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## Revisiting Minority Alliances in Turkey: The Case of Diyarbakir as a Fertile Ground for Solidarity

Sarkisian, Lianna

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**Revisiting Minority Alliances in Turkey:**  
*The Case of Diyarbakır as a Fertile Ground for Solidarity*

**Lianna Sarkisian (S2021048)**

**Supervisor: Dr. Tsovin Nalbantian**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the solidarity alliances of the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish communities in Diyarbakır, Turkey. Additionally, it poses the question, whether these alliances challenge a more exclusive national identity that is established in the official Turkish discourse. The alliances that are touched upon are the political environment of Diyarbakır; the celebration of Newroz; the commemoration of murder of Hrant Dink; and Armenian and Assyrian Genocide commemorations. I argue that the main manifestation of most of these solidarities is creation of more openness about the Genocides, in especially Kurdish discourse. The alliances depicted in this paper are each different and each form a different degree of challenge to the Turkish national identity. I conclude that the political environment of Diyarbakır forms the greatest threat, which can be perceived in the state's crackdown of its established institutions and initiatives of cultural practices, as it does not fit the homogenous identity that the Turkish State ascribes to itself.

*Keywords: Diyarbakır; Armenian; Assyrian; Kurdish; Solidarity; Alliances; Minorities; Turkey*

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## Introduction

Opposition in Turkey rose in the 2000s. Mainly the Kurdish political movement became much more visible in local Turkish political discourse in the Southeast. In retrospect, 2015 was seen as a highlight, with the popularity of the Halkların Demokratik Partisi or HDP party, which employs an inclusive approach towards minorities, the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan, PKK (Kurdistan's Worker Party), and represents Kurdish interests. The party is designed to create an alliance and solidarity with marginalized groups who are dissatisfied with the Turkish state (Geri 2017; Kaya & Whiting, 2019). This brief period of approximately fifteen years was followed by the reassertion of power by the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), the political party of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, that reimplemented a strategy of securitization with the Kurdish minority that led to clashes between them and state forces (Zurutuza, 2015; Lowen, 2016; Geri, 2017). This culminated with a full-on government crackdown between the end of 2015 until the beginning of 2016 in Southeast Turkey, targeting the majority-Kurdish population

The securitization approach of the AKP after the government crackdown of 2015 regarding the Kurds makes it seem as if the Turkish state perceived minorities, specifically Kurds as a threat. Given the fact that this crackdown appeared during the height of popularity of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), it makes sense that the Turkish state worked to undermine the power of the HDP (Kaya & Whiting, 2016). This assumption raises some questions. For example: Did the Turkish state deem this strategy of forging alliances a threat to its ideology, and why? Furthermore, it is important to establish how successful these alliances were and how they emerged (BBC, 2015). Another important aspect of this issue is in what way these alliances defy the homogeneous national identity that Turkey ascribes to itself. This is explained by scholars such as Lerna Ekmekçioğlu (2016) where she discusses how the founders of modern Turkey were very well aware of the minorities in their state. However they aimed to preserve the Turkish character while not challenging the Treaty of Lausanne, which is why they chose a specific language in their constitution.

As the HDP party is known to be active in creating solidarity between those historically marginalized by the Turkish state, it is interesting to observe the lack in literature regarding these solidarities between minorities before the crackdown. Therefore this research aims to study the

way in which minority communities in Turkey work together locally, under an oppressive regime. To be able to make sense of such an alliance it is useful to focus on a specific place or city, which will be, based on demographics, and (shared) historical events, the city of Diyarbakır in Southeast Turkey. The following research question will be employed in order to understand the dynamics between minorities in a country such as Turkey:

*In what way have the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups in Diyarbakır developed an alliance and how did this challenge a more exclusive Turkish national identity, leading up to 2015 - 2016?*

The (local) development of the relationship between these communities will be central in my research. I aim to discover how the local cooperation and allyship of these communities is challenging the 'homogeneous' identity that Turkey aims to maintain and creates spaces for ethnic minorities. In the following sections, the research question will be clarified by explaining how the actors have been chosen and how this research is relevant for the academic field. The first four chapters focus on alliances that were picked because of their relevance to the research question. Chapter one touches upon the celebration of Newroz as a solidarity alliance. Chapter two focuses on the political dimension in Diyarbakır and the local institutions and initiatives that have emerged. Chapter three zooms in on the discourse in Diyarbakır regarding the commemoration of the murder of Hrant Dink. Chapter four discusses the issue of the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides and its narrative in Diyarbakır. The fifth and final chapter zooms in on the Turkish discourse regarding Diyarbakır in 2015 - 2016, in the light of the government crackdown. In this thesis, I argue that the establishment of solidarity alliances between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups in Diyarbakır, did in fact form challenges to the Turkish national identity. While discussing the state's response to the alliance, some inherent problems based on the construction of the Turkish Republic are exposed.

## **Profiling the City: Diyarbakır**

Diyarbakır<sup>1</sup> is an old city located in Northern-Mesopotamia. The matter of demographics plays a role in the choice to analyze Diyarbakır, as its population has a large majority of Kurds living there, to the degree that Kurdish is often used instead of Turkish as the common language. Next to the Kurdish majority, there was an Armenian and Assyrian presence in the city that dates back to antiquity. However this presence was minimalized after the Armenian Genocide, during which the city of Diyarbakır actually served as a coordinating center for the genocidal campaign. Additionally, after the 1970's the city served as the epicenter for the Kurdish struggle (Sengul, 2014). Over the last two decades, Diyarbakır has become the image of migration and poverty. Due to forced migrations<sup>2</sup> following the burned villages under the state of emergency regime of the late 1980s, the city gained an increasingly large population. This led to hundreds of thousands of people migrating throughout the Kurdish region to live in peripheral cities (Neyzi & Darıcı, 2015, p. 56). Therefore Diyarbakır and these three communities possess an important link. The place carries an important history of genocide and struggle that connects these ethnic groups, which creates the perfect opportunity to analyze possible alliances between them due to the historic connections.

## **Profiling the Actors**

In relation to the research question it is important to specify the choice of the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish communities. These ethnic groups are chosen because they all have a problematic past (and present) based on repression by the Turkish state, while they are living in it as minorities. This repression is based on them not fitting the contours of the Turkish state. Both the Armenians and Assyrians have been victim of genocidal campaigns of the Ottoman Empire during the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides. They still endure the denialist policies of the Turkish State regarding these events (Karimova & Deverell, 2001; Halstead, 2018).

### *Armenians*

The Armenians are an ancient peoples, who have lived since before the first century and who are

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<sup>1</sup> The Kurdish name of the city used to be 'Amed', before the Turkification policies of the Turkish State. The Armenian equivalent is 'Tigranakert (Minassian, 2021)'.

<sup>2</sup> Aimed at depriving the PKK of rural support (Neyzi & Darıcı, 2015).



originally from the region comprising what is now the Republic of Armenia and Northeastern Turkey. They have lost a lot of land during their long and turbulent history. They have their own language, Armenian which has its own alphabet. The Armenian Genocide that took place in the early 20th century and was perpetrated in the Ottoman Empire, is the most important factor that has contributed to the formation of the Armenian diaspora. The genocidal campaign included death marches to the desert, robberies, massacres and forced Islamization (Halstead, 2018). Approximately two-third of the then-Armenian population was wiped out, which left the survivors dispersed across the Middle East, Russia, Europe and the United States (Gevorkyan, 2013; Torosyan & Vardanyan, 2020). Approximately 70.000 Armenians still remain in Turkey to this day (Hofmann, 2002).

### *Assyrians*

Over the course of the last decades, a consciousness has been realized of the massacres, ethnic cleansing and deportations of other Christian peoples during the First World War in the Ottoman Empire. Ethnically these people were of Greek and Assyrian origin. The Assyrian Genocide, also called Sayfo in the Syriac language, took place in Southeastern Anatolia as well as the Iranian province of Azerbaijan (Gaunt & Barthoma, 2017). "In 2007, the International Association of Genocide Scholars issued a consensus resolution stating that what had happened to "Armenians, Assyrians and Pontiac and Anatolian Greeks" was genocide" (Gaunt, 2015, p. 83). There have been multiple debates on the expression and use of the Assyrian identity, which are understandable considering the manifestations and changes during the 20th and 21st century. The Assyrian people are ethnically, linguistically and religiously distinct, while being a minority in the Middle East region, in which they are constituted in different areas. These are namely the north of Iraq, as well as in Baghdad and Mosul; Syria, in the Al Jazeera district; Iran, in the Urmiya region and most importantly for this research, in Turkey, mainly in South-Eastern villages and Istanbul. The Assyrians living in Turkey consist of approximately 20000 people (Boháč, 2010, p. 68). What is noteworthy about the numbers in the article of Boháč (2010), and what the author points out as well, is that the numbers that are used are not reliable and outdated because the states that have been surveyed 'pretend' to be homogenous. Exactly this notion is useful in the main research question of this thesis, given the 'exclusive national Turkish identity' that is scrutinized and is based on the expectation and assumption that the Turkish state is homogenous.

A similarity that the Assyrians share with the Kurds is based on the lack of an officially recognized homeland for neither of the ethnic groups. For the Assyrians, as well as for the Kurds, Diyarbakır is seen as part of their homeland (Atto, 2011). Useful to add is that the Assyrians are distinct from Kurds and Turks by their Orthodox Christian religion and their Assyrian language, called Suryoyo or Syriac (Arikan, 2011). Both these aspects are essential to understanding the Assyrian identity. Therefore I use these factors to identify the Assyrian people in Diyarbakır: those who identify with the Assyrian religion and who speak (as their main language) Suryoyo. This ethnic group will be mentioned in this thesis as 'Assyrians'.

### *Kurds*

The Kurdish people in Turkey are the largest ethnic minority. Kurds generally live in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In Turkey they predominantly live in the Southeast (Sengul, 2014). Violence against Kurds has been continuous, before and after the failed peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdish leadership (Yeğen, 2015). Therefore the Kurds who are the largest minority in Turkey do have a difficult relationship with the state which they are supposed to call their home (Koinova, 2019). The Armenian and Assyrian experiences during the First World War are quite similar, whereas the Kurdish history of repression by the Turkish state, took place later during several instances. The Dersim Massacre or Dersim Rebellion is one of the most memorable and traumatizing events in this category. In the early Republican years a peak of state violence was reached in Dersim, East Turkey during 1937 - 1938. The Turkish military had conducted airstrikes and had sent troops that murdered the local population after gathering them in certain places. Important to note is that the population living in Dersim were mainly Kurdish Alevi's, who differed in their religious practices from Sunni Islam. Dersim, at this point, housed the largest population of Alevi's in Turkey, including its religious leadership. In 1935, in an effort of Turkification a law passed, which enabled the governing of Dersim by special decree. This was followed by a massive military incursion, which included the bombing of areas, tribes being disarmed, girls being kidnapped and given to Turkish families and the displacement and relocation of the inhabitants into western Turkey. The number of victims differs between 10.000 and 70.000 (Ayata & Hakyemez, 2013, p. 135; Efe & Forchtner, 2015). The Dersim massacre, which is often referred to as the Dersim Genocide, is in a sense quite similar to the case of the Armenian Genocide, as the official view portrayed both these violences as the state's legitimate self-defense against an uprising of siloyal subject and internal threats (Ayata & Hakyemez, 2013, p. 135). Therefore these

traumatic experiences of these three groups in Turkey have in common that they were conducted in the same framework of state violence by the Turkish state.

## **Historical Background**

### **Minority Issues**

The concept of minorities has been problematic in the history of the Turkish Republic. With the limitations of the Lausanne Treaty, the minority groups in Turkey have been struggling to feel as a fully-fledged citizen (Karaosmanoğlu, 2010). As noted before, the Treaty of Lausanne was negotiated with the interference of European powers in which they prioritized the minority rights for non-Muslims, defining minorities on the basis of religion. With the establishment of this treaty, the mere presence of minorities in Turkey has been a reminder for the Republic of their 'Ottoman dependence to the West'. They were elements of the Turkish nation that threatened its purity (Bali, 2006; Karaosmanoğlu, 2010).

