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EFRAIM KARSH

No regional group has exerted greater influence on the fortunes of the modern Middle East than the Hashemite family of the Hijaz. Not only did one of its prominent scions, Hussein Ibn Ali, the sharif of Mecca and perpetrator of the 'Great Arab Revolt', succeed in inducing Britain to surrender to his family substantial parts of the collapsing Ottoman Empire; he also drove British officialdom to seriously entertain the destruction of that empire. As late as June 1915, nearly a year after the outbreak of the First World War, British policymakers were still amenable to the continued existence of Turkey-in-Asia, as evidenced by the recommendations of an interdepartmental committee, headed by Sir Maurice de Bunsen of the Foreign Office, that regarded the preservation of a decentralized and largely intact Ottoman Empire as the most desirable option. Four months later, the British high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, had been sufficiently impressed by Hussein's false pretence to represent 'the whole of the Arab nation without any exception'¹ to accept, albeit in a highly equivocal fashion, his demand for the creation of a vast Arab empire on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, stretching from Asia Minor to the Indian Ocean and from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean.

When this grandiose vision failed to materialize in its full scope, the Hashemites quickly complained of being 'robbed' of the fruits of victory promised to them during the war. (They were, as it happens, generously rewarded in the form of vast territories several times the size of the British Isles.) Thus arose the standard grievance that Arab intellectuals and politicians levelled at the Western powers, Britain in particular, and thus emerged the doctrine of pan-Arabism which postulates the existence of 'a single nation bound by the common ties of language, religion and history ... behind the facade of a multiplicity of sovereign states'.² The territorial expanse of this supposed nation has varied among the exponents of the ideology, ranging from merely the Fertile Crescent to the entire territory 'from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf'. But the unity of the Arabic-speaking populations inhabiting these vast territories is never questioned.

To be sure, this doctrine was already articulated by a number of pre-First World War intellectuals, most notably the Syrian political exiles Abd

al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1854–1902) and Najib Azuri (1873–1916), as well as by some of the secret Arab societies operating in the Ottoman Empire before its collapse. Yet it is highly doubtful whether these early beginnings would ever have amounted to anything more than intellectual musings had it not been for the huge ambitions of Hussein and his two most celebrated sons – Faisal and Abdullah.

Indeed, it was Faisal and Abdullah who placed another imperial ideal – that of Greater Syria – on the Arab political agenda. Even during the revolt against the Ottoman Empire, Faisal began toying with the idea of winning his own Syrian empire independently of his father's prospective empire. He tried to gain great-power endorsement for this ambition by telling the Paris Peace Conference that 'Syria claimed her unity and her independence' and that she was 'sufficiently advanced politically to manage her own internal affairs' if given adequate foreign and technical assistance.³ When the conference planned to send a special commission of inquiry to the Middle East, Faisal quickly assembled a (highly unrepresentative) General Syrian Congress that would 'make clear the wishes of the Syrian people'.⁴ And by way of leaving nothing to chance, Faisal manipulated Syrian public opinion through extensive propaganda, orchestrated demonstrations and intimidation of opponents.

When all these efforts came to naught, and his position in Syria was increasingly threatened by the French, Faisal allowed the General Syrian Congress to proclaim him the constitutional monarch of Syria 'within its natural boundaries, including Palestine' and in political and economic union with Iraq. On 8 March 1920 he was crowned as King Faisal I at the Damascus City Hall, and France and Britain were asked to vacate the western (that is, Lebanese) and the southern (that is, Palestinian) parts of Syria. The seed of the Greater Syria ideal had been sown.

Neither did Faisal abandon the Greater Syrian dream after his expulsion from Damascus by the French in July 1920. Quite the reverse. Using his subsequent position as the first monarch of Iraq, Faisal toiled ceaselessly to bring about the unification of the Fertile Crescent under his rule. This policy was sustained, following his untimely death in September 1933, by successive Iraqi leaders. Nuri Said, Faisal's comrade-in-arms and a perpetual prime minister, did so, as did Abdullah, Faisal's older brother, who articulated his own version of the Greater Syria ideal.

