosaic of the Anatolian rectangle.”⁴ That “mosaic” was not something founding elites wanted to countenance. Citizenship was conceived in a civic form, on the basis of *jus soli*,⁵ but in practice Kemalist administrators and bureaucrats, intent on modernisation and Westernisation, delineated the boundaries of the nation in narrow ethnic terms, emphasising unity, holding it in place with an authoritarian nationalism.⁶ The state and its citizens were defined by a trinity of at-

⁴ Ümit Cizre, “Turkey’s Kurdish Problem: Borders, Identity, and Hegemony,” in *Right-Sizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders*, eds. Brendan O’Leary, Ian S. Lustick, and Thomas Callaghy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 244.

⁵ Ayhan Kaya, *Europeanisation and Tolerance in Turkey: The Myth of Toleration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 47.

⁶ Çağlar Keyder, “Whither the Project of Modernity? Turkey in the 1990s,” in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 42.

tributes – Sunni, Muslim, Turkish⁷ – and the institutions of state were mobilised to effect and ensure that paradigm. In the face of extant ethnic diversity, deemed an impediment to the development of a modern nation-state, “homogenization became an ideal, a model, and a policy.”⁸

Homogenisation required a range of measures. Those not meeting or proving willing to conform to the Sunni-Muslim-Turkish paradigm would be subject to “ethnic, linguistic and religious purification.”⁹ The state made concerted efforts in this direction, resulting in considerable demographic upheaval. Eventually, this spawned a culture of denial, forgetting and indifference, where in order to maintain the façade of ethnic unity, the Turkish media, educational system and populace ignored the traumas visited upon the minorities of Anatolia.¹⁰ Pervasive nationalist rhetoric meant that any remaining members of minority communities outside of the “official” minorities in Istanbul became objects of scorn or targets for retribution. Parallel to the philosophical underpinning of nationalist ideology, whereby ethnic unity was deemed essential to ensure state survival, minorities became associated with national security.¹¹ The very existence of the former called into question the latter.

Homogenisation – Turkification – became an imperative in southeast Anatolia due to the light Turkish imprint on the landscape and among the population. Indicative of the ethnic diversity of the city and province of Diyarbakır, Uğur Ümit Üngör documents early 20th century population records listing Armenians, Kurds, Jews, Yezidis, Kizilbash, Zaza, Syriacs, Greeks and Mahalmi Arabs.¹² Around the same time, the city and province of Van were home to sizable populations of Kurds

⁷ Kaya, *Europeanisation and Tolerance*, 13.

⁸ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–50* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

⁹ Zeynep Gambetti, “Decolonizing Diyarbakır: Culture, Identity and the Struggle to Appropriate Urban Space,” in *Comparing Cities: The Middle East and South Asia*, ed. Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 98.

¹⁰ Ece Temelkuran, *Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 31, 140.

¹¹ Dilek Kurban, *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, Vol 4, 2004/5 (Leiden: Brill, 2006) 348.

¹² Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, 12–17.

and Armenians, but relatively few Turks.¹³ Meanwhile, the Tur Abdin plateau and territory south of Van was largely occupied by Syrians,¹⁴ and other provinces exhibited ethnic diversity including Mardin and Urfa (Kurdish, Arab, Syriac), as well as Bitlis, Siirt, Bingöl, Hakkari, Muş (Armenian and Kurdish) but a noticeable paucity of Turks.¹⁵

Urgent Turkification programmes did not necessarily make them effective¹⁶ – southeast Anatolia became the locus of numerous rebellions against the modernising state. One domain where the state successfully imposed the new Turkified order was in the re-annotation of the map. In a process described as “toponymical engineering,” administrators endeavoured to eradicate evidence of the diverse ethnic makeup of the population by removing topographical features in languages other than Turkish.¹⁷ This process happened across Turkey but, again, south-east Anatolia, with its preponderance of Arabic, Armenian, Syriac, Aramaic and Kurdish place names, received particular attention. The proportions of place names that were changed varied across districts,¹⁸ but those with high proportions of Kurdish speakers or large Armenian populations prior to 1915, saw the greatest changes.

In the 1980s, the emergence of the PKK, pursuing a military campaign for an independent Kurdistan, appeared to affirm long-held concerns that minorities represented a threat to the state. As southeast Anatolia was wracked by conflict, nationalist rhetoric gained currency across Turkey and a “dogma of unity” took hold. Political discourse was

¹³ Justin McCarthy, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006), 6–17.

¹⁴ McCarthy, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van*, 16.

¹⁵ Kerem Öktem, “The Nation’s Imprint: Demographic Engineering and the Change of Toponyms in Republican Turkey,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 7 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.2243>.

¹⁶ Senem Aslan, “Everyday Forms of State Power and the Kurds in Early Republican Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011): 75–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743810001200>.

¹⁷ Öktem, “The Nation’s Imprint.”

