ELECTRICAL CURRENT AND NATIONALIST TRENDS IN TRANSJORDAN: PINHAS RUTENBERG AND THE ELECTRIFICATION OF AMMAN

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In 1937, a group of American ethnographers travelled through Lebanon and Transjordan to study the living conditions and habits of two major tribes in the region. The head of the delegation compared his impressions of Amman and Beirut and summarised his observations in the following words:

[Amman] was quite different from the Beirut I was getting to know and feel comfortable in. In the first place, Beirut was a good-sized city of almost 150,000, a busy cosmopolitan seaport. Amman with a population of about 18,000 was entitled to be called a city by virtue of its being the national capital, and by contrast with the desert, the scattered villages, and the few small towns of Transjordan. Beirut was noisy with motor traffic, braying donkeys, and a web of tramlines with their clanging cars. Amman was quiet with a few cars, lots of horses, and a few camels. Sometimes, on quiet nights in Beirut the muezzin could be heard chanting the call to prayer from a minaret in the Muslim quarter of the city. In Amman, the call of the muezzin was loud and clear. (...) In Beirut, European clothes were the rule. The long, flowing aba, and the aqal and kaffiyeh of the desert Arabs were so rare as to attract attention. In Amman we four in European clothes were stared at. Desert robes were the rule (...). Our hotel, the café across the street, a lot of small shops, the post office and other government offices – commercial downtown so to speak – were in a valley surrounded by hills on which the people of Amman had built their homes. On the top of one hill was the Amir’s palace, looking across a noble Roman ruin on the top of another. (...)1

Marsh’s description reflects the general impression of Amman during the years of the British mandate being more a village than a real city in a country inhabited by tribesmen and small scale cultivators.

In fact, the development of the city after the establishment of the Emirate in 1921/23 was rather modest compared to the cities in the neighbouring Levant. Though, Amman gained special relevance as the central place of power and political action through the implementation of the new state apparatus, the mandatory authority and the settlement of members of the important political factions: the Hashemite Court and the British Resident, migrants from Syria and Palestine, Transjordanians from influential families, merchants, businessmen and the employees of the modern bureaucracy were all to be found in Amman. The city thus became the place of staunch support for the new rule and at the same time of firm opposition against it.

In contrast to that growing political relevance, the infrastructure in the city remained rather underdeveloped until the end of World War II. One of the reasons for this underdevelopment was the lack of reliable supply with electrical current in the capital, a fact which has hitherto been ignored by the scholarly research on the history of the Emirate. The reasons for this lack were twofold: political and economical. A close reading of the British Foreign Office records and the contemporary Transjordanian and Palestinian press reveals the connection and interaction between nationalist and anti-Zionist political trends in Transjordan and the economic development of Amman until the end of the 1930s.

British-Transjordanian relations

The relationship between the Hashemite Court and the British was one of clear dependence. The Emir ‘Abdullah needed the financial, military and administrative support of the mandatory force to stabilise his power. But the British were not willing to spend as much money on the Emirate as would have been necessary for its development. The British High Commissioner of Palestine commented on the 1935/36 budget calling it a “stand still budget”\(^2\). The British did much more to develop Palestine than they did for Trans-

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