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The Struggle for Jordan

Bein Yarden Lefalastin: Biografia Politit Shel Wasfi al-Tall [Between Jordan and Palestine: A Political Biography of Wasfi al-Tall], by Asher Susser. Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuhad, 1983. 227 pages, n.p.

Reviewed by **Avi Shlaim**¹

Since 'Abdallah, the grandfather of King Hussein, gained control over the West Bank, relations between the Jordanian regime and the large Palestinian population that was joined to the kingdom, have been filled with difficulties, conflicts, and political confrontations. Mutual suspicion regarding the long-term objectives of the two sides continues to characterize the relations between Jordan and the PLO until the present. All along the road, each of the two sides strove to settle the fate of the Jordanian-Palestinian entity on both sides of the Jordan and to ensure its own superiority within it. At different times, and in the light of changing circumstances and constraints, the two sides reached a certain degree of understanding between themselves. But even when the relations assumed a more cooperative form, the basic conflict between the interests of the two sides remained.

The relationship between the Hashemite regime and the Palestinian popula-

tion in Jordan is thus a key issue in the political history of the country. In the book under review, Asher Susser examines this question in its critical years—from the beginning of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s—through a political biography of a prominent Jordanian figure, Wasfi al-Tall. In the Jordanian-Palestinian confrontation, it is difficult to point to a more central figure than Wasfi al-Tall, whose political career was involved from beginning to end in the Palestinian saga and its repercussions in Jordan. Al-Tall was one of the principal pillars of the Transjordanian political elite which constitutes the backbone of the Hashemite regime and which is the secret of its vitality and longevity. Despite the importance of this elite, it has been and remains short of leaders of stature capable of sharing with the king the exhausting burden of preserving the regime under conditions of pressure and permanent crisis. Within this small group of authoritative leaders, a special place is reserved for Wasfi al-Tall, alongside Tawfiq Abu al-Huda and Samir Rifa'i before him and Zayd Rifa'i and Sharif 'Abd al-Hamid Sharaf after him.

Susser's book draws a portrait of al-Tall and describes his political career against the background of contemporary Jordanian history. Wasfi al-Tall was a practical politician and not a philosopher, hence there are no special chapters in this book on his world of ideas. They are noted in the book only at those places where they have a direct bearing on his political activity. In

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his strong personality, his unshakable loyalty to the Hashemite dynasty, and his uncompromising stand against the opponents of the regime, al-Tall epitomized the vitality of the Jordanian entity. All the fundamental characteristics of the Hashemite regime in Jordan became an inseparable part of the political consciousness of Wasfi al-Tall. From the beginning of his political career al-Tall identified completely with the monarchical regime and tied his own fate to that of the regime. Even if he chose this path out of opportunistic considerations, he clung to it with unusual consistency and resolution. He was, in Susser's view, an example and a symbol of that Jordanian establishment which is jealous of the country's independence and fearful of the forces of pan-Arabism. He belittled the value of revolution in the Nasserist or Ba'thist style. As a pragmatist he strove consistently toward clearly defined political objectives without any inclination to a particular ideology. By temperament al-Tall was a biting polemicist, with a sharp and blunt style, who treated his critics with contempt. He was a quarrelsome man who would brook no compromise and who struggled indefatigably to ensure what he saw as the supreme interests of Jordan. The use of force against those who challenge the Hashemite regime has been accepted by the Jordanian political establishment since the founding of the emirate; in Wasfi al-Tall King Hussein found a zealous executor of this basic feature in the Hashemite policy.

