

IDEAS

'Until the second decade of the 20th century, there had never been a Jordanian people, ethnic group or tribe by that name'

The fictional kingdom

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There can be no lasting peace in Jordan until the world appreciates the country's true ethnography, Geoffrey Clarfield and Salim Mansur argue

Arab nationalism is dead. It lasted for 100 years and it has suddenly disappeared. In the former states of war-torn Libya, Syria and Iraq, speaking Arabic now means nothing. However, being a member of a family, lineage or clan of either the Shia, Sunnis, Christians, Druze, Yazidi, Tuareg or Bedouin means everything. The "Arab League" is now totally dysfunctional.

From Morocco to Malaysia, Islamic jihadis go from one place to another in support of recently created political entities like the Taliban, al-Qaida, or ISIL. Nations and their borders count for nothing. Yet the new Pope has just recognized another Arab state, "Palestine." Perhaps this is because he has critically misread how Arab entities really rise and fall.

Until the end of the First World War, most of the Arabic-speaking Middle East was under the authority of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. The Turks lost their empire when they fought against the allies during the war. And so, after more than four centuries of subservience to the Turks, Christian and Muslim speakers of Arabic, longing for independence, created Arab nationalism, a political movement that mirrored the ethnic and linguistic nationalisms that were then transforming the landscape of 19th-century Europe.

In this new ideology, an "Arab" was someone who spoke Arabic. The largely Christian Arab proponents of this ideology hoped that as citizens of newly created secular states, they would finally be given the legal and political equality denied to them for centuries under Islamic law and Muslim rulers. And so, after the First World War, a number of "Arab" states were created by the League of Nations, such as Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. By the end of the Second World War, they had all gained their independence.

Among these newly created states, there arose the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which became formally independent in 1946. Until then, it was legally part of the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, implemented on trust from the League of Nations by the British government. So we must ask, in this age of suddenly disintegrating "Arab states," where do the Jordanians live and who are they?

The people who reside in Jordan live on the east side of the Jordan River. Anyone who has ever been to Sunday school probably knows the regions and cities of this area better than they know their own state or province. This is the biblical land of Bashan and of Gilead.

Three thousand years ago, what is now northern Jordan was the territory of the Israelites: specifically, the tribes of Dan, Manasseh, Gad and Reuben. Later, the area became part of the second Jewish Commonwealth under the Maccabees, before the Romans conquered the whole area and made it part of their empire (the Christian Bible has retained numerous books that describe the history of the Maccabees until the Roman conquest).

Who are the Jordanians? Until the second decade of the 20th century, there had never been a Jordanian people, ethnic group or tribe by that name, or a group of diaspora exiles who thought of themselves as "Jordanian." Jordan is a 20th-century British invention, dreamed up in the 1920s, for the peoples living in what Britain illegally hived off from the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine in 1923. Until 1946 its British administrators called it just that — Eastern Palestine.

No one reads the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine document anymore. But according to international law, it is still valid. It is the legal basis for the creation of the Jewish state of Israel. Its provisions still stand, because all of the legal pronouncements of the League were subsequently recognized as binding, when the United Nations was created after the Second World War.

In 1923 the British arbitrarily violated the Mandate, morally and legally, by creating the "Emirate of Jordan" in Eastern Palestine. The British announced that this was a "temporary" measure, which they quietly and quickly made "permanent." Jews were no longer allowed to live there.



From right, King Abdullah with Emir Abd al-Ilah of Hejaz, regent of Iraq, Emir Naif, Abdullah's youngest son, and Nuri al-Said, Iraqi ambassador-at-large, at Abdullah's coronation in Amman on May 25, 1946.

The name, the "Hashemite" Kingdom of Jordan, makes reference to the fact that its ruling tribe, the Hashemites, were imported by the British from outside of Jordan in the Hejaz (what is now western Saudi Arabia). The Hashemites rule Jordan today as the Saudis do Arabia, claiming the name of the country by right of tribal conquest and occupation, but in their case with the connivance of the British, who unilaterally lopped off 70 per cent of mandated Palestine, and gave it to them as their compensation for their tribal revolt against the Turks during the First World War.

In order to give this new national fiction of Jordan some instant legitimacy, the British creatively mistranslated Arabic titles like "emir" (in those days it meant an often non-hereditary, elected Bedouin tribal leader) and "sharif," and called these men "kings," giving them a kind of faux-royal aura. In fact, the Hashemites were and continue to be a usurping Bedouin tribal elite in Eastern Palestine.

This explains all those "tribal rebellions" that occurred there during the 1920s and 1930s. Clearly, the Bedouin tribes that were there before the Hashemites invaded had a hard time understanding why they should give up their independence and be ruled by these British imports. The Hashemites put down these "rebellions" with the active aid and military support of thinly disguised British mercenaries, in an army that was ironically named The Arab Legion, trained and led by British officers.

Although the Bedouin were the masters of most of the desert lands of Jordan, east of the river there were always small towns and villages, where farmers and townsmen eked out a living. Many of the Arab Muslims of these towns and villages were former Bedouin who had become farmers. Among them were the demographically reduced survivors of the Byzantine Empire, which had fallen to the

invading Arab Muslims in the seventh century during the first Muslim invasions from Arabia. These included various Arabic- and Aramaic-speaking Christians, as well as Armenians who were later joined by Muslims from the Caucasus, and Druze immigrants from Syria.

Today the majority of the country's inhabitants are Muslim Arabs who now think of themselves as Palestinians. Before the Mandate, they had no national identity and like that of Jordan, there is no record of a self-defined, self-declared Palestinian national identity in any historical document before the early to mid-20th century.

