

**Zozan Pehlivan**

***The Political Ecology of Violence: Peasants and Pastoralists in the Last Ottoman Century***

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*The Political Ecology of Violence* integrates environmental disruptions with economic and political developments and intercommunal violence in Ottoman Kurdistan during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to its author, Zozan Pehlivan, this study examines the environmental, economic and political histories of both Armenian Christians and Muslim Kurds, who co-existed in the same region, using British and Ottoman archival sources. She challenges Gertrude Bell's portrayal of the 'desert and the sown' dichotomy and argues that no primordial antagonism existed between Armenian peasants and Kurdish pastoralists (herd-dependent communities) during periods of peace (p. 18). Additionally, Lattimore's notion that pastoralists are less resilient to environmental factors is rejected. According to Pehlivan, both peasants and pastoralists were affected by climatic anomalies, experiencing distinct hardships under unequal conditions. Using the concept of 'ecological disequilibrium' and borrowing Nixon's idea of 'slow violence', the study identifies not only climatic anomalies but also state provisioning – in support of peasants and neglecting tribes – as key factors contributing to rising inter-communal tensions in the region during the final decades of the nineteenth century. The book opens with an introduction that presents its main theses, sources and methodological approaches. It is structured into five main chapters, followed by an epilogue with concluding remarks.

In the first chapter, Pehlivan introduces the region, highlighting its diverse geographic conditions and demographic heterogeneity. Focusing on five distinct villages in separate regions of Ottoman Kurdistan, she explains what she terms the 'landscape trilogy', comprising the mountains, highland pastures and lowland plains. For Pehlivan, the landscapes of Kurdistan were closely interconnected, primarily through the movement of pastoral nomads. She also discusses the onset of Ottoman centralisation in the region during the early second half of the nineteenth century, alongside a demographic portrait of the area. As largely presented by European travellers and diplomats, Pehlivan characterises Kurdish Muslims as pastoral nomads and Armenian Christians as settled peasants, while also acknowledging exceptions to these generalisations. She demonstrates that Ottoman Kurdistan was marked by diverse economic, social, demographic and cultural variations, which did not conform to strict ethnic, linguistic or confessional boundaries, despite the existence of a 'delicate balance' between them (p. 89). The author's comparative and micro perspective on villages highlights the diversities of the regions. By identifying Bedirhan Bey of Cezira as the last hereditary Kurdish ruler (p. 59), the author

overlooks other hereditary rulers in the region, and the view that the wintering of Kurdish nomads in rented Armenian houses emerged in the early nineteenth century due to imperial policies limiting nomads' cross-border transhumance activities during the border-making process can be refuted, as this practice had existed in earlier centuries and continued beyond the mid-nineteenth century.

In the second chapter, Pehlivan begins by explaining that, although no railways existed in the region, land caravans and steamships connected it to the capital, while inflated sheep skins, *keleks*, navigated the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, linking the region to the southern areas. In this chapter, Pehlivan asserts that peasantry and herders had strong ties and relations on economy and collaborated with each other (p.97). The author's terminology of 'landscape trilogy' from the previous chapter is revisited, with a parallel focus on the three main economic pillars of the region: agriculture, herding and industry. While the latter was given less attention, Pehlivan primarily focuses on herding activities in this chapter, as she views animal husbandry as the most significant regional and intercontinental commercial activity, linking the region with Syria, Egypt, Europe, and even the United States during the Civil War era (p. 119). However, the region was also referred to as the 'grain-producing region' within the Ottoman Empire, although this aspect is not discussed in detail in the chapter (pp. 110, 112).

