

# Why King Abdullah Is King

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## His father, King Hussein, had always wanted it that way, he just never told anybody. Except me.

Leaders around the world are enjoying a “rally around the flag” moment as they take charge of their nations’ fight against COVID-19. Jordan’s King Abdullah is no exception. After 21 years on the throne, he is at the height of his popularity, buoyed by a nationwide sense that the former special forces commander has wisely deployed the national institution with which he is most closely associated—the Jordan Arab Army—in a no-holds-barred effort to lock down the kingdom and prevent the pandemic from inflicting catastrophic damage. As one journalist, usually a sharp critic of the king, wrote me: “I am sincerely complimenting the king—and still pinching myself—but he really has been superb.”

One sign of Abdullah’s popularity is a photo circulating on Facebook and Twitter showing him at the center of a throng of cheering Jordanian soldiers, an image that conjures up similar pictures of his father—King Hussein—surrounded by adoring troops at previous moments of triumph. The message is unmistakable: Abdullah is his father’s son, acting today with the same drive, determination, and leadership that characterized Hussein’s stewardship of the country under pressure. For a monarchy that has to continually take the temperature of often-restive public opinion, the visual (and hence psychological) connection between Hussein and Abdullah is a major plus.

Eventually, though, this moment will pass and, as is the way of the world, memories will fade and critics will again grow sharp. In the Jordanian version of “what have you done for me lately,” many will forget how Abdullah handled the pandemic the way they forgot how he handled other crises, from the fallout of the September 11 attacks to America’s invasion of Iraq, from terrorism in Amman and the subsequent rise of ISIS to the mass influx of Syrian refugees, from the local ripples of the Arab Spring to the Trump Administration’s feared “deal of the century.”

Instead, they will focus on his mistakes, of which he has surely had his share. That path will inevitably lead some of them down a winding road to the original critique against him, the two-decade-old charge that Abdullah’s reign is an

accident of history, the last, lingering side-effect of a debilitating cancer treatment that sapped his father both of physical strength and mental acuity. Despite more than two decades on the throne, some whisperers in Amman will still say Abdullah's reign—allegedly born in the fog of Hussein's diminished capacity—was illegitimate when it started and remains so today.

It is not my job to fight Abdullah's political battles, but on this issue, I have special knowledge. The whisperers, when they re-emerge, will be wrong. Here's why.

Some context: I first traveled to Jordan in 1985 for an Arabic language program at Yarmouk University in the northern city of Irbid. During the course of that eye-opening summer, I had two royal encounters: a handshake with Queen Noor, Hussein's fourth wife, at a meet-and-greet reception for American students at the royal palace in Amman, and a quick hello to then-Prince Abdullah, Hussein's eldest son and then-captain of the Jordanian national race car team, when our Yarmouk contingent crossed paths with the team at the pool of the Petra Hotel.

But I didn't meet King Hussein himself until four years later, in 1989, when I was back in Amman doing research for my Oxford doctoral dissertation. My topic was Jordanian domestic politics in the 1950s. Specifically, I was fascinated with how this small, nearly landlocked, resource-poor, refugee-rich country at the center of one of the world's leading conflict zones survived the tumultuous years after the assassination of its founder, Hussein's grandfather, the first King Abdullah.

For my research, I interviewed dozens of elderly ministers, courtiers, and generals, used my wiles to gain entry to the collection of banned books, pamphlets, and memoirs that filled the "Forbidden Room"—*al-ghurfa al-mamnua'*—at the University of Jordan, and was the first Western researcher to mine the fascinating resources of the Jordanian national archives. I was also fortunate to meet frequently with some of the king's most senior palace advisors and even to have several audiences with King Hussein himself.

Early on, I realized that the best way to ensure that meetings with Hussein were meaningful was not to waste time on contemporary politics. I never used the occasion to ask about the latest twist or turn in his quiet diplomacy with Israel, the latest move in his decades-long contest with Yasser Arafat, or the latest development in his up-and-down relations with Washington. After all, these were the same questions famous journalists flocked to Amman to ask Hussein and he was unlikely to tell me anything that he hadn't already told them.

