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## *Introduction*

The modern history of Jordan is the story of the creation of a state and the attempt to mould a political community that would render allegiance to that state, and it forms the subject matter of this book. Arguably such stories are never completed, though in Jordan's case the first is considerably more advanced some 80 years after its commencement than the second. The existence of Amman as an economic and political power centre, and the elaboration of a formal set of sophisticated structures and processes can, at one level, make the Jordanian state seem a convincing entity. However, a turbulent region, the relative strength of its neighbours, lingering concerns about its own economic viability (not least its habitual reliance on external rents) and an informal political culture sometimes at odds with the trappings of the modern state give one pause for thought. As for the creation of a political community there are more, perhaps many more chapters to be written in the story. The task of reconciling Palestinian and Transjordanian, Islamist and liberal, the tribal and the post-tribal among others continues to challenge the Jordanian body politic.

There have been three broad phases in the state-building project in Jordan. The first spans the period from the post-First World War settlement to the post-Second World War settlement. The riddle it addressed was how to forge a modern state from what was a dusty, under-populated, under-developed and impoverished periphery. The project was essentially an external, neo-colonial one, led by a small band of British officials on the ground and the dependent administrative elite they introduced from outside. Increasingly, people from the new entity of Transjordan were drawn into the project. However, this gentle venture, characterised as it was by a growing partnership between the British, the Hashemites and local leaderships, was plunged into a precarious uncertainty with the emergence of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

The second phase spans the end of the 1940s through to the beginning of the 1970s. This turbulent period was one that was not without its

opportunities, as the determined Hashemite pursuit of viability through territorial expansion demonstrates; the West Bank was consequently acquired in 1950. Nevertheless, the storms of 1950s Nasserism and the viciousness of Israeli cross-border retaliation against non-state actors were to expose the vulnerabilities of the new state, and the West Bank was subsequently lost in the 1967 war. In the end, only retrenchment behind a national security state saved Hashemite Jordan in the late 1950s and the early 1970s. The state survived, but against virtually all expectations.

The third phase spans the early 1970s through to the late 1980s. It was indisputably the era of oil, and, in Jordan's case, the secondary benefits of oil wealth recycled in the form of Arab aid and remittances. With monarch and state acting as the conduits for the distribution of much of this rent, both appeared to grow stronger, with public institutions, administrative and economic, proliferating. However, declining income in the 1980s left both increasingly exposed, with the amassing of foreign debt postponing what became the economic crash landing of the late 1980s.

It was at this point that a new stage of state-building began. But how to characterise it? The fourth phase as the period of liberalisation and democratic reform foundered in 1993, as King Hussein prepared to make a historic peace with Israel; the fourth phase as participation in supra-state cooperation and integration, Shimon Peres' 'new Middle East', foundered with the collapse of comprehensive Arab–Israeli peacemaking in 2000. What this fourth phase will look like it is simply too early to tell.

The threefold staged project of state-building was to some extent mirrored by three distinct attempts to turn the people in Jordan into a Jordanian political community. The first came with the incorporation of the social-cum-spatial periphery into the physical and normative domain of the state. By the 1930s this cause was progressing well, but based on what one might call a two-way colonisation. Jordan remained a British colonial possession under the thin guise of the League of Nations mandate system, but increasingly it was the political culture of the people in Jordan that coloured the nature and *modus operandi* of state politics. Though hardly yet a Jordanian nation state, by 1946 it could be claimed that there now existed a kingdom incorporating a Jordanian state nation.

For the political community project the late 1940s were even more profoundly disruptive than for that of state-building. Onto a predominantly tribal, stable, rural and marginal population in Transjordan was grafted a people ('the Palestinians') who were more differentiated economically and socially, but who were also better educated, more prosperous and, in large

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part, damaged, that is to say psychologically if not physically, and materially dispossessed. New cleavages emerged: between political and economic elites from the two banks; between the rural and the urban; between Amman and Jerusalem as potentially competing centres of gravity. Tension was exacerbated by growing impoverishment, the spread of radical ideas, and a static governing elite. But in spite of fluctuating tensions the diverging tendencies in terms of political community were ameliorated, ironically, by two, very different ideas. On the one hand, it could be claimed that the people in Jordan were one people, based on a common Arab and predominantly Muslim identity (Caucasian and Christian millets respectively notwithstanding); at the same time, the subjective viability of Jordan was aided by the existence within one state of two lands (the East and West Banks), within which the aspirations and identities of the two peoples did at least have some room to breathe, thereby facilitating mutual coexistence.

