

An atmosphere of instability and crisis

World leaders gather at King Hussein's funeral

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The public funeral of King Hussein of Jordan conducted with great pomp and ceremony this Monday in the capital of Amman, was an extraordinary, if rather bizarre, spectacle that has served to underscore the highly inflammable and contradictory character of political relations throughout the region, and internationally.

Delegations and representatives of 75 different countries were in attendance--a greater turnout than for the funeral of either Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister assassinated in 1995, or Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian President who met a similar fate in 1981. The US delegation included Bill Clinton as well as three former US presidents--Bush, Carter and Ford--senior officials and policy advisers. French President Jacques Chirac, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Prince Charles were present as was Russian President Boris Yeltsin who dragged himself from his sick bed and, against the advice of his doctors, flew to Amman only to leave before the service.

The funeral brought together bitter enemies in the strangest of political paradoxes. At the last moment, Syria's President Hafez Assad, who in 1958 had ordered his jet fighters to shoot down Hussein's plane and had set in motion numerous other assassination attempts, arrived in Amman to head his country's delegation. For the first time, Assad took part in a public ceremony alongside a 23-person delegation from Israel, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Top officials from Iraq and Libya, countries still technically at war with Israel, were present as were representatives from the Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas. The guests included Hamas leader Khaled Meshal, who was the target of an assassination attempt in Amman in 1997, and Efraim Halevy, director of the Israeli intelligence service Mossad, who ordered the failed attack.

The turnout at the ceremony was only matched by the gushing tributes in the international media for King Hussein and his family. The TV cameras focussed attention on the grief displayed by Jordanians in the streets over the death of the king. Commentators variously portrayed him as a man of the people, a popular monarch with "the common touch," as the builder of the modern Jordanian nation and the "greatest peacemaker" in the so-called Middle East peace process.

What was missing from all accounts was any explanation as to why the dead monarch should merit a level of attention and glorification at odds with the actual political and economic significance of Jordan--an artificial construct of the great power intrigues during and after World War I. It is, after all, a country the size of the US state of South Carolina, seven eighths of which is arid desert, with a population of around 5 million, a GDP of about \$US8 billion, lacking in oil or other valuable natural resources, and hemmed in all sides by larger, more powerful and often hostile nation states.

The significance of the focus on Hussein and Jordan is two-fold. Firstly,

the leaders were not paying their respects to a representative of the Arab masses but were mourning the loss of a valuable political asset who for 47 years served as a rather shameless tool for the machinations of the major powers, including Israel, in the region. The outpouring of praise appeared to be in direct proportion to the subservience of the Jordanian regime. It is worth noting that the Israeli leadership, for whom Jordan has become virtually a client state, declared a day of mourning to mark Hussein's death and flew its flags at half-mast.

There was also no doubt an element of admiration for an autocrat who had clung to power so tenaciously for so long, surviving at least 12 assassination attempts and seven coup plots through a mixture of ruthlessness, cunning and sheer luck. No-one believed when Hussein was proclaimed king at the age of 16 in 1952 that his reign would last for more than four decades. Yet with the backing first of Britain, then of the US, he and his semi-feudal regime were able to continually tack through the ever-changing and conflicting interests of the Middle East--and survive.

Secondly, the attendance of world leaders is a mark of the great instability of the times--in Jordan, the neighbouring West Bank and Israel, throughout the region and internationally. It is ironic that for all the absurd talk about Hussein as the father of peace and stability within the region, the growing economic and political crisis in Jordan itself could turn out to be the spark which ignites the Middle Eastern tinderbox. Just days before his death Hussein conducted what amounted to a palace coup, inserting his 37-year-old son Abdullah as his successor in place of his younger brother Hussan. The new king is a virtual unknown with no political experience, whose only training is in elite schools and colleges in Britain and the US and a career in the Jordanian military, specialising significantly in counter-terrorism.

The palace intrigue simply highlights the narrow stratum on which the regime rests and the autocratic methods of its rule. Presiding over a country with more than two thirds of its population Palestinian, many of them poor workers and farmers, Hussein rested heavily on the support of his Bedouin army drawn predominantly from his own Hashemite tribe. Throughout his reign, Hussein ruled as a near absolute monarch with both executive and legislative powers. From 1957 to 1990, all political parties were banned. Only the lower house of parliament is subject to any form of elections, the upper house or Senate being chosen from the royal family and their close allies. Every aspect of Jordanian life is under the scrutiny of the monarch's secret police, the Muhabarat. Only last year new press censorship laws were imposed.

Jordan faces deepening economic woes, growing social polarisation and political instability. But the same could be said of virtually every country represented at Hussein's funeral. Across the Jordanian border in the West Bank and Israel, the much vaunted peace process remains at an impasse. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is facing national elections and his

ruling Likud Party breaking up so rapidly that everyone breathed a sigh of relief after the country's delegation managed to make it through the ceremonies without a public brawl.

