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Ronen Yitzhak, *Abdullah al-Tall—Arab Legion Officer: Arab Nationalism and Opposition to the Hashemite Regime*. Portland, OR: Sussex Acad. Press, 2012. Pp. xv, 207. ISBN 978-1-84519-408-6.

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Based on extensive primary research, including material in Israeli and British archives as well as many Arabic-language publications, *Abdullah al-Tall—Arab Legion Officer* provides a useful chronology of its subject's professional career. But it lacks an in-depth analysis of his achievements and failures as a military leader and Arab nationalist. Like many Israeli scholars of the Arab world, Ronen Yitzhak (Western Galilee College) is limited by lack of access to Arab archives and the personal insights gained through interviews with central personalities or family members. By comparison, Jordanian leaders, especially the Hashemites and King Hussein, are more fully fleshed out in the work of Nigel Ashton,¹ who had access to royal archives and key officials.

While Yitzhak notes al-Tall's birth in the opening chapter, the supposed subject of the book then disappears for over a dozen pages, until his family's deep connections to the Jordanian city of Irbid are mentioned. In fact, this is less a biography than a political history of Jordan and an overview of inter-Arab politics from the 1940s to 1970s.

After a cursory summary of the creation and development of the Arab Legion, Yitzhak correctly points out the exaggeration, by interested parties and some historians, of the Arab Legion's contribution to the British victory in Iraq during World War II (18–19). He also recounts in chapter 1 al-Tall's rapid rise within the Legion.

Chapter 2, entitled "Conqueror of Jerusalem," is far the strongest of the book: only here do al-Tall's actions and motivations drive the narrative. Yitzhak is on firm ground describing various battles and both Jordanian and Israeli plans to seize Jerusalem. The absence of maps showing terrain and place names, however, makes it difficult to follow the course of military operations. Yitzhak rightly indicates that the influx of Palestinian refugees from surrounding areas complicated military strategies. Certainly, al-Tall and the Arabs in general blamed Great Britain and the Arab Legion under the direction of Gen. John Bagot Glubb and King Abdullah for Israeli gains during the June 1948 truce; Yitzhak notes that there is some truth to these allegations (54–56). Al-Tall opposed the cease fire and worked to promote Palestinian interests, but was impeded by Abdullah's ambitions and the ongoing rivalry between the king and Mufti Husseini. He was later dismissed as commander of the 6th Regiment of the Arab Legion, probably, Yitzhak notes, owing to his poor relations with Glubb, not King Abdullah.

Yitzhak properly stresses King Abdullah's designs on the parts of Palestine allotted as the Arab state under the 1947 UN partition plan, noting the king's (by now) well documented contacts with key Zionist leaders.² Yitzhak states that Abdullah told Israeli negotiators he would not go to war with the Jews, a claim Moshe Dayan repeated, perhaps based on information he had directly from al-Tall. Most Israeli and Arab historians now believe Abdullah and the Zionists had reached at least a partial agreement about the division of territory but not the matter of Jerusalem. Citing a British intelligence report acquired by Haganah HQ, Yitzhak maintains that Britain agreed to Abdullah's occupying the Arab territories of the partition plan (35). Indeed, he uses Haganah and other Israeli materials to show that Zionists and later the state of Israel had extensive intelligence on the ground as well as access to secret agreements and reports, not only in British circles but also in neighboring Arab states. Although Yitzhak references Haganah documents containing

1. *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2008)—not cited by Yitzhak.

2. See, e.g., Mary C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain, and the Making of Jordan* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1987) and Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1988).

British and Arab secret materials, he does not explain how Israeli officials, even at this early stage of the conflict, came to possess these classified materials. This would make a fascinating topic for a future study.

Yitzhak's accounts of meetings between al-Tall and various Israeli negotiators during and after the 1948 war are very informative. At this time, Israeli leaders and journalists generally respected al-Tall and his abilities. Complicating al-Tall's efforts to maximize Arab holdings in Palestine, especially Jerusalem, were inter-Arab rivalries, King Abdullah's ambitions, and Israeli military superiority, which both the king and Glubb recognized (71). After the war, al-Tall's continued opposition to the British and fraught relationship with the monarchy led to his removal as governor of Jerusalem and relocation to London—an instance of a well-known practice of regimes wishing to distance potential rivals from the center of power.