Chapter three focuses on the 1880s and 1890s, when ENSO cycles impacted Ottoman Kurdistan, and Pehlivan examines how these cycles influenced daily life by dividing the chapter into two parts. The chapter discusses peasants first, followed by pastoralists, examining how droughts, cold temperatures, epizootics and locust infestations influenced both groups in the region to varying degrees. Pehlivan observes that the survival strategies of peasants, primarily characterised by abandonment, and pastoralists, marked by movement, were influenced by ecological disequilibrium, which had varying levels of impact on both groups. For the author, although both social groups faced significant challenges, droughts and epizootics had a more destructive impact on pastoralists, while locust swarms predominantly affected peasants. Pehlivan views pastoralists as more vulnerable to these environmental factors, which contributed to the emergence of intercommunal tensions during the last quarter of the century. While literature typically explains the rising tensions by focusing on political developments, often overlooking environmental causes, Pehlivan argues that these environmental factors had a significant impact on inter-confessional relations as well. However, the author's suggestion that pastoralists' recovery periods were longer is not thoroughly discussed in the chapter (p. 172). Additionally, rather than describing it as an 'emergence' (p. 176), the 'enhancement' of inter-confessional/communal struggle might better depict the region's inter-communal tensions, as these relations were not typically peaceful in earlier periods, though they were not solely antagonistic either.

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Chapter four questions the Ottoman relief programme in Ottoman Kurdistan, with Pehlivan arguing that it was selective, priority-based and diverse. There existed a ‘hierarchy of concern’ (p. 186) among scarcities in different urban centres, particularly those with international political issues involving the British Empire. Commercial, crowded and low-lying urban centres were prioritised over others, especially those that were geographically more accessible. According to the author, these selective relief practices were sometimes ethnically based, with Muslim urban or town-dwellers receiving assistance from the government, while some Armenian communities were disregarded. However, Pehlivan does not elaborate on why or when exactly the Ottoman government shaped its relief programme along ethnic and confessional lines. She critiques the Ottoman relief programme in light of the Tanzimat’s discourse of equality, arguing that pastoralists were excluded from any relief efforts. An elaboration on whether this was applied arbitrarily or as part of a broader indirect settlement strategy within Ottoman policies would provide a clearer understanding of its implications. For Pehlivan, these diverse, selective and hierarchy-based relief programmes exacerbated what she describes as ‘the ecological and socioeconomic disequilibrium’ (p. 183) between settled and mobile communities in Ottoman Kurdistan. However, Pehlivan also notes that local governors attempted to address scarcity issues in their cities by postponing taxes, reducing or cancelling import duties, and requesting grain supplies from neighbouring city centres, making the central government’s relief programme appear more pragmatic, selective, hierarchical and strategic in comparison to local governance.

In the last chapter, Pehlivan examines Hamidian policies of ‘state-sponsored violence’ in the Ottoman East alongside environmental factors, which, for her, exacerbated inter-communal tensions due to animal losses and pasture scarcity. She argues that current literature overlooks the environmental causes, which, in conjunction with state-sponsored violence, coincided with the empowerment of tribal elites in the 1890s. She enumerates and maps the animal thefts in Ottoman Kurdistan as an indication of heightened tensions stemming from both the violence of state-sponsored Kurdish Hamidian tribal cavalry and the scarcity of natural resources. As the culmination of these developments in the context of Nixon’s concept of ‘slow violence’ (p. 231), she cites the Sasun Massacre of 1894, framing it as an example of violence. Although environmental factors did have some influence on violent events in the region during certain years, the chapter remains vague at points, due to the broader spatial focus on Ottoman Kurdistan. This is particularly evident as it is difficult to directly link an environmental disaster to animal thefts. Additionally, Pehlivan sometimes over-generalises the pogrom of 1894–1896 to all regions of the Ottoman East (p. 270) and attributes the perpetrators to all Hamidian Cavalry Units, even though in Sasun, the perpetrators – specifically the Badikan and Bekiran tribes – were not actually Hamidian tribes. In this chapter, Hamidian

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light cavalry tribes are rarely portrayed as having agency, instead being depicted solely as perpetrators of violence, despite Pehlivan herself critiquing this approach (p. 272). Inter-tribal power relations are not thoroughly discussed, with only a brief reference in a footnote (p. 270). Since most of the animal thefts occurred during violent inter-tribal encounters, which predominantly affected the Armenian peasantry – often under the patronage and protection of another tribal power – it would be beneficial to elaborate further on this dynamic. Overall, this chapter primarily focuses on political history, complementing the previous chapters, which adopt a more environmental explanation.

Zozan Pehlivan makes a significant contribution to the literature by combining environmental, socio-economic and political developments, offering a well-rounded understanding of the region's historical context. Pehlivan's study stands as one of the first contributions to the environmental history of the region.

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