

# Bartosz Wróblewski

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## The British Perspective on Plans to Expand Transjordan into Palestine in Light of Extracts of Foreign Office Correspondence in 1946–1948

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**Bartosz Wróblewski**

**THE BRITISH PERSPECTIVE ON PLANS  
TO EXPAND TRANSJORDAN INTO PALESTINE  
IN THE LIGHT OF EXTRACTS OF FOREIGN  
OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE IN 1946–1948**

The Emirate of Transjordan was established in 1921 by the British through dividing the British-owned Palestinian territory. The area west of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea became the proper mandate area of Palestine, whereas the territories east of them were turned into an autonomous Arab emirate. The basic difference between the two resided in the fact that in Palestine the British ruled directly while in Transjordan they let a government be formed headed by Prince Abd Allah<sup>1</sup>. The British ruled Transjordan indirectly; that territory remained their protectorate between 1921 and 1946. However, in a longer perspective, what was more important was the fact that in the case of Palestine the British fully recognised the Balfour Declaration that had been announced in 1917<sup>2</sup>. In the 1920s and 1930s, the mandate authorities supported immigration of Jews to Palestine, perceiving the Jewish Agency that represented the Zionist movement as their partner in the governing of the province. This Declaration was not observed in the Emirate of Transjordan and the Jewish settlement virtually never

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<sup>1</sup> Abd Allah Ibn Hussein, an Arab aristocrat belonging to the influential Hashemite clan. His father, Hussein Ibn Ali ruled in Mecca. In 1916–1918 Abd Allah and his family headed an anti-Turkish uprising in the Hijaz. He was considered an ally by the British.

<sup>2</sup> The British Secretary of State, Arthur James Balfour sent a letter to Sir Lionel Rothschild, an important representative of the Zionist Federation, dated as of 2 November, 1917. In the letter, it was stated that the British government was supportive of the idea to create in Palestine a *national home* for the Jews and that it would take every effort to make it happen. The letter was the first official declaration by the British authorities to approve of the Zionist movement's postulates.

occurred there. The Emirate developed as a poor but purely Arab state, while in the neighbouring Palestine an influx of the Jews produced intensifying political problems. In 1936, the Arab population of Palestine, which was discriminated in political terms, rebelled against the British authorities and the Jewish settlement. The Arab uprising lasted from 1936 to 1939, forcing London to seriously consider the Palestinian problem. Nevertheless, the activities of the British were characterised by lacking consistency. In 1937, a commission headed by Earl Peel proposed that the country should be divided into an Arab and a Jewish part. In 1939, wishing to improve its relations with the Arabs, the British government issued so called White Book in which it announced that the influx of Jews to Palestine would be restricted. The country was to remain unified and as such it was to be granted self-government and independence in the future. This shift in the British politics provoked strong protests by the Zionist movement, which during World War II had been limited to verbal forms (Nowar 2006: 195, 209, 216, 220; 2001: 7–8). However, following the collapse of the Third Reich, the Jewish military organizations began a bloody terrorist campaign targeted at the British, while, simultaneously, the Zionist postulates were supported by governments of the USA, USSR and many other European states. In the changed circumstances, the government in London took yet another political turn and on 2 April in 1947 it announced that it gave up the attempts to resolve the Palestinian problem transferring the issue to the United Nations Organization. The Organization established a commission that drafted a plan to divide the country. The draft was voted over on 29 November in 1947. The General Assembly of the United Nations accepted the division of the country but did not tackle the practical side of the matter, i.e. how to do it. The British did not want to help in the implementation of the United Nations' resolution so as not to increase the Arabs' hostility towards themselves. At the same time, they announced that they would withdraw their troops by 15 of May 1948. Indeed, in the night of 14/15 of May in 1948, the last English troops left Palestine, and on 14 May in 1948, the Jewish Agency proclaimed the birth of the state of Israel. The armies of Arab states invaded Palestine on 15 May in 1948, of which most important were the Egyptian and Transjordanian forces. A war broke out that lasted for several months; ultimately it was won by the Jewish side and resulted in the establishment of the contemporary state of Israel (Chojnowski, Tomaszewski 2001: 53–54, 62).

