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Part V

**CONFLICT AND ENVIRONMENTAL
DESTRUCTION**

Chapter 18

Forest Fires in Dersim and Şırnak *Conflict and Environmental Destruction*

Pinar Dinc

In October 2020, forest fires broke out in the İskenderun and Arsuz districts of Hatay, a southern province in Turkey bordering Syria. A news article published in the pro-government newspaper *Daily Sabah*, about the devastating forest fires in the province, highlighted the government's effective action plans regarding its firefighting measures and strategies and reported that 166 fire engines, fifteen bulldozers, drones, and 700 workers worked to put the fires out (Daily Sabah 2020). The news piece also mentioned the Children of Fire Initiative, which was defined as a group with close ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK). It was reported that the Children of Fire Initiative has glorified the fires in Hatay and that "four provinces around Turkey fell victim to the PKK's hatred of nature on Saturday, with almost simultaneous fires destroying forests in various parts of the country . . . the PKK either claimed or was accused of starting many forest fires in the past" (Daily Sabah 2020).

It was true that the Children of Fire Initiative issued a statement, published on the *Nûçe Ciwan* website, claiming that "the towns and cities of those who invade and violate all parts of Kurdistan will also burn in this fire" (Nûçe Ciwan 2020). The Press Center of the People's Defense Forces (*Hêzên Parastina Gel*, HPG, known as the military wing of the PKK), however, denied any links with the forest fires in a statement (ANF News 2020). The Peoples' Democratic Party's (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), which is often viewed as the pro-Kurdish political party in Turkey's parliament, had accused the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government of deliberate ecological destruction. The HDP Ecology Commission's co-spokesperson Naci Sönmez stated that they believed these forest fires in Hatay, as well as in the provinces of Cudi/Şırnak (Şirnex) and Dersim, were "not ordinary forest fires" but intentional destruction of

the ecosystem for the economic benefit of capitalist corporations (Halkların Demokratik Partisi 2020). Sönmez also declared that the government was intentionally manipulating the public by reporting that these forest fires were the result of terrorist activities (Halkların Demokratik Partisi 2020). Indeed, the “PKK burned Hatay” hashtag [#HatayıPKKYaktı] on Twitter was a trending topic in Turkey during the forest fires in October 2020.

The recent forest fires in Hatay and the discussions around it have once again shown how media becomes an effective source that disseminates contradictory narratives of competing actors and how the content of mass and social media representation can assume the form of propaganda, manipulation, misinformation, or at times censorship and disinformation. What is disseminated or concealed in the media is highly interconnected with the owners of the media channels and their political alliances, particularly in authoritarian settings where media freedoms are under attack. In light of this background, the aim of this chapter is twofold. First, it focuses on environmental destruction during times of escalating war and conflict through politically non-biased data¹ about fires and conflict events in Dersim and Şırnak, to show the changes in the number of fires and conflict in these provinces during the peace talks between Turkey and the PKK from 2009 until the summer of 2015. Second, it examines the forest fires and conflict nexus through a qualitative discourse analysis of selected print newspapers in Turkey. In doing so, the chapter focuses specifically on August 2015 and shows the role of the opposition media as well as social media in persistently highlighting the environmental destruction in Turkey’s Kurdish regions as a state strategy, while the mainstream media turned a blind eye.

THE FIRE AND CONFLICT NEXUS

Environmental destruction has historically been used as a military strategy in times of wars and armed conflict (Austin and Bruch 2000). Armed conflicts are known to have significant impacts on the land systems. To give some varied instances, it was used by the British Army against Malayan guerrillas, by the US Army during the Vietnam War in Southeast Asia, during the armed conflict between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and during the Gulf War in Iraq. Central governments have also used environmental destruction as a military tactic to deal with insurgencies during ethno-nationalist civil wars in geographically isolated places, such as against the Tamils in Sri Lanka and Chechens in Russia (Gurses 2012).

