



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

*Crown Family Director
Professor of the Practice in Politics*
Gary Samore

*Director for Research
Charles (Corky) Goodman Professor
of Middle East History*
Naghmeb Sohrabi

Associate Director
Kristina Cherniahivsky

Assistant Director for Research
Daniel Neep

Assistant Director
Karen Spira

*Myra and Robert Kraft Professor
of Arab Politics*
Eva Bellin

*Founding Director
Professor of Politics*
Shai Feldman

*Henry J. Leir Professor of the
Economics of the Middle East*
Nader Habibi

*Renée and Lester Crown Professor
of Modern Middle East Studies*
Pascal Menoret

Founding Senior Fellows
Abdel Monem Said Aly
Khalil Shikaki

Senior Fellows
Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch
David Siddhartha Patel

Goldman Visiting Senior Fellow
Chuck Freilich

Harold Grinspoon Faculty Leave Fellow
Jeannie Sowers

Neubauer Junior Research Fellow
Ekin Kurtiç

Junior Research Fellows
Mohammad Ataie
Hannah Elsis

March 2022
No. 147

Middle East Brief

Criminalizing Environmental Activism in Turkey

Ekin Kurtiç

In the summer of 2019, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—the president of Turkey and leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)—expressed his desire to create a Turkey that would be lush and green. Taking up a citizen’s suggestion on Twitter, Erdoğan declared that November 11 would be National Tree Planting Day.¹ The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry coordinated a nationwide tree planting festival: Under the banner “Breath for the Future,” 11 million tree saplings were planted at precisely 11:11 a.m. on November 11, 2019. Broadcast on live television, the festival reinforced the image of a government firmly committed to the moral duty of greening the country. In his public address during the festival, Erdoğan explained this commitment in the following words: “Our love for green means planting 1.5 times more trees in 17 years than were planted in the entire Republican period [since 1923]. Our love of nature means we will plant over 40 times as many trees as there were in the burned areas [in the wildfires of 2019]. No scale can measure our love of green, and our sensitivity for trees and for the environment.”² The festival was intended to substantiate the AKP’s claim that it was the only—and best—force for nature protection.

In Turkey, tree planting and forestation have long been politically significant activities. Since the foundation of the Republic in 1923, the aim of greening the landscape has been a key component of building the Turkish nation-state and bolstering its power. This Brief argues, however, that Erdoğan and the AKP

Ekin Kurtiç is the
Neubauer Junior Research
Fellow at the Crown
Center.

government have presided over a historic shift in the political meaning of state-led greening practices.³ In contrast with earlier forms of nature conservation, which positioned greening as part of the political project of building a modern nation-state, the AKP government's claims to be green have emerged in response to environmental movements that pose a challenge to the ruling power. Hence, the current government is responding to, rather than deciding, the environmental agenda—and contemporary greening initiatives such as the National Tree Planting Day are defensive maneuvers against grassroots environmental mobilizations that are confronting the government from the bottom up.

The analysis of greening as a political instrument deployed by the government against the opposition leads to the second argument of this Brief: that the AKP government's self-proclaimed greenness is better understood as a tool for delegitimizing and criminalizing critical public voices. Indeed, scholars, journalists, and activists have frequently examined how states use violence and coercion to criminalize environmental protest movements. Most analyses, however, consider states' and corporations' green self-representation apart from the oppressive tools that both deploy against environmental movements. In Turkey, on the other hand, the government's self-proclaimed greenness exemplifies the close link between greening and criminalization: In President Erdoğan's public declarations and speeches, claims of being the sole and best environmentalist also function as direct and fierce attacks on the legitimacy of grassroots environmentalism. Here, greenness claims are not leveraged to gloss over or direct attention away from environmentalist criticism; instead, the government's proclamations aim to assert its control over the rhetoric of greening and redirect the environmental agenda for its own ends.

Despite all its efforts, however, the government's attempts to criminalize grassroots environmentalism remain incomplete: Both grassroots activists and dissenting experts have challenged the AKP's claims of greening and its persecution of environmental protests. In doing so, they have seized the initiative from the government and carved out a new space for political opposition.

A Brief History of Greening in Turkey

Greening practices and nature conservation have a long history in Turkey. For many years, tree planting was key to the self-branding of the Turkish nation-state and to the production of what was conceived as a modern, civilized, ethnically homogeneous national landscape.⁴ In the years around the official founding of the state, the political project of creating a Turkish national identity required not only social and political transformation, but also environmental interventions. The founders of the Republic—the Kemalist political elite who followed the lead of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in building an ethnically homogeneous, centralized, and secular nation-state⁵—made nature one of the cornerstones of their political project to create a new Turkish national identity. State control over the natural landscape, and developing people's relationships with it, was at the core of this ethno-nationalist project.

