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The Imperialist Ties that Bind: Transjordan and the Yishuv

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Imperialism is typically described as a system of alien domination locked in perpetual conflict with its opposite – nationalism – presented, generally, as a set of principles representing the authentic collective impulse for independence. The notion that imperialism provokes nationalism exercises such a powerful influence in international relations theory that few scholars even look for creative linkages between the two forces, let alone posit the possibility of interdependence. According to conventional wisdom, imperialism boomerangs because governing a country rightfully belongs to those connected to it by language, culture and residence. Imperialists cross oceans and trek through distant continents hungry for land, treasure and trade, certain of the superiority of their way of life but presumably to no permanent avail. Opposing invasions of their homes and territories, people organize into nationalist movements to fight against imperialism in order to control their own resources, create their own structures of authority, and preserve their own cultures. So the difficulties inherent in imperialism can never really be resolved; they are either buried in forced compliance or ignited into sparks of collective insurrection and revolution.

But imperialism not only generates a series of endless crises; as a matrix of ideas, injunctions and affirmations, it serves also as a constituent element in building a state and demarcating a national identity. Literary theorists, through textual studies, have been among the first to recognize the deep legacy of imperialism and to explain how nationalist revolutionaries may expel the foreigner but not the traces of foreign rule. And if nations bear the imprint of imperialism long after they achieve independence, then it is reasonable to assume that they are deeply stamped by foreign rule during the actual years of their subjugation. Because social scientific analyses have generally been slow to recognize the linkages, they, consequently, pay more attention to the conflicts and incompatibilities that are present across the imperialist/ nationalist divide than to the manufactured commonalities. When common denominators

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are identified, they are often dismissed as a byproduct of coercion and viewed either as subversive camouflage or craven accommodation.

Palestine during the years 1922 to 1948 contained within its boundaries two political creations of Great Britain's imperialist ventures: Transjordan and the Jewish National Home. Divided by nationalist identities and loyalties, Transjordan's ruler, the Emir Abdullah, and Palestine's Zionist leaders were also bound together by a common framework of dependence on Great Britain and periodically by a convergence of political objectives. Shared interests evolved in the midst of counter-pressures, the latter producing mutual antagonisms, distrust, and ultimately, violence. Operating within the context of rules and policies not of their own making, both Abdullah and the leaders of the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) had to contend with the very real possibility of losing their foreign lifeline of support. Such uncertainty could not help but engender tensions between these two dependent subalterns and threaten the stability of any joint endeavour.

Policy vacillations also brought the two sides together. While Great Britain defined the guidelines for governing both units in its own image to serve, above all, its own strategic interests, it sometimes prescribed contradictory regulations, which were often indifferently enforced. Because both Abdullah and the Zionists were determined to breathe life into their positions and communities despite their dependency and the official restrictions which limited their options and narrowed the ambit of their authority, they turned, periodically, to one another for resources and support. Although Great Britain's imperialist policies officially segregated these two parts of the Palestine Mandate along nationalist lines, legal barriers could only inhibit, not close off, contacts based on shared interests which helped lay the bedrock for independence for both Transjordan and the Yishuv.

This viewpoint is different from those put forward by most studies of the relations between Yishuv leaders and the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan which, although detailed and authoritative,[1] do not explain how these contacts loosened the hold of the imperialist order. Multiple contacts both symbolized and granted both regimes the opportunity to exercise power while simultaneously imprinting imperialist norms on the local nationalist political cultures. The interactions between Abdullah and Yishuv politicians may have been emblematic of the international political realities, but they also became the central components of a newly evolving regional balance of power. For Jews and Arabs in Palestine, imperialism operated as a grisly but important point of cultural contact and while it intensified misunderstandings, it also interacted so intensively with local elite culture that a common grammar of political development was formed and incorporated by rulers on both sides of the River Jordan. Imperialism thus has a dual impact precisely because nationalist developments

achieved their initial and highest degree of definition within the framework of this foreign political order.

The design of this essay, then, is interpretative: to show how political and cultural studies can be fruitfully joined to one another and to the larger theoretical issues associated with an analysis of imperialism and nationalism. Because this perspective requires a shift in the meaning assigned to familiar events, it is, perhaps, useful to begin with a quick historical summary. First, an outline of several of the external factors that affected the scope, as well as the outcome, of the periodic discussions between Abdullah and representatives of the Yishuv. Great Britain's mandatory policies shaped Palestine's political framework and defined the place of local rulers within it. By officially foreclosing the option of Jewish land purchases and settlement in the area ruled by Abdullah, these policies left little room for large-scale cooperative initiatives. In addition, imperial assumptions that colonies should yield dividends instead of incur losses did little to alleviate severe economic distress whenever it erupted, prompting contacts between representatives from Palestine's two administrative units for the purposes of exploring the prospect of raising investment capital for mutually profitable ventures.

The emerging structure of regional politics led Abdullah to move his policy initiatives in surprising directions. Abdullah both contributed to and operated within an orbit of bitter rivalry and had to devise defensive and offensive strategies to ensure that regional disputes were not turned against his own regime in Transjordan. Arab leaders, even those joined by family ties, were so often compelled to bend their foreign policies to the service of domestic tranquillity that the ordinary population could hardly discern a difference between internal and external issues. Malik Mufti correctly posits pan-Arabism as 'primarily a response to regime instability',[2] and nowhere did the borders of the post-Ottoman Arab world arouse more passion and fury than in Palestine. Into this maelstrom of rage and discontent, first and foremost Abdullah and then, subsequently, other Arab heads of state stepped.

