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The Plucky Little King Reconsidered: King Husayn of Jordan and the First Gulf War

By Michael Bell

Executive Summary

The late King Husayn of Jordan, charismatic, compelling, idolized, was regarded, in his mature years, as the West's best friend in the Arab world. A perspective assessment over the length of his reign, and particularly during the first Gulf War, however, reveals a far more complex figure: courageous, often wise and far-sighted, but preoccupied with lineage, haunted by ambition, and often plagued by poor judgment. During the first Gulf crisis, Husayn's demonization of his resource-poor country's traditional financiers, the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, cost Jordan dearly. It took his death in 1999 and the concerted efforts of his son and heir to rehabilitate Jordan with the oil states. 'Abdullah moved quickly on ascending the throne to lay aside Hashimite dreams, renew relations with wealthy neighbors, and establish an air-tight strategic relationship with Washington.

When King Husayn of Jordan lost his long battle with cancer in 1999, a 47-year reign ended. His funeral brought political allies and adversaries together to walk shoulder to shoulder in tribute to the man who had shepherded his small desert Kingdom through a half-century of turmoil and challenge. There were three former American presidents present, as well as the incumbent Bill Clinton. Prince Charles and Prime Minister Tony Blair represented the United Kingdom. Jacques Chirac was there. Boris Yeltsin left his sickbed to represent the Russian Federation. Those present were counted, and those absent were noted.¹

Even those Arab neighbors who had opposed him during the 1991 Gulf War crisis felt obliged to suppress their bitterness toward the King, stand tall, and attend. Husayn was a seemingly indelible part of the region. The Saudis and Kuwaitis came with their Crown Princes. Even the King's long-time adversary, Hafiz al-Asad of Syria made a surprise appearance.

Not to be outdone, virtually the entire top echelon of the Israeli political elite — President Ezer Weizman, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and future Prime Ministers Ehud Barak, and Ariel Sharon — were in Jordan to pay their respects. Even Sharon, the advocate of a Greater Israel who had wanted to overthrow the Hashimite Kingdom and replace it with a Palestinian state, felt compelled to be present.

Ordinary Jordanians drew together with the King's passing because of their admiration for the man and his leadership. For most, he was the only ruler they had ever known. Fearful of the instability that the transition to a new monarch might bring, they wanted to demonstrate their unity to promote as smooth a turnover as possible. Jordan lacks the institutional framework of strong parliamentary government, truly independent courts, and commitment to the rule of law which ease transitions in democracies. Husayn and his dynasty's legitimacy were personal and familial. In the eyes of his people, stability and normalcy had depended on him alone, hence the apprehension that led to days of tearful vigil in the streets. Those gathered hoped and prayed that the King's legacy would, as it did, see them through. Still today, having occupied the throne for 47 years, Husayn's presence is felt throughout Jordan as a father to be revered and model to be emulated.

Why so much attention to the authoritarian ruler of a minor kingdom in the modern age? His country is a classic buffer state, and this King seemed to be the ultimate strategic player. Husayn truly was impressive and charismatic. In his mature years, he was unambiguously regarded as such by the great majority of his subjects, his allies and, if often grudgingly, his opponents. There was widespread recognition that there was no positive alternative to Hashimite leadership. The one-party nationalist states of the Middle East had failed miserably, while Husayn brought stability and relative personal freedom to the Kingdom. This he did in the face of many radical threats: Nasser-

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1. The notable Western absence was that of the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who subsequently claimed that no aircraft could have been made available to get him to 'Amman within the timeframe required. There was a substantial public outcry within Canada over what was widely seen to be a cop-out. In an attempt to recoup, an invitation to visit Canada was soon dispatched by the Prime Minister to Husayn's successor, Abdullah, who with Hashimite good grace quickly accepted.



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ism, Black September, and Ba'athism were just a few of the challenges that he faced. But his was not a flawless record.

