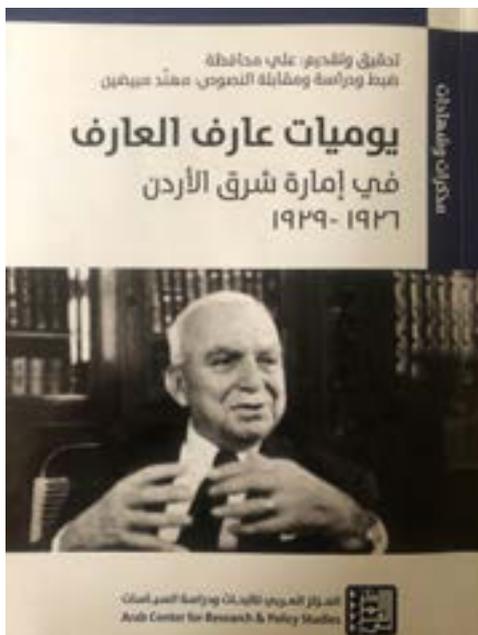


BOOK REVIEWS

Rebel at Night, Colonial Official by Day

Yawmiyat 'Arif al-'Arif fi Amarat Sharq al-'Urdan: 1926–1929 [The Diaries of 'Arif al-'Arif in the Emirate of TransJordan: 1926–1929]. Edited by Ali Muhafadha and Muhannad Mubadin (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha/Beirut, 2021).

Review by Salim Tamari



Abstract

The memoirs of 'Arif al-'Arif in Amman from 1926 to 1929 cover the period when he was secretary to the Ministerial Council, on “loan” from the Mandate authorities. This diary covers the relationship between 'Arif and Prince Abdallah during the formative period of the Jordanian state. It includes his description of the relationship between the British Colonial Office and the Hashemites, as well as a detailed assessment of the early oppositional groups such as Ansar al-Haq (Partisans of Justice) and the mysterious group known as al-Kaff al-Aswad (the black hand). The book dwells extensively on border conflicts with Arab tribes in Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Keywords

'Arif al-'Arif diaries; Prince Abdallah; Transjordan; Hashemites; Partisans of Justice; Black Hand (al-Kaff al-Aswad); Jerusalem education.

In the work of Abdul Rahman Munif, the late Saudi novelist, Amman is singled out as the “only exclusively Arab capital.” The reference here was to the Ottoman outpost built almost from scratch during the Hamidian period on the site of ancient Philadelphia in order to protect the southern flanks of the sultanate. In Munif’s *Sirat Madina*, we encounter a city lacking a “native” community, compared to Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus. A majority of Amman’s citizens were made up, then and now, of immigrants and refugees from neighboring Arab regions; hence its *Arab* identity becomes paramount.¹

This sardonic comment on native Ammanis is highlighted in the recently published memoirs of the historian ‘Arif al-‘Arif covering the years 1926–29 when ‘Arif was “loaned” by the Palestine Mandate government to serve as ministerial secretary to the newly established emirate of Transjordan. His colleagues and companions were predominantly Syrians, Iraqis, Hijazis, and a few fellow Palestinians. ‘Arif’s task in the letter of appointment was vaguely defined as “assisting in the reform of the new principality” (Eric Mills to ‘Arif, 49). At the time, Transjordan was one of five political entities established under Anglo-French suzerainty following the Sykes Picot agreement, and created after the Cairo conference of 1921. Its boundaries were still not fully determined, and one of ‘Arif’s assignments was to help negotiate the constant tribal intrusions from neighboring states into and within the Jordanian domain. Of those, the most serious was the Wahhabi major threat to the stability of Prince Abdallah’s regime, which they saw as a residual remnant of their own struggle with the Hashemites following the expulsion of Sharif Husayn, and his son King ‘Ali of Hijaz in 1926.

‘Arif had left us with three intimate diaries – all unpublished during his lifetime: *The Siberian Diary* covering his incarceration in the Russian war camp in Krasnoyarsk (1915–1917); *The Gaza Diary* (1934–1936) from when he was qaymaqam in Gaza; and the present *Amman Diaries* (1926–1929), by far the most important and of historical relevance since it throws significant light on the genesis of the Jordanian state and its rulers.