### **Exclusive National Identity**

In the early Republican era the process of Turkification was taken on by the Kemalist government, as an attempt to promote nationalism in the Republic (Bali, 2006; Kurban, 2007). This was done through projects such as administrative standardization, institutional modernization and secularization, the laws that were installed forced minorities to be or be like Turks (Ekmekçioğlu, 2016). Diversity became suspicious under Kemalism, and those who differed in the three categories (linguistic, ethnic and religious) were seen as 'others', not fitting in the image of Turkish national identity, or Turkish national uniformity. As the Republic of Turkey included a consolidation of a multi-ethnic territory this appeared to be a problematic objective. This made the practice of 'othering' appear, in which minorities were singled out (Gourlay, 2018). An example of these policies was a legislation passed by the Ministry of Education, in which primary school students had to recite the student pledge (andımız). This pledge entailed an affirmation of all Turkish-citizen children of their Turkishness everyday, while at the same time denying some of these children their fundamental citizenship rights, based on their non-Turkishness. This custom was in place in Turkey until 2013 (Ekmekçioğlu, 2016). In the construction of the Turkish State, shortly after the establishment of the Turkish Republic the Grand National Assembly had to determine the definition of a Turk for the constitution. Member of Parliament Hamdullah Suphi, argued that it would be dangerous to erase the legal difference between Turks and non-Turks,

considering the struggle they just got out of. He stated that it was required to make a distinction between 'citizenship Turk' and 'real Turk'. The citizenship Turk category was required as it was stated in the Lausanne Treaty that the 'Turkish nationals belonging to a non-Muslim minority had to enjoy the same civil and political rights as the Muslims' (Ekmekçioğlu, 2016, p. 103). This meant that the non-Turks were granted Turkishness based on citizenship. However, as Suphi found it essential to make a distinction between Turks and non-Turks, based on the internal threat perception of the Turkish State, another category was established as the real Turkness. This was based on the renouncing of other identities such as the Kurdish or Armenian ones, and completely embracing Turkish culture, as either identities were perceived mutually exclusive. This evidently leads to only 'ethnic Turks' to be part of this category (Ekmekçioğlu, 2016, pp. 104 - 105). In terms of the 'exclusive Turkish national identity' that this thesis aims to retrieve in the last chapter, this concept is based on this homogenized element of Turkish national identity. The efforts of the Turkish government aimed at homogenisation are often applied by repressing ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity, as was noted earlier by Karimova & Devereil (2001) (Bali, 2006; Gambetti, 2010; Kurban, 2007).

While a separate minority regime was established for non-Muslims, which in practice was only for Armenians, Greeks and Jews, other Muslim minorities seemed to have become part of a homogenization policy. This entails that these Muslim groups were associated and identified as 'Turks' from the 1920's and 1930's onwards. During this period, nationalist theories came up advocating and promoting the supremacy of Turkish history and language. The ban on non-Turkish names, non-Turkish languages in schools, and courts and the aim for everybody to belong to the Turkish 'race'. Therefore all the distinct cultures, histories and languages had to be limited and one could even argue suppressed, in order to 'enjoy' full citizenship (Kurban, 2007, p. 7). Discriminatory practices from the Turkish government against its minorities were mainly aimed at property and citizenship rights (Karaosmanoğlu, 2010).

According to Turkey's Human Rights Association (IHD), the minority question in Turkey is related to its state mentality. Despite the fact that Turkey is not formed based on a single ethnic human community, the identification of its citizens in the republic are based on the Turkish ethnic identity. In legal texts such descriptions are along the lines of 'Turks', 'children of Turk' or even 'honor to

be Turk'. These descriptions can be better understood through the discussion of article 66 of the Turkish constitution, as it was amended in 2001 (IHD, 2008). This article elaborates on the perception of Turkish citizenship. It makes statements such as "Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk" and "The child of a Turkish father or a Turkish mother is a Turk". It is important to remark that in this framework of Turkish citizenship it is evident that the legislator bases this status on the ethnic origin of a person. Citizenship is therefore not bound to a legal framework, as would be expected in a constitution (Turkish Government, n.d.). The IHD argues that citizenship is understood to be 'citizen of the Turk and of the Turkish State'. The fact that the header of this article is 'Turkish citizenship', instead of citizenship of the State of the Republic Turkey' demonstrates the importance that is being given to the aspect of being a Turk. This exposes the 'mono-mentality' of the state and shows in a way a sense of racism in the constitution regarding minorities, as they will never be able to be 'a Turk' (IHD, 2008). This is one of the (although the main) law and court decisions in the history of the Turkish Republic in which Turkish minorities have been discriminated against.

## **Literature Review: Minority Alliances in Turkey**

This section demonstrates existing research regarding the alliances or solidarities between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups. Most research that has been conducted regarding the social relations of these three ethnic groups is based on ethnographic investigations in the region.

### **Alliances in Diaspora**

Huw Halstead (2018; 2021) has focused in his research on solidarities between peoples that embody minorities in Turkey, such as the Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks and Kurds in diaspora. He termed these emerging allyships 'post-Ottoman solidarities', which applies for the collection of groups for this thesis as well. The ethnic groups have all lived under Ottoman-rule and continue to live under the preceding Turkish rule. Halstead (2018; 2021) argues that the guilt and realization of Kurdish complicity has initiated apologies from several (quite not all) Kurdish (diasporic) communities, which has created transcultural solidarity between the peoples who share forms of repression by the same government. He notes that the emergence of such transcultural discourses has drawn these different victim communities (Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks and Kurds) together. However, it is also emphasized that these emerging discourses have the capacity to reinforce what was already in place, namely the national histories and identities of these groups. This implies that retrieving these transcultural memories and the digital interaction between these groups could also have negative influences by mutually enforcing a competitive relationship of victimhood. With these works, Halstead (2018; 2021) has contributed to the literature on the alliance between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish communities by portraying how their relations have morphed in diaspora by the reimagination of past events such as the Armenian and Assyrian genocides.

### **Coalition-forming**

An important similarity that the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish communities have in common is their (partially) shared experience of genocide and repression by the Ottoman and Turkish leaderships. Koinova (2019) argues that when diasporas - with the objective of pursuing genocide recognition - have a common adversary and a context enabling proliferation of human rights claims, they can be in a coalition with each other. For the coalition that is aimed to be examined in this thesis, this is indeed the case. Koinova (2019) does emphasize that these coalitions and

alliances are durable, given the common adversary, which is the Turkish state. However due to political issues and other differences such as religion, coalitions with high institutional involvement have not (yet) been established. It is interesting to observe in what way this applies to these communities in Diyarbakır, given the fact that these different people have been living together for multiple decades.

### **Christian Solidarities**

Mollica (2011) has focused his academic work on the Christian societies, such as the Assyrians; Chaldeans and Armenians in Diyarbakır. He aimed to gain a sense of understanding of the pluricultural Middle Eastern Societies and its often overlooked Christian communities. Many of which have been living together in coexistence for centuries, although they have been facing growing separation and incomprehension (Mollica, 2011, p. 110). Anatolia conveyed the largest Christian population in the region for centuries, although it has been diminishing over the last hundred years, the exceptions being in Istanbul and Southeast Anatolia. Mollica (2011) focuses on attitudes of Christians in Diyarbakır with an emphasis on security-related issues raised by an emerging Islamic fundamentalism. He argues that states often experience difficulties with exercising control over decentralized areas in large states, such as Turkey. This delinkage with the state leads to an increase of segregation and distrust from this particular part of the population towards the state. The shortcomings of the state heighten social divisions, which at a local level are embodied in issues regarding property law and land connected to ethno-religious ideas. In his conclusion Mollica (2011) makes the argument that the fears that the ancient minorities experienced are the same fear of today's minorities embedded in their resistance against this growing ethnonationalism, which was also seen in their victimization. The stability of mutual tolerance in pluri-religious societies was tested in this ethnography of Diyarbakır in the light of changing demographics, constantly changing alliances and unstable religious loyalties. One of the conclusions in this study was that the Christians living in Diyarbakır have accepted the status quo and are hoping to live peacefully in the land they have been living in for years which was always interpreted as diverse. Mollica (2011) points out that violent acts toward Christians in Anatolia, especially those which are religiously motivated, are not detached from historical and spatial contexts. Therefore these instances should be interpreted in relation to these factors at all times (Mollica, 2011, p. 141). Dorronsoro and Watts (2012) explore pro-Kurdish parties and their social



footing in the city of Diyarbakır. They look into the manner in which local actors such as these political parties obstruct authorities while creating insurgent political enclaves such as Mollica (2011) noted as well. They argue that the success of pro-Kurdish parties in Diyarbakır can be ascribed to not only ethnic background but also state policies toward minorities, which carefully implies that the need for these policies is high in this specific area. This is mainly based on the observation that various ethnic groups live together in societies and make an effort to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities.

### **Shared Experiences in Mardin**

Biner (2010) has explored the multiple articulations of the genocidal campaigns of the Ottoman Empire, done to the Armenians and the Syriac Christians, today. She explores how the descendants of the victims, the perpetrators and the witnesses experience and look back at these events. Biner (2010) zooms in on the (secret) bonds between these communities who are of different religious and ethnic origin in contemporary Mardin, in South-East Turkey. This work is therefore mainly focused on the narrative of the Armenian Genocide and its presence in today's society in the interactions and experiences of the Armenian, Syriac and Kurdish groups. By discussing and presenting everyday practices, conversations and experiences, he exposed various hidden narratives about the Armenian Genocide and the Kurdish question.

### **Politics of Reconstruction**

Sengul (2014) analyzes the cultural politics of reconstruction in Diyarbakır while touching upon overemphasis regarding gender, culture and class. This was for the author a starting point to discover the histories and experiences of Kurdishness and Armenianness and the process of Turkish state-making and Kurdish nation-building in the city of Diyarbakır. Sengul (2014) bases his findings mainly on ethnographies of Kurdish and Armenian people in Diyarbakır and their experiences including violence there. Another starting point that is made in his research that is particularly interesting to this thesis is that at the beginning of the 21st century, a comprehensive politics of reconstruction was taking place that was organized around a concept of opposition, Kurdish resistance and multiculturalism. This politics of reconstruction brought back the historical heritage of the city in the light of the conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurds (Gambetti, 2010; Saaidi, 2021). This development in the conflict caused the image of the city of

Diyarbakır to become the articulation of criticism against the state's denialist nationalism. Through this articulation a reclaiming and exposure came forth of the Armenian and Kurdish heritages of Diyarbakır, while emphasizing the role of violence in the form of genocide (Sengul, 2014; Gambetti, 2010). Therefore a close study of mankind in this city is an important way to gather information regarding Armenianness and Kurdishness. And in relation to the exposure of these heritages and the denialist-nationalism of the Turkish state, the question arises in what way an alliance or coalition contributed to this exposure. This is aimed to be discovered through this exact research. Namely, the understanding of the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish identities in the city of Diyarbakır as both separate homogeneous ethnic groups, as well as a large heterogeneous group and their livelihood together in this historic city.

### **Threat Perception: Minorities**

The fear of the 'other' in the form of the internal enemy, is a recurring aspect in Turkish policies and naturally has its effects on minorities and their attitude towards the (their) Turkish government (Önis, 2004). This threat perception of the enemy has not yet been accounted for regarding minorities in Diyarbakır specifically. Works regarding this are mainly based on accounts of Kurdish resistance (Dorronsoro & Watts, 2012; Geri, 2017). This proposes a gap in this specific type of literature, to which this research contributes. Kaya (2013) argues that the notion of diversity as part of Turkish identity was taken on more recently by the Turkish government in the light of joining the European Union. The change in discourse from homogenization towards the promotion of diversity seems to be a path towards modernization for the country (Önis, 2004).

### **Relevance**

The studies that were presented in this literature review demonstrated the established relations between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups in and outside Turkey. This limited literature review shows that the existing research on these alliances lacks the incorporation of all three of these ethnic groups and their livelihood and interactions in Diyarbakır. Most of the works that were discussed in this section were based on solidarities based on the Genocide experience, while not touching upon the degree of threat perception from the state level and how this relates to

minority solidarities. Another point that is important to note is that due to the possibility of EU accession for Turkey, and other factors the position and visibility of the minorities in Southeast Turkey improved for which very few works have accounted, which shows that it is necessary to write this work.

Through the close examination of the communities in Diyarbakır, this research contributes to the existing literature of local minorities in Turkey, especially Diyarbakır. This literature review demonstrated that most of the academic work regarding Turkish threat perception in Diyarbakır is based on Kurdish insurgence and the Kurdish people at large, while overlooking other minority communities such as the Armenians or Assyrians. Therefore this gap is aimed to be filled through my research. Another contribution that this research makes is to literature regarding coalition-building between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish communities, and at the same time hopefully exposes connections between the groups that are useful for further research regarding this specific region in the Middle East and its genocidal past.