¹⁸ Senem Aslan, “Incoherent State: The Controversy over Kurdish Naming in Turkey,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 10 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4142>. For more on the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional legacy of the Anatolia landscape see the inter-active map created by the Hrant Dink Foundation, which details Armenian, Syriac, Greek and Jewish sites. Hrant Dink Foundation, “Türkiye Kültür Varlıkları Haritası,” accessed December 14, 2021, <https://turkiyekulturvarliklari.hrantdink.org/>.

notable for its distinct terminology: *birlik* (unity) and *beraberlik* (solidarity) upheld as essential and counterposed by the threat of *bölücülük* (separatism).¹⁹ Allegiance to the “nation” became paramount, and talk of diversity or pluralism was deemed to undermine solidarity.²⁰ In this milieu, the manifestation of minority particularisms called into question the integrity of Turkey’s national project and territorial sovereignty – the PKK’s agenda only served to demonstrate that. State institutions thus clung to the notion that unity meant strength, and long-held Kemalist discourses of denial remained potent. In the eastern province of Varto, journalist Christopher de Bellaigue once encountered a local official who flatly asserted that there were no minorities in Turkey.²¹

As conflict with the PKK escalated and the “dogma of unity” solidified, minorities in Anatolia had to maintain low profiles lest their distinctiveness incur nationalist wrath. In an earlier period of heightened nationalist fervour during the 1974 crisis in Cyprus, many Syrians, their loyalty called into question due to their Christian faith, had abandoned ancestral homes in the Tur Abdin for Europe or the relative safety of Istanbul.²² In the state’s military campaigns against the PKK, minority communities in the southeast were also caught up. From the mid-1980s, numerous villages across the southeast were abandoned or razed, and many people left the countryside for cities such as Diyarbakır, Istanbul and Ankara. The local Kurdish population bore the brunt of the conflict, but other communities also suffered. The Syriac exodus that had begun in 1974 continued, with many leaving Mardin to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.²³ In the Tur Abdin, Syrians were caught between belligerents, not only state forces, but also the PKK and

¹⁹ Elise Massicard, “Claiming Difference in a Unitarist Frame: the Case of Alevism,” in *Turkey beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-nationalist Identities*, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006), 78.

²⁰ Kerem Karasmanoğlu, “Revisiting the Self: Researching Minorities in Turkey,” *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 3 (2008): 127–143.

²¹ Christopher de Bellaigue, *Rebel Land* (London: Penguin, 2010), 63.

²² Susanne Güsten, *Farewell to Tur Abdin* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center), 8.

²³ Zerrin Özlem Biner, “Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss: Ghostly Effects of the ‘Armenian Crisis’ in Mardin,” *History & Memory* 22, no. 2 (2010): 78, <https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2010.22.2.68>.

Kurdish village guards.²⁴ A similar fate befell Turkey's remaining Yezidi communities in border regions.²⁵

Turkey acknowledges ethnic diversity

In February 1999 Turkish agents captured PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, prompting the PKK to announce a ceasefire, the first of a series of political transformations. Also significant was the electoral victory of the AKP in 2002, bringing to an end a period of unwieldy coalition governments. From the outset, the AKP was distinctly different to the Kemalist-infused administrations that preceded it. The AKP appeared intent on a reform programme and a re-imagining of the national project that would reshape Turkey's politics and relationship with the EU. The AKP's ascension marked the emergence of an observant Muslim elite that subscribed to a national vision not solely defined by Kemalist-informed nationalism, but that paid heed to Turkey's Ottoman past, inherently diverse and different from prevailing exclusivist, nationalist orthodoxies.²⁶ In this sense, Turkey was stepping away from "majority nationalism" and, under AKP guidance, society became attuned to "diversity as an ideology."²⁷ The fact that the intensity had been removed from the PKK conflict allowed re-appraisals of the place of minorities and new political, rather than military, approaches to the Kurdish issue.

Turkey's expanded engagement with the EU also led to broadening discussions of national identity. In turn, this created new political milieu for minorities. Kemalist elites had adopted an insular posture, portraying Turkey as isolated and at risk of subversion by external and internal enemies, but now a new discourse positioned Turkey as a bridge between Europe, the Middle East and Caucasus. Conceiving Turkey as a link in a broader geopolitical chain represented a new external vision. Greater engagement with Europe, in particular, saw the diffusion of the

²⁴ Güsten, *Farewell to Tur Abdin*, 9.

²⁵ Peter Alford Andrews, *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1989), 118–119.

²⁶ Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 19.

²⁷ Kaya, *Europeanisation and Tolerance*, 88.

EU's "unity in diversity" discourse, which had internal implication in dispelling suspicions of and allowing more space for minorities.²⁸

Given entrenched nationalist outlooks and historical narratives that portrayed minorities as unreliable, attitudes shifted only gradually to a point of "selective recognition."²⁹ Nonetheless, in contrast to the previously dominant "dogma of unity," discussion of "multiculturalism," "diversity" and "pluralism" became more widespread among political actors and state institutions.³⁰ The success of a memoir by Turkish lawyer Fethiye Çetin, in which she revealed learning of her previously hidden Armenian ancestry, demonstrated an appetite for and willingness to discuss topics of ethnicity and identity that had once been taboo.³¹

Legislative reform packages that protected minorities and upheld their rights to language, broadcasting, education and property were put in place in the early years of the AKP's tenure.³² Statements from government figures matched these legislative measures. Former Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç remarked, "We are determined to solve [minorities] remaining problems (...) through mutual trust and cooperation." He added that minority communities were "integral parts of Turkish society."³³ Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also disseminated messages of openness and support for diversity. When I met a group of labourers in Mardin in 2013, conversation turned to the easy relations between ethnic groups in the city and the atmosphere of "*barış*" [peace] that prevailed compared to nearby Syria. I asked how this was possible. One man responded immediately, "Erdoğan!" as all nodded their approval. Further demonstrating the shift in politics and

²⁸ Kaya, *Europeanisation and Tolerance*, 16, 50.

²⁹ Derya Bayir, *Minorities and Nationalism in Turkish Law* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 3, 259.

³⁰ Clémence Scalbert Yücel, "Common Ground or Battlefield? Deconstructing the Politics of Recognition in Turkey," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 22, no. 1 (2016): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2016.1133862>.

