

## BOOK REVIEW

Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xvii + 316 pages.  
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Samuel Dolbee's *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* is a timely and significant contribution to Ottoman and Middle Eastern environmental history, particularly in its exploration of state violence and ecological transformation. By centering the Jazira region, stretching between Aleppo, Baghdad, Urfa, and Diyarbekir, Dolbee positions his study at the margins of state authority, where political ecology, imperial and colonial ambitions, and human and local agency intersected in complex and often violent ways. He presents Jazira's unique political ecology as a fragmented environment where humans and non-humans constantly moved, adapted, challenged, and evaded state control under both Ottoman rule and post-Ottoman colonial administrations in British Iraq and French Syria. This focus on political ecology sets Dolbee's work apart from previous scholarship on Ottoman and Middle Eastern environmental histories, which has often emphasized Ottoman imperial ecologies of harmony and cooperation.

Throughout the book, the Moroccan locust (*Dociostaurus marocannus*) emerges both as a destructive pest and a powerful metaphor for expressing frustration and disdain. As a biological threat, locusts devastated staple grains and cash crops, prompting various control measures. These ranged from Sufi-blessed waters meant to attract starlings to consume locust eggs to incentivizing locals with monetary rewards for egg destruction, and, later, the introduction of zinc barriers and chemical insecticides in the early twentieth century. Beyond their ecological impact, locusts also carried deep symbolic weight. Ottoman statesmen and bureaucrats, driven by civilizational ambitions, likened the nomadic tribes of Jazira to locusts – unruly and disruptive. At the same time, the region's inhabitants, including Armenian deportees, genocide survivors, and Assyrian refugees, used the same metaphor to describe Ottoman state violence, equating its devastation to that of a locust swarm. In this way, the locust functioned not only as an environmental force but also as a lens through which historical actors articulated their experiences of power, destruction, and survival.

Dolbee frames Jazira as an ecological frontier, where rainfall-dependent agriculture met the unrealized potential of large-scale irrigation through the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Often envisioned as a landscape that could rival Egypt in agricultural productivity, the region's economy was deeply tied to wool production, which became increasingly integrated into global markets – especially during fluctuations in cotton and wool prices caused by the American Civil War. Since the Crimean War (1853–1856), Ottoman elites sought to assert greater control over Jazira,

experimenting with various administrative structures and economic strategies to manage its diverse populations and resources. This push for control later expanded to include a range of experts, Ottoman, German, Soviet, British, French, and Syrian, who studied the region and played roles in its governing until the widespread use of chemical insecticides eventually eradicated locusts. While some of these experts continued advising their patrons on agrarian development policies beyond the locust issue, most moved on to other imperial and colonial settings where their expertise was in high demand.

Dolbee's extensive multilingual and multisite archival research, including sources in Ottoman, Turkish, Arabic, French, and German, draws from state documents, local newspapers, consular reports, and parliamentary minutes. The result is a chronologically structured book spanning from 1858 to 1939, offering a richly detailed account of Jazira's environmental and political transformations. Chapter 1 (1858–1890) introduces the main actors shaping Jazira's political ecology. Dolbee examines the Shammar tribe's role within regional and global economic trends, particularly its responsiveness to volatile market conditions. The tribe navigated intratribal rivalries while engaging in trade, often in competition with other local and imperial forces. Meanwhile, Ottoman bureaucrats experimented with new forms of governance, including resettling Chechen refugees and creating special administrative units to promote land cultivation. British consuls – many of whom had backgrounds in the East India Company – enthusiastically supported these development projects, revealing the imperial entanglements of Ottoman statecraft. One of the state's initiatives included implementing the 1858 Land Code to restrict the movement of the Shammar while encouraging Kurdish semi-nomads to take up settled agriculture. Another was the introduction of initiatives to eradicate locusts, recognizing their destructive potential but simultaneously using them as a metaphor for perceived disorderly populations. Dolbee's nuanced portrayal of these historical actors avoids simplistic binaries, instead emphasizing the competing visions of governance and economic transformation that unfolded in Jazira.

