

# An Analysis of the Sivas Massacre in the Focus of the Parliament

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# 1. Introduction

In the summer of 1993, another massacre was added to the ones that had been witnessed many times before due to sectarian divisions in the history of the Republic of Turkey. On July 2, 1993, numerous artists and intellectuals, including Aziz Nesin, came together in Sivas for the “Pir Sultan Abdal Festivals.” At the time, Aziz Nesin was frequently being threatened by conservatives as he stated that he would translate and publish Salman Rushdie’s book “Satanic Verses” into Turkish. The people who discovered that Nesin was coming to Sivas for the event said, “*He can walk around the city as if he is mocking Muslims.*” There was an intense reaction from the public to the then-Sivas Governor Ahmet Karabilgin for agreeing to host the celebrations.

On July 2, 1993, after the Friday prayer, the attackers started a march towards the cultural center where the festivities were held, with the slogans “*Sivas will be a grave for the secularists.*”

It is known that the number of attackers reached 15 thousand in the evening hours, and these people were not dispersed. During this time, the hotel’s windows were smashed; vehicles and statues of minstrels were set on fire. After these events, the hotel was set alight by the attackers. As a result of the massacre, 37 people, including two attackers and two hotel staff, lost their lives. Of the 33 people killed, including folk music artists such as Muhlis Akarsu, Nesimi Çimen, and Hasret Gültekin, the youngest was 12, and the oldest was 66.

In this article, the Sivas massacre or Madımak massacre, one of the bloodiest ethnic massacres in Turkey’s recent history, will be examined in the focus of the GNAT, on the day of the massacre, on its anniversaries, and on close dates to the day.

## 2. Reflections of the Massacre on the Parliamentary Agenda

### 2.1. Massacre in Recent Parliamentary Sessions

The focus of the General Assembly of the GNAT, which took place on July 3, 1993, after the day of the massacre, was the new government program. However, before the speeches about the program, the deputies expressed their views on the massacre.

Comments from the conservative side about the massacre were that there was heavy provocation against Muslims and that Aziz Nesin should be held responsible for the events.

They also considered the governor, who permitted the event to be held in Sivas, among those responsible.

Welfare Party (RP) Chairman Necmettin Erbakan described the massacre as a painful event but stated that the incident could be attributed to the offensive words directed at Islam. He also claimed that a particular group went to Sivas for certain purposes and provoked the people. We can infer that by a certain group, he implied people who lost their lives in the massacre, particularly Aziz Nesin. İsmail Coşar, a member of the Welfare Party, also held Aziz Nesin responsible for the circumstances. İlhan Kaya, a member of the Motherland Party (ANAP), which is more centrally positioned than the Welfare Party, also stated that Aziz Nesin, because of his offensive statements on religion, should not be supported.

During Necmettin Erbakan's speech, Social-Democratic Populist Party (SHP) deputy İbrahim Gürsoy chided Erbakan and the Islamic political thought he represented, declaring, "you encouraged this."

Welfare Party's Erbakan defined the commission of the crime as an uproar against provocation and a protest against the behavior of the administrators.

ANAP Chairman Mesut Yılmaz also reprimanded the then-Sivas Governor Ahmet Karabilgin by expressing,

*"The events that took place in Sivas yesterday, the incidents that overshadowed these sessions today; according to the information we have received, these are affairs that need serious investigation. Whether the governor was culpable in those events should be meticulously examined. If -in the direction of the information we received- the governor of the state remained unresponsive to a speaker who denigrates the religious sentiments of our people and ridicules their religious values in Turkey, where 99 percent is Muslim; you cannot expect the nation to rely upon the state of that governor."*

There were also party members who did not employ notions such as "incitement, humiliation" while speaking about the massacre.

Aydın Güven Gürkan, deputy of the, Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP), expressed that he was anguished about the massacre and that the basis of this matter dates back to ancient times. Another SHP deputy, Azimet Köylüođlu, defined the attackers as “sharia militants.”

Tansu Çiller, the government partner and prime minister of the period, stated that the massacre was not Turkey’s primary concern but the escalating terrorist incidents in the Southeast.

The term massacre was never used in the GNAT on the first day after. It was referred to as “Sivas Incidents” instead of the Sivas Massacre.

