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978-0-521-39987-6 - King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan

Mary C. Wilson

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

Prologue

In January 1948, King Abdullah of Transjordan¹ sent his prime minister, his foreign minister, and the commander of his army to London. He had been invited to do so by the British government in order to negotiate some minor changes in the two-year-old Anglo-Transjordanian Treaty. At least, that was the stated reason for the trip. The unstated and primary reason was not difficult to divine, however. It had to do with Palestine.

Since the end of the Second World War, the future of Palestine had been the single most important and most difficult issue facing Britain in the Middle East. It was an issue that threatened to destroy Britain's position in the region, and one that might topple Britain's allies as well. One of these allies was King Abdullah.

The journey to London of the three officials, two of them Transjordanian and the other Glubb Pasha, the British commander of the Arab Legion, was to decide Transjordan's role in the future of Palestine. The outlines of Palestine's future had recently been hammered out at the United Nations, which had recommended partition between the hostile Arab and Jewish communities. Britain did not want to bear the responsibility for imposing and maintaining the unpopular division of territory and had consequently announced its intention to give up the mandate and withdraw from Palestine altogether by 15 May 1948. But, although Britain may not have wanted to carry out partition, it could not divest itself of all concern for the future of Palestine. For, whether Britain disassociated itself from the United Nations partition plan or not, whatever happened in Palestine would be laid at Britain's door by virtue of its twenty-five-year rule of the country under mandate.

Britain's objective in Palestine was clear. It was to withdraw without loss of life and in such a way as to retain as much as possible of its power and influence. But having declared the intention to give up the mandate and begun the process of withdrawal, the British could no longer control events as they had been able to do previously. Hence, British policy developed as a series of makeshift steps in response to circumstances as much as it was clearly planned.

Britain was especially concerned about what would be the fate of the areas of Palestine designated as Arab by the United Nations. It definitely preferred to see Transjordan take over these areas than to see the creation of an independent

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Palestinian state, in the interests of having as smooth a transition of power as possible and of handing over the reins of power to an established ally. Therefore when the Transjordanian prime minister, Tawfiq Abu'l-Huda, excluding even his own foreign minister, requested a private conversation with the British foreign minister, Ernest Bevin was prepared to address this sensitive topic. They met on the morning of Saturday, 7 February, at 11.30. In accordance with the delicacy of both Britain's and Transjordan's position, no verbatim account of the conversation was recorded; but Glubb Pasha, who was asked to serve as interpreter and who was the only other person present, later wrote that when Tawfiq Abu'l-Huda broached the subject of Transjordan's intention to send its army into Palestine after 15 May, Bevin agreed that it seemed 'the obvious thing to do.' But he warned Tawfiq not to invade the areas allotted to the emerging Jewish state.²

This was very much the sort of understanding that King Abdullah wanted. He was an ambitious man, overly so some thought. And since Transjordan's army, the Arab Legion, relied on British officers in key positions and on British arms and *matériel*, and further, depended utterly on a British subsidy to pay its costs, he could hardly hope to carry out a campaign contrary to British wishes. Although the Arab portions of Palestine which he would be able to add to his kingdom were small when compared to his dreams of expansion, he viewed this acquisition not as an end in itself. Rather, he viewed it as the first step towards gathering other parts of the Arab world under his aegis and he justified it as the first step towards a larger Arab unity.

The understanding with Bevin was a departure from Abdullah's usual relations with Britain. These relations were characterized by a closeness which, although not without periodic tension, was unparalleled elsewhere in the Middle East. None the less, in twenty-seven years of relative intimacy in Transjordanian affairs, Britain had never before supported Abdullah's ambitions beyond its borders.

