A comparative study of the French and German impacts on the Ottoman-Turkish forestry (1856-1937)

Selcuk Dursun, Department of History, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

The second half of the nineteenth century marked an important watershed in the history of Ottoman forestry. Like all major states, the Ottoman state also initiated practices of ‘scientific forestry’ during this period. The Ottoman Empire, through the French model, imported utilitarian and early conservationist principles into the field of forestry. If we take into consideration the French cultural and political influences in the Ottoman Empire and the similarity of problems experienced, it seems that the highly centralized forestry in France appeared to be a better alternative than the colonial forestry of the British and the German forestry of the pre-Bismarckian era. The French forest experts introduced new concepts of forestry to the Ottoman Empire. For example, they reformulated the principle of sustained yield for the management of imperial forests and introduced the silvicultural practices, like reforestation and afforestation, to the students of Ottoman forestry. The French impact began to change after the Ottoman state inclined to German foresters at the end of the nineteenth century. The German foresters were in charge of devising rules and regulations and writing down technical specifications. They later served the newly founded Turkish Republic until the late 1930s as well. Despite its limitations, the Ottoman-Turkish forestry did implement many aspects of the French and German forest management in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In this paper, I will compare the French and German impacts on Ottoman-Turkish foresteries with an eye on the internal developments and variations of rational forest management both in the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey. I argue that the focus of a certain group of elite foresters, including French, German, and Ottoman-Turkish, on forest issues was a main component of the modern state-building in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.

Dr. Selçuk Dursun studied history at Middle East Technical University and the University of Texas-Austin before completing his Ph.D. in history at Sabancı University (Istanbul). He wrote his dissertation on the history of Ottoman forestry. His current research is on the environmental (ecological) history of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans, and the Middle East with a particular emphasis on the use and governance of natural resources. He was a fellow of the Europe in the Middle East-the Middle East in Europe (EUME) program at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin during the 2008/09 academic year. Currently, he is a member of the Department of History, Middle East Technical University in Ankara (Turkey). Some of his publications include, the “Limits to Forest Administration in the Ottoman Empire: 1870-1914,” in Law and Transformation in the Russian and Ottoman Empires, ed. Huri İslamoglu and Jane Burbank (forthcoming 2010) and “A Call for an Environmental History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey: Reflections on the Fourth ESEH Conference (Review Article),” in: New Perspectives on Turkey 37 (Fall 2007): 211-222.