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## **Systemic Transformations in Jordan in 1951– 1957 – Unsuccessful Democracy**

**Keywords:** Jordan, the Hashemite, liberalization, Chamber of Deputies, parliament

**Słowa kluczowe:** Jordania, Haszymidzi, liberalizacja, Izba Deputowanych, parlament

### **Abstract**

The following text discusses the first attempt to transform the authoritarian Jordan monarchy into a constitutional monarchy, in which the parliament chosen by the people was supposed, apart from the king, to serve the role of a real supervisor of the state. Such an attempt was made in 1951–1957. It ended up in a failure and, in fact, the return of the authoritarian methods of exercising the power. This failure resulted both from the specific circumstances of the contemporary Middle East, as well as certain permanent features of Arabic societies. Thus, it is important to trace back these events to show both the attempt at reforms, as well as the causes of the failure.

The following text makes use first and foremost of English language resources concerning the history of Jordan. Also, the archive documents collected in the National Archives were used, especially the ones that refer to the correspondence between the authorities in London and the British embassy in Amman. To understand the issue, it will be necessary to go back beyond the year 1951 and to present in brief the very process of how the Hashemite monarchy came into existence.

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## Streszczenie

### **Przemiany ustrojowe w Jordanii w latach 1951–1957 – nieudana demokracja**

W tekście poniższym przedstawiona zostanie pierwsza próba przekształcenia autorytarnej monarchii jordańskiej w monarchię konstytucyjną, w której wybrany przez naród parlament miał pełnić obok króla rolę realnego zwierzchnika państwa. Próbę taką podjęto w latach 1951–1957. Zakończyła się ona niepowodzeniem i powrotem do de facto autorytarnych metod sprawowania władzy. Niepowodzenie to wynikało zarówno ze specyficznych warunków ówczesnego Bliskiego Wschodu jak i z pewnych stałych cech społeczeństw arabskich. Warto więc prześledzić te wydarzenia by ukazać zarówno tą próbę reform, jak i przyczyny jej porażki.

W tekście poniższym wykorzystane zostały przede wszystkim opracowania angielskojęzyczne dotyczące historii Jordanii. Wykorzystano również dokumenty archiwalne zgromadzone w National Archives szczególnie te wynikające z korespondencji między władzami w Londynie a ambasadą brytyjską w Ammanie. Aby zrozumieć temat konieczne będzie cofnięcie się poza rok 1951 i przedstawienie skrótowo samego procesu powstawania instytucji haszymidzkiej monarchii.

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## **I. Establishment of the State**

The new political order was created in the Middle East as a result of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. It was created by European empires, namely Great Britain and France. To a certain extent, in their actions, they had to take into account the activity of Arabs. Eventually, the two empires divided the Arab territories and created new states, such as Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon. In 1918, however, nobody predicted the establishment of a separate state on the East Bank of the Jordan. The local communities also did not strive for separating this territory; it was rather expected to be a part of bigger Arab states, e.g. Syria. The establishment of a country with the capital in Amman resulted from the decision of Great Britain. It was about rewarding the allied house of Hashemite, in particular Prince Abdullah, the son of the king of the Hejaz, Hussein. The British also wanted to form a buffer zone between Pales-

tine that was controlled by them directly and the turbulent Arabian Peninsula<sup>2</sup>. Considering these premises and after talks with Abdullah on May 27, 1921, the secretary for the colony, Winston Churchill, separated the territories on the east of the Jordan. The state was called the Transjordan Emirate, and the prince took on the authority. It must be mentioned that Transjordan was a British protectorate and maintained this status until 1946<sup>3</sup>.

It needs to be stated, without getting into details, that the emirate was dependent on the British not only politically, but also financially. The creation of its modest administration and police-military forces was completely financed by the protectors. Thus, the development of Transjordan institutions took place by a strong dependence on the British. The emirate was not subjected to London, but the authorities of British Palestine. For the first twenty years of its existence, it was not so evident whether it would become an independent state or a part of Palestine<sup>4</sup>.

It was this issue that induced Abdullah to vest Transjordan in the constitution and to establish the parliament. He was made aware of this step by the allied British officers who wanted to preserve the emirate's state separateness.

