

Impressions from Tunceli Part II: “The Dersim or Tunceli?” Debate Resurfaces - Mehmet Öğütçü



In this second part of my blog on impressions from my visit to Tunceli, I like to mention the “name controversy,” and prejudices about the city and its people.

The changing of place names is a method frequently used from pre-modern periods to the age of nations, whether to construct or reconstruct collective memory; whether for the purpose of forgetting or remembering, primarily aiming to break people’s historical connection and the influence of the language and

culture, serving the function of creating a subject suitable for the political imaginary of the state.

The current Tunceli center was formerly known as Mamıki and Kalan. The region's official name during the Ottoman period was Dersim. From the mid-19th century, it was a sancak (district) administered from Hozat. There were frequent uprisings in the Dersim region, particularly after the Tanzimat reforms aimed at strengthening central administration.

After the suppression of the first uprising in the Republican era, the Law No. 2884 of December 25, 1935, was enacted regarding the Administration of Tunceli Province, and the name Dersim was removed. Today, there are those who advocate for renaming it "Dersim" again and those who want a referendum. However, historically and geographically, "Dersim," which means "silver gate," encompasses a wider area including not only today's Tunceli but also parts of neighboring provinces such as Bingöl, Erzincan, Elazığ, and Malatya. The name "Dersim" defines not only present-day Tunceli but the name of the entire region.

Overtime, the names of Tunceli's districts have also been changed. For example, Mazgert became "Mazgirt," Pertage became "Pertek," Pulimiriye became "Pülümür," Pulur became "Ovacık," Qişle became "Nazımiye," and Xözat became "Hozat." Subsequently, the names of villages were also changed, with some adapted to words closer to Zazaki, while others were turned into unrelated names.

When talking to local people who identify themselves ethnically as Kurdish-Zaza or Zaza, they generally prefer the name "Dersim." Those who identify their ethnic identity as Turkish, except for those who support left/socialist parties, tend to emphasize the name "Tunceli."

When we asked Alevi religious leaders about it, they preferred the name "Dersim," stating that the name Tunceli excludes their ethnic and religious

identities.

It is worth noting that this name-changing frenzy is not unique to Tunceli. After the Republican era, name changes occurred for various reasons in many places throughout Türkiye.

The Dersim Rebellion

Historically, the geography of Tunceli, located near the geographical center of Anatolia, has been a security problem for both the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey since the conflicts during the Sultan Yavuz and Shah İsmail Period of Ottoman-Safavid relations in the 1570s.

Sheikh Said, a Seyyid from Diyarbakır and a Zaza-descended Naqshbandi Sheikh, was a Kurdish leader who traveled among tribes in the eastern provinces. He spread propaganda claiming that the Republic and Mustafa Kemal were godless, and new laws would eliminate Islam, marriage, honor, and the Qur'an, and that the aghas and teachers would be executed or expelled.

He said that his brother-in-law Colonel Cibranlı Halit's men would inform the League of Nations that there were no government military forces in the region and that they could easily take over the area. He prepared a fatwa against the Republic and the revolutions, declaring that the lives and properties of those supporting the revolutions were halal (lawful). He sent the fatwa to the prominent leaders of the tribes.

When Sheikh Said was invited to testify at the Bitlis Military Tribunal, he did not go because he was elderly and ill, so his statement was taken in Hınıs. After traveling for about a month in Diyarbakır, Çapakçur, Ergani, and Genç, he settled in his brother's house in Piran on February 13, 1925. Until the day they were caught in October 1924, he communicated with the government, but was

eventually reported by his brother-in-law Kasım Ataç.

After the suppression of the Sheikh Said Rebellion, he was tried and sentenced to death by the “Eastern Independence Court.” Despite the different portrayals by the parties and all the ambiguous narratives, the traumatic events during the rebellion, including the killing of many people, the exile of the survivors, and the hanging of Seyit Rıza and six others, have left a lasting memory in the minds of the people of Tunceli. Unresolved massacres of Alevis in subsequent periods are also still remembered. Undoubtedly, resolving Dersim’s grievances toward the state and earning their full trust from one day to the next is not easy, but significant progress in healing wounds is visibly apparent even to the naked eye.

In the region, both Zaza and Turkish are spoken, and in some districts, Kurmanji as well. Due to both Alevism and different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, there’s a widespread complaint among Tunceli residents about not being given significant roles in state institutions and facing discrimination in some areas. The manager of a hotel where we stayed in Elazığ also claimed that because they were Alevi, they experienced delays in electricity, water, and road connections, alleging that Sunni businessmen received preferential treatment.

Significant Decrease in Security Concerns

Living in a harsh and difficult geography, tribes have historically tried to prevent state authorities from entering their areas by taking advantage of the geography. Local people often emphasize that most of the PKK terrorists came from outside the city, and only a small percentage of them were from Tunceli, noting that FETO members could not approach the city during conversations.