### **Time Period**

Another point, which is important to touch upon is the time frame that will be employed. As is mentioned in the research question the allyship between the three communities that will be studied is specifically interesting leading up to the government crackdown in the period of 2015 - 2016. As the opposition in Turkey has been rising from the early 2000's on, it would be useful to explore an approximately 15 year period from the 2000's to 2016, given that this is the period it would have actually been possible for these groups to gain some authority in the region, before these (collective) establishments collapsed by the government crackdowns of 2015 - 2016.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research method, which is the gathering of non-numerical data to understand (human) behavior. This is essential in this case as a development in relations between certain groups is being analyzed, which requires (con)textual evidence and data. The most suitable methods for the analysis of this research question are a content analysis and a discourse analysis. A content analysis is a tool that is used in research to make sense of the presence of certain themes and concepts in texts, which could point out specific biases, relationships, opinions and feelings. This approach is important because the relationship between the actors is essential in the study, which can be identified by using these concepts and findings. In addition a discourse analysis is also a useful method in acquiring information about the actors. Discourse analysis is a post-structuralist method of doing research that scrutinizes language and the manner in which certain representations are stabilized and taken for granted. This method focuses on the contextual meanings in language and in how actors make use of these meanings to achieve particular goals, resulting in the construction of their 'truth' (Hansen, 2013). By analyzing these “truths” one is able to see how discursive representations construct the (self-)perception of the units of analysis and each other of this thesis. By looking into the use of language in local newspapers it is interesting to get an insight into the local normative culture of Diyarbakır and how these groups interact. As there is a language barrier regarding Turkish and Kurdish, only Armenian and English texts are to be analyzed for this research. In regard to the evidence I aim to use (local) newspaper articles, documents from the human rights organization of Turkey (IHD), reports of Armenian pilgrimages to Diyarbakır, existing scholarship and (possible) ethnographies of these specific communities in Diyarbakır.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This section of the thesis is focused on the establishment of a conceptual framework for the empirical part to be embedded in. The first part of this framework is based on the existing literature of alliance politics, in order to explain cooperation and coalition building between minorities and also to define the concept of alliance. The second part of the framework is explaining the concept of an exclusive national identity and how threat perception of internal enemies does play a factor in this

### **Alliance Literature**

As the actors in this research - which are the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish communities in Diyarbakır - do not embody states or international organizations, one is urged to step away from the traditional theories within the study of International Relations. Darwich (2021) acknowledges the academic gap in alliance literature regarding non-state actors and alliance politics. He argues that it is important to expand the alliance research programme beyond its state centric perspective. Applying these state centric theories to the Middle East does not suffice because of the many minority groups living in these states, which have agency of their own and do not necessarily rely on state governments. Therefore, partially in agreement with Darwich (2021), I argue in this section of the theoretical framework that it is important to include non-state actors as well in the academic debate of alliance theory and alliance forming.

Scholars perceived alliance forming as a result of asymmetrical power relations. Walt (1987) proposes a balance of threat theory, which installs the perception of threat and danger as an incentive to form alliances. Schroeder (1976), argues that alliances are formed to oppose or accommodate a threat. However, once this alliance is formed it does bring a form of management over the alliance partners, which is also the case on a local level. Koinova (2019) notes that the alliances that minorities form in regards to bettering human rights situations, become durable because of the common adversary, which in more abstract terms can be seen as the security threat. This shared security threat by the three minorities would in the case of this study be the Turkish State. Schroeder (1976) notes, in sync with realist theory, that security is not the only incentive to form an alliance. Instead, influencing or controlling policies of partners to assert their power is also an objective to maintain durable alliance relationships. While taking the position of the

minorities in Diyarbakır and in Turkey as a whole into account, asserting power is not necessarily expected to play a large role in the dynamic between the Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds in Diyarbakır. One can also make this assumption based on the fact that the city and the region in fact is predominantly Kurdish and mainly Kurds occupy local political positions, which does not leave much room for the enlargement of power by other minorities in the city.

Considering IR theory it is useful to step away from 'merely' the security dimension and approach another one of the grand theories in IR, which is constructivism. Barnett (1998) states that considering the role of ideas, norms and identities to understand the politics of alliance forming is useful, especially in the Middle East given the variety of the Middle East as a region. The perception of the threat to security, which is touched upon in (neo)realist theory, is according to Barnett (1998) better understood through the politics of identity, which implies that contextualizing the livelihood of the groups in this city is essential. It is important to specify the concept of alliance, as it is the subject of the first part of the analysis of this thesis. Weitsman (2004) describes alliances as “bilateral or multilateral agreements to provide some element of security to the signatories” (Duffield, 2012, pp. 2 -3). As this definition does not limit the specific actor that is part of the agreement, it is more suitable as a conceptual frame for the alliance that is researched regarding the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish minorities in Diyarbakır. Ball and Branscombe (2019) discuss inter-minority solidarity, in which they note that support for minority groups attempting to confront injustice can come from fellow ingroup members, members of an advantaged outgroup and also members of another disadvantaged outgroup. They argue that a more recategorization of different ethnic groups allows them to confront injustice against "us" instead of "them. They show that through the emergence of solidarities, these groups are able to form alliances in each other's experiences with injustice. In combination with the security dimension, this conceptualization of alliance forming is also taken into consideration in this analysis of Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish alliances in Diyarbakır.

The body of this thesis will explore the emergence and process of solidarities in Diyarbakır between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups. After discussing each alliance, the last chapter will zoom in on the response by the Turkish State to these solidarities and how this eventually led to the government crackdown of 2015. It is important to note that the process of these solidarities is not linear: they are different alliances, which have taken time to be constructed and the reactions by the Turkish State change, depending on what the alliances are based. It is important to note that, because of the majority ethnic Kurdish population in Diyarbakır, the connections with Armenian and Assyrian groups are of a small degree. The Kurdish ethnic groups play the most important role in the public sphere of Diyarbakır (Sengul, 2014).

## **Chapter 1: Political Environment**

This chapter engages in the description and construction of cooperation between the ethnic groups living in Diyarbakır through a political dimension. As noted earlier in this work, the alliances that are discussed do not necessarily need to be derived in an official setting, these can be small as this is the manner in which alliances or social relations between minorities begin.

### **Reconstructing the Image of Diyarbakır**

The emergence of Diyarbakır as a focal point for the pro-Kurdish movement became visible much earlier than the 2000's, namely in the 1950's when Kurdish students and intellectuals engaged in political activism (Gambetti, 2005). The practices in the Diyarbakır Prison<sup>3</sup> after the military coup influenced these political sentiments and pushed for more opposition from the Kurdish population based on the systematic torture of Kurdish inmates (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2009). These events caused radicalization and the embeddedness of secessionist nationalist ideas of a generation of Kurds (Taş, 2019). As a reaction to the injustices done to them, many former prisoners joined Kurdistan's Worker Party or PKK who initiated an armed struggle with the objective of establishing an independent Kurdistan (Taş, 2019, pp. 30 - 31).

The end of the 20th century marked the start of changes that appeared in Turkey and in this case Diyarbakır, due to the unilateral ceasefire that was declared by the PKK in 1998, the Helsinki Summit of 1999, in which Turkey was officially accepted as a candidate for European Union Membership, and the election of the pro-Kurdish DEHAP to the Metropolitan Municipality elections of Diyarbakır (Gambetti, 2004, p. 5). This was the first time that a pro-Kurdish party took office in a government institution, yielding local power (Gambetti, 2009, p. 98). During the 2000's, Diyarbakır became the center of coordination for Kurdish legal policies, governed by the pro-Kurdish elected municipality in 1999. After this local electoral victory change appeared in the form of the abolition of restrictions in the public and political spheres (Gourlay, 2021). This led to counter-policies implemented by the local municipality, as an exercise of decolonization

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<sup>3</sup> The Diyarbakır Prison was established in 1980 after the Military Coup. Many prominent Kurdish political activists were detained in the detention center. The prison was notoriously known for its systematic acts of torture to its detainees (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2009).



(Gambetti, 2009). The framework of the local government was peace-oriented and focused on human-rights activism, such as the empowerment of the educated middle class in Kurdish politics. An interesting aspect of the (Kurdish) reconstruction of the city were the large investments into symbolism, such as images and structures that could exhibit the mixed and multicultural past of Diyarbakır as a site of 'ancient cultures and civilization'. Together with the global discourses of multiculturalism and tourism-focused models of economic development, this process was aimed at the rebranding of the city; deconstructing its image as a center of conflict with imposed measures of homogenization (Sengul, 2014, p. 13). The governing body of the city therefore found it essential to embrace the historic diversity of Diyarbakır in the recreation of its image. The regional 'removal of inequalities' was part of this new image (Işık et al., 2019).

The pro-Kurdish leadership started making concrete steps towards the (re)establishment of Diyarbakır as the multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual city in the early 2000's. The Kurdish mayor of the Sur municipality in Diyarbakır made a statement in 2008, in which he vocalized that he was not only working for Kurds, but for all the people (Gourlay, 2021, p. 74). With this statement, the local leadership made clear that they aimed towards inclusivity for the city, as the co-existence with non-Muslim groups was part of the cities history. As a demonstration of this solidarity, the Demirbaş administration promoted a programme of multilingual governance (*çok dilli belediyeçilik*) in which local information was offered in various languages, such as Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian and Syriac. The intention of this programme was the promotion of mutual respect and understanding, as people were being addressed in their mother tongue (Gourlay, 2021, p. 74; Toumani, 2008; Korkmaz, 2021). Demirbaş, who was the mayor of the Sur municipality, expanded this initiative in 2012 in Sur, where he started offering Armenian language classes to employees of the municipality and enthusiasts. "If I want Kurds to have the right to education in their mother tongue, then I also want this for Armenians, Syriacs and other peoples, too," is what he stated when asked about this. This project was realized with the help of two local organizations, named the Diyarbakır Armenian Community Foundation and the Kurdish Language Research and Advancement Association (Hurriyet, 2012a). The cooperation between these actors demonstrates the manner in which grassroots organizations of the Armenian and Kurdish groups respectively work together intensely to reach a form of alliance in the establishment of a more multilingual Diyarbakır. This aspect of the Kurdish local politics is an example of the quality of social relations

between the various ethnic groups in Diyarbakır. Such local projects by the *belediye* (municipality) show that the role of norms and identities are important to consider when looking at inter-minority alliances (Barnett, 1998). This specific initiative by the local government demonstrates the importance of the preservation of identities between the ethnic groups in Diyarbakır. As a language is one of the important elements of a national identity of a group of people, the initiative embraces the national identities of all the people with different origins in the city. It also evidently reinforces the multicultural image of Diyarbakır, through the provision and therefore the acclamation of different languages that are being spoken and taught in.

The Kurdish movement and DEHAP-elected municipality established a reinvestment of Diyarbakır based on cultural meaning. Gambetti (2009) argues that Diyarbakır is attributed with the symbolic charge of being a homeland, a home city. Instead of being bounded by ethnicity, what is being constructed is an alternative self-representation that links the history of a particular place to world culture and creates a different sense of belonging for the Kurdish movement and Kurds in Turkey in general. This narrative, focused on culture, was taken on by the Diyarbakır Municipality to step away from being other-determined and the language of victimization. The leadership chose to embrace the city's diverse and historic culture (Gambetti, 2009). Seyhmus Diken, who is a Turkish writer of Kurdish origin and also a large icon in Diyarbakır agrees with the course of governance of the pro-Kurdish Municipality to install cultural meaning to the sense of belonging to Diyarbakır. However, he argued that it is important to not limit Diyarbakır to Kurdish identity only. He emphasized that it was essential to include non-Muslims and Armenians, as they are the 'absolute others' of the Turkish regime, even more so than the Kurds (Gambetti, 2009, p. 113). To exclude them from the image of the city, would narrow down Diyarbakır to a large extent. He noted that before, the city's walls were enlarged for Syriac migrants from Northern Iraq, which resulted in half of the population of the city being non-Muslims in the 1870s. Diken's idea influenced the municipalities view on the image of the city. Therefore they decided on a preservation of non-Muslim heritage, which was against the national strategy of the state (Öktem, 2004). This preservation of non-Muslim heritage outed itself in reconstructing Armenian and Syriac religious sites.

