

POLICYBRIEF

September 2025

From Conflict to Peace: The PKK's Disarmament and the Green Potential of Peace in the Middle East

Key Messages

- Conflict in the Middle East, particularly in Kurdish regions, inflicts profound environmental damage. This ecological harm is an under-recognized consequence and driver of conflicts.
- The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) disarmament presents a unique opportunity to integrate Green Transitional Justice (GTJ), shifting from environmental destruction to ecological restoration within peacebuilding efforts in the region.
- GTJ offers a critical framework for addressing environmental harm and structural inequality.
- Conventional transitional justice fails to address environmental harm due to its anthropocentric and legalistic biases. This gap can be addressed by incorporating environmental justice as an essential element of post-conflict recovery, including the recognition of both human and non-human victims.
- Achieving durable peace requires ecological inclusion, community participation, and cross-border cooperation. This demands strategic attention to both implementation and funding.

Executive Summary

This policy brief advocates for the critical integration of environmental justice into the renewed peace process between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Republic of Türkiye, which culminated in the initial phase of PKK disarmament in July 2025. Drawing on the broader framework of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) in transitional contexts, the brief promotes the concept of Green Transitional Justice (GTJ)—an approach that addresses the ecological legacies of armed conflict, particularly in the Kurdish regions of Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria. GTJ integrates environmental justice into post-conflict recovery, advocating ecological restoration, community empowerment, and the recognition of non-human victims of war. The brief argues that conventional transitional justice mechanisms neglect environmental harm and proposes policy recommendations that embed sustainability and ecological resilience into peacebuilding agendas. By foregrounding environmental concerns, GTJ can offer a transformative pathway toward inclusive and durable peace.

A Historic Opportunity Toward Green Peace

On 11 July 2025, in a symbolic ceremony near Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI),

thirty fighters from the PKK— comprising 15 women and 15 men, including senior commanders — laid down their arms and set them ablaze. This act, witnessed by local officials, civil society representatives, journalists, and international observers, marked the first public step in the PKK’s formal disarmament process. The ceremony was the result of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s call in February 2025, which led to the PKK’s May 2025 announcement to end its four-decade-long armed insurgency against the Republic of Türkiye. In a statement read aloud during the event, the PKK declared: “[W]e voluntarily destroy our weapons, before your presence, as a step of goodwill and determination. We wish that this step will bring about peace and freedom and will have auspicious outcomes for our people, the peoples of Turkey and the Middle East, and all humanity, particularly women and the youth.”¹

This moment represents a turning point not only in the history of the PKK but also in the broader trajectory of the Kurdish question in the Middle East, spanning across the Republic of Türkiye, the Republic of Iraq, Syrian Arab Republic, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. It signals the beginning of a complex and uncertain transition — from armed-conflict to peace, and potentially, from environmental destruction to environmental justice not only in Türkiye but also in the broader region.

Despite its symbolic significance, the disarmament ceremony in Sulaymaniyah is a tentative first step in what is likely to be a long and delicate transition. Moving from armed conflict to a stable and peaceful political order demands far more than the surrender of weapons—it requires the rebuilding of trust, the creation of inclusive and accountable democratic institutions, and the meaningful resolution of long-standing grievances. This process will be complex and fragile, but it is essential for laying the foundations of a just and lasting peace.

This policy brief contends that achieving a truly just and lasting peace necessitates the explicit integration

of *environmental dimensions* into the post-conflict peace process between the PKK and Türkiye, emphasizing their broader implications for ecological justice and regional stability in the Middle East. Decades of conflict have left a profound environmental toll—scorched forests, contaminated water sources, and heavily militarized landscapes across Kurdish regions. As the peace process unfolds, this brief argues for the integration of *Green Transitional Justice*—a forward-looking framework that embeds environmental restoration into post-conflict reconciliation, democratization, and sustainable peacebuilding.² By doing so, GTJ aims to foster a transformative pathway toward inclusive and durable peace, ensuring that the environment is not merely a forgotten casualty but a central pillar of future stability and well-being.

Greening DDR: Environmental Dimensions of Post-Conflict Transitions

The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process is a critical component of post-conflict peacebuilding, designed to support the transition of former combatants into civilian life. It typically involves three interconnected phases: disarmament, the collection and disposal of weapons; demobilization, the formal discharge of fighters from armed groups; and reintegration, the social and economic inclusion of ex-combatants into society. In the case of the PKK, the 2025 decision to lay down arms marks the beginning of a complex DDR process that must be carefully managed to ensure long-term stability. Given the PKK’s transnational presence and deep ideological roots, reintegration efforts must go beyond economic support and include political recognition, psychosocial care, and community-based reconciliation. Moreover, DDR in this context must be ecologically sensitive, acknowledging the environmental legacies of conflict and supporting former fighters in roles that contribute to ecological restoration and peacebuilding.