Having been elbowed aside by his younger brother, Faisal, from what he considered to be his prospective kingdom, i.e. Iraq, Abdullah turned his sights to Transjordan as a springboard for an alternative empire embracing Syria, Palestine, and possibly Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Hence, when in March 1921 it was suggested by the British Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, that Transjordan be constituted as an Arab province of Palestine, under an Arab Governor amenable to him and subordinate to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Abdullah demurred. If a certain

territory had to be incorporated into another as a province, then it should be Palestine into Transjordan, under his headship, and not the other way round: 'If His Majesty's Government could agree that there should be an Arab Emir over Palestine and Trans-Jordania in the same relation with the High Commissioner for Palestine as that of the Emir Faisal with the High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, he was convinced that the present difficulties between Arabs and Jews would be most easily overcome.' Churchill's explanation that there was a fundamental difference between Mesopotamia, which had been provisionally recognized as an independent state, and Palestine, which had been entrusted to the administration of a mandatory, failed to impress Abdullah. 'His Majesty's Government proposed to have his brother Faisal in Mesopotamia with a High Commissioner or a mandate, or whatever term they might like to employ. He felt strongly that a similar regime should be adopted for Palestine and Trans-Jordania.'⁵

These imperial ambitions constituted the cornerstone of Hashemite interest in the Zionist enterprise. As products of the Ottoman imperial system, where religion constituted the linchpin of the socio-political order of things, both Abdullah and Faisal had no real grasp of Jewish nationalism, or for that matter of the phenomenon of nationalism per se. True, they had been the moving spirit behind the 'Great Arab Revolt'; however, the revolt had far less to do with the desire to unshackle the 'Arab Nation' from the chains of Ottoman captivity than with the ambition of substituting a Hashemite Empire, extending well beyond the predominantly Arabic-speaking territories, for that of the Ottomans. Hussein and his sons did not regard themselves as part of a wider Arab nation, bound together by a shared language, religion, history, or culture. Rather, they held themselves superior to those ignorant creatures whom they were 'destined' to rule and educate. It was the white man's burden, Hijaz style.

This was also the Hashemite attitude towards the Zionist movement: not acquiescence in Jewish national self-determination but its exploitation for the benefit of Hashemite imperialism. Due to their Ottoman upbringing and their own imperial ambitions, both Faisal and Abdullah viewed Jews, like other non-Muslim minorities, as members of a tolerated religious community (*millet*), deserving protection and autonomy in the practice of their religious affairs – but not a state of their own; given their perception of Jews as an influential, affluent and technologically advanced community, they were keen to incorporate them into their kingdom – as subjects. As the Transjordanian Prime Minister, Samir al-Rifai, told Brigadier I.N. Clayton of the British Middle East Office (BMEO) in Cairo on 11 December 1947: 'The enlarged Transjordan State with the support of Jewish economy would become the most influential State in the Arab Middle East.'⁶

It is in this light that Faisal's brief liaison with the Zionist movement should be viewed. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917, in which the British government endorsed 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people' and pledged to 'use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object', had transformed the general perception of Zionism from a fledgling movement into an omnipotent expression of the mythical 'World Jewry' and a potentially beneficial ally. Consequently, in January 1919 Faisal signed an agreement with Dr Chaim Weizmann, head of the Zionist movement, expressing support for 'the fullest guarantees for carrying into effect the British Government's Declaration of the 2nd November 1917' and for the adoption of 'all necessary measures ... to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale'. Meanwhile, however, Lawrence of Arabia, Faisal's foremost champion, was reducing expectations of potential Jewish-Arab collaboration. 'The Arabs hope that the British will keep what they have conquered [in Palestine]', he told the cabinet's Eastern Committee. 'They will not approve Jewish independence for Palestine but will support as far as they can Jewish infiltration, if it is behind a British, as opposed to an international facade.'⁷

This is indeed what happened. No sooner had the ink dried on the agreement than Faisal, under the influence of his nationalist officers, reneged on this historic promise. Moreover, having been crowned by his supporters as King Faisal I of Syria, the newly installed monarch had no intention of allowing the Jewish national movement to wrest away any part of his kingdom. Hence the crowning ceremony was followed by violent demonstrations in Palestine, as rumours spread regarding the country's imminent annexation to Syria. These culminated in early April 1920 in a pogrom in Jerusalem in which five Jews were killed and 211 wounded.

