Migrants and City-Making

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CHAPTER 5

“Searching Its Future in Its Past”
THE MULTISCALAR EMPLOYMENT OF RETURNEES

On May 16, 2015, Seda and Ayşe sat with the Mukhtar1 of Kafro, his wife, and his teen-aged son on the verandah of his impressive stone house, located near the entrance of the fifteen-family settlement of Kafro. Facing vineyards and idyllic gardens in the comforting heat, they talked about the Syriac Christians who had emigrated from Mardin to Europe and had recently returned to their ancestral homeland. In 2006, Mukhtar Demir and his family had returned from Switzerland to live in Kafro, in the Midyat district of the city-region of Mardin (sixty kilometers from Mardin city center), and had been living in the meticulously built village since then.

They sat on the very same verandah shown on the website of the Kafro Tahtoyto (Kafro Development Association-Kafro Hometown Association [HTA]). This website depicted the visit on September 29, 2014, of a five-person delegation from the German parliament (Deutsche Bundestag) and an international human rights organization. Ayşe knew from the website that participants at that meeting discussed minority rights, land survey problems, mother-tongue schooling, and, above all, the future of Christians in the Middle East.

After finishing their coffee and conversation, Ayşe and Seda strolled along empty, elegantly manicured garden paths to talk to another returnee, this one from Germany, who was responsible for the finances of the Kafro Tahtoyto. Ayşe recalled pictures, dated September 19, 2014, on the HTA website of the Swiss ambassador to Turkey walking on the same garden path with his wife and the returnee to whom she and Seda were going to talk. The visitors in 2014 had spoken about Turkey’s accession to the EU and the injustices Syriac Christians faced in Turkey and in the Middle East. In the guest book that Mukhtar’s son asked Ayşe to sign as they were leaving, she found the names and good wishes of these representatives next to the wishes of officials from
several foreign embassies in Turkey and of representatives from numerous international organizations, including churches all over Europe.

Yet Kafro was the very settlement that the American consulate in Adana called “Potemkin Village-like” in a confidential communiqué (June 8, 2005) sent to the American Embassy in Ankara (Wikileaks 05ANKARA3191). In evaluating “the prospects of greater religious freedom in the foreseeable future in Turkey,” of guaranteeing the property (land) entitlements of Syriac Christians, and of ensuring Turkish authorities’ sincere and serious attention to the return and well-being of Mardin’s Syriac Christians, the communiqué articulated substantial skepticism. It concluded: “Aside from occasional Potempkin Village-like displays by Turkish authorities in the Tur Abdin region, Ankara has been conspicuously indifferent to the slow death of a Christian community with almost two millennia’s presence in this corner of modern-day Turkey” (Wikileaks 05ANKARA3191).

As did the numerous, powerful international signatories in the guestbook, this confidential US Embassy communiqué gave center stage to the Syriac Christian returnees. The state of Syriac Christians in Mardin and the possibilities of their return were also the subject of reports written by powerful US government representatives in the late 1990s. Their prominence stood in striking contrast to the few Syriacs in Mardin and to the empty roads and pathways of the lightly populated Kafro.
Syriac Christians are by no means a unified ethnic or religious group. People who designate themselves and are referred to by religious and state authorities as Syriac Christians are divided by linguistic differences, by geographical borders, and by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Church divisions. However, within the geo-religious politics and the efforts by multiple actors, including city leaders, to revitalize Mardin at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Syriac Christians took on a new salience and singularity.

Mardin, a city located on the slope of a rocky hill on the Turkish–Syrian border and facing the Mesopotamian plains, has for centuries been home to different religious and ethnic groups: Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Sunni, Alevite Muslims, Zoroastrians, Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Yezidis, Turks, and Syriacs. Displacements of Syriac Christians from Mardin have a history that dates to the early twentieth century (Özçoşar 2009, 2006). The last major exodus of Syriac Christians from Kafro occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. In the midst of increasing pressures and armed conflict between the Turkish military and guerillas of the Kurdish liberation movement, the Kurdish Labor Party (PKK), inhabitants of Kafro left for different parts of Europe. Kafro literally stood abandoned after 1995. Then, following more than two decades with no connection to their “ancestral land,” displaced Syriacs in Europe started to return to Kafro. Despite their small numbers, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Syriac emigrants’ return to Mardin, their “ancestral land,” became of interest to many national, international, transnational, and supranational actors as well as to the city leadership in Mardin. The multiscalar social field within which Syriac Christians were embedded is apparent in the US consulate’s communiqué to the US embassy in Ankara. In this chapter, we argue that to understand the dynamics of hometown associations such as Kafro Tahtoyto, the return of displaced Syriac Christians to Mardin, and their valorization in city narratives, we need to situate their emplacement in Mardin within a multiscalar social field constituted by multiple and intersecting social, political, and religious networks and institutions, including the EU, UNESCO, the US State Department, and the networks of Eastern Christianity. Actors in this field included several other Syriac Christian HTAs in different places in Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, and Turkey.

Building upon the distinctions we made in the introduction between transnational and multiscalar social fields, we argue that although the literature on hometown associations in migration scholarship acknowledges transnational or translocal personal and/or ethnic or religious community relations, it fails to connect these relations and their efficacy to multiscalar-
lar institutions and their fields of power at given conjunctures. This chapter demonstrates that the prominence accorded Syriac Christian returnees and the reach of their HTA to institutionalized power within this multiscalar field emerged in relation to powerful intersecting forces which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, sought to revitalize Mardin. This revitalization was part of the changing positioning of Mardin and Turkey within regional and global processes of political and economic restructuring at that historical conjuncture. Returnees became city-makers in this context.

**Hometown Associations and Returnees within a Multiscalar Field**

Studies about hometown ties and hometown associations contribute to the rich body of migration scholarship. This literature variously positions HTAs as (1) part of transnational ethnic community-building processes through ethnic associations and organizations (Bada, Fox, and Seele 2006; Orozco and Garcia-Zanello 2009; Sezgin 2011); (2) an important aspect of transnational politics (Portes, Escobar, and Radford 2007; Landolt, Butler, and Baires 1999; Østergaard-Nielsen 2010); (3) part of sending-state policies and remittance markets (Levitt and de la Dehasa 2003; Levitt 1998; Orozco 2000b; Sørensen 2008); (4) agents of local and grassroots politics (Smith and Guernizo 1998; Goldring 1998); and (5) agents of international development (Orozco 2000a; de Haas 2012; Iskandar 2011). While some of this scholarship celebrates HTAs as new actors of international development policies and grassroots local politics (Orozco 2000b), other authors highlight these organizations’ entanglements with state institutions and rightly question the utility of situating HTAs within the state–civil society binary (Çağlar 2006; Iskander 2011; de Haas 2011; Faist, Fauser, and Kivisto 2011). Although there is a critical literature urging scholars to situate HTAs and migrant hometown ties within new global labor regimes (Glick Schiller 2009, 2010; de Haas 2012), most of the studies fail to embed their analysis of migrants’ hometown relations and associations within a multiscalar field composed of institutions of varying scope and power shaped by temporal dynamics. When the temporal dynamics of HTAs and migrants’ hometown ties have been addressed, it is generally because of dramatic political changes in migrants’ countries of origin, such as in the case of the rising power of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). For example, the HTAs of diaspora or overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, Cuba, Mexico, and Panama have been studied in relation to the changing political economic strength and the global positioning of the PRC (Siu 2007; Nonini 2015; Hearn 2016). Although these studies note the conjunctural positioning
of nation-states, they do not address how the economic and political restructuring of regions and localities affects the potential for migrants and their hometown associations to become salient actors of city-making processes in a specific conjuncture.

Even studies of HTAs that highlight the increasing importance of remittance industries and their entanglement with powerful global organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the EU (Orozco 2002a, 2013) fail to examine the degree to which the reach of migrants and hometown associations to these global institutions varies in relation to the power contingencies, including that of different home countries and hometowns in various historical conjunctures. The temporality of these dynamics escapes these researchers’ analytical lenses; moreover, they generally fail to analyze how the ongoing reconstitution of specific places vary within conjunctural forces.

