

# Analyzing King Abdullah's Change in the Line of Succession

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

Jordan's King Abdullah stripped his younger half brother Hamzeh of the latter's position as crown prince yesterday. He has not yet named a new successor, though by the terms of the Jordanian constitution Abdullah's ten-year-old son Hussein would automatically inherit the throne.

### Background

In January 1999, Abdullah was named crown prince by his father, King Hussein, just two weeks before the latter's death from cancer. In so doing, Hussein stripped his full brother, Hassan, from the crown princeship, after more than three decades in the role. After assuming the throne, Abdullah himself named his younger half brother Hamzeh as his own crown prince, evidently fulfilling his father's wish. The now twenty-four-year-old Hamzeh, a former Sandhurst cadet who married a cousin earlier this year, is the son of Queen Noor, Hussein's fourth and last wife. (Ali, another of Hussein's sons and the product of his marriage to the Palestinian Alia Toukan, also got married this year, to the daughter of UN Iraq envoy and former Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi.)

Changing lines of succession is a time-honored Hashemite tradition. The late Hussein changed crown princes four times (from his brother Muhammad, to his infant son Abdullah, to his second brother Hassan, and again to his then-grown-up son Abdullah) and he changed the overall line on other occasions, too. In this light, the decision to strip Hamzeh of the succession and award it, by default, to Abdullah's own direct descendants was probably inevitable.

### Abdullah's Move

Announcement of the king's decision to strip his half brother of the crown princeship came in the form of a letter to "my dear brother" Hamzeh. In that note, Abdullah complimented Hamzeh as a "sincere Jordanian soldier, keen to selflessly perform the call of duty." Abdullah then set the predicate for his decision by noting he "personally" had chosen Hamzeh "from amongst all my brothers, including those who are older than you." Abdullah then offered a novel if somewhat contradictory explanation for changing his mind now. On the one hand, Abdullah wrote, the crown princeship is only an "honorary" position without "any authority or any responsibility;" he even cited the late Hussein as the source of authority for the idea of "the honorary concept of the position of Crown Prince." (This point is odd; while the position has no authority it certainly carries responsibility, i.e., the right to inherit the throne.) On the other hand, wrote Abdullah, this honorary role has been too constricting: "Holding this symbolic position has

restrained your freedom and hindered our trusting you with certain responsibilities that you are fully qualified to undertake." As a result, Abdullah concluded, "I have decided to free you from the constraints of the position of Crown Prince in order to give you the freedom to work and undertake any mission or responsibility I entrust you with, along side with all our brothers, the sons of Al Hussein, and other members of the Hashemite Family."

Abdullah did not name a new successor, but that is not a legal requirement. As he wrote to Hamzeh, "As for the position of Crown Prince, I will continue, guided by the Constitution and the good of our beloved Jordan and our noble Hashemite message, to give it my sincere attention." Abdullah was most likely referring to chapter four, article 28, of the Jordanian constitution, which stipulates that "the royal title shall pass from the holder of the throne to his eldest son." The constitution offers the king the option of choosing one of his brothers as "heir apparent," as both the incumbent and his father had done, but it does not actually require any declaration of succession. In the absence of such a declaration, succession automatically passes to the eldest son.

### **Why Change Succession?**

The simplest explanation for the timing of Abdullah's move is probably the most accurate, i.e., he changed the line of succession because he could. Nearly five years after the death of his father, Abdullah no longer operates under his father's shadow and clearly considers himself to be in full control of the Hashemite kingdom. He evidently calculated that he had attained a status in the country such that his decision would be accepted without dissent by courtiers, family members, and common people alike.

Indeed, there have already been some murmurings in the media suggesting that replacing Hamzeh, the son of the American-born Queen Noor, with Hussein, the son of the Palestinian-born Queen Rania, might even enhance Abdullah's popularity. Such rumors should not be exaggerated, however, since Hamzeh himself was widely considered a pious, faithful, and devoted young man, certainly more popular than his mother. There is no reason to believe Hamzeh will actively protest his diminished status, though Hashemites -- descendants of the Prophet Muhammad -- are famous for their long memories. Over time, oppositionists and sidelined stalwarts of the late Hussein may try to enlist Hamzeh in their cause, but Hashemites tend to hang together, perhaps because there are so few of them.

In the event Abdullah dies without further action on succession, his son Hussein will be named king but would not actually rule until 2012, when he reaches the age of eighteen. In the interim, Jordan would be governed either by a single regent or a regency council. It is the king's prerogative to name the regent or the regency council as a precaution in the event of his death; if none is named, then the responsibility falls to the Jordanian cabinet. At the moment, it is not known whether Abdullah has privately taken steps to prepare for this constitutional void; no public announcement has been made.

One intriguing passage in Abdullah's letter suggests a possible alternative route. His reference to having named Hamzeh as crown prince over his older brothers hints that the king may yet have a special role to play for his full brother, Faysal. Indeed, only about a month ago, Abdullah relieved Faysal of his duties as commander of the Jordanian air force and assigned him to Jordanian army headquarters. While some observers suggested this move was in preparation for an eventual elevation of Faysal to serve as chief of the general staff, there is a possibility that Abdullah could name Faysal as crown prince, just as his father named his uncle Hassan crown prince. While the assumption may be that the succession would eventually revert to young Hussein, there is no certainty unless formal decisions to that effect are made. One way to elevate Faysal without risking a diversion in the line of Abdullah would be to issue a royal decree naming Faysal as the regent (or at least a member of the regency council) in the event Abdullah dies before Hussein reaches his majority.

### **Conclusion**

If there had been any doubt, Abdullah's succession move underscores his tight control on the Jordanian political system. This had been manifested earlier this year by the appointment of his able chief of royal protocol as prime minister. At the same time, the succession decision confirms the political coming-of-age of the forty-two-year-old king. It follows on other bold moves he has made, including his reversal of his father's 1990 Gulf War precedent by lending political and material support to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and by spearheading a domestic "Jordan First" campaign that was perceived by many Palestinian-Jordanians as an affront to their delicate standing in local society.

More bold moves may be in the offing. One is Abdullah's effort to project a positive image of Muslim religious tolerance by issuing what he termed his "Amman Message" during Ramadan. Another -- and much riskier -- possibility to look for is Abdullah asserting himself as the moderate spokesman on behalf of Iraqi Sunnis.

*Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, is the author of From Abdullah to Hussein: Jordan in Transition (1994) and [From Hussein to Abdullah: Jordan in Transition \(templateC04.php?CID=106\)](#) (1999). ❖*

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