The Ottoman Empire, and the Republic of Turkey that followed, are no exceptions to this trend, as both used the destruction of forests and nature as a military tactic against their rivals. One example of this strategy is revealed

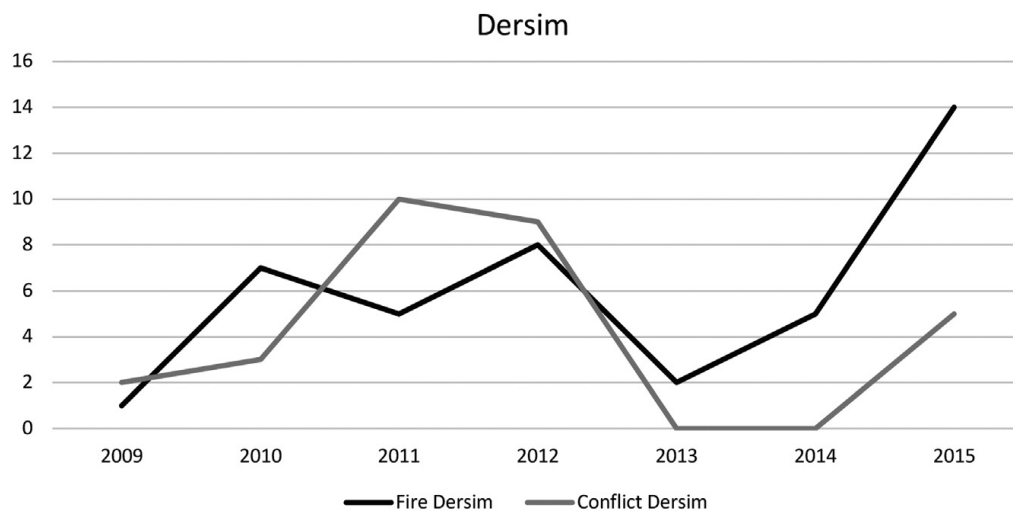
in the diary of Yeritsyan Antranik, an Armenian traveler. In his description of the late 1800s, Antranik writes that the Ottoman Sultan was told that Dersim would remain undefeated as long as its forests remained, which led the emperor to order his army to set Dersim's forests on fire (Antranik 2012). Although the Sultan's attempt miraculously failed in the late 1800s (Antranik 2012), during the early Republican period (1924–1938), the military forces once again used forest fires as a tactic in Turkey's Kurdish regions (Arslan 2014). Similar strategies were later used during the armed conflict between Turkey and the PKK in the early 1990s, when the armed forces used forest burning as a counterinsurgency tactic (Jongerden et. al. 2007; Etten et al. 2008; Dinç 2020a; Dinc et al. 2021), leading to the destruction of forests, as well as agricultural lands, livestock, and villages.² Such attacks were accompanied by the forced migration of thousands of people (van Bruinessen 1994). Based on the Kurdish Human Rights Project report (2002), over 3,000 villages were evacuated and/or burned between 1991 and 2001, the majority of which took place between 1993 and 1994. Such destruction not only has severe humanitarian and economic consequences for the people in these conflict zones but it also damages “the prospects for building and sustaining the peace in the aftermath of war” (Gurses 2012, 268).

Although we cannot talk about an uninterrupted process, there had been intermittent dialogue between Turkey and the PKK in the 2000s. Backchannel communications between Turkey and the PKK in 2005 led to the Oslo Talks between 2008 and 2011 (Dicle 2017), followed by the peace process (also referred to as the Solution Process or İmralı Process) between 2012 and 2015. When the peace process came to an end in July 2015, urban warfare between the PKK and Turkey started in various Kurdish cities in Turkey. This urban warfare continued between August 2015 and March 2016, leading to the death of hundreds of civilians, human rights abuses, the internal displacement of thousands of citizens, and massive destruction of Kurdish cities (Crisis Group Europe 2016). The human rights abuses and shift from peace and democracy were not limited to the Kurdish cities and people. The aftermath of the peace process, combined with the alleged coup attempt against the AKP government in July 2016, resulted in intensified oppression, criminalization, and violation of freedoms against—but not limited to—the Kurdish political movement, politicians, journalists, academics, human rights defenders, and activists.