In contrast, in this chapter, we focus on the dynamics of the HTA, Kafro Tahtoyto, the return of the displaced Syriac Christians to Mardin, and the way they became desirable and therefore of value to a variety of powerful state and nonstate actors. We situate the analyses of Syriac Christians’ hometown ties and associations in relation to the transformations over time of multiscalar processes of capital restructuring and to the interrelated reconfiguring of multiple institutions and networks of power in Mardin. Syriac Christians did not establish HTAs such as Kafro Tahtoyto until 2002 and did not resettle in Mardin until 2006, despite the policies and explicit attempts of the Turkish state and local city leaders to reach out to Syriac Christians starting at the end of 1990s.

We were able to make sense of the Syriacs’ increasing prominence in city narratives and in the reports and programs of supranational and global institutions, despite their small numbers, only through a conjunctural analysis. In this way we could address the position of Mardin and the region within the reconfiguring of multiple institutions and networks of power at the turn of the twenty-first century. Such an analysis requires an examination of the broader dynamics of city-making and value creation, including the valorization of places and population groups in Mardin.

**Great Expectations: Historical Conjuncture and Mardin’s Repositioning Efforts**

An underdeveloped region, as described in chapter 1, Mardin was included in a comprehensive, state-led infrastructural development project in Turkey that aimed to overcome the socioeconomic gap between more developed regions and the Southeast (Özok-Gündoğan 2005). However, in 2000, despite
subsidies and large-scale development programs, Mardin’s desired socio-economic development had yet to be achieved. On the contrary, with decreasing exports, a lack of investments, high rates of unemployment, and war and conflict, Mardin’s economy stagnated between 1990 and 2000. In 2000, as in 1990, Mardin’s share in Turkey’s gross domestic product was only 0.4 percent (DİKA 2010: 19), and the proportion of its labor force in the industrial sector remained between 2.3 and 2.4 percent (Ekinci 2015). Although the Mardin city-region’s high fertility rates led to an increase in population, which reached 705,098 in 2000, between 1990 and 2000 as noted in chapter 1, almost twice the number of people emigrated out of the Mardin city-region as immigrated into it. High rates of out-migration continued during the 2000s.

Part of this stagnation was due to the First Gulf War in Iraq, which drastically constricted Mardin’s economy. After Turkey joined the coalition forces against Iraq in 1991, border trade ground to a halt. The only border-crossing to Iraq on the direct land route between Europe and the Middle East, the Habur Gate, 230 kilometers away from Mardin city center, was closed. Largely dependent on this cross-border trade, Mardin’s economy also suffered from international sanctions imposed in 1990 on Iraq, which were observed by Turkey. Though some sectors, such as cement production, eventually benefited from rebuilding the areas in Iraq destroyed by the war, Mardin’s economy continued to deteriorate until the early 2000s.

Despite offering profitable tax and labor conditions for investment, business, and trade transactions, even Mardin’s Free Trade Zone failed to attract investment and capital. Trade volume dropped drastically between 1998 and 2001. Furthermore, in 2000–1 (at the same time that the United States and Manchester faced a severe downturn), Mardin and Turkey experienced their worst financial crisis since World War II. As stocks tumbled, banks went into crisis, and the Turkish lira was devalued, the economic situation worsened everywhere in Turkey. Mardin, still struggling after more than ten years of a conflict-ridden social, economic, and political environment and the after-effects of the Gulf War, certainly felt the effects.

Indeed, not only the Gulf War but also the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 contributed to the further deterioration of Mardin’s economy. At first Mardin’s border positioning seemed to benefit the region as the war expanded. The US military leased industrial sites in Mardin’s Industrial Organized Zone (IOZ) to provide a base for about sixty thousand soldiers as well as trucks and equipment (Migdalovitz 2003; Birch 2003). The US State Department and military expected Mardin to become the logistical support center for the US invasion force. However, contrary to US plans, the Turkish parlia-
ment rejected (March 1, 2003) the resolution that would have authorized the deployment of US troops to Turkey to invade Iraq from the north. Although Turkey granted the United States access to its airspace for air strikes shortly after the start of invasion and “agreed to provide food, fuel and other non-lethal supplies,” Turkey-US relations suffered. Turkey lost revenues and billions of dollars in US aid and loans. Though the war opened opportunities for certain sectors in Mardin, trade with Iraq completely collapsed. Following the 2003 invasion, Mardin’s local economy suffered severely and trade volume in the Free Trade Zone showed steep declines. With only twenty-three of its seventy factories in operation, the IOZ was producing at 10 percent of its capacity in 2003 and unemployment hovered above 50 percent (Collins 2003).

Yet, amid the economic and political dynamics that began in 1991 with the US invasion of Iraq in the Gulf War, which subsequently has led to continuous warfare in the region, in 1999 the European Union accepted Turkey’s official candidacy for membership. This introduced a new set of conjunctural factors that shaped city-making possibilities and the relationship between Mardin and the city’s minorities. Turkey’s candidacy meant access to several EU funds, aspects of its institutional assets, and power, but to qualify for “accession negotiations” a series of conditions had to be met, including legal and institutional reforms.

Both the funding mechanisms and the required reforms had an important impact on various social, political, economic, and cultural power configurations, including the positioning of minorities such as Mardin’s Syriac Christians (returnee or not) vis-à-vis the Turkish state and supranational institutional forces. Their EU candidacy gave rise to great expectations in Mardin after ten years of extreme economic stagnation, armed conflict between the PKK and the military, and warring in Iraq. Syriac Christians’ “project of return” and the city leadership’s efforts to reposition Mardin regionally and globally were situated within increased hopes of accessing the powerful EU networks that had entered into the conjunctural moment in the region.

“Return as a Project”: Globally Mediated Emplacement

At the same time, in the wake of the arrest of the PKK leader in 1999 and a cease-fire brokered by the Turkish military and the PKK, although war was being waged in Iraq, relative peace emerged in Mardin. At that point, the national government sought to improve social and political conditions in southeastern Turkey through a series of development programs, especially in places where the population had been subject to severe displacements. One
such regional development program, the Return to Village and Rehabilitation Project (RVRP), initiated in 1998 by the Turkish prime minister, targeted twelve cities, including Mardin. RVRP was formulated to attract displaced people with a series of monetary and/or in-kind incentives and to revive economic life in depopulated areas by creating favorable conditions for investment (Ayata and Yükseker 2005, 23).³

Syriac Christians abroad did not initially react to Turkish government programs designed to repopulate Mardin by reaching out to displaced populations. Then, in 2001, the prime minister specifically and directly addressed the displaced Syriac Christian population in Europe. According to the Mukhtar of Kafro, himself a returnee from Switzerland, Syriac Christians began to consider “the return” only after this 2001 call. Returnees or not, all Syriac Christians we talked to in Mardin, Istanbul, and Vienna emphasized that this renewed call addressed Syriac Christians as the original inhabitants of Mardin (burası [Mardin] Şüryanilerindir) and, most importantly, promised to secure their religious and property rights (field notes, January–May 2015). Plans to “return” to their historical “homeland” and return-oriented HTAs like Kafro Tahtoyto began to emerge. Neither Kafro nor the Kafro Tahtoyto HTA was unique, although they were the most prominent town and organization in Syriac Christians’ return narratives. In Europe, Syriac Christians from Mardin started to plan returning to other places in the Mardin city-region as well (such as Yemişli, Gülgöze, Altintaş, Anıtlı, Oyuklu, Sarıköy).⁴ They established numerous HTAs crisscrossing Europe and Mardin.

The abbot of the Mor Gabriel Monastery, the governor of Mardin, the Turkish deputy of the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate in Istanbul, and Mardin’s local bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church were all involved in conveying the 2001 call to return to recipients in Europe. In fact, after the call, the bishop and the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate immediately contacted Mardin’s Syriac Christian expatriates in Europe, including the ones from Kafro, to mediate and facilitate the resettlement process (interview H., December 7, 2015).⁵ By the autumn of 2001, Syriac Christians in Germany and in other parts of Europe had already been contacted. Like several other Syriac HTAs in Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria, the Kafro HTA began in Switzerland in January 2002 and was formed in the wake of such meetings.