At the meeting on July 5, 1993, the word was used for the first time in the motion submitted by Social-Democratic Populist Party deputy Ali Dinçer. Except for the aforementioned motion, no referral was made to the massacre in the deputies’ speeches. At the session of July 6, 1993, the massacre was frequently mentioned. The then Minister of Interior Beytullah Mehmet Gaziođlu, SHP deputy Ercan Karakaş, CHP deputy İbrahim Özdiş, RP deputy Muhsin Yazıcıođlu used the word “massacre” for what happened. Muhsin Yazıcıođlu stated that they opposed the mass murder in Sivas, just like what happened in the Southeast. True Path Party deputy İsmail Köse underlined that the incitement to the believers who took place in the “incident” should not be overlooked. The expression “massacre” was used 14 times, and “incident” was used 152 times while talking about the massacre.

At the meeting of July 7, 1993, the massacre was not discussed.

At the meeting on July 8, 1993, Democratic Left Party (DSP) deputy Hasan Basri Eler spoke about the massacre, while ANAP deputy Kadir Ramazan Coşkun referred to it as “incidents.” At the same gathering, RP deputy Koray Aydın declared that in “the incident,” an insulting demeanor towards religion was made, meaning there was a provocation.

At the meeting on July 13, 1993, SHP’s Ziya Halis spoke on the matter, while RP’s Ahmet Derin condemned Ziya Halis for not mentioning the Başbađlar Massacre.

Upon this accusation, Ziya Halis declared that he was a Sivas deputy, which is why he was addressing the Sivas Massacre.

In the sessions on 14 and 15 July, it was mentioned along with other massacres, and no consequential remark was made.

In the last three meetings of the 19th Term 2nd Legislative Year, no statement was made about the massacre.

In the 11 meetings held in the 20 days from the day of the massacre, the parties representing the conservative view defined the massacre as a grim occurrence in general; however, since there was a heavy provocation directed at Islam and Muslims in the incident, the crime has been shaped so that Aziz Nesin, who was regarded as the “main target” in the incident, was held responsible, not the aggressors. The gravity of the incident could not be fully grasped by Prime Minister Tansu Çiller either, and by her and her deputies with nationalist views, the massacre was mentioned together with the terrorist incidents in the Southeast, and it was even stated that terrorist incidents were a more significant issue. Representatives of the left-wing parties, who defined it as a massacre, expressed the gravity of it, opposed concepts such as provocation and incitement, and even directly indicted parties with conservative views. One point that the deputies agreed on about the massacre was that they were glad that there was no internal conflict regarding sect and ethnicity throughout the country due to the massacre. However, considering the following years, Sivas Massacre was not the last of the massacres based on this basis.

## **2.2 Reflections of the Massacre on the Parliamentary Agenda in the Following Years, on the Anniversary of the Massacre**

During the 19th Legislative Period, 1994 and 1995, there was no discourse about the massacre. It was not commemorated in the General Assemblies of the GNAT, which were held close to the anniversary of the massacre.

On the anniversary of the massacre in 1996, it was brought to the agenda of the GNAT by DYP deputy Kamer Genç. Kamer Genç commemorated the people who died in the “Sivas incident”, and then RP deputy Ertuğrul Yalçınbayır commemorated the Başbağlar massacre. Later, Kamer Genç commemorated the Başbağlar Massacre and the “Sivas incident” again and concluded his speech. There were no other mentions of the massacre except for the two deputies.

It is a notable point that the word massacre was used in the same sentence; however, it was not used for the Sivas Massacre.

Although the General Assembly was held on July 2, 1997, coinciding with the anniversary of the massacre, no remark was made. In 1998, it was commemorated solely by Kamer Genç with a short speech.

In 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002, it was not on the agenda of the General Assemblies of the GNAT, which was close to the anniversary of the massacre.

At the meeting on July 2, 2003, it was recalled by the Deputy of the Republican People's Party (CHP) Ali Rıza Gülçiçek with the word massacre. Subsequently, Minister of Interior Abdülkadir Aksu referred to the killings as "the incidents in Sivas" and stated that there were unthinkable provocations in the "incidents." After these addresses, Justice and Development Party (AKP) deputy Mehmet Kurt and the Minister of Transport of the time, Binali Yıldırım, took the floor, but they did not utter the massacre. They celebrated Cabotage Day and ended their speech.

In 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007, there was no comment about the massacre on the anniversaries or close dates.

In 2008, its anniversary was commemorated by various deputies. CHP deputies Fevzi Topuz, Kamer Genç, and Bayram Ali Meral made remarks with the word "massacre."

