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Jordan at the Turn of the 18th–19th Centuries: Napoleon and the Wahhabis

This article will focus on the impact that Napoleon's military campaign in Palestine in 1799 had on Jordan, and then on the First Sa'udi State's presence in southern Jordan between 1802 and 1811–1812.

Napoleon's Campaign in 1799

Napoleon, with a French army numbering 30,000 troops, invaded Egypt in 1798 and ruled the country for three years up to their defeat by the British in 1801. The French troops landed in Alexandria on 1 July 1798, Napoleon left to return to France on 23 August 1799, and the remaining French troops surrendered to the British on 2 September 1801. The British, for their part, did not attempt to establish permanent rule in Egypt; rather they evacuated Egypt in March 1803, leaving anarchy in Egypt until Muhammad 'Ali Pasha consolidated his power in mid-1805.

Part of the French campaign in Egypt involved an unsuccessful invasion of Palestine in the first half of 1799. Napoleon

invaded with an army of some 13,000 troops on a campaign that lasted four months. Napoleon left Cairo on 10 February 1799 (Berthier 1799: 29), when the initial fighting of the campaign at el-Arish was already underway, and started the siege of Acre on 20 March. Napoleon abandoned the siege of Acre on 21 May and arrived back in Cairo on 14 June. During that campaign no French troops reached the territory of modern-day Jordan. The closest that any French troops seem to have got was around the south end of the Sea of Galilee in the aftermath of the Battle of Esdraelon/Mount Tabor on 16 April 1799 (Berthier 1799: 57).

No fighting took place in Jordan, and the four-month duration of the campaign was not long enough for most people in Jordan to be forced to take sides. However, the Beni Sakhr were among those who fought against the French at the Battle of Esdraelon/Mount Tabor on 16 April 1799 (Peake 1958: 88).

Tribes in Palestine, however, were more directly involved. Seetzen recorded one

manifestation of that tribal involvement that had an impact on Jordan (1854: II 322; note that all translations of Seetzen are mine):

At the time of the French invasion of Syria, the Bedouins on the west side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan had gone into the field against the French and had left their families behind without protection. So the Ḥajāya and a number of other Bedouins on the east side used this good opportunity to satisfy their desire for raiding and made an incursion into Palestine, plundered the Greek monastery of Mar Saba in the desert and prowled up to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Htém, who were responsible for protecting that monastery, took this every ill and plotted revenge. They made a foray into the territory of the Ḥajāya, attacked a number of encampments, and the cruel Negros spared neither woman nor child. Thus it was easy to understand that the Ḥajāya so treated thought of blood revenge.

While those Bedouin opposed the French invasion, a tribe in the Sinai took the side of the French, as noted by Seetzen (1854: III 49).

When Seetzen (1854: I 423) was in al-Karak at the end of March 1806, he remarked that “many occasional poems and songs were circulating about Bonaparte, but very little written.” Why those poems and songs were not written down can be accounted for by another quote of Seetzen (1854: I 404) from when he was in as-Şalt in mid-March 1806:

The present Schemmâs (his name on the poem) is an Arab bard. I got from him a poem that he had made about Bonaparte’s invasion in Egypt and Syria. He sang another poem that was by him and contained a

call to the Christians of this region to quickly place themselves at the service of Bonaparte. But it was written very flowery, so that the Muslims or al-Muahadin could not understand the sense.

Not wanting the Muslims to understand the content can be seen as prudence on the part of the poet. Any call by Christians in Jordan to support the French invaders would have been an act of rebellion against the Ottomans and their regional rulers like Ahmad al-Jazzar. So, if the French invasion were to fail, as indeed happened, the Christians could expect to face the consequences of their disloyalty. But by not writing the poems down, or writing them in a flowery style that the Muslims could not understand, the Christians were careful not to provide the Ottoman authorities with written evidence of their disloyalty.

That the Christians in Jordan could be seen as potential allies of the French is evident from an observation of Irby and Mangles, who spent a week in al-Karak in 1818 (1823: 368). “It was said that at the time of the French invasion in 1799, there was a project for disarming the Christians and driving them out, which the present *sheikh* prevented.” They also noted that “There are about as many Christian inhabitants in Kerek as Turks” (1823: 368).