Rejecting this "promotion," al-Tall moved to Cairo and established contacts with Arab nationalists. He became increasingly disenchanted with King Abdullah's regime. Yitzhak examines his involvement in the king's death in chapter 3, alleging that King Farouk, a longtime rival of Abdullah, financed the assassination. The Egyptian government then refused the Jordanian request for the extradition of al-Tall. Yitzhak reviews the documents presented when suspects were tried, some in absentia, for the murder, but he does not fully describe or document the extent of al-Tall's participation.

Chapter 4 describes al-Tall's exile in Egypt and eventual return to Jordan. Although he was a well-known supporter of secular Arab nationalism, championed by Gamal Abdel Nasser, Yitzhak concentrates instead on inter-Arab enmities during the "Arab Cold War."³ Underestimating the depth of those feelings, Yitzhak erroneously concludes that the Arabs missed a chance to unify when Israel moved to divert Jordan River waters in the mid-1960s (140). The low-level warfare between conservatives and so-called revolutionary leaders made any such union of all the Arab states an impossibility.

Yitzhak's discussion of al-Tall's relations with Algerian leaders is sketchy. Curiously, he calls the Algerian struggle for independence a revolt or rebellion, not a revolution, even though the conflict is universally accepted as such. After independence, al-Tall visited Algeria and was given a diplomatic passport (131), a clear sign of the Algerians' gratitude for his contributions and perhaps of solidarity with the Palestinian cause that was so dear to his heart. Similarly, Yitzhak treats only in passing al-Tall's meetings with the founders of Fatah, including Yasir Arafat, with no explanation of how they may have affected the politics and actions of either side.

The book does, however, have an entire section on al-Tall's patently anti-Semitic writings between 1959 and 1970. In a balanced assessment, Yitzhak posits that, although these may have originated in his contacts with anti-Semitic British officers during his time in the Arab Legion, they likelier resulted from his association in Egypt with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, scholars at al-Azhar University, and supporters of the Mufti, whose anti-Semitism is well documented. Yitzhak overstates the case in calling anti-Semitism among the Egyptian populace "commonplace" (133). Although pro-Nazi sentiments were pervasive in Egypt before and during World War II, they stemmed more from hostility to British imperialism than any actual belief in National Socialist racial theories. It was a case of thinking "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Yitzhak only touches on King Hussein's pardon of al-Tall and his return to Jordan in the 1960s; nor does he elaborate on his life there or his activities, for example, during the 1967 war or the emergence of the PLO as a major factor in Jordanian politics. He does note the king's appointment of al-Tall to the Jordanian parliament after the Black September faction of the PLO assassinated his cousin, Prime Minister Wasfi al-Tall, a major figure in Jordan's military offensive against the PLO in September 1970. But he does not discuss the motivations for the appointment or the policies al-Tall supported.

Neither a biography nor a military history, Yitzhak's book is not a comprehensive study of Abdullah al-Tall's life and accomplishments. A standard reference work⁴ gives almost as much detail on the man in

3. See Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed. (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1971)—not cited by Yitzhak.

4. Yaacov Shimoni, *The Biographical Dictionary of the Middle East* (NY: Facts on File, 1991).

one paragraph as does this entire volume. Yitzhak concludes with the contradictory assertion that al-Tall “pioneered revolutionary activities” but perhaps was “not a true revolutionary” (150). It is difficult to identify his target audience: experts will know that other studies address more extensively the material he covers, while students and general readers will find his narrative far too dense.⁵

5. In addition, Israeli usages sometimes yield peculiar, if not grating, references. We read, for example, that Sherif Hussein is buried not on the Haram al Sherif but on the Temple Mount, a linguistic gaffe that would make the Sherif spin in his grave.