The region’s mountainous and forested natural structure seems suitable for terrorists to hide. Organizations like TIKKO and THKP-M have also made these areas their home in the 1970s and 80s. Now, there is no serious security issue. Life has returned to normal. The city and its surroundings have been largely

cleared of PKK and other terrorist groups. State-supported and accelerated infrastructure investments have reached a good level, and it is understood that more will be done. The rural people of Tunceli caught between the state's determined struggle and the cruelty of the PKK are tired of helplessness and pressures on whom to show loyalty. They were afraid that when the state left, PKK terrorists would come down and take revenge. Therefore, the significant reduction of the PKK in Tunceli pleased them the most.

When we spoke with security forces, they mentioned that the state's military and PKK terrorists use almost the same weapons and equipment, and young terrorists are sent with serious logistical support. After FETO elements were later purged, contrary to what was thought, intelligence, gendarmerie, and police became even more effective in the region. Now, messages are not passed to the PKK as before, and military operations do not go in vain.

A Passing Reference to Kamer Genç

. Even though eight years have passed since his death, the late deputy Kamer Genç is frequently referred and remembered in Tunceli. Kamer Genç entered the Advisory Assembly established after the 1980 coup and his funeral was carried out from the doors of the Parliament. The funeral held in the Cemevi in Tunceli had a very large attendance and was considered "remarkable," as people of Tunceli said.

Genç was jokingly nicknamed "657 Kamer Genç" in the region, as if he was elected to Parliament and remained like a civil servant according to Law No. 657. He was elected from the DYP when the SHP did not nominate him, and when the CHP did not nominate him, he became an independent candidate. In short, he never stayed out of the Turkish National Assembly thanks to his supporters from Tunceli. Since he had no desire for property, he distributed most of his income as scholarships. Because he was effective, not only party members but also supporters of other parties came to seek help. He never turned anyone away.

Seyyids and Kılıçdaroğlu

Almost every family in the East and Southeast considers themselves “Seyyid,” claiming to be relatives of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, caution is exercised regarding whether the Kureys Ocağı is “Seyyid” or not. There is actually no kinship between the Kureys tribe, to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged, and the Kureys tribe that came from Horasan. Cevdet Türkay, who works in the Prime Ministry’s Archives, states in his book “Clans, Tribes, and Communities” that the Kureys Ocağı is affiliated with the Akşehir Sanjak. Türkay also writes that the Kureys Ocağı is Turkmen.

Former CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s ancestors migrated from Konya to Tunceli, and the Kılıçdaroğlu family, which belongs to the prominent Zaza tribes known as Kureysan, is a member of the Kureys tribe. It is mentioned that Kılıçdaroğlu’s lineage may extend to the Oğuz-Bozok branch and even to the Seyyid lineage that goes back to the Ahl al-Bayt.

Among the people in Tunceli, there is a complaint about Kılıçdaroğlu. It is conveyed with a disappointed expression that he did not visit the city and his tribe properly and chose Istanbul or Izmir as his electoral district. Actually, if he wanted to jump on a plane and visit Tunceli over the weekend, it is only a three to four-hour distance from Istanbul. I cannot help but think that he could have come more often to appease his fellow citizens. Perhaps he was afraid of his Alevi origin that the government might manipulate to bring to the forefront more.

Breaking the Prejudice of Tunceli

The natural wonders I encountered, the warm and educated people, the delicious cuisine, the Alevi culture focused on humanity and nature, the state that has learned from the past and is now trying to approach its people with more compassion and development projects, along with its leaders, and the dozens of different stories I listened to—all these fostered in me a strong desire to

immediately embrace an honorary kinship with Tunceli.

A dear classmate of mine from the Mülkiye who held an influential position in this region for four years says, “The fundamental reason for the difference between what you were told and what you see is related to the difficulty of accessing correct information. It is crucial in this region to manage the perception that information is blended with emotion and technology. Being open to analyses outside the commonly accepted ideas and feeling ‘where did I go wrong’ in response to these analyses, manipulation, and disinformation, all lead us to doubt. It widens the gap between reality and perception, shadowing the proper solutions to problems.”

Indeed, there are many places, facts, and issues in our country waiting to be discovered, freed from historical mystery, prejudices, and misinformation, and rediscovered with accurate assessments. My visit to Tunceli has made a significant contribution in this context, which is why I wanted to share my impressions with you.



Mehmet Ögütçü

Chairman, Global Resources Partners, UK, and The London Energy Club. Former diplomat, prime minister adviser, IEA and OECD senior executive, director and independent board member at British Gas, Genel Energy, Invensys, Şişecam, Yaşar Holding companies. Chairman of the Middle East Institute, Washington DC,

Advisory Board. He can be contacted at mehmetogutcu@me.com

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