One case of local Christians assisting Napoleon is known: “Buonoparte was informed by the Christians of Damas, that a considerable force” was on its way to attack the French forces (Berthier 1799: 49). That was the force that Napoleon defeated at the Battle of Mount Tabor on 16 April 1799.

The French invasion of Egypt in 1798 had prompted rioting in Damascus, until Ahmad al-Jazzar, the governor of Sidon and former governor of Damascus, was reappointed governor of Damascus at the end of 1798 and suppressed the rioting. Shortly after the French retreat from Acre in

May 1799, Ahmad al-Jazzar was replaced as governor of Damascus by ‘Abd Allah Pasha, but Ahmad al-Jazzar remained governor of Sidon and was reappointed governor of Damascus in late 1803 after the pilgrimage led by ‘Abd Allah Pasha in March-April.

At the time, there was no effective Ottoman administration in Jordan. The presence of the Ottoman government was restricted to ensuring that the *Hajj* pilgrimage caravan from Damascus could safely proceed south through Jordan to the Hijaz and that the *Hajj* caravan from Egypt could safely cross the Sinai Peninsula to ‘Aqaba and then south to the Hijaz.

I have found no report about the impact that Napoleon’s campaign in Palestine had on the *Hajj* pilgrimage caravan from Damascus, but I assume that it was cancelled. The 10th of *Dhu al-Hijjah* 1213 was 15 May 1799, in the last week of the siege of Acre, and the pilgrimage caravan would have needed to set out from Damascus a few days before the Battle of Mount Tabor on 16 April and would have still been in northern Jordan at the time of the battle. I also assume that there were no other pilgrims from Palestine who would have gone in the usual pilgrim caravan from Jerusalem and Hebron to al-Karak and then south to the Hijaz, while the Egyptian pilgrim caravan across the Sinai Peninsula to ‘Aqaba and then south surely was cancelled that year as well. The disruption of the pilgrimage from Syria-Palestine would have impacted the population along the pilgrimage route who sold supplies to the pilgrims, especially in Ma‘ān, as noted below for the Wahhabi disruption of the Syrian pilgrimage caravan.

The disruption that Napoleon’s campaign in Palestine had, however, was short-term. Ahmad al-Jazzar, the Ottoman governor of Sidon and Damascus, based in Acre, remained in power until his death in May 1804, when he was succeeded by Sulayman Pasha. The situation in Egypt, however, did not begin to stabilize until May

1805 when Muhammad ‘Ali consolidated his rule.

The Wahhabis and the First Sa‘udi State

In the meantime, in the early 19th century, the Wahhabis in Arabia played a major role in southern Jordan. The puritanical religious leader Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud in 1744, establishing the First Saudi State—the Emirate of Diriyah—that lasted until 1818. Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud died in 1765, and his son ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud succeeded him. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ruled until he died in November 1803. His successor Sa‘ud ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud then ruled from 1803 to 1814, and his successor ‘Abd Allah ibn Sa‘ud ruled from 1814 to 1818. Muhammad ‘Ali, the ruler of Egypt, invaded the Hijaz in 1811–1812 to defeat the Sa‘udis and his son, Ibrahim Pasha, took over the campaign in 1817 and captured Diriyah in 1818, ending the first Saudi state.

‘Abd al-‘Aziz ruled starting in 1765 but only at the end of his reign in the early 19th century did the Wahhabis begin raiding aggressively outside of the Arabian Peninsula, starting with the sack in 1801 and 1802 of the Shi‘ite centers in Iraq of Karbala, where Husayn the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad had been martyred in 680, and Najaf, where ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib had been buried in 661.

The Hijaz and other parts of Arabia had been ruled as part of the larger Ayyubid and Mamluk states centered in Egypt for centuries, continued by the Ottomans. So, it can hardly be a coincidence that the Wahhabis began their long-range raiding in 1801–1802, at a time when anarchy in Egypt was at its worst, and that after the Egyptians reestablished a stable government in 1805, they were able to reassert their rule over the Hijaz, by invading the Hijaz in 1811–1812 and putting an end to the First Sa‘udi State

in 1818. So only in that ten-year period from 1802 to 1811–1812 were the Wahhabis in a position to rule the Hijaz and undertake raids outside Arabia free from Egyptian control.