Even during the peace process, the so-called “development” and “security” policies of the state were being implemented in Turkey's Kurdish regions through dam projects, mining activities, fossil-fuel power station constructions, as well as the construction of fortress-military stations (*kule-kols*) (Orhan 2013). Many (Dinc 2020b; Dinc 2020c; Hunt 2019; TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 145; Gurses 2012) describe the state actions as deliberate

Table 18.1 Number of Conflicts (in Turkey, Şırnak, and Dersim) and Fires during the Extended Dry Season (Şırnak and Dersim) between 2009 and 2015

Year	Number of Fires in Şırnak	Number of Conflict Events in Şırnak	Number of Fires in Dersim	Number of Conflict Events in Dersim	Number of Conflict Events in Turkey
2009	162	9	1	2	44
2010	215	7	7	3	64
2011	121	6	5	10	121
2012	115	14	8	9	129
2013	114	0	2	0	7
2014	101	0	5	0	7
2015	405	30	14	5	232

**Figure 18.1** Rise and Fall in the Number of Conflicts and Fires in Dersim during the Dry Seasons between 2009 and 2015. *Source:* © Pinar Dinc.

and systematic ecological destruction. More recently, the environmental destruction in the area has been defined as a “neocolonial ecocide” (Cudi 2020). For the purposes of this chapter, I specifically focus on the fire³ and conflict data for Dersim and Şırnak during the extended dry season—the six months between May 1 and October 31, 2015. Table 18.1 above shows a sharp increase in the number of conflict events⁴ in Turkey between 2014 and 2015.

Conflict events in Şırnak and Dersim were reported as zero in 2014, whereas in 2015 the numbers were reported as 30 and 5, respectively. The fire data shows that the number of fires in Şırnak quadrupled and the number of fires in Dersim tripled from 2014 to 2015. Figures 18.1 and 18.2 display

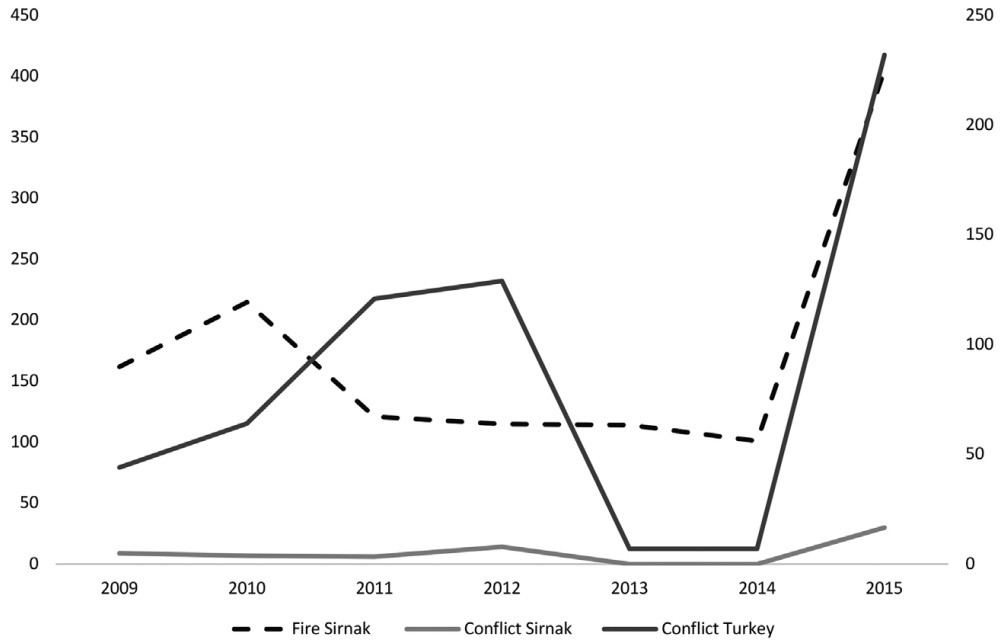


Figure 18.2 Rise and Fall in the Number of Conflicts (Turkey Plotted in Secondary Axis) and Fires in Şırnak during the Dry Seasons between 2009 and 2015. *Source:* © Pinar Dinc.

