

King Abdullah II:

'Iraq is the Battleground—The West against Iran'

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Articles & Testimony

King Abdullah II bin Al Hussein, descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, is the fourth ruler of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the great-grandson of his namesake, the kingdom's founder. Born on January 30, 1962, to King Hussein's second wife, the British-born Princess Muna, he is the eldest of Hussein's sons and was proclaimed crown prince at birth. When Abdullah was three years old, however, Hussein transferred that title to his own younger brother, Hassan. After his early schooling in Amman, Abdullah was educated in private schools in England and the United States and then, in 1980, embarked on a military career, attending Britain's Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. For the next nineteen years, he rose through the ranks of the Jordanian army, eventually serving as commander of the Royal Jordanian Special Forces and as special operations commander. Along the way, he took classes at Oxford and Georgetown universities and further military training at Fort Knox and the Royal Staff College at Camberley, United Kingdom. In 1998, he assumed the rank of major general, which he held when he was proclaimed crown prince by his father on January 24, 1999. Abdullah assumed the throne when his father died on February 7, 1999. Abdullah and his wife, Queen Rania, have two sons and two daughters. On January 11, 2005, Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, interviewed King Abdullah II at his private office in a secluded compound outside of Amman.

Fighting Extremism

Middle East Quarterly: How do you identify and energize the "silent majority" of Muslims that opposes Islamist extremism?

Abdullah: It's just not good enough to say, "Fine, we are God-fearing Muslims, this is what we believe in and this is the line that we draw in the sand." The real question for us is how do we take the battle to the street and start winning the street war. It's not just inside the Muslim world. It's also a battle for our friends in Europe and in the West.

MEQ: What is the best way to fight against the extremist ideology that motivates Islamist terrorism?

Abdullah: One of our top priorities for addressing the "hearts and minds" question is to tackle the issue of extremist clergy and how they operate inside Muslim communities. We are currently working on setting up pilot projects with our friends, the British, to get Muslim clergy from our part of the world to give the clergy in British society the ammunition to start winning back the street. This is not something that happens overnight; this will take five, ten years. If we can get the mechanism working in England, we can then duplicate it in Europe and other countries. We're starting our work in England. If we can succeed there, then we can multiply the effort and apply it to the United States. I've talked to the president about this; I just had a long talk with John Kerry about this, too. This is different than the work of interreligious organizations. Our challenge is how to get these ideas down to the average Muslim.

MEQ: Specifically, what can be done?

Abdullah: A lot of it is financing. Take, for example, the financial problems we have with our Ministry of Religious Affairs. Its budget is minuscule. They may want to get the right preachers into the mosques, but the ministry has no money. Out of the 3,625 mosques in the country, plus another 280 under construction, about 20 to 30 percent have no state preachers. The result is that anybody can stand up and give a sermon. We need to find the money so we can hire the right people.

Something else we are trying to do is turn religious training into a master's program. Up until now, the situation was that the students with the worst grades on their tawjihi (high school graduation) tests had two options—journalism or religious affairs. The result is obvious, in both fields. One solution we are trying is to make religious training into a master's program and to build a center of excellence in religious education at 'Ahl al-Bayt University, where we can actually articulate the curricula. It's going to take another three to four years until we can close the religious studies program down at other universities, transfer it to 'Ahl al-Bayt, and make it a full master's program so we actually get bright people coming out that know exactly what true moderate Islam is all about and that are not influenced by extremist teachings and thinking.

MEQ: Do your neighbors have the same approach?

Abdullah: In private, they do. At the time of the Beslan school massacre in Russia, all of us were disgusted. But it's just not good enough to sit in the privacy of one's home and say how awful this is and condemn these people who are defaming Islam. This was a crime against humanity, and we have to be much more vocal, in public. In my view, Islam is going in a direction that's very scary, and as the Hashemite Kingdom, we have a moral obligation to stand up. Yes, there are a lot of other things that are happening inside the Muslim world, but we have to draw the line. If we don't, then these people are going to win.

Even the Saudis have started talking more openly. They were supportive of the conference that we had here in Jordan for Iraq's neighboring states where we issued a clear and unambiguous call against extremism.[1] They were vocal in Amman. They are more vocal in their own country, now. But there are still some in Saudi Arabia who think that the problem of these bin Ladin supporters is a passing threat and that six months from now the extremists won't have a leg to stand on. That's just not the case and to think so is to sugarcoat the problem. It doesn't solve the problem that they have inside the country, nor does it solve the problem that we in the Muslim world have.