Within Transjordan the close association of Abdullah and Britain was a product of mutual utility. That Transjordan existed at all as a separate state was in response to Britain's strategic and political needs; and it was Abdullah's tie to Britain, his position as the keystone in the arch between British mandate authority and local society, that lifted and maintained him above the indigenous leadership of the territory. As far as British interests were concerned, Abdullah was useful as the 'native facade' behind which it was able to ensure its interests without unduly stimulating opposition.³

Mutual utility, however, did not mean equality. Abdullah, for Britain, was only one piece in the interlocking pattern of allies and protégés stretching from Egypt to Iran which maintained Britain's overall position of supremacy in the region. Without him the pattern might not have been so neat, but Britain would still have been able adequately to protect its interests and its position. Britain for

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Abdullah, however, was the single source of significant support that had allowed him to survive the tribal revolts and attacks of the 1920s and that kept his administration afloat despite the lack of taxable assets in Transjordan itself. Without Britain, it is fair to judge that neither Abdullah nor Transjordan in its formative years would have survived.

Abdullah was fully aware of the imbalance of his dependence on Britain. It haunted him, and had, over the years, an impact upon his personality. Julian Huxley, who visited Amman in April 1948 on United Nations business, found him a man of 'peculiar shrewdness, sometimes rising to wisdom, a shrewdness compounded of native intelligence, a certain naiveté, and a rational cunning, which . . . could not have developed except in some such circumstances as his – a position of power, yet played upon by still more powerful outer forces . . .'⁴ Abdullah had sought means to redress that imbalance for most of his political career. The corrective, however, was not simply independence, for Abdullah's domain, as it was created in 1921, had a population of only some 230,000,⁵ no real city, no natural resources, and no importance to trade except as a desert thoroughfare. In short, it had no reason to be a state on its own rather than a part of Syria, or of Palestine, or of Saudi Arabia, or of Iraq, except that it better served Britain's interests to be so. Although its population grew and its economy expanded somewhat during the mandatory period, its human and material resource base did not change significantly. Hence, while independence might give Abdullah freedom of action from Britain, it might by the same token leave him at the mercy of his neighbors. Indeed, when Transjordan did receive formal independence in 1946, he was relieved that Britain agreed to continue its financial support of the Arab Legion even though Iraq had agreed to step into the breach if necessary.⁶

No, the corrective to Abdullah's dependence on Britain lay elsewhere. First, he had to expand his rule beyond the borders of Transjordan in order to find greater human and material resources. Second, he had to create a regional balance of forces whose self-interest, in addition to Britain's, would be served by Transjordan's continued existence and tranquility. He had, in short, to increase his internal resources and diversify his external sources of support in order to avoid domination by any one of them.

Ever since Abdullah's arrival in Amman in March 1921 his imagination had played over the territory of his neighbors, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. His goal in coming to Amman in the first place had not been Amman, *per se*, but Damascus. The alliance between his father, the sharif of Mecca, and Britain during the First World War, which had produced the Arab revolt, had not borne the expected fruit, either for his family or for the Arabs in general. An independent Arab kingdom was not allowed to emerge. Instead the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire were divided between Britain and France and put under mandate.

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After the war, Abdullah had marched north from his home in Mecca to challenge the divisions that were being imposed. Instead, he was made a party to these divisions by Winston Churchill, then colonial secretary, who induced him to stay in Amman in part through the vague promise that Britain itself would help him to move on to Damascus.⁷ This, however, never came to pass. First the French and later the majority of Syrians themselves were adamantly against adopting Abdullah as ruler. Similarly, his dreams of unity with Iraq, ruled by his nephew after his brother Faysal's death, and of reconquering his family patrimony in the Hijaz, which had been conquered by Ibn Saud in 1924–6, came to naught. Once set up as separate hierarchies in single states, none of the other regimes in the Arab world would willingly subordinate itself to Abdullah even for the sake of Arab unity. And, owing to Abdullah's intimacy with Britain inside of Transjordan, he was not able convincingly to pose as a nationalist leader in order to appeal to the Arab public at large. Britain, for its part, had other allies in the region, and to have supported Abdullah's expansionary dreams would have hurt rather than helped British interests.