The 1923 Izmir Economic Congress—held to decide on the founding principles of the future national economy just months before the founding of the Republic—devoted considerable attention to the relationship between people, nature, and prosperity. “The Turk abstains from microbes, polluted air, epidemics, and dirtiness. The Turk likes pure air, abundant sun, and cleanliness. The Turk

The opinions and findings expressed in this Brief belong to the author exclusively and do not reflect those of the Crown Center or Brandeis University.

works for his bodily discipline by means of riding, marksmanship, hunting, and seamanship, which are [his] ancestral heritage. He also takes care of his animals and the improvement of their races, and reproduces them in numbers,” proclaimed the Economic Pact approved at the Congress.⁶ The pact further stated that the people of Turkey “love their forests like their children; for that they organize afforestation festivals and recreate the forests. They manage the mines for national production and strive to know their national wealth more than anyone else.” The founders of the Turkish Republic, then, defined national identity largely through references to the natural environment.

Accordingly, the goal of the Kemalist political elite was to transform parts of nature considered degraded, unhealthy, and unproductive into modern, green, and fertile landscapes.⁷ They associated greenness with civilization and modernity; other natural landscapes, such as steppes and swamps, were symbols of unruliness, decay, and deficiency.⁸ Arid steppes needed irrigation to become green and productive; marshes and swamps needed draining to eradicate malaria and make them cultivable.⁹ Controlling the flow of water became an essential tool in the nationalist struggle to shape the environment.

Practices such as tree planting and swamp draining accorded an important role to scientists and engineers. A well-known civil engineer turned politician, Süleyman Demirel—famously nicknamed the “King of Dams”—described the state-led work of the late 1940s and early 1950s as “an issue of science” in which “the devoted, persevering engineers took charge.”¹⁰ Noting the role of engineers in forging civilization and modernization, Demirel predicted that “the battle between the steppe and the green shall continue; the steppe shall be greened.”¹¹

During the Cold War, international development agencies advocated public works such as roads, bridges, and dams to achieve economic growth and alleviate poverty, without addressing their social or ecological costs. In Turkey, state-led nature conservation became increasingly institutionalized through new departments in central and local governments, charged with overseeing forestation, soil conservation, and erosion control. The political elite perceived conservation as necessary work to be conducted by a modern state that had both scientific and technical expertise. The agenda of economic development coexisted with conservation and greening initiatives—as long as environmental projects did not impose a limit on economic growth.

In the 1980s, the Turkish state reframed its reconciliation of economic growth and environmentalism in the new language of sustainable development that was then becoming popular worldwide. The World Commission on Environment and Development’s 1987 Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹² Turkey’s aspirations to join the European Union also motivated Ankara to adopt the agenda of sustainable development: The process of European Union membership application and harmonization, as of the late 1980s and 1990s, required compliance with environmental policies that played up the importance of sustainability. Consequently, Turkey’s fifth and sixth Five-Year Development Plans (1985–1989 and 1990–1994) referred to the principle of natural resource protection for the benefit of future generations.

But even as the environmental discourse of sustainability was gaining traction in Turkey, environmental destruction began to accelerate, as new economic policies expanded the power of the private sector and the market economy.¹³ In this regard, Turkey does not present an exceptional case: The idea of sustainability developed globally alongside the expansion of the market economy,¹⁴ and most sustainability projects contribute to the maintenance of a growth-based economic system by obstructing radical changes to the economic system more generally.¹⁵

In Turkey, just as the sustainability framework was being adopted by the state, an era of economic liberalization began after the 1980 coup d’état. These years saw the dissolution of public subsidies and state enterprises and the introduction of export initiatives and foreign investments, along with increasing market liberalization.¹⁶ These typical neoliberal policies were accompanied by unprecedented environmental destruction, which accelerated in scale and intensity as a result of the flurry of private-sector investment in energy, construction, and resource extraction projects that had become the primary means of profit-making and capital accumulation. Initiatives such as the expansion of thermal coal-fired power plants, for example, exacerbate carbon emissions and air pollution;¹⁷ mega-infrastructure projects in Istanbul—especially the new Istanbul Airport, together with the third bridge that connects Europe and Asia—damage the water basins and lead to deforestation of the surrounding area,¹⁸ and mining projects decimate forest ecosystems throughout the country.