In Jordan, one of the reasons my late father wanted to make some changes in the way that the family council was run a couple of years before he died was that he wanted to relieve himself of responsibility of being king in order to focus full-time on dealing with this problem. But there was an issue with his brother [Hassan, then-crown prince] in terms of coming to an agreement on that and, in the end, my father couldn't do it. But he saw this problem coming in the 1990s.

Iraq and "The Shi'ite Crescent"

MEQ: On Iraq, you warned that a Shi'ite-led Iraq might develop a special relationship with Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Lebanese Hezbollah to create a "crescent ... that will be very destabilizing for the Gulf countries and for the whole region." [2] Please explain.

Abdullah: The Hashemites are from 'Ahl Al Bayt [family of the Prophet] and do not have a problem with Shi'ites. We are as close to them as we are to the Sunnis. But, there are many people in Iraq—including Shi'ites—who have their own concerns about Iran.

We keep saying that the core problem in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian one, but for the first time, my fear is that if things do not quickly settle in Iraq into an inclusive process that brings stability and security, then the Israeli-Palestinian issue may no longer be the core problem. In that situation, the core problem is going to be based around Iraq, and it's going to be a terrible conflict within Islam—a Shi'ite-Sunni conflict—which would be devastating

for this part of the world. The so-called issue of “the crescent” was taken out of context and blown out of proportion. My concern is political, not religious, revolving around Iran, Iran’s political involvement inside Iraq, its relation with Syria and Hezbollah, and the strengthening of this political-strategic alliance. This would create a scenario where you have these four [Iran, Iran-influenced Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah] who have a strategic objective that could create a major conflict. I don’t have any! problem with Shi’ites. I have a real problem with certain Iranian factions’ political influence inside Iraq. Our argument to the United States is that a capable, independent, secure Iraq is the best way of containing Iran. There’s one reason why 1980 happened—the war between Iraq and Iran. The Iranians realize that the way to have success against the West is by them succeeding in Iraq. So Iraq is the battleground, the West against Iran.

MEQ: What advice would you give the Bush administration on the development of the Iraqi army?

Abdullah: I don’t think Iraq should be a launching pad for an offensive against Iran. If you have a stable, capable Iraq defending itself, and you have the Iranians and other outsiders losing any strategic capability inside Iraq, you’ve won. But there are those in the U.S. administration who do not really understand the Iraqi mentality. They believe, for example, that Iraq should only have a police force. In Iraq, if you send the police into a situation, everybody throws rocks at them, but the minute the army walks in, the people are out with tea and cookies. Disbanding of the Iraqi armed forces and the security service was a major mistake at the beginning of the process. On de-Baathification, I’ve been saying to the president: identify the core element of the Baath Party, the ones that you’re concerned with, and then let the rest of Iraqi society off the hook. He [President Bush] understood what we were talking about, but we felt that every time we came and he asked what should we [the U.S. government] do, I had to argue those same points over again, knowing that he had sent his messages to members of his administration to implement this policy, but it hadn’t been taken up.

At the moment, they’re trying to build the capacity of the army, but they’re in such a rush. They want to piecemeal people in, bring them in [for training] for six weeks and take them back. Really, that’s not how to train counterterrorist forces.

Here in Jordan, because many [Iraqi special forces personnel] have come through our Special Operations Command for training, we could identify the best people that were in training and have them come back as instructors. The next course that we have is actually going to be trained by the Iraqi cadre that we initially had in the first two, three courses. We want to adapt that capability to the army.

Then, there will be the issue of the Iraqi air force. Two or three years from now, somebody’s going to say they need an air force, and you’re going to have to start from scratch with fighter pilots. Instead, let’s identify the young majors, captains, and even some lieutenants you think are good and bring them into the training. They have Mirages. We have Mirages. There are ways for us to help. But the typical argument that we get is that instead of spending a year training, we should do it in six weeks.

Let’s do everything as we’ve said, but on top of that, let’s get a long-term plan in place. For example, I have a suggestion to put an Iraqi armored company inside of a Jordanian battalion or an Iraqi battalion inside a Jordanian brigade and have them go through our one-year training cycle. We’re downsizing our armed forces and will have these fine American tanks. We’ll give them the equipment, and we’ll train them inside of our brigades and our divisions, and then at the end of a training cycle they can go back to Iraq as a united, well-trained force.

MEQ: You have warned that the United States would have to draw some red lines for the Persian Gulf, defining what would constitute acceptable behavior. What do you mean?

