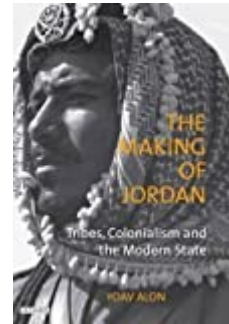




Yoav Alon. *The Making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism and the Modern State.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2007. XIV + 214 S. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84511-138-0.



Reviewed by Jan Goldberg

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Y. Alon: Making of Jordan

Readers should not give up looking for this book in their local academic library if their on-line search for Yoav Alon seems to no avail and try either the title or the name Joab B. Eilon, under which libraries on both sides of the Atlantic have catalogued the work. The reason for this unfortunate outcome of transliteration from the Hebrew remains a mystery given that the book is no translation but based on a 2000 Oxford DPhil thesis. Nowhere in the book is the author called other than Yoav Alon.

âThe Making of Jordanâ is not just another study of mandatory Transjordan. Though similarly titled, it is certainly no replacement of Mary Wilsonâs âKing Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordanâ (Cambridge 1987). Alon refers to Wilson as the standard monograph on the mandate period (p. 167), and he regrets that there is not much more of such good scholarship on Jordan, which in his eyes continues to represent relatively unknown territory if compared with other countries in the Middle East. (p. 1) Popular and some scholarly views of Jordan, he says, have been dominated for too long by miscomprehension, and Jordan has come to be oversimplified as a state with a society sharply divided between

Bedouins and Palestinians. (p. 1) Alon is likely to have thought of such historical incidents as the developments in 1970 around what has become known as Black September, when the Jordanian army with the Bedouin tribes as its backbone crushed the Palestinians who in a coup had tried to bring down the Hashemite Kingdom and take over the entire country.

The dramaturgy of such incidents contributes to history being perceived in clichÃ©-like dimensions. As if the Bedouin tribes have always had it in their blood to support the Hashemite family and guarantee its dynasty. As if things were not more complicated as there was no such natural tribal support, or, in other words, whatever support there was was neither natural nor tribal. (p. 1) Alon seeks to show this by going back to the beginnings of the Jordanian state. While not denying the support of the tribes for the Hashemite family, he argues that this support had nothing to do with intrinsic values of any sort but with negotiations on the basis of give and take, reciprocity and mutual interest in the early beginnings of the state. In Jordan more than elsewhere, tribes came to be partners of the state, whether it was subject

to local, regional or foreign control. Rather than being its enemy or rival, tribes often had their share in the establishment and stabilization of the state and its ruler. They altered in the course of this process, but did not disappear and remained almost as strong as before. Alon follows the classic distinction between the smaller more intimate *gemeinschaft* and the larger more anonymous *gesellschaft*, as marked by Ferdinand Tönnies in his *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Leipzig 1887). While actively taking part in the modernisation of the latter, the tribes maintain the former and so help minimise or postpone what might appear as negative features of modern society. (p. 7)

Hence, it is not the mandate period as such but the role of the tribes in it that attracts Alon's interest. On the basis of extensive research in archival and private paper collections in England, Jordan and Israel as well as through the study of newspapers, interviews with contemporary witnesses and an enormous amount of monographic material on Jordan, tribes in the Middle East and tribalism in general, he sets out to trace the origins of the tribal backbone of the Hashemite regime. His aim is to prove that certainly not in this case, if in any, one can explain the past by means of the present but has to resort to the past in order to get a grip of later realities, however manifest and eternal they may appear. Against the background of his findings, Alon joins a group of scholars, which no longer sees the concepts of state and tribe as dichotomous but understands them as rather interactive.

Apart from the preface, three maps and the introduction with a short account of the state of research at the beginning, a conclusion reflecting on the mandate's legacy and a glossary on tribes and sheikhs, the work is divided into five chapters. While chapter one is dealing with Transjordan's transition from an Ottoman province to a British-controlled Emirate, when British efforts to establish a number of local governments of tribal character and indirect rule failed, chapter two is looking into the first half of the 1920s, when later Emir and King Abdullah appeared on the scene. With his arrival the project of local government came to a close as the British learned to accept that they could only nominally control the country at low cost with a central government led by Abdullah, which they would support and control. Indirect rule could only be sustained at the expense of local government. Alon calls the establishment of the Hashemite Emirate the exchange of one form of indirect rule for another. (p. 35) But even though the short phase of local government had failed politically, in administrative terms it laid some fundamental framework which the

new Hashemite regime could build upon.

Chapter three covers the second half of the 1920s, when Abdullah and the British sometimes against one another, sometimes in cooperation set out to further develop the political and social fabric of a colonial state, with Abdullah elegantly using tribal politics as one important element in the formation of the state and with first attempts of administrative centralisation and the establishment of the Arab Legion under its founding commander Glubb Pasha. The role of the latter in the relationship of the British with Abdullah as well as the tribes is at the centre of chapter four. Chapter five, covering the years from 1930 to 1946, the end of the mandate, provides an account of how the state was further consolidated and how tribal participation played a crucial role in this process. Tribesmen served in the Arab Legion, became state functionaries and benefited from public services as much as they contributed to them. At the same time, tribal life and organisation continued to exist, finding the respect and encouragement of the government. Abdullah had come to be perceived as the Bedouin *per se*, an embodiment of the tribal tradition. He had been involved in tribal politics throughout the mandate both as mediator between the tribes and the British and as ruler. Hence, he could rely on some sort of a power base that had been established under the British. This is what has made some observers speak of Jordan as an essentially British invention, even though, as Alon demonstrates, things were not as simple and clear-cut and involved other players as well.

May this book, or rather what it describes, serve as a pattern to learn from about other cases said to be tribal, Afghanistan, for example? Perhaps it does. Or it does not, as this is what Alon shows: Tribalism in Jordan has been something exceptional. Here lies the true merit of Alon's work, which is by no means diminished by its only few weaker points. Alon uses Tönnies without reference. And he does not exactly say whose distorted views of Jordan he complains about. The book would not lose intellectual weight without this kind of critique, which comes across as a sort of fabrication designed to being torn down in the course of the presentation. The actual picture one gets from reading Alon's work is that he neatly picked up the thread from what scholars had produced in the past, sometimes correcting their findings, sometimes confirming them.

What readers outside of Jordan studies might regret is Alon's minute technical style that leaves not much room for background information needed to easily follow the

flow of details and the line of argumentation. Ideally, the book could have done with some textbook-like excursions, or, in other words, with a bit more of generalization and a bit less of minuteness. It would be a pity if as a result Alon's research, as good as it is, remained within the confines of Jordanian history. Hence, in order to have not only insiders of Jordan studies but also students of other areas of the Middle East gain from Alon's expertise, even if the latter will read his book with greater difficulty than the former, at least libraries with a Middle East collection should get a copy and have it correctly catalogued.

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