

## 5. *Pax Britannica* in the Steppe: British Policy and the Transjordan Bedouin

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By the end of the Mandate, the bedouin dominated the Arab Legion and seemed to embody loyalty to the Hashemite throne. Yet for the first decade of its existence, the Transjordanian state was based in the settled zone. Amman's authority only extended into the steppe through the influence of 'Abdullah and of his kinsman Shakir ibn Zayd', who was entrusted with tribal affairs. For the most part, imperial forces and the Arab Legion restricted themselves to the defence of the settled areas. Their intermittent forays into the desert failed to control the bedouin or dilute the tribal rivalries which reigned east of the Hijaz Railway.

The steppe was transformed by the advent of John Bagot Glubb in the winter of 1930. While in the service of Iraq, Glubb had succeeded in moulding bedouin recruits into an effective force, which curtailed raiding and deterred the *Wahhabi Ikhwan* (brotherhood). He now proceeded to repeat the process in Transjordan recruiting tribesmen from the Huwaytat, Bani Sakhr and Sirhan who had hitherto been implacable foes of ordered government. By the mid 1930s, the forts and patrols of Glubb's desert police had eliminated raiding and brought a degree of authority the tribes had not known since Umayyad times.

Glubb's very success in harnessing the bedouin to the purposes of the Mandatory regime has obscured the difficulties under which he laboured. These difficulties stemmed from the social and political impact of British rule. The consolidation of Mandatory rule increased the burden of taxation on the bedouin and put the final seal on the *khuwa* (protection money) they had formerly extracted from the cultivators. More importantly, Britain's concern with the stability of Arabia led her to sacrifice the interests of Transjordan in order to

conciliate Ibn Saud. As Saudi raids and a cycle of locust infestation and drought decimated their flocks between 1929 and 1936, the bedouin were pushed to the edge of famine. The hunger of the tribes explains their readiness to submit to Glubb, but also highlights the true measure of his achievement in pacifying the steppe with the meager resources at his disposal.<sup>1</sup>

### **Ibn Saud, the Ikhwan and the Desert Frontiers of Transjordan**

British attitudes on Arabian matters underwent drastic change after 1918. The consensus in Whitehall moved away from the pro-Sharifian policy of the Arab Bureau, towards the viewpoint of the government of India that conciliation of Ibn Saud offered the best way to achieve secure communications and safe passage for pilgrims in the Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> In practical terms this meant the restraint of the Colonial Office and of men on the spot inclined to take a hard line with Ibn Saud, while working to obtain agreement with Britain's Mandatory wards in Iraq and Transjordan. In the latter case these policies foundered on the instability of the fledgling Saudi state, and Ibn Saud's competition with 'Abdullah for tribal allegiances.

The roots of the Saudi-Hashemite conflict lay in Ibn Saud's resentment of the Sharif Husayn's aggrandizement during the Arab Revolt, and his fear of encirclement by the Hashemites and their allies after the war. For their part, Husayn and his sons were apprehensive of Ibn Saud's growing power in Central Arabia and the spread of Wahhabism

1. Glubb himself was very clear that the hunger and poverty he found in the steppe was due to a failure of Imperial policy. The plight of the bedouin was 'primarily due to the diplomatic policy of Her Majesty's Government, in failing to protect these tribes from Akhwan (*sic*) raids and ... in failing to face up to Ibn Saud and compel him to return the loot! ... that bad rains or bad grazing are not primary causes is proven by the fact that the Ruwala (*sic*) and the Shararat are still prosperous, as also are the Iraqi bedouins.' The Private Papers Collection, the Middle East Centre, St Antony's Collection Glubb Papers. John Bagot Glubb 'A Monthly Report on the Administration (hereafter SAC: Glubb's Report) for the Month of November 1934'.
2. In the words N. Garland of the Arab Bureau in Cairo this amounted to the view 'that there is no Emir but Ibn Saud and (H. St John) Philby is his proxy' quoted in Joseph Kostiner, *The Making of Saudi Arabia 1916-36: From Chieftaincy to Monarchical State* (New York and Oxford 1994), p. 33. British policy towards Ibn Saud is also the focus of Clive Leatherdale, *Britain and Saudi Arabia. The Imperial Oasis* (London 1983) and of Gary Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia, Britain and the Rise of the House of Saud* (London 1976).

among tribes on the eastern borders of the Hijaz. Husayn's attempts to control the town of Khurma on the Hijaz–Najd border brought the dispute into the open. The town's governor, Khalid ibn Lu'ay, its inhabitants and nearby sections of the 'Utayba tribe took up Wahhabism and resisted tax collecting expeditions from Mecca. Ibn Saud, who claimed authority over the 'Utayba, was drawn into the dispute. In the spring of 1919, Hashemite forces advancing on the town under 'Abdullah were routed at Turaba leaving over 1300 dead.<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of 'Abdullah's defeat, Husayn assembled a coalition of rulers threatened by Saudi expansion, which stretched from Kuwait to 'Asir. The Hashemites were already in alliance with the al-Rashid who saw them as a conduit to British support. As the Rashidi amirate unravelled Jabal Shammar became the cockpit of the struggle with Ibn Saud. 'Abdullah's march on Transjordan in the autumn of 1921 was interpreted by Ibn Saud as a move to support Ibn Rashid.<sup>4</sup> And the fall of Hail to Saudi forces a year later was instrumental in convincing T. E. Lawrence, and through him the Colonial Office, of the wisdom of prolonging 'Abdullah's rule in Amman as a buffer between Palestine and Ibn Saud.<sup>5</sup>