Consequently, the third and much more problematic phase aimed at reconciling the notion of political community came after 1967, or more specifically after it became clear that there would be no speedy restoration of the West Bank. Jordan now became one land, the territory of the East Bank, but with a population that was increasingly Transjordanian or, after the transformation of the PLO, Palestinian, with a consequent marginalisation of over-arching political identities. A bloody conflict for the political soul of the remaining territory took place in 1970 and 1971, though the expulsion of the armed units of the PLO and the consequent oil-induced prosperity soothed the rawness of conflicting identity and interests. But in spite of the outcome of the Jordanian civil war it remained the case that a substantial part of the (notably urban) population of the country was Palestinian. A *de facto* arrangement whereby Palestinians dominated the private sector, Transjordanians the public sector, and politeness otherwise prevailed, began to unravel in the late 1980s to mid-1990s. An increasingly impoverished state, a formal peace treaty with Israel, regional recession and growing unemployment have created a sense of injustice on all sides, and the language of ethnic politics no longer lies securely under wraps. Once again social cohesion and political stability in Jordan cannot be taken for granted.

If the period spanning the existence of these state and political community-building projects forms the historical focus of this book, its point of departure comes several decades before that. In order to understand the dynamics of the modern state in Jordan one must understand

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the social dynamics that existed prior to the state's creation. In addition, one must understand earlier experiences of politics and state-building, in the Jordanian case the extension of Ottoman authority into the area from the 1860s onwards. Too often in the past commentators and scholars have begun the story of Jordan with the British and the Hashemites, ignoring both the Ottoman experience and indeed the people of Jordan.

## CHAPTER I

*On the Edge of Empire*

Prior to the First World War, the potential for the emergence of a state from the lands beyond the River Jordan was almost non-existent. There was no significant urban concentration to act as an embryonic power centre around which political and economic power might coalesce; indeed, Amman was a deserted village until the 1870s. Neither was there much sustainable prosperity in the area from which an economic surplus capable of supporting the complex structures of a modern state might be drawn. Moreover, there was little sense of a collective community on which the ideology of a state might be built.

That is not to say that the people who lived in Transjordan prior to the Great War had no experience at all of 'stateness'. Since 1867, a substantial part of the territory had come into contact with an increasingly assertive Ottoman state: as a tax extractor (from the peasantry); as a resource distributor (to certain bedouin tribes); as a provider of arterial security; and, latterly, as an initiator of economic projects like the Hijaz Railway, which linked Damascus and Medina from 1908. The people of Transjordan, though relatively impoverished and with little formal education, had a shrewd view of the benefits and costs of interacting with a centralised state. Mobility was an important factor in deciding the degree to which sections of Transjordanian society could avoid the negative aspects of the Ottoman state.

For all their geographical and economic marginality, the lands of Transjordan were neither unsophisticated nor rule-free. The area beyond Ottoman control may have been anarchic in the literal sense of there being no over-arching government, but a complex and knowable ethical code or tribal law existed by which disputes could be addressed and resolved. Life was certainly dynamic in Transjordan during this time, not least owing to the vagaries of the climate and the logic of tribal interaction, with its emphasis on exploiting opportunities provided by the fluctuating ecology. There was a shifting relationship between the growing profile of the Ottoman state and the largely unregulated activities of the semi-nomadic tribes, with the

agrarian peasantry and trade reflecting the dynamic. This dynamic would re-emerge in the 1920s as the British replaced the Ottomans and attempted to create a state based on the lands across the Jordan, where only the edge of empire had prevailed before.

#### TRANSJORDAN AND ITS 'DARK AGES'

Little detail is known about Transjordan between the seventeenth century, when it fell out of direct rule by the Ottoman Empire, and the belated attempt to reincorporate it practically, as opposed to nominally, into the empire, in the final three decades of the nineteenth century. The reasons for this Jordanian 'dark age' were twofold. First, the climatic and economic marginality of the area, with its long stretches eastwards and southwards of arid desert: until 1867 and the reimposition of an Ottoman control system there was little reason why anyone should venture that far, either for political or commercial reasons. Second, Transjordan clearly generated no special priority for the Ottoman state itself, with its attentions firmly fixed on its European not its Middle Eastern provinces, and, as far as the latter were concerned, its essentially urban and arterial focus. If its nominal rulers could summon little enthusiasm for the place then why should anyone else? A good illustration of this is linguistic in that the world came to know Transjordan as what it was not: a land conceived of as being literally 'across (and hence beyond) the River Jordan'. With few foreign travellers, little by way of Ottoman records, and an oral as opposed to a written culture predominating among its inhabitants, there is little of a recorded nature about the deep history of the area.

