

Royal Feud in Jordan

by Michael Curtis



Beware of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.

The Middle East, as the historian Fouad Ajami once wrote, is a chronicle of illusions, despair, and politics repeatedly degenerating into bloodletting. Certainly the area has exhibited political instability, regional fragmentation, violence and kleptocracy. Uneasy lies the head of whoever wears the crown or is, as in Britain today in the line of succession. Leaders have suffered the fate of execution or political ouster: Faisal II of Iraq in 1958, King Farouk in 1952 and Hosni Mubarak in 2011 in Egypt; King Idris in 1969 and Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 in Libya, the Shah in Iran in 1978, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia in 1987.

The fate of King Abdullah II of Jordan, challenged in a royal

feud and possible plot to oust him in April 2021, is uncertain. Jordan, the country on the east bank of the Jordan river, is technically a constitutional monarchy, with two legislative houses, one appointed by the king and the other elected by proportional representation, and a hereditary king who has wide executive and legislative powers. For 200,000 years the area of what is now Jordan, has been inhabited and ruled by various peoples, Nabataean, Persian, Roman, Arab caliphs, Ottoman. The present ruling group the Hashemites, who claim to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and who ruled Mecca for over 700 years until 1925, led the liberation of Arab lands from the Ottoman Turks.

The territory of the East Bank of the Jordan was long a provincial area of the Ottoman Empire, and became a desert emirate. The basic form of social organization in Transjordan was tribal, and social relations at first were largely based on trade and the exchange of tribute for protection. The tribes were groups of related families all descending from a common ancestor. The Bedouin tribes, nomadic groups, supported the Hashemites whose leader Hussein visited them and purported to be the tribal sheik.

In 1921 the Emirate of Transjordan, with the ruler Abdullah, was established as a state, a British protectorate. It became the independent Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan in 1946, and was renamed the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1949. Its claim to the area of the West Bank that it had taken as a result of the 1948-49 war, and "annexed" in April 1950, was finally renounced in 1988, and a peace treaty with Israel was signed in 1994.

The Hashemite Kingdom has had its share of political differences, of disagreements among the numerous members of the royal Hashemite family, and has always been troubled by intrigue over the line of succession to the throne.

Most of the disagreements have not become public, but the

current inner feud has now been revealed. On April 3, 2021 a video was published revealing the feud between King Abdullah II and his half-brother, and former heir apparent to the throne, Prince Hamzah. The Prince and some 20 others had been detained on charges of plotting against the monarchy, and were placed under house arrest. The reason given was that the Prince Hamzah had attended meeting with critics of the government. Hamzah had in fact been present when criticisms of the government or the King were voiced, but seemingly had not uttered criticism himself.

Four days later, King Abdullah II “announced that the tension with Hamzah was ending,” and that “he was in the palace under my protection.” Abdullah declared that sedition had been nipped in the bud. He was angered as a brother and as the head of the Hashemite family that sedition was being planned. The country’s stability was being undermined.

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that tension has ended. Prince Hamzah may remain more critical than amicable. He asked, “Is the mismanagement of the state my fault?” The prince in defiant mood declared “I am not the person responsible for the breakdown in governance, the corruption and for the incompetence that has been prevalent in our governmental structure for the last 15 to 20 years and has been getting worse. I am not responsible for the lack of faith people have in their institutions. It has reached the point where no one is able to speak or express opinions on anything without being bullied, arrested, harassed and threatened.” It is not coincidental that Abdullah II has been on the throne for the last 22 years.

The present challenge by the prince is a mixture of personal resentment caused by a feeling of unfair treatment at losing his succession to the throne , and a role as spokesperson for expressions of genuine frustration about alleged corruption, nepotism, mismanagement of the public sector, and authoritarianism, in a country troubled by a host of problems:

the internal, tribal issues, the Bedouins, the number of Palestinians, and the increasing economic problems due to the pandemic. Unemployment has risen to 25% and almost 50% for young Jordanians, and the country has little oil or gas.

Hamzah is popular with the tribes, is fluent in local Jordanian dialects and tribal customs, and physically resembles his father Hussein. In supposed contrast, Abdullah II spent time abroad: he attended the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in 1980, was a second lieutenant in the British army, studied at Pembroke College, Oxford and then Georgetown University, and travelled to the U.S. for medical treatment. Yet, the difference is not stark. Hamzah also went to school in London, and attended Sandhurst.

Prince Hamzah has a personal grievance. At age 24, he was stripped of the title of crown prince in November 2004, though this was contrary to the dying wish of the late King Hussein. He was regarded as too young and inexperienced to be the heir to the throne. Yet he had been an officer in the Jordan armored brigade, then brigadier in the Jordan Arab army, and had occupied certain offices, and had studied for a time at Harvard, graduating in 2006.

The sense of grievance is understandable. King Hussein who had ruled for nearly a half century died in February 1999 and was succeeded by his eldest son prince Abdullah, who had been designated to succeed his father in place of the king's brother, crown prince Hassan bin Talal, also a son of Hussein. The new king Abdullah II decreed he would be succeeded not by his own son but by his half brother Hamzah who was given the title of crown prince. However, on November 28 2004 Hamzah was removed as crown prince by king Abdullah II who wrote "your

holding this symbolic position has restrained your freedom and hindered our entrusting you with certain responsibilities that you are fully qualified to undertake." No successor was named at the time, but in July 2009 Abdullah declared his eldest son Hussein would succeed him and be crown prince.

Much of the future of the regime in Jordan and its stability depends on the traditional tribes that have been the support of the Hashemite rulers and have occupied senior positions in the army, police, and intelligence service. The majority of the population is of Bedouin origin, stemming from the Bedouin tribes who immigrated from the Arabian peninsula and Hejaz to the area of Jordan. The Bedouins, who historically inhabited the desert regions of the Levant, are divided in many ways: by tribes, geography, culture, and religion, and practice a less orthodox form of Islam.

After World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Britain helped install the Hashemites in power, and the traditional tribes supported the new rulers and received jobs and services.

More Bedouins moved into the area from Syria. The initial problem in Transjordan and now Jordan is whether family, clan, and tribal allegiance is more important than national loyalty and all other political allegiances, and indeed whether there has recently been a decline in the impact of that tribal affiliation on individual behavior.

The loyalty of the tribes remains a problem as does the issue of the Palestinians. Officially, Jordan has a population of ten million of whom, although there is no official data, about half of whom are of Palestinian descent, and half of those are

refugees. Most of them have full citizenship, but to some extent are viewed with suspicion and they work in the private, not the public sector. Some of the Palestinians view the Hashemite regime as occupiers of East Palestine. Tensions in the past led to the 1970 Black September civil war, the expulsion of the PLO from the country, and the killing of thousands of Palestinians by the Bedouin army, and threats to the regime in 1989.

King Abdullah II , faced with these internal problems, must act to make the regime more representative and less corrupt, and regain the image of Jordan as a stable Arab country in the midst of a turbulent, mercurial neighborhood. Jordan must continue to play a role in regional diplomacy and well as an ally of the U.S. in counter-terrorism activity deterring , the deterring of Islamist extremism, as a base for American troops and aircraft, and as helpful for any potential negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.