Nonetheless, Bayram Ali Meral made an intriguing comparison, expressing:

*"This was a harrowing event. Now I ask you, dear friends, what is the difference between those who murdered 37 people and burned the Madimak Hotel in Sivas and the Armenians who burned the people in Erzurum alive?"*

The Interior Minister of the time, Beşir Atalay, briefly referred to the massacre as a "deplorable event."

There was no speech about the massacre in 2009, near its anniversary.

The massacre was repeatedly referred to in the General Assemblies of the GNAT on 1 and 2 July 2010. The CHP deputies commemorated it using the term "massacre," but Faruk Çelik, the then State Minister and a member of the ruling wing, was complacent about merely recalling this as "a sad event."

Additionally, when the "Sivas Massacre" was heard by the parties representing the conservative view during the massacre, the deputies who commemorated the massacre were accused of not commemorating the massacres that happened due to terrorist incidents. The AKP deputies continued the same rhetoric during the AKP period.

Kamer Genç, one of the deputies exposed to this accusation, made a speech stating: *“Mr. President, sir, AKP members have been talking about Madımak for a long time. Foremost, I wish God’s mercy on our martyrs today; I wish for their place in heaven. Now, it is clear that these Madımak killers live in prisons with privileged status. This question has been asked before, [but] they did not respond. In addition, they stroll around Europe waving their arms; they are not brought to Turkey.*

*On top of that, AKP supporters constantly bring forward this Başbağlar massacre. What does the Başbağlar massacre have to do with the Madımak killers? We condemn and curse whoever murders innocent people in Turkey. The government should disclose it if there is a connection between them on this issue. In other words, when something is brought up about Madımak, [they say] “Sir Başbağlar...” If there is [something], you are the government. Reveal it. In that respect, Mr. President, the Government is muttering some things here, but it is unclear what it is. First of all, [you] have to be open.”*

No discourse is reflected in the General Assembly of the GNAT regarding the massacre in 2011.

On the anniversary of the massacre in 2012, the most heated discussion on the subject emerged in the General Assembly of the GNAT.

During the assembly, the word massacre was used 43 times, and all of them were mentioned in the discourses of the deputies outside the power wing.

The deputies of the government generally avoided speaking about the issue. AKP deputy Ali Aşlık, who briefly served as the lawyer of the murder suspects, stated that the “Sivas Incidents” was an agenda imposed on Turkey.

AKP deputies generally noted that they were uncomfortable with the “painful incidents” being utilized as political and agitation material, and no deputies spoke on the subject except for a few who made short speeches.

*TUFAN KÖSE (CHP): “...Look, friends, I want to conclude my words: Lightless murderers set humanity on fire in Sivas, lives were burned one day, murderers will burn forever.”*

*BÜLENT TURAN (AKP): “We all got hurt.”*

*TUFAN KÖSE: “If all of you were hurt, do not say, “Good luck, it was good.” Do not say, “We are blessed.”*

*BÜLENT TURAN: “Does Sivas belong to you? You are rousing...”*

*MUSTAFA ŞAHİN (AKP): “Don’t you know anything other than Sivas?”*

*TUFAN KÖSE: “...But I heard from the Prime Minister; after the statute of limitations, I heard the words “It was favorable” from the Prime Minister.*



*The mayor in 93, Temel Karamollaoğlu, also said “Congratulations” I heard the word. I have not heard anything else from you about commemorating the souls who died there. What is your grudge for? What is your grudge for? What do you want?...”*

There were also AKP deputies who wanted to initiate a rivalry between the Sivas Massacre and the Başbağlar Massacre.

In 2013, there were no considerable changes in the picture. The massacre was commemorated in the July 2013 assembly, and the phrase “massacre” was used 30 times and “incidents” 11 times.

Those who defined it as “incidents” belonged to AKP deputies representing the conservative stance. Furthermore, AKP member İdris Şahin stated that Aziz Nesin should also be held responsible for the “incidents” and that there were provocations in the “incidents.” Again, he compared it with the Başbağlar Massacre, as the deputies with this sentiment do each year.

In addition, the opposition attorneys’ requests for the abolition of the statute of limitations were not accepted.

A similar situation was apparent in 2014. Members of CHP and Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) deputies frequently talked about the massacre and used the word “massacre.” AKP deputies, on the other hand, spoke at a minimum level and preferred the use of “incidents.” The deputy of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Yusuf Halaçoğlu, although he is in the opposition wing, expressed his regret for the “incidents” but avoided using the word ‘massacre.’