According to European understanding, the parliament implied national distinctiveness. Abdullah himself was a supporter of absolutism, exercised, however, in a lenient way. He was, however, aware of the need to legitimize the new institution to London. Thus, in February 1929 general election was held. The electoral system, however, considered voting in curiae religious communities. The Chamber of Deputies included 18 MPs, but two Bedouin representatives were elected by the committee of tribe sheiks; 16 came from general voting of men. This number had to include 11 Arab Muslims, 3 Arab Christians, and 2 Circassians. This division was not meant to limit the choice of voters, but to please various communities living in Transjordan. In contemporary circumstances, the election was a new and insignificant phenomenon. Only 3% of voters took part in the first election. It is no wonder that

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<sup>2</sup> M.C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain and the making of Jordan*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 44–45; J. Zdanowski, *Arabia Saudyjska*, Warsaw 2004, pp. 115–116.

<sup>3</sup> A. Ibn al-Husajn, *The Memoire of King Abdullah of Transjordan*, London 1950, p. 203; M.C. Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> F.G. Peake, *History and tribes of Jordan*, Miami, Florida 1958, pp. 106–107; Ph. Robins, *A History of Jordan*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 31–33.

the constitution vested by Abdullah kept all power in the hands of the Emir. The chamber was a purely ceremonial institution, as it even did not have an advisory function. At most, it was a meeting place for the emirate elites and getting them used to live together in a new state<sup>5</sup>.

A breakthrough in the history of the emirate came no sooner than in 1946 when London recognized the independence of Transjordan. Since then, it was the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. 1948 was even more important – it was then that the kingdom took part in the war in Palestine. As a result of the war, the Hashemite forces annexed the West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem. At the same time, the monarchy faced a new, dangerous neighbor, namely Israel<sup>6</sup>. Wishing to legalize the new conquest, Abdullah changed the electoral system. The Chamber of Deputies that came from the general election of the male part of citizens was since that moment to consist of 40 MPs, 20 of whom were elected on the East Bank, and the other 20 on the west of the river, in the Palestinian territories. Theoretically, the chamber gained greater legislative rights, but it was forbidden, for example, to form political parties. As a result of the elections of April 11, 1950, the Chamber of Deputies was established and it passed the unification of both parts of the state. It was then that the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was formed. In reality, Abdullah needed a modern parliament only to make the unification act, all the more because the Palestinian MPs turned out to be clearly in the opposition. It was already on April 24, when 14 MPs from the West Bank left the chamber and did not support the act – the incorporation that was passed with the votes of the delegates from the previous Transjordan.

## II. The Interregnum Period

The mentioned facts imply that Transjordan was an absolutist monarchy. At the same time, it was King Abdullah himself who, being driven by good relations with London, introduced in his country elements of the modern par-

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<sup>5</sup> U. Dann, *Studies in the History of Transjordan 1920–1949. The Making of State*, Boulder-London 1984, p. 9; B. Shwadran, *Jordan. A State of Tension*, New York 1959, pp. 175–176.

<sup>6</sup> K. Salibi, *The Modern History of Jordan, London-New York* 1998, p. 153; J.B. Glubb, *Britain and The Arabs. A Study of Fifty Years 1908–1959*, pp. 284, 287–288.

liamentary system. He did it against his own political instinct, but he understood, nevertheless, that new institutions were necessary for the struggle to gain recognition of the state on the international stage. In the Transjordan society, the king achieved such a strong position that the parliamentary system did not remove from him any real power. Nevertheless, together with the annexation of Palestinian territories there appeared a new political class that made use of the Chamber of Deputies as a forum for the anti-government opposition. Apart from that, masses of Palestinian refugees were frustrated and demanded a quick breakthrough in their situation<sup>7</sup>.

All these problems became even more dramatic in 1951. In May 1951, the king dissolved the Chamber of Deputies, on which he informed the ambassador of the United Kingdom – Alec Kirkbride. Both the king and the ambassador hoped that a new election will provide a better (more obedient) Chamber. Before that Jordan King Abdullah was shot in Jerusalem by a Palestinian, Mustafa Shukri Ashu, on July 20, 1951. Since then, the threat of terrorist acts on the side of Palestinian organizations or mass demonstrations of Palestinians became an important aspect of Jordan politics<sup>8</sup>.

