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Feature

Circassians at the service of the king of Jordan

They are Cherkessians or Chechnyans, originate from the Caucasus and have been guarding the safety of Hachemite sovereigns with the utmost devotion and faithfulness for more than a century. This report will take you on an exceptional journey to the heart of the royal guard of Jordan.

Wearing only black, an astrakhan hat on their heads, their bodies are covered with cartridge belts and silver blades. All at the same quick and light pace, these “warriors” reach the top of the stairs of the royal palace. Two of them, as if in a rehearsed performance, take place at each side of the large sculpted wooden door. The throne room can now welcome king Abdallah II of Jordan with no risk whatsoever.

This show of absolute loyalty from Caucasians to the Hachemite sovereign is nothing new. Their faithfulness dates back to 1921, the year the Emirate of Transjordan was founded under the reign of Abdallah, the great-grandfather of the current king, who was proclaimed as king on May 25, 1946 when the Hachemite Kingdom of Jordan was born. But the presence of Cherkessians in Jordan is explained by events dating back to half a century before that.

Chased away from their native soil by the Russians in awful conditions, thousands of Caucasians emigrated towards Turkey in 1864. Refugees would then scatter all throughout the Ottoman Empire, from Turkish Kurdistan to the canal of Suez to Syria (then under French rule), Palestine and Transjordan (both under British rule). The pregrinations of these people were controlled by the Sultan, who used ethnic minorities to protect and inhabit the most remote of his territories. All the more so that most Circassians are followers of the Muslim faith. Thus, between 1864 and 1873, several hundreds of Cherkessians settled in Jordan.

As soon as they arrived in this half-desertic country made of sand and rocks, so different from their wood-covered mountains and lush prairies, they built several villages. The best known of these villages, located near the remains of the Ancient city of Philadelphia (3rd century AD, under the reign of the Egyptian king Ptolemeus Philadelphus), would later become Amman, the capital of Jordan.

In the beginning, Bedouins and Circassians would routinely engage in fights. More than that, Circassians, because of their excellent reputation as mercenaries, would often enroll on the side of the Turkish, who were enemies of Jordan. Cavalry regiments were even composed out of Cherkessians and Chechnyans exclusively.

As a result, after the victories of the Arabs and the English against the Turkish and German, such as the famed revolt of the desert in the Wadi Rum of Jordan, Caucasian minorities were exposed to very difficult times. It is at this moment that the future king Abdallah asked his Bedouin tribes to show clemency for the Cherkessians and Chechnyans. In a few months, Abdallah had managed to convince the men of the desert to let go of their hostile feelings. A benevolent sovereign, Abdallah even granted Circassians with citizenship. Since those times, their devotion to the Hachemite king has remained total.

These fearsome warriors, whose courage is praised by all, their faithfulness devoid of all weakness, their attachment to the idea of respect, all these elements, even today, are a guarantee of safety for the king. As a proof, king Abdallah II shows a great deal of pride and esteem for his honour guard. No state visit would be conceivable without their presence. During official trips, they are occasionally invited to move with the sovereign, in countries such as Great Britain or Japan, as they did most recently.

The king himself choses the guard's swords, knives and cartridge belts, all carved out of silver and marked with the royal crown, created by the best artisans. In their "mountain man" outfits, inherited from their ancestors, they look all the more soldierly. The design of their outfits has hardly changed in all these years. King Hussein had banned the red color from their uniforms, but his son recently re-introduced it.

Nevertheless, the Circassian guard, limited to the number of 14 guards, remains an honour guard, attached to the king. Of course, the security of the whole kingdom is the responsibility of the Bedouin guard first and foremost. Their faithfulness and bravery, as great as that of the Circassians, are still an important asset to a country endowed with specifically strategical borders. There is no hostility between the soldiers wearing the trademark red & blue keffiyeh and their astrakhan hat-wearing colleagues, who have perfectly integrated Jordanian society.

In this very case, the success of the Cherkessian integration might have something to do with how they were enabled to keep their own language and customs. Nowadays, there are about 120,000 of them living in Jordan. In the old town of Amman, in Ras el Aïn, not far from the Roman Amphitheater, the first historic Cherkessian neighborhood still exists. Signs written in Circassian language are attached next to signs written in Arabian. In schools too, both languages co-exist peacefully.

On feast days, women put on their finest dresses, beautifully embroidered with gold and silver, and look like fairies from the tales of yore. It is an occasion for the best horsemen to perform their best feats, on horseback or not. Dancing and acrobatic feats abound during the ceremonies. Dialog and mutual respect abound in the lives of these citizens so enamoured with freedom and spirit. "When

you love, you respect. When you respect, you love and you are faithful”. An essential idea for these men from the Caucasus.

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