Abdullah: If what we are hearing from many Iraqis is correct, and Iran starts to influence Shi’ites inside of Iraq, then that immediately creates problems inside Gulf countries. The U.S. administration will have to realize where it is

going to draw the red lines because it's not just the political crescent that I was concerned about, but also the stabilization of the Gulf countries. So, again, the battleground is Iraq. That is where the red line has to be drawn.

MEQ: The Iranian acquisition of nuclear capability would change the equation. What is the best response to this?

Abdullah: You have to deal with Iran with a united front. When we went to Iran about a year and a half ago, the Iranians were under tremendous pressure. They felt that they had gotten themselves into a very tight corner, and that's why they said, "Please, we want to reach out to the United States; we have our Al-Qaeda prisoners that we want to hand over; we want to talk about weapons of mass destruction; and we want to have some sort of a common understanding on the issue of Iraq, the unity of Iraq." But the minute the Europeans had prime ministers knocking on Iran's door, the Iranians felt the pressure was off. How do you address the nuclear issue now, given the way Europe is, with France's and Germany's relationship with the United States? How do you get a united front to deal with Iran? You need a unified front. But even so, that doesn't mean we should be letting the Iranians off the hook with what they're trying to do in Iraq.

The Arab-Israeli Peace Process

MEQ: The end of the 2003 Iraq war and Yasir Arafat's death may have opened a window of opportunity to advance Israeli-Palestinian relations. What are the Arab states' responsibilities?

Abdullah: How did my late father get into the peace process? How was he successful in building a relationship with the late Yitzhak Rabin? It was because he put himself in their shoes. What do Israelis desire? Israel wants to be part of this region, from Morocco all the way across the Arab world. That's the price Arabs should be willing to pay. Israelis should have free movement and free access and a sense of fully being part of this region. The sacrifice they need to make for this is a clear future for the Palestinians. But does paying this price guarantee the Israelis that they will receive the benefits? There are serious Israelis who look at the region and say, "Okay, we'll make this sacrifice; we'll make this hard decision, and we'll work with the Palestinians so that we can have some sort of coexistence with them. But does that really change the relationship that we have with Arab countries?"

Our job is to convince them. This was started in Jordan, which then became the Jordanian-Egyptian "two-basket approach" in 2001 that was later translated into Crown Prince Abdullah's position that came out as the Arab Summit Declaration of Beirut in 2002. I think that needs to be readdressed, and we've already started.

There's a peace conference in London in March. There's the Arab summit two weeks after that. We have to reach out to the Israelis—and not just about this. We need to see what guarantees we can give Israel about what the Arabs need to do. We need to come to the Arab League summit in Algiers with a "Beirut-plus-plus," a realistic statement to the Israelis that this is what we can do, and what more can we do.

MEQ: Beirut fell flat because the summit declaration was issued the day of one of the most heinous terrorist attacks in Israel—the Park Hotel bombing on Passover—and people in Beirut said nothing.

Abdullah: Politics. We're hoping that maybe in Algeria we'll have better luck. But the ball is in our court. It's up to us to reach out to the Israelis in a much stronger and clearer way. One good thing about the Beirut declaration is that it was even signed by Saddam Hussein. So one problem—getting Arab unanimity—is not an exercise that we have to really trouble ourselves over.

MEQ: This year—2005—is about Israel's disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank, not about final status negotiations. How do you keep diplomatic and political momentum alive knowing that discussions about the endgame are not on the table anytime soon?

Abdullah: That was the one thing that I discussed with President Bush in our tête-à-tête. I said, "Sir, you articulated a vision of a viable, independent Palestinian state. It comes down to the viable part. And I'm concerned that we may, in

a year or two, run out of being able to talk about a viable Palestinian state.” So looking at the bigger picture, if there is no future for the Palestinians, then do we doom this region to several more decades of conflict between Israel and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians?

Prime Minister Sharon does want peace with the Palestinians, but there’s also part of him that wouldn’t mind waiting ten years. Can we really suffer another ten years? My father used to say that he wants peace for his children and our children’s children. He was talking about us. Do I now have to start saying I want peace for my children and our children’s children? The Middle East cannot wait that long.

On the question of having a viable state, we don’t have more than two to three years, maximum. And if we don’t have a future for the Palestinians, where does that leave us? If you don’t have a viable Palestinian state, then I could conceive of an Israeli-Palestinian problem becoming an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian problem. As I said to the president, in a private discussion, “Please, if there’s one word that I would like you to focus on, that’s the word viable.”

MEQ: The president referred to a “viable” state in his January 9 statement after the Palestinian election[3] and then he mentioned the term again the following day, but he said only that “it is essential that there be a viable economy and a viable health care system,”[4] not mentioning territory.