Al-Tall had no "philosophy of government" to distinguish him from the norms prevalent in the Arab East. His outlook, says Susser, was anchored in the authoritarian political tradition of Islam that leaves little room for the concepts and institutions that are central to Western political experience such as parliamentary government or "loyal opposition." Though al-Tall enjoyed Western education and

graduated from the American University in Beirut, he did not regard political freedom and the right to participate in government as something that citizens should take for granted. In his view, the government conferred freedom and determined the limits of that freedom. Like Hussein, al-Tall believed that Jordan could be turned into a success story through economic development, efficient administration, and the strengthening of the legitimacy of the regime. But al-Tall believed in no reform except that carried out from above. His outlook reflected intolerance of any real opposition. If in this respect al-Tall merged very well with the political culture dominant in the region, in another respect he was exceptional. He rejected with vehemence all the conspiracy theories used to explain and justify the Arabs' failures. For example, he described the defeat in the 1948 war against Israel very frankly as the result of the shortcomings of the Arabs themselves.

Wasfi al-Tall's attitude toward Israel was as complex as it was sober. On the one hand he fought for the Palestinian cause and described Zionism as "an aggressive, racist, expansionist and fascist movement, a base for imperialism and a bridgehead for the war against liberation." On the other hand he estimated realistically the strength of Israel and the balance of forces between her and the Arab world. Toward the other Arab states al-Tall displayed distrust and suspicion nor did he rate highly the Palestinian National Movement. In order to avert a war with Israel, he was prepared to deal very firmly with those who intended to upset the peace along Jordan's border and to drag her into a confrontation with the Israeli army. Susser sees no reason to assume that al-Tall's negative attitude toward Israel and the Zionist movement was not sincere, but he emphasizes that it was the overriding goal of preserving the Hashemite regime that dictated accommo-

dation with Israel and recognition of the common interests of Israel and Jordan on the Palestinian question. Basic hostility toward Israel could be reconciled with an actual policy of compromise.

Al-Tall served three times as prime minister: January 1962-March 1963; February 1965-March 1967; October 1970-November 1971. All these periods were marked by difficulties stemming from the complex relations between the Hashemite regime and the Palestinians. During al-Tall's first term in office, Jordan worked to prevent the attempts to revive the Palestinian entity. This action was taken in the context of the consistent Hashemite strategy of absorbing the Palestinians into the Jordanian state and blurring the distinctive Palestinian identity in order to deprive them of the capacity to organize a power base independent of the central government in Amman. Previously Jordan's policy had been one of reacting defensively to moves initiated by Egypt and Iraq. Al-Tall's government, on the other hand, seized the initiative by formulating a plan of its own for the liberation of Palestine. It also published a White Paper in July 1962 on the Palestine question and inter-Arab relations. Through this document al-Tall wanted to clarify three points: first, that the Arabs needed to act cautiously with regard to the West Bank because of Israel's possible reactions; second, that in any action against Israel Jordan would constitute a major factor and should therefore be brought into the Arab plans; and third, that the mobilization of the Palestinian potential should be made within the framework of a Jordanian effort because the Jordanian entity and the Palestinian entity were one and the same. The last point stood in sharp contrast to the Arab consensus, which strove to preserve a Palestinian identity and even to give it a separate organizational expression. It was this concept which lay behind the establish-

ment of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964.

During his second term of office al-Tall fought against the PLO's efforts to strike roots among the Palestinian population of the kingdom. He saw the PLO as a dangerous challenge from the very start. The danger was that the PLO would erode the power base of the regime, undermine its stability, ultimately topple the regime, and establish another in which the Palestinian political elite would replace the monarchy and the Transjordanian elite as the dominant force. Al-Tall firmly rejected the PLO's demands to organize the Palestinian population of the kingdom under its authority or to station units of the Palestine Liberation Army on the West Bank. Hussein warned against any ill-considered action that could prematurely push the Arabs into war and added, "We shall cut off any hand which is raised malevolently against this united and struggling nation." The offensive by Hussein and his government was met with a response from Ahmad al-Shuqayri, who denied Jordan's right to exist in its present form: "The final conclusion that we have reached is that Jordan, with both its banks, is under the colonial rule of the Hashemite family and that the Jordanian people with the help of the Arab people must therefore liberate Jordan from this colonialism as a necessary step toward the liberation of Palestine."

