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Migration Governance and Asylum Crises

Greenwashing Repression, Natural Disaster and the Legitimisation of Forced Migration and Non-Assistance in Syria and Eritrea/Tigray

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MAGYC Working Paper

ABSTRACT

This working paper combines research on repression in authoritarian regimes with studies of political ecology to better understand how authoritarian regimes address environmental crisis and related displacement, famine, and agricultural collapse. Climate change and global environmental change are usually seen as a threat to a society's survival, as a cause for mass displacement, or at the very least as a threat multiplier. They (or their effects) can, however, also be used to legitimise repressive practises, a finding which has received much less attention. In a two-step approach, the paper problematizes how environmental crises are presented as 'natural' in authoritarian contexts, and how this "ecologization" of a crisis can be a tool for different actors to legitimize repressive practices ('greenwashing'). The paper draws on empirical material from the 1983-5 drought in Northern Ethiopia (Eritrea and Tigray), and the 2005-07 drought in Syria, which mostly affected the Northeast Jazira region. At the time of the drought in what was then Ethiopia, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was fighting a war for independence, while the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) fought for more regional autonomy). The famine is generally considered to have been caused by a prolonged drought, when in fact, we show that it was mostly war-induced. In Syria, an agricultural crisis and related internal displacement and migration in the Jazira is widely believed to have been caused by a "century drought"; this, however, ignores the long-standing mismanagement and de-development of the region as part of the 'Arabisation' of a predominantly Kurdish area.

Introduction:

Climate change and, more broadly, global environmental change are often seen as a threat to different groups' or societies' survival, as a driving force of mass displacement and conflict, or at the very least as a threat multiplier. They can, however, also be used to legitimise repressive practices, in a process we call 'greenwashing repression'. Most commonly, the term 'greenwashing' is used to describe marketing strategies which aim to present a company's products or an actor's political goals as 'green' and eco-friendly, hoping to cater to the increasing number of people who opt for conscious consumption and green politics. The mechanism central to 'greenwashing', however, is the legitimisation of harmful practices by means of a 'green image', in other words, through a process of presenting those practices as 'natural' or as responding to 'natural' events, which is what this paper focuses on.

Two historical examples are the 1983-5 drought and connected famine and mass displacement in Northern Ethiopia (Eritrea and Tigray) in a war context, and the 2005-07 drought, connected agricultural breakdown and internal displacement in Syria, which was relatively stable at the time. At the time of the drought in what was then Ethiopia, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was fighting a war for independence (1961 to 1991), while the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) fought for more regional autonomy (1975 to 1991). The drought is generally considered to have been the main cause of the severe famine which ravaged the Horn of Africa at the time (as well as some forced migration movements), but there is evidence that both famine and displacement were in fact mostly induced by war and the Derg's scorched-earth policy, including forceful prevention of farming, of trading crops, and interference with traditional migration patterns. Nevertheless, the drought was used as a rhetoric shield to 'greenwash' repressive practices towards the different liberation movements and the civilian population, including a massive forced resettlement campaign of Tigrayans, which was justified by the allegation that Northern Ethiopia was a drought-prone area which could not feed its population. In Syria, a 'century drought' occurred in relatively stable political conditions and contributed to an agricultural crisis and related internal displacement mainly in the Northeast Jazira region. When climate change came to be considered the main culprit for the drought and its effects (Kelley et al. 2015), this argument was used by Syrian government officials to explain the state's failure to render effective assistance to affected parts of the population (most notably: Kurds), following a similar strategy as described for Ethiopia. Both droughts have thus been framed as 'natural' disasters by various actors although they were in large parts the result of mismanagement, a process which has been called "ecologization" (Robbins 2004: 173). What is more, the political practices

addressing the effects of both droughts have been legitimised through what we call ‘greenwashing’.

In this article, we problematise a) how disasters are presented as ‘natural’ in authoritarian (and other) contexts (‘ecologization’), and b), how this process can be a tool for political actors to legitimise repressive practices (‘greenwashing’). Drawing on witness interviews, primary sources and secondary literature from both cases, the article aims to answer the question: How are ‘natural’ disasters being used to ‘greenwash’ repressive practices in authoritarian contexts? We theorize that the ‘greenwashing’ of repressive practices is a feature of authoritarian rule which can help explain how authoritarian regimes address global environmental change. A political ecology framework and a focus on practices facilitate the analysis.

Importantly, this study is not about whether the drought/famine/agricultural breakdown in our two cases was caused by climate change or has itself caused conflict. This has been studied before and is not the object of this study (for Syria: Selby et al. 2017; for the Horn of Africa: Awash 2020).

The article proceeds in three steps. First, we present the state of the art in research about authoritarianism and political ecology and outline our research design. Second, we present evidence from our two cases. Third, we discuss our findings, draw tentative conclusions, and provide avenues for further research.

State of the art and research design

This article brings together insights from authoritarianism research and political ecology to address the question of how authoritarian regimes ‘ecologize’ extreme events in the natural environment, and how they ‘greenwash’ repressive practices in the context of these events. Political ecology provides knowledge on how problems can be constructed as ‘environmental’ or ‘natural’, how such ‘environmental’ situations can be framed as unprecedented and disastrous, and how such a framing can be politically useful (Robbins 2012, 131; Jeanrenaud 2002). One of the aims of this article is, thus, to ‘denaturalise’ phenomena which were attributed to climate and the environment, including famine, forced migration, and poverty, but which were, in fact, to a large extent socio-political.