## **Preservation of Non-Muslim Heritage**

The various religious sites in Diyarbakır demonstrate a mixture of religious groups in one place. These are the churches of Surp Giragos (Armenian), Meryem Ana (Syriac), Mar Petyun (Chaldean) next to the multiple mosques that represent Islam for the Muslim communities in Diyarbakır. The Surp Giragos, which means Holy Giragos, served as a cultural hub in Diyarbakır up until 2015 in the neighborhood called Sur (Gourlay, 2021). The church is one of the largest Christian churches in the Middle East<sup>4</sup>. It embodies the special place of the Armenians living in Turkey, as Diyarbakır was home to one of the largest Armenian groups in Turkey, besides Istanbul. It is also one of the few churches in Anatolia that survived the destruction during the years of the genocide, only to undergo the same faith during the 1960's and 70's with the forced expulsion of Armenians, which diminished the Armenian population even more, as was the case after the genocide. During the first years of the 21st century the heads of the Armenian religious foundation (its legal and corporate framework) took advantage of the political situation in Eastern Anatolia by advocating for and receiving support from Kurdish politicians. This was the case since it was in the era of the emergence of the Kurdish rule in especially Diyarbakır through more political rights that were granted by the state ((Işik et al., 2019; Gourlay, 2021). With the support of the Kurdish politicians in important local positions, the renovation and reopening of the Surp Giragos church became a fact on October 23, 2011. This support was shown by the pro-Kurdish party in Diyarbakır in 2009. This cooperation with the Armenian community was appropriate to the multicultural image of the city that was pursued. Despite the fact that the primary source of (financial) support came from the Istanbul Surp Giragos Foundation and Armenian diasporic groups, the mostly financial support of the Kurdish party did demonstrate the aim to embrace the non-Muslim history of the Turkish state, which was in the official discourse often overlooked or denied (Bertram, 2022). This shows the aim of the Kurdish party to improve social relations with the Armenian community. As the local Armenian community experiences these improvements first hand, it is also a form of reaching out to the Armenian diaspora entirely, since the rebuilding of the Surp Giragos has been on the agenda of the Armenian diaspora for a long time. As it is an element that demonstrates Armenian (historic) existence in Turkey (Bertram, 2022). During its reopening in 2011 the Armenian Archbishop Aram Ateşyan, was welcomed by mayor Osman

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<sup>4</sup> The church has been rebuilt after it closed down in 2015 due to clashes between Kurds and the Turkish army. It reopened on May 8th, 2022 (Ghazanchyan, 2022).

Baydemir who spoke kind words to the Armenians, in which he called for the first time for Armenians to not only come as tourists in light of the reconstruction of the church. He hoped that this would be an incentive and invitation for them to ‘return’ to their homes in Diyarbakır. In this address Baydemir also preceded Demirbaş by apologizing for ‘the events that have happened in the past’, aiming at the (Kurdish role in) the Armenian Genocide (Mouradian, 2011). This occurrence is remarkable, since another restoration project of an Armenian Church on lake Van’s Island of Akhtamar in 2020 received a different message from state authorities. There was no welcome for Armenians and the restoration made it into a secular museum without any connection to the Armenian Patriarchate and Armenian communities (Bertram, 2022). Another noticeable remark that was made by Baydemir in his address to the Armenians was the following: “You are not our guests. We are your guests” (Mouradian, 2011). This, again, shows the Kurdish but also local solidarity of Diyarbakır with the Armenians and what they went through. With the establishment of the Surp Giragos Church, the position of the Armenians as a minority in this multicultural city is secured and respected.

The fact that the Surp Giragos got renovated and even became an active church is quite special, as the region of Southeast Anatolia houses only two more active Armenian churches (Sheklian, 2019, p. 404). In 2012, on Easter Sunday an Armenian Divine Liturgy, or *Badarak*, was offered for the first time since its renovation. Several scholars observed that up until the chaos of 2015 and 2016, the Surp Giragos Church served as a cultural and social hub in the Sur neighborhood, housing a revival of Armenian culture in Diyarbakır (Sheklian, 2019; Gourlay, 2021; Ayata, 2015). At the same time, the Chaldean and Syriac churches attracted a good amount of visitors. This atmosphere is a large change in comparison to the end of the 20th century, where this part of Diyarbakır’s religious architecture was not visible or in use at all. At this time, the non-islamic holy places were neglected and in ruins (Gourlay, 2021, p. 76). Gourlay (2021) also notes that it would not have been possible in earlier decades to notice the visibility and confidence of the minorities in such a manner. He ascribes this to the narrow nationalist visions that were in place at earlier times in the republican era. The preservation of these religious sites that belong to the Armenian and Assyrian communities in Diyarbakır therefore demonstrate the urgency and importance that is given to it by the city’s municipality, in order to obtain the image of Diyarbakır as a multicultural city. The remarks of the mayor expose elements of remorse from the Kurdish side in relation to the

Armenian Genocide which is an important part of the Armenian as well as Assyrian identities. Therefore one can argue that in support and understanding with the identities and ideas of the Armenians and Assyrians, the pro-Kurdish leadership in Diyarbakır has established an alliance with these groups in regards to the preservation and reconstruction of these sites (Barnett, 1998). In comparison to the alliance that is formed through the celebration of Newroz, one can conclude that the solidarity with religious sites and the preservation of them is more institutionalized in the local municipality. There is much more evidence to be found on occurrences involving the collective reopening of such cultural architecture and monuments than it is for collective Newroz celebrations between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups.

### **Local Human Rights Institutions**

There is a broad range of actors such as political parties and political figures that promote the political position of the city, as a center in Turkish Kurdistan. Associations and Non Governmental Organizations in Diyarbakır form sort of a cultural and political community. The Dicle-Firat Cultural Center is mainly focused on the promotion of Kurdish culture, whereas associations such as IHD (Turkey's human rights association), the Diyarbakır Bar Association (DBA) and the Diyarbakır Democracy Platform are engaged in legal issues, organization of protests, information politics and political mobilization. The engagement with such associations and NGOs does show political affiliation given to the fact that the region and especially Diyarbakır is extremely politicized due to the Kurdish movement. The political environment is almost unanimously based on the resistance of the Turkish government in relation to the expansion of Kurdish rights (Massicard & Watts, 2013, pp. 110 - 111). Therefore people working for or with these organizations already show their political affiliations and solidarity with the Kurdish cause, especially when it involves a non-Kurdish person. Based on its various institutions and associations, the Kurdish Movement in Diyarbakır had opened up a space of connection with the larger public in Turkey through the element of human rights.

## **HDP and Elections**

The political environment that can be ascribed to Diyarbakır and its surrounding cities and villages became particularly known in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in 2015. The Halkların Demokratik Partisi or HDP emerged as a new sound in Turkish politics, especially for the political left in the country. The party has been formed as an umbrella party, covering the former Peace and Democracy Party *Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP) and a number of leftist parties. Other names on the list also represent Armenian intellectuals. The co-chair of the HDP at the time Sebahat Tuncel noted that the party aimed to not make politics on behalf of those marginalized, such as women, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Alevis and Lazuris, but instead was installed to make politics *with* them. This demonstrates how the party pursues to be a grassroots organization (Hurriyet, 2013).

Two days before the national elections in 2015, crowds gathered in the center of Diyarbakır for a major HDP-rally. At the rally a festival atmosphere emerged, in celebration of the expected win of the party. Despite it being a rally for the HDP as a political party, the sphere seemed to be similar to that of a Newroz celebration. The Kurdish flag colors were very visible in scarves, banners, and dresses. Therefore the perception of the event was a demonstration of Kurdish identity. Despite its multicultural and diverse agenda, this rally was presented as a manifestation of Kurdishness. People in the crowd all believed that the HDP was about to pass the threshold. People perceived victory as finally seeing representation in the parliament. It would finally be possible to promote the Kurdish political agenda through official channels. For the people in Diyarbakır, to see HDP-members in parliament would be another form of resistance, resisting the status quo, based on legitimate means. The victory would bring ‘moral and intellectual leadership’ to a ‘civil institution’ (Gourlay, 2018). In the afternoon on that same day, the rally was disrupted by bombs planted by ISIS, which killed multiple and wounded hundreds of people (Guardian, 2013). Days later in the same spot where the casualties had fallen, many citizens of Diyarbakır made a powerful gesture of solidarity and defiance by facing each other and raising their heads. These events in relation to the election of the HDP all contributed to a more heavy Kurdish discourse of oppression and resistance, as the Kurdish movement has mentioned AKP complicity in the attack. They heightened the urge to participate in the electoral process, which may have contributed to the HDP win (Gourlay, 2018, p. 143). This rally demonstrates that the victory and election process of the

HDP, is based on the narrative of Kurdishness and the Kurdish identity, despite the HDP's claim to pursue a multicultural agenda.

The HDP expected, (rightfully so) to pass the 10% threshold to enter the national parliament in 2015 (Grigoriadis, 2016). The province of Diyarbakır turned out to be an essential part of this ultimate victory of the HDP, as 10 of its 11 seats turned out to be for this party (Agos, 2015b; Akkum, 2015c; Bozarslan, 2015). The rise of the HDP shows a political change in Diyarbakır and its region. It resulted in more diversity in the city's ideas. The members of the party also display diversity, as they were of Kurdish, Turkish but also Syriac, Yezidi and Alevi origin. Among these members are Garo Paylan and Muhrat Mihçi from the Armenian community and from the Assyrian community Erol Dora next to various Kurdish politicians (Hurriyet, 2015a). The victory of the HDP, leads to the careful assumption that the Turkish voter demonstrated their acceptance to minority rights. This can be derived from the fact that the AKP experienced a decrease in their votes (Akkum, 2015c).

The win in Diyarbakır unleashed wide celebrations in its streets including fireworks, despite calls from the HDP leadership not to engage in such activities (Bozarslan, 2015; Hurriyet, 2015b). These calls demonstrate how the situation is not so peaceful and people need to be careful. However, the fact that these calls have been ignored, implies the importance of this win for the people living in Diyarbakır. People were ecstatic as it represented the start of a new era for them. An era of peace (Kenner, 2015). These sentiments make sense, considering the Kurdish struggle and how this has impacted Diyarbakır specifically; for decades the Kurdish population was subject to violence between the separatist PKK and the Turkish government. A Kurdish resident of Diyarbakır reacts to the election victory by saying: "We were not free to use our language or be open with our identity. For years, we dreamed of a peaceful country where our people could live as equal citizens. Now, that time has come (Kafanov, 2015)." This refers to the Turkification policies of the Turkish State in which speaking the Kurdish language in public life was prohibited (Kurban, 2007, p. 7). These feelings demonstrate the limitations of representation in Turkish politics for the Kurds as a minority for so long and the necessity of such an institution in Turkey but specifically in Diyarbakır as the center of Turkish Kurdistan. The electoral success of the HDP in Diyarbakır is nevertheless not only ascribed to Kurds, as more than 70% (derived from the 82% turnout) of the district voted

for the party (Daily Sabah. 2015). One can therefore draw a couple assumptions. The fact that people from different ethnic or religious groups have voted for the HDP demonstrates solidarity with the Kurdish cause, as this is the main narrative within the party. The issues that the HDP mobilizes and accounts for, appear to be issues that are salient in society in Diyarbakır as well. This applies to human rights issues, minority rights, religious and language freedom and so on. In addition to this, it shows that the HDP has represented itself as a party for other minorities as well such as Armenians and Assyrians (Syriacs). More specifically, the party has shown that it stands in solidarity with their respective causes as well. Therefore one can argue that the emergence of the HDP party does create solidarities between the minorities in Diyarbakır, however its main trajectory and discourse relies on that of the Kurdish movement. The inter-minority solidarities that this party creates are therefore mainly based on the Kurdish question as the injustice to protest against.



## **Chapter 2: A Celebration for Resistance: Newroz**

This chapter explores cultural and religious solidarities in Diyarbakır. The first part focuses on a specific Kurdish cultural aspect in the city, through which solidarities are constructed. This is the celebration of Newroz. The second part of this chapter explores alliances or relations between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups by retrieving a religious dimension of solidarity in Diyarbakır.