Before his Amman appointment, ‘Arif was already an established civil servant in Palestine during the 1920s. Following his incarceration in Siberia as an Ottoman war prisoner (1915–1918), he joined the Arab rebellion in Syria under the leadership of Prince Faysal. On returning to Palestine after the war, he joined the opposition to the military government and to the inclusion of the Balfour Declaration in the terms of the Mandate, editing briefly (with Hasan al-Budayri) the unionist newspaper *Suriyya al-Janubiyya* (Southern Syria). In 1921 he was arrested and charged, together with Hajj Amin al-Husayni, with incitement and sedition during the Nabi Musa clashes, leading to his exile in Transjordan. After being pardoned by the British, ‘Arif returned again to Palestine and was appointed as district governor (qaymaqam) successively in Jenin, Nablus, Bisan, and Jaffa.

The diary is introduced and meticulously annotated by ‘Ali Muhafadha and Muhannad Mubaidin. The latter’s extensive introduction highlights the progression of ‘Arif’s torturous relationship with the emir and his secret involvement with oppositional groups in Jordan – most notably Ansar al-Haq (partisans of justice) party – an offshoot of the Syrian Istiqlal party, and al-Ahd group – an underground military officers’ movement during the Ottoman period.

A striking feature of these memoirs is the persistence of an Ottoman presence in the lives and politics of the Arab East from the post–World War I period, despite the rupture between Sharif Husayn and the Ottoman High Porte during the Arab revolt against Turkey. Virtually all the major political appointments involved figures from the military and political personnel who served during Ottoman rule. Those include

Rashid Talee‘, the first prime minister of Transjordan and former Ottoman governor of Huran, Tripoli, and Ladhikiya; the second prime minister of Jordan ‘Ali Rida Pasha al-Riqabi, a former officer in the Ottoman army; and ‘Arif’s close associate and nemesis, Hasan Khalid Abul Huda, the third prime minister who served in several administrative posts during the reign of Sultan Abd al-Hamid. His father Shaykh Abul Huda al-Sayyadi was the chief counsellor to the High Porte and a leader of the Rifa‘i Sufi movement in the Arab East and Yemen. Many leaders of the oppositional Ansar al-Haq movement in the 1920s were former members of the cultural Arab Muntada in Istanbul, and the clandestine al-Ahd group. ‘Arif himself worked as a translator in the Ottoman foreign ministry and was a lieutenant (*mulazim*) in the Fifth Army when he was captured in the Russian Front in the battle of Erzurum. Several of those leaders, including members of the Hashemite Palace, continued to have properties in Istanbul that they visited periodically. King Talal, Abdallah’s eldest son, we learn from the diaries, spent his last days confined in his Bosphorus mansion. ‘Arif dwells on these connections, as well as their common bonds from the Ottoman period. On a number of occasions Abdallah communicates with ‘Arif in Turkish by phone and in writing, possibly in order to circumvent British eavesdropping (201).

In the memoirs, ‘Arif is engulfed by a love-hate relationship with the emir. He is fascinated by the latter’s literary prowess, his generosity, and his *joie de vivre*. During his first meeting with Abdallah, ‘Arif is welcomed as an exiled patriot from Palestine. “This country has the greatest admiration for you and your past,” he is told by the emir. “We know you from the days when you escaped from English rule in Jerusalem and sought refuge in our midst [in 1919]. Initially you were a Karaki [a refugee in Karak], then you became a Salti [a resident of Salt], and today you are here where you will become Ammani” (62). An important core of the diary is the evolution of ‘Arif’s relationship to the emir, which can be encapsulated in these critical moments of mutual affection and comradery, but eventually an enmity that leads to ‘Arif’s downfall. The emir is described as a master chess player, whose obsession with the game takes precedence over state affairs (110). But ‘Arif is also alienated by the emir’s kowtowing to the British and their dictates when it comes to the terms of the Jordanian-British treaty (147, 186); his silence over the Balfour Declaration (188); his expulsion of Syrian nationalists allied with the Druze leader Sultan al-Atrash who sought refuge in Jordan (224); and the adoption of the British drafted constitutional frame for Transjordan, which ‘Arif considers as a document of “enslavement” (247).