## **Transjordan and Palestine**

The Emirate of Transjordan played an important role in the changed British politics regarding the Palestinian problem. The very establishment of Transjordan was related to the politics carried out by some of the British civilian and military officers who wanted to diminish the difficulties linked to the Arab-Jewish conflict that intensified in connection with the influx of the Jews. The creation of purely Arab Transjordan did not diminish the tensions in Palestine, though. In 1936–1939, the Arabs started an uprising in the country. It was just then that the British presented for the first time their official plan to resolve the Palestinian problem; Transjordan was an important element of that plan. In 1937, an authorised commission came to Palestine, headed by Sir Peal. The commission's task was to investigate the causes of the conflict and to propose a realistic solution. On 7 July in 1937, the commission presented a report in which not only a division of the country into an Arab and a Jewish part was proposed but also an inclusion of the Arab territories in Transjordan. Abd Allah was to rule the new state embracing the Emirate of Transjordan and the major part of Palestine (Wilson 1999: 122–123).

Ultimately the British gave this project up. Nonetheless, it is important to ask why the mandate authorities had planned such a generous extension of Abd Allah's rule. The reason was a conviction shared by many of the British officers that Transjordan constituted their protectorate not only in legal terms; it was believed to cooperate with London on a permanent basis. This desert state was in practice absolutely dependent on British subsidies. What is more, following the collapse of his clan that had lost power in the Hijaz country in the Arab Peninsula, Emir Abd Allah was totally indebted to London for his further political fate. The Emir understood this perfectly well and occasionally demonstrated his loyalty to London in an excessive manner. Soon, he was to prove it in action. In 1941, when the British dominance in the Middle East seemed shaken, the Emir loyally remained on the side of the British (Lunt 1999: 82; Glubb 1959: 241). That is why both in 1937 and all the more so after World War II, he was perceived as a leader who could take control over the Arab part of Palestine with the British blessing. However, research in the British archives lets one conclude that despite the general agreement concerning this issue, the London officials not only did not have any clear plan of action in case that troublemaking colony was divided up but on the contrary – they were surprisingly

unrealistic in their analyses. I am going to demonstrate this basing on a few British documents dated as of 1946–1948.

### **The British and the Transjordanian postulates**

When in the period of 1945–1946 the Jewish terrorists caused an increase in tensions in Palestine, the problem of finding a solution to the growing conflict had to be reconsidered. John Bagot Glubb, who was an officer of the British army and simultaneously the Commander-in-chief of Transjordan's army, meaning the Arab Legion, proposed a resolution to the conflict. One could even state that owing to the British subsidies during World War II J. B. Glubb had created this army himself. As such, this officer played a double role, at the same time being one of Emir Abd Allah's top officials and an informal representative of Britain in Transjordan. This was a proof of the depth of London's influences in this state (Wróblewski 2009: 63 i 147; Robins 2004: 53). Playing this double role, on 13 July in 1946, J. B. Glubb sent a memorandum to his supervisors at War Office. He postulated that any hope to find a conciliatory solution to the Palestinian question was to be forsaken. According to him, the only practical solution was to divide the province by the British single handedly. Although he was aware that this might provoke protests by all sides of the controversy, in a longer run, it should lead to the extinguishing of the conflict. The division that he had proposed was favourable for the Arab side which was to be granted about 70% of the territory, inclusive of extensive but uninhabited Negev Desert. The Arab part of Palestine was to be merged with Transjordan and together they were to constitute a kingdom ruled by Abd Allah. To persuade the addressees to approve of the proposal, J.B. Glubb pointed out significant military advantages that Great Britain was to gain owing to the implementation of his plan. Its author perceived Zionism as a movement hostile to the British influences while the Transjordan authorities – to be solid partners to London. Nonetheless, J.B. Glubb indicated an even more important reason because of which London should support Amman's postulates. In March of 1946, Great Britain and Transjordan signed a military alliance. This treaty enabled the presence of the British troops in the whole territory of Transjordan as well as their movement across those areas in exchange for subsidies dedicated to the maintenance of the Arab Legion (Salibi 1998: 153; Dann 1984: 13). J.B. Glubb reminded that in case

the British army had to evacuate from the part of Palestine, owing to the alliance treaty of March 1946, it would be allowed to come back to the area that would fall under Amman's authority (NA.WO 216/207).