Husayn possessed great physical courage, a characteristic much admired in the Arab world. He bounced back from potentially catastrophic political and military challenges like a Gandhi or a Mountbatten. He was convinced of his role in history. He walked into angry and violent mobs, as during the Black September fighting of 1970-71, and in doing so he calmed the masses and disarmed his opponents. This often larger-than-life monarch said in his early autobiography *Uneasy Lies the Head*: “If I was not afraid, and I think I was not, I must admit that many times, alone in the evening in the small study of the Basam Palace, I wondered if I would live the year out. I felt like an actor on the stage in a tragedy so well known that every audience — and the audience was the world — knew what the final curtain would bring. I was almost alone. I was only twenty three.”

Whether it was professional or personal, whether it was strategic alliance, weaponry, education, marriage, the future of Palestine, his dialogue with Israeli leaders, global balance, or his view of history, Husayn's inclinations most often appeared unambiguous and straightforward, even when the constraints of power required caution and prudence. He seemed the West's best friend in the Arab world, certainly its best friend with any guts. His distrust of Palestinian radicalism and willingness to take risks for peace, when it was a lonely gamble, led to the British Foreign Office nicknaming him “the plucky little king.”

Husayn's activism, political moderation, and risk-taking were precisely the reasons why Canada opened its embassy in 'Amman in 1982, and why we established a major development presence in 1986. As Director of Middle East Relations in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and later as Canadian Ambassador to Jordan, I was a staunch supporter of the King. I, like others, overlooked his failures until I witnessed the near disaster his policies wrought in the Gulf crisis of 1990.

In King Husayn, the West saw one of the most compelling and charismatic leaders in the history of the modern Middle East, a survivor in a region beset by extraordinary risk. It is therefore no surprise that he was idolized and his failings forgiven. For many decision-makers, most critically in London, Washington, and Jerusalem, his persona was most often seen in almost mythical proportion. Perhaps naturally enough, given the circumstances, at a memorial ceremony for him at Saint Paul's Cathedral in London five months after his death, Prince Charles described Husayn as a “king among kings.” Perhaps with an unconscious hint of condescension, Charles described him as a “wonderful combination of the virtues of a Bedouin Arab and an English gentleman.” The music played at the ceremony was no less generous: Bach's Cantata 182, entitled “The King of Heaven.” Myth is part of the popular reality. It is an enlarged and edited truth that defines, comforts, and motivates those who subscribe to its expression. The myth of King Husayn of Jordan was no exception.

Prince Charles, given his position and the occasion might be forgiven, even lauded. More difficult to understand, however, is the work of Avi Shlaim, the noted Professor of International Relations at St. Antony's College, Oxford, whose biography of the King was published in 2007. Detailed and fascinating, by far the most thorough study of the King's life, this tome entitled *Lion of Jordan* suffers from the same romanticism that the Prince evinced. Shlaim relies faithfully on interviews with Jordanians, whose standing would be directly at risk were they to be critical of the former monarch, and Israelis, whose idolization of the King knows few parallels. He makes no effort to hide his own too often unquestioning disposition. Even the book's title, *Lion of Jordan*, an appellation by which Shlaim suggests Husayn was popularly known, appears the product of imagination. Despite three years service (1987-90) as Canadian Ambassador to Jordan, I had never heard the phrase, nor have knowledgeable others with whom I have subsequently spoken.

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Dennis Ross in his comprehensive 2004 examination of the Middle East peace process, *The Missing Peace*, uses a similar tone when referring to Husayn, despite the realpolitik language which dominates the text. Describing the King's reaction, to the acts of a deranged Jordanian soldier who murdered seven Israeli girls in 1997, Ross became maudlin when describing Husayn's visit to the victim's families: "on bended knee [he] expressed his shame and asked forgiveness, touching the heart of Israel."

Despite the Western world's virtually universal trust in this one Arab leader who "talked our language" with such ease, a perspective assessment of Husayn's behavior over the length of his reign, and particularly during the first Gulf War, reveals a far more complex figure whose traditional tribal values of honor and shame often trumped civic responsibilities and modern statesmanship.

