

Environmental Racism and Resistance in Kurdistan

Pınar Dinç¹

Executive summary

THE COMMENTARIES**EDITOR IN CHIEF**

Joost JONGERDEN

EDITORS

Cengiz GUNES

Bahar ŞİMŞEK

The Commentaries is an initiative by
the EUTCC.

EUTCC CHAIR

Prof Kariane WESTRHEIM,
University of Bergen, Norway

EUTCC SECRETARY GENERAL

Prof Michael GUNTER,
Tennessee Technological University,
USA

EUTCC BOARD MEMBERS

Dersim DAGDEVIREN, KURD-
AKAD, Germany

Dr Joost JONGERDEN,
Wageningen University, Netherlands

Dr Thomas JEFFREY MILEY,
Cambridge University, UK
Estella SCHMID, Peace in Kurdistan
Campaign, UK

Environmental degradation is identified as a key factor that threatens the future of life on Earth, but such generalised reading entails that conceal the uneven effects of environmental degradation. When environmental degradation takes place on the lands of the marginalised groups, it is often overlooked or further justified by hegemonic powers that view these areas as natural resources or hideouts for insurgent groups that need to be drained. The embedded prejudice and discrimination against the internal others are often inflamed through the media and followed by the dominant society. This commentary addresses this issue of differential significance attributed to environmental degradation in Kurdistan and discusses how the concept of ecological racism may help uncovering this variance. In doing so, this piece covers the existing literature about conflict and environment nexus in Kurdistan, and suggests ways forward to advance knowledge and work towards political and ecological justice.

According to Global Forest Watch, Turkey has lost more than 5 percent of its tree cover in the past two decades, primarily caused by

¹ Pınar Dinç, Lund University, Sweden. E-mail: pinar.dinc@cme.lu.se.

urbanisation and commercial agricultural expansion (Global Forest Watch). Viewing tree cover loss solely based on large datasets, however, has important limitations linked with the conceptual definition of forests. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), forests are classified as “land spanning more than 0.5 hectares with trees higher 5 metres and canopy cover of more than 10 percent, or trees being able to reach these thresholds in situ” (FAO, 2016). Such classification excludes other areas with some tree cover, such as agricultural lands, pastures and meadows, barren lands, which are classified as “other land” (FAO, 2016). Although such conceptual definitions are undoubtedly necessary, they also lead to overlooking those areas that do not fit into the forest category. In Turkey, these non-forest areas make up most of the eastern and south-eastern Turkey, also known as Turkey’s Kurdistan, and the same applies to the other parts of Kurdistan that covers lands in Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Figure 1).

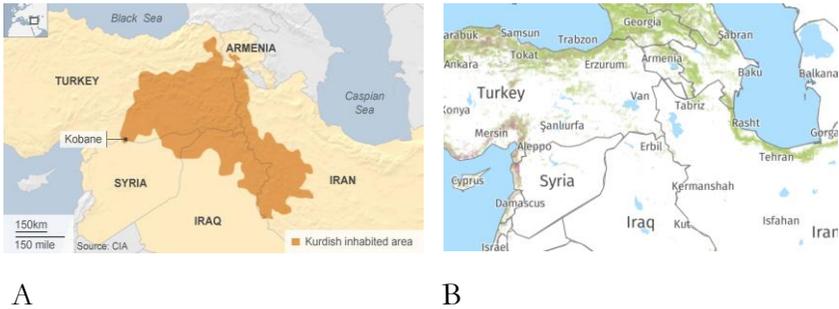


Figure 1 Map A on the left shows the Kurdish dominated areas in the larger Kurdistan (retrieved from BBC, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>) and Map B on the right shows tree cover areas in green (retrieved from Global Forest Watch, available at <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/map/>)