In contrast to earlier forms of state-directed greening, which were part of the political project of building a nation-state, the AKP government's self-proclaimed greenness emerges as a response to the grassroots protests against environmental destruction that have flourished in the last two decades. In this context, the government's claims regarding greening have acquired a novel political meaning. As the next sections argue, the AKP's claims to be green primarily serve to delegitimize these grassroots environmental movements.

The Rise of Environmental Mobilization in Turkey

Grassroots environmental movements emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to what activists called an “assault on nature.” In these decades, the adverse ecological impacts of extractive projects such as mining had become increasingly apparent in everyday life: Citizens could see for themselves the mounting problems of deforestation, land degradation, and pollution of both air and water. Moreover, civilian politics re-established itself after the 1980 coup d'état, carving out a space for people to organize around claims of certain rights.¹⁹

One of the first of these movements was the rural resistance that emerged in the mid-1990s in the town of Bergama in western Turkey. Bergama became a model both for successful protest movements and for government tactics of criminalization.²⁰ The resistance was primarily led by peasants in alliance with urban activists, local politicians, and environmental lawyers, in response to Turkey's first modern gold-mining project, led by the multinational company Eurogold. While Eurogold's uprooting of 3,000 olive and pine trees sparked the protests, the project's plans to use cyanide—a highly toxic material—in gold extraction and to store toxic waste in the village became the central issues around which the resistance revolved.²¹ The movement became a community-based struggle to protect rural livelihoods and landscapes through sit-ins, occupations, marches, lobbying, petitions, and court cases; it attracted unprecedented media attention and soon won overwhelming public support.²²

Eurogold and the Turkish government responded to the Bergama resistance with tactics ranging from persuasion to intimidation, from violent repression by state security forces to prosecutions and trials. From their perspective, one of the most effective tactics to diminish public support for the movement was accusing the resistance of espionage against the state. The allegation was that “foreign powers”—in this case, German foundations—

were providing support to the activists who were, in turn, spying in favor of Germany, an exporter of gold to Turkey that was allegedly trying to prevent Turkey from mining its own gold. This tactic proved highly successful in delegitimizing and criminalizing the resistance.

The legacy of Bergama continues to shape grassroots environmental mobilizations in Turkey, as well as government responses. As one of the first and most famous episodes of environmental activism in the country, the Bergama resistance established a repertoire of actions and arguments linking environmental rights, people's livelihoods, and social justice. The legacy of this anti-mining movement is also visible in terms of the tools that the political and economic elites in Turkey have used for purposes of criminalizing environmentalists. Today, accusations of “alliance with foreign powers” continue to be heavily used to delegitimize environmental movements, along with overt violence, suppression, and incarceration. Recently, the government has added a new ploy to its toolbox: its own self-proclaimed greenness.

Greening as a Tool of Criminalization

The Justice and Development Party faced mounting environmental protests only a few years after it was elected to power in 2002. As the government embraced a neoliberal agenda in full force, the ecologically destructive impacts of its policies led to rising public mobilization over energy, construction, and extraction projects. The *Ecology Almanac 2005–2016*—which lists public actions over ecological issues in Turkey, such as panels, media releases, and protests—identifies the year 2005 as the beginning of both a new assault on nature and a new wave of mobilization to defend the environment.²³

The resistance to private-sector construction of small-scale hydroelectric power plants (HEPPs) illustrates this new phase in both the proliferation and the repression of environmental movements. As part of the liberalization of the energy sector, after 2003 the government enacted a series of laws and regulations paving the way for more private investment in hydroelectric power. In this regard, small HEPPs—the power plants that function by channeling river flow and using the elevation gradient of the flowing water to produce energy—have played a central role. Whereas only 71 small hydropower plants existed in the country in 2002, by 2016 this number had increased to 451, making small hydropower “the most ubiquitous energy infrastructure in contemporary Turkey.”²⁴ The government branded the small HEPPs as clean and green energy infrastructures that did not

contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and that used a renewable source—water—to generate electricity.

Nevertheless, the sheer number of HEPP constructions all over the country soon caused an array of social and ecological problems—the drying of the rivers and the changes in riverbeds, given the diversion of the water flow; the destruction of forest ecosystems caused by energy transmission lines; the allocation of river water use rights to private companies; and the exclusion of local communities from decision-making—that led to rural protests. As a result, the mid-2000s witnessed numerous protests to protect the river valleys in the face of encroaching energy companies and the government policies that permitted their expansion. These local, rural struggles were primarily led by residents of the valleys impacted by HEPP constructions. They were also supported by activists from the cities and by rural-to-urban migrants who maintained their social ties with the valleys.²⁵

In 2008, then Prime Minister Erdoğan visited his hometown of Rize, a province in the eastern Black Sea region. With its many rivers and streams running through deep valleys, Rize had become a hot spot for small HEPP construction and rising anti-HEPP protests. In a public address, Erdoğan paid particular attention to these protests: It was then that the government for the first time pronounced itself as green, in contrast to what Erdoğan cast as the false environmentalism of the protesters.