As we indicate in chapter 1, Mardin’s population, and especially its Christian population, has been subject to different streams of dispossessions, displacements, and emplacements (Gaunt 2006). Although Armenians suffered most from massacres and forced displacements, Syriac Christians also had these experiences, including what they refer to as the Syriac genocide (Seyfo,
the multiscalar emplacement of returnees

“the sword”) in 1915. The highest toll of the Syriac massacre was in Tur Abdin, the historical homeland of Syriac Christians; Mardin city-region is part of Tur Abdin.6 The Armenian genocide and the Seyfo reduced Mardin’s Christian population from 36,000 in 1914 to 11,000 in 1927 (Aydın et al. 2000, 370).7 The memory of these massacres and the complicated alliances and hostilities between religious and ethnic groups and Ottoman military forces that emerged during these events continue to affect the political and social dynamics in Mardin and in the Syriac Christian “diaspora.”

Throughout the history of the Midyat district of Mardin city-region, Syriac Christians had densely populated the district where the village of Kafro is located. Until the 1930s, Midyat was the only district in Turkey where Christians outnumbered Muslims (Oktik and Nas 2005). After the establishment of the Turkish Republic (1923), Midyat, like many other places in Turkey, began to lose its Christian population.

Faced with state Turkification policies and the suppression of religious and linguistic rights during the Turkish Republic, the Syriac Christians who survived the massacre left Mardin in large numbers. As mentioned earlier, Syriac Christians were the only non-Muslim minority in Turkey whom the Lausanne Treaty did not grant the limited rights accorded to other non-Muslim minorities (Jews, Greeks, and Armenians) that safeguarded their language and religion. Changes in military-service laws permitting conscription of non-Muslim citizens for indefinite periods of service and the introduction in 1942 of a capital tax that levied higher taxes on non-Muslim citizens of Turkey triggered further dispossession and displacement of Syriacs from Turkey and from Mardin. During the Cyprus crisis in 1964 and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, which was a Greek and Turkish island, anti-Greek sentiment played an important role in Syriac Christian displacements. Associated with the Greek Orthodox population in the popular imaginary, Syriac Christians were threatened with lynching and looting (Aydın et al. 2000; Özmen 2013; Biner 2011). This fueled additional out-migration from Mardin.

Armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish Army led to a massive displacement of Syriacs in the 1980s and 1990s because they faced economic and physical insecurity.9 In fact, Mardin witnessed the displacement of two different groups during the years of conflict, which changed the demographic composition of both Mardin’s city-region and its old town. In southeastern Turkey, the Turkish military evacuated thousands of villages, ordering their inhabitants to leave their property behind. Other villages were abandoned as inhabitants fled for their lives. Approximately 2 million people (mostly
Kurds) had been forced to leave their villages. By 1996, Kafro had been evacuated by the Turkish Army and declared a prohibited area. It remained completely abandoned until displaced Syriac Christian inhabitants started to return in the mid-2000s.

Evacuations and forced displacements resulted in an influx of dispossessed peasants into urban areas. In Mardin city-region, many of these dispossessed villagers settled in district centers and on the fringes of the old town in Mardin’s city center, becoming a cheap labor pool. Meanwhile, most Syriac Christians from Mardin fled to Europe. Simultaneously, the local elites and upper middle classes also left the city. In Mardin’s city center, which used to be predominantly Christian, only seventy-five Christian families were left by 2000. All Mardinites we spoke to, including returnees, still have vivid memories of these difficult times, particularly the periods of martial law. As we have shown in chapter 1, periods of martial law and states of emergency were strongly associated with violence, terror, and poverty in the eyes of all Mardin residents, including Syriacs.

After a century of displacement, 3.5 million Syriac Christians (often referred to as the “Syriac diaspora”) are estimated to live in Europe, the United States, Australia, Brazil, Iraq, Syria, and India. Many Syriac Christians who fled Mardin in the 1960s settled in Europe as “guest workers”; in the 1980s and 1990s, they came as refugees. However, despite the multiple religious and political networks and institutions interconnecting these places of settlement, until the beginning of the 2000s, Europe’s Syriac Christian population kept few if any ties to their hometown. On the other hand, they had established complex and changing forms of alliances and relations with other displaced minority groups from Turkey living in Europe. In 2002, following the Turkish prime minister’s call to return and the initiation of the EU accession process, about ninety Syriacs from Mardin who lived in different parts of Europe organized a visit to Mardin to assess the conditions there firsthand. Initially, many were hesitant even to visit Mardin, but they were reassured by various commitments made to them. As a returnee to Kafro put it, “After being in touch with several institutions and authorities in Mardin and in Europe, we were encouraged that we could return and claim our abandoned land” (interview A., May 16, 2015). A Syriac Christian businessman who was very active in Syriac politics in Midyat saw Kafro as “a model village, which we have been organizing for several years. We wanted that village to give hope to the frustrated and displaced Syriacs abroad” (interview L., 2014). Along similar lines, another returnee recalls that their “organized return” was carefully orchestrated and transnationally
planned. He reported, “We [displaced Syriacs from Mardin in Europe] had twenty-three meetings in different places in Europe before we actually returned” (interview B., May 13, 2015). After much preparation, including beginning the construction of Kafro’s stone houses in 2004, seventeen Syriac Christian families from Zurich, Augsburg, Trulliken, and Goppingen returned to Kafro in 2006 (Güsten 2016). Ninety-one families from Europe resettled in the Mardin city-region.

The guarantee of Syriac emigrants’ property and religious rights, which was crucial in their decision to return, embedded the returnees’ emplacement in Mardin within a social and political field composed of networks of powerful Christian institutions, religious foundations, and supranational institutions such as the EU. In the early 2000s, land registries in Turkey were being modernized as part of the required legal and institutional reforms that were conditions of Turkey’s EU accession. Within this registration scheme, unless owners registered their titles for abandoned and/or expropriated land, they would lose all legal entitlement to their property. Thus, these reforms would have a substantial impact on landownership and on the legalization of land grabs. Those living abroad who had fled persecution, poverty, and war were particularly affected.

Many displaced Syriac Christians were confronted with losing their legal entitlement to most of their land in several ways. According to Turkish law, land left untilled for twenty years is counted as “abandoned” and was claimed by the state treasury. Similarly, although it had been private property, land classified as “forested” can be seized and transformed into the property of the state forestry ministry. Moreover, special clauses stipulated that those who were not registered as village residents were prevented from owning village land. Displaced Syriac Christians’ property was subject to all these forms of land grabbing and expropriation.

Absent Syriac Christians were dispossessed from their land because they were not able to find ways to till their land and pay the property tax. Such properties were transferred to the state treasury as abandoned land. Abandoned vineyards and fruit orchards, which had provided livelihoods for Syriac Christians before they fled, were burned down by the military to prevent guerilla fighters from hiding there in the 1990s. Thus, many Syriacs and others who fled or were evicted from this war-torn region lost their property to the state treasury or forestry through formally “legal” expropriations. As shown in chapter 1, property transferred to the state treasury later became an important resource in restructuring Mardin.

Most displaced Syriacs were subject to another form of land grabbing that
specifically targeted the minorities who were forced to abandon their land (Güsten 2015). Many emigrants from Mardin ended up losing their land to squatters from nearby villages, in most cases to their (Kurdish) neighbors, who simply registered the abandoned Syriac land to their own names or seized it by force (Griffith 1999, 2000, 2001). Since the 1990s, Mardinite Syriacs in Europe no longer resided or had a legal presence in Mardin, so they lacked the power to counteract this expropriation (Güsten 2015, 2016). Thus, the physical return and settlement of Syriacs in Mardin Kafro was crucial to claiming rightful ownership of formally or informally seized property. Although by 2015, returnees to Kafro, like those in other parts of Mardin, had been able to register only 20 percent of their land as their own property, they all said that, had they not returned, they would have been legally dispossessed of all the property they abandoned when they were forced to flee (field notes, December 2014–May 2015).

As indicated by Kafro’s guest book entries, which we refer to at the beginning of this chapter, global and supranational institutions and forces loomed large in the Syriac Christians’ vision of their “project of return” and emplacement in Mardin. All the returnees we have spoken to referred to their return as an orchestrated resettlement involving a broad range of actors and institutions. Syriac returnees’ designation of their resettlement as “return as a project” or as an “organized return” denoted the multiscalar social field within which their HTAs and their return were embedded. Indeed, a closer look at their return reveals a surprisingly broad range of global, supranational, and religious state and nonstate actors concerned with and involved in the return and emplacement of Syriac Christians in Mardin. As the reports and communiqués written by representatives of powerful global institutions manifest, Syriac Christians’ “collective return” and their continued presence in Mardin were of concern to all these institutions.