³¹ The book is available in translation: Fethiye Çetin, *My Grandmother: a Memoir* (London: Verso, 2008.)

³² Ioannis Grigoriadis, "Türk or Türkiyeli? The Reform of Turkey's Minority Legislation and the Rediscovery of Ottomanism," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 3 (2007): 425, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284553>.

³³ "Turkish Government 'Firm' on Solving Woes of Minorities," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 3, 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-government-firm-on-solving-woes-of-minorities-15169>.

public debate, senior AKP minister Hüseyin Çelik remarked, during negotiations about the re-opening of the Halki Seminary in Istanbul, “One who is confident in their religion would be concerned about the religious liberties of others.”³⁴ Çelik’s comment illustrated a Turkey more self-assured in a political and societal sense. No longer were enemies perceived on every horizon; Turkey was comfortable to engage in dialogue, in good faith with those long perceived as the Other.

Re-emerging multicultural spaces in Southeast Anatolia

As the largest “minority,” Kurds reaped benefits within Turkey’s new political milieu. Kurdish politicians had grown increasingly active and assertive in southeast Anatolia after winning municipal elections in 1999. Changes soon became apparent as restrictions were lifted on public and political spheres. Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, was celebrated freely across the southeast from 2000; in later years it attracted the attendance of Turkish politicians and performances by famous musicians.³⁵ Meanwhile, the AKP brought an end to the “emergency rule” that had been in place in the southeast since the late 1980s, pushed through further reforms granting language rights, allowing the establishment of a Kurdish-language channel on TRT, the state broadcaster and, by 2009, set the groundwork for a “Kurdish opening.”³⁶

Diyarbakır became the locus of activity and activism. Directed by the Kurdish-run municipality, the Sur neighbourhood became a showcase of processes of re-appropriation to reverse decades of Turkification.³⁷ Beloved Diyarbakır author Şeyhmus Diken noted that despite the city’s long association with Kurdish resistance to the Kemalist state, attempts to Kurdify the city would be as short-sighted as those to Turkify it had been, as they denied the historical presence and contribution of non-

³⁴ “Turkey’s Top Muslim Cleric Calls for Reopening of Greek Seminary in Visit,” *Today’s Zaman*, May 7, 2012, <https://www.archons.org/-/today-s-zaman-reports-on-turkey-s-top-muslim-cleric-calls-for-reopening-of-greek-seminary-in-visit>.

³⁵ Cengiz Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012), 168.

³⁶ White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*, 13.

³⁷ Gambetti, “Decolonizing Diyarbakır,” 99.

-Muslim populations including the Armenians and Syrians.³⁸ Indeed, the multi-ethnic nature of the city is inscribed in its very walls, its architecture, including the churches of Surp Giragos (Armenian), Meryem Ana (Syriac) and Mar Petyun (Chaldean), and a sign of welcome in the refurbished *caravanserai* of Sülüklü Han, which greets visitors in six languages and four scripts. Many Diyarbakır Kurds I have met discuss these aspects of their city with pride, one university student telling me that a history of co-existence with non-Muslims was “our reality.”

This sentiment resonates among Kurdish civil society organisations and political actors. Kurdish activists and administrators sought to rejuvenate Diyarbakır, previously known as a centre of conflict, and redefine it as a city of arts and culture, a process that involved acknowledging its multi-ethnic past. Through annual festivals under such banners as “Voices and Colours for Peace” and “Meeting of Faiths and Cultures” they recognised the different faiths and ethnicities that had once been prominent, and which, in the case of the Armenians, Chaldeans and Syrians still clung on, despite all odds, in the venerable Sur neighbourhood.³⁹ Interviewed in 2008, the Kurdish mayor of Sur, Abdullah Demirbaş, stated, “I am not working for the Kurds; I am working for all people.”⁴⁰ Under Demirbaş, the Sur municipality promoted a programme of *çok dilli belediyecilik* (multilingual governance), offering information in Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian and Syriac, with the intention of addressing constituents in their mother tongue and promoting mutual respect and understanding.⁴¹ The municipality also instituted the “Assembly of the Forty,” a mechanism for representatives of the city’s diverse demographic groups – ethnic, religious and ideological – to participate in administrative decisions.⁴² Through such measures, including the multilingual signs mentioned above, Diyarbakır shook off its reputation as a conflict zone and the trappings of imposed (Tur-

³⁸ Cited in Gambetti, “Decolonizing Diyarbakır,” 112.

³⁹ Scalbert Yücel, “Common Ground or Battlefield?,” 83.

⁴⁰ Meline Toumani, “Minority Rules,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 17, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/magazine/17turkey-t.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

⁴¹ Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, 168

⁴² Scalbert Yücel, “Common Ground or Battlefield?,” 85.

kish) homogenisation, thus allowing minority actors to participate in its cultural and political life.