In 2015, no discourse regarding the massacre was reflected in the General Assembly of the GNAT.

There was much discussion about the massacre in 2016. With the HDP’s active role in the parliament, commemorating and addressing the massacre became more frequent. Speeches were made regarding the extradition of fugitive suspects. MHP’s Kamil Aydın brought the name Aziz Nesin and the issue of provocation to the agenda.

In his speech, as he gave examples through the uprisings in Turkey, Ottoman and Seljuk histories, CHP and HDP deputies questioned, “Is what happened in Sivas an uprising?” Although he might not have been convinced that there was a massacre in Sivas, he continued his speech with the term ‘massacre.’

Again, MHP’s Kamil Aydın compared the Sivas Massacre with the Başbağlar Massacre and claimed that the Başbağlar Massacre was done as a retaliation for the Sivas

Massacre in the following speech:

*“29 people died here, then the houses were raided, and the elderly, women, and children were massacred in [their] houses. Thirty-three people, 33 of our citizens, were killed in Başbağlar, and the PKK terrorist organization also left messages saying, “Sivas’ revenge has been taken.”*

In 2017 and 2018, there was no discourse about the massacre reflected in the General Assembly of the GNAT.

There was an increase in the use of the word “massacre” in 2019. Furthermore, AKP deputy Muhammet Akbaşoğlu acknowledged the massacre as Sivas Madımak Massacre in his speech. The AKP deputy also claimed that this massacre was organized by “dark hands” and showed an instinct to protect the reactionary, anti-republican, political Islamist section accused of the incident.

IYI Party deputy Lütfü Türkkan, on the other hand, said that the “burned” in Madımak and the “massacred” in Başbağlar should be commemorated together and did not refer to the Sivas Massacre as a massacre.

Similar speeches were made about the massacre in 2020. IYI Party Deputy İbrahim Halil Oral, who took the floor on the HDP motion regarding the massacre, referred to it as the “Sivas Events” in his speech, although the word “massacre” was mentioned in the motion.

There was little mention of the massacre at the meetings close to the date of the massacre in 2021.

### **3. Visibility of the Massacre on Legislative Processes of the GNAT (2002-2022)**

#### **3.1 Motions of Parliamentary Inquiries**

Nine motions of parliamentary inquiries on the massacre were submitted to the Presidency of the GNAT within the specified years. Three of these motions are null and void due to the end of their legislative term, and the other six are still on the agenda. Two of the motions were submitted by CHP deputies, one by IYI Party deputies, and the remaining six by HDP deputies to the Presidency of the GNAT.

### 3.2 Motions of Parliamentary Investigations

Forty-seven motions of parliamentary investigations were submitted to the Presidency of the GNAT. Thirty-eight were submitted by CHP deputies, while HDP deputies submitted the remaining nine. Seventeen of them were not answered. Seven belong to HDP deputies. The frequency of unanswered motions increased in the current legislative period, the 27th. Seven of the 11 motions submitted during this period were not answered.

The questions regarding the massacre were generally about the fugitive defendants, the government's attitude, and the statute of limitations.

The motions were directed at Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, Former Minister of Justice Abdülhamit Gül, Former Prime Minister and Current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Former Tourism Minister Ertuğrul Günay, Former Tourism Minister Erkan Mumcu, Former Minister of Interior İdris Naim Şahin, Former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, Former Vice President Fuat Oktay, Former Interior Minister Muammer Güler, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Former Minister of Justice Sadullah Ergin, Former and Current Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.

Sadullah Ergin was the person that attracted attention by responding to the proposals. Answering all ten motions addressed to him, Ergin also answered four motions directed to others and 14 questions.

It is evident that the answers given to the motions are not satisfactory. However, the answers given to 11 of the 14 motions answered by Ergin were sufficient to illuminate the questions. Today, such a situation does not seem likely.

## 4. Conclusion

We examined the reflections of the Sivas Massacre on the GNAT. Based on this analysis of the massacre, which happened 29 years ago, it would not be false to state that although the parties' names representing the same thoughts have altered over the years, their responses and discourses have progressed similarly. It is our greatest wish that this and similar tragedies are not repeated.



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Center for Democracy Research (CDR) is a non-profit research center founded in 2020 by a group of young lawyers, technologists, and political scientists.

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