Political ecology focuses on how uneven power relations impact the control and distribution of natural resources and the environment (Le Billon and Duffy, 2018). It stresses that any effect of environmental change on a society, regardless of whether that change is considered man-made or ‘natural’, is necessarily socially mediated (Le Billon and Duffy 2018: 240). At the core of political ecology is the assumption that an uneven access to the environment and an uneven “distribution of burdens and benefits from resource-based

production and environmental change“ (Le Billon and Duffy 2018: 243) are contested and political (Robbins 2012). From this point of view, the regulation of access to natural resources, e.g., property rights, privatization or nationalization of commons, conservation measures etc., are key to understanding environmental conflicts (see for example, Turner et al. 2011; Ribot and Peluso 2003), and by extension, repressive practices. Political ecology thus "engages conflicts not only through a search for causes and a description of symptoms but emphasizes – or even promotes – their transformative and emancipatory effects in challenging structural and cultural forms of violence, done to people and the non-human" (Le Billon and Duffy 2018: 244; Watts and Peet 2004). What is more, political ecology commonly sees environmental factors as context or consequences, and not so much as causes of societal phenomena like conflicts (Bassett 1988). It is therefore fitting that this paper relies on a political ecology framework, as it looks at how the context (in our case, environmental disaster) is a) presented as 'natural' and not socio-political (a process Robbins 2004 has called "ecologizing"), and b) is used by political actors to legitimise repressive policies (a process we call 'greenwashing'). We propose that combining authoritarianism research with political ecology can help to better understand the dynamic interplay between socio-environmental changes and repressive practices.

At its core, this article is concerned with processes of 'greenwashing repression', and therefore needs to consider current research on authoritarianism, as repression is, as Josua (2021) posits, "a pervasive element of authoritarian politics." We understand authoritarianism as a political system which is characterised by a concentration of power in the hands of one leader or a small elite that is not constitutionally responsible to its people. In such systems, power is often exercised arbitrarily and without regard for existing bodies of law. Importantly, recent research on authoritarianism departs from previous, relatively static understandings of authoritarian rule by focusing on "everyday acts of authoritarianism" (Glasius 2018: 516). While there is little doubt that the contexts we focus on in this article are authoritarian, this perspective is helpful in better understanding what 'greenwashed' repressive practices may look like as opposed to more 'classical' authoritarian policies as outlined by Gerschewski (2013), who developed an influential framework to explain how authoritarian regimes maintain political stability by relying on three pillars, namely strategies of legitimation, co-optation, and repression. Gerschewski defines legitimation as a process of gaining support based on a specific 'legitimacy belief' that may stem from ideological indoctrination, performance, or output. Co-optation in his understanding refers to tactics aimed at tying strategically relevant actors to the leadership. Repression, in his view, can take the form of direct, physical, "high intensity" violence, or of "lower intensity coercion", which is less visible and includes "non-physical forms such as the denial of certain job and education opportunities as well as the curtailment of political rights like

the freedom of assembly" (Gerschewski 2013: 21), but which is, in this view, always exercised by state actors.

Following Josua (2021) and others, we posit that authoritarian governments tend to invest quite a lot of resources into legitimising violence against their citizens, so that repressive practices can be difficult to detect. What is more, authoritarianism should be understood not only as a type of government, but as a system in which a host of actors actively and intentionally sabotage accountability to achieve domination; authoritarian practices enable and cause rule breaking, limit political participation, and foster intransparency (Glasius 2018: 525; Rubenstein 2007). Thus, departing from Gerschewski's relatively schematic differentiation between high and low intensity violence exercised by state actors, authoritarian repression in our understanding includes practices which are "no longer necessarily (…) exercised by national government of states alone" (Glasius 2018: 527). Instead, practices of authoritarian repression are here understood as "a pattern of actions, embedded in an organized context, sabotaging accountability to people (…) over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by disabling their access to information and/or disabling their voice" (Glasius 2018: 527). We understand repressive practices as located on a sliding scale from illiberal to authoritarian, ranging from the prevention of dialogue and disinformation to openly violent acts, thus including all forms of structural and manifest violence.

For the purposes of this article, we consider the handling of the prolonged drought periods and subsequent agricultural collapse, famine and displacement in Eritrea/Tigray and Syria to be examples of 'greenwashed' repressive practices in authoritarian contexts, i.e., practices sabotaging accountability that are legitimised by presenting them as responding to 'natural' processes. We understand practices as "patterned actions that are embedded in particular organized contexts" (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 5). Such a practice approach allows us to analyse societies, cultures, governments, security actors, corporations, domination and coercion as features of, collections of, or as phenomena created by practices (Glasius 2018: 523, Schatzki 2001). We unpack these practices as sabotaging accountability through a combination of structural and environmental violence. Structural violence can take the form of groups of people being denied access to food, water, and shelter, or being excluded from political representation (Tyner and Rice 2016). Through structural violence, parts of a population can end up receiving less food/water/land etc. than they need to survive, and this dynamic can occur on the local, national, and international level, with the positionality of individuals, groups or states determining their ability to effectively manage such (forced) scarcity. What is more, structural violence can occur, as in our cases, in the context of or in interaction with environmental violence, which can be defined as "(a) primary violence or direct damage humans do to the environment; (b) secondary violence from the natural world as a result of this degradation; and (c) tertiary violence

between people(s) in conflict over natural resources" (Lee 2019). Famine, agricultural collapse and displacement following drought fall into the second category, while tertiary violence includes conflict parties actively preventing certain population groups from getting access to food, for instance by withholding humanitarian aid.

Our starting point in political ecology is the assumption that events which are presented (or 'framed') as natural disasters are never exclusively 'natural', but also result from human alterations of nature, especially in the Anthropocene. They are at least in part a hazard we ourselves have created (Carson, 1962), by co-creating the conditions in which they occur. This points to the old sociological debate about the relationship between society and nature: On the one hand, humans depend on natural environmental conditions and are a (very vulnerable) part of the biophysical system called earth; on the other hand, human interaction with and utilisation of nature affects those same environmental conditions, often with unintended consequences. What is more, how a society relates to nature is necessarily led by cultural ideas, which in essence translate nature into symbols. Society-nature-relationships thus always have a material and a symbolic dimension, and it is this double-edgedness which makes inquiries into environmental problems like natural disasters ambiguous and difficult (Brand 1998). As Watts put it, in order to understand natural disasters, "we should (…) begin with the epistemology and concepts of society and nature; that is with the broad problematic into which [disasters] must be situated" (Watts 1983: 231).