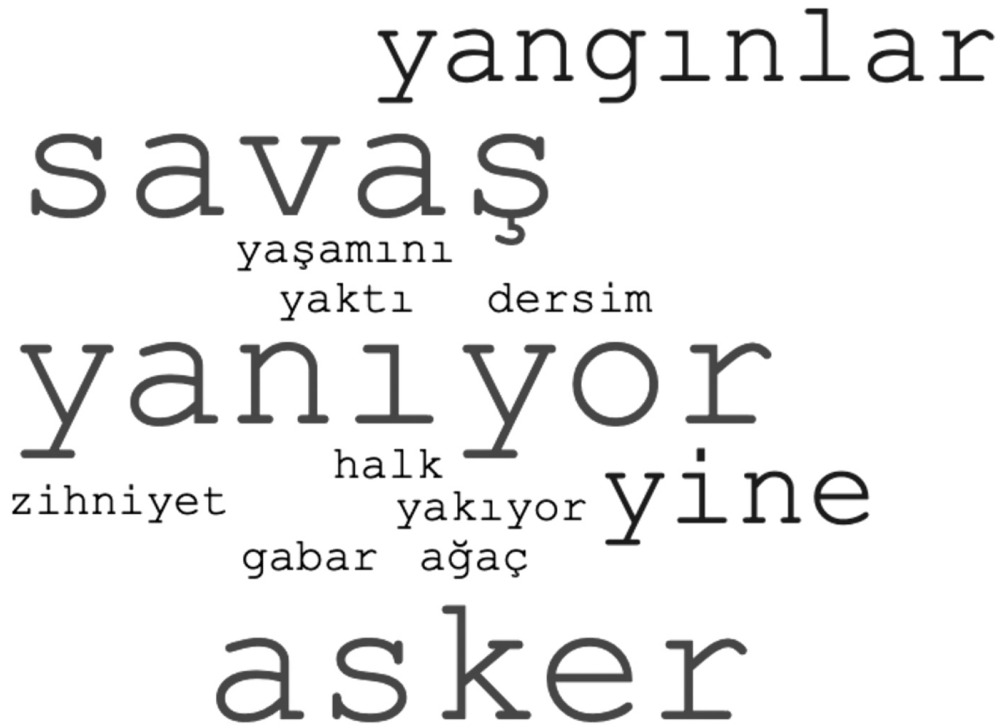


Figure 18.3 Word Cloud of News Article Titles in Özgür Gündem and Evrensel with Minimum Word Frequency of Two. *Source:* © Pinar Dinc.

the increasing trends in the number of conflicts and fires in both provinces in the aftermath of the peace process in 2015.

The spatial analysis of this data shows that in certain areas in Şırnak and Dersim, as the number of conflict events increases, the number of fires also increases. In other words, there is a positive correlation between the number of forest fires and conflict events in particular areas. This was also confirmed through the Bivariate Local Moran's Index (BiLISA), through which the correlation between fire and conflict variables were investigated (Dinc et. al. 2021). BiLISA analysis showed that the Cudi Mountains were located to the north of Silopi and the east of Cizre districts of Şırnak. The same applies to Dersim, where the Aliboğazı, Munzur Valley, Bali, Kutuderesi, and Geyiksuyu areas were the hotspots where both conflict and fire variables had high values (Dinc et. al. 2021).

MEDIA COVERAGE

Despite the positive correlation between the number of fires and conflict events in Dersim and Şırnak, media coverage of this phenomena is largely avoided, if not deliberately concealed. Table 18.2 shows the distribution of the seven newspapers analyzed in this chapter, together with their political leaning and the number of articles (including news pieces and opinion columns) published about the forest fires in Dersim and/or Şırnak during August 2015.

Table 18.2 shows that the mainstream newspapers did not report the forest fires, while left-wing newspapers were more attentive. *Evrensel* and *Özgür Gündem* were the two newspapers that recurrently published news articles and opinion columns about the forest fires not only in Dersim and Şırnak but also in other Kurdish regions in Turkey. A total of forty-eight news articles were published in *Evrensel* and *Özgür Gündem* in August 2015. Figure 18.3 displays a word cloud of the titles of all forty-eight articles, where stop

Table 18.2 Newspapers, Their Political Leaning, and the Number of Articles about Forest Fires in Dersim and/or Şırnak in August 2015

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Political Leaning</i>	<i>No of Articles</i>
Sabah	Mainstream, pro-government, right-wing	0
Sözcü	Mainstream, anti-government, Kemalist	0
Hürriyet	Mainstream, pro-government	1
Birgün	Left-wing	4
Cumhuriyet	Left-wing, Kemalist	4
Evrensel	Left-wing	19
Özgür Gündem	Left-wing, pro-Kurdish	29

forest fires were used as a war strategy against the Kurds. Fifth, the newspapers highlighted that the state was not making an effort to extinguish the fires, and it was also preventing civilians from taking part in firefighting. In relation to this, both newspapers reported on the protest activities against these forest fires and made a call to the wider society to not remain silent on this intentional environmental destruction. Finally, the systematic nature of these fires and the long history of environmental destruction in Turkey's Kurdish regions was emphasized, often with reference to the 1990s, which was also visible—albeit much fewer in number—in *Birgün* and *Cumhuriyet* as well.