To a considerable extent, Western politicians and media may have colluded with the man himself in the creation of an imagined and empathetic King who calmed our fears and met our needs. This was a man, an Arab chieftain, who emphasized his Western connection by wearing business suits at home and abroad, the only exceptions being his visits to the desert tribes. This was a man with a fine British education, impeccable and sonorous English, and a glamorous American wife. This was a man who was a great fan of the Celtic musical "Riverdance," which he attended repeatedly in London. He was complicit in the creation of his public persona because it served both his ego and interests so well.

Husayn was, however, much more than that. He was a multi-faceted individual, courageous certainly, often wise but preoccupied with lineage, haunted by unachievable ambition, and often plagued by poor judgment. Now, almost a decade after his death, we should have attained more than enough perspective to look at personality variables and begin deconstructing the popular myth, in search of the man himself.

Such an effort has given me food for thought ever since my 1987-1990 service in 'Amman. Resident in the Jordanian capital during those three years, I watched the build-up to the first Gulf war intently, fascinated by the Monarch's conflicted emotions as he struggled to cope with the consequences of Saddam's disastrous invasion of Kuwait. There is no doubt the crisis was profoundly threatening to both Husayn and Jordan, made more perilous, however, by the Monarch's imbued sense of history and his role in it as the most prominent remaining member of the legendary House of Hashim.

The King, a boy when he ascended the throne, learned from his early challenges. One of his first lessons was that people, particularly in the West, warmed to him. They were protective, even paternalistic. When he smiled, they were charmed. He realized he had charisma and that gift became the most potent tool in his political arsenal, perhaps the key to his survival. Support among Jordanians grew because he projected warmth and sincerity. The King was greatly admired for his common touch. In his autobiography he tells of driving a taxi in mufti, on the Zarqa' road. "I learned a great deal. I wanted to know what people really thought about me and I certainly found out. It is curious how people talk in taxis as if the driver was not there." There were many such stories of the King as common man.

While boasting of political liberalization and democracy in the early 1990s, Jordan, in fact, remained closer to a feudal state, a conservative people with a paternalistic King. All significant decisions were made at the top. Television daily aired cabinet ministers, generals, and prominent figures engaged in acts of fealty. This was "a one man show" based on the Monarch's careful cultivation of Jordan's major constituencies: its great families, its tribes, and the army. Husayn controlled the media — although he claimed to outsiders that the press was free — and withheld passports, rotated ministers, intimidated and, when he felt it necessary, interrogated and imprisoned those he considered threats. He exercised power through a constitution, but when pressed he bypassed legal requirements at will.

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Husayn epitomized autocracy but maintained an enlightened veneer. On the streets of ‘Amman there were no government thugs in blue jeans sporting sub-machine guns as in Damascus. The royal presence was much less “imperial” than that of Saddam Husayn in then Ba’thist Iraq or, for that matter, of Husni Mubarak in comparatively benign Egypt. Jordanian newspaper editors learned to censor themselves and, if they could not, their transfers were arranged rather than their assassinations. The King maintained that no one in Jordan had ever been executed for political beliefs and he may well have been speaking the truth.

The King’s lineage was indeed long and noble. The Hashimite family is of the Quraysh tribe, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. From the 13th century his antecedents played the dual role of Guardians of Mecca and Medina and Kings of the Hijaz, the Western regions of present day Saudi Arabia. King Husayn’s great grandfather, also named Husayn, became Sharif of Mecca in 1908. In 1914 he petitioned the British High Commissioner in Cairo, Sir Henry McMahon, for help in a revolt against the Ottoman Turks. In addition to military and financial assistance, the Sharif demanded independence for the Arabian Peninsula and the entire Fertile Crescent, which included Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These territories, along with the Hijaz, were to become three sovereign monarchical entities united under his supreme royal authority.

