

Climate and Political Injustice in the Context of Climate Change: A Case Study of Sanliurfa City in the Kurdish Region of Turkey

M. Leyla Turanalp Uysal
Harvard Graduate School of Design, MDes, Ecologies
mltuysal@mit.edu

Keywords	Climate Change Governance, Indigenous, Climate Justice, Climate Action, Kurdish, Turkey, Agriculture, Dams
City Population (Metropolitan Region)	596,637
City Area (Metropolitan Region)	18,584 km ²
City GDP	6,413 USD
Climate Zone	CSA (hot summer Mediterranean)
ARC3.3 Linkage	Governance, Enabling Policy Environments, and Just Transitions



Figure 1: Geopolitical Map of Turkey

Source: Uysal, L. 2022

Introduction. This paper examines the political issues and injustice surrounding climate change initiatives in the city of Sanliurfa, focusing on the Turkish government’s discriminatory treatment of Kurdish cities. By exploring the nexus between politics, injustice, and climate change, this study aims to shed light on the challenges faced by marginalized regions in addressing climate-related issues. The paper draws on scholarly research, reports, and government documents to analyze the underlying political dynamics and exploitation practices that hinder effective climate action in Sanliurfa. It also highlights the broader socio-political context in which these issues arise and their implications for equitable climate governance.

Geographic Description with Identified Environmental Stressors. Climate change poses multifaceted challenges that demand a united global effort. Regrettably, political issues and misrepresentation of fund allocation often hinder progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating the impacts of climate change. This paper aims to shed light on the complex interplay between political issues, injustices, and climate change in the context of the Kurdish region, with a specific focus on Sanliurfa as a case study.

The province of Urfa is an 18,584-square-kilometer plateau that bridges the Anatolian and Arabian peninsulas (City of Sanliurfa, 2023). It comprises ten districts, namely Akcakale, Birecik, Bozova, Ceylanpinar, Halfeti, Hilvan, Harran, Siverek, Suruc, and Viransehir, with a population of 2,143,000

million (TUIK, 2022). It is situated in the southeastern part of Turkey, a flat land encircled by limestone mountains in the watersheds of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The southeastern region has two seasons: harsh summers and freezing, rainy winters. Temperatures in the summertime (June-September) could go as high as 106°F (Aydogdu & Yenigün, 2016). Some of the environmental stressors and climate-related vulnerabilities in the city of Urfa are earthquakes, flooding, drought, extreme heat events, urban heat island effects, famine, and climate justice. Earthquakes, flooding, famine and climate justice are significantly at the center of this research.

Climate Governance. Providing better management in terms of climate governance is essential to understand the importance of investments. Without investments, it’s hardly possible to manage the rising temperatures and its negative impacts on livelihoods. The majority of climate disruptions are expected to threaten human health, employment, and well-being worldwide according to the UN Climate Action Reports (UN, 2023). Managing climate risks and its impact on human health requires significant amounts of investment in new energy systems, infrastructure, food production, rural development, coastal planning etc., and can minimize the threatening impacts of climate change in the physical context. CO2 emissions must be reduced, industrialized countries must minimize their emission productions and recognize the need to provide financial support to the most vulnerable countries across the globe, as they are the ones that are experiencing the most dire consequences from climate change.

Agriculture. Investing in agricultural production would be one important way of reducing the CO₂ emissions by advocating for more sustainable and organic farming practices in the Global South. To exemplify this, thriving in the fertile crescent, agriculture became the primary source of income and was very influential on the culture and economy of the Kurdish regions of Turkey. Some of the significant cultivated crops in the region are wheat, barley, lentils, chickpeas, and pistachios, with sesame and cotton being primary industrial crops (World Bank, 2021). After the Greater Anatolian Project known as GAP - a collection of 49 constructed dams - the interaction of the rivers and soil has been disrupted. The microclimate in the region slightly started to change, negatively impacting the agricultural production in the region. The focus has shifted from agriculture to textile and dress-making industries over time. Being one of the world's major agriculture producers, Turkey's farmer population is estimated to be close to 16% (TUIK, 2022).

Much of the farmer labor is in the Eastern and Southeastern of Turkey, particularly in the Sanliurfa province. After approving the Green Deal Action Plan in 2021, Turkey shifted its usage of pesticides and fertilizers (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021), to more organic and sustainable farming practices. With these recent changes and adjustments in sustainable farming practices, Turkey anticipates receiving \$104.5 million from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (Investing in Rural People, 2023) and €430 million from the European Union for rural development projects until 2027 (European Commission, 2023). Urfa's agricultural region may benefit from these development projects within the Green Deal Action Plan. In this case, the Turkish central government has direct access to these funding opportunities. However, it's not clear if Turkey has provided equal funding opportunities to the vulnerable Kurdish farmer communities in the city of Urfa or elsewhere. The funding process and mechanisms are not provided in a transparent manner, which leads many to doubt the climate justice practices in the climate governance context.