Among the four news articles in *Birgün* that covered forest fires in Dersim and/or Şırnak, two drew links between forest fires, conflict, and the traumatic memory of the 1990s. On August 4 and August 14, 2015, *Birgün* published two news articles with the titles “What difference does this have from the 1990s?” and “Forest fires put out the peace.” Three out of the four news articles published in *Cumhuriyet* on forest fires in Dersim and/or Şırnak were opinion columns written by Aydın Engin.⁶ Engin also refers in these articles to the destruction of forests and forced evacuation of civilians in the 1990s and demands that the same mechanisms of the 1990s—meaning environmental destruction via the armed forces—should not be used once



Figure 18.5 Site of Forest Fire at Bingöl-Yayladere, in 2015. Source: © Mesopotamia Ecology Movement.

again by the AKP. However, it should be noted that there were no news articles that reported on the forest fires that took place in these provinces in August 2015.

The only article published in *Hürriyet* was on August 6, which reported a soldier who was “martyred in a forest fire.” The article explains that the sergeant was taken to a hospital because he was affected by the smoke while tackling blazes in a forest fire in Şırnak.

Right-wing, nationalist newspapers, regardless of their position as pro- or anti-government, did not publish any news about the forest fires in Dersim or Şırnak. The news articles about the provinces mainly reported on “terror,” “terrorism,” “traitors,” and the PKK members killed by the Turkish armed forces. While forest fires in other, mainly western, parts of Turkey were reported as fires that scared people living in these areas, provinces like Dersim and Şırnak were only visible in news articles that reported the killing of “traitors” in the military operations of the armed forces against the PKK. In August 2015, two news articles appear next to each other in *Sözcü* newspaper, where on the left column, the title reads “14 traitors have been killed in Tunceli and Şırnak” whereas, on the right column, a forest fire that scared the people in the Bursa province in western Turkey was reported. The pictures used in the newspaper are also noteworthy, as two military aircraft are seen in the news column about Dersim, whereas in the column about Bursa, two women are shown helping to extinguish the fires. What is noteworthy here is that this is not a one-time instance but a general tendency that can be seen in mainstream newspapers. News articles about Kurdish provinces are often related to “terror” events, while forest fires in these areas are not reported. This seems to be a deliberate choice, since forest fires taking place in other parts of Turkey are reported, while forest fires in conflict zones are not.

SOCIAL MEDIA

In the last decade, social media has started to replace traditional media in disseminating information and creating public participation in a way that includes different voices that struggle against hegemonic narratives (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016). Twitter and other participatory online platforms have become spaces in which activists, journalists, and the general public express themselves, engage in politics, and disseminate silenced news stories. In Turkey, too, social media plays an important role in protest movements: the Gezi Park protests of 2013 are one of the most recent and significant examples of such movements. However, as Ozduzen and McGarry (2020) underline, social media is used by a diverse group of actors with opposing views, which are contested during and after the course of events.

The analysis of posts about forest fires in Turkey's Kurdish regions on Twitter⁷ in the aftermath of the peace process in 2015 reveals important insights about the contested nature of social media. Over 19,000 tweets (excluding retweets) were shared between July 1, 2015, and December 31, 2015, with selected hashtags including—but not limited to—“Dersim is burning” [Dersim yanıyor], “there's fire in Lice” [Licede Yangın Var], and “Cudi Mountain is burning” [Cudi Dağı Yanıyor].⁸ Figure 18.4 shows a word cloud with the most frequently used words in these tweets, after removing the hashtags, stop words, and phrases linked to other topics (that is mainly regarding increasing follower numbers on Twitter). The most frequently used words are burning [yanıyor], fire [yangın], there is [var], absent [yok], the PKK, the state [devlet], Lice, Kurd [Kürt], and nature [doğa].