So what is 'natural' about a disaster like famine or drought and thus, related effects like displacement? And what part of such events is, in turn, an "avoidable political tragedy" (Davis 2011: 8)? While drought and famine are often interpreted as 'natural' processes, market forces in capitalist societies as well as massive intervention into traditional production processes by authoritarian regimes influenced by socialist ideology (like Syria and Ethiopia) also have an impact by turning labour and land into commodities. This needs to be taken into account when trying to understand why pre-existing, often indigenous structures of welfare provision and conflict resolution break down during 'natural' disasters (Davis 2011). As Rolando Garcia wrote: "climatic facts are not facts in themselves; they assume importance only in relation to the restructuring of the environment within different systems of production" (Garcia 1981). For example, the real and nominal prices of food staples have declined steadily in the last 50 years but rose in the context of the global financial crisis and rising fuel prices in 2006-2008, illustrating the embeddedness of hunger and famine in global economic relations, with repercussions especially for the rural and urban poor and food-insecure households. This has been called "an unnatural coupling of food, fuel, and global finance" (Watts 2013: xlii).

Crucially, political ecology research tells us that absolute scarcity is rarely the issue in natural disasters. Instead, a state's political will to address 'natural'

disaster, i.e., to alleviate crop failure and to effectively address famine and drought, is central to the analysis, as are pre-existing vulnerabilities which make a disaster's impact more precarious. Vulnerability is here understood as an increased exposure to and reduced capacity to handle a crisis, and a greater likelihood of severe consequences (Bohle et al. 1994; Watts and Bohle 1993). Following Tyner and Rice (2015), vulnerability, or rather: its production, can be understood as a violent act, as violence is "any action or inaction that affects the material conditions of another, and in so doing, reduces one's potentiality to survive: or to put it another way, violence is any action or inaction that increases vulnerability" (Tyner and Rice 2016: 50). Relatedly, Davis (2011) has outlined how natural disasters can be an opportunity to strike against unwanted groups or movements (Davis 2011: 12f). Rob Nixon even speaks about "ethnocide by environmental means" (Nixon 2013: 110). This also highlights the role of intentionality, which Tyner and Rice (2016: 48) conceptualise as a) having the ability to act, but choosing not to; b) having the opportunity to prevent harm, but choosing not to; and c), being aware of one's action causing harm, and acting nonetheless. In both our cases, we claim that authoritarian elites chose not to act to alleviate or prevent the effects of what they called a 'natural disaster' despite having the ability and the opportunity to, and despite of being aware of the consequences. Instead, famine was used as an authoritarian tool of extreme repression to enforce loyalty to the regime and to decimate perceived enemies of the state. Importantly, external actors (mainly humanitarian) enabled these practices by providing, or at least not contradicting, the framing of the respective disasters as 'natural'. One important tool used by authoritarian regimes to instrumentalize drought conditions is to manipulate migration patterns that affected populations developed as coping strategies by a) inhibiting migration to areas with access to food, and b) forced resettlement campaigns of entire communities to concentration camps or "protected villages", which have been a regular component of many counterinsurgency campaigns since 1816 (Zhukov 2005: 1155).

In this article, we look at two historical cases of drought and second-order effects of such 'natural' disasters, like famine, displacement and agricultural collapse. We understand drought as "the recurrent duel between natural rainfall variability and agriculture's hydraulic defences" (Davis 2011: 18). In our understanding, drought always has a manmade dimension, especially in the Anthropocene, as it is always the product of two processes: a) high rainfall variability over a long period of time which negatively affects crop cycles, and b) scarcity in both natural and artificial water storage systems. The latter always has a social dimension, as artificial irrigation and water storage systems depend on sustained investment and upkeep, and natural water storage capacities can also be negatively affected by human practices which lead to contamination, overuse, deforestation and soil erosion (Davis 2011).

Famines also need to be seen as complex economic crises "induced by the market impacts of drought and crop failure" (Davis 2011: 19), not as food shortages per se. "Whether or not crop failure leads to starvation, and who, in the event of famine, starves, depends on a host of nonlinear social factors" (Davis 2011: 19). Importantly, famines do not necessarily have anything to do with crop yields, as Amartya Sen has pointed out: "Famine is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not being enough food to eat" (Sen 1981: 1). As a Syrian farmer from Idlib commented: "if one region experienced drought, another region was fertile". To understand famine, then, it is necessary to uncover the social relations between unequally endowed groups which may be impacted by war, depression, or developmental efforts as much as by 'nature', e.g., extreme climate events and 'natural' disaster. There is thus a deeply political dimension to famine; as Davis wrote: "The great hungers have always been redistributive class struggles" (Davis 2011: 20). Watts (2013) agrees: "Famines are … social processes" (Watts 2013: xliii).

What is more, famine is not a one-off event in a vacuum, but is "part of a continuum with the silent violence of malnutrition that precedes and conditions it, and with the mortality shadow of debilitation and disease that follows it" (Davis 2011: 21). It is thus crucial to look at who defines what a famine is. In fact, food can be seen "as a political and military weapon of coercion, torture, punishment, and death", the regulation of access to food can be a "[p]olicy of starvation and punishment" or "forced starvation" (Cameron 2018, Krüger 2019). "[I]mperial policies towards starving 'subjects' were often the exact moral equivalents of bombs dropped from 18,000 feet" (Davis 2011: 23; see also Nixon 2013; Saro-Wiwa 1995). What is more, following Rangasami, many benefit in some way from famine and repression (Rangasami 1985, see also Edkins 2002). David Keen (1994) and Mark Duffield (1993, 1994) have shown that there were numerous beneficiaries of the famines and mass starvations in the Horn of Africa, for instance. So for this study, it is key to ask what function it had for the Ethiopian and Syrian governments <u>not</u> to help their populations during drought and famine, but on the contrary, to prevent them from getting relief. Who benefited from these practices, and how did they legitimise them?