After the death of Abdullah, Jordan politics was in a deep crisis. Formally, the successor of the throne was the son of Abdullah, Prince Talal. However, he suffered from a serious type of schizophrenia. Nevertheless, he has announced the king. It was already on August 11, 1952, when he abdicated and his son Hussein became the leader. He, on the other hand, was a minor and studied in England at a military school in Sunherst. Eventually Hussein I was nominated no sooner than on May 2, 1953, but the young monarch did not exercise his power in the real sense for many consecutive months. Thus, in reality, Jordan did not have, in fact, a king from July 1951 until May 1953. Moreover, also in 1954 rather older politicians exercised the power. Therefore, between 1952 and 1954 the little kingdom became an oligarchy ruled by a group of ministers and members of the House of Hashemite. An important factor of the political power were the British. They played a very positive role

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<sup>7</sup> Ph. Robins, *A History...*, pp. 84–85; B. Wróblewski, *Jordania*, Warsaw 2011. Before 1948 Transjordan had approximately 400 thousand citizens, while on the conquered territory of central Palestine there lived 720 thousand people, 500 thousand of whom were refugees.

<sup>8</sup> From Kirkbride to Foreign Office, May 5, 1951, FO 371/91789; From Jerusalem to Foreign Office, July 20, 1951, FO 371/91838; M.C. Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, pp. 208–209.

from the viewpoint of the interests of the Jordan state. It was their advantage that kept the unity of the elites in Amman. A significantly important role was played by John Bagot Glubb – a British officer who since 1939 commanded the Jordan army. It was him who transformed it into a considerable military force, maintaining simultaneously its apolitical character<sup>9</sup>.

### III. Liberalization

Under these circumstances political reforms were introduced, the purpose of which was to establish a complete liberal constitutional monarchy in Jordan. The parliament was to gain the legislative power and the decisive influence in forming the government. Liberalization of the constitution was advised by the very King Talal. Despite his abdication, the works were continued. Prime Minister Tawfik Abu Al-Huda was a conservative who governed the country in these years. The politician was not delighted with the liberalization, although he was loyally but slowly preparing the changes. Also, the army commander, J.B. Glubb, considered fast liberalization a bad idea. He admitted that the changes were modeled after the political system of Great Britain, so it was difficult for him to completely reject the idea<sup>10</sup>.

Eventually, the changes were introduced to the constitution in 1953. The new basic law legalized political parties. The parliament was to consist of the Upper Chamber nominated by the monarch and comprised of notables, and the elected Chamber of Deputies. The latter one was to include 40 MPs, 20 from the previous Transjordan and 20 from Palestine. The Chamber of Deputies was to be elected in the general election and this time this meant competitive multiparty elections. Moreover, the rights of the Chamber of Deputies were visibly extended. Since that moment the Prime Minister was elected by the Chamber (although it was the king who appointed him). The Chamber would legislate the laws and the budget. The king maintained complete control over the administration, the army, and the police. He could also demand deposition from the prime minister. The new system required the collaboration of the court and the parliament to consolidate. Additionally, the regional

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<sup>9</sup> Ph. Robins, *A History...*, pp. 77–78; 80–82.

<sup>10</sup> J.B. Glubb, *A Soldier with The Arabs*, London 1957, pp. 349, 351.

tradition would give decisive power to the monarch, and the role of the Chamber of Deputies as an authoritative body was something new and unclear<sup>11</sup>.

Initially, young King Hussein fully supported the changes. In May 1953, he appointed Fauzi al-Mulki the prime minister, who was described as a typical Arab liberal enthralled by the idea of the British monarchy. He applied the new rules consistently, especially the law of freedom of speech. The party system developed, but it soon turned out that parties were developing in the Palestinian part of the country. Moreover, the anti-western groups grew in popularity. For a substantial part of the citizens, the ideal then was Egypt, which was ruled by a leftist dictatorship. One of the new parties – National Socialists fully adopted the idea of the so-called Arabic socialism. All of these bothered the conservative part of the elites. Al-Huda reassumed power but the changes were not revoked<sup>12</sup>.

