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Locusts of Power

In this highly original environmental history, Samuel Dolbee sheds new light on borders and state formation by following locusts and revealing how they shaped both the environment and people's imaginations from the late Ottoman Empire to the eve of the Second World War. Drawing on a wide range of archival research in multiple languages, Dolbee details environmental, political, and spatial transformations in the region's history by tracing the movements of locusts and their intimate relationship to people in motion, including Arab and Kurdish nomads, Armenian deportees, and Assyrian refugees, as well as states of the region. With locusts and moving people at center stage, surprising continuities and ruptures appear in the Jazira, the borderlands of today's Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Transcending approaches focused on the collapse of the Ottoman Empire or the creation of nation-states, Dolbee provides a new perspective on the modern Middle East grounded in environmental change, state violence, and popular resistance.

Samuel Dolbee is Assistant Professor of History at Vanderbilt University.

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"It turns out that the locust can speak and Samuel Dolbee tells us how. Grounded firmly in the fertile intersection of Ottoman, post-Ottoman and environmental studies, this book demonstrates how human-pesticide relationships shaped the transformation of Ottoman Jazira: from "desert" to agricultural land; from a place for the sedenterization of nomads to one for the forced nomadization of sedentary populations for genocidal purposes, and how the same land then became parts of post-Ottoman Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. It will become a classic and deservedly so."

Lerna Ekmekcioglu, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"In this deeply empirical and eloquent book, Samuel Dolbee offers a history of a part of the Middle East that scholars have missed (or ignored)—the Jazira. Following Dolbee following locusts across this landscape opens up modes of political and environmental analyses that point the way for future studies."

Alan Mikhail, Yale University

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Locusts of Power

Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East

SAMUEL DOLBEE
Vanderbilt University

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Preface

Locusts of Power explains how locusts and moving people made the modern Middle East. As one of the first environmental histories of the late Ottoman Empire, it focuses on the region known as the Jazira, the borderland area today stretching across Iraq, Syria, and Turkey that was recently unified under ISIS and has variously been envisioned as part of Kurdish or Assyrian homelands. The book uncovers the environmental coherence of this politically embattled region from the late Ottoman to the immediate post-Ottoman period (1858–1939) by following the locust, the insect that over those decades repeatedly took advantage of the region's political ecology. Not only was the region a mix of cultivated and uncultivated arid lands, it was also divided between Ottoman provinces and, subsequently, British Iraq, French Syria, and republican Turkey. What this meant was that locusts used political divisions to thwart various human dreams of transforming the Jazira into a breadbasket by emerging from the edges of cultivation and feasting. With each chapter centered on one group of moving people who were compared to locusts – among them Arabic- and Kurdish-speaking nomads, Armenian deportees, and Assyrian refugees – the book unearths state efforts to use borders to control these groups, and the ways that these groups managed to resist. The insects were profoundly connected to the motion of people on both a material and metaphorical level. They were organisms that forced people to move and starve, but they were also organisms upon which humans projected their own anxieties, hopes, and fears. *Locusts of Power* presents this view based on archival materials, fiction, memoirs, and newspapers in Arabic, English, French, German, Modern Turkish, and Ottoman.

The book thus offers an integrative account of state formation in the modern Middle East, while also connecting it to global transformations of

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the human relationship with the environment. The history suggests how the Ottoman world was far from a "borderless" space and examines how locusts and people alike moved across Ottoman provincial borders and left confused and quarreling officials in their wake. Rather than ignoring borders in the Ottoman period, people such as nomads actively used them for their own purposes. Moreover, the book exposes how motion, agrarian development, and state violence came together in the Jazira during one of the world-historical events of the century: the Armenian genocide. After failing to develop the Jazira for decades, Ottoman officials turned the environment into a weapon by sending hundreds of thousands of Ottoman Armenians there. Yet even amidst the horrific violence, people managed to resist, with thousands of Armenians – mostly children – surviving by living with the Jazira's nomads. Finally, the book contends that post-Ottoman borders had a different significance than is conventionally believed. The borders took meaning not just from colonial decrees or national declarations in faraway capitals; the new borders significantly emerged in the context of an Ottoman legacy of provincial borders. They also were underpinned by a host of technologies and interventions of agrarian development. As new chemical insecticides largely wiped out the region's distinctive locusts, the mobile political economy that had characterized the Jazira for so many decades unraveled. It was from these clouds of pesticides used on all sides of the Jazira that Iraqi, Syrian, and Turkish national projects emerged. The book thus offers an account of regional transformation, tracing how an area envisioned as a site of nomadic settlement became the site of the Armenian genocide, then the most agriculturally productive lands of Syria, and then the heartland of ISIS. Attention to the environmental rhythms of all of these events connects the particularities of the end of the Ottoman Empire with global transformations of the human relationship with the nonhuman world.