Research design

To understand processes of 'greenwashing' repressive practices, we conduct a historically grounded analysis which relies on witness interviews, primary and secondary sources from Syria and Eritrea/Tigray.[1] On this basis, we hope to be able to paint a nuanced and historically grounded picture of both cases. This

[1] Eritrea/Tigray: secondary literature review, six interviews conducted in 2021 with contemporary witnesses of the famine, and participant observation of one author as a member of the Eritrea Hilfswerk e.V., the German branch of the Eritrean Relief Organisation, from the mid-1980s onwards. Syria: 20 interviews with contemporary witnesses of the drought conducted in 2014, document analysis, and a secondary literature review.

is in line with many political ecology studies which employ an ethnographic understanding of particular places "with their specific histories, actors, affects, and socio-environmental relations" (Le Billon and Duffy 2018: 246). Importantly, we understand the process of greenwashing repression "as a site-specific phenomenon rooted in local histories and social relations yet connected to larger processes of material transformation and power relations" (Peluso and Watts 2001: 5).

We start from the assumption that 'greenwashing' repressive practices is a way of upholding a "regime of truth" (Robbins 2012: 70) that keeps a society together, and we understand 'truth' in Foucault's sense: "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse that it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault 1980: 131). The goal of this article is to uncover and critically evaluate "taken for granted dominant stories" (Robbins 2012: 70) about drought and ensuing famine, agricultural collapse and displacement in our two cases to build knowledge on how natural disasters have been "ecologized" and then used to 'greenwash' repressive policies in two authoritarian states, Syria and Eritrea/Tigray.

Robbins (2004: 173), in his work on environmental conflict, offers insights which are helpful for operationalising our theoretical framework. He differentiates between the "politicization" of environmental problems, i.e., "when local groups … secure control of collective resources at the expense of others by leveraging management interventions by development authorities, state agents, or private firms", and the "ecologization" of pre-existing conflicts, which he understands as caused by "changes in conservation or resource development policy" (ibid.). This argument draws on feminist theory, property research, and critical development studies (Le Billon 2015). For one, labour and power divisions result in uneven access to and responsibility for natural goods. Secondly, property systems are complex "bundles of rights that are politically partial and historically contingent" (Robbins 2004: 173). And finally, development activities need to be seen as rooted in perceptions and assumptions about intersectional characteristics like class, race, gender, ethnicity etc. of those participating in a development process, which often results in poorly formed policy and uneven results (Le Billon 2015: 600).

Building on Robbins, we propose that 'ecologisation' consists of 'ecologising moves', which means discursively reframing a phenomenon caused by socio-political conditions as having been caused by the natural environment. 'Ecologisation' is therefore here understood as a specific speech act, an utterance by which an issue is constructed as a matter of ecology/nature. What we call 'greenwashing' is a specific form of such ecologising moves, as greenwashing refers to repressive practices that are not commonly perceived as connected to the management of environmental crises. In fact, the process of ecologisation is a prerequisite for legitimising repressive

practices by presenting them as responding to 'natural' events. Such practices include non-assistance or selective assistance in cases of environmental crises; not mitigating/preventing displacement in response to such a crisis; preventing migration to areas with access to food; forced resettlement; the "silent violence" of malnutrition before and the mortality shadow of debilitation and disease after a 'natural' disaster; the utilisation and control of natural resources through agents of repression during a disaster; the monopolisation of aid in the context of disaster; the refusal to provide aid citing the severity of a disaster; and the refusal to provide aid by deflecting responsibility for a disaster. In the following we provide evidence from both our cases for a) the ecologization of disaster, and b) for repressive practices and their greenwashing by different actors.

The Great Famine in Tigray and Eritrea: Ecologization and greenwashing by external actors

Ethiopia had been a monarchy for centuries and had been ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie until 1974, when he was overthrown by a military junta, the Derg (the Amharic word for "committee"), which became Ethiopia's socialist military government. By 1978, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam had taken control over the council and followed a Marxist strategy, relying heavily on East Bloc support to maintain power (Kebede, 2010). However, the Derg's erratic development policies where mostly driven by efforts to totally control the population and soon triggered resistance from equally Marxist-oriented liberation movements, first and foremost the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which had split from the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in the mid-1970s. Both movements were part of the fight for national independence, which began in 1962 when Emperor Haile Selassie's illegally annexed Eritrea as an Ethiopian province. In the adjacent province of Tigray, the Derg also faced resistance by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), founded in 1975, which became dominant after its fraternization with the EPLF. In the mid-1980s, about 25 rebel groups were active throughout Ethiopia (Kaplan 1988: 12).

From about 1983 to 1985, a devastating drought hit northern Ethiopia that affected both Tigray and Eritrea, at that time Ethiopia's two northernmost provinces. Aid organization were denied access to the affected areas, and Western media and the international public picked up on the famine rather late, in part because the Derg was busy preparing its tenth anniversary celebrations and tried to cover up the evolving famine. Only when a BBC news crew reported on what it called a "biblical famine" in October 1984 did the disturbing pictures on TV trigger an immense fundraising and aid campaign, in which Bob Geldof, the organizer of Band Aid, played a prominent role (The Irish Times, 2014). Yet, most Western media pictured the famine as being caused by prolonged drought (Rieff 2005), while in reality the famine was mostly war induced. This can be seen as an ecologising move

which resulted in a dominant "regime of truth", presumably aiming to produce stories acceptable to the average Western media consumer, to uphold Western interest in the Horn of Africa, and to reduce the complexity behind the human tragedy. Such an ecologization of the famine then provided a framework for greenwashing repressive practices, or in other words: a way to deflect responsibility for what was, in fact, a clear political strategy (see below).

