“Writing the History of Jordan in the West: Changing sources and approaches”

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Abstract

(150-200 words)

Essay

Though turning 100 this year, Jordan remains a relatively young nation with a recent history. If anything, this enhances the importance of history in the Jordanian national project. History is one of the foundation stones of nationalism. The newer the nation, the more important the national history. The legitimacy of the national project hinges on the roots of the nation, and the deeper they run, the more historical legitimacy a new nation enjoys. At what point, however, does it make sense to write the history of a new nation? There are no clear-cut rules setting out the number of years that must pass before a country can credibly claim a past. Jordan provides a fascinated case study in the emergence of national history writing in a newly shaped nation – a process that started within twenty years of the establishment of the Mandate of Transjordan.

In his study of the history of Arab nationalism, Rashid Khalidi distinguishes between three distinct phases in the historiography (Khalidi, 1991: 50-51). He characterises the first authors to write the history of Arab nationalism as

"participants in the early stages of the movement and their contemporaries." We could refer to them as "subjective historians," activists who were themselves Arab nationalists and wrote as partisans about their movement – authors like Sati al-Husri or George Antonius. The next phase in writing the history of Arab nationalism Khalidi characterized as "the first scholarly attempts to revise, build upon, or contradict the theses of these first chroniclers of the history." These authors had more critical distance on their subject and based their work on archival and published sources to write works of synthesis. We may refer to these authors collectively as "objective historians," given their critical distance from their subject. Objective historians included scholars like the AUB historian Zeine Zeine or Oxford's Albert Hourani. The third generation of authors were "revisionists": scholars who, applying new sources or methodological approaches, challenged or revised the previous generation's work. In a mature historical field, this process of revision is open-ended, and fosters the debates that drive historical innovation.

This three-phase typology provides a useful framework to examine the historical writing on Jordan in English over the century since the establishment of the mandate in 1922. I distinguish historical writing in English from the development of the literature in Arabic because it has followed a different trajectory over the past century, and has targeted a different audience from works in Arabic. This focus on English does not exclude Jordanian authors,

many of whom have contributed to the literature in English. In fact, the very first draft of the modern history of Jordan was written by a British military officer in collaboration with a Jordanian official – the first of Jordan's subjective historians.

The Subjective Histories

Jordan's first historians were a native son and an English officer who helped establish the Arab Legion.

Baha Uddin Toukan (d. 1971) was only a child at the time of the establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan in 1922. Born in al-Salt in 1910, he completed his university studies in the American University of Beirut. At the age of 22 he joined the Arab Legion in 1932 where he served as secretary to Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Gerard Peake (1886-1970), better known as Peake Pasha, the commander of the Arab Legion. Toukan later served in the royal court of Amir Abdullah. In later life he became one of Jordan's most senior diplomats, serving as ambassador to Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United Nations. Had he lived one year longer, he would have been father-in-law to King Hussein of Jordan, who married Toukan's daughter Alia in 1972.

Peake Pasha was born into a military family in England and trained in the Royal Military College in Sandhurst. He served with the Imperial Camel Corps in the First World War, and participated in the Arab Revolt with the British detachment headed by Colonel T.E. Lawrence. In 1920, upon the

demobilisation of the Imperial Camel Corps, he joined the Palestine Police and was dispatched to Transjordan to found a security force for the region, then still part of the Palestine mandate (Jarvis, 1942). He would spend the next 19 years in the country as commander of the Arab Legion.

Though Peake was a generation older than Toukan, the two men shared a keen interest in the history of Jordan across the ages. Together they wrote the first dedicated history of Transjordan, published in Arabic in 1936, with Toukan publishing an English history in 1945 and Peake publishing his English text in 1958. We know little about how they divided their labours in writing their books, though both men highlighted their partnership in their English-language editions. Toukan noted in his preface that he 'collaborated with Colonel F.G. Peake in producing a detailed volume on the history of Transjordan' (Toukan, 1945: 1) while Peake claimed 'my thanks are due in the first place to Baha al-Din Tuqan' and noted in particular his help with the Arabic sources for the book (Peake, 1948: x).