Parallel to the deterioration in relations between Jordan and the PLO, there was a reversal of the trend toward inter-Arab reconciliation which had begun with the Cairo summit of January 1964. Nasir's assertion that only the revolutionary Arab forces could confront the Zionist danger caused a polarization in 1966 between Arab progressive and conservative regimes. Given his outlook and experience, al-Tall was a natural candidate to carry out the new policy of moving closer to Saudi Arabia and conducting an unceasing prop-

aganda war against 'Abd al-Nasir and the Syrian Ba'th.

One of the symptoms of the renewal of the Arab cold war was Egyptian and Syrian encouragement of guerrilla raids against Israel launched from Jordanian territory. The efforts of the Jordanian authorities to curb such activities were only partially successful. For an incident in which three Israeli soldiers were killed, the IDF retaliated on 13 November 1966 with a raid against the Jordanian village of al-Samu', south of Hebron. This was the largest reprisal raid carried out by the IDF since the Suez War. Instead of striking the *fida'iyyin* organizations, the operation destabilized the regime in Jordan and exposed it to a combined propaganda offensive by Egypt, Syria, and the PLO. Since the annexation of the West Bank by the Kingdom of Jordan, the policy toward Israel had been one of the main sources of tension between a large part of the Palestinian public and the regime. The Jordanian regime, out of a sober appraisal of the balance of forces, preferred to preserve the status quo with Israel; that required peace along the border. This policy derived from the regime's weakness: reprisal raids from Israel underlined the impotence of the regime and had the potential to culminate in the capture of the West Bank in the event of a full-scale confrontation. The Palestinians, on the other hand, demanded that Jordan be turned into a base for launching the war for the liberation of Palestine. The raid on al-Samu', as Susser shows, exposed this latent tension. It presented the regime as incapable of defending the West Bank and unwilling to turn Jordan into the vanguard in the struggle against Israel.

Wasfi al-Tall's frank comments after the raid on al-Samu' against the entry of Arab forces into Jordan and *fida'iyyin* operations against Israel, and his tough handling of the opposition, turned him and his gov-

ernment into the object of criticism of militant Palestinian forces. Al-Tall's government succeeded in stabilizing the internal situation, but Hussein thought that in the sphere of relations with Egypt, al-Tall had gone too far. Al-Tall's replacement thus came to pave the way for an improvement in relations both internally and in the inter-Arab sphere. It was not the first time nor the last in which Hussein resorted to a government reshuffle to overcome a crisis. The events following the raid on al-Samu' were a typical example of that phenomenon in Jordanian politics in which the government and its head are used as a kind of shock absorber designed to draw criticism which is in fact directed at the king's policies.

Al-Tall's appointment as chief of the Royal Diwan left him within the inner circle; yet, during the crisis of May-June 1967 his efforts to persuade Hussein not to join the Egyptian camp in the war against Israel were unsuccessful. Al-Tall was opposed to Hussein's entry into the war and was the only Jordanian politician who dared criticize publicly the cooperation between Jordan and Egypt in June 1967. Hussein was very concerned with the question of the legitimacy of his regime in the eyes of the Arab world in general and among Palestinians in particular. He was therefore prepared to make compromises and concessions, even costly ones, to the Egyptians and Palestinians for the sake of his long-term goal of strengthening his regime at home and abroad. Al-Tall, on the other hand, was prepared to pay the price of confrontation with the Palestinians and the price of isolation within the Arab world. He was much less troubled by considerations of prestige, honor, and legitimacy.

