Middle East Assassinations, 50 Years On

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Articles & Testimony

On Friday, July 20, 1951 - exactly 50 years ago today Jordan's King Abdullah bin Hussein was walking out of Jerusalem's al-Aksa Mosque following noontime prayers when he was shot dead by an unemployed Palestinian tailor.

Twenty years ago this October, Egypt's Anwar Sadat was presiding over an annual military parade when he was gunned down by radical Islamic militants.

Six years ago this November, Israel's Yitzhak Rabin was getting into his car after leading thousands of Israelis in a "song for peace" when he was murdered by a fanatic Jew bent on stopping the Oslo peace process.

In the tumultuous history of Arab-Israeli relations, these three events stand out as seminal moments. The Middle East, regrettably, has had more than its share of political assassinations; indeed, virtually no country in the region has been immune. But among the kings, presidents, and premiers killed by their countrymen, Abdullah, Sadat and Rabin stand out as leaders who themselves sought to change history through sheer acts of will. Their assassinations raise questions, not only about "what might have been" but also about the nature of leadership and the pattern of succession in each of their societies.

Though lightly regarded by the British, his fellow Hashemites and other Arab leaders, the diminutive Abdullah was, in fact, a man of vision and ambition whose reign over the small, poor, weak, backwater of Transjordan left him "trapped in a canary's cage," as he put it. To some, he was an expansionist, always looking for ways to enlarge his kingdom and eventually succeeding with the annexation of part of Palestine -- the West Bank -- after the 1948 war.

To others, he was a realist, recognizing early the benefits that his poor country stood to reap through cooperation with the Zionist entity. Though he led the Arab armies into battle against the newborn Jewish state in May 1948, he also initialed a "non-belligerency" pact with Israel in 1950, an accord that fell apart due to the spinelessness of local Arab notables and the indifference of Britain, still the key external actor. Indeed, a little-known fact is that his assassination prevented Abdullah from keeping another appointment later that day with an Israeli diplomat in Jerusalem. Abdullah's heirs were very different. His son, Talal, was a popular liberal whose reign was cut short after just 11 months due to his schizophrenia. Talal was succeeded by his eldest son, Hussein, who was standing next to Abdullah on that fateful day in July 1951 and would have been killed if the assassin's bullet had not ricocheted off a

ceremonial medal on his princely uniform.

Perhaps that experience led Hussein down a different path than his grandfather. Whereas Abdullah was a risk-taker, Hussein was a conservative, motivated more by the drive to keep what he had than to gain more. For him, the goal was survival in a hostile neighborhood. In his worldview, going to war against Israel in 1967 and siding with Saddam Hussein in 1990/91 were acts of courage and strategic wisdom, for which much was lost, but the kingdom was preserved.

Throughout his 47 years on the throne, Hussein still kept up quiet ties with Israel, especially on security matters, and like his father, he fostered a more liberal polity than almost anywhere else in the Arab world -- a compassionate conservative, as it were. But it was not until 42 years into his reign that Hussein would sign his own formal peace treaty with Israel, waiting for Egypt and the Palestinians to reach their deals first.

No one expected great things of Sadat when, as vice president, he became Egypt's leader when president Gamal Abdul Nasser died in 1970. Sadat was a mediocre personality in a regime of strong men. Few believed he would survive the sometimes bloody intrigue of Cairene politics. Few believed that he would expel the Soviet advisers who controlled the Egyptian army. Few believed that he would wage war against the more powerful Israelis. Few believed that he had a primarily political, not a predatory, purpose, to the war, which was to restore Egyptian prestige and to launch a diplomatic process to regain the balance of the Sinai from Israel. And fewer still believed that he would go to Jerusalem -- "the end of the earth," as he put it -- to tell the Israeli parliament of his vision of "no more war." But Sadat made believers of us all.

Like him, Sadat's successor was a man who inspired low expectations.

Perhaps, as was the case with Hussein, it was the experience of nearly being killed by an assassin's bullet that shaped Hosni Mubarak's worldview. After all, then-vice president Mubarak was sitting next to Sadat on the parade platform that October morning and was himself injured in the shower of machine-gun fire.

The byword for the next 20 years of Mubarak's presidency has been "caution." At home, Mubarak quashed a very real threat from radical fundamentalists that plagued Egypt in the 1980s and much of the 1990s, but has done little since to open political space for liberals and other non-Islamists from whom Egypt has nothing to fear. Whereas Sadat bucked the Arab consensus to forge peace with Israel, Mubarak has taken refuge in the Arab consensus to maintain a limited "cold" peace.

