

Succession Prospects in Jordan: Context, Options, and Implications

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Jan 21, 1999

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Brief Analysis

King Hussein's return to Amman, after six months of medical treatment in the United States, has produced not only jubilation among Jordanians at the monarch's apparent recovery but also intense speculation about impending changes in the Hashemite line of succession. At this sensitive moment -- with economic perils at home and challenges from Iraq and "final status" issues abroad -- a change in the succession line within Jordan could pose serious challenges to near-term stability inside the kingdom and regionally as well.

The family tree: Hussein became king at age 17, in August 1952, following the deposition, by parliament, of his ill father, Talal. Because of Hussein's young age, a "regency council" ruled in his name until he formally assumed his constitutional powers in May 1953. For the first decade of his reign, his middle brother -- Muhammad (b. 1940) -- served as crown prince. In 1962, Hussein's second wife, the British-born Princess Muna (Toni Avril Gardiner) gave birth to the couple's first son, Abdullah, who immediately replaced his uncle as the crown prince. In 1965, the king stripped his three-year old son of the crown princship and instead bestowed it on his youngest brother, Hassan (b. 1947), Muhammad having been deemed no longer suitable for the position. In order to make that move, a constitutional amendment was approved by the Jordanian parliament giving the monarch the right to name his brother or his eldest son as crown prince. While most commentators have focused on Abdullah's lineage -- son of a non-Arab, non-Muslim wife -- as the reason for the change, this is incorrect; the more straightforward reason was that at a time of great challenge to the Hashemite throne from Nasserists, Ba'thists, and other Arab radicals, the king was apparently convinced by family members, courtiers and tribal leaders that Jordan needed an older, more mature crown prince than the infant Abdullah.

Hassan, who is the third crown prince to hold that title under Hussein, has served without interruption for the past 34 years. While there have been periodic episodes of apparent tension between the two brothers -- e.g., when large-scale rioting broke out in 1989 on Hassan's watch, when Hussein was visiting the United States, or when, in the mid-1990s, the king supported as prime minister someone (Abdul Karim Kabariti) who did not shy from clashes with the crown prince -- rumors about actually stripping Hassan of the succession were usually quashed with alacrity by the royal court. Indeed, in recent years, the two brothers seemed to have forged a more intimate ruling partnership than ever before, especially in terms of their joint effort to pursue peace with Israel, despite popular and bureaucratic

opposition.

Additional wrinkles in the succession story were added in the mid-1970s. In 1975, the king's third wife -- the Palestinian-born Alia -- gave birth to a son, Ali. Soon thereafter, Hussein dispatched a letter to Jordan's National Consultative Council (parliament at that time having been suspended due to the loss of the West Bank in 1967) stating the king's intention to have Ali named as "heir" when he turned 18 years old. That letter had no force of law and, in the course of time, Ali's political prospects waned. In 1978, Hassan's wife, the Pakistani-born Sarvath, gave birth to her first son, Rashed, who, according to the Jordanian constitution, would be crown prince should Hassan become king. Then, in 1979, Hussein's fourth and current wife -- the American-born Noor (Lisa Halaby) -- gave birth to her first son, Hamzeh, now studying at Britain's Sandhurst military academy.

From rumor to reality? Hussein's six months in America constituted his longest period of time outside Jordan since his own schooling at Sandhurst, and from virtually the first day of his absence, Amman was rife with rumors about succession, i.e., his own. While the king had been ill before -- he underwent surgery for cancer and had one kidney removed in 1992 -- the current bout with non-Hodgkins lymphoma suggested to many that the man who has ruled his country since Truman was in the White House may, in fact, be mortal. Hussein himself fed this sense last August by giving Hassan wider regency powers than ever before. Soon, however, stories began to emerge from Rochester, Minnesota and the Jordanian capital that the king may be taking advantage of his distance from Jordan to view succession in a new perspective. Rumors and counter-rumors were fed largely by palace intrigue and the machinations of various hangers-on to the king and crown prince. Several public comments, including statements by Queen Noor during an August 1998 televised interview with Larry King that were interpreted as dismissive of the crown prince, added to the speculative frenzy.

In recent days, King Hussein has done nothing to stamp out the frenzy and, in fact, has provided considerable grist for the mill. Signals came in the form of small but significant slights of the crown prince before the king's return to Amman (referring to him only briefly in a televised address from London and then as the king's "deputy," not as crown prince) and statements by the king that he would, upon his return, make a "comprehensive review" of critical issues facing Jordan. A clearer indication came in the royal court's weekend denial of a story in the Arabic press that Hussein had discussed succession with U.S. officials; instead of taking the opportunity to reaffirm Hassan's position, the court's statement simply noted that the king did not discuss such matters in Washington because he alone "is the one to decide all that serves Jordan's interests." Yesterday, the king's comments to CNN -- that he has some "thoughts and ideas" on the matter of succession; that "Hassan is not the sole focus of my attention at this stage;" and that he "did not mean at all" that his 1965 appointment of Hassan as crown prince would be "the end of the [succession] story" -- seemed to remove doubt that reconsideration of the line of succession is at the top of his "comprehensive review." It is said that Hussein would like to clarify the situation, once and for all, prior to his return to the Mayo Clinic for a March check-up.