On October 16, 1954 elections were held according to the new electoral system. Al-Huda was accused by many of electoral frauds. The pro-government candidates kept the majority, but many politicians revoked their nominations in a sign of protest. Moreover, violent riots broke out in Amman after the voting. The army had to be sent to suppress them; although they managed to suppress the riots, 10 people were killed. These events initiated a more radical period in the history of Jordan. What is worse, it turned out that the political discourse concerned mainly the issues of the alliance with London and the conflict with Israel, which dangerously incited the emotions<sup>13</sup>.

Between 1955 and 1956 there was a growth in tension – the opposition acted not through the parliament but mass riots. Naser coming into power in Egypt in 1954 worsened the situation within Jordan. The Egyptian dictator quickly managed to create his image as a rebel against the dominance of the west in the Arab world and a leader who would soon defeat Israel and give refugees their homes back. For the Palestinian citizens of Jordan, it was Naser who epitomized hope. What is worse, the propaganda of Cairo was persuading that the monarchy was a pro-western influence that was hostile to Arabs<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> B. Wróblewski, *Jordania...*, pp. 125–126; Ph. Robins, *A History...*, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> J.B. Glubb, *A Soldier...*, pp. 351–352.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 352–354.

<sup>14</sup> B. Wróblewski, *Jordania...*, pp. 126–127.

These circumstances caused the democratization of the Jordan system was in reality a risky experiment. Full recognition of the voters' will could easily lead to the decline of monarchy, war with Israel, and dissolving the Jordan state in general, which, in the Arab world, would be welcomed as it would mean annexation of its area to the territories of bigger countries and, thus, a step to unity. For the court in Amman this of course was a disastrous perspective. The axis of the conflict between the opposition and the pro-monarchy establishment was the issue of the alliance with Great Britain and the role of the British in the army. One must remind that the army command was dominated by British officers and the commander was J.B. Glubb. This was a nuisance for the national pride. It was London that covered almost all the expenses for the army and its development. Apart from that, the alliance with Great Britain protected Jordan against attacks of Israel. In the view of Palestinians, however, it was regarded as treason<sup>15</sup>.

#### **IV. The Political Crisis**

Within the period between 1955 and 1956, the main point of the political struggle was the issue of Jordan involvement in the 'Bagdad Pact' created by London. The opposition managed not to let the accession happen due to huge and violent riots in December 1955 and January 1956. They spread through the West Bank and Amman itself. The population in the capital rose quickly after 1948 but the city was dominated mostly by Palestinian citizens. The riots revealed the weakness of the authority. The Hashemites were protected only by the army that was suppressing the protests and it was commanded by a British, which discredited the young king. Under these circumstances, King Hussein made his first very risky decision. On March 1, 1956, he ordered J.B. Glubb and several other British officers to leave the country. This step was risky as it meant a loss of subsidies and a lack of money for financing the military forces. Fortunately, the British withdrew their subsidies gradually. Apart from that, the king nominated new Arab commanders. This was a remedy for the frustration of the staff, but they were

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<sup>15</sup> J. Lunt, *The Arab Legion*, London 1999, pp. 144–145; J. Lunt, *Glubb Pasha. A Biography*, London 1984, pp. 193–194.



young people without experience and they did not always have the support among soldiers<sup>16</sup>.

The young monarch put a lot at risk, but he gained one thing- he was no longer seen as a puppet in the hands of the British. One can say that he flowed on the wave of contemporary Arab nationalism, which was promoted from Cairo. Meanwhile, on July 26, the Egyptians took control over the Suez Channel. In October and November 1956, they led to a military conflict. The election in Jordan was held in such a tense atmosphere. It was one of the most transparent elections in the history of the region. The political parties were competing with no pressure from the administration. The situation was anyway so hectic that the administration had no clue who to support, while the king expected that his popularity would provide success to the monarchist candidates. Meanwhile, the election of October 21, 1956, gave success to the national leftist opposition. It was not spectacular – for 40 seats in the Chamber of Deputies the National Socialists received 11 seats, the Baas party 2 seats, and the National Bloc (the alliance of groups led by communist intelligentsia) – 3 seats. Thanks to the support of several other independent MPs the leftist coalition of these three parties gained a modest majority. The king appointed the prime minister who, theoretically, did not have to be a representative of the winning party. However, according to the idea of new laws, Hussein I nominated the leader of National Socialists, Suleiman Nabulsi the prime minister. For the first time, an attempt was made to provide legal collaboration of the king and the opposition controlling the government<sup>17</sup>.

