THE BALQĀ’ REVOLT: TRIBES AND EARLY STATE-BUILDING IN TRANSJORDAN

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Introduction: A revisionist approach

In summer 1923 the Balqā’ tribal confederacy launched a revolt against ʿAbdullāh bin Husayn, the Emir of the young emirate of Transjordan. The rebellion began when hundreds of tribesmen, mounted on horseback and led by their paramount shaykh, Sulṭān al-ʿAdwān, and his eldest son, Mājid, marched on ʿAbdullāh’s camp. They surged through the centre of Amman in an impressive and provocative demonstration of power. Shouting and shooting in the air, the demonstrators expressed their discontent with the regime and the way it treated them and the thousands more they represented. During his conversation with ʿAbdullāh, Sulṭān presented the Emir with an ultimatum—to reform his government and to change its attitudes towards ruling the inhabitants of the Balqā’ region. Two weeks later a few hundred tribal warriors were easily defeated by a small British force. Although short-lived and suppressed, the Balqā’ revolt—more commonly known as the ʿAdwān revolt—was certainly the most dramatic event in the history of Jordan during its formative years under the British mandate and in fact until the 1948 war.

Moreover, even now the story of the revolt sparks the imagination of many Jordanians—it being a source of embarrassment to some, a cause of pride for others. In Jordan, as Andrew Shryock...
has demonstrated, history and collective memory reflect, and are influenced by, contemporary power relations between the different tribes or between the old shaykhly elite and ordinary tribespeople within the same tribe. In recounting their history, prominent tribes and families cast their shadow over others, sometimes within the context of the competition for resources and for the Hashemite family’s favour. Thus, a group of students from the ‘Ajārma tribes urged me to give due credit to the role played by their tribes in the affair and to name the revolt movement Thawrat al-‘Adwān wa-l‘Ajārma, the ‘Adwān and ‘Ajārma revolt, instead of the common name, Thawrat al-‘Adwān. They felt, indeed quite justifiably, that their tribes and leaders were written out of the history of the revolt in favour of the more prominent ‘Adwan and their shaykhs. Whereas the ‘Ajārma students wanted to emphasise the revolt and their historical role in it, the ‘Adwānis would rather play it down. In their attempts to legitimise and secure their privileged position in today’s Jordan, the ‘Adwān elite (the close descendents of shaykh Majid) stresses the historical friendship between Majid and ‘Abdullāh, which developed into a political alliance between the ‘Adwān and the Hashemites spanning over eighty years. The revolt’s memory could hamper these attempts at legitimisation and therefore cause embarrassment. The memory of 1923 sometimes works in another way. For those who stand against the ‘Adwānis, mention of the revolt corroborates the ‘Adwān’s contemporary image as unruly, violent, hot-headed and sometimes even dangerous. This is especially applicable to those ‘Adwān tribespeople who still live on their traditional land in the Jordan Valley.

2 A meeting with students at al-Iṣra’ University, 2 June 1998. I thank my friend ‘Azīz Ajārmeh (not a member of these tribes despite his name) for introducing me to his friends Mu‘ayyad Bakhit and Fīrās Drahbī.