Disruption of the *Hajj* Pilgrimage Caravan from Damascus

The Syrian *Hajj* caravan, with tens of thousands of pilgrims, was always subject to attack by Bedouin along their way from Damascus south to the Hijaz, so the safety of the caravan was a primary concern of the Ottoman authorities, who needed to organize a military escort for the pilgrim caravan (Barbir 1980: 167–77, 200–1; Peters 1994b: 145–62). The Bedouin attack on the Syrian caravan in 1757, for example, was catastrophic (Peters 1994b: 161–2). The Wahhabis were also prone to attack the *Hajj* caravan; in 1786 Ahmad al-Jazzar was successful in organizing effective protection against the Wahhabi attacks (Cohen 1973: 71). Burckhardt, however, remarked that prior to the Wahhabi takeover of the Hijaz the pilgrim-caravans passed from Damascus, Baghdad, and Egypt without any molestation through Wahhabi territory (1831: II 181, 191).

But the Wahhabi takeover of the Hijaz changed the political balance between them, the Ottomans, and the Hashemite Sharif of Mecca. The Wahhabis captured Mecca in 1803 and Medina in 1804; however, they failed to capture Jeddah in 1803, which remained under the control of an Ottoman governor. The Wahhabi takeover soon led to awkward confrontations with the annual Syrian pilgrimage caravan, as the Wahhabis attempted to block the pilgrimage caravan from coming due to ideological reasons (Corancez 1810: ch. 9 66–82, ch. 11 92–104).

In 1803 ‘Abd Allah Pasha was the leader (*amir al-hajj*) of the pilgrimage caravan from Damascus, and when the pilgrims arrived in the Hijaz, the Wahhabis leveled onerous taxes, and an armed confrontation ensued

in which 150 Wahhabis were killed. But the Wahhabis did allow the pilgrims to perform the *Hajj* rituals (Corancez 1810: 32–33; Peters 1994a: 302; 1994b: 200–1).

Although Burckhardt (1831: II 192, see 102) wrote that “The Syrian caravan performed its pilgrimage for the last time in 1802,” Syrian pilgrims were still able to come for a few more years (TABLE 1). In 1804 the Ottoman had to pay heavy tolls to the Wahhabis, but the pilgrims in the caravan were allowed to perform the *Hajj* rituals (Corancez 1810: 74–7). In 1805 the Syrian caravan was allowed to come, but only after paying high tolls, with Ottomans paying more than Arabs (Corancez 1810: 74, 92–3; Peters 1994a: 302 emends the date to 1803). The Wahhabis informed the Ottoman commander of the caravan that the caravan would not be allowed to come the next year. As Ali Bey al-Abbassi put it (1816: II 135–6; Peters 1994a: 303):

The great caravan from Damascus in 1805 could not obtain a passage but by heavy sacrifices, and Sa‘ud signified to the Pasha of Damascus, the Amir al-Hajj or Prince of the Pilgrims, that this caravan should no longer come under the protection of the Turks, or bring the rich carpet that the Grand Seignior sends every year to cover the sepulcher of the Prophet, a thing looked upon as a great sin by the Wahhabis. In short, he required that the whole caravan should be composed absolutely of pilgrims alone, without troops, arms, flags, or any trophies or ornaments, and without music or women.

In 1806 the Syrian caravan came as usual, anyway, but the Wahhabis blocked the *Hajj* caravan outside of Medina from proceeding any further, so that the pilgrims were not able to perform the *Hajj* rituals. As Ali Bey al-Abbassi described it (1816: II 135–6; Peters 1994a: 303):

Table 1. The Date of the Pilgrimage to Mecca (10 Dhu al-Hijjah) 1213/1799–1233/1818.

