

Yoav Alon

The Shaykh of Shaykhs. Mithqal al-Fayiz and Tribal Leadership in Modern Jordan.

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Any academic researcher studying Jordan will, sooner or later, be confronted with the importance of tribes in the Hashemite kingdom. Whether it is the huge photographs of King ‘Abdallāh II (r. 1999-) in tribal dress displayed throughout Amman, the tribal role in mediating disputes, the same names of tribal representatives that keep popping up in the powerful circle of officials surrounding the king, or the page-long newspaper articles showing tribal support for the regime’s policies, the message is clear: tribes in Jordan are important. Throughout the past few decades, some excellent books have been published about this phenomenon, including by Eugene Rogan, Andrew Shryock and Yoav Alon.¹ Alon, a senior lecturer in Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University, has now added another volume to this body of work with this fascinating biography of Mithqāl al-Fāyiz (d. 1967), a prominent tribal leader of the Banī Sakhr, one of the numerically biggest tribes in Jordan.

Alon starts *The Shaykh of Shaykhs* by painting a vivid portrait of the tribal origins of Mithqāl and the context in which he grew up, which was characterised by the cultivation of land, camel herding, a nomadic lifestyle and often strategic marriages within the tribe or with daughters of prominent members of other tribes. Alon pays special attention to tribal customs and traditions (e.g., hospitality, generosity, frequent military raids on other tribes, and courage on the battlefield), but he also notes that Mithqāl, like so many other tribal shaykhs, was illiterate throughout his life (p. 25).

Chapter 2 deals with Mithqāl’s jockeying for position with the Ottoman authorities of his time and his constant confrontations with the empire’s desire to centralise power at the expense of tribal autonomy. Interestingly, Mithqāl frequently came out on top in these political conflicts and, indeed, *The Shaykh of Shaykhs* shows how he – albeit through ups and downs – was repeatedly able to adapt to changing circumstances and secure money, influence and power for himself and his tribe. This chapter also shows how Mithqāl used his cunning to stand out on the basis of his personal qualities and how he was able and willing to play his opponents off against each other.

¹ Yoav Alon, *The Making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism and the Modern State* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

As Chapter 3 shows, Mithqāl applied this strategy both to the British colonial powers in Transjordan and also to the emir of the latter, ‘Abdallāh b. Husayn (d. 1951), eventually rising to the position of Shaykh of Shaykhs of the Banī Sakhr in 1921. In his rise to power, he frequently outwitted the British (or at least frustrated their plans) and laid the basis for a lasting alliance with ‘Abdallāh and the Hashemite royal family. This relationship between Mithqāl and the emir was beneficial to both, with the former providing crucial support (both political and military) to ‘Abdallāh, and the latter rewarding the shaykh with land, status and gifts. These made Mithqāl not only quite rich but also, perhaps, more powerful than the emir himself.

The wealth acquired by Mithqāl was not the result of greed or financial ambitions, but was needed to maintain his leadership position, both within the tribe itself and vis-à-vis other actors in the country and region. An important part of this had to do with Mithqāl’s shaykhly duties, including displaying great hospitality to visitors or people who asked for his protection, being exceedingly generous to guests and generally making sure that the members of his tribe were cared for. This set of tribal customs and duties is the subject of Chapter 4, in which Alon delves into subjects such as daily life among the tribes; Mithqāl’s marriages; food and rituals; quarrels between spouses; and even the shaykh’s hair. Particularly interesting are the pages Alon dedicates to the raids led by Mithqāl, which relate fascinating eyewitness accounts of certain battles.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the increasing pressure Mithqāl felt from economic crisis and the British colonial authorities, who tried to limit his influence and power. British policies at the time came at the expense of all tribes, not just the Banī Sakhr, but Mithqāl managed to survive the crisis better than most. This had to do not just with his close relations with Emir ‘Abdallāh but also with his willingness to seek a new patron by reaching out to Zionist Jews in neighbouring Palestine. Although this may sound surprising for a man who is hailed as a champion of Palestinian and Arab rights in today’s Jordan, to Mithqāl, who had no particularly nationalist ideals at that time, “this made perfect sense; it was pure business, and based on practical considerations” (p. 122). This same attitude, which was primarily focused on self-preservation and the perpetuation of his own status and that of his tribe, allowed him to support Palestinian nationalism later in life.

Chapter 6 focuses on the transition from the Emirate to the Kingdom of Transjordan in the 1940s. Although Mithqāl initially had difficulty dealing with some of the developments taking place in this period, he eventually regained his power and successfully transformed himself and, increasingly, his son ‘Ākif (1922-1998) into modern leaders of the Banī Sakhr. This process entailed

focusing increasingly on parliamentary politics rather than on tribal raids, and caused several of Mithqāl's descendants to become prominent politicians during his life, but also after his death in 1967.

Alon has done an outstanding job with this book. His highly detailed analysis of the career of one tribal shaykh is based on a wide range of sources, including archives in several countries, the writings of contemporary visitors to Mithqāl's camp, oral history, fieldwork and local periodicals. The result is a nuanced and dynamic account of the shaykh's life. While one could, perhaps, describe the book as somewhat sympathetic to Mithqāl, it is certainly not uncritical and does not shy away from mentioning the shaykh's failed endeavours. In doing so, it provides an account of tribal life in Jordan through the prism of the life of one of its chief protagonists. It is an account that is sometimes amusing and sometimes surprising, but always fascinating. The many anecdotes with which Alon peppers the story make this book a joy to read. In fact, while this is a book that will certainly offer a lot of new information to scholars of Jordanian tribal life, it is written in a very accessible way and I, for one, greatly enjoyed reading it. Finally, through the study of Mithqāl's life and career, Alon also provides insight into Jordanian politics and helps his readers better understand today's situation in the kingdom. For all these reasons, this book is highly recommended to specialists and non-specialists alike.

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