The majority of these tweets aimed to make the forest fires in Şırnak, Diyarbakır, and Dersim visible to the public. Similar to the news articles in *Özgür Gündem* and *Evrensel*, these tweets made references to the forest fires initiated by the armed forces in the 1990s and highlighted the intended nature and ideological motivations of the state's actions against the Kurds. There were also critiques toward the apathy about the forest fires taking place in Kurdistan, underlining that the forest fires or environmental destruction in Turkey's Kurdish regions were not deemed important by the majority of the Turkish public and the mainstream media. The state, as well as the public, was being called to notice these forest fires and to take action to extinguish them and stop the destruction of the Kurdish environment.

The Internet, however, does not only function as a sphere for freedom of speech but also allows its users “to engage in othering and hate” (Ozduzen, Korkut, and Ozduzen 2020, 4). Supporting this argument, there were tweets that blamed the PKK for starting forest fires as an act of terror and argued that the PKK was now using a so-called environmentalist discourse to cover up its crimes. There were also tweets suggesting that even if forest fires were resulting from military operations, they were still legitimate in Turkey's fight against terror.

The War Press during Times of Environmental Destruction

The War Press [Savaş Press] title comes from *Özgür Gündem* in August 2015, months before it was shut down in 2016 by an executive decree. The article described the mainstream media, including *Star*, *Sabah*, *Vatan*, *Akşam*, *Yeni Şafak*, *Milliyet*, and *Hürriyet*, as fueling the fight against the Kurds led by the AKP government. The article stated that the media has been acting like a warmonger by turning a blind eye to the government's “arrests, imprisonments, executions, civilian massacres, burning of corpses, burning of forests, declarations of states of emergency, and all kinds of torture, and returning to

the familiar narratives of ‘dishonorable, villain, disloyal, traitor, ignoble’ of the 1990s” (Özgür Gündem 2015).

The argument about the close ties between the government and the media in Turkey is well-grounded. Sözeri and Kurban (2014, 208) highlight that the “vast majority of news outlets [in Turkey] belong to large conglomerates with political and financial ties to the government” which becomes a factor that fosters censorship. This, as a result, creates a type of censorship that includes not only top to bottom but also a form of self-censorship to avoid lawsuits, dismissals, fines, and media outlet closures. The suppression of Turkey’s media system, which was already clientelist and politicized, has “deteriorated further during the AKP regime” (Yesil 2016, 138). Media freedoms, as well as human rights, have been in sharp decay in Turkey, which was labeled a “hybrid regime” in the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index in 2019. Yesil (2016, 139) draws attention to the similarities between the AKP’s tactics and other authoritarian regimes in the world and argues that the AKP uses “information management” as a strategy.⁹

Kampf and Liebes (2013, 3) define the coverage of war and terror in news as “more complex and varied than in the past,” and individuals today “confront an abundance of competing images, frame and narratives, from above and below, from far away and close by, and from involved and uninvolved sources.” Despite numerous local accounts on the ground (see Akkuş 2015a; 2015b; 2015c), reports (Halkların Demokratik Partisi 2015; Demokratik Toplum Kongresi 2015), and the positive correlation between conflict and fire evident through data analysis, the state, as well as the mainstream media, failed to cover the escalated conflict from different perspectives. The AKP, which once seemed devoted to overthrowing Kemalism and its military tutelary, replaced it with Erdoganism, and the Kurds have continued to be labeled as domestic threats to the well-being and indivisible unity of Turkey under both ideologies dominating the republic (Dinc 2021, forthcoming). The indifference regarding the environmental destruction in Turkey’s Kurdish regions can also be understood through the deeply embedded Turkish nationalism. Although the Turkish nationalist perspective views Turkey as a united whole, the indifference to the environmental destruction in Turkey’s Kurdish regions shows that some parts of Turkey can be subjected to destruction and devastation, so long as it supports the security of the nation and the well-being of the state.

Consequently, we see that the Kurdish regions in Turkey have been systematically subjected to ecological destruction through dam projects (Bilgen 2018; Bilgen 2020; Açar and Böhm 2021), mining activities, and deforestation. Even during times of reduced conflict, environmental destruction continues to take place under banners of developmentalism or securitization. However, the scope and intensity of destruction significantly increases

during times of escalated conflict. Particularly with the imposition of states of emergency and military security zones, the destruction of the environment becomes unrestrained, while organizational or civilian action to prevent such destruction is stonewalled. This has been the case in Turkey's Kurdish regions once again, since the end of the peace process in the summer of 2015.