Both Peake and Toukan relied heavily on first-hand accounts and personal experience in writing their books. Toukan's short history provides no sources and has no footnotes. For his earlier chapters Peake cited the classical sources and travel accounts that were available to him at the time of writing – between 1919 and 1939 – but provided no sources or footnotes for his chapters dealing with the history of Transjordan after World War I. Taken together, these books

represent a first draft of the history of Jordan, written by men associated with two of the foundation stones of the young principality: the Arab Legion and the Hashemite monarchy.

Given how the two men worked together, and were bound by a mutual commitment to the British role in the Hashemite state, their books share a number of key themes.

Both Peake and Toukan ascribe deep history to the new state of Transjordan. They do not question the ruler-straight boundaries that British colonial officials gave the new state, but accept Transjordan as a natural nation-state and lay claim to all of the history that transpired on that territory as rightly part of the new state's history. Thus, Jordan's history begins in Biblical times and spans classical antiquity, Byzantium, the Islamic conquests, the Crusaders, Ayyubids and Mamluks, and the Ottomans down to the First World War as prelude to the emergence of the new state of Transjordan under British mandate. In Toukan's book, the pre-1922 history of Transjordan takes up the first 44 pages of his 49-page text; for Peake, it was 104 pages of his 110-page history. The modern history of Transjordan after the foundation of the mandate in 1922 thus takes up less than one-tenth of these first histories of the country.

This emphasis on ancient history is not surprising. Those who served in Transjordan in the first half of the twentieth century were impressed by the extensive archaeological remains that covered the landscape, and this informed

their historical imagining of the country. Peake wrote of 'Jordan, with its 2000 years' history of the movements of peoples and its impressive archaeological records of the conflict between the "Desert and the Sown." (Peake, 1958: 94) In this way, by linking the new state to all of the historic empires that preceded Transjordan, Toukan and Peake were giving the country deep historical roots.

A second key theme in these histories is the central role of the Arab Revolt during the First World War in fostering a partnership between the British and the Hashemites that resulted in the creation of Transjordan. Toukan noted how the Arab Revolt spread to Transjordan when 'Sherif Feisal (late King of Iraq), helped by Colonel Lawrence, led an expedition against Aqaba and captured it. Henceforth Trans-Jordan assumed a position of importance in the War.' (Toukan, 1945: 43) Peake made the same point in his book, claiming that 'after the capture of Aqaba the Arab revolt assumed a new importance; for it was now possible to move the greater part of the army, which had been isolated in the Hijaz, up into Jordan, where it could act in conjunction with the British Army in Palestine.' (Peake: 1958, 99) Both authors made reference to key battles of the Arab Revolt fought in Transjordan, including at Ma`an, Shawbak and al-Tafila.

Both authors avoided some of the awkward issues raised by the Anglo-Hashemite alliance during WWI. The wartime partition diplomacy that underlay the Arab Revolt is not mentioned in either book. Both Toukan and Peake would have been familiar with the work of George Antonius, published

in 1938, exposing the duplicity of British wartime diplomacy. But neither the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, which promised British recognition of an Arab Kingdom in return for the Hashemite sharifs leading a revolt against the Ottoman Empire, nor the contradictory agreements with France (Sykes-Picot) and the Zionist Movement (Balfour Declaration) that Antonius decried as 'a startling piece of double-dealing' (Antonius: 1938, 248) gained a mention in Toukan's narrative, and only the briefest assessment by Peake. This should come as no surprise. The books served to reinforce Britain's role as mandatory power, and the legitimacy of Amir Abdullah as ruler over the new state. As such, the authors left to Antonius the agenda of exposing controversies and questioning the legitimacy of Britain's postwar colonial position in the Arab world. Their books sit more comfortably on the shelf next to those of other Britons in Transjordanian service like Alec Kirkbride and John Bagot Glubb, and of course the memoirs of Amir Abdullah himself.