On the one hand, this policy permits a quiet border with Israel and the flow of handsome aid from the United States; on the other hand, it allows Islamist and Nasserist antiSemitism to flower under the garb of "free speech," while Egypt conjures up one issue after another -- from Israel's nuclear capabilities to pan-Islamic interests in Jerusalem holy sites - to attack Israel in international forums and counsel against Palestinian concessions in the peace process. That Mubarak himself has never voluntarily traveled to Israel -- Washington had to twist his arm to attend Rabin's 1995 funeral - stands in stark contrast to Sadat's own courageous journey for peace.

Like Abdullah and Sadat, Rabin led his nation in war and in peace. The first native-born Israeli to rise to the premiership, Rabin was a son of the land whose army career ranged from the Zionists' pre-state militia to the Israel Defense Forces' stunning victory in the Six Day War. Then began Rabin's second career as diplomat, politician and national leader.

Taking political risks did not come easy to Rabin. When Sadat opted for diplomacy after the 1973 war, Rabin was cautious and skeptical; when the United States proposed a modest territorial agreement with Jordan at that time, Rabin held back. But late in life, when his election in 1992 gave him a chance to apply the lessons from a failed term in office in the mid-1970s, Rabin was willing to test the boundaries of the thinkable, a process that culminated in the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles. To be sure, Oslo was a risky gambit, a test of Israel's ability not just to make

peace with an implacable foe, but to remake that foe into a partner for cooperation and coexistence. When he was killed, the jury - the people of Israel - was still very much out.

If Israeli politics followed the pattern of Arab politics after the assassinations of Abdullah and Sadat, then Rabin's successors would have recoiled from peacemaking, built the walls of "fortress Israel" and pulled into their national shell. That is not what happened.

Rabin's first successor, his lifelong antagonist-cum-partner Shimon Peres, pressed on with negotiations on both the Syrian and the Palestinian fronts. However, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's "green light" to terrorism - four lethal bombs in nine black days of February/March 1996 - combined with a military debacle in Lebanon, brought a young Likud leader, Binyamin Netanyahu, to the prime ministership.

For his part, Netanyahu did not undo Oslo, though he had both motive and opportunity. Instead, he slowed the process down, signing deals with Arafat that returned smaller bits of territory - a piece of Hebron, a small percentage of the West Bank - than would have been the case under Labor. Along the way, he legitimized the idea of territorial compromise among Israel's Right, a historic contribution to the pursuit of peace.

His successor, Labor's Ehud Barak, was perhaps the boldest to some, the most reckless - of them all. His strategy was to dispense with step-by-step diplomacy altogether and offer the Palestinians a complete package - all of Gaza, 90-plus percent of the West Bank, large swaths of Jerusalem and a resolution of the festering refugee problem - in exchange for a final end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Arafat said no, choosing further conflict - the 10-month old intifada - rather than a negotiated compromise. That the parties are now mired in a war of attrition, further from peace than any time in the last generation, does not alter the fact that Rabin's successors, each in his own way, risked political careers (and even more) to sustain and advance a very risky process of peacemaking.

In the Middle East, assassinations appear to have given birth to two contrasting trends. In Jordan and Egypt, the inheritors turned insular, inward and conservative. In Israel, the political heirs forged ahead, perhaps even more brazenly than circumstances warranted. These examples, of course, are too few to reach some general conclusions about the differences between Arab and Israeli societies or the contrast between authoritarian and democratic regimes, though it is transparently true that peaceful transfers of power are exceptional in the Arab world while routine in Israel. The stories of what happened in these three cases may simply reflect what the political traffic in each country could bear.

It is clear, however, that in none of these cases did the assassin truly achieve his political goal. A half century after Abdullah's killing, the Hashemites are at peace with Israel and rule Palestinian-majority Jordan with far more popular legitimacy than they had in 1951. Two decades after Sadat's murder, preserving the strategic aspects of the the Egyptian-Israel peace treaty - "no more war" - seems to be one of the few constants of Cairo's foreign policy. And despite the collapse of the Oslo peace process six years after Rabin's assassination, his successors cannot truthfully be faulted for lack of effort.

The one bright spot in this dreary tale is that an assassin's bullet may slow down history or perhaps force a detour, but it does not thrust history into reverse. ❖

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