Chapter 5

The Infrastructure of Mandatory Power in the Towns

Marooned in Amman by the imperial division of Greater Syria, and faced with a “tiny heterogeneous population that owed no allegiance to the Hashemites,” it has been argued that ‘Abdullah “overcame Jordan’s geographical, economic, and demographic handicaps” by creating a “neo-patrimonial rentier state.” External revenues, supplied by the British in the form of an annual grant-in aid, provided the means to co-opt and conciliate “potential opponents” bequeathing a factionalized pattern of “political association” that posed little threat to the Amir or British colonial control. In fact, the Trans-Jordanian state was very much a British rather than a Hashemite creation, although its imperial architects built upon foundations laid down by Ottoman reform. After containing the threats posed by recalcitrant tribes and the radical wing of the Istiqlal in the early 1920s, Great Britain proceeded to complete the centralizing project begun by the Ottomans. The British Residency took charge of state finances and administrative appointments in 1924 and, having reduced the Arab Legion to what was little more than a colonial gendarmerie, went on to integrate Trans-Jordan’s security structures into a system of Air Control firmly under imperial command.

Far from being a distributor of patrimonial largesse, the Mandatory state was until World War II run on a shoestring budget that privileged the military and the bureaucracy and left little funds available for development or social services. The budgetary bias of the colonial state did little to promote the welfare of the mass of Trans-Jordanians and was a matter of bitter complaint by what was for a

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time a highly cohesive opposition. This built on the proto-national sentiment thrown up during the revolt of the ‘Adwan to hold five Transjordan National Congresses (TJNCs) between 1929 and 1933. However, the transport and communications infrastructure needed to sustain the Arab Legion, the incomes and expenditures of the men it enlisted, and its demand for staples and consumption goods generated what Michael Mann calls a “military multiplier.” The operation of this Mandatory “military Keynesianism” created enclaves of soldiers and administrators that transformed the structure of Trans-Jordan’s economy and altered the distribution of its urban population. It also sustained an immigrant network of merchants and bureaucrats that formed the dependent core of a “collaborating elite” abetting British control.

**Abetting Colonial Control: The “Dependent Elite”**

While tighter British control over the administration in Amman was only formalized by the 1928 treaty, it began in practice with ‘Ali Ridha al-Rikabi’s second term in office in 1924. Two years later, the cabinet of Khalid Abu al-Huda al-Sayyadi established a pattern whereby the key posts in the administration were filled by seconded officials from the government of Palestine. Thus, even after the departure of the Istiqlal, Trans-Jordanians were for the most part excluded from decision-making, and local notables played a subordinate role in the stratum of native administrators who oversaw the day-to-day work of the colonial regime. The Legislative Councils, to which the major tribal leaders could gain admission via appointment (for selected Bedouin *shaykhs*) or indirect elections (for those whose tribes either farmed or herded in the sown), gave ‘Abdullah “some leverage,” allowing him to create parliamentary blocs that could confront “the Mandatory power [on measures] that he and his government could not resist openly.” However, Trans-Jordan’s parliament was only partially elective and had very narrow prerogatives. On most issues, the votes of the Legislature’s elected delegates could be offset by those of *ex officio* members who held seats by means of membership in the Executive Council. When the British could not enforce their will through the votes of cabinet members, or by pressuring the *shaykhs* appointed to represent the “northern” and “southern” Bedouin, they could always play on regional antipathies between a population that still retained a high degree of loyalty to locality or clan. At the