As things transpired, British assurances were discarded in favor of a Great Power carve-up: French Mandates in Syria and Lebanon, a British Mandate in Palestine west of the Jordan, and British-dominated Hashimite regimes in Iraq and Transjordan. The Sharif’s son Faysal was crowned in Baghdad and another son, ‘Abdullah, was enthroned in ‘Amman as Emir. Hashimite rule, particularly in Jordan, was conservative and patriarchal. Cut off from the Arabian Peninsula by Ibn Saud’s conquests there, ‘Abdullah continued to dream of a Fertile Crescent federation with Greater Syria and Iraq. Political opinion in the Arab world, however, proved strongly opposed to any changes in favor of the Hashimites. But Emir ‘Abdullah, like his father, was persistent. Motivated by both personal and dynastic ambition, he attempted, if unsuccessfully, to marry these dreams to the cause of Arab nationalism.

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Author and historian James Morris says of Husayn’s grandfather ‘Abdullah: “His ambitions were constantly bubbling, for Transjordan was a very small principality for so ample a prince. All his life he cherished the notion of a greater Syria, a substitute for the Arab empire denied his father ... For decades this scheme ran as a leitmotif through the affairs of the Middle East.”² And, as we shall see, the tensions it caused between the Hashimites and the House of Saud would land directly on King Husayn’s doorstep 45 years later.

With Greater Syria unattainable, ‘Abdullah’s immediate priority became Palestine. The British Mandated territory was far richer, more sophisticated, and developed than his very modest Emirate of some 300,000 persons, half of whom were nomads. More dramatically still, Palestine contained the holy city of Jerusalem. Cunningly, ‘Abdullah maintained good relations with the leaders of Jewish Palestine. From 1946 his contacts with Zionists intensified and led to an unwritten secret agreement that he would not resist or impede the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. The Zionists, in turn, agreed not to hinder ‘Abdullah in taking over the eastern territories of the planned Palestinian state specified in the United Nations’ 1947 Partition Plan.

And so it was. When the war between the new Israel and the Arab states ended, Jordan held the present-day West Bank and the prized Old City of Jerusalem. ‘Abdullah’s forces, by secret arrangement with the Zionists, had limited fighting almost entirely to the Jerusalem area. But the Jordanian King’s hope to peacefully take over this new turf with Zionist complicity was thwarted by pan-Arab pressure that forced him at least to appear to be defending the displaced Palestinians who had swarmed into the West Bank.

In any event, ‘Abdullah transformed his Kingdom, tripling its population and acquiring a Palestinian majority.

2. James Morris, *The Hashemite Kings* (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1959), p. 99.

He labored hard to gain the support of the Palestinian leadership, but with very mixed results. Under ‘Amman’s sway, political activists in the West Bank were carefully watched and, when judged necessary, suppressed. At this time, a serious challenge to Hashimite rule was impossible, but there was always the threat to personal security.

In 1951, ‘Abdullah was assassinated by a lone terrorist at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Husayn, the Monarch’s grandson, cradled the dying man in his arms. The murder made an indelible impact on the 17-year-old. Husayn was soon crowned King, the succession having bypassed his own father who was too mentally unstable to rule. These events fueled an enormous sense of responsibility and ambition in the new ruler. But with kingship came a legacy of stinging loss. The young Husayn had been nurtured on the dream of family glory. He wanted to prove that his grandfather’s trust in him had not been misplaced. In his autobiography, the new King said: “I decided to start these memoirs with the murder of my grandfather since he, above all men, had the most profound influence on my life.” Husayn recalled his grandfather saying: “I look to you to do your very best to see that my work is not lost.”

The King’s life-long preoccupation with his heritage was the margin that separates honor and shame. Husayn moved with ease in the West, but his most profound dreams and ambitions were not Western at all. They were those of the scion of a conservative Arabian dynasty.