Al-Tall was no less hostile toward Syria than he was toward Egypt. Susser argues that in the middle of the June war, when the Arab defeat was imminent, al-Tall

participated in a plot to topple the Ba'ath regime in Syria. The source for this startling revelation is the trial in Damascus of seventy-seven officers and civilians who were accused of involvement in the abortive coup of Salim Hatum in June 1967. One of the witnesses spoke of the contacts they had had with Jordan and of meetings at which al-Tall was present and gave his backing to the activities of the conspirators. According to the witness, al-Tall sent a signed cheque for over 40,000 Lebanese pounds to Salah al-Din al-Bitar, the old leader of the Ba'ath, who was in exile in Lebanon and a co-conspirator with Hatum. During the June war, said the witness, there were a number of meetings with al-Tall in Amman at which he urged the conspirators to seize the opportunity presented by the war. Indeed, on 10 June, at the meeting between al-Tall and Hatum, it was decided to launch the coup under the pretext of saving the country from Israel. Hatum and his supporters, who were in a military camp in Mafraq in northern Jordan, crossed the Jordanian-Syrian border the next day, but the bid for power was unsuccessful as they were unable to make contact with their supporters in Syria. The Syrian security forces caught Hatum and his men trying to escape back to Jordan and placed them on trial in September 1968.

On 14 June, a few days after the end of the war, al-Tall resigned from his position as chief of the Royal Diwan. On 31 October 1967, Hussein appointed a new Senate. Al-Tall was a member of this Senate, but in fact he remained outside the small political group that ran the government. This freezing out of al-Tall was not accidental: after the June war there was Jordanian-Egyptian cooperation in the inter-Arab sphere and cooperation between the Hashemite regime and the *fidaiyyin* inside Jordan. Under these circumstances there

was no room for al-Tall within the inner circle of policymakers.

In August 1967, al-Tall submitted to the king a plan for far-reaching action to contain the PLO and to stop the *fidaiyyin* organizations from continuing to erode the authority of the central regime in Jordan. The plan included strengthening the Jordanian front with air and armored forces, establishing a popular militia, reorganizing the regular army into small and independent units and integrating the *fidaiyyin* operations into the general military effort. This effort was intended to lead to a real guerrilla war that would exhaust Israel and force it to overextend itself, thus bringing about its eventual collapse. Al-Tall made his plan conditional on the rejection of any political settlement that would recognize Israeli sovereignty over part of Palestine. In order to ensure success, al-Tall demanded the transformation of Arab society into a fighting society in which everyone contributed to the national effort. But another condition for the implementation of his plan was that the *fidaiyyin* be subordinated to the Jordanian army. Hussein did not accept the plan and preferred for the time being to continue with his policy of restraint. But when his authority continued to be flouted, the king opted for full-scale confrontation and launched the army offensive which has come to be known as "Black September." Once he had decided to fight, Hussein's aim was to destroy completely the *fidaiyyin* organizations in Jordan. The road was thus opened for the return of Wasfi al-Tall as the most suitable candidate to implement this tough and uncompromising policy.

During his third term as prime minister, from October 1970 to November 1971, al-Tall restored law and order, conducted a policy of permanent pressure on the *fidaiyyin*, presided over their final expulsion from Amman and Irbid, and prevented them from re-establishing their

presence in the Jordan valley. The government sought to thwart any attempts to carry out operations against Israel for fear that Israeli reprisals would upset the plans to redevelop this important agricultural area and perhaps even lead to war. Under the leadership of al-Tall, the effort to liquidate the PLO presence was systematic, resolute, and uncompromising. Moreover, ending the *fiḍa'iyyin* presence in Jordan weakened the other sources of opposition in the kingdom and restored the authority of the central government.

Al-Tall had few inhibitions and hesitations when it came to taking measures against the Palestinians. That is why Susser identifies him with the group inside the Jordanian political elite that includes Prince Hasan, the Queen Mother Zayn, and Hussein's uncle, Nasir bin Jamil, about whom it is said that they aspire to disengage from the West Bank and from Jordan's commitment to the Palestinian cause. It would be an exaggeration to speak of two rival schools of thought within the Jordanian political elite. The picture drawn by Susser is much more complex. Hard evidence about the differences in approach between the king and the anti-Palestinian group are not easy to come by. Susser therefore presents a series of assumptions which, together, amount to a persuasive explanation of the thinking and aims of the king and those close to him:

