

Jordan's Survivor Passes On

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Articles & Testimony

"However much one may admire the courage of this lonely young king," wrote former British minister Anthony Nutting, "it is difficult to avoid the conclusion his days are numbered." Those words appeared in the New York Herald Tribune on July 31, 1958. Yesterday, more than 40 years later, Jordan's King Hussein bin Talal died after an intrepid fight against cancer. He was 63.

Born in Amman on Nov. 14, 1935, from a family that traces its lineage to the Prophet Mohammad, Hussein was the eldest son of the eldest son of the kingdom's founder, Abdullah. In the first of many brushes with fate, Hussein was at his grandfather's side when the latter was felled by an assassin's bullet in Jerusalem in July 1951; Hussein himself escaped death only because a stray shot caromed off a medal on his chest. One year later, in August 1952, Hussein was named king when parliament deposed his father, Talal, because of mental illness. After a brief training course at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, Hussein formally assumed his constitutional powers in May 1953.

Jordan, like its king, was an adolescent, still raw and unformed, flooded with refugees from the 1948 war, beholden to foreign powers and vulnerable to the wild ideological currents of the Arab world. After an interlude of tutelage under his grandfather's advisers, the young king struck out on his own. At first, he tacked to the right -- and earned the wrath of his people -- by promising to join the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact; just weeks later, he tacked to the left -- and won back his popularity -- by firing the British general Glubb Pasha, who commanded Jordan's army. For the next four decades, the king would thus navigate the dangerous shoals of the Middle East.

Hussein faced the challenges of two wars with Israel (1967 and 1973), two near-wars with Syria (1970 and 1980), one civil war (Black September, 1970-71), and numerous thwarted coups and assassination attempts. He also weathered his share of automobile crashes, bomb explosions, a previous bout of cancer and a near-fatal bleeding ulcer. His prime ministers have been blown up and shot down. In his 1962 autobiography, the young king was brutally honest when he wrote that "Arab lands are not like other lands. Life is all too often held cheaply, and death often passes unheeded." Hussein's may be an exception.

Throughout his rule Hussein's drive to survive was paramount. In contrast to his adventurous grandfather, he was profoundly conservative, driven more by the fear of losing what he had than by the desire to gain more. At times, this required him to accept bitter failure, such as the attack on Jerusalem and the subsequent loss of the West Bank to Israel in 1967. And sometimes, it required Hussein to make deals with the devil, such as a strategic embrace of

Saddam Hussein in the 1980s that lingered into the Gulf War, costing Jordan dearly in its relations with erstwhile Gulf Arab patrons as well as the U.S. But painful as these setbacks were, they were only tactical defeats in a remarkably successful strategy of survival.

As he matured, so did his kingdom. When Hussein first came to power, Amman was an overcrowded village, Jordan a regional backwater, and Jordanians a poor, undereducated people. Hussein oversaw a vast transformation inside his kingdom. Today, Amman is a sprawling, modern metropolis, home to half the nation's five million people, and Jordanians can boast one of the highest literacy rates and lowest infant-mortality rates in the Third World.

For Hussein, investing in his people's education and health was wise since Jordan lacks much else in the way of natural resources. Indeed, until his last days, Hussein was forced, hat in hand, to balance his and his country's books through the generosity of foreigners, first British, then American, Arab, European and Japanese. Throughout, Hussein himself was Jordan's principal export -- first as the "Plucky Little King," then as the brave soldier fighting Palestinian extremists, most recently as the warrior making peace with Israel.

Dealing with Israel and managing the Palestinian problem was the never-ending challenge of Hussein's career. An intensely proud Arab patriot, he nevertheless understood that Hashemite Jordan and Zionist Israel shared a fear of Arab radicalism and Palestinian irredentism. In private meetings and then through highly public acts, including his moving graveside eulogy of Yitzhak Rabin, Hussein braved Arab criticism to nurture Jordan's relationship with the Jewish state. But the king was always wary of acting precipitously. Hence, his initial reluctance to call in the army against Yasser Arafat's fedayeen in Black September and his refusal to join the Camp David summit talks in 1978. only after Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization cut their own deals with Israel did Hussein feel comfortable' enough to take the formal leap, too.

Hussein married four times; he had children with each wife and adopted even more. To the end, family was uppermost in his mind. Just days before his death, he willed himself back to Amman in order summarily to dismiss his brother and long-time heir-apparent, Hassan, in favor of his eldest son, Abdullah. The speed and manner of the act, reminiscent of Ottoman intrigues or Shakespearean tales, shocked many. The severity of the blow seemed out of character for a man known as a courteous, courtly and benevolent ruler. But, as one historian wrote of him: "[Hussein] knows how to bide his time and he knows when to hit hard."

A man who became king when Harry Truman was president leaves multiple legacies. Though not Jordan's first king, he is truly the father of his country. Most Jordanians have known no other leader. Raising survival to the level of statesmanship -- indeed, defying the odds to die a natural death -- was itself no mean achievement. Not just making peace with Israel but infusing it with humanity was a priceless contribution. Though he leaves behind a novice successor and the still unfinished business of nation building, Jordan today stands a much better chance of surviving the next half-century than it did when he came to power a half-century ago.

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