“In different parts of the world, there are environmentalists like these. You ask them, ‘What do you do?’ and you find out that they don’t have a proper job. They become environmentalists just to make use of their free time. Tomorrow the newspapers will [...] say, ‘He objected to the environmentalists.’ I am the most genuine environmentalist. I am the real environmentalist,” he declared, amid applause.²⁶ Erdoğan then invited anyone questioning his environmentalist credentials to consider the public water provision during his term as mayor of Istanbul (1994–98). That Turkey was a signatory of the Kyoto Protocol was offered as further evidence of the AKP government’s environmentalism. According to Erdoğan, the environmentalists’ lack of appreciation for these actions proved that their real concern was not protecting the environment, but advancing their own political agenda.

As Erdoğan had predicted, activists reacted strongly to his speech, rejecting both his characterization of environmentalists as idlers and his claims of being the best caretaker of nature. The co-spokesperson of

the Green Party of Turkey declared that the prime minister’s words were a manifestation of the increasing coercion being inflicted on environmentalists.²⁷ Indeed, the coercive dimensions of Erdoğan’s approach were quick to materialize. At the time of Erdoğan’s speech, the Ecological Utopias Association was holding an international camp in Sinop, another province of the Black Sea region, to raise awareness of renewable energy alternatives. Although the camp organizers had obtained the necessary permissions from the relevant authorities, the police and gendarmerie nevertheless harassed camp participants on the basis of their participation in a local anti-nuclear protest. Just a few hours after Erdoğan’s speech, the camp received the final blow: The regional forestry directorate and the gendarmerie revoked their authorization to hold the camp. Participants resisted the evacuation of the camp and held a protest in front of the governor’s office, which ended with the detention of 33 activists.

In subsequent years, protests over environmental destruction gathered steam all over the country. In the summer of 2013, protesters at Gezi Park in central Istanbul fought to protect an urban green space from the threat of destruction: The plan for redesigning Taksim Square involved replacing the park with a replica of a historical military barracks, which would house a shopping mall and hotel. The protests started with a relatively small group of activists who had been organizing against gentrification, construction, and the privatization of urban space. When protestors camped overnight in the park to prevent the uprooting of trees, they were met with brutal police violence—including heavy tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons, in addition to the burning of their tents.

Support for the resistance against the transformation of Gezi Park quickly spread across the country and turned into one of the largest grassroots mobilizations in Turkey’s history. The protesters expressed discontent with the oppressive regime, the increasingly authoritarian rule, and the restriction of rights and freedoms as well as with the commodification of nature and the destruction of common spaces. After four days of street demonstrations, thousands of people occupied Gezi Park and Taksim Square for fifteen days.

During these days of occupation, ongoing protests in different parts of Istanbul and the country faced recurrent police violence. After two weeks, the occupation of Gezi ended with a final police crackdown and the violent expulsion of the protestors. The mobilization then continued in the form of neighborhood forums. People’s forums had already taken place during

the occupation of Gezi as a means of decision-making via direct democracy. Upon the forced evacuation of the park, these forums dispersed to city neighborhoods. People gathered to discuss topics ranging from local neighborhood issues and citywide problems of gentrification and environmental destruction to broader questions of national politics.²⁸ To this day, the replica military barracks/shopping mall complex has not yet been built in Gezi Park.

In addition to police violence, prosecutions, and incarceration, the government's response to the protests has been marked by repeated proclamations of its own green credentials. In his first public address during the Gezi protests, Prime Minister Erdoğan offered the greening activities of the AKP government as constituting unmistakable proof that it embraced environmentalism. Once again referring to his tenure as mayor of Istanbul, Erdoğan recalled the tree planting activities he had organized: "We imported trees from Italy and Germany because I wanted to make the city green as soon as possible. And now we have planted 2 billion saplings all over Turkey, in addition to 750 million trees between 3 and 10 years old. We have built around 160 parks all over Turkey. We also provide for free 250,000 or 500,000 square meters of land to those [individuals and organizations] who will plant trees."²⁹

According to Erdoğan, a government that showed such vigor when it came to tree planting could neither be criticized for massacring trees nor preached to about environmentalism. In highlighting the government's greening activities, Erdoğan questioned the legitimacy of the Gezi protests as environmental mobilization. His self-proclaimed greenness helped to criminalize the protestors as "çapulcu" (looters) who took to the streets only with the intent to destroy. If the protestors were genuinely concerned about the trees, he stated, they already had an "environmentalist prime minister in this country" they could talk to; it was the government that really took care of the environment.³⁰ According to Erdoğan, the Gezi Park protests had nothing to do with environmental concerns. Most of the protestors had never been to the park before, he noted, so they could not really care about it that much; they went there just to destroy public property, loot stores, set fire to cars, wreck the economy, and upset the political order.