He never forgave himself for being bullied by then Egyptian President, Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir, the pre-eminent symbol of pan-Arab radicalism, into joining the war against Israel in 1967. Nasser’s attempts to undermine the young King during the 1950s and early 60s played their part in shaping the Monarch’s worldview. During those years, Nasser used Radio Cairo daily to humiliate Husayn, claiming he was a vassal of the West. The King subsequently determined never again to accept such public shaming. Experts like Asher Susser, Director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University, believe the King never fully bounced back from Nasser’s campaign. Hence, they say, his sense of vulnerability led him to decisions he knew to be fraught with risk.

There is no doubt that power relationships and psychological dynamics influenced the King profoundly. How could they not? Joining Nasser in the 1967 war cost him the Palestinian territories and the Old City of Jerusalem, which his grandfather had struggled so hard to acquire — at the ultimate cost of his life. Believing he had failed ‘Abdullah, this guilty preoccupation, based on emotional memory and a feeling of dynastic and filial obligation, often led Husayn to ignore the realities and limitations of Jordanian national interest in favor, as he saw it, of a more sacrosanct mission.

Husayn never truly reconciled himself to the frustrated ambitions of Palestinian nationalism because acceptance of the hard realities of the Palestinian perspective would have been at the cost of Hashimite ambition. His lifelong, and futile, efforts to undermine the Palestinian quest for identity and independence undermined his own search for regional stability. His dynastic quest for a “Greater Jordan” pumped up by the British, Americans, and Israelis was ultimately unsustainable. The latter never delivered what Husayn needed: the old cease-fire lines, and foremost within them East Jerusalem and its Old City. The Israelis, however, kept playing him. His reluctant and belated recognition of Palestinian cultural, social, and political aspirations, and the limits of Israeli flexibility came too late in the day, thereby creating still more tension, strife, and conflict as the Hashimite legend clashed with realpolitik.

During the late 1980s, when I was Canada’s Ambassador to the Kingdom, the spillover of the oil boom in the Arab world had created a feeling of considerable material well-being, despite Jordan being bone dry. In a Kingdom unaccustomed to affluence, Mercedes automobiles clogged the streets of even the smallest towns, and the country’s elites

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partied as never before. Jordanians learned to live far beyond their means with development money and significant cash transfers from Saudi Arabia and the other oil-rich Gulf states.

This was dramatically augmented by remittances from the hundreds of thousands of skilled Jordanian expatriates working in the Gulf, equal if not greater in size than the Kingdom's domestic workforce. Jordan had successfully positioned itself as the region's purveyor of skilled manpower. These sources, transfers, and remittances, together accounted for two-thirds of the Kingdom's gross domestic product. The situation was, however, almost entirely artificial. With the Monarch seemingly uncaring, Jordanian debt, at US \$8.4 billion, had reached 220% of gross national product. The bubble was about to burst, occasioned in considerable part by the King's disinterest in economic realities and penchant for strategic overreach. His ambitions went far beyond Jordan's ability to sustain them.

The oil states themselves had retrenched by the mid-1980s, but Jordan kept spending virtually without restraint, while borrowing from abroad. By the summer of 1988, the fiscal crisis could no longer be ignored and the Kingdom was in need of a serious financial bailout. But the Saudis and the Gulf states had become reluctant enablers in such profligacy. Aid from the oil states was historically thought to be Jordan's right, by both Monarch and citizenry, because the Kingdom acted as a conservative bulwark between both the radical Ba'athist regimes in Syria and Iraq and an expansionist Jewish state. The Gulf states, however, increasingly evinced lukewarm enthusiasm for supporting Jordan as their own revenues dried up in the waning days of the oil boom. They also suspected a lingering sense of Hashimite ambition with respect to dominion over the Hijaz, lost to the Saudis in 1925. Husayn's sense of entitlement and superiority irked them even more.