Floods. The construction of massive dams and the disturbance of watersheds across the Kurdish regions has caused erosion in many places over the past several decades. Thus, the amount and frequency of floods have been at extreme levels. For instance, the most recent extreme floods in Urfa and Adiyaman provinces brought fatalities, massive destruction, and damage to the region in March 2023. Although periodic flooding is critical for the fertile land, managing flooding has historically been a concern for the societies between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Dams. The region's political fragility and ongoing struggles further complicate the already challenging task of addressing climate change. For instance, the building of dams was an attempt at managing water resources in the 20th century that created new environmental issues particularly in the Kurdish regions in Turkey. To promote economic development, the construction of big dams increased drastically from the 1930s to the 1970s, peaking during that decade (WCD, 2000). However, depending on location and time, dams can positively and

negatively impact environmental flow (Dwivedi et al., 2010). While non-native species may increase and the riparian area downstream of a dam may expand (Zeiringer et al., 2018), the dam's water-holding structure interferes with the river's natural flow, adversely affecting the ecosystem, aquatic life, and rivers.

The 2023 floods, such as the ones in eastern Turkey, were at extreme levels of risk. Climate variability, including the warming temperatures and increased frequency of excessive rainfall, contributes to these floods. Many scholars have recognized the impact of the dams and reservoirs on local climate in the context of the changes in the land surface and water cycle (Yiyang Zhao et al., 2021). Scientific studies and modeling done in 2021 show the negative impacts of the 200 dams constructed between 1995 and 2005 on microclimates (Yiyang Zhao et al., 2021). Dams are known to be disturbing the natural landscape, ecosystems, microclimates and soil quality. In looking at Urfa's history, the negative impacts of dams and the flooding in the region might provide a better understanding of the decrease in agricultural production and increase in climate injustices.

Earthquakes. The Kurdish regions lie on the East Anatolian fault line and was recently hit by two devastating earthquakes - known as the twin earthquakes, with magnitudes of 7.4 and 7.8 on February 6, 2023. After these devastating earthquakes and the extreme flooding that followed, it is of the utmost importance that the ancient city of Urfa become one of the most protected regions in Turkey due to its vulnerability to climate change-related events. Sanliurfa has emerged as a rapidly developing urban center since 2013. However, it frequently grapples with the repercussions of climate change, including floods, heat waves, earthquakes, and droughts.

Historical Context Aiding in the Vulnerability of Urfa. The Kurdish people are a unique ethnic group native to Mesopotamia with outstanding cultural heritage dating back thousands of years. Kurds have been marginalized and persecuted in the countries they inhabit, despite their significant contributions to society (Houston, 2009). In Turkey, the Kurdish population has played an essential role in the country's progress, but historical tensions have been the highlight of their relationship with the government, particularly in Urfa. The most recent earthquakes brought these injustices to the international community's attention.

On February 6th, 2023 "the twin earthquakes" of 7.4 and 7.8 magnitude struck the region, and during the most critical initial 36 hours of the disaster, all international aid offers were publicly rejected by the Turkish government, and the roads were blocked to enter the region due to safety concerns. TIME magazine stated that the Turkish government faced harsh criticism for its disaster response or rather lack thereof in the first week of the disaster (TIME, 2023). Military forces were not sent on site for help, people were left alone, many residents were not able to reach out to Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), while help offers were constantly being rejected (Burga, 2023). It was visible in the international arena that the Kurdish regions received no support from the Turkish government

in the first most critical 36 hours of such a massive disaster.

A month after these earthquakes, there were extreme flood events in the southeastern part of Turkey, brutally threatening the earthquake victims, their tents, and the remaining damaged homes and lives. The local and regional aid was nowhere to be found and people were left alone once again in the middle of a crisis. These floods were the result of mismanagement of the soil quality and aggressive construction of the dams in the region. The most famous ancient fertile lands of Mesopotamia have been facing erosion since the 1950s, which led to the extreme floods and eventually caused many deaths in the region, (Wilks, 2023). These disasters have shown the inequalities and injustices that Kurdish people have been facing in Turkey. The government's lack of response has mobilized the public across Turkey, with people gathering for help and providing aid to the site.

After these catastrophes, the mistreatment of the Kurdish people by the Turkish government was subject to public discussion and led to significant awareness around this historic issue. Moreover, there is growing recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusivity, and efforts are underway to foster better understanding and appreciation for Kurdish culture and heritage. Embracing diversity and promoting unity are crucial to shaping a more hopeful and inclusive future for all, especially in the context of climate governance.