Hussein's options: After his "review," there are three options Hussein could pursue:

- Reach the conclusion that he had been right to have Hassan as his number-two all these years and reaffirm him as crown prince. This anxiety-filled episode will then have been some sort of comeuppance to Hassan for some perceived affront, but no more than that.
- Affirm Hassan as successor but announce, perhaps through the little-known mechanism of the Hashemite family council, a line of succession after Hassan that reverts back to Hussein's sons, stripping Rashed of his chance at the throne. This would effectively be to adopt the Saudi succession model, in which the family recognizes an heir apparent and an heir to the heir. In Jordan's case, this would require a constitutional amendment. For Hussein, the problem with this scenario is that no sitting monarch can ever be sure that his

decisions will not be overturned by a future monarch.

- Remove Hassan from the crown princeship and bestow it on one of the king's own children. The two most likely candidates are Abdullah, a lieutenant general in the Jordanian armed forces and commander of Special Operations, and Hamzeh, who was at the king's side through much of his Mayo Clinic treatment. Naming Hamzeh would require a constitutional amendment; naming his first-born son, Abdullah, would not.

Implications: Should Hussein decide to strip Hassan of the succession so soon after having him serve as regent -- especially without attributing to the latter any major blunder, obvious failure or embarrassing indiscretion -- it would be an earthquake in the Hashemite family, inside Jordan, and in the region. Inside the small Hashemite family -- which has perhaps a dozen major male figures, compared with thousands in the Saudi ruling clan -- one can only speculate on the aftershocks. For Hassan, a highly accomplished man whose situation placed him, for decades, in a nearly impossible position, the ignominy would be overwhelming. There is no constitutional role for an ex-crown prince and, unlike Muhammad and Abdullah, Hassan has spent his entire adult life in this role. In the event of Hussein's early passing, it would be difficult, though not impossible, to imagine Hassan playing a mentor role to his nephew, the new king.

For Jordan itself, such a change would inject a note of instability into the kingdom precisely when the peace process, Iraq, and Syria pose so many other challenges. In contrast to many Arab states, a key element of Jordan's stability has long been its understood (and accepted) line of succession; neither Egypt, nor Syria, nor Iraq, nor the Palestinian Authority can boast a succession as clear as Jordan's has been for more than three decades. At the most fundamental level, therefore, a change from Hassan to one of the king's sons (whether the young and untested Hamzeh or the more mature and experienced Abdullah) would highlight an attribute that is a close cousin to instability, namely uncertainty.

Moreover, such a switch would serve as a reminder that despite its efforts to democratize and to build a state of institutions, Jordan in the 1990s remains a true monarchy, in virtually all senses of that word. After 34 years, the crown prince's role had itself been institutionalized; in some ways, Jordanians viewed the position with at least as much respect as its occupant. A swift change would be a blow whose reverberations will be felt in numerous, and perhaps unforeseen ways, at all levels of society.

On the regional and international level, it is difficult to gauge the impact of a possible ouster of Hassan. Much depends on whether Hussein remains on the scene for a number of years or whether the new crown prince ascends to the throne in a relatively (and regrettably) short period of time. Hassan is associated with three major issues: opposition to Arab hard-liners, especially Yasir Arafat and Hafiz al-Asad; good relations with Israel; and economic development at home. The first two are, of course, the king's policies, too. However, it will be more difficult for Jordan to deal with Syria and the PLO without the flexibility afforded by the good-cop/bad-cop strategy the brothers often were able to employ, and the absence of Hassan's creative and committed approach to normalization with Israel may slow that important process, too. On economic matters, Hassan's departure could aggravate the already sorry state of the Jordanian economy. It would mean that Jordan loses the royal who best understood economics and who took an abiding interest in it, sending a chill through potential foreign investors. If Hassan goes, that will raise the question of what will happen to the impressive network of economic advisors, social planners, and scientific and technological institutes he patronized.

In the long run, events may bear out the wisdom of a late-course correction by King Hussein. He is a proven survivor, with sound instincts, who may find a way to pass on that knack to the next generation of Hashemites. He is known to bear the pain of having taken the crown princeship from his brother Muhammad, thereby removing from royal succession Muhammad's two able sons, Talal and Ghazi, and of having stripped it from his own son, Abdullah. In

contrast to 1965, today he does have options. Abdullah, for example, is only fourteen years younger than Hassan and more than twice Hussein's age when the latter was named king. At the same time, history shows that the king has, on occasion, made quick, mercurial, perhaps impetuous decisions that have not served him (or Jordan) well. Given the vital role that the Hashemite kingdom plays in regional stability, one can only hope that a decision to change the line of succession -- should one come to pass -- makes Jordan stronger, more cohesive and better able to cope with the array of challenges looming on the horizon.

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