These concerns came together at the nexus of several different but intersecting, political, economic, and religious agendas. The project to revitalize Mardin was the meeting point for multiple institutional networks of power. These included globe-spanning financial and corporate institutions bent on the accumulation of capital through urban restructuring and tourism; the EU, with its own complex mission of capital formation and geopolitical influence; the United States and NATO, with related but not identical imperial projects entangled with military interests; and global Christian institutions, with their religious missions. Beginning in the 1990s, representatives of several religious missions in Europe and the Middle East; representatives from the embassies of the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Holland,
Switzerland, India, Canada, Korea, Slovenia, and Germany; and the US Defense Attaché, the chairman of the secretary of state’s Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom abroad, and representatives of UNESCO all visited Mardin and met with several representatives of local churches and monasteries and with Mardin’s governor. Each visitor expressed interest in the region through queries framed about the welfare, condition, and especially the religious rights and freedom of Christians in the area. Their reports repeatedly assessed the possibilities of Syriac Christians’ return (Griffith 1999).

Tourism Industries, Urban Regeneration, and the Valorization of Syriac Christians in Mardin

The meeting points between the project of urban regeneration, assistance from EU institutions, and a variety of funds, on the one hand, and the project of Syriac Christian return, on the other, were the heritage tourism industry and Turkey’s EU candidacy. City leaders looked to this nexus to attract investment and capital to the city, to generate wealth, and to alter Mardin’s regional and global connectedness. Attracting investments and capital became more viable with the opportunities opened by the context of the relatively peaceful environment following the cease-fire with Kurdish guerillas, the emerging markets and the changing global power dynamics in the Middle East. Heritage industry–induced urban regeneration and pre-accession EU funds and institutions established an axis of efforts to reposition Mardin within a multiscalar field. It is within these processes that Syriac Christians, returnees, their HTAs, and the spaces that came to be associated with them acquired value in Mardin. All these value-creation processes became entangled with and constitutive of each other.

During the early 2000s, heritage tourism industries came to the forefront as sectors through which wealth could be generated. The goal was to attract capital, resources, and subsidies to reposition the city regionally and globally. In 1999, in order to develop domestic tourism, an airport opened in Mardin and an international airport was planned for 2014. At the same time, mayors, governors, and businessmen in Mardin put forth a coordinated effort to promote the city-region through heritage tourism and cultural and art events. City-promoting documentaries and promotional material “commissioned” by Mardin businessmen appeared on domestic and international media, including numerous TV channels (TRT, NTV, Show TV, BBC, Al Jazeera, Hungarian TV), and were featured in Sunday and travel newspaper supplements. In the tourism sector, cultural institutions and activities were developed to
transform Mardin’s image from a fortified, dangerous, violence-ridden site to a city with a centuries-old legacy of the peaceful cohabitation of religions, languages, and ethnic groups. Mardin’s Syriac Christian minority became central to these branding narratives.

To brand Mardin as a city with a multifaith heritage, city leaders, project directors, and businessmen organized and launched several promotional campaigns. They agreed that Mardin should be branded for “niche tourism, with culture and heritage tourism . . . because it is classified internationally as the place of birth of civilizations” (interview P., 2015). According to the program director of the Sustainable Tourism Project:

The advantage of Mardin compared to the other cities in the region is that it is not a simple religious tourism. . . . Mardin is culture and heritage. . . . A tourist goes to see a monument, it is a pile of old stones. . . . You have to give meaning to the pile of stones. . . . If I mention three cities to you internationally and ask you the one thing that is famous about them—if I say London you would say Big Ben or if I say France you would say Eiffel Tower. What would you say about Mardin? The Deyrulzafaran Monastery in Mardin. . . . [It] is the oldest monastery operating in the world. . . . The Deyrulzafaran Monastery is a Syriac institution, it is presented very well. . . . This is a Syriac tourist attraction (interview P., 2015).

Branding and regenerating Mardin through culture and heritage tourism acquired considerable momentum in the second half of the 2000s through several tourism and urban development projects. Large projects were needed to market the city globally. One of the most important sources of funding for tourism infrastructure and urban regeneration projects in Mardin was the EU. Since Turkey was not a member state, it was not entitled to full EU development and structural funds. However, as an accession country, beginning in 1999 Turkey became eligible for financial assistance through Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) funds. These funds provided EU candidate countries with assistance in their transition to membership. At the same time, this funding required the EU to monitor a country’s progress in fulfilling membership conditions. The monitoring process focused on the development of legal and political frameworks that specified the rights and obligations of EU governments and citizens, and these concerns shaped how the return of the Syriac Christians was narrated within the city’s regeneration processes. Turkey received its first IPA funding in 2002.

At the same time, several of the initiatives that sought to situate Mardin within the tourism-heritage industry were also closely entangled with urban
regeneration. The old city center and its historical buildings as well as the multireligious, multiethnic, multicultural built environment in the Mardin city-region had to be renewed and restored. As the presence of Syriac Christians was vital to verifying the multifaith nature of this heritage, restoring Syriac (as well as Catholic and Orthodox) monasteries and churches in situ took pride of place in accessing funds and institutional support for restoration projects. Funds came from different global institutions.

The Mardin Participatory Urban Rehabilitation Project (Mardinar Project) initiated the restoration and renovation processes in the city. Financial support came from the government of Switzerland through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the project was supervised by Istanbul Technical University. The state-sponsored South East Anatolian Project (GAP-Gidem) channeled project coordination for the Mardinar Project to local actors and organized a civic platform (Local Agenda, Yerel Gün- dem). This was turned into a civic organization called City Council, with support from the UNDP, the World Bank, and İstanbul Technical University as well as from the local governor, the municipality, and other local actors. According to one of its founders (interview K., 2015), those involved in the Mardinar Project were enchanted with “the idea that such a project would permit [us] not only to preserve the historical assets of Mardin and promote them to the world but also convert them into marketable commodities. . . . Mardin will be promoted to the world!! These assets will be preserved and promoted to the world. But also these assets will become our bread.” The Mutual Aid and Education Foundation of Mardinites (MAREV) in Istanbul and the City Council platform played a critical role in the implementation of this project.16 Another large (9.2 million euro) project that sought to promote the city globally by improving Mardin’s tourism infrastructure focused on renewing the main street (1st Avenue) of the old city center by refurbishing building facades and standardizing signboards, shutters, and sunshades.17

According to a member of the civic platform City Council, to create Mardin as a tourist attraction for cultural tourism, they tried to attract the funds of cultural agents such as the World Bank, the EU, and cultural funds of certain countries. Within the IPA framework, twenty-six projects in Mardin received a total of 3,194,910 euro. Additionally, projects developed by different Turkish ministries and associations were also supported through EU funds. One such project, the Mardin-Cultural Tourism Project, aimed to improve the infrastructure of the tourism industry and the city’s marketing activities.18 These funds also helped regenerate the old town. In addition to contributing “to the social and economic development of Mardin” by strengthening
**FIG 5.2** Mardin city center, before renovation. Photograph by Ayşe Çağlar.

**FIG 5.3** Mardin city center, after partial renovation. Photograph by Ayşe Çağlar.
its tourism sector, the Mardin-Cultural Tourism Project’s main aim was to develop and execute a branding strategy for the city (GOPA Worldwide Consultants 2012).