Political and Administrative Structure in Turkey and in Sanliurfa. The city of Urfa has a complex political and administrative geography involving several levels of government. At the national level, the Turkish government, based in Ankara, governs the city, which is responsible for overall policy and regulation across the country. Urfa is one of the 81 provinces of Turkey, each with a governor appointed by the national government. The governor oversees the provincial administration, which includes various departments such as education, health, and public works.

Urfa has a city government at the municipal level with a mayor and a city council. The mayor is elected by popular vote and is responsible for managing the city's daily affairs, including municipal services, public safety, and economic development. The city council comprises elected representatives who oversee the mayor's work and make decisions on zoning, budgeting, and infrastructure projects. Urfa has several neighborhoods and/or districts, each with a municipal government. These neighborhood administrations are responsible for providing local services such as trash collection and maintaining public spaces.

Overall, Urfa's political and administrative geography is complex and involves multiple levels of governance, from the national to the neighborhood level. Each level has its liabilities and capabilities. Collaboration and coordination between these levels are fundamental to guarantee viable administration for the city's occupants.

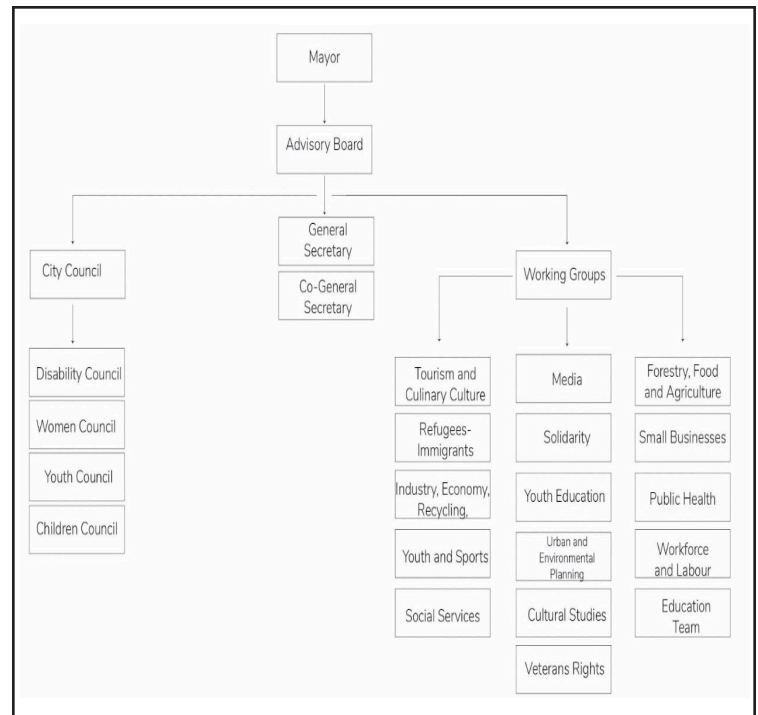


Figure 2: The City of Sanliurfa's Governance Structure
Source: Uysal, L. 2022

In the meantime, the current central government made some dramatic changes in the Turkish Governmental System, weakening the parliament and putting the president in the center of power, as seen in the graph below. This change directly shifted the power in the regional and local municipalities and has direct control of national and international funding mechanisms that support the local and regional municipalities.

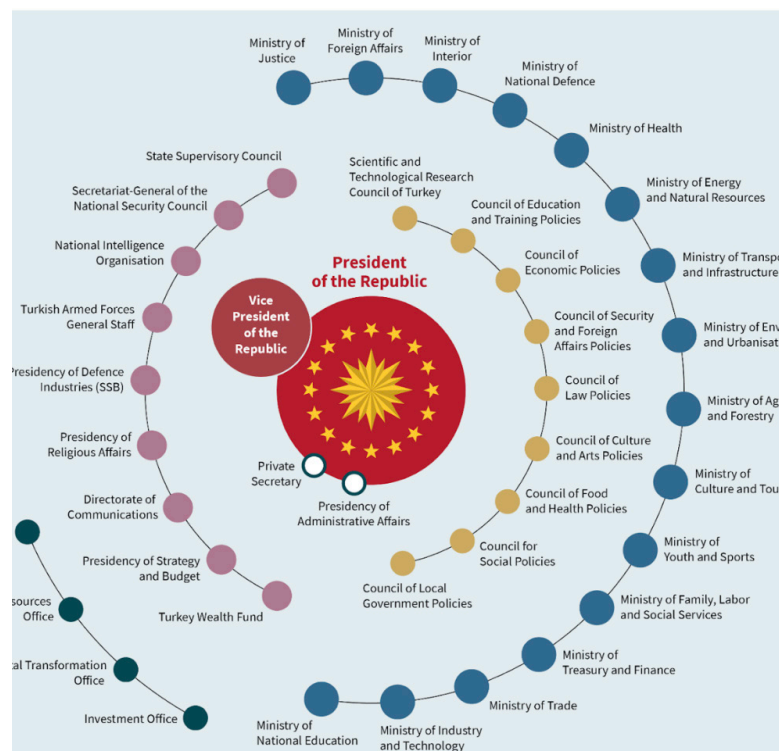


Figure 3: National Political Structure of Turkish Government

Source: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/>

The power shift from parliament to the central government has shown the effect of the president as the one man in charge during the earthquakes and disasters in the Kurdish regions, mentioned above. The president was the sole actor in the decision-making process to respond to these disasters and yet the new system jeopardized the equality and justice in disaster management and climate governance, as was seen in the lack of response to the disasters in the Kurdish regions.