1213	15 May 1799
1214	5 May 1800
1215	24 April 1801
1216	13 April 1802
1217	3 April 1803
1218	22 March 1804
1219	12 March 1805
1220	1 March 1806
1221	18 February 1807
1222	8 February 1808
1223	27 January 1809
1224	16 January 1810
1225	6 January 1811
1226	26 December 1811
1227	15 December 1812
1228	4 December 1813
1229	23 November 1814
1230	13 November 1815
1231	1 November 1815
1232	21 October 1817
1233	11 October 1818

Notwithstanding this declaration of Sa'ud, the caravan of Damascus wished to make the pilgrimage in the following year, 1806, without strictly conforming to the ordinances of the conqueror; but it had hardly arrived at the gates of Medina when it was obliged to retire in disorder, persecuted and annoyed by the Wahhabis, who occupied the city and its neighborhood.

In 1807 the requirement that the pilgrims accept the Wahhabi standards of behavior discouraged many prospective pilgrims from coming (Corancez 1810: 132; Peters 1994a: 305). But the Damascus pilgrimage caravan again came as usual,

only to be stopped before reaching Medina, so that the pilgrims were unable to perform the *Hajj* rituals. As Seetzen mentioned in March 1807, when he was in Beersheba (1854: III 33–4):

In the afternoon a Greek Christian came back with a small caravan from Maân, which had brought food and other needs and trade goods for the returning pilgrim caravan. He told us that the inhabitants of Maân and the entire region trembled due to the Wuhabis, who he called Muháby, and confirmed the news that Abdallah Pasha of Damascus had to withdraw again from the vicinity of Medina, leaving things unperformed.

For the pilgrimage in 1808, the pilgrimage caravan was on a much-reduced level as it left Damascus on 30 December 1807. Corancez (1810: 132) give the figure of 350 pilgrims. The coverage by Corancez stops in 1808, so for the pilgrimages of 1809, 1810, and twice in 1811, I have not found any explicit statement about whether the Syrian caravan came or was cancelled, beyond Burkhardt's report about the Barbary pilgrims who were permitted by the Wahabi chief to perform their pilgrimage in 1810 and 1811 and return via Ma'ân and ash-Shawbak to Hebron, Jerusalem, and Yaffa (1822: 437, see below). Seemingly other pilgrims were not able to do the same, an indication that none tried to come via the Syrian pilgrimage route.

But the Wahhabis were not the only obstacle to the pilgrimage caravans. Another threat was the Omran tribe on the Red Sea coast. As Burckhardt wrote (1831: II 9):

They inhabit the mountains between Akaba and Moeyleh, on the eastern coast of the Red Sea. The Omran are a strong tribe of very independent spirit. Their frequent depredations

render them objects of terror to the pilgrims proceeding to Mekka, who are under the necessity of passing through their territory. At the time when Mohammad Aly, Pasha of Egypt, had reduced all other Bedouins on the Egyptian Hadj road to complete subjection, the Omran still proved obstinate. In the year 1814 they attacked and plundered a detachment of Turkish cavalry near Akaba; and in 1815 they pillaged the whole advanced corps of the Syrian pilgrimage caravan, on their return from Medinah to Damascus.

Elsewhere, Burckhardt identified all the tribes southward of Akaba al-Shámy (Fassu'a), along the Syrian *Hajj* route that went east of the port of 'Aqaba, to Medinah as Wahhabis, "continuing to profess themselves such even after the campaign of Mohammad Aly Pasha against these sectarians" (1831: II 25).

Another non-Wahhabi threat was the *El 'Owf*, enterprising robbers between Mecca and Medina who were never completely subjugated by the Wahhabis and who in parties of 300 or 400 men would carry off by night valuable loads out of the midst of the encampments of the *Hajj* and cut off stragglers (Burckhardt 1831: II 35–6).

The blockage of the Ottoman *Hajj* caravan from Damascus did not mean a larger disruption in the *Hajj* pilgrimage, since pilgrims could come by sea via the port of Jeddah, or overland by other routes, as during the pilgrimage of January–February 1807, although the ongoing Napoleonic Wars in Europe that paralyzed the commerce of the East and the revolutions in Egypt after Napoleon adversely impacted the wellbeing of the population of Jeddah (Ali Bey al-Abbassi 1816: II 52).