Moreover, 6,795,809 euro were allocated to eight projects in Mardin through the Financial Support Program for the Development of Competitive Sectors and Financial Support Program for Industry, Tourism and City Infrastructure via the regional Turkish development agency DİKA, established in 2010 as part of the reforms introduced to bolster Turkey’s EU candidacy.19 The development of tourism infrastructure and urban regeneration was closely connected in the deployment of these funds. Because of this support for tourism and urban regeneration projects, domestic and international (especially heritage) tourism substantially increased in Mardin. After the mid-2000s, the city witnessed steady domestic and international tourism, and organized tours and flights to Mardin increased. The number of tourists visiting Mardin increased from 54,870 in 2001 to 203,000 in 2010. At 270 percent, growth was double the average in Turkey (Egresi, Kara, and Bayram 2012), and between 2009 and 2012, the total number of visitors to Mardin increased 44 percent. Consequently, employment in tourism-related areas (hotel, restaurant, food and beverage services, transportation) as well as in the culture and entertainment sector also increased in Mardin (Mardin Tourism Strategic Plan 2014; İŞKUR 2011).20

The ambitious urban rehabilitation project carried out by the municipality, governorship, and the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ), which we refer to in chapter 1, aimed to regenerate the old town by returning “the historic city of Mardin to the way it looked around a century ago.” In announcing the massive renewal project, the governor of Mardin emphasized the city leaders’ regenerative vision: “We constructed the city’s past from the perspective of its future” (Star Gazete 2011). According to him, “Mardin possessed an extraordinary cultural heritage, and as therefore, ancient churches belonging to the city’s Süryani [Syriac Christian] community were pegged next for restoration... We are doing what suits a city known for its tolerance” (Ana-Mardelli 2011). The construction sector and related subfields became local economic drivers in the context of these massive rehabilitation and regeneration projects.

Syriac Christians also took central stage in the emerging cultural institutions that were established in Mardin after the mid-2000s. On the one hand, these institutions and their public activities contributed to the further valorization of Syriac Christians as integral to the city by depicting them as part of the city’s past and its daily life. On the other hand, because these new insti-
tutions played vital roles in urban restructuring, their invocation of a Syriac Christian presence entered into the restructuring process. Artuklu University, Mardin City Museum, and the Biennial art festival are examples of such institutions that were established in the second half of 2000s. They used decaying but occupied or abandoned historical buildings in the city that were made available to them through the city governorship or the central state. All contributed to the regeneration of those parts of the city in which they were located. And all three invoked Mardin’s Syriac Christian population (past and present), their language, and their architectural and religious legacy as part of the revaluation of urban districts and structures.

The teaching staff of the newly founded Mardin’s Artuklu University (2007) included both foreign- and Turkish-born faculty and North American—or European-educated staff as well as well-known scholars commuting from Istanbul or Ankara to Mardin. The transnational reach of the university faculty to the United States and Europe was remarkable. The old-town campus, located in historical buildings, became a particularly important factor in regenerating a very run-down city area. The campus offered attractive, restored buildings and restaurants and cafes catering to students, the faculty, and frequent visitors from different parts of Turkey and abroad. Former residents of this area were displaced.

The university was established with a global vision. In the words of a City Council member, “We had an idea of a university in which the language of instruction would be Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, Assyrian, and the Chaldean language. There are many examples of such universities in Tokyo or London. With this project, we were planning to promote Mardin to the world” (interview M., December 2014). Indeed, with the initiation of the Institute of Living Languages in Mardin, Kurdish, Arabic, Aramaic, and Chaldean were taught at a university institute in Turkey for the first time. Mardin’s very first Syriac Christian co-mayor, elected in 2014, was a graduate of this institute.

Mardin City Museum, which opened its doors to visitors in 2009 with the support of an influential private holding company, was located in a renovated historical building facing Artuklu University’s newly refurbished Department of Architecture. The structure that housed the museum had previously been a decaying building owned by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture but had since been transferred to an Istanbul-based private foundation. The governor at that time expected a regenerational synergy from the comprehensive renovation of abandoned and decaying historical buildings in the area such as the one housing the museum. According to him, the museum would transform its immediate vicinity “[in]to a square like those in European cit-
ies” (Yavuz 2012, 54–55). The director of Mardin City Museum in 2015 was well aware of the museum’s regenerative impact.

He saw “the opening of the Museum as a milestone of urban restructuring in that part of the old town in Mardin”:

Before the opening of the Museum, on that road one could not even walk because of the mud. . . . There was not even a road. . . . The facades of these houses were also restored afterwards. Then, the tide in this part completely changed. . . . This street found life, became rejuvenated, Mardin became rejuvenated. The number of tourists increased ten times. . . . The activities in the museum, the exhibitions and the symposiums all changed the social texture and the social and cultural life in Mardin (interview E., February 22, 2015).

According to Mardin’s governor, the museum was expected to develop a sense of urban history (Yavuz 2012, 54–55). Indeed, its permanent exhibition on Mardin’s history and everyday life and culture contributed to the popularization and valorization of the city’s minorities (especially its Christian minority) and the multifaith character of city life. Starting in 2010, the three Mardin Biennials (2010, 2012, 2015) utilized historical sites in Mardin, with the aims of “transforming Mardin into a center of contemporary art” and making the city “a part of the cultural and artistic map of the world” (Mardin Biennial 2015). They utilized historical religious sites and places of daily life for exhibitions and installations. Curators of the first and second Biennials had internationally acknowledged track records with other international celebrations in Thessaloniki and Istanbul and exhibitions in art institutions in Rome, Italy; Manchester, United Kingdom; and the Dallas Museum of Art in the United States (Mardin Biennial 2012). Enjoying support from a broad spectrum of public, private, and civil society actors ranging from the British Council and the French and Spanish Cultural Institutes to the Catholic Syriac Foundation and the Chaldean and Mor Benham (Syriac) Church, selected Biennial sites often highlighted Mardin’s built environment, which was portrayed as representing the city’s Christian (Orthodox and Catholic) and Muslim heritage. However, the broad resonance these Biennials found in Turkish and international media and their remarkable multiscalar reach stood in contrast to their presence in local inhabitants’ everyday life.

While attending the third Biennial, Ayşe and Seda experienced the contrast between, on the one hand, the degree to which Christian minorities and the festival were absent in the everyday life of most of the city’s residents and, on the other, the remarkable multiscalar reach of Mardin’s Biennial. Excited
by an invitation announcing that local Mardin residents, rather than professionals, would curate exhibits, Ayşe started asking directions to the monastery where the Biennial’s opening would take place. First, she inquired at a renovated historic inn, turned hotel, the Artuklu Caravan Palace. While waiting for someone to assist her, Ayşe examined pictures on the walls of the empty guest corridor. They documented visits of political and business celebrities—from Prince Charles to well-known businesspeople in Turkey—to Mardin and to the hotel.

Surprised to learn that no one at the hotel knew anything about the Biennial, Ayşe sought information from people on the old town’s newly renovated 1st Avenue, replete with shops displaying specialties from Mardin, such as soaps, spiced almonds and tea, Syriac wine, and jewelry. She was certain that someone would know the way. But the shopkeeper’s customers and the pedestrians had not heard of the Biennial or did not know where the monastery was located. Finally, by chance, she ran into a Syriac shopkeeper whom she knew was involved in the Biennial. He was on his way to the opening and told Ayşe he would escort her. When they arrived at the Catholic Monastery, which had stood abandoned and decaying for more than eighty years, Ayşe once again was surprised. The courtyard of the monastery Ayşe had so much difficulty finding was filled with Turkish and international artists and journalists, city leaders and representatives of several NGOs and international organizations, as well as a group of locals who were closely involved with the Biennial. The opening was held in Turkish with English translation (field notes, May 2015).

The project to make Mardin a global city renowned for its unique, centuries-old, multireligious heritage included attempts by city leaders and developers to ensure that certain religious sites were included on the UNESCO World Heritage list of historical sites. Inclusion became important in the city leadership’s agenda for re-empowerment. As the governor of Mardin said at the completion of an IPA-funded project, “Mardin needs to be renewed to become a value and Mardin needs to become part of UNESCO.” However, since the city withdrew its first application in 2002, when it seemed destined to fail, it has not officially submitted other applications.

There was a renewed attempt in 2013 to submit an application to UNESCO. This effort was a good example of not only the importance of historical conjuncture in the positioning of Syriac Christians in city narratives and urban regeneration projects but also of the positioning of Syriac Christian returnees and minorities within city politics. The dynamics around this attempt were an early indicator that power constellations in the region were once again
changing as a result of the shifting priorities of the Turkish state and the positioning of Syriac Christians within them. At the same time, this application process highlighted the emerging agendas and trajectories of the returnees themselves.