Although Palestinian Arab opposition to the mandatory policies backing Zionist projects was total, the experience of political opposition did not produce unity. Palestinian Arabs were fragmented by social structure, political loyalties and factional disputes. The range of political and social fragmentation remained too great to forge a meaningful consensus. No one had more reason or more opportunity than Abdullah, from his base in Transjordan, to take advantage of the high level of wrangling that characterized Palestinian Arab public affairs. Abdullah responded to the factional disputes by lending support to opponents of Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the pre-eminent leader of the Palestinian Arabs. But the social dynamics that generated incentives for Abdullah's interference in Palestinian Arab politics also triggered the possibility for

similar sorts of actions initiated by Palestinian Arabs within the Emir's own realm.

The exploration of the multiplicity of external factors only draws attention back to local issues confronting these regimes, for Abdullah's contacts with Yishuv leaders owed as much to internal pressures as to external constraints. Periodic outbursts of violence against Jewish immigration and colonization had ominous echoes for Abdullah and the security of his regime. Abdullah consolidated power in Transjordan partly but significantly by confronting tribal uprisings and securing military ascendancy for the troops in his service and under British command. Tribal antagonisms to the emerging demands of a more centralizing state than ever before experienced provided Palestinian nationalist leaders with potential assets for their own struggles against Zionism. Searching for allies to supply weapons or to provide safe havens, Palestine's Arab political activists attempted to conscript into their cause tribal groupings willing to transport military supplies and to establish staging grounds for attacks east of the Jordan. But Abdullah understood that his power could not be sustained by forfeiting enclaves to groups possessing their own autonomous structures of authority, allegiances and objectives. The Emir also knew that he could not extend his domain against tribal uprisings on one day and expect to hold it against autonomous tribal initiatives on another.

For many years, scholars have had great difficulty finding labels to describe Abdullah's relations with Zionist leaders during Great Britain's rule as mandatory authority in Palestine. To some, the ties seemed so strong, they paved the way for dividing the land and denying independence to the Palestinians.[3] To others, the years of discussions and limited joint endeavours primarily reflected, on the one hand, Abdullah's dynastic ambitions which led him to imagine that acquiring power in Palestine would pave the way for a call to govern in Damascus, and on the other, the desperation of Zionist leaders to find Arab support for their political project.[4] These earlier works now enable a shift in focus away from analysing the views of leaders to probing the conditions in which these leaders operated and to the values and concepts at their disposal for making sense of their newly designed political conditions. While these interactions produced no formal and full agreement, they did shape perceptions and format political tactics, which ultimately coalesced into a regional balance of power.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR: DEFINING THE ISSUES

When the First World War destroyed the Ottoman Empire, it not only permanently altered the landscape of the Middle East, it also exposed and widened the political fault lines that had lain just beneath the surface. On

the battlefields and in the diplomatic halls of Versailles, agreements transformed Arab society no less fully than Jewish, as longstanding conflicts acquired altered meanings and new groups emerged into political consciousness. Zionists embraced the changes and saw in them the opportunity for realizing their political objectives. By contrast, Arabs – even those endorsing the principle of a new political order – viewed the actual changes imposed as deeply problematic. While Zionists could see in the British Mandate the promise of far-reaching emancipation, Arabs, particularly those living in the newly demarcated territory of Palestine, could envision only the prospect of loss and subordination.

Even had there been no opposition to the building of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, the years following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire were unsettling times to live in. Among the changes introduced too rapidly for the local Arab population to assimilate were the radically new definitions of space – borders mapped to separate people formerly united in a single imperial framework, joined together in continuous economic exchanges, and bound by a common religious culture. The postwar territorial divisions made no sense to most Arab men and women and created deeply felt disruptions. As Ottoman subjects, even as Arabs organized themselves into households and local communities, they were tied to the Empire through provincial councils and religious institutions. Under the mandatory system, political allegiance and identity were supposed to stop at borders drawn by outsiders with sufficient power to institute an organization of political space intended to serve European, not Arab, interests.

The interaction of changing British politics with changing former Ottoman provinces generated severe strains throughout the Middle East. The war's very duration had stimulated new thinking about politics at the local level, and there were signs of a new political consciousness in many Arab cities and towns. For Great Britain, the need to wage war, defeat a large Muslim empire, and retain the allegiance of the vast numbers of Muslims living within its own imperial framework prompted a political strategy based on cultivating local Arab clients. By encouraging and working through dissident Arabs now embracing the new political rhetoric and consciousness, Great Britain expected to intensify military pressure from within the Ottoman Empire, and more importantly, to obtain leverage for its policies after the war ended.

During the war, Great Britain forged its central Arab alliance with the family of Sharif Hussein, Abdullah's father and the Ottoman official in charge of the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. Sharif Hussein and his sons expected Great Britain to bring them to power over a vast expanse of Arab lands, which, if divided into separate states, would be joined by dynastic authority. British overtures to Sharif Hussein and his family promised as much and inspired in a number of Arab nationalist societies

the millennial sense of living at the dawn of a new era of power and freedom. But military successes diminished the significance of past wartime alliances in what was expected to be an epoch of peace. For that reason, postwar diplomatic decisions reflected a newly calibrated balance of international power and led the victorious powers to oppose the formation of a single Arab state. The Empire's former Arab provinces were, instead, divided into several separate states in deference to European interests and spheres of influence. To Sharif Hussein, his sons and their supporters, postwar political decisions made a farce of wartime promises and structured, instead, new forms of subordination.

In countries not of their own making, the first generation of Arab heads of state faced unprecedented challenges. Bequeathed nearly empty treasuries, many confronted the devastation of war and the task of consolidating an entirely new political system with less than broad-based popular support. All encountered a crisis of legitimacy as a result of their willingness to cooperate with the British or the French, the very powers responsible for intruding their alien political values into the region. War may have fundamentally altered the nature of political life in the Arab world, but it had not yet instilled in the region's population a new political culture. The challenge confronting each Arab leader was nothing less than to make a state acceptable to the body politic while that state differed profoundly from anything the antebellum region had known or was led to expect. Although the mandatory system, with its tutelary authorities dedicated to preparing local populations for self-government, clothed imperial authority with a moral purpose, its implementation in the Middle East destabilized economies and ruptured longstanding political associations.

