



# The Al-Khidr Conflict. Shared Holy Sites as Observatories of the Social Fabric during the Mandate Period (Emirate of Transjordan)

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***The al-Khidr conflict:  
Shared Holy sites as observatories of the social fabric during the Mandate  
period (Emirate of Transjordan)***

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**Abstract :**

*Using a micro-historical approach, with the mausoleum of al-Khidr in Karak (Jordan) as a case study, this paper questions the restructuring of tribal solidarities during the Mandate period. Between 1937 and 1939, the shrine was the scene of major conflicts involving members of Greek Orthodox and Muslim tribes. The case soon became a national matter. Due to this dispute, the local tribes affirmed or redefined their political importance in a context of social and political restructuring. The authority of al-Khidr was disputed through the control of its symbolic territory. It was therefore his holy figure who guarantees the constitution, the recomposition and superimposition of symbolic borders between social groups. These stakes challenged the young Jordanian government, which tried to regulate the conflict by nationalizing the holy site. This case study reveals the complex mobilisation of modes of belonging at the local level and the porosity of social group boundaries. This chapter insists on the multiplicity of factors that leads to the mobilisation of confessional identities according to the contexts and groups concerned.*

Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sharing the same place of worship or holy site was a common practice in many cities in southern Ottoman Bilad al-Shām and especially Transjordan<sup>1</sup>. During this time, the Dominican Friar Antonin Jaussen mentioned these practices as follows: “In Kerak as well, in addition to Hader which has a universal cult in our region, a large number of welys are worshipped, throughout the city and surroundings, all known by a miraculous fact” (Jaussen 1948: 303). In these regions, as in most parts of the Middle East, the shared holy sites were mainly dedicated to a prophet or holy figure common to the three monotheisms. Antonin Jaussen refers to a ‘universal’ cult that was organised around certain holy figures, such as Noah/Nūh or St. George/al-Khidr in Karak.

The existence of bi-or pluri-confessional shared holy sites depended on specific political and social contexts (Barkan and Barkey 2014). In this paper, this social reality will be considered by taking up Bowman perception in the context of shared worship practices, identities are neither fixed nor irrevocably transformed (Bowman 2009). Research on Ottoman Transjordan emphasised the importance of the lineage system within local belonging mechanisms. Until the arrival of Christian and Muslim missionaries at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious boundaries were not the determining element of local identities and political affiliations, even though they could be mobilised for different purposes (Chatelard 2004). They did not structure the internal dynamics of local societies. Thus, in Karak, sharing holy sites was possible due to the coexistence of local tribes within the same urban space and its surroundings during part of the year, especially spring and autumn, which determined shared everyday practices.

Over the last ten years, with the renewal of studies on shared holy sites, many Middle Eastern cases studies have been investigated. Most of these studies concern Christian places of worship or shrines visited by Muslims, such as the monastery of Mar Elias in Palestine (Bowman 1993: 434), the church of St George in Istanbul (Fliche and Pénicaud 2020) and sites dedicated to the Marian figure, such as the sanctuary of Bechouate in Lebanon (Aubin Boltanski 2008) or the House of the Virgin in Ephesus (Pénicaud 2014). Sharing worship practices between different religions or faiths should be considered in the singular historical contexts in which they developed and the specificity of local social dynamics.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Ottoman period, the name Jordan or Transjordan was not used in Arabic or Ottoman Turkish sources. The territory corresponding to the south of contemporary Jordan belonged to the south of Bilād al-Shām. Western travellers sometimes used the term ‘overseas’ in their narratives. In this article, the terms south of Bilād al-Shām or southern Ottoman Transjordan are used to refer to these territories for the sake of accuracy and convenience.

In the case of Egypt, Mayeur-Jaouen insists on the disappearance of shared worship practices between Copts and Muslims for the patron saint's day, the *mawlid*, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mayeur-Jaouen 2013). In Palestine, Bourmaud and Bowman proposed that pilgrimage was a long-term shared experience in order to insist on the evolution of religious practices during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bourmaud 2009; Bowman 2013). This paper analyses the consequences of the changes in political and social dynamics, due to the creation of the Emirate of Transjordanian under British Mandate, on the shared worship practices in Karak.

In addition, two research dynamics have intersected over the last ten years: the renewal of studies on interreligious relations in the Middle East (Valensi 1986: 820) which sometimes refer to shared sanctuaries as privileged observatories (Bowman 2009; Hayden 2002), and a new reading and understanding of the Ottoman Bilad al-Shām societies, questioning the use of confessional categories (Chatelard, 2004; Maggiolini 2012). In addition to reflecting on the confessionalisation processes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the importance of other modes of belonging such as tribal or urban solidarity have been highlighted. Several academic publications have addressed the multiple forms of interaction between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities at the end of the Ottoman period, particularly in Palestine (Campos 2010; Barkey 2008). In the continuity of this research and by using a micro-historical approach, this paper questions the restructuring of tribal solidarities at the local level during the Mandate period by studying a conflict that broke out in 1938 around the shrine of al-Khidr. This case study reveals a progressive confessionalisation process from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards in this region. While using the concept of confessionalisation, this paper will not use a strictly confessional reading of the social dynamics around shared holy sites. It insists on the multiplicity of factors that leads to the mobilisation of confessional identities according to the contexts and groups concerned.

In the Karak region, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, both Ottoman officials and Catholic and Protestant missionaries attempted to strictly define confessional boundaries by limiting shared religious practices (Rogan 1998; Neveu 2013). To do so, they encouraged places of worship to be constructed in Karak because few such sites existed. These places represented a tool for reorganising the familiar space according to confessional preoccupation. This led to the centralisation of religious practices around places of worship specific to each community. Despite this specialisation and territorialisation of religious practices, certain shared holy sites retained a central function of regulating the local social relations, for example the shrine of Al-Khidr located in the heart of Karak city.

The city of Karak, located south of Amman, was mainly inhabited by village tribes which made their living by cultivating the plots of land surrounding the city. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the reinvestment of the Ottoman administration and the development of agriculture, trade developed in the city. Karak had privileged commercial relations with Hebron. Before 1921 and the creation of the Emirate of Transjordan, the city had remained relatively independent from the Ottoman central power and tribalism remained at the centre of political play. However, the region soon became loyal to the government of Emir Abdullah. The years 1921 and 1922, a period when the political dynamics were redefined, were marked by major armed conflicts between the local tribes. Political life was governed by a nodal division between two tribal alliances led by the sheikhs Rifayfān al-Majāli and Husayn al-Tarāwna. The Christian tribes were historically linked to the alliance led by Majālī. At the time of the Mandate, Christians represented approximately a quarter of the city's population which was estimated around 15,000 inhabitants. From the 1920s onwards, some of Karak's Christian notables, including 'Awda al-Qusūs, became privileged interlocutors of the representatives of the British Mandate.

In the Emirate of Transjordan, in the 1920-1930s, an important reform of the land system brought about profound changes in the management of religious properties and in particular *waqf*-s. This reform generated conflicts between the local communities and the government of Transjordan, under the influence of the British administration (Fischbach 2000). These conflicts spread within the local societies because the status of land plots on which religious property was located changed. The al-Khidr case study developed in this paper represents a paradigmatic example of these conflicts, to give an accurate interpretation of the stakes involved when controlling holy sites at the local level. This conflict broke out in 1938 between members of the Greek Orthodox community and a Muslim architect

concerning the renovation of the shrine. It spread quickly to involve most of the inhabitants of the city and surroundings. This conflict led to a redefinition of the right of access and ownership of the al-Khidr shrine and reveals a certain confessionalisation of political and social dynamics.

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