By 1948 Abdullah had not achieved any of his objectives. Transjordan, although technically independent, was as beholden as ever to Britain for financial, military and diplomatic support. And even that support was beginning to look transitory as Britain's imperial tide began to ebb world-wide. When British plans to withdraw from Palestine were announced, Abdullah began to be alarmed that Britain would soon lose the interest and the will to sustain Transjordan as well.⁸ British officials were at pains to reassure him that, on the contrary, the withdrawal from Palestine rendered Transjordan more rather than less important to Britain's position in the Middle East. They were sincere, at least in the short run; but in the long run it was Abdullah who was right. Britain's imperial tide was irreversibly running out and Transjordan would not be able to count on British support forever. Although he longed to be free of British constraints on one hand, British support and the *raison d'être* of British strategic concerns could not be easily replaced on the other.

As British power waned, successor regimes, created for the most part by Britain or in Britain's favor, waited to take over in all the Arab mandated states but Palestine. Britain's troubled mandate there had allowed the creation of a Jewish Agency which was prepared and eager to step in as a state government, but not of an equivalent on the Arab side of the equation. This failure, compounded by the undermining of the Palestinian leadership in years of fruitless struggle with Britain, gave Abdullah his chance.

The 1948 agreement, then, was a real turning point for Abdullah personally, for Transjordan's position in the region, and for the Anglo-Transjordanian relationship. Abdullah was sixty-six years old. By any reckoning he had little time to achieve his ambitions. The sands of time were also running out on the regional balance of power dominated by Britain that had sustained Transjordan

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thus far. The ebb of British power allowed Abdullah to take Britain's place in at least part of Palestine. It also made it imperative that he do so in order to find a new constellation of regional and international forces to sustain himself and his kingdom in Britain's absence.

Britain's withdrawal from Palestine set in motion the process by which Abdullah was finally able to expand his domain. Through this expansion, Transjordan became Jordan and found a new *raison d'être* and a new regional balance of power which allowed it to survive the turmoil of the 1950s and the end of British hegemony. Although Abdullah did not live to see the development of that new order, he had, for better or for worse, laid its foundations.

Owing to the circumstances of time and place, Abdullah's life had pulsed in rhythm to the surge and diffusion of Britain's power and influence in the region. He was born in Mecca in 1882, the year that Britain occupied Egypt. He reached manhood as the framework of the Ottoman Empire gave way at last under pressure from without and within – from Britain among other forces on the outside, and from dissident and dissatisfied groups, among them Abdullah and his family, on the inside. In the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire and at the height of Britain's power in the region, he, in his middle years, became a British protégé by accepting the leadership of Transjordan under British mandate. Finally, during the twilight years of 'Britain's moment in the Middle East,'⁹ when the persistence of its influence was little more than an atavism, he died in an echo of the same events in Palestine that had cost Britain its position.

The confluence of Abdullah's and Britain's interests had flowed throughout his entire lifetime. Even before his birth, the nineteenth-century expansion of British interests in the Middle East, the growing centralization and vigor of the Ottoman Empire, and the protective instinct of an Arab elite anxious to maintain its place and power within the empire had set the waters in motion. Abdullah's family in Mecca was part of that Arab elite. Hence the story of the mingling of Britain's imperial interests with Abdullah's personal ones begins in Mecca and in its developing alienation from Istanbul.

Chapter 2

Mecca and Istanbul

Abdullah is often characterized in the Middle East and the West alike as a beduin. This notion comes from the latter half of his life when his personal history became entwined with the creation of Transjordan and he came to be identified with and to identify himself with the tribal hierarchy of that country. As to his upbringing, however, nothing could be further from the truth. He grew up in two of the more important cities in the Middle East in the nineteenth century, Mecca and Istanbul. One was the holiest city of Islam and the focus of religious consciousness and practice; the other was the capital of the Ottoman Empire and the hub of political power.