External Factors

The burden of a new and alien order weighed more heavily on Abdullah than on his counterparts in other Arab lands. Sensing defeat for himself and his family as the British allowed France to occupy Syria and drive his brother and his troops out of the country, Abdullah marched with 400 fighters from Arabia to put up a show of resistance to what seemed like a massive betrayal of promises. Encamped first at Maan and then later at Amman, Abdullah's presence in an area which had been included in Palestine in several treaties but actually ruled as part of Syria in the aftermath of the war demonstrated the need for demarcating the frontiers and acknowledging the fact that order had not yet been brought to the region.[5]

Aware that their plans for the region contained contradictory objectives, British policymakers were subjected to increasing domestic criticism for projected costs and blatant inefficiencies. 'At all levels of English society,' Aharon Klieman observes, 'the cry in 1920 was for economy and an end to domestic problems.'[6] The deficit of 473 million

pounds seemed staggering. Attempting to fulfil wartime obligations to the French without threatening their own interests, British officials determined that regional stability would only be forged by consolidating their own authority over this rather ambiguously defined area east of the Jordan. For Faisal's expulsion from Syria carried the risk that French influence would be pushed unimpeded up to the very borders of Arabia and Iraq, corridors vital to Great Britain's oil resources and its imperial lifelines. Instability in this area seemed a ready-made pretext for France to invade and possibly expand its regional power.[7] Additionally, Efraim and Inari Karsh underscore Churchill's conviction that the 'British needed to harmonize their policy in Transjordan and Mesopotamia'.[8]

Because the region around Abdullah's encampment had already been included in the Palestine Mandate, Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill reconfirmed its status as defined by earlier treaty. However, in an effort to live up to the country's wartime pledges, Churchill offered Abdullah, temporarily at first, the position of Emir or governor over the lands east of the Jordan. By indulging Abdullah's dynastic dream of one day ruling over a united Arab nation with its capital in Damascus, Churchill hinted that if the Emir agreed to serve as the governor of a region with a small population and no significant resources, he might one day find himself ruling over a vast territory and a large Arab nation. Without detaching the area from the Mandate, Churchill sought to distinguish its administration by closing off the possibility of Jewish land purchases and settlement and by honouring the country's wartime promises to Sharif Hussein's family with Abdullah's appointment. These policies, forged at the Cairo Conference of 1921 and reconfirmed by international agreement, promised to stabilize a region where the British were still pouring in millions of pounds to suppress insurgents in Iraq and quell riots in Palestine, and where the French were spreading hatred with each discharge of their cannons against the nationalist supporters of Abdullah's brother. Pacifying and controlling this region, which in Mary Wilson's words more than proved its 'political and strategic worth', protected access to Great Britain's oil reserves and ultimately functioned as a core axiom for local rulers in their own strategic calculations of regional political stability.[9]

In terms of their immediate reaction, Zionists regarded the British restrictions imposed on their activities in Transjordan as inconsistent if not subversive of the terms of the Mandate and to the commitments some read into its stipulations. In practice, Transjordan's role in Yishuv politics was less messianic than Zionist rhetoric implied. But the Zionist vision of revitalizing Jewish life through political action drew heavily for inspiration and historical validation on Biblical references. And as Zionists scrutinized the Bible for names of ancient Jewish settlements, they found a trail of identifiable sites in the area demarcated as Transjordan. The bulk

of the Jewish population in the ancient world had lived in Palestine's interior and not along the Mediterranean Sea coast, which only in recent years had become the centre of modern Jewish settlement. In the Zionist imagination, Transjordan could not be relinquished without at least an emotional struggle. But although all Zionists opposed the new strictures, they were deeply divided about how to respond. Whether or not to turn anxiety into political confrontation and rupture ties to Great Britain was hotly debated by Zionist leaders, an elite already polarized by sharp ideological and policy disagreements. Recognizing that the new mandate system produced new kinds of dependencies – and despite the strident principled opposition expressed by some Zionist leaders – most mainstream Zionists registered their objections in mild protests and expressed them in guarded language. Transjordan's status, initially an issue pertinent to Jewish national identity, eventually became a matter of state security and viability.

Still, Zionists never lost hope that they might one day be able to move beyond boundaries and restrictions when political calculations worked in their favour. While the new British policy cast a dark cloud over the most expansive of Zionist visions, it also had a more concrete impact on Zionism's material base by cutting off access to what were perceived as significant economic resources. Economic interest had already directed Zionist attention east of the River Jordan. For decades, Zionists had attempted to develop agricultural settlements on these lands but without success. Despite past failures, Zionist leaders, with full confidence in their rights, continued to be lured to cross the Jordan by what they conceived as market incentives and a favourable political climate. Prices were lower, and the Arab population much smaller, which according to Zionist calculations meant more attractive options for Jewish land purchases. Moreover, notwithstanding the mandatory restrictions on access of Jews to land, Yishuv leaders still hoped to find loopholes that would permit Jews to move to Abdullah's province for the jobs so desperately needed by the immigrants unable to find employment in Palestine's Jewish economy.