Many non-state armed groups (NSAGs) worldwide have been actively incorporating pro-environmental awareness, policies, and actions into their broader decolonial and/or self-determination agendas.³

The PKK was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan with the initial aim of establishing an independent Kurdish state. The PKK’s insurgency against the Turkish state began in 1984 and has since resulted in the deaths of over 40,000 people, widespread displacement, and the destruction of thousands of villages. Over time, particularly from the 1990s onward, the group shifted its goals toward seeking autonomy and cultural rights for Kurds within Türkiye. The group is designated a terrorist organization by Türkiye, the United States, and the European Union, though it also commands significant support among segments of the Kurdish population in parts of Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, as well as Iran.

Such NSAGs take advantage of an *environmental twist* in implementing their agenda by intertwining environmental grievances with their ethnic, Indigenous, or national grievances, making ecological concerns an integral part of their political struggle rather than a separate or secondary issue. Struggles for cultural difference, ethnic identity, and territorial autonomy are increasingly reshaping the dynamics and narratives of environmental conflicts. These struggles are not only about access to resources or ecological preservation — they are also about power, recognition, and justice. The concept of ecological racism — also known as environmental racism or eco-racism — captures how ethnic, religious, and racial minorities are disproportionately exposed to environmental harm.^{4,5} This harm is not incidental; it is often the result of asymmetric power dynamics, colonial legacies, and violence.⁵ Environmental degradation has been an evident consequence of militarization and conflicts, affecting forests, rivers, biodiversity, and agricultural lands as well as other natural habitats and cultural landscapes. Meanwhile, this environmental damage is often ignored or otherwise legitimized by states, framing it as a necessary part of counterinsurgency or development and furthermore criminalizing environmental movements and resistance.

Given these realities, there is a growing need to rethink *environmental peace* and *conflict*.^{6,7} As scholars rightly warn, environmental peacebuilding can sometimes serve as a smokescreen — depoliticizing conflict, displacing communities, or even worsening environmental degradation.⁸ To move beyond these pitfalls, scholars and practitioners have proposed the peace ecology paradigm — an approach that combines environmental consciousness with a broader peace consciousness.⁹ This means the environment must be an essential component of the peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and inclusion processes.

The PKK's environmental twist — with its emphasis on local autonomy, ecological stewardship, and gender emancipation — offers a potential model for this kind of integrated peacebuilding. This vision has, in many ways, already found resonance across both urban and rural areas: environmental and ecology-focused organizations, local communities, and regional bar associations have actively resisted environmental harm. But realizing this vision will require more than disarmament. It will demand a transformative approach to justice—one that includes *green* transitional justice and holds *all* actors accountable.

Problem Statement

Transitional justice refers to the mechanisms societies use to address legacies of mass violence, repression, and systemic injustice during periods of political transition. These mechanisms — including truth commissions, criminal trials, reparations, and

institutional reforms — aim to promote accountability, reconciliation, and democratic transformation.^{10,11} However, conventional transitional justice has been widely critiqued for its limitations, particularly in relation to environmental harm.

Scholars underline five key problems with the mainstream transitional justice framework²:

- **Anthropocentric and Eurocentric Bias:** Conventional transitional justice is rooted in Western legal traditions that prioritize human victims and exclude Indigenous and non-Western understandings of justice and the environment.
- **Overreliance on Legalism:** By focusing narrowly on criminal accountability and legal reform, transitional justice overlooks less visible or normalized forms of environmental harm that fall outside conventional legal frameworks.
- **Neglect of Structural Inequalities:** Transitional justice fails to address long-standing systemic issues like environmental racism and resource dispossession that contribute to conflict and persist beyond it.
- **Alignment with Neoliberal Development Models:** Post-conflict recovery efforts often adopt neoliberal approaches that promote extractive industries and infrastructure over ecological restoration, exacerbating environmental and social harm.
- **Reconstruction Paradox:** In omitting environmental and structural concerns, transitional justice can unintentionally reinforce the very injustices it seeks to resolve, undermining long-term peace and sustainability.

Green Transitional Justice: A Framework for Post-Conflict Environmental Repair

In response to these limitations, GTJ expands the boundaries of justice to include environmental destruction and ecological repair, outlining six guiding principles for a green approach to transitional justice²:

- Green transitional justice must be decolonial — it must confront and dismantle colonial legacies in both environmental governance and justice processes. This involves a fundamentally “decolonizing of knowledge,” moving beyond abstract universals and incorporating the knowledge(s) of the Global South and Indigenous Peoples. By embracing these alternative understandings of violence, harm, and crime, this ensures that justice becomes culturally resonant and effectively addresses historical power imbalances.

