

CHOOSING JORDAN'S HEIR

The story behind King Hussein's choice of successor shows that palace intrigue is alive and well in the modern world.

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Jordan is known to expatriates as 'the Middle East for beginners', and you do not have to go far in Amman to understand why. The well-laid roads are filled with smart cars, gleaming as best they can in a country which consists largely of dust; the pavements beside them are cooled by the shadows of new hotels and office blocks. But now and again, between the high-rises, you catch sight of an open patch of land where a shepherd in a keffiyeh tends his scrawny flock: a reminder that for many of the five million people in Jordan, life has not changed greatly since Biblical times.

There is a handy parallel here with the nation's monarchy. The members of the Hashemite dynasty have long impressed Westerners with their eagerness to embrace the modern world: they attend British and American schools, wear well-cut suits, speak faultless English. Behind the scenes, however, there are glimpses of palace politics that seem to belong to another age – and nothing demonstrates this better than the story of the present king's succession. Brought up to believe that he would never inherit the throne, Abdullah found himself thrust into the role of Crown Prince – displacing an uncle who had held the position for over 30 years – as a result of his dying father's eleventh-hour change of heart. It is a story of ambition, skulduggery, and fatal misjudgement: as the King's cousin Prince Raad, remarks, 'Shakespeare could not have come up with something more dramatic.'

The reverence of Jordanians for the late King Hussein is palpable. In government offices, his portrait invariably hangs beside that of his son, his intense gaze still commanding respect. An essential part of Hussein's mystique was his great courtesy – he was famous for addressing his most unassuming subjects as 'Sir', and they in turn are extraordinarily polite. (Approach an automatic door and they will hurry forward to activate it for you, rather than put your front foot to the trouble; taxi-drivers, far from forbidding passengers to smoke, will smilingly offer you a cigarette before lighting up themselves.) 'The man in the street,' says Prince Raad, 'was his number-one priority' – and it was a policy which stood Hussein in good stead, helping him to retain power for 47 years in one of the most turbulent regions on earth.

This is not to suggest that the members of the Hashemite dynasty are strangers to glamour. King Abdullah has, in his 31-year-old wife Queen Rania, the most ravishing consort of any monarch alive – a Julia Roberts of the Jordan Valley. Princess Firyal, the ex-wife of his uncle Muhammad, is endlessly photographed at parties in London and New York with Lauders, Rockefellers and Niarchoses. But in a country whose stony ground yields none of the oil which has enriched its Arab neighbours, and where hundreds of thousands of people live in refugee camps, it is as well not to flash your tiara too often.

Queen Rania learnt this early on, when her interest in fashion earned her the label 'the handbag queen' in Amman. 'She went about it the wrong way, giving interviews to glossy magazines and so on,' agrees one member of the royal circle. 'She should have been more low-key. Some people did get a bit fed up – but she's learnt her lesson now.'

It is partly to ward off such criticism that, while the male members of the Royal Family take important posts in the Government and armed forces, their wives and daughters often earn their keep through royal non-

governmental organisations – or, in Jordanian shorthand, RINGOs.

‘They see all the attacks on the British Royal Family,’ says an English resident of Amman, ‘and prefer to be more on the Scandinavian model. They’re easy, relaxed and informal, rather than detached from ordinary people.’ Queen Rania’s Jordan River Foundation concerns itself with child abuse, employment for underprivileged women, and the environment. ‘She’s not just a royal figurehead,’ insists its Director General, Maha Khatib. ‘She very hands-on. She attends all the board meetings, knows all the details.’

Prince Raad’s Swedish wife, Princess Majda, sets a fine example, having worked with the disabled for 30 years. She and her husband live in a comfortable but modest house in the suburbs of Amman, dominated by wall-sized paintings by the Prince’s mother. Apart from a tableful of royal photographs in heavy silver frames, the only obvious clues to their status are (at the gate) an armed sentry and (on the roof) a satellite dish of such awesome proportions that it suggests a circus elephant balancing on a stool.

A contemporary of King Hussein’s, Prince Raad was brought up in Iraq and fled to Jordan when his cousin King Feisal was overthrown in the revolution of 1958. For the last 25 years he has held the post of Lord Chamberlain, making him, in his own words, ‘a kind of ombudsman’. His face has folded like a mastiff’s with age, and as he speaks of the nation his family has ruled for 81 years, you cannot but be aware that he has seen history shaped at first hand.

The Hashemite dynasty, which claims direct descent from the Prophet Mohammed, is not native to Jordan: it originated in Hejaz, a kingdom famous for the sacred city of Mecca, and now part of Saudi Arabia. From here, in 1916, Prince Raad’s grandfather Sharif Hussein and T.E. Lawrence led the Arab Revolt to drive out the ruling Turks. In the

aftermath, Sharif – having overoptimistically proclaimed himself ‘King of the Arabs’ – lost his homeland to his enemy Ibn bin Saud, and was given the newly created state of Transjordan by the British.