An important element of this has been the increased visibility and acknowledgement of the Armenian population. Broadly speaking, Kurdish political figures have been willing to recognise and accept responsibility for the genocide visited on the Armenians in 1915, although by no means do all Kurds adopt such a position.⁴³ Some Kurds go further and purvey a narrative of kindred experience, whereby both Kurds and Armenians have been subjected to the violent responses of the Ottoman state and the Republic of Turkey, thus asserting solidarity with the much-diminished Armenian community.⁴⁴ Indeed, kinship extends beyond mere rhetoric for some: unknown numbers of Kurds are descended from so-called “hidden Armenians,” who were rescued from the genocide and raised Muslim. Zerrin Özlem Biner relates meeting a Kurdish woman in Mardin who told of Armenians in her extended family and who claimed, “There is an Armenian-ness rooted in the origin of every Kurd.”⁴⁵ As a milieu of multiculturalism gained momentum, Osman Baydemir, mayor of metropolitan Diyarbakır, made a plea in 2012 to Armenians and other minorities to return. Recognising the Kurds, Armenians, Chaldeans, Yezidis and other ethnic communities who had historically been present, he commented, “All of these people have a right to this city.”⁴⁶ Yervent Bostancı, a musician who had left Turkey in the 1990s after being hounded for admitting his Armenian identity, was one who heeded Baydemir’s call, returning to Diyarbakır.⁴⁷

These developments followed the reopening of the Armenian Cathedral of Surp Giragos in Diyarbakır’s Sur neighbourhood. The cathedral had fallen into disrepair after 1915 and the subsequent decline of the

⁴³ Biner, “Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss,” 78–81.

⁴⁴ Meline Toumani, *There Was and There Was Not: A Journey through Hate and Possibility in Turkey and Armenia* (New York: Picador, 2014), 126–127.

⁴⁵ Biner, “Acts of Defacement, Memory of Loss,” 75.

⁴⁶ “Come Back, Diyarbakır Mayor Tells Armenians,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 27, 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/come-back-diyarbakir-mayor-tells-armenians-31096>.

⁴⁷ “Master of Oud of Armenian Descent Announces Return to His Hometown, Diyarbakır,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 30, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/master-of-oud-of-armenian-descent-announces-return-to-his-hometown-diyarbakir-43949>.

Armenian population. A campaign instigated by Istanbul Armenians won backing from the local municipality and financial contributions from the Armenian diaspora, leading to a restoration project that saw the building reinstated to its former glory. In October 2011 the cathedral opened for the first Armenian liturgy in decades.⁴⁸ In June 2013 I attended a concert of Kurdish music, Turkish poetry and Armenian folk songs in the grand space of the cathedral. Concert goers told me, when I asked who was attending, that a range of ethnicities was present: Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian. During several visits to Diyarbakır up until 2015 it was apparent to me that Surp Giragos was a social and cultural hub in the busy Sur neighbourhood, while the nearby Chaldean Church of Mar Petyun and the Syriac Church attracted steady streams of visitors. When I first visited in the 1990s, all had been in varying states of neglect and dereliction. Now all were refurbished and their communities more visible and confident. None of this would have been conceivable in an earlier era when narrow nationalist visions held sway in Turkey.

Similar restoration projects occurred elsewhere in southeast Anatolia. A prime example is the Armenian Church of the Holy Cross on Akdamar Island in Lake Van. After being restored with state funds, the church was opened in 2007 as a tourist attraction. In 2008 I encountered a group of Iranian tourists at the church, among them ethnic Armenians. However, the church's reopening as a museum precluded its functioning as a place of worship, other than for annual liturgies that were allowed from 2010 as part of officially promoted "faith tourism" programmes.⁴⁹ While the opening of the church on Akdamar appears to demonstrate greater space for minorities, considerable controversies arose suggesting a more complex picture. Meline Toumani notes that an official booklet produced for the 2007 opening ceremony failed to disclose that the church was of Armenian provenance, blandly describing it as "Anatolian," while also describing the cultures, arts, peoples

⁴⁸ Robert Hayden, et al., *Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites and Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2016), 189.

⁴⁹ Defne Över, "Cultural Tourism and Complex Histories: The Armenian Akhtamar Church, the Turkish State and National Identity," *Qualitative Sociology* 39, no.2. (2016): 173–194, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-016-9323-x>.

and, indeed, diversity, of the region as Anatolian, rather than attributing any specific ethnicity.⁵⁰ Of course, Armenian history and architecture are parts of the broader Anatolian fabric, but steadfast refusal to acknowledge that the church was Armenian appears to be deliberate obfuscation, and speaks of an unwillingness to confront both the ghosts of the past and current realities. Defne Över documents literature produced by the Culture Ministry highlighting extant art and architecture and that it cites as evidence of Turkey's long-standing "notion of respect and high esteem [for] other religions."⁵¹ Such positions make good PR, but do not necessarily reflect long-standing state discourses and policies or the lived experiences of Anatolian minorities.

The experience of Akdamar echoes that of Mardin. From the early 2000s the Culture Ministry made concerted attempts to promote the city as an example of living cosmopolitanism, including nominating it as a UNESCO World Heritage site.⁵² Famous for its distinctive architecture, Mardin is also notable for its ethnic mix, being home to Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs (and, like Van and Diyarbakır, relatively few Turks). Mardin was self-consciously promoted by the Turkish media, "as a kind of Babylon with a peaceful co-existence of its multi-religious and multi-lingual communities."⁵³ Ultimately, the UNESCO bid was unsuccessful, but the campaign expanded discussion of Turkey's minority communities and contributed to ideas of the "Turkish Orient," which represented a different depiction of Turkey to the mono-ethnic one that had always been portrayed. This was exemplified by the 2012 establishment of the Mardin Multi-lingual Multi-faith Choir, which brought together members of the different minority communities to sing in Turkish, Kurdish, Syriac, Arabic and Armenian. The choir master explained that members wanted to, "Introduce our ancient city,

⁵⁰ Toumani, *There Was and There Was Not*, 146.

⁵¹ Över, "Cultural Tourism and Complex Histories," 180.