The fall of Hail brought Saudi power into the Syrian desert for the first time since the early nineteenth century. The inhabitants of Jawf, which had repeatedly changed hands between Ibn Rashid and the Sha'lan *shaykhs* of the Ruwala, now declared allegiance to Ibn Saud. This derailed the attempts of 'Abdullah and St John Philby – at the time British resident in Amman – to annex Jawf through agreement with Nuri al-Sha'lan, paramount *shaykh* of the Ruwala. As Ibn Saud consolidated his sway over the oasis, Jawf became the platform for the spread of Wahhabi influence up the Wadi Sirhan. Two major Ikhwan raids were launched against Transjordan. On both occasions the Ikhwan were beaten back by local tribesmen aided by the aeroplanes and armoured cars of the RAF. However, the Abu Tayah section of the Huwaytat, whose *shaykh* 'Audah Abu Tayah had played a prominent role in the Arab Revolt, now gravitated towards the Saudi embrace.<sup>6</sup>

3. Kostiner, *Making of Saudi Arabia*, p. 31. For 'Abdullah's role in the battle of Turaba see Mary Wilson, *King 'Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan* (Cambridge 1987), pp. 36–8.

4. Kostiner, *Making of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 46–9, 50–2.

5. Wilson, *King 'Abdullah, Britain*, p. 71.

6. Kostiner, *Making of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 85–7. For Philby's role in the Jawf episode see Elisabeth Monroe, *Philby of Arabia* (London 1973), pp. 120–2.

Having consolidated his hold on Jawf, Ibn Saud now pressed for a corridor into Syria, invoking ancestral claims to tribes in the Shamiyya (Syrian) desert. These included the 'Amarat, 'Anaza and Dahamsha tribes, Shammari refugees fleeing the collapse of Rashidi rule, and the Dhafir tribe in the Muntafiq region. In order to bend these tribes to his will, Ibn Saud sanctioned Ikhwan raids into Iraq for which the Mutayr Ikhwan provided willing volunteers. For their part the Hashemites gave tacit encouragement to Shammar counter raids into Najd and supported Nuri al-Sha'lan's attempt to unite the northern 'Anaza. 'Abdullah hoped this would interpose a tribal buffer between Transjordan and the menace of the Ikhwan.<sup>7</sup>

Britain attempted to diffuse this simmering conflict at a series of conferences which were brought to a conclusion by Gilbert Clayton in 1925. With Husayn in exile, and Ibn Saud in virtual control of the Hijaz, the borders between Iraq and Najd, and Najd and Transjordan, were fixed by agreements signed at Bahra and Hadda. In the case of Transjordan, imperial strategy required the maintenance of a secure land corridor across the steppe to Iraq. In order to achieve this aim, Clayton was forced to concede Kaf, and with it the winter pastures of the Bani Sakhr and Sirhan tribes, to Ibn Saud. Clayton failed to obtain Saudi recognition of the annexation of al-'Aqaba and Ma'an to Transjordan. Subsequent negotiations, which led to the treaty of Jeddah, also failed to fix the border between the Hijaz and Transjordan. This put the pastures of the Huwaytat in jeopardy, and ensured that the tribe would bear the brunt of Ibn Saud's intermittent attempts to regain al-'Aqaba.<sup>8</sup>

The Hadda conference cost the Transjordanian tribes grazing rights in the Wadi Sirhan, and Najdi tribal rights were forfeited to Iraq. The line in the sand drawn by Sir Percy Cox (then high commissioner in Iraq and Ibn Saud's chief supporter among British officialdom) at the 'Uqayr conference, and confirmed by the Bahra agreement, annexed a considerable part of the Mutayr's winter pastures to Iraq. Ironically enough this added an economic motive to Ikhwan attacks and rendered Ibn Saud's efforts to restrict raiding counter-productive. Ibn Saud's reluctant submission to British pressure exposed him to the charge of

7. Kostiner, *Making of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 93-4.

8. Wilson King 'Abdullah, *Britain*, pp. 99-100. For the implications of ceding the Wadi Sirhan, see George Antonious, 'A Memorandum on the Eastern Frontier of Transjordan' 1925, in the Clayton Papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham. Antonious assisted Clayton during the Hadda negotiations.

sacrificing 'Najdi rights' in Iraq. His imposition of fines on Ikhwan raiders, combined with punitive taxation of their trade routes into Kuwait, produced a stream of Mutayr defectors to Iraq, where they quickly joined Shammar raids into Najd.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the escalating cycle of raids and counter raids British policy remained blind to the major cause of cross-border raiding: the ambivalent and often strained relationship between Ibn Saud and the Ikhwan. The brotherhood's power fed on Ibn Saud's conquests, and elevated it to the status of a 'self appointed elite who ... acted as a pressure group for raids, expansion and conversion'.<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1920s the Ikhwan had also become the defenders of the old tribal order (*al-nizam al-qadim*) in Najd. This set them against Ibn Saud's project of a territorially-defined state and his accommodation to the British order in the Middle East. Ikhwan raids were now geared to subverting Ibn Saud's agreements with Britain's Hashemite clients.<sup>11</sup>

Given their loss of pastures to Iraq, the opposition of the Mutayr Ikhwan was particularly vehement. Even before the conquest of Hijaz, Faisal al-Dawish, the commander of the Artawiyya settlement, had already emerged as the chief spokesman of Mutayri aspirations to maintain an autonomous and unbroken grazing space, and of Wahhabi objections to an agreement with Britain. After returning in triumph from the Hijaz, al-Dawish began to organize raids into Iraq with the object of frustrating agreement with Britain.

Kostiner argues convincingly that the need to circumscribe the activities of al-Dawish lay behind Ibn Saud's courtship of the northern 'Anaza and the attempt to drive a territorial wedge into Syria:<sup>12</sup>

By gaining access to western Iraq via a corridor between Iraq and Transjordan, Ibn Saud hoped to frustrate any pro-Hashemite co-operation against him, and to establish control in the Shamiyya Desert so as to outflank the ... new Mutayr refugees and Shammar tribesmen. Moreover he would have been able to do all

9. On Ibn Saud's escalating dispute with the Ikhwan and its impact on the Iraqi border, see Christine Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia* (London 1981), pp. 225-46, and Joseph Kostiner, 'Britain and the Northern Frontier of the Saudi State' in Uriel Dann (ed.) *The Great Powers in the Middle East* (New York 1988).