It is important to note that the highlands of Tigray and Eritrea have experienced drought and famines for centuries, and the region's people have developed coping mechanisms such as seasonal migration and grain trade between surplus and drought-affected areas. These strategies failed during the famine of the early 1980s, however, as the drought's effects were severely aggravated by deliberate practices of the Derg to use access food and natural resources as a weapon to weaken their opponents. They forced hundreds of thousands of Eritreans and Tigrayans to flee to Sudan (De Waal: 1991; Kaplan: 1988), they prohibited life-saving trade and interfered in traditional migration patterns, they routinely used access to food to weaken or destroy the different liberation movements, and they used forced migration to inhospitable places to bring potential rebels under their control. This is in line with what Zukhov (2015: 1155) found for the case of the Soviet Union: in asymmetric armed conflicts, the government usually has an advantage in resources and controls a standing army, while rebels have an advantage in information, for which they rely on the local population (ibid: 1159).

During the famine period, there were significant differences between Eritrea, where the liberation movement could rely on some 30,000 fighters and controlled several liberated areas that served as a rear base (Gayim 1993: 490), and Tigray, where some 15,000 TPLF fighters fought a classical guerrilla war which left the population caught in the middle of an armed conflict and without shelter against the Derg's atrocities, which included poisoning of wells and burning of crops (Kaplan 1988: 88-89). The evolving situation can be described as a political ecology of war, in which belligerents tried to retain control over resource revenues to influence the course of the armed conflict (Le Billon 2001: 566). During the famine period of the 1980s, the resources in question were simply the subsistence goods necessary for survival. According to eyewitness Dawit Wolde Giorgis, then head of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RCC), Mengistu explained his strategy as follows:

> *"The guerrillas operating in many of these areas do so with great help from the population. The people are like the sea and the guerrillas are like fish swimming in that sea. Without the sea there will be no fish. We have to drain the sea, or if we cannot completely drain it, we must bring it to a level where they will have room to move at will, and their movements will be easily restricted." (1989: 297)*

This can be interpreted as an active call for genocide to weaken the liberation movements. Food as a weapon and instrumentalization of aid was, however, used by all combatant organisations involved; the EPLF and to some extent the TPLF tried to win supporters by rewarding followers with food aid, medical services and support provided via Sudan (Pateman 1990; Connell 2005). Thus, the violence that occurred at that time can be seen as a process aiming to reshape conditions of access to and control over resources through a struggle for political control (Le Billon and Duffy 2018: 248).

Alex de Waal (1991) produced the most thorough analysis of the 1980's famine in Eritrea and Tigray. He states that in Tigray, poverty and unpredictable climate contributed to the famine, although there had been bumper crops on the national level during the period, and if food redistribution had been possible, famine could have been avoided. He writes: "at the center of the famine – Tigray and north Wollo – the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian army was the single-most important reason why the drought of 1983-4 became not a 'normal' period of hardship but a famine of a severity and extent unparalleled for a century" (1991:133).

In Eritrea, famine was less severe, but also exacerbated by war through direct destruction, restrictions on economic activities and other repressive practices, environmental degradation caused by war, and failure of rainfall (De Waal: 124). Young (1991) agrees that the famine was clearly a result of the Derg's repressive counter-insurgency strategy (131-132). Derg attacks concentrated on agricultural districts, systematic looting destroyed oil presses, grinding mills, grain stores and irrigation systems, markets were targeted through aerial bombing, and their attenders massacred to prevent grain trade. Thus, the government's strategy of "draining the sea to catch the fish" amounted to counter-population warfare (De Waal 1991: 140-149).

According to Kaplan, "in the early 1980s, disastrous agricultural policies, drought, and two major government offensives against guerillas in Eritrea and Tigre [Amharic for Tigray] – which devastated the land, the peasant farmers who worked it, and the livestock – resulted in the worst famine since the 1932-1933 famine in the Ukraine", where the Soviets had once applied similar strategies (Zhukov 2015). Most of the fighting took place during the harvest season, and vast areas could not be cultivated, while nomads were unable to move with their cattle (Kaplan 1988: 64). Dawit Wolde Giorgis stated that the RCC in fact tried to reach all people in need and there was no official policy of starvation; yet, he concedes that "allegations [of a man-made famine] had the ring of truth because there were those in the government […] who wanted to starve entire populations into submission. Their argument was that by giving food to the people not directly under the control of the government, we might be feeding the rebels" (1989: 311). It can thus be argued that the drought and its effects provided a welcome framework for repressive political action and non-assistance by the Derg in a war context.

Importantly, the Mengistu regime did not only contribute significantly to the aggravation of the famine, it also profited financially from aid provided by Western donors. Western NGOs were mostly restricted to Addis Ababa with no access to the conflict areas, and most of their representatives “watched” the crisis from the local Hilton Hotel. The Derg generated income by charging a port fee on food donations, which even replaced coffee as Ethiopia’s most important source of hard currency (Kaplan 1988: 31). A former diplomat in the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirms that during the time of the famine, the Ethiopian governmental authorities used the food aid for their own interests instead of distributing it among the needy people. According to him, the government confiscated food aid and distributed it among loyal groups as a form of co-optation (interview, 28.02.2020).