⁵² Zerrin Özlem Biner, "Retrieving the Dignity of a Cosmopolitan City: Contested Perspectives on Rights, Culture and Ethnicity in Mardin," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 37 (2007): 31–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600004726>.

⁵³ Biner, "Retrieving the Dignity," 34.

where many civilisations live... We want everyone to be aware of the richness of Mardin.”⁵⁴

As at Akdamar, these developments were not without controversy, often used as window-dressing exercises to portray Turkey as a bastion of inter-communal benevolence and tolerance though little practical change was happening. Nonetheless, minorities in Mardin were able to more comfortably assert their identities than previously. This was true to varying degrees across Turkey. A process of the “normalising” of ethnic and religious diversity was under way in Turkey’s public and political landscapes,⁵⁵ as was apparent in the daily life of the southeast. The Kurdish presence and Kurdish culture grew more visible in cities such as Diyarbakır; so too did certain aspects of the Armenian imprint on the southeast and the Syriac presence in Mardin and the Tur Abdin. In 1999 then Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit had urged Syriacs to return to the region, but it was only during the 2000s with the AKP’s apparently more genuine welcome that members of the diaspora began to return in earnest.⁵⁶ As if to demonstrate this new milieu of inclusiveness, in 2012 a Syriac woman from Mardin, famed for her traditional weaving, won Turkey’s “Woman of the Year” award,⁵⁷ and the Syriac community in Midyat began publishing a newspaper, *Sabro*, meaning “hope” in the Syriac language, the front page of the first edition confidently emblazoned with headlines, “*Biz’de varız. Tanımlanmak istiyoruz.*” [We are here too. We want to be identified.]⁵⁸

Re-imagining the southeast: hopes and fears

In the early 1990s I was warned by Turks against travelling east of Cappadocia. These warnings stemmed from safety concerns arising

⁵⁴ “Mardin Diller ve Dinler Korosu’ Kuruldu,” *Haber 7*, December 18, 2012, <http://www.haber7.com/muzik/haber/966296-mardin-diller-ve-dinler-korosu-kuruldu>.

⁵⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2016 Annual Report* (Washington, 2016), 202–204.

⁵⁶ Güsten, “Farewell to Tur Abdin,” 10–11.

⁵⁷ “Nasra Çilli’ye Ödül,” *Sabah*, March 3, 2012, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2012/03/08/nasra-cilliyeye-odul>.

⁵⁸ “First Turkish-Syriac Paper Hits the Shelves,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 15, 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/first-turkish-syriac-paper-hits-the-shelves-16039>.

from the PKK conflict and the widely held conviction that the southeast was lawless. Some 20 years later I spoke to an arts administrator in Diyarbakır. A Turk herself, she organised cultural exchange programmes for students between western cities like Izmir and Canakkale and eastern ones like Diyarbakır and Mardin. She explained that every year she was oversubscribed with applications from students who were clamouring to visit the southeast. The region had undergone a shift in the Turkish collective imagination from a no-go zone prone to violence to a must-see.

The shift in perceptions of the southeast was largely due to the improving security situation as the PKK conflict subsided, but it also occurred alongside broader discussions about Turkey's national project and the place(s) of minorities therein. Turkish society developed a fascination with its south-eastern "backyard," a phenomenon that extended to the region becoming the location for several television series and a popular holiday destination.⁵⁹ For Turks this involved both the portrayal of and engagement with other ethnicities, the long-overlooked minorities, and their places of worship and socio-cultural milieu. Visiting the churches of Diyarbakır, I have commonly encountered Turkish tourists who appeared rapt by their unfamiliar surroundings and merrily took happy snaps of church interiors despite signs forbidding photography. Such instances do not indicate an overnight change in nation-wide attitudes to a position of acceptance of diversity and embrace of minority communities. In fact, it may be argued that part of the appeal of visiting the southeast was the frisson of danger that came with it, being a region associated with violence and terrorism, a realm that was a repository of ethnic "Otherness," by turns fascinating and terrifying, familiar yet foreign.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, extending what was acceptable for TV series and holiday destinations meant the possibility of previously unthinkable leisure activities and demonstrated a willin-

⁵⁹ Ayşe Öncü, "Representing and Consuming 'the East' in Cultural Markets," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45 (2011): 49–73, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S089663460001308>

⁶⁰ Francesco Marilungo, "The City of Terrorism or a City for Breakfast: Diyarbakır's Sense of Place in the TV Series *Sultan*," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 275–293, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-00903005>.

ness to engage with an aspect of Turkey's historical legacy and social fabric that had been previously ignored or denied.

A corollary to Turkey's broader discussions about national identity and minorities was growing nostalgia for purported harmonious co-habitation in earlier eras. Often this related to Greek and Jewish communities in Istanbul,⁶¹ but Kurds in the southeast also enthusiastically took up the idea. This gained traction in the inclusive milieu fostered by Kurdish-run municipalities, such as that in Sur, which encouraged multi-lingual governance, and others that installed multi-lingual signs on municipal offices. The warmth with which Kurds embraced Mıgırđıç Margosyan, an Armenian writer who grew up in Diyarbakır's Hançepek quarter in the 1940s, and championed him as a native son is indicative of this inclusiveness.⁶² As noted earlier, Kurdish politicians and activists generally proved more willing than Turks to acknowledge the traumas that minorities endured in the early 20th century. In my experience, Kurds are also more willing to acknowledge ethnic diversity in their family histories. Numerous Kurds in Diyarbakır have related to me stories of Armenian or Yezidi ancestors, something that no Turk has ever done.