10. Kostiner, 'Britain and the Northern Frontier', p. 40.

11. Kostiner, *Making of Saudi Arabia*, p. 115.

12. Kostiner, 'Britain and the Northern Frontier', p. 42.

that without al-Dawish's interference and thus obtain a considerable advantage over the latter.

By 1927 al-Dawish had been joined by Sultan Ibn Humayd (Ibn Bijad) of the 'Utayba and Dhidan ibn Hithlayn of the 'Ajman. For the next year and a half 'the Ikhwan tribes waged an independent war on Iraq without the consent of their King'.<sup>13</sup> As disobedience hardened into rebellion, a cycle of violence erupted, which at times threatened to overwhelm the order so painstakingly constructed by the British.

### The Rebellion of the Ikhwan

Until 1928 the threat of the Ikhwan to Transjordan remained in abeyance: al-Dawish's following was cut off from the Syrian desert and concentrated its efforts on Iraq during 1927. Ibn Saud's consolidation of his position in the Shamiyya desert posed the main threat to the Transjordanian bedouin. A major raid was launched on the Bani Sakhr in February 1925 with the object of neutralizing these Hashemite clients as he completed the conquest of the Hijaz. The establishment of a Saudi garrison at Kaf a few months later led to the final eclipse of Nuri Sha'lan's authority in the area. Notoriously fickle,<sup>14</sup> Nuri now defected to Ibn Saud and by the end of the year RAF intelligence reports were speaking of 'young gallants' led by Nuri's grandson Fawaz raiding into Transjordan with the encouragement of Ibn Musa'ad, Ibn Saud's uncle and the governor of Hail and Jawf.<sup>15</sup>

A little more than a year after the signing of the treaty at Hadda (1925), Ibn Saud's lieutenants began collecting *zakat* (religious tax) in the Wadi Sirhan. The exaction of *zakat* contravened the terms of the Hadda agreement and constituted a claim of sovereignty according to tribal norms.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it faced the cash strapped authorities in Amman with the dilemma 'of exempting (the bedouin) from Animal Tax or of suffering the accusation ... of oppressing them by making them pay ... tax for the second time in one year'.<sup>17</sup>

13. John Bagot Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion* (London 1948), p. 71.

14. Nuri's shifts of allegiance are charted in Philip Khoury, 'The Tribal Sheikh, French Tribal Policy, and the Nationalist Movement in Syria Between Two World Wars', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 18 (1982), pp. 180-93.

15. Great Britain, Public Record Office (henceforth PRO), CO831/13/11.

16. For its antecedents and its political use by Ibn Saud, see Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 151-9.

17. PRO CO 733/133/8: Cox to Chief Secretary, Government Offices, Jerusalem.

Increased policing of the frontier by the RAF and the influence of 'Abdullah and Shakir at first prevented any response to these raids. Largely as a result of the amir's persuasion, the tribes were prepared to pin their hopes for the return of lost camels on the tribunal established to control cross-border raiding under the Hadda agreement. However, Saudi obstructionism at its meetings in Jericho prevented any restitution of loot, and matters deteriorated as adverse conditions – a failure of the rains south and east of Amman and an infestation of locusts in Ma'an and the eastern desert – created the classic conditions for bedouin warfare.<sup>18</sup>

The peace that had prevailed within Transjordan since 1925 was disrupted by tribal raiding – the age-old method of rebuilding depleted herds. Huwaytat tribesmen under Muhammad Abu Tayah were intercepted on the Euphrates in May 1927 having taken part in a joint expedition with Bani Sakhr camel men led by Dirdah Ibn Fayiz.<sup>19</sup> After initially resisting a police force sent against him, Dirdah was compelled to return his share of the loot by an RAF sally from Azraq.<sup>20</sup> Six raids by the Ahl al-Jabal on the Bani Khalid and Sardiyyah were recorded the following summer.<sup>21</sup> Contacts with the French authorities and a tribal conference at Irbid in November diffused the affair – as well as establishing a precedent for controlling cross border attacks.<sup>22</sup>

These incidents were for the most part economically motivated and small in scale, involving the theft of a few camels or sheep at most. The threat they posed was minimal at a time when apprehension at the news of Ikhwan raids into Iraq was pulling the bedouin in towards the settled zone. Yet even as the authorities were congratulating themselves on their success against Dirdah – in the words of Cox it had 'gone very far to convince the Bani Sakhr of the governments ability to control them'<sup>23</sup> – the situation was being transformed by the spread of the Ikhwan's struggle with Ibn Saud into the Transjordan theatre. This not only undermined hopes of repeating the success achieved on the Syrian

18. FO371/13024: Quarterly Situation Report on Transjordan (QSR) 1 September 1927; FO371/12272 QSR, 19 January 1927; FO371/13025 QSR, 1 November 1928.

19. CO832/28/7.

20. FO371/1227: QSR 1 April 1927.

21. FO371/13025; CO831/2/6: Raids into Syria by Transjordanian tribes.

22. FO371/1307: Irbid Conference.

23. FO371/1307: Irbid Conference.

frontier, but led to an unprecedented increase in the scale and violence of tribal raiding.