In this new UNESCO application attempt, international and local actors involved in Mardin’s large-scale sustainable tourism project brought in “a top consultant, a retired UNESCO expert.” The consultant’s report stated, “The best chance that Mardin has got for UNESCO nomination is to concentrate on the Syriac Christian population.” Furthermore, the expert clearly recommended the “promotion of the Syriac culture, Syriac churches and monasteries, especially Deyrulzafaran” (interview P., February 2015). According to the president of the Association of Syriac Unity, “UNESCO officials noticed not only the exclusion of (Syriac) Deyrulzeferan Monastery in the [former] application, but they noticed the official mentality of this country, negating this people [the Syriacs]. . . . UNESCO saw this.” He proudly added that UNESCO’s realization of the Turkish State’s hostile and exclusionary attitude was the result of the “coordinated work [of Mardin’s returnees and Syriac minorities] with the Syriacs abroad” (interview G., December 2014).

However, by 2015, the political climate in Turkey changed. Especially after the escalation and expansion of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey changed its regional priorities and aspirations, and moved away from the EU. In these new conditions, the Mardinate governorate (under control of the central government) rejected the consultant’s advice because of the primacy of Syriac Christians and their heritage in his report. The application process stopped.

**Turkey’s EU Accession, Minority Rights, and the Christian Presence in Mardin**

By 2015, the Syriac Christian inhabitants of Mardin and the city’s multifaith heritage acquired value in the city’s public, social, economic, and cultural life as Syriac Christians became part of city leaderships’ efforts to reposition Mardin in relation to global and supranational fields of power. However, despite the prominence of religious diversity and the heritage industry in these efforts and hopes, the valorization of Mardin’s Syriac minority and its success in reaching out to powerful regional, supranational, and global actors were not simply an issue of religious and cultural diversity. It would be misleading to simply frame Mardin’s repositioning dynamics as culture-led urban restructurings fueled by cultural diversity and cultural industries.

The EU, as an institution and as a political body, had been present in regeneration processes, discourses, and imaginaries in Mardin in multiple
ways. The EU was present in Mardin in terms of funding mechanisms and schemes but also as part of cultural and religious rights discourses. EU funding schemes and policies and its mechanisms for monitoring and supervising improvements in Turkey’s democratization (in line with the EU mission) were very much entangled with each other. The financial assistance through the IPA schemes we referred to and the EU mission of fostering respect for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights were closely connected. Turkey’s accession status implied that the EU assistance would “be used to support a stable, modern, democratic, multi ethnic and open society based on the rule of law . . . where promoting respect for human rights is often linked to promoting cultural and religious rights . . . and above all tolerance and religious freedom to religious minorities” (Bodirsky 2012, 15). Monitoring Turkey’s governance of its minorities, especially Christians, has been crucial to the EU’s “regime of supervision” (Cowan 2007b).

Since its acceptance of the Lisbon Strategy in 2001 and its further neoliberalization, EU funding policies increasingly connected the endorsement of diversity to the generation of wealth. Thus, the utility of culture for making places conducive to capital, especially by creating business- and investment-friendly climates, came increasingly to the forefront in EU funding schemes. Since adopting laws of harmonization in 2001, debates on Turkey’s suitability for EU membership were marked by Turkey’s record of violations of minority cultural and/or religious rights and the potential value of religious diversity and rights for economic competitiveness (Arıkan 2003, 25, quoted in Bodirsky 2012).

With the start of accession negotiations in 2005, the rights of religious minorities increasingly occupied an important place in EU narratives. In all EU funding provided to Mardin, the need to embrace and strengthen minority rights and religious freedom and the urgency to strengthen local and civil society institutions and governance to attract business to the region were strikingly present. Driven by the contestations surrounding Turkey’s accession to the EU within Europe and by the importance of religious and linguistic diversity and freedom within EU criteria, the physical presence and well-being of religious minorities like Syriac Christians in their ancestral land became an index of Turkey’s observance of minority rights, religious freedom and tolerance, and the rule of law.

It is important to note that Mardin’s multilingual and Christian heritage, personified by Syriac Christians, acquired importance in city-making processes once they became assets for city leaders reaching out to supranational and global institutions and once their presence was taken as an indicator that
the city was a safe place for capital investment. They became a valorized political asset because of a constellation of global, political, and regional dynamics, aspirations, and policies that acquired salience in Mardin at the historical conjuncture we have outlined.

The actual return of persecuted and displaced Syriac Christians to Mardin acquired a crucial importance in all public discourses about the EU and Turkey’s EU accession. Turkey’s desire to join the European Union, and EU pressures on the Turkish state to secure and protect its religious minorities, particularly in light of past failures to do so, played an important role in the prime minister’s address in 2001 concerning displaced Syriac Christians from Mardin then living in Europe:

It has been alleged that citizens of Syriac origin who left the country due to the PKK terror or other reasons have been confronted with certain problems when returning to their villages. . . . It is thought that these allegations could become the subject of new human rights violations complaints against Turkey by international circles. In order to prevent this turning into a campaign against Turkey, the Ministry of the Interior will carry out the necessary measures to permit those citizens of Syriac origin who have sought asylum or settled in European countries to return to their villages if they so wish (quoted in Güsten 2016, 11, our emphasis).

Immediately after this address by the prime minister to displaced Christians from Mardin in Europe, restoration began on many of the abandoned convents and monasteries of Christian minorities in southeastern Turkey. 22

Concomitantly, the EU assessment about whether Christian rights would be respected was reflected in Syriac Christians’ discourse about the return to Mardin. The Archbishop of Mor Gebreil believed that the continuity of the positive developments regarding Mardin’s Syriac population depended on EU surveillance. The Archbishop of the Deyrulzfaran Monastery saw a direct connection between protection of Christian minority rights and Turkey–EU relations: “We would like to see Turkey in the EU to live better and practice our culture better. We, as Christian minorities, have a great task in establishing ties between Turkey and the European Union” (Çulpan 2004). It is noteworthy that the minister responsible for human rights in the Turkish parliament was part of the group visiting Mardin and its villages in June 2006 to assess the Syriac migrants’ return (Midyat Habur 2006). Officials from the European Parliament also took part in Mardin’s many festivities celebrating the resettlement of Syriac Christians. Symbolically, a EU flag waved on the Syriac Cultural Center in Midyat.
In short, the return of the displaced Christians and their continued presence in Mardin was understood as an indicator both of an improvement in Turkey’s human rights record of securing Christians’ property and religious rights and of the restoration of political stability and the success of the peace process in the region. The return of Mardin’s persecuted Syriac Christian minority became an enactment of its safe environment. Providing a safe, business-friendly environment was crucial in reaching out to powerful institutions and attracting much-desired business and investment to the city. Public enactments of religious diversity, human rights, and the rule of law with a prominent role accorded to Christians were crucial for Mardin’s hopes of regeneration and re-empowerment.

When the Archbishop of Tur Abdin said that “the church, the government and the Muslim population all hope that the returnees will develop the region” (Trauthig 2003), he was indeed expressing hopes integrally linked to global players including investors. For this reason, not only the Syriac Christian heritage in the city but also the actual return of Syriac Christians, despite their small numbers, were highlighted on every occasion. Their continued presence in the city was repeatedly and publicly performed as contributing to Mardin’s cultural, economic, and political capital. They also became a political asset in Turkey–EU relations.

Thus, for Mardin’s leaders, performances of tolerance and religious diversity became part of providing a “good business climate” for attracting capital. Given the conflict-ridden, war-torn image of Mardin from the 1990s to 2000, public enactments of safety and tolerance by returnees in the second half of the 2000s became important for attracting any business to the city. This is what the governor of Mardin highlighted when he hailed Mardin’s progress, in “becoming an important world brand.” Referring to the peace process, he added, “People are now thinking that the city is safer than it used to be, and they are coming to our city to see its historical and cultural richness. And many businessmen have also been investing in the city” (World Bulletin 2013).

To improve Mardin’s image by diminishing its associations with war and violence, Mardiniate businessmen invited powerful businessmen from Istanbul and Ankara to Mardin, including the president of the Turkish Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association (TÜSİAD), the most powerful business association in Turkey. They organized important annual meetings of business federations and associations in Mardin and hosted the leaders of major holdings in Turkey. At these meetings, the Mardiniate businessmen promoted Mardin’s safe and investment-conducive environment (interview F,)
March 3, 2015). Their hopes for repositioning Mardin were shaped by the re-configuring of forces and emerging markets in the Middle East, especially after the 2008 crisis, the Turkish state’s regional and global aspirations, and Turkey–EU relations.