J.B. Glubb's proposal was not at all enthusiastically received in London. Foreign Office looked skeptically at the role of Transjordan and for a prolonged period of time avoided any clear-cut declarations concerning the future of Palestine. At the same time the Ministry's officials were planning a considerable reduction of the Arab Legion, sending letters that urged the ambassador in Amman Alec Kirkbridge to proceed with this task.

The ambassador opposed those proposals patiently explaining that the costs incurred by the Transjordanian army were not so high comparing to the British standards. He managed partially to dissuade the authorities from the plan to reduce the subsidies; even so some savings during 1946 were indeed made (NA.FO 371/52605). There is hardly a better proof in 1946 that the British did not have any plans to use the Arab Legion in order to divide Palestine. In 1947, when London decided to evacuate from Palestine, there were no plans to use the Transjordanian forces, either. The decision to evacuate the imperial forces from Palestine came as a full surprise to the king of Transjordan which was formally, since May 1946, independent. What is more, towards the end of 1947, Abd Allah was informed that the Arab Legion's garrisons must leave Palestine by 15 May of 1948. So far these forces, as part of the British forces, maintained order in the lands inhabited by Arabs. A British civilian officer, Bernard Burrows, sent a telegram from Amman on 12 December in 1947 that the information concerning those decisions made King unhappy. Abd Allah could not understand why he was to withdraw his troops if otherwise he was to be going to take control over the Arab part of Palestine, which he did not hide from London (NA.FO 371/62196). Samir ar Rikabi, Transjordan's Prime Minister informed the British ambassador in Cairo about those plans while paying a visit in Egypt on 10 December in 1947. He stressed the benefits that could result when the Amman authorities took over such a large part of Palestine. However, the British side had no specific plan. The British neither opposed the Transjordanians' proposal, nor supported it. On 21 December in 1947, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ernest Bevin in a letter to the embassy in Amman directly stated that it was too early to plan the role for the Arab Legion after 15 May of 1948. This issue could be discussed during the visit of the Transjordanian party in 1948 (NA.FO 371/62226). The reality proved that it was not

only not too early; it was slowly becoming too late to plan a rational division of Palestine. A war broke out in the Palestinian territory between the Arabs and the Jewish fighters.

In February of 1948, a delegation went from Transjordan to London officially to discuss the changes in some parts of the alliance treaty of 1946. However, the most important was the problem of Palestine's division. The key talks were conducted within a circle of three persons. Those were: Ernest Bevin, Transjordan's Prime Minister Tawfik Abu al-Huda and John Bagot Glubb. Glubb acted in the capacity of interpreter as Tawfik Abu al-Huda did not speak English. Transjordan's Prime Minister stated during that secret discussion that following the Brits' withdrawal his ruler wanted to take control of the Arab part of Palestine. He explicitly asked the British Minister for his opinion. Ernest Bevin accepted this plan, remarking only that the Arab Legion should not encroach the areas that had been transferred to the Jewish state by force of the United Nations General Assembly's resolution. Both Tawfik and Glubb accepted this solution. They left the talks convinced that the British side accepted and supported the occupation by the Arab Legion of those Palestinian territories that the United Nations' plan had granted to the Arabs. One should add that there is no trace of the key conversation in the documents. It is only cited by one eyewitness, J.B. Glubb, who is, generally, believed to be trustworthy (Glubb 1957: 63.)

### **The British and the expansion of Transjordan**

On 15 May in 1948, Palestine was invaded by the armies of a few Arab states. Instead of a peaceful division bloody fighting broke out. Also, the Arab Legion fought against the Israelis in Jerusalem and at Latrum. As a result, the Transjordanian units occupied central Palestine and Eastern Jerusalem. It is very interesting to see how that situation was viewed by the British officials when the war led to the de facto division of the country and the Arab Legion had occupied its part. It is to be added that in spite of the impression formed in February of 1948, the British government did not support Amman's action officially. To exemplify the opinions concerning this matter, one might quote extracts from correspondence between the British Foreign Office and War Office from September of 1948. In addition, that was the period when the Arab side controlled most of Palestine. The Egyptians had occupied

the northern part of Negev with Ber Szewa, the region of Gaza, and even Hebron. The allied Transjordanians controlled central Palestine, while Israel controlled mainly the terrains on the Mediterranean Coast and Galileah.