### **Newroz**

Earlier in this research I noted that Kurdish politicians had become increasingly active in Southeast Turkey after the municipal elections of 1999. The changes that took place were apparent in the restrictions that were being lifted in political but also public spheres. An example of this is the celebration of Newroz<sup>5</sup>, the celebration of a spring festival, which is celebrated by the Kurds in Turkey. The aspect of Newroz as a celebratory day has been present in Kurdish (among others) history for a very long time. Before the 1980's, the feast was mostly celebrated in rural areas by lighting bonfires, jumping over it and singing next to it. However, after the rise of pro-Kurdish political parties, followed by the widespread displacement of Kurds from rural to urban areas, the celebrations gained a more popular atmosphere (Guvenc, 2019, p. 357). The fact that the celebration gained more salience with the emergence of the Kurdish movement, shows that Newroz is politicized to a large extent. Over time, the cultural holiday in which spring was welcomed, even received the attention of Turkish politicians and famous artists who performed during the festivities (Gourlay, 2021, p. 73). Since its armed uprising of 1984 the PKK - in particular Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of this organization - has transformed this cultural day into a symbol of Kurdish national identity building and resistance (Yetkin, 2015). The organization of the PKK had declared Newroz as the national day of only Kurdish people, which brought about an element of polarization between minority groups in Southeast Turkey as well as peoples who did also celebrate it (Yetkin, 2018). Therefore, it can be argued that the celebration of Newroz was a

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<sup>5</sup> Newroz is the Kurdish equivalent of the celebration of the Persian new year. It is one of the most important festivals of the ancient Iranians, and is a symbol of rebirth, freshness, freedom, and peace. This festival that celebrates the beginning of spring is celebrated by many ethnicities across the Middle East such as the Afghans, Iranians, Kurds, Azeris, Tajiks and Balochs (Khalid, 2020, p. 116). As this work heavily relies on Kurdish discourse, the term 'Newroz' is used, unless referring to the Turkish nationalistic equivalent, which is 'Nevruz'.

symbol for Kurdish freedom for the Kurds as the leadership of their resistance added a political dimension to their cultural practice.

To counterbalance the effects of the counter-hegemonic installation of Newroz by the Kurdish movement, the Turkish state declared a Turkified version of the festival as an official celebration in Turkey. They named it *Nevruz* and therefore changed the discourse from whether it was allowed to celebrate the festivity to *who* was in charge of organizing it. Until the year 2000, a limited number of people participated in the officially authorized celebrations. However, there were still unauthorized celebrations taking place, which in fact were broadly attended. The reaction of the Turkish State to these celebrations was sending security forces, which resulted in violent clashes with these participants (Gambetti, 2005, p. 9). Newroz was legitimately celebrated on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2000. Over 500.000 residents of Diyarbakır participated in the emotional celebrations. By this year, Diyarbakır was home to the largest Newroz celebration of Turkey, drawing participants from nearby rural areas as well. In the following years the festival was enlarged to the extent that by 2005, the attendance had grown to 100.000, while the duration also expanded to a week of festivities (Guvenc, 2019). The celebration in Diyarbakır marked a turning point by demonstrating how previous attempts by the Turkish state to Turkify and de-radicalize the celebration had failed. The Turkish State seemed to have realized that it had to try and diminish the celebration of *Newroz* from its connection to Kurdishness and Kurdish resistance (Nyberg, 2012). In 2000 President Demirel and Prime Minister Ecevit emphasized the brotherly significance of the celebration. Newroz was aimed to be represented as a Central Asian Turkic festivity by the Turkish State (Gambetti, 2005).

The celebration of Newroz has been an institution in Diyarbakır since the legitimization of the event in 2000. From 2000 until 2015 in particular, the use of urban spectacles has been a key element for the Kurdish movement. These spectacles have taken on the form of mass demonstrations and annual festivals, which have revealed the presence of a degree of public opposition that could not have been retrieved through other forms of political action. This was also not possible, as the movement experienced an absence of representational and institutional standing within Turkish politics (Guvenc, 2019, p. 362). The number of participants only grew, as it reached 400.000 in 2009 and 700.000 in 2011. To accommodate this, the municipality of Diyarbakır opened a large Newroz park in the city (Guvenc, 2019, p. 357). The increasing

attendance of the Newroz festivities demonstrates the importance of the event for the majority-Kurdish populated region.

## **Artists**

The attendance of celebrities such as Sezen Aksu during the festivities in Diyarbakır in 2002, attracted hundreds of thousands of spectators. Such performances signaled that the cause of the Kurdish people was embraced by prominent figures in Turkish society, which became problematic in official state discourse as this solidarity was perceived as practices of betrayal to the Turkish State (Gambetti, 2005; Gourlay, 2021). During Newroz ceremonies, images of martyrs are hung beside the stage. By cultivating the symbolism of their heroic past, they intended to create national heroes out of ordinary citizens. Alongside these images, the image of the ethnic-Armenian singer Aram Tigran<sup>6</sup> was showcased as well (Gambetti, 2005, p. 358). Tigran was a contemporary singer, whose parents originated from Diyarbakır. At 20 years old he was singing in Arabic, Armenian, Kurdish and Syriac. He sang primarily in Kurdish and gave his first public concerts at Newroz celebrations in the 1950's and 1960's. Because of his many Kurdish songs and performances and Kurdish gatherings such as the Diyarbakır and Batman Newroz festivals, he has become a cultural figure for the Kurds. The incorporation of Tigran in the festival of Newroz in Diyarbakır shows the affinity that the Kurdish people have with his music as he dedicated his life to the Kurdish culture and music. One of his most famous remarks has been: “There is no distinction between Turk, Kurd, Arab and Armenian. We are brothers. (Gourlay, 2018, p. 486)”. His work was therefore a fostering of kinship between these various ethnic communities and an emphasis of intercultural solidarity. As Tigran had his roots in Diyarbakır, he embodies the solidarity and cohesion between the different ethnic groups in the city. Because he sang in Kurdish, Armenian and Syriac languages, Tigran as a symbol during Newroz also demonstrates the solidarity and multiculturalism of Diyarbakır. Additionally, this fits in the politics of multiculturalism which was an objective in the reconstruction of the image of the city. Such brotherly remarks demonstrate expressions of equality and open-mindedness, but they also serve as repudiations of the Turkish status quo regarding minorities, which is not inconvenient for the Kurdish resistance movement (Toumani, 2008; Gourlay, 2018, p. 486).

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<sup>6</sup> Deceased on 8 August, 2009.

A policy report, analyzing the celebration of Newroz in Diyarbakır by the Centre on Strategic Research and Analysis has scrutinized the festivities in 2013. It concluded that the Newroz event in Diyarbakır witnessed the participation of different social groups from the Eastern and Southeastern parts of Turkey. They note that the celebration of this particular year has demonstrated the cultural and social richness of the celebration in the city of Diyarbakır. The report shows that the officials of Diyarbakır, make efforts to put emphasis on the social and cultural diversity of the city. This can be perceived as they invite guests from other ethnic communities to participate in the celebrations. An example of this was the invitation of a musician from the North of Turkey, with Laz<sup>7</sup> origin. The mayor of the Sur Municipality, Abdullah Demirbaş welcomed him by saying that he was hopeful that Kurdish songs will be sung in the Black Sea area of Turkey (Dağ, 2013, p. 5). This small encounter demonstrates the emphasis that is aimed to be put on multiculturalism and the mixture of peoples through celebration of the Kurdish cause or Newroz. Between artists from other ethnicities and the Diyarbakır leadership there seems to be a mutual understanding and mutual respect in regards to them being different in ethnicity. This is seen in a remark that one of the artists from Laz origin made: "we do not have to speak the same language to understand each other" (Dağ, 2013, p. 5). In the context of Diyarbakır being a city that embraces its multicultural heritage and present, the remark does seem to point to solidarity between the various ethnic groups in Turkey, specifically Diyarbakır.

In the same report, Dağ (2013) points out that another social group that was represented and attended the festivities was the Assyrian community. The priest of the Assyrian St. Mary Church in Diyarbakır, Yusuf Akbulut was also invited and warmly welcomed by the Diyarbakır Municipality (Dağ, 2013, p. 5). The invitation of such a prominent figure of the Assyrian community to the Newroz celebrations demonstrates the closeness of the various ethnic communities in Diyarbakır and the importance that is given to the attendance of such figures. The attendance of this important figure in the Assyrian community in Diyarbakır, carefully implies that people who belong to this community have also made an attendance during the celebrations. This shows the solidarity between the Kurdish and Assyrian people in their shared celebration of

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<sup>7</sup> The Laz are a people of Caucasian origin sharing similar roots with the Migrels who live between Abkhazia and Georgia today.  
<https://minorityrights.org/minorities/laz/#:~:text=The%20Laz%20are%20a%20people,in%20Rize%20and%20Artvin%20provinces.>

Newroz, which is explicitly connected to the Kurdish cause. The 2013 celebration of Newroz therefore shows that a slow shift has been taking place over the years in which the attendance and participation of other ethnic communities has become important. This, as noted before, also relates back to the atmosphere and image of multiculturalism of Diyarbakır.

The examples of the singer Aram Tigran being presented as a Kurdish cultural symbol, with his remarks regarding brotherhood of the different minorities in Turkey, the invitation of singers of different ethnic backgrounds to the Newroz celebrations, as well as the attendance of the Assyrian priest to the celebration relate back to the conceptual framework of this thesis. Ball and Branscombe (2019) argued that support for minority groups attempting to confront injustice can come from members of another disadvantaged outgroup. The creation of a unity instead of a division then initiates inter-minority solidarities. The confronting of injustice is in a way manifested in the celebration of Newroz as there is a strong emphasis on its connection to Kurdish resistance, especially in 2013 after Öcalan's speech. Therefore the participation of people from these groups to the celebration, implies their solidarity to the Kurdish cause and inter-minority solidarities between those groups in Diyarbakır. These examples also demonstrate that urban spectacles such as the Newroz festival in Diyarbakır are employed by diverse political groups and or forces to build larger and more sustainable political and social movements. The sustainability is therefore reassured by building these alliances for the Kurdish movement.

### **Öcalan's Newroz Address**

In his address on March 21st 2013, while being imprisoned, Öcalan - the leader of the PKK - spoke words of solidarity between the Diyarbakır minorities in the light of the Newroz celebration: “On the occasion of this Newroz, I invite the Armenians, the Turkmens, the Assyrians, the Arabs, and other peoples, at least as much as I invite the Kurds, to see and experience the lights of freedom and equality emanating from the fire that has been lit, as their very own lights of equality and freedom,” (Akkum, 2013a). He also asked for the PKK fighters to leave Turkey and put down their guns (Akkum, 2013a). This statement was the result of weeks of negotiations between the Kurdish government, Öcalan and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (at the time BDP).

The fact that the PKK leadership makes an address on this day demonstrates again, the politicization of Newroz. A statement on the day of Newroz by the most prominent figure in the

Kurdish movements demonstrates that through promoting their own narrative of resurrection and resistance, the festivity of Newroz symbolizes the struggle of a nation seeking its freedom (Guvenc, 2019, p. 357). Thus, a call from Öcalan for collectivity of the various ethnic groups The statement by Öcalan also shows the importance of unification between other minority groups such as the Armenians and Assyrians for the Kurdish cause. One can derive from this call by Öcalan that the Kurds invite other peoples to join them in their celebration, which they see similar to their political struggle for autonomy and peace (Yetkin, 2018; Guvenc, 2019, p. 343). In a way, Öcalan appears to make a call for (informal) alliance forming and solidarity between the minority groups that he names. He calls for them to become a part of the movement that pursues freedom and equality for the Kurds. The manner in which he makes the address does create a certain sphere of collectivity as if these other minorities are in the same situation; the Kurdish struggle is presented as the representative of the collective struggle of minorities in Turkey. This can be noted by the inclusion of other minority groups in such remarks by the Kurdish leadership. The call by Öcalan, did therefore demonstrate how the cultural holiday was not a site of polarization - which was implied with its call for Newroz as the national day for Kurdish people (Yetkin, 2018) - but instead a site of unity and shared struggle. The positive and hopeful narrative that the 2013 Nowruz celebration installed in people did not last for long unfortunately. The invitations by Kurds for other minority groups to share the celebration of Nowruz relates to the multicultural image that is aimed for Diyarbakır by its leadership, which was already seen at the beginning of the 2000's.

