

King Hassan of Morocco: world leaders mourn a ruthless despot

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King Hassan II of Morocco, who died at the age of 70 last Friday after 38 years on the throne, was the second Middle Eastern puppet of US and European imperialism to die in the last six months.

Delegations and representatives from more than 60 countries flocked to the Moroccan capital, Rabat, to pay their respects to such a loyal servant. That more than a few put aside their public differences with each other and Morocco to attend speaks volumes for the unstable character of international relations today.

The US delegation included Bill and Hillary Clinton, who broke off a fund-raising trip to Colorado to attend, former president George Bush and two former Secretaries of State that have played key roles in earlier Middle East peace processes—James Baker and Warren Christopher.

"King Hassan worked tirelessly for the welfare of his people," Clinton gushed. "He had taken important steps to deepen freedom in his country", he added, in an apparent reference to the release from prison of political and militant opponents.

President Jacques Chirac represented France, which ruled Morocco under the Treaty of Fez from 1912 to 1956. "We have lost a man who loved France and the French people—we feel immense pain," Chirac said. King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia represented Spain, which also once ruled part of Morocco. Prince Charles and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook represented Britain.

Yassir Arafat came from Palestine. Hafez el-Assad, the Syrian President, pulled out at the last moment but sent his deputy, Mohammed Zuhair Masharqua. President Hosni Mubarak represented Egypt. All these leaders had, publicly at least, opposed Hassan for maintaining friendly relations with Israel, represented at the funeral by Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Secretary David Levy. Shimon Peres, a former Israeli Prime minister, said, "With his passing we lose one of the most experienced and wisest leaders that this region has enjoyed in the last half century".

Hassan's relations with his North African neighbours had been far from amicable, yet they too came. Mohamed Abdelaziz, the president of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), whose territory is controlled by Morocco, joined the mourners. The Polisario Front fought a bitter war against Morocco for more than a decade over Western Sahara, which Morocco claims as its territory.

President Mohammed Bouteflika came from Algeria, the first official visit in two decades between the two countries, which had closed their borders to the movement of goods and people as a result of the dispute over the Western Sahara.

Colonel Muammar Gadhaffi ordered Major Khouildi Hamidi, a member of the country's revolutionary council, to cut short his visit to the Gambia in order to represent the Libyan government. Three days of national mourning were declared, despite relations between the two countries having roller-coastered over the last three decades. Libya is technically at war with Israel.

High level delegations came from all the Middle East states, including

Iraq, and other Moslem countries. Heads of state came from 14 African countries. The Organisation for African Unity (OAU) sent condolences, even though Morocco left the OAU more than 20 years ago when it recognised the SADR.

The various politicians portrayed King Hassan as some kind of elder statesman in Middle East affairs, like King Hussein of Jordan who died earlier this year. Yet Hassan has had a substantially lower public profile than Hussein, and ruled a country that was nearer to London than Jerusalem, and poorer than any other in North Africa.

Known as the "great survivor" by his political opponents, Hassan became the longest reigning monarch in the Arab world after the death of Hussein. He became king in 1961, after the death of his father. His crown remained in place while those of Libya, Egypt, Iran and Iraq toppled. He survived half a dozen coups and assassination attempts.

In the 38 years of his despotic rule, he played a crucial role in ensuring the survival of the Zionist State at the expense of the Palestinians. He suppressed the Polisario in phosphate-rich Western Sahara and Islamic fundamentalism in Morocco itself. He opened up the Moroccan economy as a platform for cheap mineral resources and manufactured goods, particularly clothing for the European market.

His death comes at a crucial time not only for the Middle East peace process, but also for the Maghreb countries of northwest Africa that are seeking to breathe life into the Arab-Maghreb trading union. Within Africa, rivalries between the US and the former colonial powers are destabilising economic and political relations.

It is for all these reasons that the world's leaders came to Rabat. While officially they were there to mourn and pay tribute to Hassan, more than a few made use of the opportunity for formal and informal talks with those they have not spoken to for years. Most came to inspect the new King, about whom little is known, and see if he is a man they can do business with.

The official eulogies to Hassan's statesman-like qualities conveniently omitted any mention of his brutal suppression of his political opponents, gross abuse of human rights, the conditions that have left the Moroccan people the poorest in North Africa and the isolation and betrayal of the Palestinian people.

Born Moulay Hassan in 1929, he was the oldest of the six children of Sultan Sidi Mohammed ben Youssef—who claimed descent from the Prophet Mohammed. At that time, Morocco was a protectorate of France except for sections governed by Spain in the northwest and the southern coast, and the city of Tangier, an international zone. As Sultan, Sidi Mohammed was responsible for local and religious affairs.