The diary is replete with anecdotes about palace plots and back-stabbing attempts by fellow ministers and former comrades in arms from the Ottoman period. ‘Arif narrates in detail Abdallah’s strained relationship with his brother Prince (later King) Faysal, whom he sees as a less deserving claimant over the crown of Syria, and later to the Iraqi throne. One intriguing episode deals with the education of Abdallah’s sons, Prince Talal and Prince Nayif. The emir complains to ‘Arif that the British keep interfering on how and where Nayif, his favorite son, should be educated. He (the emir) chooses Rawdat al-Ma‘arif college in Jerusalem. The British high commissioner is enraged because Rawdat al-Ma‘arif is known for its radical nationalist curriculum

and decides that Nayif should go to St. George's college (diary entry for 3 December 1926). Since the Qur'an is not taught in St. George's, the commissioner suggests that a private tutor be brought to instruct him in Qur'anic studies (127). The battle over Nayif's schooling continued for two months until they finally reached a compromise by sending him to the Teachers College where Nayif would be under the personal supervision of the principal, Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi (6 January 1926). The emir was still unhappy since he found that the professor of Arabic literature in the Teacher's College was none other than Is'af al-Nashashibi, whom he described as "an atheist, who does not believe in God and the day of Judgement." Furthermore "Nashashibi is pro-Umayyad, and I do not want my son to grow loving the Umayyad dynasty, and opposed to the Hashemites." 'Arif is shocked beyond description – "I said to myself, I would have thought the Emir would oppose his son being exposed to British legal practices, or Zionist propaganda . . . but here he was expressing repulsion at his studying Umayyad history, as if the Umayyads were *kuffar* (unbelievers), and irrelevant to the study of Arab and Islamic history!" (138).

The break with the emir and the government came finally as a result of their adoption of a constitutional draft ("dictated by the high commissioner and the colonial office in London") that 'Arif and Ansar al-Haq described as a "treaty of submission" (246 - 48).

What can this diary tell us about the genesis of the Transjordanian State? The main contours of those formative years have already been covered in Zirikly's *Two Years in Amman 1921–1923*.² In terms of historical analysis, there is not much beyond the material already available from the works of Sulayman Musa, Andrew Shryock, and Joseph Massad.³ 'Arif's diary is an intimate self-reflective record of his public events that was clearly not intended for publication since he kept it under cover for nearly fifty years until his death. It does, however, provide us with original insight into the nature of tribal rivalries within Jordan, and border conflicts with Saudi and Iraqi tribal groups. It also provides a vivid picture of the earliest oppositional groups, such as Ansar al-Haq, that challenged the almost total hegemony of the British colonial apparatus. Of the tribal conflicts, the only successful achievement of 'Arif during his Amman tenure was to oversee the Iraq-Jordanian border tribal conflicts in 1927 involving the Bani Sakhr, Huwaytat, and Zaban on the Jordanian side, and Shammar, Anza, and Daliam tribes on the Iraqi side. Since the underlying conflict was over turf, land control, and grazing rights it was clear that the tribes did not recognize as their own state boundaries what the British established as new demarcations of the colonial state. During the same period, the embryonic state became engulfed with a series of internal violent incidents triggered by "the Black Hand."

With the Black Hand group (*al-Kaff al-Aswad*) we encounter a detective narrative of the first order. During the period of December 1926 to February 1927 a "terrorist group" surfaced in Amman calling for the elimination of those who act contrary to the "will of the people." It carried out a number of bombings in the capital and in the southern towns of Karak and Maan (138–39). A police investigation claimed that the plot had targeted the British high commissioner, the commander of the armed forces,

the prime minister, and the emir himself (140). The “terrorist suspects” according to the police, were headed by Tahir al-Juqqa, head of the Jordanian People’s Party, and the Palestinian journalist Mahmoud al-Karmi, editor of *al-Shri’a* newspaper. Scores of additional oppositional characters were arrested and sent to jail under the charge of terrorism. The government established a committee of enquiry into the activities of the Black Hand headed by the public prosecutor and a number of judges, and included ‘Arif al-‘Arif himself in his capacity as the secretary of the ministerial council. The committee came out with a highly contested report on 4 February 1927, indicating that the Black Hand was a fabricated organization engineered by Shawkat Hamid, the Circassian director of police, and instigated by the British high commissioner in order to suppress nationalist opposition to the British (141). The nationalist suspects were released and the charges against them were dropped, but the suppression of opposition groups continued.