‘My grandfather’s aim was to show a new way for everyone in the Arab world,’ says Prince Raad. ‘That approach gave Jordan a dignified, tolerant attitude towards minorities. There is a sense of openness here.’ Titles and social standing, he adds, ‘are worth nothing if they are not used to tear down barriers. You have to earn the support of the people.’

The sentiments, on the face of it, of a thoroughly modern monarchy. But Jordan has a fair way to go on the road to democracy: although it has a parliament, it is the King who calls elections and chooses the Prime Minister. He also gets to choose his successor, who can be any one of his sons or brothers: and since King Hussein’s extended family presented nine possible candidates, the room for manoeuvre in his case was considerable.

King Hussein (habitually referred to in royal circles as ‘His Majesty’ or simply ‘HM’) married four times, fathering eleven children. His Majesty’s first marriage – to his older cousin Dina – lasted only 19 months, and produced one daughter, Alia. His second, to Toni Gardiner (an Englishwoman from an Army family, who converted to Islam and took the name Princess Muna) also ended in divorce, but not before four children had been born: Abdullah, his younger brother Feisal, and twin sisters, Zein and Aisha.

Queen Alia, Hussein’s next wife, gave him a son and daughter, Ali and Haya, before dying tragically in a helicopter crash. Finally, in 1978, Lisa Halaby – an American of Lebanese descent – became Queen Noor al-Hussein. A clever, determined Princeton graduate, Noor bore the King two sons and two daughters – Hamzah, Hashim, Iman and Raiyah; and no one doubted

that in her book Hamzah was the perfect heir.

The game of musical chairs that would eventually leave Abdullah sitting on the royal throne began at his birth in 1962. As Hussein's first son, he was immediately named heir; but then the King recognised the danger to the country if he died while Abdullah was a minor. He therefore appointed his brother Hassan as Crown Prince – a title which Hassan was to hold until two weeks before Hussein's death.

It was in 1998, when King Hussein travelled to the USA for six months' cancer treatment at the Mayo Clinic – leaving Hassan, then 6?, as Regent – that the issue came to a head. 'The whole of Jordan went to visit him,' says a senior diplomat, 'except Hassan – that was his big mistake. The rest of the family were all jockeying for position – in the most civilised way – and Noor persuaded Hussein that Hassan should be replaced, thinking that Hussein would choose Hamzah.'

Hassan's position was further weakened by reports that his Pakistani wife Princess Sarvath – in anticipation of becoming Queen – had ordered one of the royal palaces to be redecorated. In the meantime, outlandish rumours about Queen Noor were also being circulated: that she was a CIA agent, that she was the parent of an illegitimate black child, and so on. After his return, King Hussein wrote his brother a furious open letter in which he defended Noor against 'slandering and falsehoods' – and named Abdullah as his successor.

Some believe that Hassan would have lost the succession regardless of outside interference – 'At the end of the day,' says a British diplomat, 'King Hussein thought that he was not the right person to take the country forward: he was not dynamic enough' – and that this public denouncement was needed to justify the choice of the comparatively unqualified Abdullah. Nevertheless, insists a friend of the family, the

letter was grotesquely unfair: 'It was the most cruel thing, after Hassan had spent 35 years as Crown Prince. There are many things you can criticise him for – for being moody, and long-winded – but never for lacking loyalty to his brother or his country.'

Hassan failed to visit Hussein, the friend adds, only because he believed that it was his duty to remain in Jordan. As for the rumoured redecoration of the palace, this was nonsense: Princess Sarvath had simply visited the kitchens to discuss arrangements for a diplomatic visit, and – shocked at the lack of hygiene – had asked for them and other parts of the palace to be cleaned up. 'Noor would have stood back and let the staff get on with it,' says the friend, 'but Sarvath doesn't keep her mouth shut – she had to get involved.' So the rumour-mongers went to town: by such apparently trivial events are the fates of nations changed.

With Hassan discredited, Queen Noor must have felt that the way was open for Hamzah, who was generally agreed to be Hussein's favourite son. Hamzah is a serious and sober young man, who distinguished himself in his schooldays at Harrow as a historian, a public speaker and an athlete. (A passion for sport is endemic in the Royal Family: Queen Noor played hockey and basketball at Princeton, the Oxford-educated Princess Haya is an international showjumper, and Prince Feisal helps to organise the Pan-Arab Games.) He is also the spitting image of his father – unlike Abdullah, who is sometimes known as 'the English King' because of his pale eyes and difficulty in speaking classical Arabic.