This sometimes extends to rose-coloured views of the past. Meline Toumani relates an encounter with a Diyarbakır Kurd who was convinced of an idyllic history of intercommunal fraternity.⁶³ Such interpretations of history gloss over pivotal events, when relations were anything but fraternal. It appears that historically, co-existence and daily interactions between Kurds, Armenians and others were the norm and the periodic intercommunal violence that broke out generally occurred within broader geopolitical upheavals.⁶⁴ Evocations of unrelenting inter-ethnic harmony do not tell the whole story. Nonetheless, even false evocations of history are a departure from the earlier nationalist

⁶¹ Nicholas Doumanis, *Before the Nation: Muslim-Christian Coexistence and Its Destruction in Late-Ottoman Anatolia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶² Margosyan's memoir of growing up in Diyarbakır, *Gâvur Mahallesi* [Infidel Quarter], first published in 1992, was translated into Kurdish in 1999.

⁶³ Toumani, *There Was and There Was Not*, 162.

⁶⁴ Sami Zubaida, "Religion and Ethnicity as Politicized Boundaries", in *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, ed. Faleh Jabar and Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi, 2006), 93–102.

attempts at homogenisation and deliberate overlooking of the multi-ethnic make up of southeast Anatolia.

Meanwhile, a transformation also occurred in politics, as candidates from minority communities began to mobilise. Erol Dora, from Şırnak, became, in the 2011 election, the first Syriac elected to the Turkish parliament. In 2015, Feleknaş Uca, from Diyarbakır, became the first Yezidi elected to parliament. Both Dora and Uca are members of the pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Peoples' Democratic Party; HDP), a party which, in 2015, ran on a self-consciously diverse ticket that featured not only Kurds and Turks, but also Armenians, Yezidis, Syriacs, Circassians and Alevis.⁶⁵ The HDP accentuated its acceptance of diversity, highlighting its vision of Turkey in a campaign video as "*hem çok renkli hem çok dilli*" ("both multi-coloured and multilingual").⁶⁶ Significantly, the HDP won considerable support from Turkish voters in the election of June 2015, a factor that led to a fall in the vote of the ruling AKP and demonstrated that some in the Turkish electorate were willing to view minority candidates as legitimate political actors.

This is not to say that all Turks welcomed such developments. The nationalist impulse remains strong. Some reacted angrily to shifting discourses on national identity and the higher profiles of minorities. In 2004, an advisory group appointed by the Prime Minister's office published "The Report on Minority Rights and Cultural Rights." Baskın Oran, a member of the group, reported a furious backlash including threats and insults from some. Oran relates that the report's discussion of the idea of *Türkiyeli* as an inclusive way to (re)define Turkey drew particular criticism on the grounds that any undermining of the primacy of Turkishness and acknowledgement of diversity would lead to state

⁶⁵ "Inclusive HDP Candidate List Aspires to Pass 10 Pct Election Threshold," *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 7, 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/inclusive-hdp-candidate-list-aspires-to-pass-10-pct-election-threshold.aspx?pageID=238&nID=80731&NewsCatID=338>. It should be noted that inter-ethnic relations are not always amicable, as witnessed in accusations that HDP-aligned Kurds have appropriated land from some Assyrians in the Tur Abdin. See Güsten, *Farewell to Tur Abdin*, 23–24.

⁶⁶ "HDP'nin Seçim Videosu Yayında: İnadına Barış, İnadına Umut," *Diken*, October 16, 2015, <http://www.diken.com.tr/hdpnin-secim-videosu-yayinda-inadina-baris-inadina-umut/>.

disintegration.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, events such as the reopening of the church on Akdamar in 2007, provoked angry reactions from hard-line nationalists. Meline Toumani reports that the nationalist Büyük Birlik Partisi (Great Unity Party) bussed members into Van to protest the event.⁶⁸ In 2010, apparently in response to the first liturgy performed at Akdamar, members of the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party), chanting “*Allah akbar*” and carrying Turkish flags, proceeded to pray in the remains of the Armenian cathedral in the ruined city of Ani.⁶⁹ Such actions, although appearing petty and spiteful to some, win applause from some Turks and indicate that disdain for and fear of minorities are entrenched in the Turkish polity.

Political spaces contract again

The momentum for a more inclusive Turkey, one that allowed space for minorities and acknowledged their historical legacy, has seemingly dissipated and apparent gains have been reversed. Clémence Scalbert-Yücel writes that Turkey has undergone the “rise and fall of a diversity wave.”⁷⁰ The furious rear-guard actions of nationalist politicians mentioned above are evidence of an undercurrent of intolerance and paranoia that appears difficult to subdue. After hostilities reignited with the PKK in late 2015 nationalist rhetoric surged. But even earlier, while Turkey’s national identity was being debated more openly, signs, such as the 2007 murder in Istanbul of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, indicated that change would be difficult to achieve and could be abruptly reversed. The obfuscation that surrounded the opening of the church at Akdamar, which was also subjected to stalling tactics regarding the installation of its cross and permission for services to be performed, was perhaps indicative of the sincerity – or lack thereof – of

⁶⁷ Baskın Oran, “Exploring Turkishness: ‘Turkish’ and Türkiyeli’,” in *Turkey and the Politics of National Identity*, ed. Shane Brennan and Marc Herzog (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 23–37.

⁶⁸ Toumani, *There Was and There Was Not*, 146.

⁶⁹ “Turkish Nationalists Pray In Ancient Armenian Cathedral,” *Radio Free Europe*, October 2, 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Turkish_Nationalists_Prayer_In_Ancient_Armenian_Cathedral/2174492.html.