Regardless of being classified as forests or not, for inhabitants the lands with tree cover “represent secure water supplies, fodder for animals, housing materials, medicines for friends and family, a home for local deities, and shelter from army patrols, tax collectors or (for playful children) adults” (Hildyard et. al. 2001). For others, such as



states, governments, and businesses alike, forests are simply resources for economic interests (Hildyard 2021). The difference in the perceptions about the meaning of forests is widened even further when the environment belongs to the marginalised groups. For example, forest fires taking place in Turkey's western and southern coasts lead to public reaction against deforestation and bad governance (e.g., lack of protection of forest areas or incapacity to extinguish forest fires on time). The politicians, both from the government and the opposition, address the importance of environmental protection when forest fires take place in these areas. Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers Party, PKK) is frequently accused for intentionally setting Turkey's forests on fire. Consequently, the Kurdish movement is criminalised for arsonism, or what the literature also calls pyro-terrorism. Although these claims are either disputed or proven false as investigations continued, by then the disseminated by pro-government media outlets as well as social media channels (e.g., Twitter hashtags accusing the Kurds and the PKK of causing forest fires). However, forest fires taking place in the Kurdish-dominated parts of Turkey are not equally emphasised by the same politicians, the same media outlets, or the same social media users. Environmental destruction on Turkey's Kurdistan is further justified as security measures the Turkish army and the state are rightfully taking against terrorist activities targeting the unity of the homeland. The Kurds whose environment is being destroyed, on the other hand, argue that forests on their lands burn as a direct consequence of military exercises of the Turkish army, or due to the neglect of local authorities that knowingly do not act to extinguish forest fires in these areas.

Environmental racism and resistance

The uneven importance attributed to the environment in different parts of Turkey can be linked to the question of "to whom the environment belongs?" Existing theses of political ecology (e.g., environmental conflict and exclusion thesis, environmental subjects and identity thesis, political objects and actors thesis) all touch upon

the interaction between environment and politics, repression and resistance, hegemonic institutions and marginalised group resistances (Robbins 2019). It is a known fact that environmental conflicts are not independent of cultural differences, ethnic identities, or struggles over territories and resources (Escobar 2006). Ecological racism (also known as environmental racism or eco-racism) is a useful concept that depicts ethnic, religious, and/or racial underlying factors that result in marginalised communities' disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards and destruction in comparison to non-marginalised communities (Chavis 1993, Bullard 1993, Pulido 1996, 2015, 2017, 2018). While the concept points out the disproportionate exposure of marginalised communities for environmental destruction along the lines of ethnicity and race, the concept also touches upon other factors such as asymmetric power relations, imperialism, and colonialism (Ross 2017). Note that when I use the concept "race" I refer to "racialisation processes" described as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified social relationship, social practice or group" (Omi and Winant 2014). In other words, I do not reify the race concept but point out that environmental racism as a concept successfully depicts the different weight given to environmental degradation on the lands of the marginalised groups.

Ecological racism also brings about environmental resistance demands that push for ethical, balanced, and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for all peoples (free from any form of discrimination or bias) and other living things. Today, the vast literature on environmental justice includes critical environmental justice, which invites scholars to confront "various forms of social inequality and power," (Pellow 2018) with particular attention to state power. Overall, environmental justice movements work towards ecological (also called environmental) democracy to ensure environmental sustainability while safeguarding democracy (Pickering et. al. 2020, Eckersley 2020). Studies of environmental justice movements, such as Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (EJAtlas) and Global



Witness provide large-scale information about conflicts and environmental justice movements in different parts of the world that allows researchers to investigate specific countries, resisting actors, or environmental projects more extensively. Although in-depth single-case studies hint that these two approaches intersect as “resistance groups tap into ethnic minority grievances” (Obi 2010) in their struggle against environmental destruction, the existing literature does not systematically explain the causal mechanisms of conflict, environmental degradation, and peaceful and/or armed acts of resistance against environmental degradation on the lands of the marginalised people. The differences in responses to environmental degradation on the lands of the marginalised are often not addressed in cost-benefit analyses of environmental degradation that policymakers act upon either.