The net effect of Great Britain's restrictive covenant for this area, then, had broad implications for Zionist prospects west of the Jordan because it complicated core Zionist activities – immigration and land settlement. Sealing off Transjordan from Jewish development automatically diminished Palestine's economic absorptive capacity, now proclaimed as the official standard for determining the number of immigration certificates to be issued to the Zionist Organization for distribution. Knowing that achieving their goals depended on population growth and economic development, Zionists were eager to purchase as much of Palestine's land as possible. But land acquisition required high levels of capital not only at the time of sale but also during subsequent periods when the necessary preparations for viable agricultural settlement were

undertaken. With these concerns in mind, Zionists steadily reworked their material environment to increase its productivity and expand its capacity to sustain life. Constantly higher prices for land and increasing opposition to Jewish land purchases west of the Jordan made salient how deeply Zionist economic interests could be affected by British restrictions imposed on any part of Palestine.

Measured by their dreams, the first decade of British rule in Palestine was judged by Zionist leaders to be a disappointment. Fewer immigrants than expected arrived in Palestine and much less capital than anticipated was raised, severely retarding the development of a robust economy and of the demographic growth necessary for the establishment of an independent state. Immigrants often had to rely on public works projects for employment, at best a temporary palliative. Although a relatively large number of immigrants possessing capital produced a short-term boom in 1924, the depression that followed lasted longer than the run of prosperity. After 18 months of full employment and the introduction of many new businesses, the intoxicating economic expansion ended abruptly in 1925 and produced such a steep downturn that it threatened those at the very top of the society with a radically altered balance of power, and those living at the margins with starvation.

In 1927 Solel Boneh, a pillar of the Yishuv's economy, collapsed after being unable to pay its creditors. Solel Boneh's open-ended expansion, financed by speculative credit drawn from a heavily over-valued Polish currency, erected a financial house of cards doomed to eventual collapse. Within a short period, a financial panic engulfed the credit system, particularly affecting those associated with the labour movement. Histadrut enterprises began laying off workers, and the ensuing depression raised questions about some of the fundamental premises of Zionist ideology and the coherence of its programmes. In the face of dire economic conditions, with many thousands of workers unemployed, Yishuv leaders searched for pathways to development not only in every corner of Palestine, but also, once again, in Transjordan, despite its formal closure to Zionist economic activities.[10]

Zionist leaders renewed their overtures to the Emir Abdullah for purposes of both investment and employment opportunities. Given Great Britain's oppositional stance to such ventures, Zionists could devise no coherent policy and chose, instead, to rely on informal channels which brought tangible, but very marginal, results. Scattering down innumerable byways to strengthen the Yishuv's economy, Zionists found Abdullah also searching for resources and thus willing to engage in small-scale joint endeavours, though not initially through formal channels. Zionist entrepreneur and venture capitalist, Pinhas Rutenberg, received permission to buy land in Transjordan and build a plant to produce electricity. A joint Jewish–Transjordanian company extracted potash from

the Dead Sea. Zionists hoped that such enterprises might open the door to additional economic opportunities including the establishment of agricultural colonies. Aware that the Emir's well-publicized meetings with Zionist officials sometimes triggered antagonism, Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann hoped that Jews might be able to build on the notable successes achieved by private entrepreneurs.[11]

For Abdullah, however, circumscribed economic cooperation with some of Palestine's leading Zionist entrepreneurs represented one of the few ways available for attracting capital investment, mitigating underdevelopment and of not posing too direct a challenge to Great Britain. Because Abdullah believed that Zionists had access to unlimited resources, he was anxious to tap into them for desperately needed capital. Zionists, too, held exalted expectations of what negotiations with Abdullah might yield. The kind of economic opportunities Zionists actually sought lay well beyond the Emir's straightened circumstances to offer.

Great Britain's policies pushed Abdullah toward both dependence and freedom and toward channelling the limited resources at this disposal primarily to Transjordan's political development and secondarily into expanding his regional status. Abdullah could not acquire freedom without power, but he could not wield power without British backing, which was extended on terms aimed primarily at serving imperial interests.[12] Despite having been deprived of the throne he expected in Iraq, Abdullah believed that he could leverage his position in Transjordan to regional dominance in Syria. But first, Abdullah had to prove that he could maintain his position and invest his office with significant power. While Abdullah did not hide his political ambitions, the British left him ill-equipped to galvanize the forces necessary to fulfil what he saw as his family's dynastic destiny. Careful monitoring of the budget controlled Abdullah's access to the state's treasury and constrained his freedom to channel funds to secure allies. Funds sufficient to shore up his own political base in Transjordan could not instantly produce the capital necessary to forge stable regional alliances.[13]

Wary of Abdullah's connections to nationalist activists driven from Syria by the French in the early 1920s, the British eventually pressed the Emir in 1924 to expel them from Amman. By forcing the Emir to end his association with a proven group of nationalists, Great Britain weakened the link between the crusade for Arab unity and populist nationalist sentiments. Particularly after he was compelled to stand silently and passively on the sidelines during Syria's bloody revolt against the French in 1925, Abdullah appeared unaffected and unmoved by the nationalist argument and cause.[14]

But the nationalist struggle was a many-sided dynamic and it, as much as subjugation to imperialist domination, structured Abdullah's foreign policy stances. Nationalist unity to Abdullah meant not so much freedom

as power. Abdullah contended that the unity of the separate Arab states would not only fulfil his family's heritage but would also bring independence from imperialism. Recognizing the impossibility of openly challenging British policies, Abdullah discerned how British support for strategic security and stability in the region might be harnessed to strengthen his own regime, advance Transjordan's political development, and, simultaneously, promote closer cooperation among Arab regimes. As much as the polemics of the day, Abdullah's actions defined the meaning of Arab nationalism.[15] While attempts to unify the separate Arab states stemmed partly from Abdullah's personal ambitions and from his conscious efforts to subvert the power of rivals, Arab unity was not simply a metaphor for the power of state and for regime antagonisms and competition. For not only did unification of divided states represent a proposal for the region's future, it also harkened back to an older Ottoman political tradition which had become incorporated into the consciousness of many postwar Arab rulers, such as Abdullah, from their formative political instruction and earliest experiences. When the Ottoman defeat in war deprived Arab elites of their common framework of authority, it did not denude them of the norms and values that had for so long organized their culture.