In his speech at the 2019 tree planting festival discussed in the first paragraph of this Brief, Erdoğan recalled what he called the Gezi "events" in an aggressive tone at odds with the festival's supposedly celebratory mood: "Back in time, some people intended to loot our cities under the excuse of [protecting] trees. For

weeks, they set the streets on fire; they plundered the properties of our shopkeepers." Amidst the audience's shouts of "Çapulcular!" (looters!)—a term they had borrowed from his earlier speeches—Erdoğan added: "Here we are, planting trees. So where are those who stirred up trouble while pointing at the trees? Where are those who verbally assaulted us under the guise of environmentalism? They are nowhere to be found. They haven't planted a single tree. Because planting trees is not their concern. They are interested in burning down Turkey."³¹

The symbolism of tree planting enabled the government both to present itself as a caretaker of the environment and to denounce environmental mobilization as illegitimate, criminal activity. In this formulation, state-led greening practices bear a two-layered political meaning. By reflecting the government's commitment and dedication to greening, they convey an image of the grassroots mobilizations as disingenuous and politically motivated. The self-proclaimed greenness of the government suggests that legitimate environmentalism can only be apolitical: Concern about the environment is genuine only to the extent that it is detached from political concerns. By accusing grassroots protestors of having political motivations, the government set up these activists to face more serious charges. Sixteen defendants are caught up in a lengthy and ongoing Gezi Park prosecution that began in 2019. The indictment defined the Gezi protests as a coup attempt, and the defendants face charges of attempting to overthrow the government, disrupting public order, and looting.³² Delegitimizing environmental movements in contrast to the ostensibly genuine green credentials of the government thus paves the way for depicting the protests as a threat to domestic security, which provides a pretext to oppress activists with the full weight of Turkey's criminal justice system.

The Challenge to State-Led Greening

The ruling power's appeal to greenness asserts a claim to power and authority, but it also creates new fronts for resistance and draws new actors into criticism. Today, forestry experts are increasingly joining the critical voices that challenge how the AKP uses greening practices for its own political purposes. Although forestry policies have long been controversial in Turkey, in the past, expert criticism focused primarily on the destruction or overexploitation of forests. Now, tree planting and afforestation have become objects of critique as well.

A prominent forestry professor explained in a 2019 newspaper article, for example, that the number of

trees planted by the government cannot be directly correlated with the government's claims about the size of the reforested area, since not all saplings successfully grow into trees. He further observed that the increase in forest area cannot be attributed to the AKP government, since forestation happens over a long time frame. The increase in the size of forest area, he explained, was the result of forestation practices conducted prior to the AKP government.³³

A second forestry expert contributed to this line of criticism in a newspaper interview entitled “The AKP Cannot Claim That They Have Increased the Forest Size.” He argued that the increase in forest area was caused by factors other than the government's proclaimed intention to green the country: specifically, increasing rural-to-urban migration, the regeneration of forests without human intervention, and new land surveys that now included previously unregistered forests in official statistics. He also pointed out that the increase in afforestation was mostly due to the increase in rehabilitation work needed to restore forests degraded under the AKP, rather than resulting from the creation of new ones.³⁴

In addition, these experts criticized the government's narrow focus on forestation and tree planting; they underlined the *deforestation* simultaneously taking place: 221,000 hectares (approximately 546,000 acres) underwent forestation after 2013, but 226,000 hectares (nearly 558,500 acres) were *deforested* in the same period.

A further example of forestry experts' pushback against the politics of greening took place during Turkey's wildfires in summer 2021. The largest wildfires in Turkey's recent history turned 135,000 hectares (approximately 333,500 acres) of Mediterranean forest to ash and took the lives of eight people and thousands of animals. While the expanding fire consumed the Mediterranean provinces, Turkey's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry appealed to citizens to donate to the “Breath for the Future” campaign that had been launched as part of National Tree Planting Day in 2019. During the wildfires, the campaign website added a new pop-up window juxtaposing an image of trees engulfed in flames with lush forest greenery. The pop-up window invited citizens to donate a sapling to generate some collective hope amidst the devastation and cultivate a “breath for the future” in fire-affected areas.