The conflict and fire nexus in Kurdistan

While there are competing narratives around conflict and forest fires, the interdisciplinary study I carried out with a research group shows a positive correlation between the two phenomena. Our quantitative assessment of conflict data (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, UCDP) and active fire data (NASA’s Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer, MODIS) in Kurdish-dominated provinces of Turkey (e.g., Dersim, Şırnak, Hakkari) for the period between 2003 and 2019 show that as the number of conflict events increases, forest fires usually follow. When we carried out a more detailed, spatial analysis of the correlation between conflict and forest fires in specific areas (Bivariate Local Moran’s Index, BILISA), we observed that the specific areas where both conflict and fires were recorded simultaneously matched with local accounts about the areas that were systematically burnt. These areas include Hozat district, Munzur valley, Bali, Kutuderesi, Geyiksuyu in Dersim (Dinc et. al. 2021), Cudi Mountains in Şırnak (Dinc 2021), Çukurca and Şemdinli in Hakkari provinces.

Positive correlations between forest fires and conflict are far from being limited to Turkey’s Kurdistan. Our assessment of the forest

fires and conflict nexus in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has shown that the Turkey-PKK conflict had affected forested areas mainly because the PKK guerrillas and top-level administrators are based in Qandil Mountains with natural vegetation. This area has been targeted by both Turkish and Iranian military forces (Eklund et. al 2021). Similar claims have been made about the links between the Kurdish identity, conflict, and environmental issues in Syrian Kurdistan/Rojava (Hunt 2019, Sustam 2021) as well as Iran's Kurdistan (Hassaniyan 2020, Ženko and Uležić 2019). One may argue that environmental destruction on the lands where Kurdish identity is dominant is neither a new phenomenon (Arslan 2014, van Etten et. al. 2008, Jongerden et. al. 2007), nor it is limited to forest destruction. There is a vast literature on other forms of ecological destruction (such as dam construction, mining activities) in Turkey's Kurdish dominated areas (see contributions in Hunt 2021, Akıncı 2020, Bilgen 2020, Gurses 2012). Needless to say, Kurds are not the only people whose environment is being subjected to destruction. Today, dominant states in various parts of the world continue to cause environmental degradation on the lands of Indigenous peoples (e.g., in Mexico, Brazil, Sweden, Canada, United States) and other ethnic groups (e.g., Palestinians, Tamils in Sri Lanka).

Possible ways forward

Despite the expanding literature, there is still much to uncover about the mechanisms of conflict, environmental degradation. One possible way to get a better understanding of the environment-conflict nexus is to bring political ecology together with historical sociology (Hoffman 2018) that would allow us to explain the intertwined relationship between politics, economy, and ecology. Geopolitics is certainly an important aspect of environmental issues, and this is not limited to the Kurdish areas or the Middle East. Research using further creation and analysis of datasets would be an important and valuable way forward. Bringing different disciplines together –from natural sciences and social sciences to law and medicine– would allow scholars to explain the different causes



environmental degradation, as well as their effects on society and politics. Such an approach would not only expand the knowledge but also allow more informed policies for policymakers, stakeholders, non-governmental organisations, and activists.

I believe that adding the resistance aspect to the conflict and environment nexus is also much needed. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, known as Rojava, has been an important experience where the Kurdish movement implemented Bookchin's idea of “social ecology” (Bookchin 1996) as it was re-framed as “democratic-ecological society” in Öcalan’s writings (Öcalan 2011, see also Gerber and Brincat 2018, Dinc 2020). The Rojava experience has not only been a remarkable resistance against the Islamic State, but it has also been the implementation of a new political project around direct democracy, gender equality, and ecology. While the Kurds’ resistance against the IS has been acknowledged—and admired-- internationally, the political project in Rojava has largely been avoided, or else militarily attacked. This did not only create a humanitarian crisis, but also an environmental crisis in Rojava, where crops have been burnt and thousands of olive trees have reportedly been cut down, burnt, or confiscated by the Turkish armed forces particularly, although not exclusively, in occupied Afrin.