Finally, both Peake and Toukan were influential in shaping the perception of Transjordan as a Bedouin society. Writing before the 1948 war and the massive flows of Palestinian refugees into Transjordan, Peake and Toukan paid far more attention to Jordan's tribes than to their towns. 'A good section of the population are Beduins, nomadic or semi-nomadic,' Toukan claimed, and he listed the main tribes of each district of Transjordan (Toukan: 1945, 4, 7) Peake dedicated nearly half his book to the tribes of Jordan, in a bid to preserve what

he saw as the authentic Jordanian culture then under attack by the forces of modernity. 'Whereas but a few years ago the tribesmen and villagers would during the warm summer evenings gather round to listen to the poems and legends of the wars, deeds and loves of their tribal heroes, now the younger generation have other occupations,' Peake lamented. (Peake: 1958, 141) Newspapers, politics, gramophones and automobiles were more appealing to the younger generation than 'the song of the old minstrel with his rababa'. In the books by Toukan and Peake, it was the Bedouin tribal culture that set Transjordan apart from its neighbours in Palestine and Syria. The tribes made Transjordan a distinct country in its own right, with other communities – Circassians, Chechens, Turkomans, even Bahais – providing diversity. However such views might be dismissed as Orientalist and essentialist today, it is Peake's ethnography of the tribes of Jordan in Part II of his book that would prove to be his enduring contribution.

Toukan and Peake devote only a few pages to the history of Transjordan after 1922. Given their works were written in the first twenty years of statehood, this should come as no surprise. The young country had only begun to record a history distinct from that of Syria, Palestine and the Hijaz. For both authors, the starting point of this modern history was the arrival of Amir Abdullah in Amman in March 1921, and his subsequent meetings in Jerusalem with Winston Churchill and Herbert Samuel, in which the parties struck agreement to create a

provisional government in Transjordan under Amir Abdullah's administration, answerable to the British High Commissioner for Palestine, for a six-month period. In September 1922, Transjordan was formally separated from the Palestine Mandate to constitute a mandate in its own right, and in 1923 the British declared Amir Abdullah ruler of the new state, under a League of Nations mandate. The main events chronicled by Toukan for the early years of the mandate were the series of revolts that broke out in the Kura district of `Ajlun, in Karak and Tafila in 1921-22; the `Adwan Revolt in September 1923; and the Wahhabi attacks between 1922-1924. Peake uses those events to frame the history of the creation of the Arab Legion, in which he played a key role. These passages, written in the first person, are very much about Peake's place in the modern history of Jordan.

In 1925, the territory of Transjordan was extended through the annexation of Ma`an and `Aqaba, formerly parts of the Hijaz. And in 1928, the Amir concluded a formal agreement with the British Government and elections held to elect a legislature that in 1929 ratified the agreement with Britain. Both authors noted the role the Arab Legion played in the Anglo-Iraqi conflict in 1941 in overturning the Rashid Ali Coup and the restoration of King Faisal II under the regency of Amir Abd al-Illah. Peake updated his draft for publication in 1958 to include the assassination of King Abdullah and the succession of King Hussein (oddly, Peake made no mention of the brief reign of King Talal).

These first histories of Jordan are seldom used by scholars today. They were already outdated by the time they were published, as the Anglo-Hashemite partnership succumbed to the forces of Arab Nationalism. Peake's book was finally published in English in the same year as the Iraqi Revolution that toppled Hashemite rule. Yet the books by Toukan and Peake are valuable precisely because they document the imperial partnership established by the British and the Hashemites in the Transjordan mandate, and the role of the Hashemite royal family and the Arab Legion in preserving that partnership. Written to encourage patriotism in Transjordan and pride in the nation's history, they were not nationalist books that would stir anti-imperial sentiment. A subsequent generation of historians would introduce those tensions in the era of Arab Nationalism and anti-imperialism of the 1950s and 1960s.

The Objective Histories

Patai and Shwadran and Naseer Arurui (Jordan: A study in political development (1921-1965) – The Hague, 1972)

Salibi and Abu Nowar

The Revisionists

Doctoral students begin to focus on specific eras of Jordanian history, specific parts of Jordan, drawing on field work and research into archival sources. Mary Wilson leads the way (British archival sources), though Peter Gubser's work on

Karak a blend of anthropology, history and politics. Next generation of scholars captured in Village, Steppe and State, drawing on Jordanian primary and secondary sources. This is where the Arabic tradition of history writing begins to really influence English-language history writing. Al-Madi and Mousa as a foundational text. The Jordanian school. The challenge raised by Israeli sources and the New Historians led by Avi Shlaim. Challenges to the legitimating principles of the HKJ: anti-colonial, validating Arab National accusations of collusion across the Jordan.

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