Hussein, al-Tall, and Hasan strove to ensure the survival of Jordan in its traditional form, under the leadership of the Hashemite family, supported by the Transjordanian elite, which continues to enjoy the ascendancy and preference in key positions compared with the Palestinians of the kingdom. It may be assumed al-Tall and Hasan reckoned, like Hussein, that in order to ensure this, Jordan had to prevent the establishment of a hostile Palestinian political entity on the West Bank, especially under PLO

leadership. Hence it may be assumed that they had no intention of severing the link with the West Bank and letting develop a process which from their point of view was undesirable. At the same time, since they attach less importance to the quality of Jordan's relations with the Arab world in general and the Palestinians in particular, al-Tall, Hasan, and others in the political leadership showed greater willingness than Hussein to come to terms with the situation which was created after the Six Day War. It seems that, as with his attitude toward the question of Jordan's entry into the Six Day War and toward the *fiḍa'iyyin* and with regard to future relations with the West Bank, al-Tall was moved primarily by short-term considerations and downplayed the long-term considerations of the legitimacy of the regime, which were important to Hussein.

Presumably, Hussein also understood the advantage inherent in a situation in which Israel prevented the establishment on the West Bank of an entity hostile to the regime on the East Bank while assuming itself the burden of monitoring and policing the Palestinian population. But Hussein's conclusion that no force in the Arab world would come to terms with Israeli rule over the whole of western Palestine led him to cooperate with the Arab states in the political struggle to restore Israel to her 1967 borders. Al-Tall and Hasan preferred to adopt a more passive line of acquiescence in the status quo. Their position stemmed essentially from the fear that political or military cooperation with the other confrontation states would expose Jordan to pressures in the inter-Arab arena to participate in an eastern front and possibly even in an unwanted war. Such a policy could also confront Jordan with the demand to make concessions to the Palestinians and the PLO if it wanted to take part in the negotiations and regain the West Bank.

It can be assumed that al-Tall understood that Jordan, with its large Pales-

tinian population on the East Bank, could not disengage from the Palestinian question or the question of the future of the West Bank. But it seems that he was of the opinion that as long as Israel ruled over the West Bank, there was no need for special efforts or concessions in the inter-Arab arena in order to change the status quo. He took this line without disputing the basic concept underlying the Jordanian policy on the Palestinian question which impels Jordan to maintain its control over the West Bank if and when Israel withdraws from there. There may have been differences of emphasis, but not substantive or enduring conflicts of opinion.

Al-Tall's policy of liquidating *fidaiyyin* presence and influence in Jordan was not intended to weaken Jordan's link with the West Bank. His government even took some steps to maintain this link, notably the creation of the "Jordanian National Union" in September 1971. The ideological basis for rallying the public behind the regime found expression in the covenant of the National Union which was drafted by Wasfi al-Tall together with Ibrahim Habashna and two Palestinians, 'Adnan Abu 'Awdah and Mustafa Dudin. In its ideas, content, and goals the covenant closely resembled the White Paper published by al-Tall's government in 1962 on Jordan's position on the Palestinian question and inter-Arab relations. The covenant, like the White Paper, emphasized Jordan's commitment to unity with the Palestinians and the interdependence between the two banks of the Jordan River.

During al-Tall's last term as prime minister there were rumors of friction between him and King Hussein, especially over policy toward the *fidaiyyin*. His arrogant and cynical behavior, blunt manner of expression, and scornful dismissal of his critics created the impression that he was not just the executor but the architect of