The intertwined relationship between conflict, environment, and resistance in Turkey, particularly in areas the PKK has a stronghold, has also witnessed armed acts of contention, albeit in a different fashion. In provinces such as Adıyaman, Bingöl, Dersim, and Şırnak, the PKK have been “hijacking vehicles used in the construction of hydropower plants or military fortresses, kidnapping or at times killing their drivers, and burning the goods these vehicles carried” (Borsuk et al 2021). While these acts of contention are viewed to be against the colonial acts of the Turkish state (Cudi 2020), they are also used by the state to justify advance securitisation and militarisation policies in the area. Environmental activists and organisations within or close to the Kurdish movement also become victims of such criminalisation, as seen in the imprisonment of the

Mesopotamian Ecology Movement chairperson Ali Barmağıç, and HDP member and ecologist scholar Prof. Beyza Üstün. Environmentalist parties, politicians, activists, and NGOs in the international sphere should therefore pay more attention to ecology struggles in zones of conflict.

Focusing on environmental degradation in Kurdistan is yet another example that reveals the intertwined nature of ecology and conflict. More importantly, we need to focus more specifically on the causal links between political repression, ecological racism, *and* acts of resistance, to further enrich the existing literature. Advancing theoretical and empirical knowledge in this field would allow a better understanding of the ways to reach a working democratic model that fosters political and environmental justice not only for the Kurds in the Middle East, but for all marginalised groups across the globe.

References

- Akıncı, Z.S., Bilgen, A., Casellas, A. & Jongerden, J. (2020). 'Development through design: Knowledge, power, and absences in the making of southeastern Turkey', *Geoforum*, 114, pp. 181–188.
- Arslan, S. (2014). 'Kürdistan'da Doğa/Ekoloji Katliamı', *Toplum ve Kuram* 9, pp. 62–74.
- Bilgen, A. (2020). 'Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP): a qualitative review of the literature', *British journal of Middle Eastern studies*, 47(4), pp. 652–671.
- Bookchin, M. (1996). *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*. Available at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-philosophy-of-social-ecology>
- Borsuk, İ., Dinc, P. Kavak, S. & Sayan, P. (2021). 'Consolidating and Contesting Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Turkey: Towards a Framework' in Borsuk, İ., Dinc, P. Kavak, S. & Sayan, P. (eds.), *Turkey: Construction, Consolidation, Contestation*. Singapore: Palgrave Springer.
- Bullard, R.D. (1993). *Confronting environmental racism: voices from the grassroots*. 1st edition, Boston, Mass: South End Press.
- Chavis, B. (1993). 'Foreword' in Bullard, R.D. *Confronting environmental racism: voices from the grassroots*. Boston, Mass: South End Press.
- Conde, G. (2016). 'Water and counter-hegemony: Kurdish struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey', *Revista de paz y conflictos*, (2), pp. 43–58.
- Cüdi, R. (2020). 'Cüdi'de yeni-kolonyal müdahale ve eko-kırım', *Yeni Özgür Politika*, April 4, 2020. Available at <https://justpaste.it/50tdw>
- Dinc, P. (2020). 'The Kurdish Movement and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria: An Alternative to the (Nation-)State Model?' *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22 (1), pp. 47–67.