The promise of post-fire forest restoration through tree planting resonated with the AKP government's self-proclaimed greenness—but it also was a target of criticism from forestry experts. They challenged

the understanding of tree planting as necessarily beneficial: In the fire-prone Mediterranean, they pointed out, planting trees could actually lead to disaster.³⁵ Mediterranean forests, they explained, have developed natural survival skills (such as pine cones remaining intact in the flames, only to open afterwards and germinate with the first rains falling on the sun-filled and nutrient-rich post-fire soil), which give them a unique capacity for recovering from wildfires. Planting trees would prevent the burnt forests from regenerating naturally, they pointed out, and could even damage their capacity to do so.

The observations of these experts were circulated widely across both social and traditional media, creating a space for public debate over the merits of tree planting. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry felt compelled to respond. In a public statement, the director of the Afforestation Department explained that devastated forests would be left to regenerate naturally in some areas, while seeding and planting would be employed elsewhere. But the director added that the department did not have the patience to wait for self-regeneration: Priority would be given to greening as soon as possible. The next National Tree Planting Day, which took place on November 11, 2021, consequently targeted fire-affected areas with great vigor, prompting several ecology scientists to denounce this activity as an “aggressive intervention” that damaged biodiversity as well as nature's capacity for regeneration.³⁶

The AKP government's self-proclaimed greenness, then, has generated criticism regarding the validity, relevance, and ecological benefits of greening practices. Forestry experts and ecology scientists have taken an active role in the controversy by producing and publicizing knowledge that challenges the government's goal of establishing control over the environmental agenda. By challenging the government's self-proclaimed greenness, experts' critiques also push back against the delegitimization and criminalization of environmental activism and activists.

Concluding Reflections

The history of creating a green nation-state in Turkey dates back to the foundation of the Republic in 1923. From the beginning, the ruling elite equated green spaces with modernity and civilization, and tree planting became a central component of building an ethnically homogeneous and modern national identity. Today, the Justice and Development Party government claims to be continuing this endeavor by planting trees at an unprecedented scale. The government promotes a

National Tree Planting Day, in which millions of saplings are planted each year, as following in this tradition. Representing state-led greening as a mere continuation of past practices, however, obscures its novel political significance.

In the contemporary context, the government's claim to be "the most genuine environmentalist" is based on the notion that environmentalism is an apolitical act that is best carried out by the state itself. Yet in fashioning this green self-image, President Erdoğan and his government stigmatize environmental activists as disingenuous, politically motivated actors who want to create disorder and chaos by overthrowing the government—which in turn paves the way for oppressing protest movements. Accusations that activists threaten domestic security have been used to subject them to police violence, legal prosecution, and incarceration. Erdoğan's ostensibly apolitical greenness forms the basis for a highly political goal: the criminalization of grassroots environmentalism.

This analysis has implications beyond Turkey, as the increasing criminalization of environmental activism is a worldwide phenomenon: Recent research shows that, in the last fifteen years, murders of environmental activists have doubled.³⁷ To understand the various forms of injustice and rights violations that socio-environmental movements face in different parts of the world, analysts need to examine the wide range of tactics deployed by states and corporate powers. In the case of Turkey, Erdoğan's use of greening to promote a notion of apolitical environmentalism makes it possible for him to depict protestors as threats to the political order—and thereby provides a pretext for using force to repress activists and the protest movement generally. Though tree planting might appear to be an innocuous activity, in Turkey its roots are intertwined with coercion and oppression.

Endnotes

- 1 "President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declares November 11th as 'National Tree Planting Day,'" Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, accessed February 26, 2021.
- 2 "11 Milyon Ağaç: Bugün Fidan, Yarın Nefes' Programında Yaptıkları Konuşma" [The speech given during the program "11 Million Trees: Today Saplings, Tomorrow Our Breath"], Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, accessed December 20, 2021. In this Brief, all translations from Turkish to English are the responsibility of the author.
- 3 I use "greening" broadly to refer to the practice of making a space both green and environmentally sound. Some critical scholars have dubbed states' and corporations'