The blockage of the *Hajj* caravan from Damascus, however, had an direct impact on the livelihoods of the populations along

the route, as in Ma'án, who depended on trade with the pilgrims. When Wallin passed through in 1845, he emphasized the importance of trading during the four days a year that the Syrian *Hajj* caravan was in Ma'án for the wellbeing of the population of some 200 families for the rest of the year (1854: 121–4). Burckhardt, who passed through Ma'án in 1812 also wrote about the impact that the blockage of the Syrian pilgrimage caravan had on Ma'án (1822: 437):

Maan is situated in the midst of a rocky country, not capable of cultivation; the inhabitants therefore depend upon their neighbours of Djebal and Shera for their provision of wheat and barley. At present, owing to the discontinuance of the Syrian Hadj, they are scarcely able to obtain money to purchase it. Many of them have commenced pedlers among the Bedouins, and fabricators of different articles for their use, especially sheep-skin furs, while others have emigrated to Tafyle and Kerek. The Barbary pilgrims who were permitted by the Wahabi chief to perform their pilgrimage in 1810, and 1811, returned from Medina by way of Maan and Shobak to Hebron, Jerusalem, and Yaffa, where they embarked for their own country, having taken this circuitous route on account of the hostile demonstrations of Mohammad Ali Pasha on the Egyptian road. Several thousands of them died of fatigue before they reached Maan. The people of this town derived large profits from the survivors, and for the transport of their effects; but it is probable that if the Syrian Hadj is not soon reestablished, the place will in a few years be abandoned.

Elsewhere (1822: 404–5) Burckhardt

mentioned that the inhabitants of Ṭāfila “supply the Syrian *Hadj* with a great quantity of provisions, which they sell to the caravan at the castle El Ahsa,” but that “It is much to be doubted whether the peasants of Djebal and Shera will be able to continue their field-labour, if the Syrian pilgrim caravan be not soon re-established.”

The Wahhabis blocking the Syrian pilgrimage caravan led to the Ottomans supporting Muhammad ‘Ali, the ruler of Egypt, in invading the Hijaz in 1811–1812. The Egyptians took Medina in October 1812 and Mecca in January 1813. Ibrahim Pasha took over the campaign in 1817 and captured Diriyah in 1818, resulting in the end of the first Saudi state.

Sa‘ud ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, the ruler from 1803 to 1814, had tried unsuccessfully to stop his followers from trading with Syria and Iraq. As Burkhardt put it (1831: II 141),

... Saoud found it necessary to relax his severity on that subject. He even tacitly connived, in the last period of the Syrian hadj, at his Arabs transporting provisions for the caravans, and took himself one dollar for every camel, belonging to his people, so employed; but except in this carrying business of the hadj, he never would allow any of his Arabs to trade with Syria or Baghdad until after 1810, when the Egyptian expedition began.

Wahhabi Control of Southern Jordan

In addition to disrupting the *Hajj* caravan from Damascus, between 1802 and the Egyptian invasion in 1811–1812, the Wahhabis expanded their political control into southern Jordan and beyond. Details are scarce and come mostly from the observations of Western travelers, notably Jasper Ulrich Seetzen, John Lewis Burckhardt, and Charles Irby and James Mangles.

The Wahhabis raided far afield into

Iraq and Syria, including a raid in 1810 to Damascus and the Hauran with about 6,000 men that led to the sack of 35 villages (Burchkhardt 1831: II 164, 170, 209–10). But their longer-distance raids were for the sake of plunder rather than to extend their dominions, as Burckhardt stated (1831: II 166). The Wahhabis may have found some supporters in Damascus and the region (El-Abbassi 1816: II 322–3), but the Ottoman governors ruling as far south as Hebron, were in a position to keep the Wahhabis from doing anything beyond raiding.

But in southern Jordan the Wahhabi presence was more substantial. The clearest evidence for the Wahhabi presence is their collection of tribute from the Bedouin tribes. As Seetzen, who in January 1807 spent the night in a Beni Sakhr encampment in the area below Ḥisbān, remarked (1854: II 323):

The conversation among other things turned to the new sect of the Wuhāby: the numerous tribe of the Beni Szácher and the far more numerous one of the Ánäséh are already for some years tributary to the current caliphs of the founder of the religion. However, this year the collector of this tribute (el Síka) had not arrived, for which no one could give a reason. From the utterances of our hosts, I concluded that they were very opposed to this new, previously unknown imposition.

