

Ore & building materials extraction

Keywords

- > Gold exploration
- > Cyanide-leaching
- > Mount Ida, Biga District, Turkey
- > Distribution of environmental costs and benefits
- > Middle-class environmentalism

Introduction

This conflict concerns the development of gold mining at Mount Ida in the Biga District of western Turkey. Prospecting for gold has been expanding in the region since 2007, leading to the development of an opposition that aims to halt several cyanide-leaching open pit gold mining projects in an area valued for its environment, agricultural production and cultural heritage.

Gold mining projects

Since the early 1990s, there have been intermittent exploration activities for gold and other minerals at several locations around Mount Ida. Mount Ida is situated in Biga, in north-western Anatolia, and part of it was declared a National Park in 1993. Because an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is not required at the exploration stage in Turkey, a permit from the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources is enough to get started.

Companies began to increase their exploration efforts in 2004, following the changes in the mining law and the rise in international gold prices. Since then, two projects, *Ağrı Dağı* and *Kirazlı*, previously jointly owned by Canadian junior companies Teck Cominco and Fronteer, and acquired by Canadian Alamos Gold in 2010, have advanced to the mine development stage. The mining concessions for the two projects cover 1,540 hectares (3,805 acres) and 12,703 hectares (31,390 acres) respectively and are located at elevations ranging from 300 metres (985 feet) to 900 metres (2,950 feet). The initial and sustaining capital costs of the two projects are estimated at US\$ 234.6 million. The area is well-served with roads, electricity and transmission lines, which reduces the need for significant investments in infrastructure. According to its newsletter dated 28 June 2012, Alamos Gold expects to produce 1,001,800 ounces of gold and 1,896,700 ounces of silver over seven years with the *Ağrı Dağı* Project; and 495,300 ounces of gold and 3,006,100 ounces of silver over five years at *Kirazlı*.

The company completed EIA reports for the mine pits of the two Projects (not the



Protest in Kızılelma against the EIA report.
Source: Evrensel, 23 February 2012.
<http://www.evrensel.net/news.php?id=23695>

processing plants), which were approved by the Ministry of the Environment and Urbanisation, and announced on the website of the ministry's Çanakkale Provincial Directorate on 13 July 2012. However, there was one condition demanded both by the communities and the Ministry that the company had to meet before commencing with the *Ağrı Dağı* Project. Because the mine site sits on top of the catchment area of water resources for over 20 villages, the company had to find another water source and build the infrastructure to deliver it to the villages. The company is also exploring in the *Çamyurt* and *Kayalık Mevki* areas close to the *Ağrı Dağı* and *Kirazlı*, respectively.

Other projects in Biga include the *TV Tower* and *Halilağa* owned by Teck Cominco and Pilot Gold (formerly Fronteer) and the *Kestanelik* Project owned by Australian Chesser Resources. All three projects are currently in the exploration stage and the companies are reporting "exciting" initial drilling results.

The conflict

Exploration activities for these projects, located north of Mount Ida, had not created much discontent until 2007, despite few sporadic confrontations between villagers and company workers. It was the arrival of another company, Global Mining from Turkey, to the village of *Bahçedere* to the south in the summer of 2007 that triggered the region-wide conflict, which quickly became a prominent topic on the public agenda at the national level. By October 2007, the issue was making headlines in the





Locations of TV Tower and Halilaga Projects operated by Pilot Gold
Source: pilotgold.com/our-projects/turkey/tv-tower



Villagers and activists meet in the village of Bahcedere, 28 October 2007.
Source: Author



Protest in downtown Çanakkale on 5 April 2008.
Source: Author

national media, drawing public attention to what was happening in the region.

The particular social make-up of the region to the south, along the coast of Edremit Bay was the underlying reason for the strong and immediate response. In Biga, almost half of the population lives in rural areas, and the local economy relies primarily on agriculture and animal husbandry, related food production industries, and forestry. In the favourable conditions of the Mediterranean climate with mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers, the production of high value-added fruits and vegetables on the irrigated plains has provided many of the villages with a relatively good and stable income. However, the southern part of the region that overlooks the Edremit Bay (in the Aegean Sea) has a different social structure. The coast has been witness to rapid urbanisation associated with the permanent and seasonal migration of middle and upper-middle class residents, especially retirees from the large urban centres nearby (Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, Balıkesir) who wish to enjoy the environmental amenities the region provides (Hurley & Ari, 2011). Moreover, olive oil production occupies a significant place in the economy in this area, and makes an important and growing contribution to Turkey's exports. There are also a number of ecotourism facilities that were established to offer opportunities to enjoy the region's environment (ibid.).

It was these homeowners, olive and

olive oil producers, and business owners in the tourism industry—many of them members and founders of local environmental organisations—who led the development of a broad-based opposition to gold mining in the region. They quickly earned the support of local governments, villagers, and national environmental organisations (e.g. Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion, Reforestation & the Protection of Natural Habitats, BirdLife International's partner in Turkey, *Doğa Derneği*, and *Buğday* Association for Supporting Ecological Living). Their connections to influential networks in urban centres—in the media, universities, with intellectuals and the elite—enabled them to place the issue on the public agenda and put pressure on the government and mining companies.