Abdullah's interaction with the Zionist movement was far longer than his brother's, yet not much more fruitful as he never wavered from his Greater Syrian ambition until it was dealt a mortal blow by the establishment of the state of Israel and its ability to withstand the pan-Arab attack of May 1948. It was this ambition that underlay Abdullah's endorsement of the 1937 recommendations by the Peel Commission: not acceptance of the partition of Mandatory Palestine into independent Jewish and Palestinian states but rather the incorporation of these two communities into his kingdom. This is what he repeatedly communicated to the Zionist movement in the 1930s – before, during and after the Peel Commission;⁸ this is what he informed the follow-up Woodhead Commission of Inquiry (1938),⁹ and this is what he told Jewish leaders well after the Second World War,¹⁰ including the Acting Head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department, Golda Meir, in their meeting on 17 November 1947. 'Let me seize this opportunity to suggest to you the idea,

for future consideration,' he told Meir, 'of an independent Hebrew Republic in part of Palestine within a Transjordan state that would include both banks of the Jordan, with me at its head, and in which the economy, the army and the legislature will be joint.'¹¹

It was only upon realizing that this solution was totally unacceptable to Meir, who insisted on a two-state solution in line with the impending UN Partition Resolution, that Abdullah opted for the lesser choice of incorporating the Arab areas of Mandatory Palestine into his kingdom. But even then he did not view this option as final, but rather as a tactical withdrawal on the road of his strategic goal: in early December 1947, shortly after the passing of the UN Partition Resolution and a fortnight after his secret meeting with Meir, Abdullah sought to persuade the Arab League to finance Transjordan's occupation of Palestine, which he was prepared to undertake.¹² As his Arab partners were no warmer to the idea than his Jewish interlocutors, Abdullah renewed his efforts to convince the Jewish Agency to cede him some of the territory awarded to them by the UN or even to forego the idea of an independent state altogether and to become an autonomous province in his kingdom.

The last such attempt was made during Abdullah's second meeting with Golda Meir on 11 May 1948, a mere three days before the establishment of the state of Israel and its subsequent invasion by the Arab states. 'Why are you in such a hurry to proclaim your state?' he asked. 'Why don't you wait a few years? I will take over the whole country and you will be represented in my parliament. I will treat you very well and there will be no war.' Meir's categorical rejection of the idea failed to impress the king. Even as she was taking her leave, Abdullah reiterated his request to consider his offer, 'and if the reply were affirmative, it had to be given before 15 May'.¹³

Just as Abdullah was totally impervious to the essence of Zionist aspirations – national self-determination – so the Zionists would not concede to the king what he considered to be rightfully his. It is true that the Zionist movement preferred Abdullah over the militant Palestinian leader, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the former Mufti of Jerusalem and Hitler's sidekick, as their direct neighbour. But this did not *ipso facto* preclude the possibility of an independent Palestinian state that would be headed by this arch enemy of the Jewish national cause, especially in view of the Zionist wariness of Abdullah's imperial ambitions.

This was vividly demonstrated by Meir's refusal to condone Abdullah's annexation of the Arab parts of Palestine and her insistence on the temporary nature of Transjordan's occupation 'until the United Nations could establish a government in that part [of Palestine]'. It was further underscored by Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett at the Israeli cabinet meeting of 16 June 1948. Those were the days of the first armistice after

the pan-Arab invasion of Israel the previous month. Fighting was about to resume in three weeks; several political solutions revising the UN Partition Resolution were being contrived, especially by the British government, and Sharett briefed his fellow ministers of the various options confronting Israel. 'At a certain stage we committed ourselves vis-à-vis the international community to a specific arrangement – that of the 29th of November', he said,

We gave our partial and explicit agreement to a specific arrangement, and now we are being asked in England and America: 'Do you wash your hands of it? But you would be renegeing on your commitment!' It seems to me that it should be clear, which is precisely what I have said at a press conference and advised colleagues to speak in a similar vein: the 29 November Resolution is an arrangement comprising several components, which together constitute one whole. When there was a chance for this 'package deal' to be implemented – we accepted it. And if it is still feasible – we would not renege on our undertaking.