Among Hussein's other sons, Ali had blown his chances of succession during an excessively wild youth; Feisal, despite holding high rank in the air force, was considered a lightweight. Abdullah had a reputation as a playboy, with his father's passion for women and fast cars, and a love of practical jokes (Peter Hinchcliffe, a former British Ambassador to

Amman, remembers him arranging an elaborate device to raise the French flag and play the *Marseillaise* when Hinchcliffe arrived to visit Princess Muna). And although he was popular and respected as head of Jordan's special forces – something which makes his present position especially secure – he admits that he had no ambitions beyond the army.

Had King Hussein lived a few more years, there is little doubt that Hamzah would have succeeded him. But Hamzah was still only 18; and in the meantime, there was another visitor to the King's sickbed: the unaffected, impeccably behaved Princess Muna.

'Princess Muna never gave up hope that Abdullah would become King,' says a diplomat who knows her. 'Although King Hussein divorced her, it was mainly for political reasons, and they remained on good terms: they used to have lunch together every Sunday, and Muna became a kind of grandmother figure to the family, because a lot of them didn't get on with Noor. Muna wouldn't have rubbished Hamzah, but she would certainly have made the case for Abdullah.' Whatever she said had the desired effect: more than three decades after he had first held the title, Abdullah became once more the heir to the throne.

At first King Hussein's cancer treatment appeared to have been successful, and he returned from America to streets filled with cheering subjects (another source of conflict with Hassan, who had recommended a low-key reception). But the remission was a brief one: in February 1999, he died, and Abdullah became King.

Abdullah immediately set about healing the rifts in the family. His first move was to name Hamzah as Crown Prince – though there is nothing to stop him giving the title to his own young son, Hussein, in due course. Prince Ali has since been made head of the royal bodyguard, while Feisal commands the airforce.

Hassan, however, was left out in the cold, as were the courtiers and advisers closest to him. Instead, Abdullah – announcing that his main priority was the country’s beleaguered economy – surrounded himself with a cabal of young businessmen such as Karim Kawar, a 36-year-old IT expert who is his new Ambassador to Washington.

‘King Abdullah has what we call in Arabic “hot blood”,’ says Khalid Irani, head of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature. ‘He wants to push things forward *now*, and it suits a young man like me very well.’

It doesn’t suit everyone, though. Abdullah’s shedding of senior advisers has caused considerable resentment among the excluded, whose murmurings recently caused him to inveigh publicly against Amman’s political salons. ‘There *is* a sort of tug-of-war with the old guard,’ admits Prince Raad. ‘But there has to be a change somehow.’

The new king has particular impatience with Jordan’s bureaucracy. ‘This is what he got from the Army – he doesn’t kid around,’ says Marwan Juma, one of his King’s economic advisers. ‘When you’re told, “Capture that hill”, you capture that hill.’ Abdullah has delighted his subjects by visiting government offices and hospitals in elaborate disguise to witness the treatment of ordinary citizens, and then hauling the managers over the coals.

Becoming King, Juma claims, has not changed Abdullah: ‘When he was a young prince he would go around in jeans and boots, and tuck his gun in the back of his belt. He was an easygoing, modest person – and it’s the same thing now.’

Perhaps not quite as easygoing, though. The troubled state of the Middle East means that the King and Queen can no longer eat in local restaurants and drop in casually on friends. But they and their three children still live in an unostentatious four-storey house, where the King

takes his turn at the cooking. In the words of a diplomat's wife, 'They're as relaxed as you can be when you're always looking over your shoulder.'

In domestic politics, Rania serves a useful purpose, since two-thirds of the population are Palestinians like herself. The much-anticipated Battle of the Queens between Rania and Noor has failed to materialise: although Noor retains houses in Amman and Aqaba, she now spends most of the time in the US, where her daughters Iman and Raiyah are at school, and Hamzah is attending Harvard. 'She's given back the turf that she occupied,' says one Amman resident. 'She knows that Jordan isn't big enough for two Queens.'

Of the other losers under the new order, the most bitter is said to be Princess Savarath, who has seen her husband – and by extension her son – forfeit the chance of becoming King of Jordan. Hassan has borne his demotion more stoically ('He has behaved as you would expect him to,' says a former palace employee: 'like a prince') and has recently taken a minor governmental role as the head of an initiative to improve Islamic-Christian relations.

But it may be that history has not finished with him yet. There is a palace in a neighbouring state which could shortly be in need of a new occupant: and if, as some political commentators have speculated, the Hashemite dynasty manages to turn back the clock and reclaim it, then the world could yet be paying its respects to King Hassan – of Iraq.