After the initial spark set in the summer of 2007, opposition groups intensified their struggle through various means. They organised panels and seminars in several towns that were attended by academics from regional universities; local and regional EJOs such as the Çanakkale Environmental Platform, Mount Ida Conservation Initiative and GÜMÇED (The Keepers of the Beautiful Edremit Bay); professional organisations (e.g. Union of Chamber of Turkish Engineers, local Chambers of Agriculture); and representatives from local tourism businesses, to talk about the ecological, economic and cultural values of the region, and the threats



1990-2007	Sporadic exploration activities at several locations in the region.
2007-2008	Exploration expands to the south of the region, initiating conflict. Protests ensue.
2009-2011	Work in the south is dropped, explorations continue in the north. Two projects advance to development phase. The opposition partly loses vigour.
2012	The meetings to publicise the EIAs meet with protest. The Ministry approves the EIAs for the Ağrı Dağı and Kirazlı Projects, allowing them to start production.

Chronology of Major Events

posed by gold mining. To support the opposition groups, 34 municipalities in the region formed the Union of Municipalities of Mount Ida and Madra Mountain. A petition was addressed to the then Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources to annul the exploration permits. Numerous demonstrations were held in several towns, the largest at downtown Çanakkale in April 2008, attended by close to ten thousand people. Some members of parliament from the opposition also carried the issue to parliament, voicing their concerns and demanding explanations from the government as to why gold mining was being promoted in such an ecologically and culturally valuable region.

Faced with such active opposition, the companies backed off from the southern part of the region, and reduced the intensity of their activities in the north for a while. The projects were not abandoned, however, and when Alamos Gold acquired the two most developed projects in January 2010, the pace of exploration and development work gained pace once more. By this time, the opposition has faded considerably. Although the issue has remained on the agenda of local EJOs, still discussed in email groups and meetings, the opposition seems to have lost its initial fervour due to the weakness of efforts to organise at the grassroots level. The EJOs' middle-class environmentalism was not effectively linked to the concerns of villagers living in the vicinity of mining sites; hence their active opposition was not sustained over the long term. In fact, many people from the villages close to the mining sites now work for the companies, and many who are still against mining think there is nothing they can do to stop the projects.

Nonetheless, although weakened, the opposition has not died out. In February 2012, for instance, in the village of *Kızılelma*, a group of villagers from this

and other surrounding villages came together with people from local EJOs and protested the meeting held by the company to publicise the EIA report, and did not allow the meeting to proceed despite the deployment of security forces to prevent protesters from entering the village. Later, on 3 June, another protest was organised in the village of Etili to voice opposition to gold mining. The majority of the approximately two thousand protesters were people the EJOs had transported from urban centres. Currently, the EJOs are preparing to initiate a legal process to annul of the EIA report, and plan other activities to reboot the opposition.

Opposition discourses

The discontents over the development of gold mining around Mount Ida are based on the potential impacts of open pit, cyanide-leaching gold production in an environment valued for its agricultural production, landscape, and historical and cultural importance. Such concerns gave rise to slogans such as "Mount Ida is a world heritage", and "What is on top of Mount Ida is worth more than what is beneath it". The cyanide-leaching method in particular is considered a major threat in this geographical setting of rich agricultural lands, fruit and olive orchards, pastures and forests. Opposition actors claim that one way or another, cyanide will leak into the environment, contaminate the water and soil, and endanger both public health and agricultural production.

Debates on probable impacts centre on the distribution of the environmental costs and benefits of gold mining. First, leading actors—mainly local EJOs and local governments—maintain that potential economic gains from gold production will be much less than the overall costs due to income losses in agriculture and tourism, public health problems and environmental

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degradation. Second, they argue that the local population will have to shoulder most of the costs while mining companies will reap the benefits. In relation to the latter, a nationalistic discourse that underlines foreign ownership of the projects has gained prominence, couching the opposition more in terms of national interest than in environmental justice (Avcı et al. 2010).

There are two other important issues that have developed along with the conflict up to the present. The first is that local communities have become divided as some people work for the companies, while others consider job offers and other benefits as “bribes” to win hearts. Those in the first group accuse the others of not thinking about the future development of their communities, and playing into the hands of civil society groups allegedly motivated by their own political ideologies rather than the protection of the environment or the people. The second group, on the other hand, claims that those who work for the companies are sacrificing the common good of the community to pursue their own personal interests.

A second issue that stands out is the extensive use of scientific/technical language in the arguments against mining. In the numerous panels, seminars and meetings organised by opposition groups, experts from various fields and organisations—especially from Chambers of Engineers and universities—have taken central stage, and expressed their opposition to gold mining mainly by using the scientific jargon of their respective fields; for instance, presenting data, maps, climate **figures, and information on land cover** and biodiversity in the region. Although this seems to have appealed to some to a certain extent, for others it appears to have remained alien and confusing; even more so because mining companies also use technical arguments to convince people that the impacts are not as grave as claimed, and that they can be easily controlled by proper use of technology. In this context, the scientific information has proven perhaps not totally irrelevant, but inconsequential in shaping people’s positions on the issue.

The valuation discourses used at Mount Ida primarily demonstrate the multi-dimensionality of such conflicts. These discourses include sustaining peasant livelihood and ways of life, protecting ecological integrity and public health, and defending national interests versus those of foreign companies. The articulation of multiple discourses is particularly important since the government and the companies try to depict the issue of environmental impacts solely as a technical problem that will be handled with the proper use of technology. The only important thing then is the contributions of gold mining to local and national economic development—considered a must for a developing country like Turkey.

It is worth reemphasising that more than one gold mine is planned in the region. Depending on feasibility and rentability assessments, the companies may choose not to move ahead with some of them. What is certain is that they will continue with exploration and development work in the upcoming years. Therefore, even if the opposition fails to stop the first projects and they indeed start production—which currently seems the most likely outcome—the conflicts will most probably continue.

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