There are four such components [in the 'package deal']: a) A Jewish State in a certain part of Palestine within specific borders; b) A separate Arab State, unattached to Transjordan, let alone Syria, but rather a separate Arab-Palestinian State in a specific territory of Palestine and within specific borders; c) An international Jerusalem having an efficient international regime based on certain elements, such as ensuring equality and free access to holy sites etc; d) An economic alliance *unifying* these three elements – the Jewish State, the Arab State, and International Jerusalem – into a single economic entity, thus *preserving* the country's unity and the interrelationship between those parts. This is what we have agreed to.

'I assume, therefore, that it is our unanimous view that an Arab Palestine is here to stay', Sharett added, reflecting the general reluctance within the Israeli cabinet to condone Transjordan's annexation of the Arab areas of Mandatory Palestine,

And there is a more concrete question of Arab Palestine, namely the question of Abdullah. I do not think that on this issue we can determine the course of events in one way or the other, but we should have a prepared position for all possible contingencies.

If Arab Palestine goes to Abdullah, this means unification with Transjordan; and a possible linkage with Iraq. And if this Palestine is a separate state, standing on its own – it is a wholly different issue. In the former case [i.e., unification with Transjordan] – an economic alliance is impossible. This is not to say that no economic alliance would be feasible – but not the economic alliance [envisaged by the

UN Partition Resolution] in which we would pay tax [to the Palestinian State], and which would comprise joint customs, an international regime, as well as shared use of the railway system and the port of Haifa. All this will be inconceivable. We undertook to associate ourselves with a specific partner, and we are prepared to negotiate with it. But not with another partner.¹⁴

Two months later, in a telegram to Bechor Shalom Shitrit, Minister of Police and Minorities in the Israeli government, Sharett was equally opposed to Transjordan's annexation of the Arab areas of Mandatory Palestine:

We should strive for contact and mutual understanding with people and groups among our opponents who carry weight in Arab public life and who are today prepared for cooperation with us, whether on the basis of recognizing the State of Israel within its borders or in order to establish independent rule in the Arab part of Western Palestine.

Without being able to totally remove from the agenda the possibility of the annexation of the Arab part of Western Palestine to Transjordan, we must prefer the establishment of an independent Arab state within Western Palestine. In any event we must endeavour to explore this possibility and to underscore its desirability in our eyes over the annexation proposal.¹⁵

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion was similarly wary of Transjordan's possible annexation of the Arab parts of Palestine. 'Our main objective now is peace ... which is why I support talking to Abdullah', he told his advisors on 18 December 1948,

but we should clarify [to him] from the start that apart from a truce, there is not yet any agreement between us, and that the discussion is on the basis of *tabula rasa*. We will not be able to agree lightly to the annexation of [the Arab] parts of Palestine to Transjordan, because of 1) Israel's security: an Arab State in Western Palestine is less dangerous than a state that is tied to Transjordan, and tomorrow – probably to Iraq; 2) Why should we vainly antagonize the Russians? 3) Why should we do this [i.e., agree to Transjordan's annexation of Western Palestine] against the [wishes of the] rest of the Arab states? This does not mean that we might not agree under any circumstances – but only in the context of a general arrangement.¹⁶

This is of course water under the bridge. As the Palestinians disappeared from the political scene following their defeat and dispersal in the 1948 war, Israel acquiesced in the annexation of the territory that would henceforth come to be known as the West Bank (of the Hashemite

Kingdom of Jordan), especially since Abdullah's grandson, Hussein Ibn Talal, who ruled Jordan from 1953 until his premature death some 50 years later, unequivocally discarded his grandfather's imperial ambitions without dissociating himself from the covert interaction with Israel.