For his part, King Husayn deeply resented the perceived arrogance of his Gulf financiers, particularly the Kuwaitis. Out of necessity, however, he continued to canvass donors for the funds necessary to, at a minimum, provide a soft landing. He made repeated personal efforts, but was angered by increasingly tepid responses, particularly when they were in the public view and he consequently lost face. In February 1990, Husayn sheepishly took his "begging bowl" to the Gulf for the last time. His entreaties fell on deaf ears. Once again he had been publicly rebuffed and slighted. Bruised, he returned. His humiliation was palpable. Even the most intense efforts at media control could not hide this from public view. Such indignity, in the King's mind, among the elites and on the street, could not go unanswered.

As Gulf ties soured, the King began to speak with great enthusiasm of the dividend he believed would save Jordan if aid from the Arabian states would not. The alternative to Gulf money was the regime of Saddam Husayn. The Monarch, and his people, grabbed at it with alacrity.

The Iran-Iraq War had ended in 1988, and Jordan's eastern neighbor, Iraq, had begun to pour money into re-developing its civilian economy. For this, they needed a partner and a secure port. Aqaba, Jordan's most southern city already had become a major entry point for military goods destined for Iraq's war with Iran. After that conflict goods continued to flow. The British military attaché, with the author in tow, discovered by sheer fluke that the super-gun, the brainchild of the weapon's developer Gerald Bull, was being smuggled, in components, through Aqaba to Iraq.³

Much wealth flowed into Jordan as a result of the Iran-Iraq War. The royal family, the elite, the business community, and many others got rich as agents, brokers, transporters and facilitators. By early 1990, close to three-quarters of Jordanian industry was exporting primarily to Iraq. Saddam also promised substantial participation in major infrastructure projects and a generous flow of soft oil. Officially recorded transit exports through Aqaba to Iraq had grown from 98,000 tons in 1981 to 3,000,000 in 1988. The immensely profitable business links that developed generated a

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3. This appears to have cost the King nothing. Bull was subsequently assassinated outside his home in Brussels, presumably by the Israeli security services.

complacent Jordanian view of the Saddam regime.

The prospect of economic cooperation with his resource-rich neighbor played a large role in the King's strategic calculations. It would free him from the humiliation and resentment he felt toward his Saudi and Gulf patrons. It was wildly popular on the Jordanian street. It would compensate them for lost remittances, capital flight, declining tourism, and the threat of almost 400,000 expatriates returning home, their Gulf jobs gone.

My impression was that the King willed himself to believe Saddam's greatly exaggerated promises. No one was likely to counter this except his brother Crown Prince Hassan, who understood Jordan's economic realities well. Hassan struggled mightily with his sibling throughout this crisis, without success. The rhetoric from Baghdad, so widely welcomed, spoke not only to Jordan's austerity shock but just as importantly to the King's emotional shock. By the summer of 1990, Jordan and Iraq had become partners in a jaundiced love affair.

Saddam's frequent references to the ongoing Arab-Israeli dispute resonated with the majority Palestinian population of the Kingdom. Jordanians were witnessing the first Intifada in the West Bank and Gaza. They feared that Israel would impose the "Jordan is Palestine" option through population transfer. The Jordanians detested Israel's "creeping annexation" of Palestinian territories via the establishment of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. They were unable to do anything about it and that impotence embarrassed them. When Saddam invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990 waving the banner of Arab nationalism, many Jordanians felt that they could soothe their angst by supporting Iraq.

The King watched as his traditional Gulf patrons were pummeled by Saddam. Their recent tight-fistedness had stung, but their current battering was balm to his wounds. Thus encouraged, he dramatically cast aside the system of interstate relations he had labored so diligently to build.

Husayn embraced Saddam, a man whose origins, brutality, and ambitions had formerly been toxic to the Hashimites. On February 16, 1991, in a highly publicized message Husayn praised Saddam as a "dear brother" referring to his namesake's "peace initiative" as representing "Arab hopes" and "legitimate pan-Arab and national demands." Throughout Jordan, billboards pictured Saddam and the King side by side in a brotherly embrace. From the Iraqi Embassy, briefcases full of cash were delivered to and accepted by influential members of the Jordanian elite in payment for services rendered. Iraqi military reconnaissance expanded up to the Jordan River. The Muslim Brothers were given a free hand to agitate both against the West and Husayn's new Gulf adversaries. Evasion of UN sanctions, designed to limit Iraq's access to strategic materials, was rampant — the super-gun being only the most dramatic. Expatriate managers confided to me that they had been told by the regime to play ball or get out.