Thus, the alliance that has emerged through the celebration of Newroz demonstrates how, over the years, the event has become a tool for the Kurdish movement to attract participants in its cause. This has been achieved by the invitation and attendance of prominent figures in each community such as the Assyrian priest of the St. Mary Church and artists such as the ethnically Armenian Aram Tigran and others. The address by Abdallah Öcalan of 2013 also emphasizes that through the Newroz festival alliances are aimed to be built between the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish communities in Diyarbakır. These alliances and therefore unity are important for the Kurdish cause to establish a joined front to their political struggle for autonomy and peace.

## **Chapter 3: Solidarity in Mourning: Commemoration of Hrant Dink**

The murder of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink unleashed a large upheaval in Turkey. As it was such an important event that exposed minority issues in the country, I find it useful to touch upon the reactions of this event in Diyarbakır as well.

### **Hrant Dink**

Dink was a journalist and one of the founders of the Armenian-Turkish newspaper *Agos*. He aimed to address the discomforts and burdens that his community was living with in Turkey. Dink spoke about the struggles of being a citizen in Turkey while belonging to the Armenian community when he became a public intellectual. When the Armenian community in Turkey was accused of being affiliated with the Kurdish PKK organization, he became a more known public figure. He concluded quite fast that the solution to the problems of the Armenian community in Turkey were intimately linked to the status of tolerance, democracy and freedom in Turkey (Tchilingirian, 2007). Dink was most known for advocating for Armenian-Turkish reconciliation, human rights and minority rights in Turkey. It is important to note that Dink was also known for his critiques against the Turkish state denial of the Armenian Genocide as well as the position of the Armenian diaspora in its chase for recognition (Freely, 2007). The Turkish author Dogu Ergil remarked what made Hrant Dink special in his time: “Dink *was* Turkey in its complexity. He was a Turk against Armenian extremism and an Armenian against Turkish extremism (Tchilingirian, 2007, p. 3)”. Through the foundation of *Agos*, Dink had established a platform in which he, other than touching upon the Armenian issue in Turkey, also was able to express opinions on other taboo subjects such as the Kurdish issue, secularism, the headscarf issue and so on. He discussed this all through questioning the Turkish democratization process (Korkmaz, 2021).

During the early 2000's Dink was the target of racist campaigns by people accusing him of 'insulting Turkishness', which ultimately resulted in his assassination. His death caused an immense outcry in Turkey among people from different ethnic and religious groups (Sengul, 2014).

Hundreds of thousands of people joined the funeral protests in Istanbul in front of the *Agos* offices, which was documented by BBC and CNN news channels. In these images over 100.000 mourning

people were seen, carrying signs and shouting words such as: ‘We are all Hrant, we are all Armenians’. Many Turks joined these protests. With the death of Hrant Dink and the high attendance of the protests, this group of people established a sense of hope that this event would serve as a wake-up call for incumbent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who after all, had publicly announced the murder of Dink as a 'shot against Turkey' (Freely, 2007, p. 9; Gourlay, 2021; Bertram, 2022).

### **Commemoration**

Since Dink's murder in 2007, the Diyarbakır community commemorates him every year. In 2013, representatives from Turkey's human rights organization (IHD) attended his commemoration (Haberturk, 2013). The annual commemoration in 2014 was held in front of the human rights monument in Diyarbakır. Many people from the local Kurdish community made an appearance, including intellectuals, the Saturday mothers<sup>8</sup>, pro-Kurdish BDP mayoral candidate Firat Anlı, Diyarbakır Bar Association president Tahir Elçi, and members of the city's small Armenian community as well (Akkum, 2014). The attendance of every one of these people shows the solidarity of the Kurdish community with the Armenians as Dink was an advocator for the Armenian Genocide and its recognition and Armenian-Turkish relations. However, it also demonstrates how the death of Dink embodied the hope for a different narrative in Turkey, regarding its human rights situation. In a sense one can conclude that the high degree of attendance shows the mourning of this narrative for the minorities in Turkey, and in this case Diyarbakır. As Dink represented not only the aim to reconcile the Armenian issue but human rights problems in general in Turkey, this loss is the loss of every person who aimed for a change in Turkey's human rights approach. This is the reason why there is such a collective pain and trauma regarding this murder. The president of the Diyarbakır Bar Association called the murder of Hrant Dink 'a continuation of the Armenian Genocide' (Akkum, 2014). Human rights issues are an important aspect of the Kurdish movement, of which Diyarbakır functions as the center in Turkey. Therefore, as the human rights organization for Diyarbakır this statement describes a lot about the stance of the city regarding the murder. The eighth anniversary of Dink's murder was celebrated in Diyarbakır in a cultural center, attended by the metropolitan mayor and organized by the Armenian

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<sup>8</sup> Mothers of Kurdish activists whose murders remain unresolved (Karaman, 2016).



community of the city and a local NGO. The 2015 commemoration is a special year because it coincided with the centennial commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. Pakrat Estukyan, from the *Agos* newspaper attended as well. As a representative of the *Agos* newspaper which was co-established by Dink, he pointed out that he was especially moved by the tribute that the city of Diyarbakır paid to the late journalist. During this commemoration, the murder of Dink was placed in the discourse of Armenian Genocide recognition. This solidarity that is shown by the organizational committee demonstrates how the commemoration of Hrant Dink has opened up the narrative regarding the Armenian Genocide, as it is touched upon more and more. Later in 2015, the Diyarbakır Municipality made sure that the name of Hrant Dink will live in its urban sphere by naming a park as the late journalist in Gaziler, Diyarbakır (Agos, 2015a). The naming of such a part of urban life in the city after Dink, means that he and his ideas have left a mark on the city. This is another example of the impact that Dink had on people in Turkey. Considering the political history regarding the city's past as a stage of genocidal policies and its present regarding the Kurdish struggle, implies that the naming of the Hrant Dink Park symbolizes the importance of his person as an advocate for the rights of those marginalized by the Turkish State

In 2016, the DBA received the International Hrant Dink Award, as a reward for their impartiality, sensitivity to human rights issues, its opposition to all manners of violence, for standing as a role-model in the region. As this award is a huge honor in the Armenian community, due to the importance of Hrant Dink and his work among Armenians, the DBA receiving this award shows the solidarity that the organization has with the Armenian community in Diyarbakır. To give this important award to the DBA, implies that the Armenian community in Diyarbakır views them quite highly. The award was also a tribute for Tahir Elçi, the former head of the organization who had gotten killed during a press statement in the Sur district (Hürriyet, 2016). The award and commemorations for Hrant Dink show the manner in which the journalist is being remembered in Turkish collective memory. Tataryan (2012) argues that people succeeded in giving the murder of Hrant Dink a voice and changing it into a transformative force, even though it did not bring change in narrative, it did change perceptions and opinions of people.

The solidarity and unity that is observed in Diyarbakır, during the commemorations of Hrant Dink as a Turkish public figure, demonstrates the inter-minority alliance between the different ethnic

groups in Diyarbakır in advocating for injustice. As Dink was an advocate for human- and minority rights, the injustice that was done to the Armenian community - as he was also an advocate for reconciliation of Armenian-Turkish relations - was also one done to those that feel marginalized by the Turkish State. As discussed often in this work, Diyarbakır houses many of these marginalized groups such as the Kurds and the Assyrians. Therefore this injustice is a collective one, an injustice for “us”, instead of “them”. This has created a solidarity in Diyarbakır between people commemorating Dink.

## **Chapter 4: Genocide Solidarities**

As noted above, the image and therefore the discourse of Diyarbakır changed from a conflict generated region towards a multicultural, multiethnic place full of shared history. In the creation of this image the role of minorities is important as they have to be able to participate in the public, as well as the political spheres of the city. An essential aspect of this reputation has appeared to be the increased visibility of the Armenian people living in Diyarbakır. For the Armenian and Assyrian communities, the most important political and cultural issue - especially while living in Turkey - is the recognition of the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides during the First World War, which in the national discourse is still being denied by the Turkish government (Halstead, 2018; Koinova, 2019).

### **Discourse of Shared Struggle**

In general, many Kurdish political figures have been speaking out on this issue and recognizing the tragedy of 1915. Despite some Kurds who do not agree with this narrative, Gourlay (2021) notes that many Kurds have taken on a discourse in which the Kurds have struggled next to the Armenians under violent Ottoman rule as well as in republican times. This discourse perpetuates the Kurdish solidarity with the Armenians and demonstrates how shared history and trauma bring about a certain bond. Books written by Armenian and Kurdish writers describing the cohabitation of Armenians, Kurds, Syrians and other minorities in the Suriçi district of Diyarbakır, have had considerable impact on the reconstruction of the image of Diyarbakır as a city with a multicultural identity. The writers in question were Mıgırđıç Margosyan and Şeyhmus Diken. Their works demonstrated accounts of the history of their people and ancestors and their experiences during the tragedies they were put through. These subjects became common conversation topics within the Diyarbakır community (Çelik, 2020). It is important to note that the acknowledgement of the events of 1915, also had a sensitive dimension for Kurds, because despite the fact that Kurds claim a shared treatment and experience, many of them also claim a sense of responsibility for what happened (Biner, 2010, p. 78). This demonstrates how important and necessary the Kurdish solidarity is with the Armenian cause, as Kurds have been a witness and to some extent a perpetrator to the cruelties at the time. Therefore their understanding and support in Genocide

recognition is an important element in the discourse. This is especially of importance to note in the light of the restructuring of the image of Diyarbakır as a multicultural and multiethnic city, which has been demonstrated over time during some instances that are discussed below.

### **Calls for Solidarity**

From the beginning of the 2000s, Diyarbakır has been going through an increased involvement in the practices of commemoration and confrontation of the past. As noted earlier in this work, the city of Diyarbakır has been the stage for genocidal campaigns against the Armenians and Assyrians, which increases its symbolism as one of the most significant places of commemoration in Turkey (Çelik, 2021, p. 1). In 2012, the mayor of Diyarbakır at the time, Osman Baydemir called on the Armenians, as well as other (non-Muslim) minorities that had a historic presence in the region to return. He made the following statement: “An Armenian, an Assyrian and a Chaldean, whose grandfathers or great-grandfathers were born in Diyarbakır, have the same right to live in Diyarbakır as I have, [speaking] as a Kurdish person who was born in Diyarbakır. I would like to invite all the ethnic groups whose ancestors lived in Diyarbakır back to Diyarbakır again. Come back to your city,” (Gourlay, 2021; Hurriyet, 2012b). The fact that the mayor also specifically called on the Assyrian people, is an important acknowledgement for the Assyrians as their victimhood in the genocide is often overlooked (Travis, 2011). This call of solidarity and humbleness from a powerful figure in politics describes the manner in which minorities were viewed by Kurds, and thus the local governing body as their equals, which also contributes to the establishment of the multicultural image of Diyarbakır. In the same conference as he made this call, the mayor also expressed his sentiments regarding the events of 1915, in which he stated that the denial of the crimes committed by some of their (Kurdish) grandfathers, would be the same as to be an ally in those crimes. He continued that it is necessary to acknowledge their mistakes, in order to move on and heal the wounds (Hurriyet, 2012b). The mayor used the Genocide and its discourse to argue that it is important to create dialogue between the different minority groups in Diyarbakır. This will lead to mutual acceptance and peaceful co-existence, which is necessary in the establishment of the new image of the city.

## **Commemorating**

On the annual commemoration day of the Armenian Genocide on April 24th in 2013, cities in Turkey, among which Diyarbakır hosted its first ever commemoration ceremony. The Diyarbakır Bar Association, which is mainly based on the promotion of the Kurdish cause, was the organizer of this event in cooperation with the Diyarbakır Municipality (Akkum, 2013b). The head of the DBA, Tahir Elci expressed himself in the same manner as mayor Baydemir did during his call for minorities to return. He touched upon the importance of Kurdish solidarity and responsibility regarding the genocide. Elci dismissed the denialist discourse and reiterated that Diyarbakır stands with its Armenian brothers who fell victim to the horrors of 1915. It is important that the genocide was being commemorated before 2013 as well. However this was never done in such a large capacity, organized by institutions, but instead based on individual initiatives in the form of grassroots events by locals living in cities in Turkey, among which Diyarbakır as well. However, it is important to note that the mayor, or someone else from the municipality was present often. Therefore since the establishment of the pro-Kurdish leadership in Diyarbakır the commemoration of the Genocide has always taken place in an official setting in the sense that a local official has been present with the Armenian community, however the first official commemoration event in Diyarbakır took place in 2013 (Barabraham, 2011).