Indeed, to many Arabs and to British officials, Abdullah seemed something of a political anachronism, a proponent of views trapped in an earlier era. Raised in Istanbul and Arabia, Abdullah may have shifted his political loyalty from the Ottoman to the British Empire, but he did not so easily or quickly displace his values or his way of understanding politics. Less a matter of ideology than of power, politics unfolded for Abdullah in the building of coalitions as the central agents of governance and in the distribution of funds to solidly entrenched elites as the essential instrument of establishing a stable base of support. Abdullah's idea of governance fostered a sense of loyalty to rulers before policies and to a structure of power rather than to a set of clear principles.

Abdullah retained the belief in the steady hand of a monarch and elite to govern, and in a united Arab political structure to link regimes as the best and perhaps only way to withstand the pressures of foreign powers. But wherever Abdullah turned for alliances, he found either rivalries to his own claims for hegemony or opposition to his conception of who should rightfully exercise authority. As a remedy for weakness and subordination, the language of Arab unity also became the rationale linking independence with the hopes for a better life that populations dispersed well beyond the borders of any single state embraced fully and enthusiastically. But popular sentiments in support of Arab unity posed complications for rulers like Abdullah who understood that such impulses carried with them democratic corollaries that simply divided and threatened too many established interests and powers.

Arab nationalism, which resonated deeply in the culture, thus became a vortex pulling leaders and followers in very different directions. Populist organizations adopted the discourse of Arab unity and tried to use it to advance their own aims. Railing against unwarranted foreign intervention, Abdullah and other Arab rulers could not avoid arousing passions, but their rhetoric of power and hope was not intended to activate a participatory politics or create a momentum too strong for the staying hand of a deferential order. It is no wonder, then, that the idea of Arab unity Abdullah put forward as a means to achieving independence from foreign control also pushed the Emir to deepen his dependence on foreign power as the only way to preserve his regime and insure stability. Imperialism was not just a system of alien rule; it became the rule itself, endowing local regimes with the necessary resources to maintain power and build state institutions.

During the second decade of British rule, Abdullah made considerable progress in consolidating his administration in Transjordan. A British trained and led Arab Legion deterred and/or put down a number of tribal revolts. In deploying the Arab Legion to quell uprisings and by extension to curb the capacity of tribes to control certain lands, Abdullah and his British advisors may have intended to service imperialist interests, but they also ended up forging a vital instrument of state-building.[16] Military prowess made possible the creation of a distinctive political culture whose structures of government may have been designed by a foreign power but whose mode of operations was distinctly reflective of local values. By deflecting some tribal challenges and confronting others militarily, Abdullah enlarged the scope of his local authority on the one hand, and expanded Transjordan's role in sustaining a particular regional balance of power on the other.

The development of state institutions strengthened Abdullah's position and laid the groundwork for increasingly autonomous political practices. Ironically, the introduction of a legislative council by Great Britain provided a major impetus for localist resistance to the demands of the imperialist order. Transjordan's Legislative Council functioned not only as a policy advisor to the Emir but also as a judicial body and as a negotiating instrument particularly in matters of taxation. Established for the sake of legitimizing Abdullah's authority, and by extension that of Great Britain, the Council ended up achieving much more for the Emir and his regime. By transmogrifying tribal practices into legal rulings and judgments, the Council accorded the Emir manoeuvrability with regard to his British overlords and allowed Transjordan to incorporate a formidable body of local customs into policy and law.[17] Although power and policy in Transjordan still had to meet local and foreign demands, there were fewer conflicts between the two sources of pressure as Abdullah found satisfactory ways of accommodating both and forcing each into patterns

of behaviour that recalled the legitimacy of the past, even if it still did not fully project an absolute institutional viability for the future.

Internal Factors

The shift in priorities from regional to internal developments allowed Abdullah to find within his own borders a valid form of political authority, but it also drew him into an increasing involvement in Palestine's general internal controversies. Not surprisingly, then, the outbreak of violence in Palestine in 1929, which destabilized British rule and Jewish settlement, intensified Abdullah's interactions with Zionist leaders. Arabs and Jews in Palestine emerged from the devastation shaken by how easily ordinary everyday tensions could descend into violence and how uncertain the future seemed in the context of disorder. In his masterful study of Jewish–Transjordanian relations, Yoav Gelber calls these disturbances a 'turning point' and describes in detail some of the profound changes.

> Late in 1929 the British Residency in Amman learned about attempts to raise armed bands to overrun Jewish settlements west of the river … Similar reports reached the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Council … They described the recruitment of bandits in Transjordan and warned of an impending attack on the Naharayim electricity plan and Jewish settlements in the Jordan Valley. Shortly after the riots, the Jewish national institutions established a 'Joint Bureau' to take charge of Arab affairs. In February 1930 the Bureau's Council discussed the situation across the river and several deputies suggested placating the Bedouins by bribing their chieftains. For the time being, however, no funds were available for that purpose.[18]

The pace of the contacts often underscored the urgency of the need, although they were conducted in times when other political powers in the region, including Great Britain, faced something close to political paralysis. In the aftermath of what were until then the largest disturbances in the country, financial transactions between Zionist leaders and Abdullah increased. They were, however, impelled more by the unsettled conditions of the day than by the prospects of material reward.