Resistance to colonial rule mounted over the next decade. After the fall of France during World War II, President Roosevelt for the USA, Winston Churchill for Britain and Charles de Gaulle of France met in Casablanca and promised independence within 10 years if Morocco would cooperate in the war against the Axis powers. This was a promise the French proved unwilling to keep.

After an education in France and service in the French navy aboard the battleship *Jeanne d'Arc*, Moulay Hassan became a playboy frequenting Europe's casinos and sporting the typical accoutrements of royals, with or without their crowns: racehorses, sports cars, aircraft, and film star girlfriends.

As demands for self-rule grew, the Sultan put himself at the head of the movement. In 1953, the French exiled him and his family, firstly to Corsica and then to Madagascar. As the rioting and guerrilla warfare increased, the French, by this time already embroiled in the Algerian war of independence, were forced to concede. Making the calculation that their interests would best be served by heading off the working class and pan-Maghreb nationalism by granting independence, they accepted Sidi Mohammed as ruler of Morocco.

The sultan changed his title to King and proclaimed himself Mohammed V to give his new throne an air of legitimacy. His son became commander in chief of the Royal Moroccan Army, which was divided between those who had been loyal to the French and the former rebels.

Moulay Hassan reorganised the army, doubled its size and put it to work on civilian projects. But the monarchy was far from popular in the squalor and misery of the shantytowns of Rabat, Casablanca and other cities. He became King in 1961, after the unexpected death of his father following a minor operation, and assumed the title of Hassan II. A measure of the "success" of his regime may be seen from the following statistics.

The two chief problems faced by the country in 1961 were unemployment and illiteracy. After nearly 40 years and a trebling of the population to just under 30 million, official youth unemployment is 25 percent, but the real figure is probably double that. At least 55 percent of Moroccans are illiterate and 40 percent of children have never attended school. Infant mortality has halved to 64 per 1,000, but is still the highest in North Africa and more than double that of Algeria. Only half the rural population has access to proper healthcare and less than one fifth have access to sanitation and clean water.

In 1997, Morocco ranked 119th on the United Nations human development index, very little above Iraq (126th) after years of sanctions. The bodies washed up every month on the coast of southern Spain, as desperate would-be migrants take to the Strait of Gibraltar in flimsy boats, are a powerful testimony to Hassan's legacy. The venal monarch himself owned ten palaces and 20 percent of the agricultural land.

The appalling social conditions gave rise to continual opposition throughout his reign. As early as 1965, there were violent student riots in Casablanca and elsewhere over plans to cut higher education. Arrests, imprisonment, exile and execution of opposition leaders followed. Mehdi Ben Barka, a prominent nationalist and opposition leader of the Union des Forces Populaires, who had taught the King mathematics for four years, was kidnapped in Paris and assassinated. Israeli intelligence experts have said that Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, helped with the assassination. The King's right hand man, the Minister of the Interior, Mohamed Oufkir, was widely believed to have been responsible but charges were never pressed.

Hassan dissolved Parliament and instituted a state of emergency, wielding absolute power until a new constitution was adopted in 1970. For much of his reign, he suppressed opposition with an iron hand and sought help from the West in maintaining his rule. The CIA had him on their payroll for years.

In 1971, at his 42nd birthday banquet for 800 guests at the summer palace, 1,400 armed cadets invaded the palace, shooting indiscriminately. They killed more than 100 people, including the Belgian ambassador and wounded some 200 others. Hassan hid in a bathroom until the firing died down. Loyal troops crushed the revolt, killing more than 150 rebels and capturing 900 others. A dozen high ranking, conservative officers were later executed. The king appointed General Oufkir as Minister of Defence.

A little more than 12 months later, four Royal Moroccan Airforce F-5

fighters attacked the King's aircraft as it came into land at Rabat after a visit to Paris. The fighters continued strafing the runway after it made an emergency landing, until Hassan seized the radio and told them that they had been successful and the King was dead. The rebels broke off the attack and within hours, the leaders were arrested and shot by a firing squad.

One of these was General Oufkir, who had also been involved in the earlier attack on the palace. According to official reports, the General committed suicide, but his body was found with several wounds. After razing their Rabat home to the ground, Hassan had Oufkir's widow and six children banished to the desert where they were placed under house arrest and not released until 1991.

During the 1970s, Hassan took several steps aimed at damping domestic turmoil. In 1973, he put through measures to increase Moroccan ownership and employment in companies doing business in Morocco and redistributed farmland owned by foreigners to local peasants. In this way, he tried to manoeuvre a path between the national bourgeoisie and the masses, at the expense of foreign capitalists.