Readers expecting a conceptual paradigm for the genesis of the Jordanian state should be cautioned that this is a diary/memoir and not an analytical treatise. Its material is rich in anecdotal and political gossip, especially on palace intrigues and inter-governmental rivalries. It should be read in tandem with the earlier diaries of Khayr al-Din Zirikly, *Two Years in Amman 1921–1923*, when Zirikly was appointed as the first inspector of education in the nascent state five years earlier. But these memoirs also contain astute observations on the nature of the British colonial strategies in the Arab East during the post-Sykes Picot period, as well as original analysis on one of the earliest oppositional movements in the twentieth century, Ansar al-Haq. ‘Arif considers his own involvement with Ansar al-Haq as his crowning achievement in Jordan, leading to his co-authorship in 1926 of *Al-Kitab al-Aswad* (the black book), which addressed the repression of the oppositional movement in Transjordan and the “pervasive anarchy” in its administrative apparatus. *Al-Kitab al-Aswad* was the collective work of the Ansar al-Haq group that included Salah Bseiso, Rashid al-Khuza’i, ‘Adil al-‘Azmah, Husayn Tarawna, and other former members of al-Istiqlal party. It is noteworthy that members of this nationalist group included native East Jordanians, but also a wide array of Syrians, Iraqis, Hijazis, and Palestinians. ‘Arif himself was the co-author (with Muhammad al-Shurayqi – a Syrian former leader of the Young Arab movement during the Ottoman period). *Al-Kitab al-Aswad* was initially a clandestine manifesto containing an exposé of British rule, but was eventually published in Jerusalem (presumably a tamer version) under the collective authorship of Ansar al-Haq in 1929. ⁴ The manifesto called for an end to corruption and British meddling in the affairs of state – *but significantly not an end to British rule*. It openly called for the abrogation of the British-Jordanian Treaty, and the British-sponsored constitution. The document called for the establishment of a free constituent assembly and parliament that would be elected directly, and for a government accountable to the parliament (246).

Two questions evoked by this diary go unanswered by ‘Arif: First, why would the author be seconded as an advisor to the nascent government of Transjordan when a few years earlier he had been charged with being a subversive nationalist and anti-

colonial outlaw and condemned to life imprisonment? And secondly, how is it possible for the author, after such a radical break with the regime that he considered to be a tool of British colonialism, to go back and serve in its administration as a senior minister and mayor of its major city?

Throughout the diary ‘Arif expresses anguish and self-doubt over his conflicted role as an advisor to the emir, and a member of the ruling elite in Amman. He was often complicit in the duality between his loyalty to the Hashemites (and implicitly to the British *diktat*) and his Arabist affinities to oppositional groups – a situation that he described as “government loyalist during the day, and nationalist rebel at night.” He was finally unable to square the circle and resigned from his mission pressured by both the emir and the British high commissioner, Colonel Cox, in a moment that was most likely triggered by his involvement with Ansar al-Haq. ‘Arif’s later involvement with British rule in Palestine continued to exhibit this Machiavellian conflict in his character, as he continued his public service with the Mandate, as governor of Bir Sab‘a (during the Palestine rebellion), Gaza, and Ramallah. But his relationship with Prince (now King) Abdallah resumed after the war of 1948, when he became mayor of (Arab) Jerusalem and continued in that position until 1955.

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Endnotes

- 1 Abdul Rahman Munif, *Sirat Madina*, published in English as *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman*, (London: Quartet Books, 1988). The reference to Amman in the 1940s as “the only exclusive Arab city” comes from Mu’nis al-Razzaz reading of *Sirat Madina*, and appears in the preface of the Arabic edition. In reviewing the story of Munif’s Amman, Tetz Rooke made a remark about the author that beautifully captures ‘Arif’s relationship to the city in an earlier period. “A twin story about personal growth and development and about urban growth and development about the surrounding city of Amman,” writes Rooke, “the boy-protagonist is depicted at the start of an identity-building process, his creation of himself, and so is the Jordanian capital whose lack of historical roots and quest for identity makes it a perfect metaphor of Arab modernity and uncertainty about belonging.” Tetz Rooke, *In My*
- Childhood: A Study of Arabic Autobiography*, Stockholm Oriental Studies (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1997).
- 2 Khayr al-Din Zirikly, *Two Years in Amman 1921–1923*, Amman, nd.
- 3 Sulayman Musa, *Saf’hat min tarikh al-Urdun al-Hadith: Adwa’ ala al-watha’iq al-Baritaniyya 1946–1952* (Amman: Dar al-Sahafa, 1992); Joseph Andoni Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).
- 4 Ansar al-Haq, *Al-Kitab al-Aswad fil-Qadiyya al-Urduniyya al-Arabiyya* [The black book on the Arab Jordanian cause (Dar al-Aytam al-Islamiyyah, 1929).