Instead, I always focused our interviews on history—his recollections of characters, episodes, and crises from his youth. I asked Hussein about pivotal moments, such as his decision to fire the legendary Arab Legion commander Glubb Pasha in 1956 and then his success in putting down a coup plot from Jordanian radicals within the same army just a few months later. And I asked about his evolving relations with Western powers, from his dependence on the often-domineering British to his reliance on an America that, in his view, too naively wooed the man he viewed as his most dangerous nemesis, Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser.

Most of all, I asked Hussein about his family. This wasn't always easy. A reserved man of military bearing, Hussein was not one to trade in family gossip or seek to settle scores through the medium of an historian. Rather than volunteer insights from his youth, he often fell back on stylized versions of stories re-told a thousand times from his autobiography, ghost-written by a British journalist. Perhaps that is because he saw and heard tragedies that no boy, teenager, or young man should have to witness: from his grandfather's murder at al-Aqsa Mosque, which nearly killed him too; to his father Talal's public outbursts, triggered by a tragic mental illness; to the gruesome execution of the Iraqi branch of his family during the revolution against Hashemite rule there in 1958.

I did my best to treat our conversations and those with his close advisors with care and discretion. My focus was on the historical value of their remarks, not on what might titillate palace observers. The result was that I never cited anything about the royal family unless it helped answer the fundamental question of my research—the source of

Jordan's political survival.

Perhaps it was that care and discretion which kept me in good stead with King Hussein after the dissertation was completed and eventually published as a book. We continued to meet—periodically and infrequently, I won't exaggerate—in Amman and at River House, his American home-away-from-home in Potomac, Maryland.

It was in River House, in June 1996, that I had my last face-to-face conversation with Hussein. It was, in my view, the most intimate and revealing conversation we ever had.

I remember it like yesterday. My arrival at the house corresponded with the departure of Judith Kipper, a former television producer and fixture on the Washington Middle East scene, who I met in the driveway. When I entered, the house seemed almost empty—there appeared to be no one there except an aide or two and the king. We sat in a comfortable living room, filled with plush, light-colored armchairs and sofas and adorned with large, metal-framed family photographs. Almost immediately, the king picked up a pack of cigarettes and lit up. That's what got us started.

"I see you're still smoking, Your Majesty," I said, implicitly questioning the judgment of a man who had surgery to excise a cancerous tumor in his urinary tract and remove a kidney four years earlier.

"Yes, sir," he said—he invariably called people sir, an affectation from his boarding school days—"but as you see, they are Marlboro LIGHTS."

That exchange triggered a conversation we had never had before, a discussion about fate, risk, and choices. In my (albeit limited) experience, Hussein was not generally retrospective, not the sort to be preoccupied with second-guessing critical decisions or revisiting doubts he may have had about choosing this or that course of action. When you live on the edge as he did—facing multiple coups and assassination plots, continual palace intrigue and the occasional war, plus the calamities of his grandfather's murder, father's illness, and the sudden, violent death of a wife (Alia, his third) in a helicopter crash—there is little time to meditate on the if-onlys and what-might-have-beens. The fact that he was willing to entertain an entire conversation on this topic was something special.

Eventually, the discussion turned more reflective than ever. I asked Hussein, who was 60 at the time, what he considered his greatest regret. I had expected him to say something about the loss of Jerusalem, which Jordan had ruled from 1949 to 1967 but which Israel took in the June war and was never going to cede back to the Jordanians. But he thought for a moment and then said something totally unexpected.

"My greatest regret is the terrible injury I did to my son, Abdullah," said Hussein.

"Terrible injury?" I asked. Then I quickly realized what he was saying. "Are you referring to taking the crown principality away from him?"

"Yes," he said. "I know how painful this was. And I vow that before I die, I will repair this. I will correct what I did."

Let me explain: Abdullah, born in January 1962, was Jordan's crown prince until he was three years old, when advisors convinced the king that it was too dangerous to have a toddler as heir when there were so many threats on the king's life. It didn't help, palace lore added, that the toddler's mother—Hussein's second wife, Muna—was born Toni Avril Gardiner, the daughter of a British officer, not a selling point at a moment of intense Arab nationalism across the Middle East. Heeding his advisors' counsel, Hussein had Jordanian law amended in 1965 to name as crown prince his youngest brother, the then-18-year-old Hassan.