In sum, the famine in Tigray and to a lesser extent in Eritrea caused a human tragedy in which up to one million people either vanished through starvation or were displaced, either internally or by fleeing to Sudan. They were affected by a war in which aerial bombardments, destruction of harvests, poisoning of wells and slaughtering of cattle herds were common mechanisms applied by the Derg military regime to weaken the liberation movements. It is not known how many people died exactly during the famine, because the government actively discouraged any mortality studies, and the UN’s estimate of one million deaths is imprecise. What is known for sure is that the majority of those who died were children under five, and that in 1984/85, more than half a million people lived in relief shelters with frequent outbreaks of deadly epidemics of measles, typhus cholera and other diseases (De Waal 1991: 172-174), pointing to the “mortality shadow of debilitation and disease” mentioned earlier.

The atrocities committed by the Derg drove people into the arms of the liberation fronts, which contributed decisively to their military victory against the Ethiopian army in 1991. The TPLF was able to turn the famine into an asset because the Derg government was deeply hated, and lots of young fighters volunteered for the TPLF (de Waal 1991: 154). Similarly, the EPLF used refugee camps in Sudan as recruitment bases: “it profited from these settlements inside Sudan to recruit young people, to collect funds, and to gain sympathy (…); even the Sudanese government was sympathetic and sent money” (Interview 28.01.2020).

To sum up, the 1984-5 famine in Northern Ethiopia was clearly war-induced, but it was broadly perceived and presented as a ‘natural’ disaster caused by a natural drought in the West and is therefore a good example of ecologization. The Derg applied extremely limited public relation strategies related to greenwashing its repressive practices, yet Western NGOs did little to draw the public’s attention to the true causes of the disaster, thereby providing a legitimising framework for repressive action in Eritrea and Tigray. Some NGOs actively supported Mengistu’s forced resettlement program, branding it as a measure to enable people to settle on fertile grounds instead

of starving in their drought-prone homeland. Rieff (2005) succinctly notes that "t[T]he truth is that the Dergue's resettlement policy – of moving 600,000 people from the north while enforcing the "villagisation" of three million others – was at least in part a military campaign, masquerading as a humanitarian effort. And it was assisted by western aid money". Greenwashing of repressive practices was thus, in this case, mainly employed by Western, external actors.

Syria's Century Drought: Embracing Climate Change

Syria's northeast Jazira region, which hosts most of Syria's Kurds, some Arab tribes and other minorities, experienced a severe so-called 'century drought' in 2005-2007. Importantly, the peoples of the region were quite used to drought periods, which a farmer from Dar'a governorate described as follows: "We did not have a lot of rain. Since 1980 until today there is not really rain in Syria. There are always droughts and if there is rain, then not at the right time. … Since 1980 we have to rely on irrigation." Another farmer from rural Dar'a explained that "the amount of rain (…) changed bizarrely [and] often came at unsuitable or unusual times. Also, the amount of rain decreased a lot. (..) The temperature also rose. (…) Instead of in October, the rain usually came only in December. The times changed a lot and there was no regularity in the rain periods anymore." A farmer from Deir ez-Zor also addressed the issue of water scarcity: "In Deirz Ez-zor we lived with water scarcity 24/7. There was no water. We had to buy it. We bought a tank for 1500 Lira." Many Syrians working in agriculture had therefore developed coping strategies involving changes in crops, fertilizer, irrigation techniques, and increased mobility to sustain their livelihoods.

While the exact relationship between the 2005-07 drought, climate change, agricultural crisis, internal mobility and conflict onset remains disputed (Selby et al. 2017), President Bashar al-Assad's regime, together with the international aid community, readily embraced a narrative of climate change causing the crisis in the northeast. The dominant "regime of truth" stressed the 'natural' character of the agrarian crisis in the region, rather than its more fundamental economic and political causes. The 2008 UN OCHA Syria Drought Appeal estimated that approx. one million people in Northeastern Syria had "seen their livelihoods and assets shrink dramatically as a result of the current drought, commencing in October 2007." The report did not expect the situation to improve until spring 2009, "when the crops sown in October 2008 will mature, if the rains do not fail for a second year in a row" (UN OCHA 2008). The appeal also suggested several measures to assist "small-scale farmers and herders to diversify their income through creation of alternative jobs in non-agricultural sectors of the local economy, thus increasing their resilience to climate-related disasters and preventing future out migration" (ibid.), illustrating how the drought was seen as a) a result of climate change in an ecologizing move, and b) as a potential driving forced

of future out-migration from drought-affected areas, a second-order effect of the drought which was clearly unwanted. The Syria Drought Response Plan of 2009 (UN OCHA 2009) accordingly proposed the diversification of crops and jobs to strengthen drought resilience, as well as technical assistance projects "benefiting the Syrian authorities on limiting the effects of climate change" (UN OCHA 2009: 16). In a similar vein, President al-Assad embraced climate change as the main explaining factor of the drought by invoking that it had been "beyond our powers" (SANA 2011). His Minister of Agriculture posited that the drought had been "beyond our capacity as a country to deal with" (UN Drought Appeal for Syria 2008), and then Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari publicly blamed the drought for Syria's failure to achieve a series of economic goals by saying "Syria could have achieved [its] goals pertaining to unemployment, poverty and growth if it was not for the drought that hit the country" (US Embassy Damascus 2010).