The 1929 riots took everyone by surprise, and the relatively high number of casualties in communities widely dispersed over the country provoked the British government into ordering a serious reappraisal of its Palestine policy. And because British policy statements appeared as a welter of contradictions, reflective of different perspectives and of the specific interests of disparate government ministries, Abdullah saw in this violence another opportunity to make real the promise of his own political ambitions. For their part, Zionists hoped to find a basis for cooperation with Abdullah to demonstrate to Great Britain that Palestinian Arab opposition was unusually intransigent and rigid. For both Abdullah and

Zionist leaders, ongoing contacts showed how two dependent powers could mitigate the terms of their colonial dependencies by widening, however tentatively, the roles assigned them. Ironically, Abdullah's discussions with Yishuv leaders strongly influenced the process of political consolidation in Palestine and gave the structures of both regimes a legitimacy neither had possessed before.

Abdullah offered the Zionists options for land purchases in Transjordan in violation of official restrictions.[19] With one offer, he aimed at securing funds and at demonstrating to his British advisors that his actions could not be fully controlled. Although Great Britain's commitment to the Jewish National Home remained largely intact, events in Palestine and at Whitehall in 1929 and 1930 convinced Abdullah that he was confronting a new set of circumstances and the distinct possibility of reconfiguring his own authority.

Sharing neither Abdullah's expansive conception of his claims nor his determination to unite the separate Arab lands of the Fertile Crescent, Yishuv leaders came to view engagement but not full cooperation with Abdullah as indispensable to their own search for regional legitimacy and security. Zionists were anxious to find an Arab leader who would be willing to recognize Jewish independence in the Middle East but who would not necessarily compromise Arab rights and interests, especially important in view of the shadow of fear draped over the movement by the latest and most serious eruption of fury in Palestine. The sporadic contacts between Abdullah and Yishuv leaders did not fulfil the hopes of either side, but neither was there a feeling of deep betrayal or disappointment. Even those representing the Yishuv who questioned the value of continuing discussions and payments generally admitted the utility of exchanging information and perspectives. For Yishuv representatives, Abdullah's demands captured and interpreted the views of the larger Arab world and suggested that there were common pragmatic grounds for agreement even if they had not yet been discovered. For if their shared dependency on Great Britain for political survival propelled Abdullah and Yishuv leaders to engage in discussions, it did not erase their differences and contradictory objectives. Although Abdullah welcomed Jewish investment in Transjordan and did not oppose immigration to lands he controlled, he stopped well short of supporting the idea of Jewish independence. These discussions always remained both a source of contention and a crucial point of self-definition for two developing political systems.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR: CHANGING THE SCOPE OF RELATIONS AND CONFRONTATIONS

Simple chronology tells us that the frequency of Transjordan's contacts with Yishuv leaders also coincided with major world political and

economic developments, but it has always been difficult to bring these themes together. For the Zionist movement, the rise of Nazism triggered its most profound crisis but eventually paved the way for the Yishuv's most sustained and significant period of growth. Even as the racist policies of Nazism cast a long and dark shadow over Palestine's Jewish community, the imaginative diplomacy of the 1933 Transfer Agreement and the continued flow of skilled immigrants to the shores of Eretz Israel created the basis for sound investment and consolidated economic development. Fearing that such impressive expansion jeopardized their own interests and futures, Palestine's Arabs determined to take an absolute stand against the ongoing building of the Jewish National Home and touched off a massive uprising in 1936 against British policies that permitted Jewish immigration and land settlement. Proclaiming a general strike and a boycott as well as a revolt, Palestinian Arabs gave vent to their anger and fears to attack Jews in their homes and on the roads.

In the rapid economic expansion and demographic growth, one can see how visible changes in the landscape controlled by the Jews predisposed Palestinian Arabs to conceive of thoughts of violence. Although Palestinian Arab leaders initially urged restraint, based on their own calculations of available resources, military supplies and organizational readiness, most became swept up in the passions to endorse the revolt and mobilize the population to provide material support.[20] The practical obstacles to persisting in armed resistance were immense. Weapons had not been sufficiently stockpiled; no mechanisms for coordinating attacks were established, and above all, because Great Britain was absolutely prepared to suppress the violence, in any large confrontation, Arabs stood at a fatal disadvantage. For what Palestinian Arabs saw as an opportunity to destroy the Jewish National Home struck British mandatory officials as a criminal assault against political order.[21]

Joining together with Zionist militias, British mandatory authorities met violence with violence, and soon enough the sequence of developments in the Revolt produced more turmoil in Arab than in Jewish society. In villages and towns all across Palestine, initial enthusiasm for the Revolt was soon succeeded by disillusionment as the spreading violence and work stoppages plunged much of the population more deeply into poverty. The end of the Revolt came not because Palestinian Arabs had achieved their goals but rather because they fell victim to internal violence and to the massive military might unleashed by Great Britain.

Nonetheless, the violence of the Arab Revolt of 1936–39 raised in its starkest form the question of the firmness of Great Britain's commitment to the Zionist project. Worried that the strikes and attacks in Palestine might convince the British to close the door to Jewish immigration, Zionists also contended with the possibility that new political policies would foreclose the prospect of independence. Seeking an Arab ally that

might afford their project the semblance of legitimacy, Zionists once again sought out Abdullah for his willingness to consider, under highly specific circumstances, the possibility of Jewish immigration and land purchases even in contradiction to official British policy. Although these meetings underscored the fundamental differences dividing the sides, Yishuv leaders thought that discussions might eventually produce a set of overlapping interests. They did. Geography helps explain Transjordan's vulnerabilities as well as its solidity. Zionists concentrated their discussions with Abdullah or his aides on making certain that Transjordan did not become a staging ground for rebel attacks against Jewish settlements and that the region did not become a conduit for weapons supplies.

For his part, Abdullah hoped that he could convince Yishuv leaders to endorse the idea of a temporary halt to immigration and carry out a task that had eluded his British overseers. In return for a gesture of compromise, Abdullah held out the possibility of settling Jewish immigrants, without political claims, in Transjordan and promised to call on Palestinian Arabs to end their uprising.