- Dinc, P. (2021). 'Forest fires in Dersim and Şırnak: Conflict and Environmental Destruction', in Hunt, S.E., (ed.) *Ecological Solidarity and the Kurdish Freedom Movement: Thought, Practice, Challenges, and Opportunities*. London: Lexington Books.
- Dinc, P., Eklund, L., Shahpurwala, A., Mansourian, A., Aturinde, A. & Pilesjö, P. (2021). 'Fighting Insurgency, Ruining the Environment: the Case of Forest Fires in the Dersim Province of Turkey', *Human ecology: an interdisciplinary journal*, 49(4), pp. 481–493.
- Eckersley, R. (2020). 'Ecological democracy and the rise and decline of liberal democracy: looking back, looking forward', *Environmental politics*, 29(2), pp. 214–234.
- Eklund, L., Abdulkhakim M.A., Shahpurwala, A. & Dinc, P. (2021). 'On the Geopolitics of Fire, Conflict and Land in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *Remote Sensing*. 13(8): p. 1575.
- Escobar, A. (2006). 'Difference and Conflict in the Struggle Over Natural Resources: A political ecology framework', *Development* 49(3), pp. 6-13.
- FAO. (2016). 'State of the World's Forests 2016. Forests and agriculture: land-use challenges and opportunities', Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/i5588e/i5588e.pdf>.
- Gerber, D. & Brincat, S. (2018). 'When Öcalan met Bookchin: the Kurdish freedom movement and the political theory of democratic confederalism', *Geopolitics*.
- Global Forest Watch, Available at <https://gfw.global/3M8RI5e>
- Gurses, M. (2012). 'Environmental Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey', *Civil Wars* 14 (2), pp. 254–271
- Hassaniyan, A. (2020). 'Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: causes and conditions for its securitisation', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 20(3), pp. 355-378.
- Hildyard, N. (2021). 'Radical or Reactionary Tomatoes? Organizing against the Toxic Legacy of Capital's Environmentalism' in Hunt, S.E. (ed.) *Ecological Solidarity and the Kurdish Freedom Movement: Thought, Practice, Challenges, and Opportunities*. London: Lexington Books.
- Hildyard, N., Hegde, P., Wolvekamp, P. & Reddy, S. (2001). 'Pluralism, Participation and Power: Joint Forest Management in India' in Cooke, B. & Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.
- Hoffmann, C. (2018). 'Environmental determinism as Orientalism: The geo-political ecology of crisis in the Middle East', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 31, pp. 94–104.
- Hunt, S. E. (2019). 'Prospects for Kurdish Ecology Initiatives in Syria and Turkey: Democratic Confederalism and Social Ecology', *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 30(3), pp. 7–26.
- Jongerden, J., de Vos, H. & van Etten, J. (2007). 'Forest Burning as Counterinsurgency in Turkish-Kurdistan: An analysis from space', *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 21(1&2).
- Obi, C.I. (2010). 'Oil Extraction, Dispossession, Resistance, and Conflict in Nigeria's Oil-Rich Niger Delta', *Revue anadienne d'études du développement*, 30(1-2), pp.219–236.
- Öcalan, A. (2011). *Democratic Confederalism*, London: Transmedia Publishing and Cologne: International Initiative Edition.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2014). *Racial formation in the United States*. 3rd edition, Routledge.

- Pellow, D.N. (2018). *What is critical environmental justice?* Cambridge, England, Medford, Massachusetts: Polity.
- Pickering, J., Bäckstrand, K. & Schlosberg, D. (2020). 'Between environmental and ecological democracy: theory and practice at the democracy-environment nexus', *Journal of environmental policy & planning*, 22(1), pp. 1–15.
- Pulido, L. (1996). 'A Critical Review of the Methodology of Environmental Racism Research'; *Antipode*, 28(2), pp. 142–159.
- Pulido, L. (2015). 'Geographies of race and ethnicity 1', *Progress in human geography*, 39(6), pp. 809–817.
- Pulido, L. (2016). 'Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism', *Capitalism, nature, socialism*, 27(3), pp. 1–16.
- Pulido, L. (2017). 'Geographies of race and ethnicity II', *Progress in human geography*, 41(4), pp. 524–533; Pulido, L. (2018). 'Geographies of race and ethnicity III', *Progress in human geography*, 42(2), pp. 309–318.
- Robbins, P. (2019). *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*. Newark: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ross, C. (2017). *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sustam, E. (2021). 'Ecological Self-Governmentality in Kurdish Space at a Time of Neoliberal Authoritarianism' in Hunt, S.E. (ed.) *Ecological Solidarity and the Kurdish Freedom Movement: Thought, Practice, Challenges, and Opportunities*. London: Lexington Books.
- van Etten, J., Jongerden, J, de Vos, H.J., Klaase, A., & van Hove, E.C.E. (2008). 'Environmental Destruction as a Counterinsurgency Strategy in the Kurdistan Region of Turkey'. *Geoforum* 39 (5), pp. 1786–97.
- Ženko, M. & Uležić, S., (2019) 'The unequal vulnerability of Kurdish and Azeri minorities in the case of the degradation of Lake Urmia, Iran', *Journal of Political Ecology* 26(1), pp.167-183.