On 24 September in 1948, an officer of Foreign Office, B. Burrows, sent a letter containing some questions to the chief commander and other British commanders. He asked them to evaluate strategic consequences of Transjordan's expansion. He took this expansion as a *fait accompli* but simultaneously as something surprising. He asked the military where the new state borders in that region could be established and if the British, in connection with this changed situation, should increase the number of their military bases or quite on the contrary – to decrease their number. Burrows was also curious what appropriate attitude to the newly established Israel should be adopted and what consequences could those changes mean in terms of the British budget (NA.FO 371/68860). This series of questions may evidence a complete lack of earlier considerations of the consequences of events occurring in Palestine. In another letter, also dated as of 24 September, 1948, which was also addressed to the chief commander and to the Secretary for War, the same officer suggested that part of the British forces should be transferred from Egypt to Transjordan. The sudden growth of the latter's territory was thought to be a strategically advantageous fact. What is more, the letter suggested that the Gaza region within the Mediterranean would become part of Great Transjordan, as its author phrased it. This suggests that the relocation of the British troops within the area ruled by Abd Allah could be beneficial as far as stabilization of the British army's position is concerned. In a letter dated as of 26 October, 1948, the Office of Commander-in-chief dispatched its own analysis of the issue. The military thought that the conflict could lead to the emergence of the state of Israel which, however, would only embrace Galileah and the coastal plain. Instead, central Palestine, the Negev Desert and the coast of the Mediterranean Sea as far as the city of Majal Madzal would fall into the Arab hands. Even though the plan to divide Palestine that had been adopted by the United Nations gave Negev over to the Jewish state, the British commandship took the inclusion of this strategically important area in the Arab zone for granted. The military assumed also that the areas occupied by the Arabs were going to be united with Transjordan. As far as the issue of the British bases is concerned, the committee of commanders-in-chief essentially supported the position expressed in the letter of Sep-



tember 24. The military judged the transfer of part of the British army from Egypt to Transjordan after the latter's expansion to be a good idea. As for now, however, they had only planned a relocation of some forces to Libya, while their future relocation to the north was to be subject for further considerations (NA.FO 371/68860).

## Conclusion

Basing on those few examples taken primarily from the correspondence of the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one could state that in the years of 1946–1948, that were of utmost importance for the Palestinian issue, the activities of London did not result from a premeditated plan and were, largely, accidental. The British were driven by two contradictory motives. On the one hand, they wanted to get rid of the responsibility for the problem of Palestine, and so they stressed that they would completely evacuate their forces from that colony and would not want to influence its fate any longer. At the same time, part of the British establishment, especially the army, wanted to preserve control at least over a small part of that territory – because of strategic reasons. Transjordan was to be an instrument to fulfill those ambitions, which was a state formally independent but totally dependent on London. However, in the decisive moment the British did not lend Transjordan adequate support. What is more, the correspondence from September of 1948 reveals a picture of considerable incompetence of the British analysts. For unknown reasons the military assumed that the whole Arab part of Palestine would be included in Transjordan. They did not see that there was a crucial controversy between Transjordan and Egypt that had occupied a large part of that area. What is more, they did not notice either that the Israeli side would not be satisfied with the area that it had occupied in September of 1948. Within the subsequent three months, the Israelis beat the Egyptians and occupied Negev. The British analyses pertaining strategic implications of the expansion of Transjordan, between September and October of 1948, proved completely useless. In January of 1949, the collapse of the British strategy made London react in a nervous manner, including threatening Israel with war, which also proved unrealistic because of the support lent to Tel Aviv by the USA. These matters exceed, however, the frames adopted for the present paper. Ultimately, following the analysis of the important issues related to the division of Palestine and

the role that Transjordan played in this process, one must come to the conclusion that the British commanders and civilian officers exhibited then a complete lack of realism.

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