

**Nationalist Voices in Jordan:
The Street and the State**

Betty S. Anderson

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Jordan has existed now for nearly 60 years, since the termination of the British mandate in 1946, and has generally been studied in terms of its Hashemite rulers and the “King’s men,” those who helped the Hashemites construct it. These historical narratives, argues Anderson, have privileged the Jordanian monarchy and the “high” elements of society and, consequently, have ignored the “urban” elements that played an equal, if not a greater, role in constructing the Jordanian national identity. In this sense, Anderson gives voice to narratives that were previously unknown and unheard and, by so doing, makes a significant contribution to the body of literature on Jordan.

She contends that the “Arab Street” “holds a key to understanding Jordan in the twentieth century” and, in this regard, focuses upon the “true” Jordanian natives and their narrative. Taking a subaltern approach to Jordanian history, she examines the foundation of the Jordanian National Movement (JNM), a coalition of leftist parties based loosely upon Arab nationalism, and its influence upon the nation’s formation. Given her unique approach to Jordanian history, she admits that her work is incomplete, for many first-hand accounts and memoirs, which cannot be found, should be examined in light of the larger body of literature on Jordan.

The history of Jordan is that of post-colonial independence and nationhood, of a nation that had never existed in the hearts and minds of those who would live within its borders until it was actually drawn on a map. In an agreement brokered in late March 1921 between Winston Churchill, then the British colonial secretary, and Abdullah I, the latter would accept British

suzerainty over “Transjordan” and, in return, would be recognized as its ruler. Therefore, from its earliest days Jordan’s history is that of its Hashemite monarchs appeasing their colonial benefactors. This is important for two reasons, as Anderson notes: First, it helps explain why King Hussein crushed the JNM. Second, and more importantly, it helps students of Jordanian history better understand the motivating factors and decisions of its Hashemite rulers.

Anderson’s works sheds light on a highly tumultuous period not only of Middle Eastern history, but also of what should really be considered under the larger rubric of world history – the history of British colonialism and mandates, post-colonial independence, and the formation of nationhood. Through nine chapters, she covers each stage in the aforementioned process, carefully avoiding the trap of focusing on one period or quickly glossing over others. As a result, her work gives an equal amount of attention to each historical period and, in so doing, offers a remarkable balance of both depth and breadth.

Returning to the importance of the Jordanian natives in forming Jordan, she examines Jordan’s rejection of the British-backed Baghdad Pact in late 1955. Anderson argues that the pressure brought to bear upon King Hussein by the JNM proved too much and thus forced him to acquiesce to its rejection. The 1954 election had been hampered by government manipulation to ensure a Hashemite-compliant government. These were the days of both heady Arab nationalism and the height of the cold war. The Baghdad Pact was designed to create a buffer zone of Middle Eastern nations in the battle against Soviet communism. The British first looked to Egypt and Syria, but both declined.

The next obvious choice, writes Anderson, was Jordan. While King Hussein – like father, like son – agreed to accommodate the colonial master’s commands, going so far as to sign the document personally in spite of the JNM, the British ambassador advised against it until a legitimate government could be formed to rubber stamp the agreement. The JNM, refusing to kowtow to either British or Hashemite pressure, though at this point they were perhaps one and the same, brought Jordan to the “most violent demonstrations the country had ever seen” (p. 162), and led the rejection of the Baghdad Pact. Through examining the failure of the Baghdad Pact, Anderson persuasively highlights the JNM’s power, and thus of the Jordanian natives, in effectively altering national policy.

Perhaps the curse of the JNM was its very own success, in that it posed a viable threat to Hashemite rule and could effectively undermine the

king's will. By the 1956 election, the JNM had won an overwhelming margin, and, for the first time, Jordan had a leftist-oriented Arab nationalist government that highly favored Jamal Abdul Nasser and his worldview. In this heyday of Arab nationalism, Sulayman al-Nablusi, the newly elected prime minister, made no secret that Jordan could not exist independently of its fellow Arab neighbor states and should form some sort of union. Two years later, Egypt and Syria united to form the United Arab Republic. Al-Nablusi, pushing the card further, openly courted the Soviet ambassador, allowed Jordanian communist parties to function normally, and permitted the Soviet news agency, Tass, to open an office in Jordan. Anderson believes that these bold and highly controversial overtures caused the JNM's downfall. Using the threat of a military coup, whether real or artificially created, King Hussein arrested its leaders and thereby ensured its demise.

This work will be of great interest to students of Jordanian and Palestinian history and those exploring the creation of state and nationalism within the Middle East. Its only shortcoming is its somewhat disjointed coverage of the JNM. While the entire book is premised on exploring Jordanian history vis-à-vis the JNM, only the last four chapters do so exclusively, for the first half focuses on the concepts of identity, nationalism, and nationhood in regards to Jordan. This work is a *tour de force* of Jordanian history, with captivating attention to detail and painstaking research, made evident by her use of poetry, textbooks, interviews, and previously unknown memoirs. It heralds the arrival of Anderson as a "new historian" of Jordan.

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