- greening claims and practices "greenwashing": that is, conveying an image of caring for the environment to gloss over environmentally destructive practices.
- 4 For political and cultural histories and ethnographies of tree planting and greening in the Middle East, see Iruş Braverman, *Planted Flags: Trees, Land, and Law in Israel/Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Pernilla Ouis, "'Greening the Emirates': The Modern Construction of Nature in the United Arab Emirates," *Cultural Geographies* 9, no. 3 (2002): 334–47; and Gareth Doherty, *Paradoxes of Green: Landscapes of a City-Scape* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2017).
- 5 To read more on the Kemalist period, as well as the shifts and continuities vis-à-vis the post-Kemalist, AKP period, see Hikmet Kocamaner, "How New is Erdoğan's 'New Turkey'?" *Middle East Brief* 91 (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, April 2015).
- 6 A. Afetinan, İzmir İktisat Kongresi, 17 Şubat–4 Mart, 1923 [İzmir Economic Conference, February 17– March 4, 1923] (Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1982).
- 7 The top-down, state-led project of transforming nature also called for citizens' engagement. All over the country, central and local state officials organized tree-planting festivals aiming to get ordinary citizens to work the soil and plant saplings and to instill a love for trees into people's hearts and minds, as love of nature was equated with love for the nation. See Erhan Kılıç, *Osmanlı'dan Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'ne Ağaç Bayramları* [Tree festivals from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey] (Orman Mühendisleri Odası Yayınevi, 2020), 66.
- 8 Hande Özkan, "Cultivating the Nation in Nature: Forestry and Nation-Building in Turkey," PhD diss., (Yale University, 2013).
- 9 Caterina Scaramelli, *How to Make a Wetland: Water and Moral Ecology in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021); Kyle T. Evered and Emine Ö. Evered, "Governing Population, Public Health, and Malaria in the Early Turkish Republic," *Journal of Historical Geography* 37, no. 4 (2011): 470–82.
- 10 Süleyman Demirel, *Süleyman Demirel: Bir Ömür Suyun Peşinde* [Süleyman Demirel: A life in pursuit of water], (ABC Medya Ajansı, 2005), 17.
- 11 Ibid., 24.
- 12 *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (1987). <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>
- 13 Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory & Event* 7, no. 1 (2003): 1–43.
- 14 Arturo Escobar, "Constructing Nature: Elements for a Poststructural Political Ecology," in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, ed. Richard Peet and Michael Watts (New York: Routledge, 1996). For a critical analysis of how sustainable development and green economy frameworks are used in Turkey to depoliticize environmental issues, see Ethemcan Turhan and Arif Cem Gündoğan, "The Post-politics of the Green Economy in Turkey: Re-claiming the Future?" *Journal of Political Ecology* 24, no. 1 (2017): 277–95.
- 15 For an ethnographic account of sustainable city building in Abu Dhabi as a practice of sustaining the status quo