the tough policy toward the *fidaiyyin*. But the claim that al-Tall and members of the royal family who were close to him (such as Prince Hasan) dictated to Hussein a policy with which he was not happy seems exaggerated. Despite his hesitations, Hussein was not much more compromising than al-Tall. There was no fundamental difference, argues Susser, between the policy of al-Tall and the policy of King Hussein. The difference was one of temperament, style, and tactics. It stemmed from the different weight attached by the two leaders to the constraints of diplomacy and legitimacy. Whereas Hussein was greatly preoccupied with these considerations, to al-Tall they appeared of only limited consequence. Hussein's vision was broader, more sober, and more long-term than al-Tall's. Hussein was more sophisticated, more adept at political maneuvers, and less dogmatic than al-Tall. Occasionally Hussein had reservations about steps taken by al-Tall and had to cover up for his mistakes and excesses. Al-Tall had considerable influence and shared the burden of governing the country, but he did not act in opposition to the basic interests of the Hashemite king. Hussein remained the principal policymaker, the central axis around which the entire political system revolved. When he handed the reins of power to al-Tall, as he did with other politicians before and after him, it was understood that the incumbent would carry out to the best of his ability the policy favored by the king at that particular time.

At the peak of his political career, in the middle of a process of reinvigorating the Jordanian regime, al-Tall was assassinated in Cairo by an offshoot of Fateh called "Black September." The assassins were defended at their trial by none other than Ahmad al-Shuqayri, the former PLO chairman, and all four were freed. Al-Shuqayri argued that al-Tall had been

killed, not just because of his direct responsibility for the events of September 1970, but because he was a target symbolic of the Hashemite regime, which was responsible for all the disasters that had befallen the Arab nation. For the *fidai'iyyin* and for the followers of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, like Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal who also justified the murder, al-Tall was indeed a symbol of the Hashemite regime and a reminder of the failure to remove that regime from the political scene. The great irony is that al-Tall's political career, which began by his joining the Palestinian fight against the Zionists in the 1940s, came to its sudden end when he was murdered by the Palestinian members of Black September who saw in him the real force behind their expulsion from Jordan.

An irony of a different kind lies in the fact that al-Tall's first biographer is an Israeli, and the only full-scale study of his political career appears in Hebrew. Asher Susser is well aware of the disadvantages of writing about a major public figure without having had the opportunity to visit Jordan or talk to the people who worked with him. Nevertheless, Susser believes that the primary sources at his disposal—the writings, speeches, and interviews of al-Tall, the press, and transcripts of radio broadcasts—as well as the secondary literature, makes it possible to draw an authentic picture of the man and his place in Jordanian politics in the 1960s and early 1970s. This belief is fully borne out by the final product. The author has not only carried out extensive and in-depth research; he also presents his material in an admirably clear, orderly, and coherent manner. The result is an excellent book which sheds a great deal of new light on the troubled relationship between Jordan and the Palestinians.

Although the book is not particularly long, it provides a searching analysis of the ideas, forces, and conflicts at play in Jor-

danian politics as well as a fascinating account of the life and work of a highly able and controversial Jordanian statesman. The author is a senior researcher at the Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies of Tel Aviv University and his book is the first volume in a new series edited by that center on contemporary issues and problems in the Middle East. It is very much to be hoped that this particular volume, which sets such high standards for the ones that are to follow, will be translated into English for the benefit of all those interested in the politics of the region but who cannot read Hebrew.

From Ajlun to Shatila _____

Un captif amoureux, by Jean Genet.
Paris: Gallimard, 1986. 504 pages. 96FF.

Reviewed by **Hisham Sharabi**²

This is Jean Genet's last work, completed just before his death in 1986 and published posthumously. With the possible exception of Arnold Toynbee, Jean Genet is probably the most celebrated Western author to have written about the Palestinians with sympathy and from a position of intimate personal knowledge.

Like Toynbee, Genet came to know the Arab world when young and at first hand. As an eighteen-year-old recruit in the French army, he arrived in Syria shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian revolt of 1929. Forty years later, when he arrived in Damascus after having escaped from Jordan with Palestinian help, he was stopped by two 'Alawi soldiers on horseback who spoke fluent French and turned out to be veterans of the French colonial army in Syria. When Genet told them that he had been a soldier in Syria in the same army,

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