The Genocide commemorations are often in the form of rallies as well, against the denialist discourse of the Turkish state. This demonstrates another part of the alliances that have been formed between the different ethnic groups in Diyarbakır. The common adversary or injustice is the Turkish State and its denialist discourse. These rallies fit the description of Weitsman (2004) in which there is an agreement between multiple parties - in this case the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups in Diyarbakır - who come together to provide an element of security, or in this case more of a positioning against the state. Reports from the Assyrian International News Agency point out that these protests are highly courageous, taking into account the denialism that is institutionalized in the Turkish state (Barabraham, 2011). In the case when commemoration events are allowed, the presence of police is always a fact in combination with counter protests. Over the years many people have been detained for even using the word 'genocide' considering that a reference to the Armenian Genocide is viewed as "an attempt to denigrate Turkish national

identity". This act is even punishable by imprisonment, in accordance with the well-known article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code (Souleimanov & Ehrmann, 2014; Yackley, 2019).

On September 12 2013, the Sur Municipality of Diyarbakır held the official opening of its memorial for the Armenian and Assyrian Genocide victims. During this inauguration mayor Abdallah Demirbaş apologized (in line with his predecessor) on behalf of the Kurds for the Armenian and Assyrian massacres and deportations (N.D., 2013). The fact that the mayor specifically mentioned the Assyrian struggle was a great gesture towards the very small community of Assyrians in Diyarbakır, but also towards the Assyrian community as a whole as it was commemorated as a separate pain. The inscription on the monument read in six languages the following phrase: "We share the pain so that it is not repeated". Apart from its historic symbolism to remember such tragedies, the monument has a contemporary purpose as well by expressing solidarity with those affected by massacres under the Ottoman and Turkish regimes. However, it is important to note that the monument does not explicitly say anything about the (Armenian) Genocide in particular, which leads to a little vagueness regarding its establishment in the city. The mayor states in his speech that the monument is also dedicated to people and religious groups who have suffered 'on these lands'. By saying this he seems to be referring to other minorities such as the Alevi's, Jews, Yezidi's and even Sunni's 'who stood against the system' (N.D., 2013). This remark and symbolism, however, seems to create distance and vagueness despite the position of the city in 1915, as specific victims are not being mentioned. Therefore it seems like a vague acknowledgement, however that does not take away from the fact that it is an acknowledgement nonetheless. Nevertheless, is this event another example of the intensive manner in which the local government of Diyarbakır is realizing good social relations between its habitants based on mutual respect and solidarity.

During his ethnographic work in Diyarbakır between 2013 and 2015, Çelik (2021) interviewed inhabitants of the city on the topic of past and present violence against the Kurds. Interestingly, many kept referring to the Armenian Genocide. This demonstrates that the people in Diyarbakır perceive the Armenian Genocide to be connected to their own struggle as well. Therefore the remarks by Kurdish politicians apologizing for the Kurdish part in the Genocide demonstrates that the Kurds face a large moral responsibility in the acknowledgement and apology for their

complicity in violence against Armenians during the Genocide (Çelik, 2021). A common theme that came forward during the interviews for this ethnography was that "the Kurds were paying the price for their complicity in 1915"<sup>9</sup>. These practices thus demonstrate the increasing solidarity of the Kurds with the Armenians and also Assyrians which has created an allyship between these peoples in general but specifically in Diyarbakır as they link their own history of oppression to that of the Armenians Çelik, 2020.

### **Centennial Commemoration**

Çelik (2020) argues that the 2015 centenary commemoration of the Genocide in Diyarbakır was the peak of the process in which Kurds were aiming for the establishment of forgiveness and commemoration from the Kurdish community in regards to the Armenian Genocide and their complicity in this matter. Especially after such remarks from Kurdish political figures in the years before, it is important to emphasize that they established a "new discursive and commemorative regime that is publicly deployed in the Kurdish landscape" (Çelik, 2020). They do this "by providing full space to the history and memory of Armenians and honoring ethnic and religious diversity instead of denigrating it. This is a dangerous practice in Turkey, where state authority imposes a vision of so-called national unity by combining the massive use of violence with the denial of history" (Çelik, 2020, para. 28).

During the centennial commemoration of the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides in 2015, various human rights organizations initiated the programmes of the commemorations in Istanbul and Diyarbakır. Diyarbakır's Human Rights Association, the Diyarbakır Bar Association, the Zan Foundation, the Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, and the Sur Municipality organized this for their inhabitants. The commemoration took place with a march from Mardinkapı Street to the ruins of the Surp Sargis church. This place symbolizes the destruction of the Genocide, as there is not much left of the Church anymore except for its ruins (Akkum, 2015b; Boran, 2015). The fact that these commemorations were so coordinated in advance showed the importance of the centennial commemoration. During the commemoration, which was quite largely attended by

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<sup>9</sup> This narrative is based on the Kurdish saying "*em şîv in hûn paşîv in*", which means: "we are breakfast, you will be lunch", connecting Armenian victimhood to their own past and present of oppression (Çelik, 2020).

inhabitants of Diyarbakır and members of the associations that organized the event, people walked with the forget-me-not-flower. This had become the symbol of the Armenian Genocide centennial.

A representative of the Gomidas Institute (an academic institute committed to Armenia) spoke at the event saying that while the denialist discourse of the Turkish State continues, the Kurds have taken meaningful steps towards the Armenian community (Akkum, 2015b). This is another example of the increasing solidarity of the Kurds in Diyarbakır towards the Armenian and Assyrian communities in terms of Genocide recognition and acknowledgement. The increased visibility of the Armenians that was enabled by the Kurdish movement in Diyarbakır has caused more importance to be given to the commemoration of the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides in Diyarbakır. The Kurdish alliance with the Armenian and Assyrian communities in this regard is based on 'Kurdish guilt' for their involvement in the events of 1915. Additionally, the discourse of the city regarding the commemoration and the Genocide as a whole, relies on the connection with Kurdish oppression. This narrative entails that all three groups are being placed in the same 'victimized' position with one common adversary, which is the Turkish State and similar injustices that have to be fought. The narrative of the Armenian Genocide is the dominant discourse that is used by its pro-Kurdish municipality to create solidarity between the different ethnic groups. This solidarity alliance does therefore create more openness about the Genocide.



## **Chapter 5: Reaction of the State**

Following the solidarity alliances that were touched upon in the preceding four chapters, this final chapter focuses on the reaction of the Turkish State to them. The reaction of the state to each of these alliances differs. The government crackdown of 2015 initiated a sharp escalation of violence in the Southeast of Turkey. This chapter also demonstrates whether these solidarities fit the contours of the Turkish State at the time.

### **Government Crackdown**

Following the AKPs loss of a majority government after more than ten years, the party initiated a national campaign of arrest, repression and state violence against Kurdish politicians, activists and civil society (Bardakçi, 2016). In the summer following these events, Kurdish resistance increased as youth militants initiated a campaign of declaring autonomous neighborhoods in different cities in the Southeast, against the continuing violence of Turkish security forces. This heightened political tensions even more (Gourlay, 2021, p. 84). Many neighborhoods in Sur, Diyarbakır were part of this resistance. As a reaction to these insurgent practices, the Turkish government installed clock curfews in these areas, while continuing the violence, which in fact was a form of military take-over in majority Kurdish populated areas, through these measures of which some are still in place, the state regained control in these areas.

After the failed military coup in 2016, this situation intensified and the crackdown against the Kurdish movement emerged in the urban, legal and civil spheres by the arrest of Kurdish politicians and members of parliament (Iltis, 2015). In addition to this, organizations, initiatives between local governments and civil society and even media outlets which were in place for the Kurdish population were all shut down (HRW, 2016). An example of such a newspaper is *Cumhuriyet*, which also experienced the detention of its editors, in line with many other newspapers which had their head offices based in the Southeast (Letch, 2016). The accomplishments, positions and institutions that were realized by the Kurds in the urban spaces were taken away from them by the government (Saadi, 2021, p. 852). In the preceding chapters, especially chapter one, I touched upon such institutions initiated by the Diyarbakır Municipality.

## **Manifestations of Solidarity Alliances**

In order to determine whether the alliances that were discussed in the previous chapters formed a challenge to the Turkish State and its image of its national identity, it is useful to address the state's reactions to these during the government crackdown.

### *Crackdown of Pro-Kurdish Leadership*

The break-down of the initiated peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK leadership was the start of an increase in violence in the Southeast, followed by the HDP win in the election causing the AKP to lose its majority in parliament (Saadi, 2021). Over a hundred HDP offices were bombed in the run-up to both the June election, as well as the one in November. The PKK blamed Turkish authorities for the bombings and reacted in turn with killings on police and army. Additionally, most members from the HDP faced politically motivated prosecutions. After the failed coup of 15 July 2016, the crackdown became visible in urban and civil society spheres as well. The Stockholm Center for Freedom argues in their report regarding the HDP crackdown that "the party, its administrators and members are being subjected to a systematic campaign of defamation and hatred led by Erdoğan, his associates and his propaganda machine" (SCF, 2018, p. 7). These Kurdish political figures were all arrested for alleged connections to the PKK. Among these were Selahattin Demirtaş, Figen Yüksekdağ, Gültan Kışanak and Osman Kavala, and the assassination of Tahir Elçi (Çelik, 2020). Eighty-three pro-Kurdish municipalities, among which also that of Diyarbakır were replaced by government appointed administrators. This led to the immediate shutdown of many non-governmental organizations and collaborative initiatives between municipalities and civil society (BBC, 2016). This meant that all that the Kurds had achieved in Diyarbakır since their election in 1999 was removed from them (Saadi, 2021, p. 852). It is quite evident that the political alliance that took place in the framework of the HDP, in which minority issues in Turkey are prioritized, was the main concern of the Turkish State as its crackdown of the pro-Kurdish political establishment in Diyarbakır was violent to a large extent (Lowen, 2016). This crackdown demonstrated that the largest threat from minorities is derived when they attain a large degree of political power, which was the case with the HDP entering parliament (Whiting & Kaya, 2016).

The removal of the established political structure in Diyarbakır meant that all the initiatives that were put in place by the pro-Kurdish municipality to improve social relations and create solidarities between the different ethnic groups in Diyarbakır were taken away by the state. This includes the multilingual governance program that was initiated to create mutual respect for each other's language and national identity (Gourlay, 2021; Toumani, 2008). The fact that such initiatives were removed from the administrative body of the city, demonstrates that their purpose of the tightening bonds between these groups, did not fit the idea of the Turkish State.

Another important part of the government crackdown in Diyarbakır, and therefore the state's to its political and urban establishment, was the 'urgent expropriation decision" of the Armenian 'Surb Giragos' and Syriac Virgin Mary Ancient Churches in Sur, Diyarbakır (Gültekin, 2016). Analysts say that the AKP has, with this decision, punished the Armenians and Assyrians by taking away one of their few achievements in Turkey. In the light of the political climate, this punishment can be regarded as both for Armenians, Assyrians and for Kurds in Diyarbakır as the first two are expected to have voted for the HDP, enabling their participation in the national parliament (Tremblay, 2016). As noted in chapter one, the (re)establishment of these religious sites for the Armenians and Assyrians created social hubs in the Sur neighborhood, in which these different ethnic groups from the city could come together or gather and revive their cultures (Gourlay, 2021). As this promoted diversity and multiculturalism, in an already very diverse city as Diyarbakır, the decision to expropriate these sites in 2016 implies that it did not fit the image of the Turkish State. By this decision the Turkish State was able to keep the Armenian and Assyrian communities in Diyarbakır small and low profile as they lost a place to practice and interact with their respective cultures.

Additionally, in December 2016, the Armenian and Assyrian writing that was placed by the Sur mayor Demirbaş in 2012 was removed by the Turkish authorities and replaced by a Turkish flag. This act by the Turkish government showed its aversion against the symbol of solidarity that was initiated by the mayor at the time, to create sentiments of allyship and respect for the Armenian and Assyrian groups in Diyarbakır (AW, 2016). It also demonstrates that such symbolism goes against the Turkish idea of homogeneity, as the sign is replaced by a Turkish flag, which is supposed to represent this.