The skeletal corpus of surviving information that we have about the 50 years or so up to the Ottoman reassertion is overwhelmingly based on the recorded impressions and experiences of a relatively small number of European travellers. Their conceptions of the area were inevitably skewed according to their own preconceptions and preoccupations. A good example of this is the fact that their concern with 'Transjordan', with its strong biblical associations, would have had little currency either as a geographical or a cultural description for either the Ottomans or the local population. For the Ottomans, the preoccupation was much more with the administrative units of Greater Syria, of which a truncated Transjordan was soon to become a part. For the inhabitants of the area the focus of identity was either more precise – membership of kin-group or village – or more general, notably part of a loose but distinct religious entity. This disparity in conception was neither new nor unusual. For Europeans had long conceived of the

Ottoman Empire, a multi-ethnic organisation cemented by a predominant ideology of Islam, in specifically ethnic terms as a 'Turkish' state.

It is hardly surprising that the relatively small number of Europeans who ventured across the Jordan during the 1800s had difficulties in conceptualising its nature. First, the area contained a relatively small population, which suffered poor health and low life expectancy, thereby restricting the potential for demographic growth. Second, the harshness and unpredictability of the climatic conditions, with the arid nature of the overwhelmingly desert conditions and the precariousness of the rain-fed uplands agriculture, resulted fundamentally in a subsistence economy, thereby restricting the potential for human development. Third, the economic activity of the area reflected its ecology, with a relatively small area of sustainable agriculture around Ajlun in the north, more fluctuating agrarian fortunes along the upland spine running vertically to the centre of the country, and livestock herding based on the search for pastureland on the edge of the desert.

The climate and topography of the area determined the socio-economic division of labour that typified Transjordan. In Ajlun, the Ottoman administrative unit covering the north of the country, where economic activity was as certain as it could be and the hilly uplands provided a degree of protection against bedouin expropriation unavailable on the plains, a relatively settled peasantry was to be found. These peasant communities clustered around villages, which became associated with dominant clans. Examples include: the Shraidah in Kufr al-Ma; the Nusayrat in al-Husn; the Khasawnah in al-Nu'aymah. In spite of the sedentary nature of these people, tribal norms dominated the culture of the area, with the emphasis on the *noblesse oblige* of the shaikhly head of the dominant clan as strong as among the semi-nomadic tribal population of the area.<sup>1</sup>

Bedouin tribes engaged in pastoral nomadism dominated the livestock herding activities, with the range and regularity of movement of such people depending on the land and water resources under their control. For the more formidable of the tribal confederations, such as the Bani Sakhr in the central area and the Huwaitat in the south, extra income could be earned from merchants and even the Ottoman state in protecting (for which read 'undertaking not to raid') the movement of convoys of predominantly commodities and pilgrims. Such symbiotic relations were not unchanging. The Ottoman decision to construct the Hijaz Railway appeared to threaten the material interests of the larger tribes, as pilgrimage and other traffic by rail would have less need of their assistance, either in the form of transportation or protection.

The third and smallest of the socio-economic groupings in Transjordan at this time was that of the artisan-trader, who was to be found in the handful of settlements in Transjordan, but who was often obliged to be mobile in order to render his services. The more significant among this group also acted as an economic bridge between the peasants and nomads on the one hand and the external economy on the other. In what was often an economic interaction based on barter trade, the narrow range of agricultural products produced locally – notably wheat, on the part of farmers, which the social historian of the time, Raouf Abujaber, called ‘the king of all cereals’;<sup>2</sup> camels and sheep, wool and dried yoghurt on the part of livestock herders – were exchanged for staples like tea and sugar or basic consumer goods, such as textiles and utensils.

#### THE OTTOMAN STATE AND ITS IMPACT<sup>3</sup>

The Ottoman attempt at imperial self-rejuvenation began in the 1830s with the *Tanzimat* reforms.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the modernisation of administrative practice, the raft of reforms included a movement for the incorporation of the imperial peripheries, especially after the politically disruptive occupation of the Levant by the renegade forces of Muhammad Ali to 1841. Through the unprecedented level of centralisation of empire, this incorporation was to be executed more effectively than had been the case over the preceding three centuries.

As befitting such marginal lands, the move to incorporate Transjordan took place relatively late in the process of reform and in what were to be the last decades of the existence of the Ottoman state. Even here the experience was to be one of a fitful, and in some respects incremental extension of authority, with some false starts and a geographical limitation which hardly saw the process extend much to the south of Karak, that is to say beyond the northern half of what would eventually become the territory of the state of Jordan.<sup>5</sup> Even when the incorporation of Transjordan was in full swing there was a limit to its scope and style, with a further centralising impetus only coming after the Young Turk Revolution in Istanbul in 1908.