These are classic ecologizing moves of what could more adequately be described as the results of a severe and long-standing mismanagement of the region (Selby 2018), which had de-facto been governed as an "internal colony" for decades (International Crisis Group 2011: 22). The area had essentially been administered by security services due to the sensitivity of the Kurdish question; virtually the entire local administration consisted of civil servants from other parts of the country; and the wealth produced with the region's rich natural resources was routinely exported and rarely re-invested to benefit the local population. The International Crisis Group cites a journalist interviewed in Damascus in September 2009 as follows: "On the one hand, the regime extracts resources from the north east: oil, gas, wheat, cotton, phosphates – it's all there. On the other hand, it sends people from elsewhere to staff the petroleum industry, local administrations, schools and so on. That is why there is such a sense of deprivation, among Kurds and Arabs alike" (ibid.). Another, local journalist called the drought "a convenient excuse" in November 2009:

> *"The problem had long been forecast. (…) Semi-arid areas around the Euphrates and the Khabur River, where agriculture was banned in favour of grazing, were turned into arable land used for intensive agriculture, at the cost of pumping the water table dry. The drought only brought to light a man-made disaster. And yet, the regime continues to bring diplomats to the north east and tells them it all has to do with global warming" (International Crisis Group 2011: 23).*

External actors proceeded to reproduce this dominant "regime of truth" in order to uphold the fragile relationship with the Syrian regime, avoiding criticism of the government, and ignoring the fact that the region in question hosts a sizeable, discriminated-against Kurdish minority (see for instance UN OCHA 2008). Media reports followed the same logic, relying on the same sources and not necessarily questioning their findings. Together, this resulted

in a full ecologization of a largely man-made disaster, which then served as a framework to greenwash the regime's repressive practices in the region.

To understand repressive practices in Syria's Northeast, it is important that, as Jongerden (2021) has put it, "in the imaginary of the nation-state of Syria as an Arab republic, the existence of Kurds was considered troublesome." As mentioned, Syrian Kurds live mainly in Syria's north-eastern region, which incidentally is also where most of Syria's farming was done. Therefore, the Syrian regime under Hafiz and later Bashar al-Assad developed a process of assimilation and repression in which the strategic dispossession of non-Arabs played a key role. As Jongerden (2021) put it: "Kurds and Christians, who were the main inhabitants of the North, needed either to be culturally integrated or 'removed'". Claiming to want to modernize Syrian agriculture, the ruling Ba'th party proceeded to extend its control to rural areas by micromanaging agricultural activities; it developed a centralised and highly regulated system of agricultural production including detailed annual plans, designating areas for specific crops, and telling famers which crop to grow and how (Ababsa et al. 2011: 5f). A Syrian farmer from Idlib put it as follows: "You want to plant cotton or grazing crops, but you cannot. You would be fined if you did." Claiming agricultural modernization and development, land rights were routinely transferred from Kurds to Arabs (Tejel 2009: 64f), thereby greenwashing repressive practices aimed to achieve the 'Arabisation' of the so-called 'Arab Belt', "a 280km stretch of well-cultivated land running along the border with Turkey" (Tejel 2009: 61; Allsopp 2014). At the same time, the crops produced in the region were processed and sold in the country's west, leading to a severe under- or de-development of what would otherwise have been one of the richest parts of Syria due to its natural resources (Jongerden 2021).

Similar dynamics were at work in the water sector, as a farmer from Idlib explained: "The government prohibited us from building new wells, even though our land had a lot of water. We could only do it at night, in secret. They brought water to us from over 2000km away." A farmer from Rural Dar'a said: "Syria is the only land which can survive despite being shunned and occupied from the outside, because we have resources. We have 17 environments. We can live 2000 years without any help from the outside. … We have everything. And still, there is unemployment among young men of over 90%." A farmer from Deir az-Zor put it as follows:

> *"In Deir ez-Zor, most workers were unemployed. There was no work. The people were poor and hungry. … Young people like me, we just wanted to work. To live. We have nothing to do and only smoke the whole day. They [the government] stole everything from the oil. … They stole the rights of every man. … There is no proper accommodation and food. They do not offer proper health care. Everything is stolen. What is important for them is whether someone has connections. If you don't have connections, you are excluded."*

To retain their rural constituencies, the Ba'thist regime continuously favoured Arab settlers through irrigation schemes, land reclamation programmes, state farms and a dedicated credit system (Selby 2005), the administration of which helped to further extend its political control over Kurdish areas (Ababsa 2011). However, the state-led agriculture failed to deliver as planned and quickly started to create severe environmental problems like soil degradation, water pollution, water scarcity, and salinisation (de Châtel 2014). Syria's food self-sufficiency, which had been a declared goal of virtually all Syrian governments, fell from 78% in 1970 to 48% in the early 1990s (Daoudy 2020).

Bashar al-Assad attempted to amend the deteriorating situation by privatising/de-nationalising some agricultural assets like state farms (Ababsa 2011), and by cutting some of the numerous state subsidies which had been necessary to keep the system going. The removal of fuel subsidies in 2008, however, resulted in a jump in fuel prices of nearly 350%, while the removal of fertilizer subsidies one year later resulted in price increases of around 200 to 450% (De Schutter, 2011: 16). A farmer from rural Dar'a confirmed: "the government raised the price of on litre of fuel from 7 Lira to 15 and 25. This was a decisive change with strong influence on water prices." His wife added: "Fruit and vegetables became more and more expensive. A kilo which had cost 25 was now 50 Lira or more." Many peasants in the region lost their livelihoods, and entire villages were abandoned (Haddad 2011), while at the same time, new landlords accumulated wealth in and from the region. The decades-old practices of dispossessing Kurds also continued: a 2008 decree made land title deed transfers conditional on the permission from the Ministry of Defense and the Political Security Directorate in Damascus, which meant that hundreds of Kurdish farmers in the region lost access to their farmland (Allsopp 2014).