- through technical adjustments, see Gökçe Günel, *Spaceship in the Desert: Energy, Climate Change, and Urban Design in Abu Dhabi* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 16 Sinan Erenşü, "Powering Neoliberalization: Energy and Politics in the Making of a New Turkey," *Energy Research & Social Science* 41 (2018): 148–57.
 - 17 [Karbon Nötr Türkiye Yolunda İlk Adım: Kömürden Çıkış 2030 \[First Step in the Pathway to a Carbon-Neutral Turkey: Coal Phase Out 2030\] \(2021\).](#)
 - 18 [Kuzey Ormanlari Savunması, Kuzey Ormanlari Tehdit ve Tahrip Raporu \[Report on threats to and destruction of the Northern Forests\] \(2021\).](#)
 - 19 It is important to note that political rights were not expanding evenly for all groups. The 1990s were very oppressive and violent years for the Kurdish movement.
 - 20 As Ümit Şahin (2019) notes, the resistance to the construction of a coal-fired power plant in Gökova Bay in the Aegean region "triggered the first popular national environmental debate in 1984." But whereas urban environmentalists were at the center of the Gökova movement, the Bergama case attracted extensive media and public attention as a rural people's mobilization—and set the stage for future environmental resistance movements as well. See Ümit Şahin, "The Politics of Environment and Climate Change," in *The Routledge Handbook of Turkish Politics*, eds. Alpaslan Özerdem and Matthew Whiting, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 177–189.
 - 21 Tarik Nejat Dinç, "Incomplete: Risk Topographies and Conflict Landscapes in Turkey in the Age of The New Gold Rush," PhD diss., (Stanford University, 2022).
 - 22 Aykut Çoban, "Community-based Ecological Resistance: The Bergama Movement in Turkey," *Environmental Politics* 13, no. 2 (2004): 438–60.
 - 23 Cemil Aksu and Ramazan Korkut, *Ekoloji Almanağı 2005–2016 [Ecology almanac, 2005–2016]* (Istanbul: Yeni İnsan Yayınevi, 2005).
 - 24 Sinan Erenşü, "Fragile Energy: Power, Nature, and the Politics of Infrastructure in the 'New Turkey'" PhD diss., (University of Minnesota, 2016).
 - 25 To read more on anti-HEPP struggles, see Mine Islar, "Struggles for Recognition: Privatisation of Water Use Rights of Turkish Rivers," *Local Environment* 17, no. 3 (2012): 317–29; Özlem Aslan, "Resistances against Hydropower Projects as Place-Based Struggles: The Case of Artvin, Turkey" PhD diss., (University of Toronto, 2019); Zeynep Kadirbeyoğlu and Ekin Kurtiç, "Problems and Prospects for Genuine Participation in Water Governance in Turkey," in *Contemporary Water Governance in the Global South: Scarcity, Marketization, and Participation*, ed. Leila M. Harris, Jacqueline A. Goldin, and Christopher Sneddon (New York: Routledge, 2015), 199–215.
 - 26 [Radikal Newspaper, "Erdoğan: Çevrecinin Daniskası Benim" \[Erdoğan: I am the Most Genuine Environmentalist\], August 23, 2008.](#)
 - 27 [Radikal Newspaper, "Erdoğan'a Sert Tepki" \[Strong Reaction to Erdoğan\], August 25, 2008.](#)
 - 28 Bengi Akbulut, "'A Few Trees in Gezi Park': Resisting the Spatial Politics of Neoliberalism in Turkey," in *Urban Forests, Trees, and Green Space: A Political Ecology Perspective*, ed. L. Anders Sandberg, Adrina Bardekjian, and Sadia Butt, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 227–41. The description and analysis in this Brief of both the Gezi uprising and the subsequent neighborhood forums also draw upon the author's participant observation.
 - 29 [Milliyet Newspaper, "Erdoğan Gezi Olaylarından Sonra İlk Kez Konuştu" \[Erdoğan spoke for the first time after the Gezi events\], June 2, 2013.](#)
 - 30 [Radikal Newspaper, "Başbakan Erdoğan: Biz Birkaç Çapulcunun Yaptıklarını Yapmayız" \[Prime Minister Erdoğan: We won't do what a couple of looters do\], June 6, 2013.](#)
 - 31 A video recording of the festival is available on YouTube, accessed December 28, 2021.
 - 32 The never-ending prosecution process with regard to the Gezi protests has become an ongoing tool of oppression. The first prosecution took place in 2014, in which twenty-six defendants faced trial; in 2015, all were acquitted. In 2019, based on the accusation of intending to overthrow the government, another prosecution began, this time with sixteen defendants, two of whom were held in pre-trial detention. Though all the defendants were acquitted in 2020, the Court of Appeal has reversed the judgment. Throughout this process, since 2017, Osman Kavala, a well-known businessman and founder and member of many civil society organizations in Turkey, has remained under pre-trial detention.
 - 33 [Miray Gökçe, "Türkiye'de Fidanlar Artıyor, Ormanlar Azalıyor" \[In Turkey, as the Number of Saplings Increases, the Forest Area Decreases\], Deutsche Welle Türkçe, January 16, 2019.](#)
 - 34 [Özer Akdemir, "AKP Orman Varlığını Biz Arttırdık Diyemez" \[The AKP cannot claim that they have increased the forest size\], Evrenel, March 6, 2017.](#)
 - 35 [Serkan Alan, "Doç. Dr. Tavşanoğlu: Ağaç Dikme Seferberliği Ekolojik Felaket Getirir" \[Assoc. Prof. Tavşanoğlu: Tree planting mobilization would lead to ecological disaster\], Gazete Duvar, August 26, 2019.](#)
 - 36 Çağatay Tavşanoğlu and Juli G. Pausas, "Turkish Postfire Action Overlooks Biodiversity," *Science* 375, no. 6579 (2022): 391.
 - 37 Nathalie Butt, Frances Lambrick, Mary Menton, and Anna Renwick, "The Supply Chain of Violence," *Nature Sustainability* 2 (2019): 742–47.

Middle East Brief

Criminalizing Environmental Activism in Turkey

Ekin Kurtiç

Recent Middle East Briefs:

Available on the Crown Center website: www.brandeis.edu/crown

Nader Habibi, “The Belt and Road Initiative in the Eastern Mediterranean: China’s Relations with Egypt, Turkey, and Israel,” No. 146

Hadi Kahalzadeh, “Iran After Trump: Can Biden Revive the Nuclear Deal and Does Iran Even Want to? No 145

Huma Gupta, “The Birth of Sadr City and Popular Protest in Iraq,” No. 144

Alex Boodrookas, “Reconceptualizing Noncitizen Labor Rights in the Persian Gulf,” No. 143