In this chapter, I have focused on the case of forest fires in Dersim and Şırnak, in the immediate aftermath of the peace process between Turkey and the PKK. Using different sets of empirical data, I have shown the positive correlation between fires and conflict in Dersim and Şırnak, and portrayed the coverage—or lack thereof—in both print and social media through examples from selected newspaper coverage and Twitter posts. In doing so, I have argued that the systematic ecological destruction cannot be prevented with an apolitical approach or by viewing ecological destruction in parts of Turkey where Sunni-Turkishness is not the hegemonic power (that is mainly Kurdish, Alevi areas) as a natural or legitimate outcome of “protecting the homeland from division and terrorism.” Likewise, the approach of blaming the Kurds or the PKK for the forest fires happening in the non-Kurdish-dominated parts of Turkey has to be changed. Instead, we need a political ecology perspective in Turkey that breaks what Ünlü (2016) defined as the “Turkishness contract” and understands that the environment is equally important in all parts of Turkey (Dinç 2020b). Likewise, it is important to emphasize that such responsibility should be expected not only from the ruling party but also from the opposition parties, as well as local, national, and international environmentalist groups that often fail to draw attention to the destruction of the environment in Turkey's predominately Kurdish regions (Dinç 2020c).

NOTES

1. The data was gathered through remote sensing techniques based on fire data (downloaded from NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System, FIRMS), satellite images (detected by MODIS satellite sensors and their corresponding algorithms), and geo-referenced global conflict data (downloaded from the Conflict Data Program, UCDP). I would like to thank Lina Eklund and Aiman Shahpurwala for their help in retrieving and analyzing this data.

2. For a study on the effects of conflict on land systems in Iraq, which specifically focuses on the impact of the Turkey-PKK conflict on forested areas in the conflict and fire in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, see Eklund et. al. 2021.

3. The data provides information on active fires or “hotspots” detected by MODIS satellite sensors and their corresponding algorithms. The algorithm determines if there has been a fire in a 500 x 500 meter area, and then centers the point within that area. The data is provided in point shapefile format with WGS 1984 native projection. Only data classified as Type “0,” indicating vegetative fires, were found.

4. Each conflict event in the UCDP dataset is defined as an instance of organized violence with at least one fatality.

5. The expression ‘çocuk işi’ [it’s a snap] was also removed from the word cloud to only keep the words relevant to the forest fires in the regions.

6. Aydın Engin no longer writes in *Cumhuriyet*.

7. Over 19,000 tweets were extracted from Twitter’s Advanced Search using Python between July 1, 2015 and December 31, 2015 with the GetOldTweets3 library (<https://pypi.org/project/GetOldTweets3/>) using specific hashtags about the forest fires in Dersim, Şırnak, and Diyarbakır. Since many of these hashtags are often used together, the data was pre-processed by deleting duplicate tweets. These tweets were also pre-processed using the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) library on Python (<https://pypi.org/project/nltk/>). This process removed any unnecessary punctuation symbols, and Turkish stopwords (that is “bu,” “ve,” “ya,” and “filan”). The author would like to thank Cansu Ozduzen for her help in retrieving and analyzing Twitter data.

8. Full list of hashtags included in the search are: #DersimYaniyor [Dersim is Burning], #DersimYakiliyor [Dersim is being burnt], #DersimeSesVer [Give voice to Dersim], #DersimeSesOl [Be the voice of Dersim], #DersimeSuOl [Be water for Dersim], #DersimeBirDamlaSuOl [Be a drop of water for Dersim], #DersimKöyleriBosaltiliyor [Villages are evacuated in Dersim], #TunceliYaniyor [Tunceli is burning], #LiceYaniyor [Lice is burning], #LiceyeSesVer [Give voice to Lice], #LicedeYanginVar [There is fire in Lice], #LicedeDogaKatliamiVar [The nature is destroyed in Lice], #CudiYaniyor [Cudi is burning], #CudideDogaKatliamiVar [The nature is destroyed in Cudi], #CudiDagiYaniyor [Cudi Mountain is burning], #CudiDagindaKatliamVar [There is a massacre in Cudi Mountain].

9. In the years following the end of the peace process and re-securitization/re-militarization, forest fires continued to take place in Turkey’s Kurdish regions. These fires were not widely reported in the mainstream media, and when they were shared on social media, the response from the government and state cadres often highlighted that these were exaggerated or fake news.

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