### *Newroz Reaction*

We established in chapter one that the Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır serve next to its cultural purpose, as a tool to assert Kurdish national identity, the demand for greater rights and inter-minority solidarity for the Kurdish cause. The celebrations of Newroz in 2016, during the heightened period of the crackdown, did not take place as was the case in previous years. Despite the celebrations being banned in Ankara and Istanbul where security forces took the necessary military action, detaining hundreds of people, Diyarbakır did host its event with the attendance of over thousand people (Fraser & Soguel, 2016). Turkish authorities made sure that the celebration would remain peaceful by setting up checkpoints and military vehicles in the area, which implies that the state has no problem with the celebration in Diyarbakır, and that it therefore perceives no problem in regard to the inter-minority alliance that is formed in such an atmosphere (Bianet, 2016). Authorities did provide permission for the celebrations to be held in Diyarbakır. The allowance for the Newroz festivities to be held only in Diyarbakır demonstrates that it is in the state's interest that the event takes place in the majority-Kurdish city (Sharma, 2016). As the event was prohibited in other cities in the country, one can assume that the Turkish State was aware of the composition of the region, and that to a certain degree it was aware of the composition of the celebration as a forum for the minority alliance in Diyarbakır as well. Therefore, the state should be aware of the possibility of a resistance that a crackdown of such an event can initiate, which is why it most likely did not take that step. Another assumption that is important to consider is that the allowance of the Turkish State for the celebration of Newroz in Diyarbakır was possibly based on the fact that, amidst a time of emergency, it shows to the outside world that Turkey is still concerned about its minorities. Therefore it is based on a notion of good publicity externally.

Additionally, it is important to consider that the Turkish State has allowed *Nevruz* to be celebrated through the state discourse of it being a Turkish celebration, as it secures "Turkey's solidarity and brotherhood" as noted in chapter two (Gambetti, 2005). Despite the fact that the AKP has allowed a more multicultural Turkey in comparison to earlier decades and administrations, the establishment of a Turkish *Nevruz* demonstrates Turkish attempts at imposing homogeneity. Although multiculturalism is allowed and promoted, the state does maintain a tight hold on proceedings of the celebration and festivity. It enables Newroz to be celebrated but at the same time insists on *how* it is celebrated and therefore keeps control (Gourlay, 2020, pp. 77 - 79). This therefore exposes how the Turkish State deals with Newroz as a symbol for Kurdish identity and

resistance, in the same way it dealt with - at the time - the Kurdish language: By extinguishing it, in this case Turkifying it for the sake of homogeneity.

### *Dink and the Genocide Solidarities*

In regard to chapters three and four, thus the chapters depicting the alliances created in Diyarbakır over the commemoration of Hrant Dink and the Armenian Genocide, it is notable to notice that the Turkish State did not directly crack down on these solidarities in 2015 (Gourlay, 2018). State reactions on the commemorations of both Hrant Dink and the Genocide in Diyarbakır have not been significantly present in the official state discourse of Turkey. However, the crackdown of the political establishment can be perceived as an indirect reaction to these solidarities and commemorations as well. As noted earlier, the alliance that is established in the remembrance of the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides and the assassination of Dink, has created an openness within various minority communities such as that of the Kurds in Diyarbakır to speak about the events that unfolded in 1915. And maybe even more importantly, these alliances also created room for the Kurds to speak out about their guilt regarding their complicity. As noted in chapter four, the pro-Kurdish Municipality has made multiple efforts, besides recognition, in stating that they stand in solidarity with the Armenian and Assyrian struggle for recognition (Biner, 2010; Hurriyet, 2012b).

It is a logical step for the Turkish State not to interfere or react to the commemorations. In the case of the Hrant Dink commemoration, it would not make sense considering previous remarks by President Erdogan in which he condemned and saw as an insult to the Turkish State (CNN, 2007). As the Turkish government had issued condolence messages in 2014 and 2015 to those who lost their lives during the First World War, which made it legitimate to have official commemorations relating to the Genocide (although it was still denied by the state). Such a step demonstrates that the AKP government does not comply with a sharp denialist discourse, as was the case before the 2000's, as the current narrative is one regarding a 'shared pain and loss' (Turan, 2016). Therefore, to act on these commemorations in Diyarbakır would not fit in the discourse of the Turkish State.

An indirect way in which the state reacted to Genocide solidarities in Diyarbakır was through urban development projects<sup>10</sup>. The policy of emergency during the crackdown in Diyarbakır, caused destruction to the city's memory work in regards to the events of 1915. The main example of this is the demolition of the Sur district in Diyarbakır (Saadi, 2021). Çelik (2020) argues that this ruination of urban landscape exposes the obsession of the state authorities with annihilating the Armenian presence at all costs. It started with the physical annihilation in 1915 in this exact place, followed by the annihilation of the last surviving communities throughout the 20th century, resulting in the “annihilation of the conditions for their rehabilitation, as well as of any gesture, practice or speech that aims to pay homage to them” (Çelik, 2020, p. 12). In other words, Çelik (2020) wants to make clear that the Turkish State did perceive such culturally rich places, which enable minority gatherings and inter-ethnic solidarities as a threat, since these platforms (such as the Churches as cultural hubs for the different communities) are fertile grounds for the emergence of resistances or uprisings. Thus it is important to reemphasize that these solidarity alliances that were initiated by the pro-Kurdish Municipality in Diyarbakır had created a certain openness between and within these communities in talking about the Genocide. Due to the manifestations of these multiple solidarities I argue that the Turkish State has made efforts to provide a pushback to this openness. Through its crackdown on local institutions and its narrative of emergency based on the ongoing violence in the Southeast the process of establishing Genocide acceptance and solidarity, was halted, as it goes against the denialist structure of the Turkish Republic.

### **Challenges to National Identity**

When considering the exclusive national identity that I touched upon in the introduction of this thesis and linking it with these sentiments of the Turkish State one can make the following assumptions. The collaborative projects, initiated by the Diyarbakır Municipality, such as the program of multilingual governance, in combination with the establishment of the sign on the Sur Municipality building in both Armenian and Assyrian languages established a platform for promotion of cultural practices. By the promotion of these non-Turkish languages the national identities of these ethnic groups in Diyarbakır are being elevated. The provision of other languages

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<sup>10</sup> See Çaylı & Doğrul (2021) for more regarding these 'development projects' and how they were used by the Turkish government as tools to assert power in specific local areas.

therefore forms a threat, as it steps outside of the discourse of homogenization. The reconstruction of the religious sites can also be perceived as the culmination of Armenian and Assyrian culture that is being retrieved, which can be perceived as a challenge to a Turkish national identity. Despite the notion of diversity as part of Turkey's discourse in the light of EU accession, the Diyarbakır Municipality, the institution in charge of enabling such practices, was the main target of its crackdown (Kaya, 2013). Additionally, the celebration of Nowruz, is most likely a large threat to Turkish national identity, considering the fact that the state has Turkified the event, during the 1980's, and still holds to this discourse. These cultural practices were therefore not fitting the contours of a 'real' Turk based on Turkishness, which was solved by the state through making it Turkish, limiting the diversification as much as possible. In the solidarities regarding the commemorations of the Genocide and Dink, one does not necessarily notice challenges in the Turkish State responses, regarding their national identity. However, the openness that was created through the initiatives and remarks by Kurdish politicians does go against Turkish culture. The unity that is found in commemorating the past between these groups could therefore also form a threat, as it emerged through non-Turkish cultural practices.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to depict relations between minority groups in Diyarbakır, Turkey. Through a discourse analysis of a combination of primary sources and secondary literature I answered the following research question: *In what way have the Armenian, Assyrian and Kurdish groups in Diyarbakır developed an alliance and how did this challenge a more exclusive Turkish national identity, leading up to 2015 - 2016?* I analyzed four solidarity alliances, based on the saliency they had in Diyarbakır's public life. These were the local political environment, the celebration of Newroz and the commemorations of Hrant Dink and the Armenian and Assyrian Genocides. While focusing on the Turkish response to these alliances, inherent problems of the Turkish State came to the surface. The main problem being the distinction that is made by the state between 'citizen Turk' and 'real Turk'.

The first solidarity alliance of this work was the political environment of Diyarbakır, especially the agency of its pro-Kurdish municipality and the HDP victory of 2015. The Municipality of Diyarbakır changed its image from a conflict generated region towards a multicultural multiethnic place. They reinvented the discourse of Diyarbakır as a homeland instead of simply a city. This was established by embracing the diverse groups living in the city, such as the Armenians and Assyrians. Through local initiatives, assurances by local political leaders and the reconstruction of cultural heritage, the pro-Kurdish leadership succeeded in creating solidarities between the Armenians, Kurds and Assyrians. The success of the HDP, in creating a platform for minorities to be heard, was exactly the configuration that Diyarbakır followed as well. Based on its success of the establishment of an inter-minority alliance it could have been expected that this part of the establishment in Diyarbakır would form the largest threat to the Turkish State, which is why it cracked down so hard on HDP institutions within the municipality. It is important to emphasize that with the establishment of the pro-Kurdish municipality, these solidarity alliances emerged after a large period of struggle for minorities in Turkey. As this institution is the main factor for the emergence of these alliances, it could explain why the Turkish State cracked down on its establishment the hardest.



The second solidarity alliance that was chosen was the celebration of Newroz in Diyarbakır. The study of this event showed that all three minority groups were represented or in attendance during the celebration. The Kurdish movement was pursuing a discourse in which Newroz was equal to Kurdish identity and resistance and aimed for minorities to join this movement. As the event is so connected to Kurdish resistance, attending means solidarity with the Kurdish cause and a brotherhood in struggle. The reaction of the Turkish State to alliance-forming through the celebration of Newroz, was remarkable, not to shut the event down as they enabled the festival only in Diyarbakır in 2016, which demonstrates the state's awareness to the composition of the region, and of the event. In regards to the challenge of Newroz to the Turkish identity, I can argue that this did not form a problem as the *Nevruz* in the Turkish discourse, was a Turkified celebration for Turkish solidarity and brotherhood.

The third solidarity alliance was based on the commemoration of the late journalist Hrant Dink. The commemorations of Dink demonstrate the inter-minority alliance between the different ethnic groups in Diyarbakır in advocating for injustice. As Dink was an advocate for minority rights, which is an essential political dimension for the people in Diyarbakır, his loss, the injustice, is a collective burden, which creates a solidarity alliance between the minority groups in Diyarbakır.

The last solidarity alliance that was scrutinized was that of the Armenian Genocide and its influence and commemoration in Diyarbakır. The narrative of the Armenian Genocide is the dominant discourse that is used by its pro-Kurdish municipality to create solidarity between the different ethnic groups. The narrative is also used in a way to connect the struggles of the ethnic groups to each other. This dimension demonstrated that the Kurdish leadership in Diyarbakır has taken meaningful steps towards the Armenian community. As demonstrated in many examples, this resulted in recognition of the Genocide by Kurdish politicians and the acknowledgement of Kurdish complicity. I can argue that the main manifestation, of most of these solidarities (except for Newroz) in regards to the Armenian community, has led to more openness about the Genocide in the local public sphere as well between and within these different minority groups in Diyarbakır.

The reaction of the Turkish State to the Dink and Genocide solidarity alliances in Diyarbakır was not directly visible. However, as the municipality of Diyarbakır served as an institution that initiated such gatherings, this solidarity alliance has been affected by its crackdown as well.

The main challenge of these solidarity alliances to the state were based on cultural practices that were threatening a homogenized Turkey, which was keen on preserving its Turkishness and therefore perceived cultural diversity in the form of celebrations, commemorations and language promotion as a threat. Unfortunately, this analysis showed that despite so many efforts and steps towards a better position for minorities in the region, due to the hostilities that resumed in 2015 between the state and the PKK, they have to maintain a low profile again (Gourlay, 2021).

As in any research, it is important to discuss some limitations that I encountered during the process. Most of these are based on the retrieval of sources. As the research is on a micro level, it was quite hard to find sources from time to time, especially as I do not master Kurdish or Turkish, which in my opinion - in hindsight - were essential. Another limitation that I find worth noting is that the role of the Assyrian community in Diyarbakır was very hard to retrieve from the already limited sources. This is also why this community is not that heavily touched upon. Lastly, for future research regarding this topic I would like to suggest the incorporation of Armenian and Kurdish diaspora communities and their respective alliances and solidarities on foreign soil in regard to their national identities. I suspect it would be interesting to dive deeper into this 'brotherhood' and whether it is sustainable in the diaspora.

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