- II. It must decenter the state — recognizing that justice can and should be pursued by communities, not solely through state institutions. This principle of inclusivity empowers local communities to define the issues they face and develop appropriate responses, fostering community-led approaches so that justice becomes more responsive to lived experiences and less prone to top-down impositions.
- III. Victimhood must include more-than-human life — recognizing ecosystems, animals, and non-human entities must be recognized as victims of violence. This broadens the traditional anthropocentric understanding of victimhood, allowing for a more complete understanding of conflict's harms and enabling "fuller forms of redress" that extend beyond human-centric reparations.
- IV. Justice is a process, not merely a mechanism — it must be ongoing, participatory, and responsive to evolving ecological and social realities. This moves beyond a one-off, legalistic approach to a dynamic, continuous engagement with justice, acknowledging that societal and ecological healing are long-term endeavors.
- V. Neoliberalism is not inevitable — post-conflict recovery must resist extractive economic models and prioritize sustainability and equity. This involves integrating alternative economic models that place a stronger emphasis on "democratic control of the economy and protection of the environment," ensuring that economic recovery does not come at the expense of ecological integrity or social well-being.
- VI. There is value in pursuing holistic justice — even if imperfect, efforts to integrate ecological, social, and political justice are necessary and worthwhile. Recognizing the "interdependence of human and ecological well-being" paves the way to achieve more comprehensive and sustainable peace outcomes by addressing the interconnectedness of all forms of life and justice.

In the Kurdish context, where environmental degradation has been a significant product of decades of conflict, GTJ offers a powerful framework for recognizing and repairing ecological harm. It supports community-led restoration, the documentation of environmental violence, and the inclusion of non-human victims in justice processes.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure that the new peace process between Türkiye and the PKK evolves into a positive peace — one that addresses not only the cessation of violence but also

the structural and ecological legacies of conflict — the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Integrating Environmental Justice into Peace Processes

Environmental concerns must be elevated to core components of the peace process, moving beyond their historical treatment as secondary issues. This requires a systemic shift in how negotiations are approached.

- a. **Integrate Environmental Justice into Peace Negotiations:** Environmental concerns must be treated as core components of the peace process. Negotiators should include environmental experts, local ecological knowledge holders, and civil society actors to ensure that ecological harm is acknowledged and addressed in any future agreements.
- b. **Recognize and Document Environmental Destruction:** Environmental harms caused by decades of armed conflict, including deforestation, water contamination, land degradation, and biodiversity loss, must be acknowledged. Truth and memory mechanisms that center community testimony, ecological data, and cultural memory must be established to support the process.
- c. **Adopt a Green Transitional Justice Framework:** Policymakers and international actors should treat the principles of GTC as foundational to post-conflict recovery. These principles broaden the concept of justice to include environmental destruction, ecological repair, and interspecies victimhood. This framework should be integrated into peacebuilding efforts to ensure that ecological damage is recognized and addressed as part of a more inclusive and sustainable post-conflict recovery.
- d. **Foster Positive Peace Through Ecological Inclusion:** Peacebuilding efforts must move beyond the pursuit of "negative peace" — the mere absence of violence — and instead embrace positive peace, which includes social justice, ecological restoration, and democratic inclusion. Nature should be recognized not only as a victim of conflict but as a participant in peacebuilding.

2. Fostering Community-Led Restoration and Equitable Resource Governance

Sustainable peace requires empowering local communities and establishing fair governance over natural resources.

- a. **Support Community-Led Ecological Restoration:** Environmental restoration projects in conflict-

affected areas should be led by local and Indigenous communities. These initiatives should prioritize ecological regeneration, cultural continuity, and sustainable livelihoods, and be protected from top-down development agendas.

- b. Ensure Equitable Access to Natural Resources:** Post-conflict governance structures must guarantee fair and inclusive access to land, water, forests, and other natural resources. This includes dismantling discriminatory policies and practices that have historically marginalized certain communities as well as stateless or Indigenous groups.
- c. Promote Cross-Border Environmental Cooperation:** Given the transboundary nature of ecosystems and Kurdish geography, regional cooperation between neighboring states is essential. Joint environmental monitoring, watershed management, and climate adaptation strategies can serve as confidence-building measures and contribute to long-term peace.
- d. Empower Local and Traditional Governance Structures:** Peacebuilding and environmental management should be rooted in regional or community-level ownership and grassroots legitimacy. Transitional justice processes must strengthen local capacities and integrate traditional leadership into peacebuilding efforts to ensure context-specific solutions, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability.

3. Strengthening Protection and Accountability

Establishing robust mechanisms for protection and accountability is paramount to ensuring environmental justice in post-conflict settings.