In 1975, Hassan asserted Morocco's claim to Western Sahara, a region claimed by Morocco in the north and Mauritania in the south, but still officially under Spanish administration, by marching 350,000 Moroccans armed only with the Koran and banners across the frontier.

Western Sahara covers an area of 100,000 square miles with fewer than 75,000 residents, mainly nomadic pastoralists. Although the land was largely desert, it was rich in minerals.

Spain withdrew and ceded control to Morocco and Mauritania. This ignited a brutal and expensive war against the Polisario Front, which had been fighting for independence from Spain and did not want to be ruled by the Moroccans. With Libya and Algeria supporting the Polisario against Morocco and some 70 governments worldwide recognising the Polisario Front, their victory seemed assured. But Hassan brushed aside international protests and occupied the contested territory.

If anyone dared to speak out against the Moroccan takeover, the King's response was unfailingly brutal. Opponents disappeared in their hundreds. Many were never accounted for. Amnesty International's reports are littered with incidents of torture and ill treatment by Morocco's security forces.

In 1979, following a coup, the new government of Mauritania relinquished its claims to Western Sahara. But Morocco simply used this opportunity to extend its administration to cover the whole of the country.

In 1984, after standing by and watching the Palestinians slaughtered at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, Colonel Gadhaffi applied the same treatment to the Saharan rebels. He signed a deal with Morocco that ended Libyan backing for the Polisario and paved the way for their defeat. Hassan built a rampart several hundred miles long to protect Morocco's mining interests in Western Sahara against incursions by the Polisario. Algeria, increasingly beset by its own internal problems, provided little effective support to the rebels.

With the Polisario isolated, Morocco eventually gained control of most of the region and agreed to a UN brokered cease-fire in 1991. The UN were supposed to hold a referendum to resolve the conflict, but with no agreement as to who had the right to vote, this failed to materialise. The 16-year war is estimated to have cost \$20 billion, about equal to a national debt that is among the highest of any Arab country.

Above all it was Hassan's prominent role in supporting the Zionist state of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians that won him the support of the US. Nearly all of the quarter of a million Jews living in Morocco were encouraged to leave for Israel, which depended upon immigration for survival. Despite sending a nominal number of troops to support Egypt and Syria in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, Hassan kept his informal channels open with Israel.

Israeli history is studded with accounts of high-level secret visits to

Morocco that proved pivotal for the peace process. Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres were among the Israeli leaders who, in elaborate disguises, flew in Hassan's private planes at crucial moments.

Israeli newspapers said that Hassan allowed Mossad to set up a station in Morocco and develop close ties with Moroccan security forces. As Joseph Alpher, a former Mossad official and director of the American-Jewish Committees's office in Israel, said: "For Morocco, it provided the King with additional intelligence and know-how to stabilise his regime. For the Israelis, it was good as a window into the Arab world."

Dayan's visit as Foreign Secretary to Fez in 1977 established the foundation for the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord and paved the way for Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem. Peres' first secret trip, in 1978, laid the groundwork for a dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organisation; a subsequent one brought him together with Yassir Arafat, the PLO leader, to overcome a moment of crisis in 1995.

In 1982 Hassan hosted a meeting of Arab leaders in Fez where he pushed through agreement on a peace plan that called for the creation of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, but implicitly recognised Israel's right to exist. The plan, although rejected by Israel, laid the groundwork for the King to meet Prime Minister Peres in 1986.

In 1993, the King gave de facto recognition to Israel by welcoming Prime Minister Rabin, marking the first official visit by an Israeli leader to an Arab nation other than Egypt. He played a crucial role in the Oslo agreement in 1993 and the peace deal a year later with Jordan.

Despite ritual protests, other Arab nations encouraged Hassan's relationship with Israel because it allowed Morocco, geographically distant from the immediate conflicts, to play a key role in brokering deals with the US and Israel on their behalf.

Formal political independence, within the framework of continued imperialist domination and the monarchy, has failed to resolve any of the economic, social and political problems that are the legacy of colonialism and precolonial backwardness. Hassan's 38-year rule leaves behind a country seething with social problems.

On the economic front, the European Union agreement that opens up Morocco's market to European products will leave many native companies bankrupt and exacerbate unemployment. The US last year launched its own initiative to build economic ties with North African countries. On the political front, the long running dispute with the Polisario over Western Sahara has still to be settled.

One by one, as the elderly despots that have held together increasingly polarised states for decades come to the end of their days, they leave behind a Middle East and North Africa teetering on the precipice. It was in a vain attempt to shore up one such state that the world leaders gathered in Rabat.



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