Abdullah was born in Mecca in the Ottoman province of the Hijaz in February 1882. He was the second son of Husayn ibn 'Ali and 'Abdiyya bint Abdullah.¹ His parents were themselves first cousins and both bore the title sharif, meaning noble, which denoted their descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Sharifian lineage is determined by complex genealogies which can be and have been forged, falsified and bought; yet in Mecca and in the Hijaz in general, genealogical tradition has survived in its greatest purity, making it difficult to forge false links to the Prophet there.² Sharifs enjoy special respect as a natural result of reverence for the Prophet, but the title itself does not ensure its bearer wealth or power and sharifs can be found at all levels of the socio-economic order. Those from Meccan lineages, however, were eligible for a special office, sharif of Mecca, which conferred on its holder religious authority, political power and wealth.³ In the year of Abdullah's birth, his great-uncle held this office.

Abdullah, being a sharif and closely related to the sharif of Mecca was born into a privileged layer of Meccan society. He was brought up in town, although it was the custom for the sons of Meccan sharifs to be sent to nearby nomadic tribes to be raised in order to cement relations with the tribes on whose goodwill Mecca's well-being depended. His mother died when he was four, after the birth of his younger brother Faysal. After her death, his great grandmother and great aunt on his father's side took care of him.

It was at the knees of these women of the Bani Shihr tribe that he learned of tribal history and nomadic ways. They passed on to him their knowledge and love of tribal lore, songs and poetry, and his expertise in such things was often

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remarked upon as he grew older. Especially vivid were the tales they told him of the unsettled times at the beginning of the century, of the conquest and 'desecration' of Mecca by tribes of central Arabia acting under the impetus of Wahhabism, of its reconquest by Muhammad 'Ali of Egypt on behalf of the Ottoman Sultan, and of the accession to the sharifate by his great grandfather.⁴

Sharif of Mecca was an ancient office, dating from before the time of the Ottoman conquest of the Hijaz in the sixteenth century. Under the Ottomans the sharif retained his position of local leadership and a certain freedom of action. Indeed, within the imperial structure Mecca, the Prophet's birthplace, and Medina, where he lies buried, prospered. The two cities were the recipients of empire-wide religious taxes and alms, collected and remitted through Istanbul, and of the personal munificence and protection of the sultan, who was anxious that no problems in the holy cities should mar his standing as their overlord. Moreover, their inhabitants were not taxed, nor were they liable to conscription. In return, the sultan was able to add to his titles one that gave him primacy among Muslim rulers: *khadim al-haramayn* (servant of the two holy places).

Although the sharif of Mecca had been accorded a wide range of authority at the time of the Ottoman conquest, his position and his relationship to Istanbul were not immutable. Throughout most of the Ottoman period, the Hijaz did enjoy a remarkable degree of autonomy. In the nineteenth century, however, the balance of power between Istanbul and Mecca began to change. This shift and growing British interest in the region was dramatically to affect Abdullah's life, and indeed, the history of the entire Middle East.

At the beginning of the century a rising force in Arabia upset the *status quo* in the Hijaz. The Wahhabis, followers of a central Arabian religious reformer and purist, allied with the political power of the Al Saud, a ruling family of central Arabia, occupied and 'purified' Mecca in 1803. They replaced the incumbent sharif of Mecca with one of their own choosing, thereby challenging Ottoman authority. Ottoman hegemony was re-established in 1819 through the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali. He named Abdullah's great grandfather sharif of Mecca, the first of Abdullah's immediate ancestry to hold the position. Owing to this temporary but none the less frightening loss of control, the Ottomans became more vigilant in regard to the Hijaz thereafter. This vigilance, coupled with the nineteenth-century movement to strengthen the empire by reformation and centralization, resulted in the gradual erosion of Hijazi autonomy. Using to advantage the rivalry between the two leading sharifian clans, the Dhawi Zayd and Abdullah's line, the 'Abadila, Istanbul worked to bend succeeding sharifs of Mecca more closely to its own will.⁵

Ottoman control of Hijazi affairs was aided after the mid-century by new means of transport and communication, which brought Mecca closer to the center of imperial affairs. The development of steamships and the completion of