There were good reasons for this. While the pacification of the north-western areas of Transjordan was important to the development of trade and to the extension southwards and eastwards of an administrative net, there was less economic incentive to push that line further south. Moreover, the Ottomans, as befitting an imperial regime that had based an empire on rule through local elites, no doubt instinctively felt that the new strategy of reform was likely to be more successful, not to mention cost-effective, if it



incorporated significant local players than if it was predicated on military domination. Such means were not required in Ajlun and Salt, where a symbiotic relationship was increasingly forged based on the provision of security in exchange for the receipt of taxes. However, the Ottomans were not above the use of more brutal methods, when openly opposed. It is no coincidence that the main example of a more punitive approach occurred in response to the Karak revolt in 1911, raised in the name of resisting taxation and conscription, Karak being an area where the reciprocity of state-periphery relations was far less well established.

The transitional period of incorporation was an extended and untidy one, both administratively and socio-economically. After a number of false starts, a stable administrative structure was established in Ajlun and Salt in the late 1860s. The former was placed under the reorganised administration of the Hawran to the north, while the latter became part of a new administrative unit based on Nablus to the west. The central area of Karak was also made part of the Nablus district, but only nominally so, while the Red Sea port of Aqaba was never considered to be part of 'Transjordan' at all. With the Ottomans now looking to expand southwards, a further reorganisation followed in 1893 in which Karak became an administrative district in its own right under the provincial government in Damascus, and had Salt attached to it.

The extension of the active implementation of Ottoman authority in Transjordan soon ran up against the semi-nomadic tribes that instinctively resisted the imposition of a rival basis for authority. However, once the tribal leaders discovered that there were gains to be made from the arrangement, important local interests and power groups were happy to explore the unfolding new relationship with the Ottoman state. At the forefront was the interaction between the Ottomans and a number of the most powerful semi-nomadic tribes, most notably the Bani Sakhr. With both tribe and state being essentially a security-oriented collective, with goals of defence and economic security in mind, it would have seemed that in the Transjordanian case, as in others, the two sides would have been pitted in a zero-sum struggle; a fight for supremacy and autonomy respectively. This would have been problematic for both sides: the tribes because of the notional resources at the disposal of the state which they could never hope to match; the state, in the absence of aircraft and four-wheel-drive vehicles, because of the rapid mobility of the tribes in the arid areas outside its physical grasp.

In the Transjordanian case, the experience of Ottoman imperialism was not one of a life and death struggle, but rather one of emerging accommodation. The tribes were increasingly incorporated into the state-inspired

security regime. This meant that they lost the opportunity themselves to extract a security tax, or *khuwa*,<sup>6</sup> from the peasantry of the north, who now paid their taxes to the Ottoman state. Instead, the tribes benefited directly through the payments they received from the state for assuring the pacification of trade and communications routes, and indirectly through an increase in trade, from which they were in part the beneficiaries. A broader atmosphere of security through land registration, combined with a boom in European cereals prices, enabled the tribes to develop the lands they controlled for agriculture, with trade again enhancing the economic potential of such activity. As Eugene Rogan has succinctly put it: 'While [Ottoman] direct rule was imposed by force, it was maintained by persuasion.'<sup>7</sup>

A measure of the increase in security in the northern heartland of Transjordan was the growth in settlement and production across the area. According to Rogan there were three distinct waves of village settlement in Transjordan between 1867 and 1910. Each of these was a function of the deliberate policy of the Ottomans, and aimed at populating lands between administrative centres with cultivators, 'with title to land employed strategically'.<sup>8</sup> These three waves comprised: local peasants, who radiated out from existing settlements to create new villages; the Ottoman settlement of refugee communities; sharecroppers settled in plantation villages by bedouin tribes, fearful of the encroachment of the state.

For commentators of a romantic persuasion, the favourite story told relates to the second wave, and the introduction of refugees from the expansion of the Russian Empire in the Transcaucasus. Communities of Circassians and Chechens were, as Conder put it at the time, 'planted'<sup>9</sup> in Transjordan from 1878 onwards in a handful of sites, predominantly in the Amman–Suwailah–Na'ur triangle. Initially, it was the Ottoman intention that these hardy people would defy the semi-nomadic tribesmen of the area by expanding a chain of settlements, extending the areas of cultivation and bolstering the cause of sedentary preoccupations. After the early hardships of conflict and disease, these communities emulated their Ottoman patrons and made their peace with the tribes. Today, they have been assimilated into Jordanian society, though with distinctive cultural and political features.

The arrival of larger numbers of increasingly more prosperous merchants, in particular from the north and west, was a less alluring but probably more important illustration of the growing areas of settlement as a function of the extension of security. There had long been movement and interaction on vertical and lateral axes, notably trading relations with Damascus. The growing security from 1870 onwards, the increasing demand for wheat as a result of demographic growth in Palestine, and higher world wheat prices all