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Acknowledgments

I must begin by acknowledging the people and places that are the subject of this book. Without the mobile people whose traces somehow made it into state archives, the photographs of the fiercely defiant stares of Armenian survivors, and the chassis-rattling road between Harran and Viranşehir, this book would not be.

Formulating these thoughts has required time and space, and I am grateful to a number of institutions for granting these comforts to me. The work began as a dissertation at New York University, under the gentle and sage care of Zachary Lockman. Whether through affably delivered tough questions, quizzically smiling squints, or drafts red with Track Changes, Zach radiated a scholarly generosity that taught me how to think with historical rigor while also never losing sight of the political stakes of the work in the present. Karl Appuhn has always believed in me more than I have believed in myself, and I wrote much of this book in the hope it would earn one of his highest terms of academic praise: that it is "badass." Manu Goswami, Dina Rizk Khoury, and Sam White offered generous readings of the work at that early stage. The research and writing benefited from grants from the American Academic Research Institute in Iraq, the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, and New York University. My work as a teacher during this time was a joy, not only because of my students at NYU, but also because of protections afforded by GSOC-UAW Local 2110, and I thank the generations of graduate student organizers who made it possible. I received postdoctoral support and funding from the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University, and the Program in Agrarian

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Studies at Yale University, where I wrote under the watchful gaze of a poster of a chicken. I thank James Scott and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan for their good-humored guidance. I thank Shivi as well as Jonathan Wyrtzen, Alan Mikhail, Meltem Toksöz, and Thomas Wickman for providing incisive comments during a virtual book-manuscript workshop in the terrifying early months of the pandemic. Further work has taken place in the basement of the Barker Center while teaching in Harvard's History & Literature program, where I am grateful for the leadership of Lauren Kaminsky and Phil Deloria, and the bright-eyed enthusiasm of my students. Special thanks to Briana Smith, Duncan White, and all those who workshopped the book's introduction and offered characteristically thoughtful advice. During my five years in the borderlands of Cambridge-Somerville, Harvard's Political Anthropology/Ecology Working Group grounded me, and I'm thankful for the patient anthropologists who allowed the obtuse questions of a historian. I completed work on the book in my new scholarly home in the History Department and Program in Climate and Environmental Studies at Vanderbilt University. I thank Emily Greble, David Hess, Julia Phillips Cohen, Tasha Rijke-Epstein, Ruth Rogaski, Samira Sheikh, Eddie Wright-Rios, Meng Zhang, and all of my new colleagues for making me feel so welcome in Nashville.

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reviewers for their careful readings, which both improved and encouraged the book. Portions of the book are based on the articles "The Desert at the End of Empire: An Environmental History of the Armenian Genocide," published in the May 2020 issue of *Past & Present*, and "Empire on the Edge: Desert, Nomads, and the Making of an Ottoman Provincial Border," published in the March 2022 issue of *American Historical Review*. I thank the editors for permission to use amended versions of these articles.

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Thank you to Tayga Hatice Urus for sending me so many direct messages on Instagram, and also for praying for me. Thank you to Joey Dolbee for making me laugh. Thank you to Arianne Sedef Urus for going

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to yoga with me a decade ago and also for reading the entire manuscript (I am still reconsidering my prepositions). And finally, thank you to my parents, Susan Peecher and William Dolbee, who can be blamed for my obsession with space thanks to the many gloriously long car rides they took me on when I was a child. It is to them – and their decades of labor as teachers – that I dedicate this book.

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Note on Spelling and Units of Measurement

Deciding on how to spell the names of places and people in a polyglot contested space is fraught and can convey a certainty or one-sidedness that was in actuality contingent and dynamic. Should I write Ras al-Ayn (as it is typically spelled in English), Raʿs al-ʿAyn (the Arabic transliteration), Resulayn (the Turkish spelling), Serê Kaniyê (the Kurdish version), or Rēš Aynā (the Syriac version)? For the sake of simplicity, I have opted for the preferred English spelling whenever possible and also acknowledge the flaws of this approach (see, for example, the panoply of renderings of Deir ez-Zor). When transliterating Ottoman Turkish, I have used the modern Turkish equivalents, and when transliterating Arabic, I have followed the standards of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and omitted diacritical marks except for ʿayn and hamza. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

There are a few spellings from Turkish that require explanation for those unfamiliar:

"c" in Cemal or Cevdet is pronounced like a "j," as in jaguar
"ş" in Viranşehir is pronounced like a "sh," as in shark
"ç" in Suruç is pronounced like a "ch," as in cheetah
"ğ" in Karacadağ is silent and elongates the preceding vowel

For measurements of weight and distance, I have used conversions given by Redhouse:

1 kiyye = 1 okka = 1.28 kilograms = 2.83 pounds
1 dunham = 0.9393 square kilometers = 0.58 square miles

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