At the time of my River House meeting with Hussein, Hassan had ably and loyally served as crown prince for 30 years, most recently playing a key role in Jordan's decision to make formal peace with Israel. But the king had just told me, in the privacy of his living room, that the greatest pain he carried was from stripping his son of his birthright—and it was obvious that Hussein was the one pained by this, not the toddler. And he told me in words that were crystal clear that he eventually planned to change the order of royal succession and restore his eldest son to the role of future king.

I was numb. This was not some intimate detail about a royal figure from decades past; this was a bombshell about who would serve as Jordan's next king. My heart raced. Still, I went on with the conversation without revealing how excited I was to have been told Hussein's innermost thoughts on perhaps the most important question of his life—who would succeed him.

Unusually, it didn't take much prompting from me for him to continue. After his statement promising to return Abdullah to the crown princeship, he explained how important it was to him to take care of his nephews Talal and Ghazi, sons of his middle brother, Muhammad, who himself had served as crown prince for the decade before Abdullah's birth. Then, after a brief remark underscoring the importance of preserving the unity of the family for the next generation, the king's moment of reflection passed and the conversation quickly came to an end.

As I got up from the couch and began to take my leave, Hussein looked directly at me and said, "What I just told you, sir, I would be grateful if you kept to yourself." I gave him my word.

It wasn't always easy to keep that promise. When Hussein ultimately changed the line of royal succession just two weeks before his death, there were those in Amman who claimed this was a mercurial decision influenced by the heavy dose of medication he was taking for the pain of his advanced cancer. Some suggested the king acted in pique at the alleged offenses of his brother Hassan and members of Hassan's family. The upshot was to imply that the re-appointment of Abdullah as crown prince and, ultimately, his elevation to the throne was not only a sudden decision but somehow illegitimate, tainted by the cloud of illness and the intrigue of palace courtiers taking advantage of Hussein's diminished capacity.

From my own conversation with Hussein nearly three years before his death, I knew these rumors were wrong—they were wrong when Hussein died in 1999 and they remained wrong two decades later. When Abdullah marked 20 years on the throne a year ago, the time had come, I decided, to put to rest the canard that Hussein's shift in succession two weeks before he died was a sudden, deathbed impulse and to explain my understanding of his intent, based on his own words to me. At the late monarch's request, I had kept the conversation to myself for almost a quarter century, but I concluded that I had fulfilled my promise to Hussein and could now, with clear conscience, tell this story. The first to know should be Abdullah himself, so I looked for an opportunity to tell the king what his father had told me.

My chance came last November. Just before escorting Abdullah into a New York ballroom, I was fortunate to have nearly thirty minutes alone in a small hotel sitting room with him, his wife Queen Rania, and their eldest son, Crown Prince Hussein. With no courtiers or photographers present, it was just the four of us, on modest wooden chairs, sitting close to each other, our knees almost touching.

In that intimate setting, I finally had the opportunity to tell the royal family about the private conversation I had nearly 25 years ago with Abdullah's father.

I explained that Hussein had long planned to change the order of succession, that restoring his eldest son was a way to repair a painful hurt he believed had been inflicted on Abdullah decades earlier, and that the fundamental decision had nothing to do with Hussein's alleged dissatisfaction with Hassan or his family. (Indeed, never once in our conversations did Hussein utter a critical word about Hassan; to the contrary, any reference to Hassan was animated with big brotherly affection.) And now, at a moment when Abdullah's popularity is sky-high and this revelation can't be viewed as special pleading to help him weather some crisis or scandal, I am telling the story publicly for the first time.

In retrospect, Hussein's decision to restore Abdullah to the position of crown prince and heir was not very complicated. It is a story of kings and commoners alike; it is a story as old as time itself. It is the story of a father and his son.

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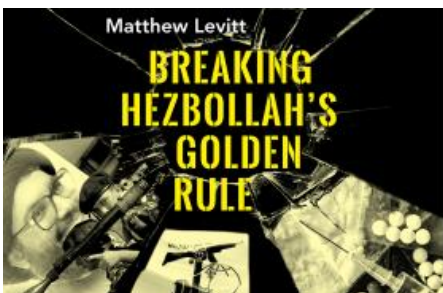
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