The role of Abdullah's contacts with Zionist representatives has usually been treated as tangential to the main themes of the Revolt. But these contacts, in the context of an increasingly fragmented Palestinian Arab society and the expanding regional Arab involvement in the Palestine issue, had a profound impact on the political development of Transjordan and of the Yishuv. Interactions strengthened both regimes by enlarging their autonomously driven initiatives. If the Revolt illustrated the nationalist aspirations galvanized by ordinary Palestinian Arab men and women, its crushing defeat marked the beginning of an era of retreat for autonomous Palestinian Arab political action and for the idea that they might be able to organize, on their own, for independence. Both Abdullah and Yishuv leaders moulded the conflict according to their own state-building purposes. In the midst of the disruptive struggles against British policies in Palestine, that Abdullah could maintain stability east of the Jordan was no small triumph.

In order to persuade Palestinian Arabs to end their armed struggle, Great Britain promised, at several junctures, to create a commission to investigate conditions and reconsider fundamental mandatory policies. During the three years of the Revolt, the range of changes ran from the Peel Commission's partition proposal to the 1939 White Paper policy, which backed away from the idea of dividing Palestine and promised policies to ensure that Jews would forever remain a minority in the country. If the Peel Commission's report represented an attempt to reconcile two contradictory nationalist objectives in a design perpetuating Great Britain's strategic interests, the 1939 White Paper marked an acknowledgement of British Balfour policy failures and a sign that allegiances were about to shift.

The recommendation put forward by Lord Peel for partitioning Palestine into two states contained a somewhat incongruous mixture of idealism and political expediency. The Commission suggested the division of Palestine along national lines but failed to place Palestinians in immediate control of their own territory. Instead, the Arab parts of Palestine were to be annexed to Transjordan and governed by Abdullah, who became, in Gelber's words, 'the principal Arab partner for any conceivable Jewish–Arab political arrangement'.[22] For Palestinians, the idea of partition seemed less a fulfilment of their nationalist creed than the culmination of Abdullah's dynastic ambitions.

By contrast, although the stipulations of the 1939 White Paper favoured the long-term nationalist cause of the Arabs, they did not go far enough to guarantee Palestinian Arabs their independence immediately, nor were they effective enough to halt the growth and development of the Jewish National Home. Because the Revolt had such a devastating impact on all political organizations, Palestinian Arab society could not quickly or easily recover from its effects. This prolonged violence deprived many Palestinian Arab leaders of their lives, fortunes and homes. In short, the disruptions of Palestinian Arab society heralded the beginning of a new regional intervention in Palestine that would be institutionalized into a pattern of interactions and an evolving balance of power. Abdullah's intense involvement in Palestine, which initially had primary consequences for his own regime interests, now became central to the new regional dynamic. No event revealed this trend more clearly than the moves toward war in the aftermath of the United Nations Partition Resolution of 29 November 1947.

PARTITION AND SOVEREIGNTY: 1947–48

The United Nations Resolution which proposed the establishment of Jewish and Arab states in Palestine, was condemned by Palestinian Arabs and praised by the Zionists. Within days, frightening incidents of violence seemed to confirm that the Yishuv would have to withstand a massive assault in order to ensure implementation of the United Nations recommendation. But enthusiasm for a crusade against the Zionists did not immediately engulf Arab rulers: for many months, it was unclear how much they were willing to risk or to stake in the coming conflict. Yishuv leaders were thus unsure what kind of war to expect – an ambitious series of local attacks or a sustained military campaign by the armies of the several independent Arab states.[23]

The steps by which seven Arab states moved from an initial policy devoted to supporting a war by proxy against the Yishuv to ordering their own troops to march in a full-scale invasion of Palestine have often been chronicled and shown to reflect the diversity of interests dividing Arab

states and their rulers. For Abdullah, international political and regional currents worked at cross-purposes. No longer a British-appointed governor of an administrative unit of Palestine, Abdullah had won formal independence for Transjordan in 1946 but had not yet secured its full emancipation in policymaking. The prospect of a war he would not be able to control was unappealing and first convinced Abdullah of the need for some contact with representatives of the Yishuv. The discussions retained some elements of their past bargaining pattern but also registered a new level of intensity accompanied by markedly different characteristics given the dangers confronting the region. They repeated earlier encounters insofar as Abdullah requested Yishuv leaders to delay their proclamation of independence in deference to Arab opposition and the likelihood of horrific bloodshed. In return, Abdullah promised security. But the fears of a terrifying attack, which led Yishuv diplomats to Abdullah's palace to see if he might refuse to join in an Arab war, did not dispose them to postpone their decision to proclaim an independent Jewish state.

While Abdullah resisted Zionist pleas for neutrality, he did not rush to join the battles planned by the Arab League. Unwilling to devolve military control of the Legion on military commanders appointed by the Arab League, the Emir was also aware that wartime alliances and even a common objective did not necessarily produce a harmony of political interests. Nor would a war erase the regional rivalries, which could undermine his regime. Finally, for reasons of his own state interests, Abdullah was reluctant to engage the Legion in prolonged and destructive battles with increasingly powerful Jewish forces.

The violence, which erupted in December 1947, wreaked havoc with the lives of Palestinian Arabs and destroyed many of their communities. The massive dislocations and looming disaster brought streams of refugees into Transjordan, transporting the Palestine problem directly into Abdullah's domain. The Emir could not remain indifferent to their plight without endangering the stability of his own region. Meanwhile, by the spring of 1948, there had been sufficient Arab defeats to expose the initial assumptions of the Arab League as misguided: this war could not be fought by untrained volunteers nor without incurring substantial cost. Having failed to create a united military command, the League now bowed to the reality of the aggressive spirit of autonomy characterizing the member states by naming Emir Abdullah Supreme Commander. But formal hierarchy fell far short of military effectiveness and unity.