Is There a Better Approach to Climate Action?

Effective climate action in a city like Urfa - a place that has many vulnerabilities, requires a collaborative effort involving various stakeholders in the climate and disaster management process. This includes bringing essential stakeholders like critical decision-makers at various levels of government, such as national, provincial, and municipal leaders, who can create policies and regulations to support climate action. However, beyond decision-makers, organized stakeholders such as environmental and local community organizations can play an essential role in advocating for climate action and mobilizing support from the public. Advocates, including researchers, educators, and media outlets, can raise awareness and generate momentum for better climate governance.

Core constituencies, including people directly affected by climate change, should also be involved in the climate action process. These may include vulnerable populations such as low-income communities and historically marginalized ethnic groups. In the context of this case study, this means Kurdish and Arab communities, indigenous groups, disabled people, and youth. These marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change but may need more resources or political power to engage in decision-making for the sake of better climate governance. It is also essential to involve businesses and industry groups, as they significantly impact emissions and can play a critical role in reducing their carbon footprint at the local scale.

Additionally, academics, scientists, and technical experts can provide valuable insights and guidance on adequate strategies and technologies for reducing emissions and adapting to climate change impacts.

Despite the importance of engaging a broad range of stakeholders, there may be challenges in ensuring that everyone is included in the climate action process. For example, marginalized communities may face barriers to participation, such as language, lack of access to resources, and political exclusion. Therefore, addressing these barriers and prioritizing equity and inclusion in the climate action process is essential. To maximize the effectiveness of climate action, it is critical to accurately gauge the challenges the city is confronted with regarding climate change and the capability of each actor to tackle them. Each stakeholder can confront the same issue from various fronts. For instance, in an example of extreme heat risk, the central government may provide financing for heat abatement projects, local governments may adopt building codes that necessitate the usage of cool roofs and green spaces, and NGOs can initiate educational campaigns on the potential health issues caused by extreme heat.

These three different actors, with unique capabilities, can address the same issue with various resources. The image below depicts both stakeholder groups recognized by the government and those who aren't recognized (i.e., minorities, indigenous and marginalized communities) yet are still active. This creates a disconnect between actors making change while needing access to funding. Meanwhile, regional and local municipalities can access funding, which has unclear data as to where and what it is being allocated towards.

Figure 4: Power Map in the Political Structure of Sanliurfa

Source: Uysal, L. 2022



What to do Next? Effectively tackling the political issues and climate injustice associated with climate change in Sanliurfa and the wider Kurdish region requires a thorough understanding of the underlying causes. One major contributing factor is the need for political leadership to confront climate change in this region and provide more adequate funding opportunities to local stakeholders including the marginalized and indigenous groups. Government officials in the region often prioritize economic expansion and development, overlooking climate change's adverse social and economic impacts. Companies and individuals with vested economic interests in the region have been accused of unjust practices and influencing government representatives for personal gains (Özdilek, 2019). This has led to environmentally damaging activities such as deforestation, droughts, and the over-exploitation of water resources, exacerbating the effects of climate change. Another challenge in the region is the need for more awareness and education regarding climate change (OECD, 2021). Most of the population remains uninformed about climate change's consequences and denies human activities' role in exacerbating it. This poses a significant barrier to generating public support for climate action and holding officials accountable for their inaction.

Educational and awareness campaigns should be launched to educate the public about the impacts of climate change and the urgent need for action. Measures should be taken to promote environmentally friendly practices, including renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and low-carbon transportation (UNDP, 2020). Robust regulations and enforcement mechanisms should also be implemented to combat unjust practices and ensure compliance with environmental regulations. In conclusion, political issues and injustice pose significant barriers to effective climate action in the Kurdish regions in Turkey. Overcoming these challenges necessitates solid political action and leadership. Providing access to funding, raising public awareness and fostering education can also create a broad-based movement supporting climate action. Strategic regulatory interventions are also essential to hold economic actors accountable for environmentally damaging practices.

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Additional Data

- **Population Density:** 118 people/km² [2023]
- **Gross National Income (GNI):** 11,730 USD (Higher-Middle Income) [2023]
- **Gini Coefficient:** 44.4 [2021]
- **Human Development Index (HDI):** 0.853 (Very High) [2023]
- **Type of Climate Intervention:** Adaptation