The region itself is an arena of intense great power rivalry for the control of its immediate oil reserves and of the routes for potential pipelines from the Caspian Sea and Central Asian oil reserves. The US, France, Britain, Germany, and Japan are engaged in a ferocious struggle with one another and seeking their own separate deals with various sections of the Arab bourgeoisie. In a period of enormous volatility and shifting alliances, the funeral of Hussein provided an ideal opportunity for talks and negotiations, both open and secret. In a certain sense, no-one could afford not to be present.

In many ways, Hussein was a typical representative of the venal Arab bourgeoisie--a thin, privileged layer on which imperialism has relied over the last 50 years to defend its interests throughout the Middle East. But in his regime, all the characteristics--duplicity, instability, autocratic rule and dependence on great power backing--were heightened by the inherent weakness of the Jordanian state.

Hussein was born in 1935 when the British mandate or protectorate of Transjordan had been in existence for just 12 years. It was an artificial creation of British colonial policy, which owed its existence to substantial financial subsidies from London. The borders of the territory were not determined by ancient ties or national bonds but were literally drawn in the sands of the desert in 1923 by the then Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill, who later boasted of having created Jordan "in an afternoon".

Its origins lie in the ambitions of Hussein's great grandfather Sharif Hussein, a leader of the Hashemites, a desert clan based in Hijaz, the site of the Muslim holy places of Mecca and Medina and now part of Saudi Arabia. If anything distinguished the Hashemites from other Arab tribes in the Middle East it was their willingness to sell themselves to the highest bidder. Britain initially rejected offers by Arab nationalists to conduct a war against the Ottoman Turkish Empire in return for British recognition of Arab independence. But in 1915, following the disastrous defeat of the Allied landings at Gallipoli, Britain sent a letter to the Hashemites accepting their terms.

As a result, Sharif Hussein together with his sons Abdullah and Feisal declared in 1916 what became known as the Arab Revolt, made famous by the popularisation of the exploits of the British agent T.E. Lawrence--better known as "Lawrence of Arabia". Feisal led the allies into Damascus, the present Syrian capital, in October 1918, and temporarily established his own rule.

But the British had no intention of keeping their promises. The Sykes-Picot agreement, signed in 1916 with the French, partitioned the Ottoman Empire between the two powers, ceding control of Syria to French imperialism. Having deceived the Hashemites during the war, Britain then proceeded to use them as willing servants in its domination of the region. Feisal and his retinue were shifted to Iraq under British tutelage.

British plans in the region were further complicated by its pledge made under the Balfour Declaration of 1917 for "a national home for the Jewish people" in its mandate of Palestine. Fearing the danger of local revolts as Jewish settlers moved into the territory, the British established Transjordan with Feisal's elder brother Abdullah as its nominal monarch in the eastern deserts of Palestine.

Transjordan was to become a virtual prison camp into which Palestinians were herded and a military bastion against the designs of France within the area. Britain retained strict control through the establishment of the Arab Legion, which was drawn from the Hashemite tribe; it was organised, trained and officered by the British and became the strongest military force within the region. Even though Jordan was granted formal independence in 1946, its army remained under the leadership of a British general and officers. In 1948, the Jordanian army defeated the nascent Israeli state, crossing the Jordan River to take the

West Bank and the holy sites in East Jerusalem.

Hussein grew up in the world of colonial and palace intrigue. He was only 15 when his grandfather Abdullah was shot dead in 1951 by a Palestinian assassin while both were at Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque. A little over a year later, he was made king after his father was ruled unfit for office. His education had taken place in the prestigious Victoria College in Alexandria, Egypt, then Harrow grammar school in England, followed by six months military training at Sandhurst, the British military college.

In his autobiography *Uneasy Lies the Head* published in 1962, Hussein recalled that at a young age he recognised his precarious position: "I had seen enough of Europe even at 17 to know that its playgrounds were filled with ex-Kings, some of whom lost their thrones because they did not understand the duties of a monarch... I was not going to become a permanent member of their swimming parties in the south of France."

In the early 1950s, Hussein faced the rising tide of Arab nationalism to which he was compelled to accommodate himself. In 1956, he dismissed the British commander of the Jordanian army, Sir John Bagot Glubb, replaced all British officers with Jordanians and declared martial law. In the course of the Suez crisis only months later, Hussein offered to put Jordan's armed forces at the disposal of Egypt's president Nasser in the confrontation with Britain and France.

He was constantly forced to manoeuvre with the larger Arab states--Egypt and Syria in particular--while balancing between the major powers, facing an increasingly powerful Israel state, and confronting the demands of the Jordanian masses at home. The insecure nature of the Hashemite monarchs was underscored in 1958 when King Faisal of Iraq, Hussein's cousin, was overthrown and killed in a bloody coup. Hussein turned for help to the British who promptly dispatched troops to Jordan to prop up his regime.

In the aftermath of the Suez crisis, Hussein began to switch his allegiances from the British to the US. In 1977, it was revealed that he had been on the payroll of the US Central Intelligence Agency since 1958. His monthly cheque was supposedly discontinued after the disclosure, but his close collaboration with the US continued. As early as 1963, Hussein also began to meet secretly with the Zionist regime in Israel. Even towards the end of his life, he refused to discuss details of what the Israelis estimate to be more than 500 hours of talks with Israeli leaders except Menachem Begin.