⁷⁰ Scalbert Yücel, “Common Ground or Battlefield?,” 74.

state initiatives at fostering multiculturalism. These initiatives may have been useful for encouraging “faith tourism” but it appeared that the government intended to keep a rein on how much and what types of ethnicity were on show. Some argue that the AKP government devised a form of “acceptable diversity”: it acknowledges ethnic minorities and grants them space to operate but only in ways that do not contradict its own agenda.⁷¹ In the case of Akdamar, this amounted to the cathedral being touted as a symbol of inter-communal harmony and benevolence towards minorities, but not to granting the Armenian community the autonomy to use it as a place of regular prayer, or even to place a cross atop the spire.

The greatest challenge for the state and the AKP in this regard remains the Kurds. As the largest minority, they are most visible and vocal, and their struggle, both in political and military terms, attracts most attention domestically and internationally. The AKP made overtures to the Kurds since arriving in office, initiatives that were more concerted, and appeared more sincere than any from earlier administrations. The establishment of TRT6 meant Kurdish was heard on the national broadcaster for the first time ever and the lifting of emergency rule made palpable differences to citizens in the southeast. Discussions about broadening national identity had largely centred on allowing space to incorporate Kurds within any redefinition, but logically any broadening of scope extended to other minorities. A Kurd from Diyarbakır once declared to me that the Kurds had brought an end to the “politics of assimilation in Turkey,” citing the increased visibility of Istanbul’s Circassian community in the wake of the Kurdish political movement.

The pro-Kurdish movement also gathered the most political momentum. Pro-Kurdish parties had operated in Turkey, despite political and physical harassment, since the 1990s, but in the AKP era they came into their own. In the general election of June 2015, the HDP became the first pro-Kurdish party to pass a parliamentary “threshold” that decrees that any party winning less than 10 percent of the national vote is disqualified from holding seats. The HDP’s championing of

⁷¹ Nick Danforth, “In Turkey, Obedience to the State Trumps Multiculturalism,” *Muftah*, February 2, 2016, <https://muftah.org/turkey-obedience-multiculturalism/>.

multi-ethnic politics did not contradict the AKP's vision of a broader national identity, but the party mobilised very effectively, while also pursuing the re-appropriation of public spaces in the southeast, a process that Zeynep Gambetti described as "de-colonisation"⁷² and adopting a strongly anti-AKP position. The HDP's success in June 2015 represented an electoral rebuke to the AKP and meant that the AKP lost its parliamentary majority, its vote falling almost nine percent from the 2011 election.

It was after this, and the re-ignition of the PKK conflict, that the AKP abandoned its pro-diversity discourse and reclaimed the baton of nationalist rhetoric. Debate rages about whether the government or the PKK were responsible for the resumption of hostilities, but the AKP has made no attempt to resume any form of negotiation with the PKK. There had been signs earlier that Erdoğan was adopting a less inclusive position. In 2005 he had stated that the "Kurdish problem" was "my problem too," but before the 2015 election he claimed there was "no such thing" [...*böyle bir şey yok*].⁷³ Such a standpoint indicated either a simplistic view of the political grievances of Turkey's Kurds or an unwillingness to make tangible steps to address them. Many Kurds argued that Erdoğan and the AKP's overtures for peace and talk of diversity and inclusiveness had been insincere from the outset.⁷⁴ According to this reasoning, they were merely window dressing to win Kurdish votes and consolidate Erdoğan's own position.

From mid-2015, military clashes spread across southeast Anatolia. Some Kurdish politicians must share the blame for their declarations of "autonomy," which heightened political tensions. The PKK adopted a new tactic of conducting military operations within cities, bringing the war to the doorsteps of residents and resulting in unprecedented physical destruction in urban locations. As violence flared, nationalist passions ignited. Turkish nationalist rhetoric echoed across the country.

⁷² Gambetti, "Decolonizing Diyarbakır," 99.

⁷³ "Erdoğan'ın 'Kürt sorunu yoktur' açılımında geldiği son nokta: 'Var' diyen ayrımcıdır," *Diken*, April 28, 2015, <http://www.diken.com.tr/erdoganin-kurt-sorunu-yoktur-aciliminda-geldigi-son-nokta-var-diyen-ayrimcidir/>.

⁷⁴ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey's Two Elections: The AKP Comes Back," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 2 (2016), 144.

Amid the destruction visited upon some cities of the southeast, state security forces also graffitied buildings with messages asserting the racial superiority of Turks and the reach of the state.⁷⁵ These slogans were aimed at PKK militants but they cannot have failed to alarm everyday citizens of these cities and minority communities across Turkey. A presidential advisor also alleged that PKK militants were not circumcised, implying that they were in fact Armenian, in so doing rekindling nationalist arguments that cast minorities as untrustworthy.⁷⁶ Erdoğan later pushed a similar line claiming that the PKK and “Armenian brigands” were part of a “treason gang” working to undermine Turkey.⁷⁷ Thus discourse turned to a reliable list of usual suspects – those who were not visibly and vocally Turkish, i.e. the minorities – portraying them as the cause of the trouble that beset the nation-state.