The terms of Transjordan's engagement in this war reflect the country's state interests and the increasing power of Abdullah's regime. Presumably responding to cries for help, the Arab Legion's conduct during the war was not guided simply by popular pressure but rather by Great Britain's demands that Abdullah's troops not attack areas designated by the United

Nations Partition Resolution as the proposed Jewish state, and by a consciousness that its former patron's strategic needs served as well the interests of the newly independent Transjordan. Legion strategy was also moulded by the ever-changing battle conditions and the awareness that it only made sense to attack in areas where there was the possibility of making significant political and territorial gains for Transjordan. Aware that the Legion lacked the power to destroy the enemy, Abdullah chose his military engagements carefully and only risked major bloodshed – such as in the Jerusalem area – when the gains favoured the country's interests. The Legion remained in its fortified camps sometimes when masses of Palestinians were being driven from their homes in nearby towns.

Looking at the outcome of the 1948 War has persuaded some scholars of a convergence of interests between Abdullah and Yishuv leaders, but as Avraham Sela concludes in his masterful study of the tactics deployed by both sides, reality was much more complicated.

> What may appear to be a strategy of limited war intentionally adopted was … a cycle of actions dictated by strategic necessities, political constraints, limitations of strength and military setbacks, rather than by deliberate and voluntary self-restraint … When the country was finally divided de facto between Transjordan and Israel, it was not because the sides had upheld the elements of that prior accord; it derived from a military and political reality which Israel was compelled to accept despite the collapse of the unwritten understanding with Abdullah, and Israel's marked military advantage.[24]

CONCLUSION

Imperialism in the Middle East took many forms: it created diverse governing structures and several political subcultures even within a single empire. As colonial possessions matured, the balance of power shifted partly because imperialist resources had imbued their colonies with their own strategic norms and assumptions and had endowed local institutions with new capacities for governance. The extent to which local nationalist leaders accepted these imports varied, but they were all participants in these exchanges. It is important to remember that while the absorption into empire dramatically alters a political culture, it does not do so uniformly or absolutely. The so-called titanic struggles between imperialist and nationalist forces which spark violence also set in motion sustained cultural and political transactions producing, as in this case, surprising compatibilities and alliances.

NOTES

1. Uriel Dann, *Studies in the History of Transjordan, 1920–1949: The Making of a State*, Boulder and London, 1984; Yoav Gelber, *Jewish–Transjordanian Relations, 1921–1948*, London, 1997; Zvi Ilan, *ha-Kemihah le-Hityashvut Yehudit be-Ever ha-Yarden 1871–1947* (The Longing for Jewish Settlement in Transjordan, 1875–1947) Jerusalem, 1984; Mary C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain, and The Making of Jordan*, Cambridge, 1984; Avraham Sela, 'Transjordan, Israel and the 1948 War: Myth, Historiography and Reality', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.8, No.4 (October 1992), pp.623–88.
2. Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq*, London, 1996, p.14.
3. Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across The Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine*, Oxford, 1988.
4. Gelber, *Jewish–Transjordanian Relations*; Yehoshua Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity 1930–1945*, London, 1986.
5. Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle For Mastery in the Middle East 1789–1923*, Cambridge, 1999, p.316.
6. Aharon S. Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy in the Arab World: The Cairo Conference of 1921*, Baltimore, 1970, p.83.
7. Ibid, p.69.
8. Efraim and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand*, p.319.
9. Mary C. Wilson, *King Abdullah*, p.60.
10. Ilan, *ha-Kemihah le-Hityashvut Yehudit be-Ever ha-Yarden*, pp.368–84.
11. Gelber, *Jewish–Transjordanian Relations*, p.41.
12. Vartan M. Amadouny, 'Infrastructural Development Under the British Mandate', in Eugene L. Rogan and Tariq Tell (eds), *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, London, 1994, pp.128–61. See especially page 129 where Amadouny writes, 'Until recently, the standard view of the Mandate period emphasized the political agenda, with the creation of the Hashemite amirate and the Arab Legion as the outstanding legacy. P.J. Vatikiotis, for example, argued that not only did the creation of the Arab Legion precede that of "a sovereign, independent state", but that "the army created the state". The primacy of the political agenda, and the need for an effective military service in Transjordan, is not in doubt. But the Arab Legion did not spring fully formed in 1921; it grew and matured throughout the Mandate period, as did the state apparatus. This involved the formal establishment of departments of government. Though small and poorly funded, they contributed to the long-term development of a state apparatus, in addition to expanding governmental obligations in the towns and villages.'
13. Uriel Dann, *Studies in the History of Transjordan, 1920–1949: The Making of a State*, Boulder, 1984, pp.6–7.
14. Ibid, chapter six.
15. Wilson, *King Abdullah*, chapter six.
16. Riccardo Bocco and Tariq M.M. Tell, 'Pax Britannica in the Steppe: British Policy and the Transjordan Bedouin', in *Village, Steppe and the State*, pp.108–27.
17. Wilson, *King Abdullah*, pp. 96ff.
18. Gelber, *Jewish–Transjordanian Relations*, p.24.
19. Wilson, *King Abdullah*, pp.108–9.
20. Perhaps the most accessible sources in English are Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab Nationalist Movement From Riots to Rebellion*, London, 1977 and Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, *The Palestinians: The Making of a People*, New York, 1993, chapter four.
21. For an understanding of Great Britain's approach to violence in Palestine see Martin Kolinsky, *Law, Order and Riots in Mandatory Palestine, 1928–1935*, London, 1993.
22. Gelber, *Jewish–Transjordanian Relations*, p.111.
23. One good source in English is Uri Milstein, *History of the War of Independence*, Volume I, Lanham, Maryland, 1996.
24. Sela, 'Transjordan, Israel and the 1948 War', p.676.