Seetzen also remarked in March 1807 (1854 III 9–10) that the *Ḥuweīṭat* a year and a half ago (so Fall 1805) were compelled to pay the ruler in Najd the *Suqea* tax. They joined the other tribes in Jabal (the region around Ṭāfila) and Jabal al-Sharah (the region around Wādī Mūsā) in military action against them, but Seetzen thought that would be in vain—that all tribes from Hedjaz to Damascus will pay tribute to Wahhabis. The center of the *Ḥuweīṭat* is

around Ma'ān, but up to al-Karak and south of Hebron.

But how effectively the Wahhabis were able to collect that tribute is questionable. Charles Irby and James Mangles, who spent a week in al-Karak in 1818 reported about the Wahhabis (1832: 366):

It appears that the Wahabees made an attempt on Kerek, and were encamped for several days on the heights south of the town; one of them was sent in to parley, and the inhabitants boast of having killed about forty of them, from the loop holes of the castle, with their muskets.

Another quote from Irby and Mangles (1832: 369), however, gives another picture: "Here [just west of al-Karak] we were joined by an Arab from Djebel who had been forced away by the Wahabees, and had lived and served with them; almost all his fellow-townsmen had been put to death."

In 1808 al-Karak came under the nominal control of the Wahhabis, as Burckhardt noted (1822: 387–8), but the Wahhabis never exercised direct control in the area and did not collect taxes (Gubser 1985: 16).

The Wahhabis may have claimed the nominal allegiance of the population, but much of the local population may not have approved of Wahhabi ideology, as suggested by such quotes as that of Seetzen, when he was in Beersheva in March 1807 (1854: III 33–4):

The Wuhabisten are said to maintain very strongly the prohibition against smoking tobacco, and a while ago their leader had a tobacco dealer seized and burned next to his tobacco. Although smoking tobacco certainly belongs to the most ridiculous customs that were ever conceived by the human race, one should have to admit that

such a punishment was too hard and cruel. Ignoring the threatening danger, many are so very used to it, that they are not able to completely give it up. Meanwhile they smoke in secret and use for that only the pipe heads, as I noticed among the Huethât. Some affirm that the short confession of belief of the Wuhabis consists of the following: "I believe in the one God and in Mohammed, the servant of the one sent of God, who was born and died." Often the conversation of the local Bedouins turned to this topic, and Wuhâb's reformation of Islam sometimes found its secret defenders. Basically, it can be indifferent to the Bedouin, whether they confess to this or that sect, because they care little or nothing for religion, and only bear the name of Mohammedans.

The Wahhabi presence in southern Jordan may also have affected the remnant Christian population. When Burckhardt passed through Petra in 1812, he remarked about the now abandoned village of Badabde near Wādī Mūsā that "It was inhabited till within a few years by about twenty families of Greek Christians who subsequently retired to Kerek" (1822: 420). That abandoned village can be identified as Dibdibah (MEGA Jordan site 12446), some six km north of Wādī Mūsā and two and a half km east of Bayḍā. Reading between the lines, one can plausibly attribute the decision of the Christians of Badabde to leave for the safety of al-Karak, where Christians were concentrated, to the Wahhabi presence.

Musil, who visited Petra between 1896 and 1902, also recorded a story about a Christian clan living in Wu'eira who left at some unspecified time due to Arab pressure (Musil 1908: 58). That decision to leave could conceivably also have been due to the Wahhabis taking over the region nearly a century before Musil's time.

The Aftermath of the Wahhabis

A Wahhabi presence in southern Jordan would have collapsed as a result of the Egyptian invasion of the Hijaz starting in 1811–1812 led by Muhammad ‘Ali and his son Ibrahim Pasha. The Ottoman governors of Damascus would have been able to reestablish their authority, which largely consisted in establishing relations with the Bedouin tribes to insuring the safe passage of the *Hajj* caravans from Egypt and Syria. Only with the Egyptian takeover by Muhammad ‘Ali and Ibrahim Pasha between 1830 and 1840, followed by the Ottoman recovery in the *Tanzimat* period, would a new phase of stronger government authority in Jordan begin.

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