This period effectively saw Turkish discourse and politics come full circle. Amid the tumult of resurgent violence in the southeast and the coup attempt of July 2016, opponents and critics of the government were dismissed as traitors or terrorists. Gone was the confident, inclusive, outward-looking Turkey of the early 2000s. As Ayhan Kaya had observed previously, the AKP reversed course on itself, adopting many of the traits, such as the co-optation of the judiciary and military, of earlier governments that it had once criticised.⁷⁸ This now accelerated and, as the statements above indicate, extended to suspicion of and scapegoating of minorities. The government also found that adopting a more nationalist position created electoral advantages. It entered a series of alliances with the nationalist MHP, attracting the votes of Turkey’s nationalist rump to secure electoral victories from November 2015 and beyond. Previously, Erdoğan and the AKP had espoused a more inclusive and multicultural Turkey in courting a diverse constituency, but to do so now would jeopardise the nationalist vote on which it relied.

⁷⁵ “Esedullah genelgesi,” *Demokrat Haber*, November 21, 2015, <https://www.demokrathaber.org/guncel/esedullah-genelgesi-h57528.html>.

⁷⁶ “Kuzu’dan ilginç açıklama: Teröristler sünnetsiz,” *Hürriyet*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/kuzu-dan-ilginc-aciklama-teroristler-sunnetsiz-30013152>.

⁷⁷ “Erdoğan: Gülenists, PKK, Armenian Brigands, YPG Tarred with the Same Brush,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, June 17, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-gulenists-pkk-armenian-brigands-ypg-tarred-with-the-same-brush-100617>.

⁷⁸ Kaya, *Europeanisation and Tolerance*, 85.

The situation changed on the ground in the southeast, too. The government removed mayors of numerous municipalities claiming that as HDP members they were linked to the PKK.⁷⁹ This resulted in the installation of government-appointed trustees and, eventually, in the removal of the multi-lingual signs noted above. The tightening of restrictions on manifestations of minority identity became apparent in the closure of numerous Kurdish-language schools and media, the termination of a project to commemorate the Armenian-American writer William Saroyan in Bitlis, the closure of a multi-lingual kindergarten in Mardin and the arrest of its administrator.⁸⁰ The urban landscape of the southeast also suffered enormous damage, Şırnak and Nusaybin being reduced almost entirely to rubble. In Diyarbakır parts of the historic Sur neighbourhood were razed and appropriated by the state, including the Armenian Cathedral of Surp Giragos. Such was the destruction that, when looking at photos, Mıgırdıç Margosyan, who claimed to know the city “stone by stone,” was unable to recognise his street or house.⁸¹ Former mayor Abdullah Demirbaş wrote despairingly that years of work rebuilding the city’s multi-ethnic fabric were being undone.⁸² Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu remarked that the state would rebuild Sur, citing the earlier example of reconstruction in Toledo in Spain.⁸³ This suggestion received a scathing response from some locals.⁸⁴ Rebuilding Sur would allow a degree of top-down control that

⁷⁹ “Turkey Removes Two Dozen Elected Mayors in Kurdish Militant Crackdown,” *Reuters*, September 11, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-kurds-idUSKCN11H065>.

⁸⁰ Constance Letsch, “In Turkey, Repression of the Kurdish Language Is Back, With No End in Sight,” *The Nation*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/in-turkey-repression-of-the-kurdish-language-is-back-with-no-end-in-sight/>.

⁸¹ “Mıgırdıç Margosyan Couldn’t Recognize His Street Amidst Ruins,” *Bianet*, April 25, 2017, <https://bianet.org/english/politics/185871-migirdic-margosyan-couldn-t-find-his-street-in-ruins>.

⁸² Abdullah Demirbaş, “Undoing Years of Progress in Turkey,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/25/opinion/undoing-years-of-progress-in-turkey.html>.

⁸³ “Diyarbakır’s Ruined Sur to Be Rebuilt ‘Like Spain’s Toledo,’ Vows Turkish PM,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/diyarbakirs-ruined-sur-to-be-rebuilt-like-spains-toledo-vows-turkish-pm-94615>.

⁸⁴ “Why Is Spanish Toledo Not Good Enough for Diyarbakır?” *Rudaw*, April 9, 2016, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/09042016>.

the government had never previously had over the city. This reflects the AKP's approach to multiculturalism and the manifestation of minority identities: the government is open to the idea of diversity, trumpeting it as a hallmark of the nation-state, but insists on maintaining control over its implementation and manifestation.

Conclusion:

There has been considerable change in southeast Anatolia and to perceptions of the region and its people(s) in the Turkish consciousness. Once the target of assimilationist policies of military activity against the PKK, the region has undergone a transformation, experiencing greater visibility for its extant minorities, primarily Kurds, but also Armenians, Syriacs and others. Changes instigated following the ascendance of Kurdish municipal politicians and the AKP at the national level brought a new political dynamic. Minorities won more space and were attracted back to the region, and the region won a place in the Turkish public's imagination. The era of denial and forgetting of minorities may therefore be over, but the resumption of hostilities in 2015 between the state and the PKK, and the associated rekindling of nationalist discourse, mean that minorities must again maintain a low profile. Minorities are once more viewed suspiciously; political and societal discourse implores unity, meaning divergent opinions or identities are subject to harsh criticism. The degree to which the AKP now relies on the support of nationalists, and seeks to keep a tight rein on Kurdish politics, further restricts minorities' room to move, meaning little possibility of greater visibility or involvement in politics. If Diyarbakır is seen as a barometer of the situation of minorities in southeast Anatolia, it testifies to the uncertain state they find themselves in today. Only recently reinvigorated and showcasing its multi-faith, multi-ethnic fabric, parts of the city now lie in ruins, a casualty of Turkey's ongoing inability to create an open, inclusive socio-political sphere and national identity that allows all of its diverse citizens to prosper.

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