The instrument of this violence proved to be a Wahhabi pocket among the Ruwala, ironically enough the tribe most assiduously courted by both 'Abdullah and Ibn Saud. Early in 1928 Farhan Ibn Mashhur, a 'restless and discontented young member of the Sha'an family',<sup>24</sup> carried out a bloody raid on the Zabn section of the Bani Sakhr. The raid was mounted in solidarity with the Ikhwan's threatened assault on the 'infidels' in Iraq. Thousands of sheep and camels were looted, and scores of tribesmen killed, in keeping with Ikhwan practice. Reaction to the raid was severe as women were molested and Hatmal al-Zabn, the section's *shaykh*, was killed.<sup>25</sup> Attempts to restrain the Zabn proved fruitless, and punitive action had to be taken against them by the Transjordan Frontier Force (TJFF) the following December.<sup>26</sup>

The wanton savagery of Ibn Mashhur's attack had a clear rationale in the context of the Ikhwan rebellion. The Zabn had gravitated into the orbit of the Saudi amir of Jawf, asking permission to raid the Huwaytat only weeks before being attacked by the Ruwala. Ibn Mashhur's raid not only advertised Ibn Saud's lack of complete control over the Ruwala, but also served as a warning to other tribes under his influence. A similar logic visited Ibn Mashhur's fury upon the Huwaytat in the autumn of 1928.<sup>27</sup> This attack was mounted in cooperation with Ikhwan from Ibn Humayd's 'Utayba. The raiding party then escaped across the Nufudh desert reaching the borders of Kuwait while the Ikhwan revolt was at its height.<sup>28</sup>

Ibn Mashhur had been joined by local tribesmen including the Shararat and the Hijaz 'Anaza during his second raid. These tribes, owing allegiance to Ibn Saud and under the protection of his lieutenants in Jawf, bore the brunt of the Huwaytat's retaliation. Coming at a time of weakness, with Ibn Saud's forces occupied along the Kuwait-Iraq border, the attacks were regarded as a 'stab in the back' to be repaid in due course. Matters were exacerbated as the Huwaytat continued to raid

24. John Bagot Glubb, *War in the Desert* (London 1960), p. 267.

25. FO371/13025: QSR, 1 April 1928.

26. CO831/5/1: Report on the punitive expedition against Fahd al-Trad of the Gam'an section of the Zabn (Bani Sakhr).

27. Imperial War Museum, Peake Papers: letters from Peake to Washam dated 30 January 1928 and 4 February 1928.

28. CO831/11/1: A Memorandum on the Situation on the Southern Frontier of Transjordan, by J. B. Glubb, November 1930.

during the following winter. This occurred at a time when the Ikhwan rebels, having been defeated at Sibilla, were rumored to be planning an escape into Syria. To the actors on the other side of the Nufudh desert, including Glubb, it appeared as if the attacks on Jawf were diversions facilitating the passage of the defeated Ikhwan.<sup>29</sup>

### The Evolution of Desert Control

The Saudi government had maintained a stream of anti-Hashemite invective, whether in the form of written protests to the British consul in Jeddah, or of imaginative articles in the official *Umm al-Qura* newspaper, throughout the escalating cycle of raids. In the wake of the Huwaytat's raids on Jawf, Saudi allegations rose to a crescendo. Copious refutation by the authorities in Amman and Jerusalem had little impact in London. The Saudi accusations were looked upon with apparent sympathy by a Foreign Office which was, under Austen Chamberlain, firmly in the grip of the 'Indian' view of Arabian affairs.<sup>30</sup>

Foreign Office pressure at interdepartmental meetings in London was instrumental in reforming the system of desert control and quashing calls from the local RAF command to clear the Wadi Sirhan by main force. It was also behind the adoption of Ibn Saud's suggestion that an impartial British arbitrator adjudicate between the competing claims of Transjordan and Najd for the restitution of loot taken in raids since the signing of Hadda.<sup>31</sup>

In the wake of the TJFF raid on the Zabn at the end of 1929, the authorities in Jerusalem and Amman took steps to reassert their authority in the steppe. A Tribal Control Board (TCB) was established under Shakir and moves were initiated to engage an intelligence officer in the desert area, a process which eventually brought Glubb to Transjordan in November 1930. With the Jericho meetings moribund, a new commission was appointed to arbitrate between the competing claims of the Transjordanian and Saudi tribes. A former official of the Egyptian government, a Mr M. S. McDonnell was chosen to head its proceedings.<sup>32</sup>

McDonnell was chosen after Ibn Saud refused to countenance the appointment of Alec Kirkbride to the same post because of his

29. CO831/11/1: A Memorandum on the Situation ...

30. CO831/7/8; FO371/13075: Chancellor to Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 7 January 1929.

31. FO 371/13725: Rendel to Secretary of State, FO, 19 December 1929.

32. CO831/6/13: Becket to Williams; CO831/8/7: Chancellor to the Secretary of State, CO.

connections with the Transjordan government. The preferment of McDonnell was indicative of the Foreign Office's determination to protect Saudi interests from an increasingly hostile Colonial Office and Air Ministry.<sup>33</sup> Ironically enough the bias towards Ibn Saud only served to undermine the new measures Whitehall had previously advocated.

Foreign Office objections delayed the establishment of fortified police posts in the desert area.<sup>34</sup> And the McDonnell arbitration quickly became entangled in a web of competing claims, and was unable to overcome Ibn Saud's refusal to recognize raids carried out by Ibn Mashhur on the grounds that he was at the time in rebellion against his authority.<sup>35</sup> The wider diplomatic concerns of Whitehall had thus left the desert frontier dangerously exposed in early 1930. By then, victory over the Ikhwan rebels at Sibilla had restored Ibn Saud's authority in Najd and left him free to exact retribution on the Huwaytat.