This, to be sure, did not prevent Hussein from betraying his secret Israeli interlocutor at the moment of truth. In June 1967, when a frenzied Arab world, intoxicated with its own rhetoric on Israel's imminent demise, was gearing itself for the 'final round' with the Jewish state, the Jordanian monarch, eager to share the war spoils, ignored secret Israeli pleas to stay out of the impending conflict and on 5 June attacked the Jewish state. Yet, as with Abdullah, the Israelis seemed to regard Hussein's act of aggression more leniently than that of the other Arab states, perhaps because of his willingness to parallel his overt hostility with covert interaction. Consequently, from the late 1960s onwards, the secret Jordanian-Israeli relationship grew closer and more multifaceted as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the surge of Palestinian nationalism, under the militant leadership of the PLO, created a strong convergence of interests between Israel and the Hashemites. Given the PLO's implacable commitment to Israel's destruction, Jordan was widely viewed as the foremost partner to any potential deal over the West Bank's future, though Hussein proved himself no more disposed than his grandfather to make the leap from a secret relationship to a public commitment to peace (in 1951 Abdullah reneged on a secretly agreed non-belligerence treaty with Israel), especially in view of the PLO's growing influence in the West Bank and Gaza.

Surprisingly enough, notwithstanding its unquestioned preference of the 'Jordanian option', Israel did surprisingly little to stunt the growth of the PLO's political influence in the territories. The publication of pro-PLO editorials in the local press was permitted, and anti-Israel political activities by its local supporters were tolerated so long as they did not involve overt and direct incitement to violence. Israel also allowed the free flow of PLO-controlled funds into the territories ('It does not matter that they get money from the PLO, as long as they don't build arms factories with it', said Minister of Defence Ezer Weizmann in 1978), and, with very few exceptions, did not attempt to encourage the formation of alternative political force as a counterweight to the PLO. As a result, the PLO gradually established itself as the predominant force in the territories, relegating the traditional pro-Jordan leadership to the fringes of the political system.

And yet, even the Likud party, which views the West Bank as an integral part of the historic land of Israel, and which at the time of its rise to power in May 1977 included influential members who believed that the Hashemite Kingdom, east of the Jordan River, with its substantial Palestinian population, should become a Palestinian state, sustained the

close tacit relationship with Jordan. Indeed, shortly after coming to power, Menachem Begin sent his foreign minister, Moshe Dayan, to explore the possibility of a peace agreement with Jordan based on a territorial compromise in the West Bank. In two secret meetings with Hussein in London on 22–3 August 1977, Dayan failed to entice the king into action. The pan-Arab Rabat Summit of 1974 had appointed the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinians, Hussein said, and he had no intention of imposing himself on them. Were the Palestinians to turn to him, he would naturally respond, given his deep sense of obligation towards them. However, he was no longer their representative and was not going to seek this role either.

Would the king accept a territorial compromise that would divide the West Bank between Jordan and Israel? Dayan asked. The answer was an unequivocal 'No'. The Israelis had to understand, Hussein said,

that he, as an Arab monarch, could not propose to the people of even a single Arab village that they cut themselves off from their brother Arabs and become Israelis. His agreement to such a plan would be regarded as treachery. He would be charged with 'selling' Arab land to Jews so that he could enlarge his own kingdom.

What then was the King's preferred solution for the West Bank? Didn't he fear that the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the territories, under PLO leadership, would endanger his throne? Hussein was evasive. He did not dispute Dayan's presumption regarding a Palestinian state, but did not endorse it either. 'Let the Palestinians do what they want,' he said. 'I could do without them.'¹⁷

Hussein's evasiveness must not have been that disheartening for Begin. Had the king picked up the gauntlet and agreed to enter into a dialogue, the prime minister would have been boxed into a corner given his relentless commitment to the ideal of 'Greater Israel'. As it was, a relieved Begin could argue that there was no real partner for negotiations over the West Bank, and that the key to Arab-Israeli peace lay in Egypt, in its capacity as the largest and most powerful Arab state. He must have been similarly relieved when a couple of years later the PLO rejected the invitation by US President Jimmy Carter to join the peace process, on the basis of a framework agreed by the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, and Begin himself, during their Camp David summit of September 1978.