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the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated movement between Istanbul and Mecca. Telegraphs and a regular postal system, set up in 1882, brought the Hijaz even more closely under Ottoman supervision. These technical innovations were double-edged, however, for they also tied the Hijaz more tightly into a world-wide network of communications and trade. In particular, the Suez Canal cut the journey by sea between Britain and the west coast of India by seventy-seven per cent, turning the Suez Canal–Red Sea route into Britain's most important imperial artery. Britain's ever-increasing interest in the Red Sea, beginning in the eighteenth century and taking a marked leap forward after 1869, strengthened Ottoman determination to rule the Hijaz with a firm hand.⁶

By the time of Abdullah's birth in 1882, the challenge to Hijazi autonomy created by modern means of communication and increased Ottoman vigilance and control had begun to be felt. In the same year a profound shock was dealt the empire. Britain occupied Egypt. This event reverberated loudly in Mecca, where Cairenes on pilgrimage reputedly dropped their offensive air of superiority and acknowledged Mecca as the true refuge of Islam, and even admitted the inferiority of their own city where unbelievers meddled in the religious affairs of the faithful. Two years later students in Mecca closely followed the uprising in the Sudan, joyfully awaiting the moment when the *mahdi* would defeat Britain and cross the Red Sea to the holy city.⁷ But they waited in vain. Although Britain was defeated in 1885, its advance up the Nile was only halted for a moment. Thirteen years later British and Egyptian troops together conquered and sacked the mahdist capital, Omdurman.

Britain's occupation of Egypt rounded out its control of the outlets of the Red Sea; Aden at its southern end had been occupied in 1839. More importantly, it introduced Britain's actual presence into the Middle East in a far more profound and deeply felt manner than had the opening of the Suez Canal, though the one was prelude to the other. Britain was also concerned with the peace and tranquility of the holy cities, the facilitation of the pilgrimage, and therefore with the policies of the sharifs of Mecca, since Queen Victoria had more Muslims in her empire than the sultan had in his. Aware of Britain's interest and its ability to project its interests territorially, Ottoman authority in the Hijaz became increasingly intrusive. Istanbul even tried to stem the tide of British Indian pilgrims for fear they might become a pretext for British occupation.⁸

Britain, however, was wary of intervening directly in the affairs of the Muslim holy land. British policy was also officially committed to upholding the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. Egypt, despite the British occupation, remained officially a part of the empire, but under what came to be called Britain's 'Veiled Protectorate.' So, even though the increase of Britain's interest and influence was palpable, it was not manifested by any outward change in political relations. Nevertheless, the British consul was acknowledged as the most influential foreign consul in Jidda. And because Ottoman power had at the

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same time become so intrusive, it was whispered locally that British protection might be preferable to Ottoman control, and that if Britain would agree to prevent Ottoman troops from reaching the Hijaz, the Turks could be expelled.⁹ Rumor also implicated an Ottoman agent in the murder of the sharif of Mecca two years before Abdullah's birth, a murder supposedly committed because the sharif favored the 'Engleys.' Rumors of Britain's interest in establishing an Arabian caliphate surfaced periodically thereafter.¹⁰

Ottoman authority in the Hijaz was directly represented by the *vali*, or governor, who was sent from Istanbul and who resided in the provincial capital, at first Jidda, later Mecca. The bounds of authority between *vali* and sharif were not fixed and the two vied for local pre-eminence. A strong *vali* with (and sometimes without) a strong central government behind him could curtail the sharif's autonomy, while a strong-willed sharif could wield power at the expense of the *vali* and the central government.