- a. Protect Environmental Defenders and Ecological Knowledge:** Legal and physical protection must be ensured for environmental activists, researchers, and community leaders who document or resist ecological harm. Traditional ecological knowledge must be recognized and supported as a valuable resource for post-conflict recovery and sustainability.
- b. Advance the Right to a Healthy Environment:** The right to a healthy environment must be integrated into post-conflict legal and policy frameworks, including clean air, safe water, fertile soil, and access to nature — not only as environmental goals but as fundamental human rights.
- c. Mechanisms for Environmental Reparations and Accountability:** Standalone systems to assess and fund environmental reparations post-conflict must be created. These mechanisms should enable

prompt ecological rehabilitation and prioritize environmental harm even amid broader post-war claims.

4. Sustainable Financing for Green Peacebuilding

Adequate and sustainable financing is critical to translate the principles of GTJ into tangible action.

- a. Leverage International Funds:** International funding mechanisms must be leveraged to support environmental peacebuilding. Global institutions such as the United Nations, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Green Climate Fund (GFC) should support environmental peacebuilding by aligning their mandates more closely with the intersection of environment and conflict. Shifts in institutional priorities, such as the World Bank's growing focus on climate-conflict links, should offer more opportunities to integrate environmental goals into peace and recovery efforts.
- b. Promote Innovative Financing Mechanisms:** Novel funding models like peace bonds, public-private partnerships should be pursued to diversify and stabilize financing for green post-conflict transitions.

Final Remarks

The PKK's decision to lay down arms in 2025 marks a historic opportunity to reimagine peace in the Middle East — not only as a political settlement but as a transformative process that includes environmental justice, community empowerment, and ecological repair.

By adopting the principles of GTJ, policymakers, civil society actors, and international institutions can help ensure that the legacies of environmental harm are not ignored, and that post-conflict recovery is inclusive, sustainable, and just. This means recognizing the environment as both a casualty and a stakeholder in conflict and building peace that restores not only political relations but also the ecosystems and communities that sustain life.

The road ahead is uncertain, but the current moment offers a rare chance to build a future rooted in ecological care, inclusivity, and shared responsibility. It is a chance to move from destruction to restoration, from silence to recognition, and from conflict to a peace that includes all forms of life.

References

1. BIA News Desk. Full text: PKK statement during disarmament ceremony. Bianet (2025).

2. Killean, R. & Dempster, L. *Green Transitional Justice*. (Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon [UK] ; New York, NY, 2025).
3. Munive, J. & Stepputat, F. *How Non-State Armed Groups Engage in Environmental Protection*. (2023).
4. Bullard, R. D. *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1994).
5. Pulido, L. Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism. *Capital. Nat. Social.* 27, 1–16 (2016).
6. Ide, T. et al. The Future of Environmental Peace and Conflict Research. *Environ. Polit.* 32, 1077–1103 (2023).
7. Conca, K. & Wallace, J. *Environment and Peacebuilding in War-torn Societies: Lessons from the UN Environment Programme's Experience with Postconflict Assessment*. *Glob. Gov.* 15, 485–504 (2009).
8. Ide, T. The dark side of environmental peacebuilding. *World Dev.* 127, 104777 (2020).
9. Kyrou, C. N. Peace Ecology: An Emerging Paradigm in Peace Studies. *Int. J. Peace Stud.* 12, 73–92 (2007).
10. Alici, N. *Transitional Justice and the Kurdish Conflict: A Grassroots Approach*. (Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon [UK] ; New York, NY, 2026).
11. *Transitional Justice in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Truth versus Justice*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006).

Dr. Pınar Dinç is an Environment-Conflict Nexus Research Fellow at UNU-INWEH and an associate professor of political science at the Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, working on environmental peace and conflict studies, with a particular focus on the interplay between political power, climate and environmental change, ecological degradation, authoritarianism, resistance, and migration.

Dr. Lina Eklund is an Environmental Security, Conflict and Migration Research Fellow at UNU-INWEH, an associate senior lecturer at the Department of Physical Geography and Ecosystem Science and a researcher at the Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, specializing in land system dynamics in the context of migration and armed conflict, using earth observation and spatial analysis.

Dr. Mir Matin is the Manager of the Geospatial, Climate and Infrastructure Analytics Programme at UNU-INWEH, working on the application of earth observation and geoinformation solutions to mitigate risk and enhance resilience.

Professor Kaveh Madani is the Director of UNU-INWEH and a Research Professor at the City University of New York's Remote Sensing Earth Systems Institute (CUNY CREST) with expertise in modeling complex human-nature systems to advise policy.

doi: 10.53328/INR25PDR001
ISBN: 978-92-808-6130-3

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United Nations University.

Recommended Citation: Dinç, P., Eklund, L., Matin, M., Madani, K. (2025). From Conflict to Peace: The PKK's Disarmament and the Green Potential of Peace in the Middle East. United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH), Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada, doi:10.53328/INR25PDR001.