Chapter 2 (1890–1908) explores the rise of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Brigades and their impact on the region. Dolbee details how İbrahim Paşa of the Millî tribe, a prominent figure in the brigades, leveraged his military power to restrict the movements of the Shammar, who were increasingly likened to locusts – parasitic and uncontrollable. Yet, over more than a decade of rule, İbrahim Paşa himself came to be seen in similar terms, with the prominent nationalist figure Ziya Gökalp condemning him as an “enemy of civilization.” Beyond a personal grievance rooted in his late father's fraught encounter with the Paşa – an encounter that left his family in debt – Gökalp's resentment reflected the broader discontent among Diyarbekir's landowning elite, who saw İbrahim Paşa as someone continually recruiting Kurdish tribes to expand his personal sphere of influence, using the locust eradication campaign as a convenient pretext. Dolbee connects this emerging ecology of violence to broader Ottoman political shifts, particularly the *Tanzimat* reforms, which promised protections for non-Muslim subjects. He expands on existing historiographical discussions by underscoring how local power magnates affiliated with the Hamidiye Brigades carried out violence on the ground, directly shaping the agrarian conditions that later played a role in the Armenian genocide. His analysis highlights the

centrality of property disputes and multilayered complicity, adding depth to the existing scholarship on Ottoman state violence.

Chapter 3 (1908–1918) most explicitly treats locusts as historical actors, highlighting their tangible and symbolic roles in shaping governance and land use. The Balkan Wars reignited debates over refugee resettlement, while the 1908 constitutional revolution briefly empowered local governors to support peasant claims against large landowners, leading to renewed conflicts. At the same time, a prolonged cold wave beginning in 1911 disrupted locust egg collection efforts, worsening both ecological and economic instability. Dolbee presents 1913 and the years that followed as a major turning point for Ottomanism, as a concept of equal citizenship, following the defeat in the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the loss of territory, and the growing perception of Anatolia as the new homeland. This was as a pivotal moment where environmental forces, imperial governance, and local contestations converged in striking ways. Jazira, in particular, became both a site of genocide for Armenian deportees and, for some, a place of survival. As early as 1915, Ottoman Armenian and German locust experts observed that the displacement and genocide of Armenians created conditions favorable for locust infestations. The absence of Armenian peasant households and farmers, who once plowed the land and destroyed locust eggs, further facilitated the formation of locust swarms, amplifying the region's ecological and agricultural devastation.


Chapter 4 (1918–1939), the final body chapter, traces how locust control became a key issue in the post-Ottoman world, now framed through national discourses and border politics. Jazira's ecological continuity complicated territorial divisions as different states attempted to impose administrative and environmental control. Turkey, for example, increasingly relied on zinc border walls and later chemical solutions to combat the locust threat. Meanwhile, the British Air Force used chemical pesticides like sodium arsenate, which inadvertently killed livestock and disrupted local economies. Dolbee also highlights how many colonial officials involved in locust control later applied similar techniques elsewhere, revealing the trans-imperial circulation of expertise. In French-controlled Syria, the eventual eradication of locusts facilitated agricultural expansion, which in turn nurtured new political movements for local autonomy. Thus, the chapter situates Jazira's ecological history within broader discussions in political ecology, showing how environmental management served as a tool of both governance and resistance.

By weaving together environmental history, political ecology, and imperial and colonial governance, *Locusts of Power* delivers a richly textured narrative that resists simplistic conclusions. Dolbee's commitment to a narrative form distinctive to environmental history, reflecting his extensive research and departure from conventional academic writing, at times subdues the book's argumentative tone and makes its structure less explicitly outlined. While the literature reviews scattered throughout the body chapters are helpful, they would be more effective if placed earlier in the chapters to better orient readers to shifts in time and place. That said, the book's contribution to Ottoman, Middle Eastern, and environmental history remains undeniable.

Throughout the book, Dolbee draws anecdotal comparisons between the Ottoman experience and other colonial projects and aspirations, though he stops short of making explicit arguments. He highlights parallels between Midhat Paşa's efforts to force the

Shammar into sedentary agriculture and the dispossession of Native Americans, whose lands were later transformed into land-grant universities (Chapter 1). Likewise, he notes Talat Paşa's affirmative tone, in the context of the Armenian genocide, toward U.S. settler-colonial projects and the violence inflicted on Indigenous communities and communities of color (Chapter 3). By taking this approach, Dolbee offers a nuanced analysis that situates Ottoman policies within broader patterns of colonial governance while leaving room for further exploration of the Ottoman Empire's role in global histories of capitalism and colonialism.

Overall, the book's ability to embrace complexity and portray historical actors in their contradictions makes it an essential read for scholars exploring the intersections of ecology, empire, and state violence. In addition to courses on the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East, *Locusts of Power* will be a valuable addition to syllabi on environmental history as well as science and technology studies.

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