It was only after the signing of the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel in September 1993, virtually modelled on the Camp David formula of 15 years earlier, that Hussein felt confident enough to make his public peace with Israel, thus renouncing once and for all potential Jordanian claims to the West Bank. This, however, has not eliminated the fundamental convergence of Israeli-Jordanian interests created in the wake of the 1967 war. So long as the PLO has not truly renounced its

commitment to the destruction of the Jewish state, despite its formal commitment to do so in the Oslo Accords, Israel is bound to continue to consider Jordan a strategic ally, if only on account of their being partners in adversity. So long as the PLO fails to transcend its terrorist origins and to eschew the use of violence as its foremost political instrument, the Jordanians cannot relent in their (tacit) opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state, for fear that they will be the next victim of PLO irredentism. It is only when all these three nations – Israelis, Jordanians and Palestinians – accept the legitimacy of the others' right to peaceful and uninterrupted existence, within secure and recognized borders, that their long and tortuous journey will come to a satisfactory conclusion.

NOTES

1. Hussein to McMahon (Cairo), July 1915–March 1916, presented to the British Parliament, Cmd. 5957, London, 1939, p.3 (hereinafter – Hussein to McMahon).
2. Walid Khalidi, 'Thinking the Unthinkable: A Sovereign Palestinian State', *Foreign Affairs*, July 1978, pp.695–6; Hisham Sharabi, *Nationalism and Revolution in the Arab World*, New York, 1966, p.3.
3. 'Memorandum by the Emir Faisal, 1 January 1919', FO 608/80.
4. Abu Khaldun Sati al-Husri, *Yaum Maisalun: Safha min Tarikh al-Arab al-Hadith*, rev. ed. Beirut, 1964, p.261.
5. 'First Conversation on Trans-Jordania, Held at Government House, Jerusalem, 28 March 1921', FO 371/6343, fols. 99–101.
6. Clayton to Foreign Office, 12 December 1947, telegram 67, FO 371/62226/E11928.
7. Minutes of the 37th Meeting of the Eastern Committee of the War Cabinet, 29 November 1918, CAB 27/24 (1918), pp.148–52; see also: T.E. Lawrence, 'Reconstruction of Arabia', 4 November 1918, in David Garnett (ed.), *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, London, 1964 (first published 1938), pp.268–9.
8. See, for example, B. Joseph, 'Note of Talk with Salim Ayoub, 20 May 1936', and 'Note of Talk with "S.A.", M. al-Unsi and "Fr. N."', 5 June 1936, CZA, S25\10093; Lourie to Shertok (Sharett), 25 May 1936, S25/6325; Shertok to Abdullah, 30 April 1936 and Abdullah to Shertok, 6 May 1936, S25/3243; Yehoshua Porath, *Mi-mhumot li-mrida: Ha-tmu'a Ha-arvit-Ha-Palestinit 1929–1939*, Tel-Aviv, 1978, pp.97–8.
9. See, for example, 'Text of the Proposal for the Solution of the Palestine Problem Sent to the British Government' (i.e., to the Woodhead Commission, May 1938), in King Abdullah of Jordan, *My Memoirs Completed: 'al-Takmilah'*, London, 1951, pp.89–90.
10. See, for example, Sasson's reports on his two meetings in August 1946 with Abdullah: CZA, S25/9036; idem, *Ba-derekh el Ha-shalom: Igrot Ve-shihot*, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp.367–72.
11. Ezra Danin, 'Siha Im Abdullah, 17.11.47', Central Zionist Archives, S25/4004.
12. Haza al-Majali, *Mudhakkirati*, Beirut, 1960, p.63.
13. Meir's verbal report to the Provisional State Council on 12 May 1948.
14. Israel's State Archives, 'Protocol of the Provisional Government Meeting of 16 June 1948', pp.12–13, 23–4 (emphasis in the original).
15. Sharett to Shitrit, 8 August 1948, in Yehoshua Freindlich (ed.), *Teudot Mediniot Ve-diplomatit, May–September 1948*, Jerusalem, 1981, p.498.
16. David Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Ha-milhama*, Tel Aviv, 1984, 18 December 1948, Vol.III, p.885.
17. Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt–Israeli Peace Negotiations*, London, 1981, pp.35–7.