The coalition exercising the power was a motley mixture of liberals and Arab socialists. They shared hostility to Great Britain and the West, which was often connected with recognizing Naser as the true leader of Arabs. The government of Nabulsi was thus systematically removing any British influences and attempted to coordinate their policy with Egypt. It failed, however, in improving the citizens' quality of life. The main problem was, however, finding new resources for financing the army. It was here, where the pathways of

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<sup>16</sup> B. Wróblewski, *Sojusz Wielkiej Brytanii z Haszymidzkim Królestwem Jordanii (1946–1858). Dylematy mocarstwa w relacjach z zależnym partnerem*, Rzeszów 2013, pp. 312–313; Ph. Robins, *A History...*, p. 92; Emergency. Secret. Amman to Foreign Office, March 1, 1956, FO 0800/724/VJ 1201/9/6. J.B. Glubb finally left Amman in the morning of March 2, 1956.

<sup>17</sup> Ph. Robins, *A History...*, pp. 77–78, 95–96.

the monarch and the government diverged completely. The king was searching for subsidies in the USA and the government in Egypt, and this in consequence implied improving relations with the USSR. The issue of Jordan's future became a small but important element of the Cold War. The court in Amman on the other hand probably felt that the coalition would be content to abolish the monarchy. After all, Egypt, which was a role model for it, had begun changes by overthrowing the king in 1952. On April 10, 1957, the king took the risk and dismissed the prime minister. The capital was overtaken by manifestations of Nabulsi supporters. However, on April 13, 1957, when riots in the army began, it turned out that leftist officers had no control over the army. Among young soldiers of Bedouin background, it was the king who received instantaneous support and suppressed the anxiety. Bedouin soldiers were quite indifferent to the Pan-Arabic ideology, while the House of Hashemite (the ancestors of Muhammed) evoked their respect<sup>18</sup>.

Sulejman An-Nabulsi accepted the deposition. Initially, it was thought that a compromise was possible and a new government would be formed, at least partially like the previous one. Eventually, however, the left strived for confrontation. The citizens were called to protest. Riots occurred and Egypt accused the king of treason. On April 25, 1957, the king introduced martial law. Within a few days, the army suppressed the riots, at the expense of the lives of several dozens of citizens. The opposition politicians were arrested. Moreover, the political parties were dissolved. The liberal experiment ended. Admittedly, the king was quick to seize the repressions, but since then Jordan was, in fact, an absolutist monarchy with an illusionary parliament, and occasionally, like in April 1957, the monarch ruled with the help of the army. The next real democratization occurred only in 1989<sup>19</sup>.

## V. Summary

Between 1951 and 1957 a political revival took place and as a result of the constitutional reforms, a new political system was introduced in Jordan. In the

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<sup>18</sup> Animal review for 1957, British, Embassy, Amman, January 28, 1958, FO 371/124006/VJ 1011/1/58, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, pp. 10–11; B. Wróblewski, *Sojusz...*, p. 395.

ory, it was supposed to be a constitutional monarchy in which the real legislative power and the task of appointing the government were to be taken by the Chamber of Deputies. Such profound reforms were possible mainly because after the death of King Abdullah in 1951, until 1953, the country did not have a monarch. After 1953, on the other hand, King Hussein was dependent on his advisors and became independent only in 1956. The second reason for the change was the fact that many members of the Jordan establishment had indiscriminate admiration for the model of the political system in Great Britain and strived to replicate it. For this model to consolidate in Amman loyal collaboration of the monarchy with the political class was necessary. This condition, however, was not met. The period between 1956 and 1957 was, by all means, the worst possible time for such changes. Anti-western attitudes were then quite common in the Arab world. The will of the masses provided success to the politicians of the pan-Arabic left, and the Israeli threat increased political tensions. The pan-Arabic movement considered overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a 'progressive' dictatorship. When observing the events in Egypt, or Iraq years later, one must state that the Hashemites were right to be concerned about the successes of the left and the influences of Naser. Under these circumstances establishing a liberal monarchy turned out to be impossible.

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