The minute a minimum level of democracy was applied, the Palestinian majority would take over

Palestinian Arab identity seems to have developed quite recently, as a contrary movement and mirror image to that of the Jews, who were returning to their ancient homeland by right, and whose physical, religious and cultural connection to the land had never been severed, or questioned, and which was formally recognized by the League of Nations after the First World War. This is the essence of that strange and paradoxical ethnogenesis of what is now called the Palestinian nation.

Once the British established the Mandate, and Jewish immigration began to create a mini-industrial revolution, both Western and Eastern Palestine attracted waves of Muslim Arab immigrants from Egypt and

Syria. These new immigrants found it convenient to make common cause with the non-Bedouin residents of Jordan and much later, specifically after 1967, called themselves and their children Palestinians. President Roosevelt pointed out in 1939 that "Arab immigration into Palestine since 1921 has vastly exceeded the total Jewish immigration during this whole period."

The great historical irony of this period is that all of the ancestors of today's Muslim Arab Palestinians, now living in Mandated Eastern Palestine, all of a sudden stopped being thought of as Arabs of Palestine by the British, and then by the members of the United Nations after 1948, and even more so since the Oslo process began in 1992. This has been and remains one of the great disappearing acts of modern history, for Jordan is clearly a Palestinian Arab State in what was formerly British Mandated Palestine, with a majority of non-Bedouin villagers and townspeople who do not define themselves as Bedouin or Jordanian.

In 1948, the same year that the British-led Arab (Bedouin) Legion of Jordan invaded the newly created State of Israel, King Abdullah of Jordan declared that "Palestine and Jordan are one." And so in 1948, Arabs resident in both Eastern and Western Palestine went to war with the newly created state of Israel in that small part of Western Palestine that had been begrudged by the UN to the Jewish people. No one thought that this new state of Israel would survive.

The Arabs of the British Mandate on both sides of the Jordan attacked Israel and when they were defeated, many of them removed themselves from one part of Western Palestine to those parts of Palestine, on both sides of the Jordan, then under "Jordanian" authority. The same thing happened when Arabs from the West Bank chose to cross the Jordan after the 1967 and, subsequently, when

Jordan and so many of them had once again taken up arms against Israel, in the hope of conquering all of Western Palestine. If that is the case, are they really "refugees" or are they not still residents in the territory of the Palestine Mandate?

The political and ethnographic disappearance of the Palestinian nature of the Arabs of Eastern Palestine (Jordan), has largely been a tactic used by the Arab League, and its allies on the left, to put Israel and its supporters on the defensive, for many Arabs have made public statements in favour of the Jordan-is-Palestine argument. They just happen to do so in a way that usually implies the destruction of the Jewish State.

For example, on Feb. 2, 1970, Prince Hassan of the Jordanian National Assembly said, "Palestine is Jordan and Jordan is Palestine: there is only one land, with one history and one and the same fate."

On March 14, 1977, Farouk Kadumi, the head of the PLO political department, told Newsweek, "There should be a kind of linkage because Jordanians and Palestinians are considered by the PLO as one people."

Also in 1977, speaking to a Dutch newspaper, PLO representative Zuhair Muhsein said, "For tactical reasons, Jordan, which is a sovereign state with defined borders, cannot raise claims to Haifa and Jaffa, while as a Palestinian, I can undoubtedly demand Haifa, Jaffa, Beer-Sheva and Jerusalem. However, the moment we reclaim our right to all of Palestine, we will not wait even a minute to unite Palestine and Jordan."

Perhaps the most revealing public quote by Muhsein was when he bluntly stated that, "There are no differences between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese. We are all part of one nation. It is only for political reasons that we carefully underline our Palestinian identity. ... The existence of a separate Palestinian identity serves only tactical purposes. The founding of a Palestinian state is a new tool in the continuing battle against Israel." (And this goes some way to explaining why Arab states rise and fall so quickly. They have little historical or ethnographic unity, with the exception of Egypt.)

Mudar Zahran is an Arab, Muslim, Palestinian Jordanian who has had to flee Jordan because he has told the truth to his fellow Arabs — that Jordan is a Palestinian State. In a recent article he has bluntly stated: "There is, in fact, almost nothing un-Palestinian about Jordan except for the royal family. Despite decades of official imposition of a Bedouin image on the country, and even Bedouin accents on state television, the Palestinian identity is still the most dominant ... to the point where the Jordanian capital, Amman, is the largest and most populated Palestinian city anywhere. Palestinians view it as a symbol of their economic success and ability to excel. Moreover, empowering a Palestinian statehood for Jordan has a well-founded and legally accepted grounding: The minute the minimum level of democracy is applied to Jordan, the Palestinian majority would, by right, take over the political momentum."

The Jewish state of Israel lies west of the Jordan River and has sovereignty over that territory by historical and legal right. There is no "occupation." If the Israeli government decides to give back some of this land in a territory-for-peace deal, it will have done so knowing it is sacrificing part of its historic homeland to hostile Islamic expansionists, not to "a people without a land," for the Arabs of Palestine, that is the Palestinians, are a majority in Eastern Palestine.

The world has been living with a two-state solution for decades. No matter what the faux king of Jordan may say or do, his country and his people are not Jordanian. Jordan is what anthropologists call an "ethnographic fiction." The majority of Jordanians are Palestinians living in Mandated Palestine. There can be no peace without the recognition of this simple ethnographic truth. The Pope should know this.

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