Glubb and Transjordan, 1930–1945

Introduction

Glubb's arrival in Transjordan in November 1930 marked the beginning of a remarkably long period of service in the kingdom. His early years there were dominated by desert control and raising the Arab Legion's Desert Patrol. The policies that he applied in Transjordan were heavily influenced by his experience of desert control in Iraq. During the early 1930s, Glubb's most significant contribution was the peaceful prevention of tribal raiding that had blighted the country. He adopted a system of desert control that relied on winning over the tribes rather than coercing them.

Following the outbreak of a revolt in Palestine in 1936, Glubb started to comment on political matters that had nothing to do with his formal role. He accurately argued that the government had to employ various techniques, such as paying subsidies to prevent the spread of disorder to Transjordan, which were successful. He became commander of the Arab Legion in 1939, and during the Second World War the legion played a role in operations in Iraq and Syria, and it underwent a fundamental transformation from a gendarmerie to a nascent army. During the war years, Glubb had the opportunity to write a series of memoranda in which he pontificated on a variety of issues, such as the future of Palestine and the weaknesses of Arab governments and their armies. He made every effort to extol the virtues of Amir Abdullah’s rule and the successful development of Transjordan's political system, which was based on limited British interference.
Glubb and the British imperial system in Transjordan

When Glubb arrived in Transjordan in 1930, the British had established a system of light-touch imperial influence in the country over the previous decade. The establishment of a Hashemite amirate east of the River Jordan was accidental, resulting from the political and strategic circumstances that prevailed in the region after the First World War. Britain’s interests in Transjordan were determined by strategic considerations that included the defence of the Suez Canal, a desert air route to India and an oil pipeline to Iraq. The British presence in Transjordan focused on relations with Abdullah ibn Husayn, the second son of Husayn ibn Ali, the sharif of Mecca, who was born in February 1882. Relations between Amir Abdullah and the British evolved gradually during the 1920s, and Glubb was a vociferous supporter of the British system of imperialism in Transjordan.

In May 1943, he argued in a memorandum entitled ‘A further note on peace terms in the Middle East’ that in comparison with Iraq, which he regarded as a disaster, Transjordan was a qualified success. (18) This document is significant because it provides a detailed account of how Transjordan was successfully run during the amirate. Glubb was a consistent advocate of patriarchal rule with a small number of first-class British officials whose job was to advise rulers such as Amir Abdullah. Transjordan was the epitome of this form of authoritarian government and that the continuation of British control worked better than independence. Glubb argued that the population of Transjordan should have been rewarded for their loyalty to the British Empire during the Second World War with greatly increased economic development. The British succeeded in Transjordan because they were willing to share power with Amir Abdullah and the tribal shaikhs who supported the British so long as their interests were not impinged. The country also benefited from a comparatively homogeneous population, and a small educated urban population that might have supported anti-colonial nationalism.

Desert control in Transjordan

In the early years of the amirate the British gave Amir Abdullah a free hand on tribal policy, but as the British became more involved in running the emerging state they tried to expand its authority. This policy