Generally in the nineteenth century the sharifs of Mecca were more powerful than the *valis*, despite state policies of reform and centralization. 'The governorship of the Hijaz, like many other provincial governorships, was viewed as a kind of exile for losers in the game of political intrigue in Istanbul.'¹¹ The *vali* had an Ottoman garrison to ensure his authority in the towns of the Hijaz, but in the dreary distances in between tribal authority held sway. The lynchpin of Ottoman relations with these tribes was the sharif. By virtue of a network of marriage ties and institutionalized patronage, he was able to bind tribal hierarchies to himself in varying degrees of closeness. These ties could not be replaced by the use of force, at least not by the military organization and level of technicalization the Ottomans then had at their command.¹²

It was absolutely imperative for the empire to maintain contact with, and some sort of control over, the tribes of the Hijaz, since it was through their territory that the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) caravan passed on its way to Mecca. The *hajj* was the greatest religious event of the Islamic year. It was also the greatest trading event, and arid Mecca's lifeline to the world. It was referred to as 'the most important of the exalted state's affairs' in Ottoman correspondence. The sultan's prestige and legitimacy rested in part on his ability to organize and ease the pilgrims' arduous journey within the empire.¹³ The sharif's fitness for office was also judged in part on his ability to ensure safe passage through tribal lands as the pilgrims neared Mecca.

The *hajj* required vast powers of organization. Even with relatively primitive nineteenth-century modes of travel, it was a great communal in-gathering which brought together believers from the far-flung corners of the Ottoman Empire and from the vast Muslim communities beyond its borders in Africa, India, China, and Java. Each year, during the last month of the Muslim lunar calendar, two great streams of pilgrims gathered at Damascus and Cairo. As they flowed slowly towards Mecca the whole region along the way swung into

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orchestrated movement. Fortresses built to guard the way were stocked and ready to provide shelter for the passing caravan. Villages and oases gathered their yearly surplus to trade for exotic wares from afar. Each pilgrim brought goods from his native land to trade along the way for sustenance and lodging. Merchants, no less pious perhaps than simple pilgrims but traders by profession, also took the opportunity of the *hajj* to ply their wares in distant markets. Tribes offered their animals for sale or rent and their animal products in exchange for agricultural products and manufactured goods of Fez, Istanbul, Isfahan and Bukhara. The judicious distribution of cash sweeteners along the major *hajj* routes from Damascus south helped to ensure that the tribes would trade with the caravan rather than plunder it.¹⁴

These tens and hundreds of thousands of people, speaking dozens of languages in multi-hued dialects, their animals loaded with goods, converged *en masse* on Mecca, the birthplace of the Prophet, as it lay hot and parched in its narrow sandy valley surrounded by barren mountains. The sharif of Mecca waited to receive them, to conduct the annual rites, and to receive the subventions of goods and cash which came with the pilgrimage every year for the upkeep of the holy city and the sustenance of its population. Abdullah's birthplace, like his kingdom later, depended on external sources of support owing to its own lack of natural resources.

Mecca is hot all year round, and very dry.¹⁵ For lack of water, little grows there although there are gardens within ten and twenty kilometres. Other fresh produce comes from Ta'if in the mountains two days to the east. Trade with the surrounding tribes provides meat and dairy products. Wheat, barley, rice, and broad beans come as subventions in kind from Egypt and Iraq. Jidda, Mecca's window on the world on the shores of the Red Sea, is sixty miles to the west. Before the advent of the automobile this was a trip of fifteen hours or two days depending on whether one travelled by donkey or camel caravan. But owing to its religious importance, Mecca is able to transcend the strictures of its temporal circumstances. Geographically remote, it none the less lies at the center of Muslim consciousness; it is towards Mecca that devout Muslims pray five times a day, and it is a religious duty to make the *hajj*. Although provincial, it is none the less cosmopolitan, for believers of all nationalities visit and many settle in the holy environs, enriching the cultural and commercial life of what would otherwise have been a little-known market town in western Arabia. Indians, Javanese, South Arabians, and Turks were the largest foreign communities. Slaves, mainly from East Africa and the Sudan, also added to the cultural and ethnic diversity of Mecca.

Everyone in Mecca depended on the traffic of pilgrims to sell their wares and services and to bring the alms and gifts which supplemented their livelihood. Most combined the service of God with trade to make a living. Gifts of cash and precious objects came from the sultan and other Muslim rulers. These gifts and