Ibn Saud now sanctioned two crushing raids on the unfortunate tribe by Ibn Musa'ad and Ibrahim al-Nashmi, the new governor of Jawf. The two raids illustrated clearly the disparity between the methods perfected by Ibn Saud's followers in ten years of conquest and the small-scale operations of the Transjordan bedouin. Several thousand camels and sheep were looted and scores of tribesmen were killed. The terror of the raids led to a mass flight towards the security of the settled zone, multiplying the loss of livestock on the forced march westward, and through the restrictions on grazing which resulted from the Huwaytat's attempt to concentrate their forces against Ibn Saud.<sup>36</sup>

Faced with a huge drain of livestock, and an almost complete lack of alternative means of succour, the Huwaytat attempted to recoup some of their losses, and therefore resumed raiding operations during the spring of 1930. Once again their raids were small in scale and fell upon the local tribes rather than the governor of Jawf. At this point, British forces intruded upon the scene as a mechanized company of the TJFF, with intelligence and aerial support from the RAF, moved into the desert with the aim of preventing raiding. The TJFF was recruited in the settled areas of Palestine, with a Circassian contingent from the East Bank. Divided from the bedouin by a gulf of mutual suspicion it was

33. CO831/7/8: Situation on the Hejaz Najd Border.

34. CO831/7/8: Situation on the Hejaz Najd Border. Chancellor to Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 25 January 1930.

35. CO831/9/1: McDonnell to Secretary of State, 3 October 1930.

36. CO831/11/1: J. B. Glubb, A Memorandum on the situation ..., November 1930.

unable to control the situation or operate effectively in desert conditions.

As raiders continued to evade them, imperial forces began to resort to the forced exclusion of the tribes from the vicinity of the frontier. This was guaranteed to multiply flock mortality through overgrazing and shortage of water, and thus increase the bedouin's plight. The prestige of the Amman government reached its nadir in the summer and autumn of 1930. Ibn Saud sanctioned the resumption of raiding by the Najd tribes in August 1930, perhaps with the intention of derailing the deliberations of the McDonnell commission, which was then meeting in Amman. As raids into Transjordan commenced, the TJFF 'by a stroke of most evil fortune' missed three raids by the Shararat, while intercepting the Huwaytat raiding party which set off in pursuit.<sup>37</sup>

This occurred in August 1930 when the majority of the Huwaytat *shaykhs* were in conference with the McDonnell commission. Given the menial status of the Shararat tribe, the raid was not only an act of treachery, but a grievous insult to the honour of the Huwaytat. The furore caused by the raids, together with a detailed report by Glubb on the crisis facing the tribes finally overcame Foreign Office resistance. A protest was dispatched to Jiddah, which emphasized Britain's determination to stabilize the Saudi-Transjordan frontier. Glubb was able to proceed with the formation of the Desert Patrol and regular meetings were arranged with Ibn Zayd, the new Saudi inspector of the northern frontier in order to punish raiding and restore loot.<sup>38</sup>

The assiduous practice of 'desert diplomacy' allowed Glubb to develop an amicable relationship both with Ibn Zayd and the two Sudairis, 'Abdullah and 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Sudairi who succeeded him in 1934.<sup>39</sup> Despite this amity the frontiers with Najd and Hijaz remained tense. Saudi exactions in the Wadi Sirhan intensified in the early 1930s. Under Salih Ibn 'Abd al-Wahid the authorities at Kaf began to threaten the traditional rights of the Sirhan to the date plantations surrounding the town. Grazing preserves were declared in the Wadi Sirhan and the lava hills bordering it during the winter and spring months when Transjordanian tribes used the area.<sup>40</sup> Since the Saudi authorities acted with the clear intention of reserving the pasture for their own bedouin

37. CO831/11/1: J. B. Glubb, A Memorandum on the situation ..., November 1930.

38. FO371/13725: Memo by Rendel to HM Consul, Jiddah, 2 October 1930.

39. Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion*, pp. 201-23.

40. SAC: Glubb's Report for May 1933.

coming up from Jawf in the summer, this placed considerable strain on the allegiance of the Transjordanian bedouin.

The same period saw several Saudi attempts to seduce tribes with interests on both sides of the borders agreed at Hadda. The impoverished Abu Tayah *shaykh*, Muhammad, was subjected to a determined campaign of enticement between 1932 and 1934. Even the Bani-Sakhr kept open their relationship to Ibn Saud. Recalcitrant *shaykhs* such as 'Awwad al-Sattam and Turki al-Zabn found ready refuge in Jawf when at odds with Transjordanian justice. Similarly, Ibn Saud's marital ties with Dahham al-Fayiz, and through him Mithqal, offered a link to the nationalist opposition in Amman.<sup>41</sup>

Relations with Najd were jeopardized further by Hashemite intrigue. In 1932 Shakir, and possibly 'Abdullah, were implicated in the abortive invasion of the Hijaz by Billi tribesmen under Ibn Rifada and a rebellion in 'Asir.<sup>42</sup> But ironically enough, the Hashemite's machinations prepared the way for Glubb's predominance in the steppe. Whitehall used the Ibn Rifada incident to force 'Abdullah to sign a treaty of *bon voisinage* in July 1933. The Sharifian hold on the TCB was loosened. It was decided that the officer commanding the Arab Legion, or his designated deputy, would become responsible for cross-border incidents involving the bedouin.<sup>43</sup>

A year later Glubb expelled the Bani 'Attayah, after it had been decided that their links with Shakir made them into a potential instrument for 'mischief'. This signalled to the bedouin where power now lay in the desert. Glubb's position was strengthened further by the rift over unity with Iraq, which developed between 'Abdullah and Shakir in 1933. The TCB was effectively immobilized by 'Abdullah's boycott of its proceedings, and power devolved to Glubb as 'the man on the spot'. Shakir's death in December 1934 opened the way for the formalization of Glubb's (and Britain's) control under the new Tribal Courts Law of 1936. This provided for the use of customary law and tribal judges to settle disputes and effectively made Glubb into the final court of appeal. In the five years after Shakir's death 50–60 per cent of the

41. SAC: Glubb's Reports for August 1932; February 1934; February 1935 and April 1940.

42. For the Ibn Rifada affair and its consequences, see Kostiner, *Making of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 165–6; Wilson, *King 'Abdullah, Britain*, p. 101.