As a result, as we show in chapter 1, domestic as well as foreign investments increased along with Mardin’s export volume. Between 2002 and 2012, the city’s share in Turkey’s exports increased tenfold, and between 2009 and 2012 it increased by 120 percent. However, as we also detail in chapter 1, the increased investments, impressive exports, and acquisition of funds and subsidies from the Turkish state, the EU, the World Bank, and UNDP did not increase income levels in Mardin. Increasing exports of low value-added products failed to translate into higher income levels. The use of public monies and resources, especially by TOKİ, for urban regeneration drained public coffers while contributing to private corporate profits. In terms of its life quality according to the Human Capital index, Mardin dropped from seventy-sixth to eightieth in Turkey from 2009 to 2010 (Urak 2011, quoted in Ekinci 2015).

Presence but Not Entitlement

“We were promised several things for both sides [EU and Turkish state] and we were disappointed by both sides.” So one returnee summarized the lessons that he and others who sought emplacement in Mardin had learned. According to him, both the EU and the Turkish state did not live up to their promises. Land entitlements continue to be a problem. Neither the five thousand euro from a Swiss church organization to restore Kafro’s church nor the water pump donated by the German ambassador was enough to sustain returnees’ hopes. Construction by the Turkish state of Internet infrastructure accompanied by donated computers was also an insufficient encouragement for people eagerly returning to lands from which they had been violently displaced (field notes, May 2015).

The road to Kafro was in very bad condition, and repeated complaints to the Mardin metropolitan municipality remained unheeded until 2014, when Kurdish and Syriac co-mayors were elected. One returnee, who was also a member of the Kafro HTA, expressed very clearly that “if we [Syriacs] accept returning and being here, then conditions for us here should be very good, this is very clear” (interview A., May 14, 2015, our emphasis). As he complained of the lack of follow-up projects, Ayşe asked what would be his dream project. Without hesitation, he answered, “The settlement of 2,000–
3,000 Syriac families from Europe through a collaborative project between the Turkish state and the EU.”

Many returnees underlined the need for a broader project with sustainable support, possibly from European and international institutions. However, they were all quick to add, “for that, one needs the necessary know-how and the local contacts and power,” which, according to them, they lacked. Complaints about the lack of daily political power at the local level contrasts with the striking presence of Mardin’s Syriacs in the agendas of the aforementioned powerful institutions and actors, in all imaginaries about Mardin in media, in cultural and tourist industries centered on Mardin, in development projects and reports, in cultural and art events in and about Mardin, and above all in narratives of city leaders since the millennium. Without exception, Syriac Christians and their resettlement in Mardin were central to reports about the city and to promotional features in numerous magazines and newspapers between 2000 and 2015.24

While city leaders and businessmen positioned Syriac Christian returnees as a cultural, economic, and political asset for the heritage industry and highlighted their presence in efforts to reassure potential investors about the city’s safety as well as to demonstrate Turkey’s improvement in respecting minority rights and religious freedom, they failed to acknowledge the multiplicity of Christian Syriacs returnees’ involvement, together with other Mardinates, in other forms of city-making. After their return, Syriac Christians continued to be strongly embedded within a multiscale social field connecting them and their HTAs not only throughout the region25 but also throughout Europe via multiple institutionalized, interconnecting networks and umbrella Syriac associations (such as European Syriac Unity and Federation of Syriac Associations).

Once we adopted a multiscale perspective, we were able to trace the simultaneity and multiplicity of Mardin’s residents’ interconnected network relationships. Though overlapping, these networks were never isomorphic. However, through mutual relationships, minorities, migrants, returnees, and non-migrants mutually constituted networks of multiple scales, although these interconnections never encompassed all Mardin’s residents or all those displaced from Mardin. Nor were these relationships fixed; they were ever changing within contingent conjunctural forces.

For example, by following the daily activities of Mahmut, a shopkeeper, we could trace a multiscale field encompassing not only Syriac Christians abroad and the residents of the city, including Mardinite returnees, but also political, religious, and economic local, national, supranational, and global
institutional networks. Mahmut had an artisan jewelry shop on the renovated 1st Avenue of the old town. Neither a migrant nor a returnee, Mahmut was a Syriac Christian Mardinate who had never left Mardin. As a shopkeeper, he became part of the regeneration processes at the “heart” of the old town. Producing and exhibiting jewelry inspired by traditional Syriac designs, which he developed as an art form, Mahmut sought international and domestic tourists as his customer base.

However, his shop, situated centrally on the main street of the old town, connected his small business to the powerful multiscalar actors seeking to rebuild and reposition the city. These included the heritage-based tourism industry and the infrastructure renewal projects, as we highlight in chapter 1, funded by global actors such as the EU, UNDP, and powerful domestic and international institutions. At the same time, Mahmut’s family and social networks connected him closely to city narratives of Mardin’s multifaith legacy, which had been circulating widely in domestic and international media since 2000. These branding narratives and their transnational reach were facilitated by international consulting agencies, with funding and publicity coming in part from pre-accession EU funds. One of Mahmut’s relatives’ embroidery and printed textiles depicting Syriac Christian figures and themes became part of the multifaith heritage display in the Mardin City Museum, which contributed to the regeneration of a dilapidated part of the old town.

Mahmut simultaneously participated in broader networks of cultural and art institutions with a clear transnational and multiscalar reach. He became part of the team of city resident curators for the third Biennial, which was tightly integrated into, and benefited from, funding and support from British, French, and Spanish cultural institutes as well as from global religious foundations, numerous religious institutions, and churches. The opening of the third Biennial at an abandoned and decaying Syriac Catholic Monastery (Mor Ephraim) occupied by squatters connected Mahmut to the ongoing contestations to raise the visibility of and to reclaim abandoned and/or appropriated Syriac Christian and church properties.

However, Mahmut’s most contentious political activity was his simultaneous involvement in political struggles for international and state recognition of the Syriac genocide, Seyfo, as part of the genocide of Armenians by the Ottoman military forces. This political engagement connected him to a multiscalar political field with very powerful global religious and political actors, including Syriac Christian diasporic organizations such as the Swedish Assyrian Federation and an array of religious and political associations that extended beyond Syriac Christians. These networked organizations contested
the official narratives of the Turkish state. Within this multiscalar social field, at the intersection of the conjunctural forces that were facilitating their presence and prominence in Mardin, Syriac Christian returnees developed their own agendas and forms of participation in city-making.

Returnees acquired a significant presence in the public sphere and in social justice claims in the city. They increasingly participated in the political life and public sphere of the city. One Syriac returnee who had fled Mardin in 1989 and lived and worked in Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and Belgium before returning to Mardin from Switzerland in 2010 became head of the Federation of Syriac Associations established in Midyat, Mardin, in 2012. He was also a member of the Brussels-based European Syriac Unity. These associations in Mardin as well as the numerous Syriac Christian associations in Europe (including the Syriac Christian HTAS) became important stakeholders in the 2014 local elections, especially in the contested race of a Syriac Christian running to become co-mayor.

Another Syriac returnee, who had spent twenty-five years in Europe, started publishing a monthly, Midyat-based newspaper, Sabro,26 with offices in Istanbul, Switzerland, and the United States. Published in Aramaic and Turkish, Sabro became the first Syriac newspaper printed during the Turkish Republic since the closing of the last Syriac newspaper in the aftermath of the Armenian and Syriac genocides under the Ottomans.

Global Christian Networks and Mardin

Global Christian networks were another aspect of the multiscalar social field within which Syriac Christians’ emplacement in Mardin was embedded. Historically, Mardin as a city-region had been very important for both Orthodox and Catholic Christians. With its numerous churches, monasteries, mosques, and madrasas, Mardin was a centuries-old center for religion, education, and art long before its peripheralization and disempowerment. Monasteries and churches in Mardin province were especially important in the history of Eastern Christianity. Deyrulzafaran Monastery was the seat of the Orthodox Syriac Patriarch from the thirteenth century until the early 1930s. Mor Behram Church was an important center of worship for Orthodox Syriacs and the summer seat of the Patriarch. Mor Ephraim Monastery, where in 2015 the opening of the third Biennial took place, was very important for Syriac Catholics. Thus, both Catholic and Orthodox hierarchies felt it was imperative to keep a Christian presence in the Syriacs’ ancestral home as a holy land for Eastern Christianity.
Maintaining Christian populations, their religious freedom, and the possibility of Christian education as well as restoring Christian religious sites in Mardin and around the Middle East have been major concerns not only for Christian clergy and religious leaders but also for numerous European and American officials (including chairmen of the secretary of state’s Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom abroad). With the reconfiguration of the Middle East through wars, this became an even stronger concern. In the face of increasing violence toward Christian populations in Syria and Iraq, religious leaders of Christian churches, including the pope, repeatedly underlined the importance of keeping Christians in the “Orient” (interview U., December 7, 2015).