In 1967, Hussein joined Egypt and Syria when the Arab states were drawn into the disastrous Six-Day war with Israel. As a result, Jordan lost the West Bank and the Old City in Jerusalem as well as its entire airforce and 15,000 troops. Thousands of Palestinians streamed across the Jordan River into the country's already crowded refugee camps fuelling Palestinian nationalism and filling the ranks of the P.L.O.

Hussein joined the other Arab states, believing it inevitable that Jordan would be drawn into the impending conflict. "We couldn't have survived an Israeli conflict. Our only defence lay in coming together with the others," he commented later. After the defeat he rapidly concluded that closer alliances--with the US and with Israel--were necessary to forestall another disaster.

To demonstrate his bonafides, he set out to eradicate the operation of armed Palestinian resistance groups from bases within Jordan, bringing him into sharper and sharper conflict with the Palestinian masses who formed a majority of the country's population. The violence culminated in September 1970, known as "Black September" by Palestinians because of the huge death toll they suffered. Hussein ordered his regular troops, backed by heavy armour, to launch an all-out assault on the refugee camps under pretext of suppressing guerrilla operations.

In his book *Palestine and the Palestinians*, Samih Farsoun described what took place: "By 1970 the regime succeeded in orchestrating an anti-guerrilla propaganda campaign and unleashed against them a savage

military attack in September (Black September), which drove them out of the camps and the city of Amman at a horrendous cost in lives of innocent camp civilians, estimated in the tens of thousands. In 1971 the mountain-based Palestinian guerrillas were driven out of the western hills of Jordan; they took refuge in southwestern Lebanon. After their departure, the Palestinian camps and other population concentrations in Jordan lived under a police state until the 1990s, when Jordan instituted some political liberalisation and some democratic reforms." [page 162]

The Arab bourgeoisie cynically stood by and watched the slaughter. A halfhearted intervention by the Syrian regime in support of the Palestinian fighters came to nothing. At any rate, Israel, with the backing of the US, had put its armed forces on alert and was prepared to intervene on behalf of Hussein if the Syrian army threatened to tip the balance of forces against him.

The Black September massacres cemented the closer relations with the US and Israel. Jordan only had a token military role in the Yom Kippur War with Israel in 1973 and in fact secretly warned the Zionist state that Egypt and Syria were about to launch military attacks--warnings that were ignored.

By the 1980s, the Reagan administration increasing turned to Hussein as the US began to look for a means of establishing a new imperialist arrangement with the Arab bourgeoisie in the Middle East. In 1988, following the outbreak of the *intifada* revolt in the Israeli occupied territories, Hussein relinquished control of the West Bank and severed most administrative links with the area.

During the 1990-91 Persian Gulf war, he was compelled by widespread anti-US demonstrations and protests at home to publicly criticise the military onslaught by America and its allies on Iraq. But in its aftermath, he rapidly backed away from his support for Saddam Hussein in order to win back crucial financial backing from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States. The US administration quickly forgave him and he played a key role on its behalf at the Palestinian-Israeli talks in Madrid later in 1991.

Hussein backed the Middle East peace process following the Gulf War in the hope that a deal would open up the region, Jordan included, to substantial international investment. In 1994, following the signing of the Oslo peace accord between Israel and the PLO in 1993, Hussein signed his own agreement with Israel opening up trade relations between the two countries. Last year he was wheeled out of the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota where he was being treated for cancer, to help salvage the US-sponsored Wye Plantation talks between Arafat and Netanyahu to patch up the tottering Oslo accord.

But Hussein's expectations have come to very little. The election of the Netanyahu government threw the process of political and economic normalisation into crisis and blocked the flow of investment. Jordan was further hit by the decision of the US, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to temporarily cut off desperately needed financial support as punishment for Hussein's support for Iraq in 1990-91. Furthermore the continuing UN economic sanctions on Iraq have had a devastating impact on what was Jordan's main market. The country's foreign debt stands at \$8 billion, more than its GDP.

Hussein had initially welcomed the intervention of the International Monetary Fund as a means of attracting foreign investment. But as the IMF austerity measures savagely hit living standards, he was confronted with growing unrest and protests. Annual per capital income has stagnated at \$1,500, below the level of the Palestinian West Bank. Unemployment is 15 percent and climbing, and about 20 percent of the population is living below the poverty line.

In 1996, demonstrations broke out in southern Jordan against the ending of price subsidies for wheat and the doubling overnight of the price of bread. Police armed with tear gas and backed by helicopters moved in to carry out Hussein's instructions to "hit with an iron fist... anyone who challenges security and instigates dissent". He suspended the session of

parliament in which less than half of the MPs had voted for the price rises.

Far from being one of peace and stability, Hussein's legacy in Jordan and throughout the region will be one of social and political upheaval. The mood in Jordan itself was perhaps summed up by one of the wealthier onlookers at his funeral: "You hear these figures on the television, like \$300 million [in US aid], but the people won't see any of it. We have people whose meals are tea and bread. The new King needs to prove he can make the economy better and, and needs to do it soon."



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