43. CO831/22/2.

cases heard by the court were settled by him without recourse to Amman.<sup>44</sup>

### **'Humane Imperialism' in the Steppe**

The political difficulties with Ibn Saud were dwarfed by the legacy of repeated drought and Ikhwan attack. The poverty of the bedouin imbued Glubb's approach with a conscious social dimension, modelled on Sir Robert Sandeman's 'humane imperialism' along the north-west frontier of India. As applied to Transjordan, its main precepts were 'a humane and sympathetic' approach to tribal complaints, the provision of employment, subsidies to tribal *shaykhs*, and the application of tribal law wherever possible. These elements were underpinned by a kind of hearts and minds policy designed to prevent the hunger of the tribes leading to the recrudescence of raiding, and to stymie Ibn Saud's attempt to gain influence among them.

Glubb saw clearly that it was the bedouin's lack of assets – of pasture, water and livestock – that held the key to their plight. The loss of unimpeded access to winter pastures in the Wadi Sirhan was particularly serious. In dry years the Sirhan wells formed the only sources of water between the Hijaz Railway and Iraq. The borders drawn at Hadda left Transjordan with only 15 of 60 permanent wells in the Wadi. During the dry period between 1929 and 1936 most of the tribes had to pay *zakat* to the governors of Kaf or Jawf, and faced the prospect of an additional tax burden when they moved west in the spring.<sup>45</sup>

Ibn Saud's raids imposed an extra hardship. After sifting through the claims of both sides, McDonnell estimated the net losses of the Transjordan bedouin at 3662 camels, 5270 sheep, 50 killed and £P 1020 in lost possessions.<sup>46</sup> In 1931, what had formerly been an 'exceptionally prosperous' section of the Huwaytat, raided twice by Ibn Saud the year before, owned on average two camels per tent. This compared with 30 per tent in the previous year and a minimum requirement of 10 to 15 camels per tent for survival. Even the *shaykh* of the tribe had been reduced to virtual penury, owning 12 camels as opposed to 200 in former times. According to Glubb it was difficult to 'see how the

44. SAC: Glubb's Reports for June and August 1933, January 1940. For the operation of the TCB courts, see SAC: Glubb Papers: A Note on the Principles and Administration of Tribal Law.

45. SAC: Glubb Papers, 'A Note on the Wadi Sirhan Question'.

46. CO831/12/1: McDonnell to Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 17 January 1931.

occupants of these fifty tents can long keep alive. If they could sell all the camels which they now possess they might subsist for a year, but would then be faced with starvation'.<sup>47</sup> In 1930 and 1931 most sections of the Huwaytat were in the same condition as were parts of the Bani 'Attiyah. Glubb fully expected one third of these tribes to starve within a year.

McDonnell's failure to deliver a clear verdict on the balance of the raids quashed the last hope for a restoration of the Transjordanian livestock and condemned the bedouin to suffer a famine that lasted until the mid-1930s. Renewed locust attacks on the desert pastures in 1932 left the Huwaytat at 'rock bottom', and by the end of the year only the scraps left over from the new Desert Patrol post at Jafr was keeping whole sections of them alive. The 250 surviving families of the Sirhan were eking out an existence in similar fashion outside the fort at Azraq. By then the persistence of drought and crop failure had begun to affect the Bani Sakhr, hitherto spared the full impact of the famine through their *shaykhs*' ownership of land in Balqa'. The Khraysha, the *shaykhly* clan of the Ka'abnah section of the tribe, asked to be forgiven the payment of animal tax in 1932. Together with their less fortunate kinsmen, the Khraysha survived by wage work in Palestine.<sup>48</sup>

On Glubb's estimate another failure of the rains during the 'fatal' year of 1933 – nicknamed the *muwayja* or little wave by the bedouin – reduced the tribes' average income by half. Even after clement rains in the winter of 1934 had eased the situation, a survey by a medical officer on loan from Palestine revealed that all but 16 per cent of the Sirhan, Bani Sakhr, and Huwaytat were prey to malnutrition. And as drought returned to Transjordan the following year, the family of Haditha al-Khraysha, one of the two most powerful *shaykhs* of the Bani Sakhr, was forced to make do with barley bread, a food reserved for slaves (*'abid*) in good years. In all, the livestock held by the Transjordan bedouin fell by 70 per cent between 1932, already a famine year, and 1936.<sup>49</sup>

47. CO831/11/1: Glubb, 'A Memorandum on the Situation ...', p. 112.

48. SAC: Glubb's Reports for February 1932, June 1934.

49. SAC: Glubb's Report for October 1934; PRO: CO831/37/13. The findings of the survey were later published in Norman MacLennan, 'General Health Conditions of Certain Bedouin Tribes in Transjordan', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, vol. 29, no. 23 (November 1935), pp. 227–48. We would like to thank Vartan Amadouny for bringing this reference to our attention.