Abdullah: He and I know what is meant by the word, because he said, “Do you mean the maps?” I said, “Mr. President, from what I gather, you know the settlements, the roads, the maps a lot better than I do.” So when he and I talked about it, it was territorial. And he said, “I got the message.”

Jordanian Political Reform

MEQ: When you first took office six years ago, you highlighted a policy of non-interference in the affairs of others. But over the last year, you have spoken out about developments inside Iraq and advised Arafat that he should look in the mirror and see if he is helping his people. Why the change?

Abdullah: Not getting involved in the internal affairs of others means that we are not committing ourselves to get into the West Bank. We’ve been very careful about doing that, and using the Iraq example, this is one of the arguments I’m using. I have been very opposed to the idea of the Hashemite family getting involved in Iraq. Sheikh Ali, the Hashemite prince, keeps pounding on our door to come and visit us, but I refuse and have said so to everyone, including Prince Hassan. Whenever the subject came up, I have disagreed with members of my cabinet about getting involved in Iraq. I don’t think that there is a role for the Hashemites. If there is a role for the Hashemites, that comes many years down the line if the Iraqis want it. But it’s a non-starter for me. It’s the same argument that I use when I’m talking about the moral high ground of the Iranians and others who wish certain involvement in Iraq when I say that I don’t believe that Amman should get involved in Baghdad.

We don’t play those sort of Cold War games, with my people inside the West Bank trying to foment against the other side. So yes, I call things as I see them, whether on Iran and Iraq or Arafat and Palestinians.

My statement on Arafat was calculated to have an impact. I didn’t know that he was that ill. But I just saw what was going on with him and had to speak out. The problem with the Palestinians is they spend most of their time blaming the Arab street and the Arab leaders. And that’s what I was saying—Stop blaming us, because we’re ready to help you, but you’ve got to help yourself first. If you look at Al-Jazeera, it’s always saying, “Where are the Arab leaders; where’s the Arab street, and they’re letting us down.” No. You’re letting yourselves down. We want to help you, but every time I sat down with Arafat and asked, where’s your plan, where’s your strategy, there was nothing there.

MEQ: Six years ago the economy was your top priority, and you said it a 100 times. What is your top priority now?

Abdullah: When we change priorities, it doesn’t mean that we lessen any of the other ones. So I think socioeconomic

issues are something that we still have to move on full speed, and we can't take any prisoners on that. But a year ago I announced that we're now ready for political reform. Then, in a speech in parliament, I said political reform is important, but the flavor of the next couple of months is administration reform. Some people here said, "Ah, we're backing down on political reform." But it's not one thing and not the other. We start on a layered level of attacking different problems in Jordan, and all these programs are going to continue. But we're now in a position to really tackle political reform.

We will have a major proposal coming out on political reform.[5] The problem is I have tried to deal with political reform from the top down, and it's not working. I've been trying to engage with this parliament on creating, instead of our current thirty or so political parties, just two or three or four that represent left, right, and center. I've been begging the parliamentarians. There are 110 parliamentarians who are better educated and younger than their predecessors, and I said, "What do you stand for? We know what the older generation stands for, but you, as a young parliamentarian, where do you stand on health? Where do you stand on education? Where do you stand on social services?" I was hoping that we'd be able to tackle the issues of giving enough bite to young parliamentarians so that we could start creating these blocs. If we do this, we said to them, then in the next parliamentary elections, you'll be elected because of your party's political platform and not because you're from this tribe or this village or this particular group. Unfortunately, we're not going to get there, not in this round. So I'm now going to work from the bottom up. We're going to do something in Jordan that has not been done before in the Middle East. And it's serious. I had my first meeting with a very small group, and I said, "You all understand when we start the process, we're talking about true democratic political reform. Once we start this, there's no going back, and it's comprehensive, and it's long term."

You'll notice when we talk about political reform, there's reform also for the security services. I think they're beginning to get the message that you can't have political reform and have the archaic way of doing things.

[1] "Final Communiqué of the Seventh Meeting of the Neighboring Countries of Iraq," Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Amman, Jan. 6, 2005. [2] Interview on Chris Matthews Show, MSNBC, Dec. 12, 2004. [3] White House news release, Jan. 9, 2005. [4] White House news conference, Jan. 10, 2005. [5] On Jan. 26, 2005, King Abdullah announced an initiative to decentralize Jordanian political life, creating directly elected regional assemblies with control over local expenditures. ❖

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