Overall, the government did very little to alleviate the drought of 2005-07, as well as other environmental issues outside of this particularly dry period. As a Syrian farmer from Hasakah described: "Often there were problems because of the wells. I had a big well, but if I wanted to build another one, it was forbidden for me and other citizens by the police and the municipality. Especially during the drought." When asked how the Syrian government addressed the drought between 2005 and 2007, he added: "They shut down unofficial and unauthorised wells. If you wanted authorisation for a well, you had to pay a very large sum or have a lot of land. That was very difficult." A farmer from rural Dar'a explained that government 'help' was not, in fact, very helpful: "The government would offer 'stipends' for farmers, and seeds, but not free or for a low price. … The government did not try to address drought, land degradation and such problems." Another farmer from the same region never applied for government help stating he "did not dare to, because if you take a credit, then they will detract interest for the first and the following 5 years. … for a credit of one million, they will detract 300.000

and only give me 700.000. I have a friend, Saddam. He was a trader and I acted as his warrantor. He wanted a credit of 300.000, and they gave him only 220.000 Lira." He added: "there was no support for agriculture at all." When asked whether he thought the Syrian government dealt with environmental issues enough, he replied: "On the contrary, they let them get worse." This was echoed by yet another farmer from Dar'a governorate, who said that "fertilizer was available before 2000. After that (…) farmers had to buy fertilizer at very high prices." Asked what had changed, he continued: "the state lowered the amount of fertilizer it gave to the agricultural distributors. They claimed that there were people who used fertilizer to build explosives. Another reason was that (…) people who had a lot of money sometimes bought all fertilizer on the market for themselves which made the price go up automatically." And yet another farmer from the same region agreed: "The government did nothing, despite the drought and the lack of resources. Instead they raised the prices of fuel and fertilizer." Together with the above-mentioned statements by high-level officials of the Syrian government, it seems that the drought and other environmental changes in Syria provided a framework for authoritarian elites to deflect blame and responsibility for mismanagement and non-assistance, and this greenwashing strategy was enabled by international actors buying into this narrative.

Conclusion and Outlook

This paper was interested in how disasters are presented as 'natural' in authoritarian contexts ('ecologization'), and how such an 'ecologized' disaster can be used by different actors to legitimize ('greenwash') repressive practices such as non-assistance, forced resettlement, or preventing migration for survival. The paper drew on evidence from two historical cases of drought, the 1980s drought and famine in Eritrea/Tigray, and the 2005-07 drought and agricultural collapse in Syria.

As has been shown above, state and non-state actors presented the respective droughts and their effects as 'natural' phenomena beyond their control, and then proceeded to use this "ecologization" to legitimise repression against liberation movements in Eritrea and Tigray and against unwanted parts of the Syrian population, most prominently Kurds. This can be understood as a continuation of previous repressive practices, ranging from horrific violence to more subtle practices of creating extremely unequal economic development between center and periphery in a process which has been called internal colonization by de-development (Mohammadpour & Soleimani 2020; Yadirgi 2020).

International actors joined these ecologizing moves in both cases, presumably not to disturb the already strained relationship with the two authoritarian regimes. Both humanitarian actors and the media presented the two droughts in question as "biblical" or "century" droughts, which in turn

provided room for other actors, most crucially the two governments, to deflect responsibility for their poor management of those 'natural' events. While it is understandable that external actors need to safeguard what little access they have to vulnerable or suffering populations in authoritarian states, especially in a war context, this paper has shown that "greenwashing" is a strategy of legitimation in authoritarian states which serves to cover up repressive and immensely hurtful policies towards unwanted parts of a population at times of ecological crisis. This finding helps us better understand how authoritarian regimes will likely address climate change and is particularly important as both Eritrea/Tigray and Syria are again suffering from severe environmental crises today.

In November 2021, low water levels in the Euphrates River together with the Turkish occupation of a key water station have made almost half a million Syrians water insecure (Laffert et al. 2021; IFRC 2021). In fact, according to some sources, Syria is facing the worst drought in 70 years due to a record low in rainfall and "unprecedented low water levels of the Euphrates River (…) resulting in two of the most significant reservoirs in Syria having significantly diminished and 54 out of 73 water stations severely impacted in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Al-Hasakeh, and Ar-Raqqa governorates" (IFRC 2021). The situation is threatening more than five million Syrians with severe water scarcity according to several aid groups (ENS 2021). Internal displacement because of the drought is already ongoing and the reduction of water has already led to increasing outbreaks of water borne diseases (ibid.). This crisis comes on top of civil war, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a severe economic decline. What is more, state land confiscations continue to displace farmers throughout the country, thereby "cementing the seeds of deeper instability in rural areas as well as uncertainty about the future of agrarian development" (Bernadaux 2021). The concentration of landownership in the hands of a few families – a process which can be traced back to Ottoman times, but which in Modern times began in earnest when Bashar al-Assad started to privatise agricultural assets – is still on-going and has created powerful patronage networks which are likely to play a key role in a post-war Syria.

In Tigray, the international community has been watching with great concern but little leverage how history is repeating itself, as another war between the TPLF and Ethiopia's federal government has led to renewed famine conditions among the civilian population since November 2021. At the same time, southern Somali and Oromia regions are experiencing severe drought conditions: lack of drinking water, a rise in waterborne diseases like cholera, and difficulty preserving livestock (Al Jazeera 2021). Many of the 1980s's actors are involved in this new war: The former leader of the EPLF (and since 1993 Eritrea's unelected president) Isaias Afewerki partnered with Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to once again destroy the TPLF's leadership. In part, the same strategies are being employed, such as restricting access to food aid to Tigray's civilian population, restriction of movement to Sudan,

forced displacement in western Tigray and atrocities against the civilian population. And once again, the number of young people joining the TPLF in its fight against the central government has increased, leading to a protracted guerrilla war (de Waal, 2021).

It is only a question of time until the Ethiopian and the Syrian governments will evoke the same greenwashing techniques outlined above to justify their non-assistance or active mismanagement of these new crises. Therefore, it is key to remember that "[f]amines are not caused by abstractions – climate, food supply, entitlement failure, war – they are brought about through the acts or omissions of people or groups of people. These people are responsible for famine and mass starvation – and they should be held accountable" (Edkins 2002: 17).

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