For all Glubb's sympathy for the bedouin, he could do little to restore their lost assets. Instead, he provided injections of purchasing power, which tided the tribes over the years of drought in the early 1930s, and again during the drought of 1936. Soon after Glubb's arrival in Transjordan, he began to pay subsidies to tribal *shaykhs* to ensure their cooperation in the control of raiding. Given the workings of tribal clientelism, these sums were undoubtedly redistributed to the base of the tribe. Payments by *shaykhs* to their tribal clients provided partial compensation for the inability to rebuild flocks through raiding, and allowed the relatively peaceable curtailment of raiding by 1932.<sup>50</sup>

The Desert Patrol itself provided another means of redistribution. A *jundi's* (soldier's) pay could sustain several bedouin families in the famine conditions of the 1930s. Glubb had initially intended to raise what would have been a mercenary force from tribes outside Transjordan. However, he now geared recruitment into the Desert Patrol to a 'welfare' as well as a military rationale. The Huwaytat, who had been most affected by the crisis in 1930, formed the largest block in the new force. The Sirhan, 'the poorest tribe in the world' in 1934, increased their numbers to the third largest contingent in 1935. After overcoming bureaucratic resistance in Amman, Glubb was able to turn the Desert Patrol and its forts into a network of agents for collecting the animal tax. This ensured that its burden was more fairly distributed, and eliminated the additional expense formally imposed by the tax collector's share and the cost of providing him with hospitality.<sup>51</sup>

More direct relief was provided in the form of employment on road works and on the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) pipeline. The sums expended were relatively minor: £P 4500 in August 1933, and between £P 2000 and £P 2800 in the following two years. However, the amounts were spread as thinly as possible (£P 3 per man and not more than one man from each household) and allocated where the need was greatest. Again the Huwaytat appear as the early beneficiaries and the Sirhan as the main recipients of employment by 1934. The extent of this system's coverage is clear from Glubb's report in 1934 that the Bani Sakhr and the Huwaytat were surviving on relief work in winter and migratory labour in Palestine during the summer.<sup>52</sup>

50. SAC: Glubb's Reports for December 1930 and June 1932.

51. SAC: Glubb's Reports for November 1932, July 1933 and May 1935.

52. SAC: Glubb's Reports June 1934, August–October 1934.

### The Consolidation of Desert Control

Outside observers, notably Eliahu Epstein of the Jewish Agency, discussed the travails of the tribes under the rubric of 'the Nomad Problem in Transjordan'. In this view, the terminal decline of camel nomadism lay at the root of the bedouins' hardship. The contraction of the market for camels, the abolition of the raids by which the bedouin had traditionally rebuilt their herds and the restrictions imposed by the division of the Syrian desert between Ibn Saud and the Mandatory powers heralded the collapse of the bedouin economy. In turn this presented the tribes with a dilemma: 'starvation and decay leading to extinction on the one hand, or changeover to (the life of) a settled cultivator on the other'.<sup>53</sup>

Glubb was aware that the realities of life in the steppe were more complex. The boundaries between camel and sheep herding had always been fluid, and many bedouin had been cultivators since Ottoman times. By the late 1930s, Glubb considered that there were no purely nomadic tribes in Transjordan. The designation of tribes such as the Huwaytat and Bani Sakhr as bedouin involved stretching the 'meaning of the word ... to include tribes which own land but themselves migrate to the desert for at least part of the year on camels'.<sup>54</sup> Glubb was more sanguine about such bedouins' prospects, arguing that they could survive on the basis of a mixed economy combining cultivation and pastoralism. From 1935 onwards he began to provide the bedouin with the wherewithal to begin cultivation, dispensing seed loans to encourage Huwaytat cultivation in the Shirah plain, and to promote date cultivation by favoured *shaykhs* at Rum and Azraq.<sup>55</sup>

53. Eliahu Epstein, 'The Nomad Problem in Transjordan', *Palestine and Middle East Economic Magazine*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1937), pp. 87-90, 107. The 'nomad problem' was debated further by Glubb and Epstein in the pages of the *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society (JRCAS)*: E. Epstein, 'The Bedouin of Transjordan: Their Social and Economic Problems', *JRCAS*, vol. 25 (1938), pp. 228-36; E. Epstein, 'The Economic Situation of the Transjordan Tribes', *JRCAS*, vol. 26 (1939), pp. 177-84; J. B. Glubb, 'The Economic Situation of the Transjordan Tribes', *JRCAS*, vol. 25 (1938), pp. 448-59.

54. Glubb, 'The Economic Situation', p. 449.

55. SAC: Glubb's Reports, July 1934, January 1935.

After the loss of the Wadi Sirhan – ‘agriculturally a potential gold mine’<sup>56</sup> the land available for bedouin settlement was limited, therefore the bedouin could only become ‘part-time cultivators and part-time stockbreeders’. However, this diversified system had its advantages: ‘By a perhaps providential dispensation, a year which produced a grain famine was often an average one for grazing and vice versa, because grazing and grain crops required rain at different seasons. Thus a family with sheep and camels on the one hand and a few acres under wheat or barley on the other was unlikely to starve completely.’<sup>57</sup>

Poor rains and the unsuitability of the date saplings imported from Iraq at first stymied Glubb’s attempts to promote bedouin farming. However, the trend towards bedouin settlement accelerated after 1937. Bumper harvests encouraged the extension of the frontier of cultivation to its eastern limits and by 1939 ‘there was scarcely a bedouin family in Transjordan which did not (cultivate) its patch of grain crops in addition to its flocks’.<sup>58</sup> In the late 1930s bedouin relief work was geared to cleaning out springs, wells and water catchments owned by the bedouin. This encouraged cultivation and increased the value of the surrounding pastures, thus adding to the tribes’ income.<sup>59</sup>

By this time the steppe was being drawn steadily into the mainstream of Transjordan’s affairs. The extension of security encouraged the sheep herders to move their flocks east of the Hijaz Railway – the Bani Hamida moved into the desert for the first time in living memory in 1935. By the late 1930s they were being joined by villagers who acquired tents and began to graze sheep and goats in the desert during the slack seasons. The steady integration of desert and sown increased the Desert Patrol’s chores along the desert edge, as the bedouin clashed with newcomers unaware of ill-defined tribal boundaries. However, the extra duties were viewed with equanimity by Glubb. They were an index of the inward movement of the tribes’ vital interests, away from the desert frontiers and the influence of Ibn Saud, whose shadow loomed once again over Transjordan as a result of the outbreak of revolt in Palestine in 1936.<sup>60</sup>

56. SAC: Glubb Papers, ‘A Note on the Wadi Sirhan’. Glubb considered that the retention of the Wadi would have been sufficient ‘to provide a livelihood for all the paupers and starving bedouin ... in Transjordan’.

57. Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion*, pp. 170–1.

58. Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion*, p. 170.

59. SAC: Glubb’s Report, December 1938.

60. SAC: Glubb’s Report, December 1938.

The outbreak of the revolt led to the expansion of the Arab Legion as unrest threatened to spill over into Transjordan. The IPC financed the recruitment of a bedouin reserve force in order to guard its pipeline against sabotage. This provided an occupation for unemployed tribesmen who could not be absorbed into the Desert Patrol. The outlet was a welcome one. By the summer of 1936, the ferment in Palestine and hostile Saudi propaganda had begun to touch the bedouin. The Bani Sakhr were particularly affected by the unrest. This was in part due to the involvement of Mithqal al-Fayiz, their paramount *shaykh* in nationalist politics, and partly due to exposure of the Ka'abnah (in particular the Khraysha, Hammad, Badarin and Shara' clans) to radical politics while working in Palestine.<sup>61</sup>

The following winter saw attacks by the Bani Sakhr on Najdi merchants and a clash between the Khraysha and the Sardiyya in the vicinity of Irbid. However, the situation was stabilized by the judicious use of subsidies to tribal *shaykhs* and the dispatch of bedouin soldiers to the Bani Sakhr's encampments. In the summer of the same year the Desert Patrol dispersed a major demonstration by the Zabn section of the tribe.<sup>62</sup> Two years later the force spearheaded resistance to the spillover of the Palestine rebellion into 'Ajlun, defeating two major rebel bands operating in the vicinity of Judaytah in the spring of 1939.<sup>63</sup>

The outbreak of war a few months later brought Transjordan unprecedented prosperity in which the bedouin shared fully. British military construction in Transjordan and Palestine absorbed so many workers that labour shortages were apparent on the East Bank by the summer of 1940. As the rains failed the following year, the southern bedouin were drawn into British army works: during the winter of 1941 between 5000 and 8000 tribesmen worked on railway and road construction in the vicinity of al-'Aqaba alone. The rest of the war saw better harvests and the bedouin, like other cultivators, benefitted from wartime inflation. Wartime shortages led to a shortage of spare parts for

61. CO831/37/13: Glubb's Report for June 1936.

62. CO831/41/11: Glubb's Reports for February, March and July 1937.

63. SAC: Glubb's Report, April 1939.

motorcars; this revived interest in camel portage as did the smuggling that became Transjordan's most lucrative activity.<sup>64</sup>

More importantly, the war years saw Glubb take command of the Arab Legion and stamp it with the Desert Patrol's ways. Transjordan became the lynchpin of wartime security in the Levant. By the end of the war Arab Legion companies were guarding British installations between Haifa and Iran. The strength of the Arab Legion rose to 8000 men, with 3000 in the all-bedouin Mechanized Brigade.<sup>65</sup> In the spring of 1941, bedouin troops, apparently immune to the nationalist ferment all around them, guided British forces across the desert to crush the Gailani revolt in Iraq.<sup>66</sup> Calls by Bani Sakhr *shaykhs* with nationalist sympathies, including Haditha al-Khraysha, for their kinsmen to boycott the expedition went unheeded. Haditha, as was by now customary with dissident *shaykhs*, exiled himself briefly to Saudi Arabia, before returning to make his peace with the amir.

The repercussions of the Gailani affair demonstrated that matters had come full circle in the steppe. Haditha's chief rival, Mithqal al-Fayiz was now made the object of the amir's favour. Mithqal took it upon himself to storm into the Prime Ministry and 'protest in a most unseemly manner at the way local chiefs were neglected and to crown all forced to pay taxes'. Much to his surprise, Mithqal was arrested and forced to apologize to Tawfiq Abu al-Huda, the prime minister. More significantly, the Bani Sakhr, with the exception of Mithqal's immediate Fayiz kinsmen, took no action over the affair.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, Glubb and his troops went on to capture Sukhna during the campaign to expel the Vichy French from Syria. For a brief period before the protests of the Free French led to his withdrawal, Glubb held sway over most of the Shamiyyah desert.

64. CO 831/57/8; CO 831/58/2. The number of camels in Transjordan increased from 2068 to 2389 between 1939/40 and 1940/1 (CO831/55/7, Quarterly Administrative Report on Transjordan). For wartime shortages and the rise of smuggling, see Amawi in this volume.

65. James Lunt, *Glubb Pasha: A Biography* (London 1984), p. 119.

66. SAC: Glubb Papers, J. B. Glubb, A Report on the Role Played by the Arab Legion in Connection with the Recent Operations in Iraq.

67. CO831/58/2: Report by the British Resident ... for September 1941.

### Conclusion

In later years, Glubb was to look back on the decade that followed the Gailani revolt as the 'golden age' of Transjordan.<sup>68</sup> His work in the steppe in the 1930s had fashioned one of its main pillars. Having arrived in Transjordan when hunger stalked the desert and the prestige of the government was at its nadir, he had forged a new order, which bound the tribes to the Mandatory regime. A welfare system centred on the Desert Patrol now tided the bedouin over bad years, and patches of grain west of the Hijaz Railway – well within the state's span of control – supplemented the yield of their diminished flocks. Soldiering, subsidies and relief work had replaced the claims on clan and *shaykh* that had guaranteed survival in the past. Wrapped in the regalia of the Arab Legion, the new order in the steppe gave the regime in Amman a cohesion absent in other parts of the Fertile Crescent, and allowed the Hashemites to survive the first turbulent years of independence.

68. Lunt, *Glubb Pasha*, p. 92.

VILLAGE, STEPPE AND STATE  
*The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*

Edited by  
EUGENE L. ROGAN  
and TARIQ TELL

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