Representatives of different European Syriac churches, organizations for the protection of Christian rights—particularly in the Orient, and representatives of diverse Syriac and Aramaic associations and federations from different parts of Europe all came together at several events and celebrations that took place within the framework of Syriac migrants’ return to Mardin from Europe. Encouraging Syriac Christians’ return to Mardin had been important to the agenda of many of these organizations (Wikileaks 2006). For example, a five-year project aimed at securing Christian migrants’ return to Mardin (particularly to Tur Abdin) was the result of such organizations’ concern. This project was initiated and led by a Catholic priest, but the Evangelical Church in Bayern and Baden Wüttenburg and the Austrian organization Christian Orient–Friends of Tur Abdin were also patrons. Keeping a Christian population in the area became an urgent concern for global Christian networks. It is no coincidence that following Pope Francis’s visit to Turkey in 2014, returnees expected the “Vatican to act” to secure the rights of Christians in eastern Turkey to live on their own lands and to teach in their own mother tongue. They hoped that ultimately the Turkish government would publicly acknowledge the Syriac genocide and allow Syriac Christians to control and administer churches and monasteries.

The presence of Syriacs in Mardin on their historical lands and issues of religious freedom, particularly for Christian minorities, were also ongoing concerns of the US government. As Wikileaks documents and a report by the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Apocrisarius in Syria and Lebanon indicate, US State Department officials closely monitored Turkey’s record vis-à-vis religious minorities. According to the chairman of the US State Department’s Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, part of their concern about this NATO ally’s observance of human rights focused on religious freedom. These documents indicate that US officials were regularly in touch with
numerous Orthodox and Catholic religious networks to monitor the local conditions of Christians. The US secretary of state made at least two official visits (in 1994 and 1998) to Mardin and wrote reports on these visits. Through visits to the monasteries and talks with priests, archbishops, and representatives of Syriac churches in the region, the United States was able to probe the state of religious freedom and violations of human rights.

In Turkey–US relations, however, human rights and religious freedom were also closely entangled with global warring and the delivery of military equipment to Turkey.27 There also had been a NATO Combined Air Operations Center in Mardin since 1960. The historical castle area in Mardin had been allocated to NATO for air defense early-warning radar. To the surprise of local cultural officials, the castle, located within the Mardin old town area that they had officially designated as a heritage zone, belonged to NATO, and this southeastern NATO radar post remained a forbidden military compound.28

**Conclusion**

A multiscalar analysis of the emplacement of Syriac Christians from Europe in Mardin shows that Syriac Christians’ “project of return” and HTAs were embedded within a field constituted and shaped by several regional, supranational, and global institutions and actors. Unfortunately, many transnational migration scholars fail to see the significance of temporality in the emplacement of minorities and returnees and the role of the historical conjuncture in configuring institutionalized power. This scholarship, when it addresses migrants’ HTAs and their institutional connections, often focuses on remittance markets and development agencies without assessing the potency of these institutions in relationship to multiscalar transformations of places over time. Migrants from Mardin forged hometown ties and established HTAs only when they could situate themselves as social and political actors vis-à-vis an array of global, regional, and European institutions in the context of reconfiguring power relations in Mardin and in the Middle East at a given conjuncture. The Syriac minority and the previously dispossessed and displaced Syriac returnees were emplaced in Mardin as part of an array of social and political forces of city-making. Thus, the salience they acquired was temporarily contingent.

Valorization of the Syriac Christian minority and their built environment in Mardin and the emplacement of previously displaced returnees were closely entangled with efforts to strengthen place-specific assets of the disempowered city of Mardin and thereby make it attractive to capital and in-
vestments, allow it to generate wealth, and reposition the city regionally and globally. Syriac Christians’ return and their resultant HTAs were emplaced in Mardin as part of the process of capital accumulation by dispossession. The practices and subjectivities of Syriac minorities and Syriac returnees were constituted within this multiscalar field.

Yet, although culture and religious and architectural heritage were at the forefront of these projects, policies, funding schemes, and narratives centered on restructuring Mardin, as we have argued the valorization of Syriac Christians’ heritage and the emplacement of returnees cannot be attributed merely to the dynamics of culture-led urban restructuring. Of course, EU funding schemes were geared toward enhancing and encouraging heritage and cultural industries and toward attracting “creative classes” (Florida 2003), but far more than cultural regeneration was at stake. Cultural, religious, and architectural heritage acquired salience primarily because of the conjunctural intersection of Turkey’s EU accession, its emerging markets, and the shifting alliances of global warring in the Middle East in the 2000s. The emplacement of Syriac Christian returnees described in this chapter was part of this temporal dimension of Mardin’s intersecting networks of power.

As we have also shown in this chapter, because the revaluation of the legacy of Mardin’s minorities was also related to the Turkish government’s aspirations, priorities, and policies, changes in these goals affected the positioning of these minorities. As Turkish officials repositioned Turkey within a multiscalar field of regional and global political power hierarchies, especially vis-à-vis the EU and the United States, the institutional reach and resources of Syriac Christians with respect to the Turkish state, especially after 2012, also changed.

Global networks of Christianity (especially of Eastern Christianity) acquired salience in the emplacement of Syriac Christians within the context of the wars in the Middle East beginning in the 1990s. This warring unleashed radical Islamic forces and violence that threatened Christian populations in Eastern Christianity’s historic homeland.

Without the concept of historical conjuncture developed in chapter 1, it would have been difficult to analyze the emplacement of the Syriac minority in Mardin’s city-making processes. As we show in this chapter, Syriac Christian returnees’ institutional emplacement extended not only to these powerful religious networks but also to EU- and US-centered supranational hierarchies of power and were conjunctural in that they depended upon the broader global agendas and interests in the region of powerful, globe-spanning institutions and states. While these institutions supported and fa-
cilitated the return and continued presence of Syriac Christians in Mardin, they did not intend to grant these Syriacs political power within a project of sociopolitical transformation. Moreover, the guarantee of Syriac Christian minority rights within these global institutions’ general “anti-political politics of human rights” (Ranciere 2004; Zizek 2005) remained rather shallow, limited, and depoliticizing. Largely, global institutions’ regional and global politico-economic and military interests motivated the promise of rights. Consequently, Christian Syriacs becoming emplaced as cultural, symbolic, and political actors within the processes of city-making was painfully ephemeral.

Since June 2015, the peace processes between the PKK and the Turkish state, on the one hand, and multifaith heritage valorizations and diversity narratives, on the other, have disappeared almost without a trace. The Turkish state again wages war against the PKK. Combined with the escalating wars in Syria and Iraq and the increasing authoritarianism of the regime in Turkey—with a clear turn away from securing any kind of rights, including minority rights—Mardin once more became a conflict-ridden, violent area marked by bombings, shootings, and armed attacks followed by massive displacements and disposessions. Tourism and the business sectors suffered drastic losses, and most hotels stood either empty or closed. The contracts of many international academics at Artuklu University were terminated, and many of them left the city. Many places in the region and several districts in the Mardin city-region, including Midyat, experienced military siege with long periods of curfew and suppressive violence. The central government changed Midyat’s administrative status from a district of Mardin to a city so that it would no longer fall under the governance of the elected Kurdish and Syriac co-mayors of Mardin, who at any rate were removed from office in 2016. Kafro and Syriac Christians were caught up in the escalating violence. Within the changed historical conjuncture, the revaluing of Syriac Christians within city narratives, as part of efforts to restructure Mardin and generate wealth, came to a halt. “We are being pulverized between the fronts again just like in the 90s,” said a returnee who came back to Kafro from Switzerland (Güsten 2016). By 2016, many returnees were again on their way to Europe, seeking safety.