Rumors were rampant that Saddam had promised the King a significant share of any war booty. In addition, one can argue that Hashimite ambition led the King, trapped by historic memory, to overreach. In such a frenzied atmosphere, with the world turned upside down, the impossible might just have seemed possible.

On August 15 of the same year, the Monarch addressed Parliament, telling Jordanians that the term "king" in reference to himself was outmoded and that they should use the title "Sharif" instead. This was soon followed by a rally in the town of Madaba, where the crowd took the cue, shouting, "Sharif, Sharif" when Husayn addressed them. To the Saudis, this gesture was nothing less than an attempt to revise Arabia's history at their expense: the title "Sharif of Mecca" had been assumed by the House of Saud since the Hashimite expulsion. The King soon backed off, probably realizing that he had gone too far. The King's speech to legislators was erased from the parliamentary record.⁴

4. Avi Shlaim dismisses this incident as insignificant, but never explains why such language was expunged from the Hashimite lexicon for decades only to be re-introduced in this moment of crisis and flux. Husayn was far too aware of the power of language in the Arab world for this to have been anything but deliberate.

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During the crisis, Crown Prince Hassan spoke to me of the difficulty of forging a responsible public policy in the face of radicalized popular opinion. He maintained that the King really shared American concerns. The Crown Prince had been delegated to reassure the West. At the same time, the King continued in Arabic to demonize George H.W. Bush for preventing “an Arab solution to an Arab problem” and for “occupying” Islam’s two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina.

On September 17, 1990, I conveyed this increasingly dark mood to the Foreign Affairs Department in Ottawa: “Public opinion here continues to demonstrate overwhelming support for Saddam despite virtually unanimous condemnation. [This] sentiment is common even in key government departments like [the] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [the] Central Bank and General Intelligence ... replete with emotionalism and inconsistency. There is near complete failure to recognize Western determination or [the] validity of [the] principle of resisting aggression. Anti-Arab prejudice is repeatedly adduced as [the] reason for West’s vigorous diplomatic and military reaction. [The] fact that more than half of [the] Arab League has condemned Iraq and many of its leading members have sent troops is conveniently attributed variously to [the] corruption of leaders, lack of empathy between them and their subjects, [and] dependence on USA/Saudi largess.”

Could such self-destructive behavior be expected on the basis of past experience? Quite possibly, but the question remains the Monarch’s response, which as it turned out was less than reassuring. On September 17, I also reported: “Critics of [the] King ... maintain that he could have set [the] tone for [a] more balanced public assessment by [a] less equivocal posture of his own immediately following [the] invasion. [The] initial failure they assert has been succeeded by others. Prominent local journalists as well as heads of major professional syndicates and important political figures ... are said to be on [the] payroll of Iraqi ambassador to Jordan. [The] vitriolic content of political columns led several Gulf embassies to protest to [the] Minister of Information, which resulted in some toning down, but criticism was merely transferred to USA and Western allies. Jordan TV ... has taken to screening films with anti-imperialist themes ... with viewers left to draw [the] desired conclusion. [The] failure of [the] Palace to intervene is becoming part of problem.”

Events moved quickly. On September 25, I reported: “Jordanians were shocked by [the] Saudi decision 19 September to cut off oil supplies and threaten to expel Amman’s diplomats from Riyadh. Decision-makers here recognize this as [an] attempt to force King Husayn to demonstrate greater sensitivity to [the] view of anti-Saddam coalition... Some in [the] inner circle recognize movement is needed and Foreign Minister Marwan Qasem’s address to UNGA may be [the] opportunity to float [a] trial balloon in this direction. Realistic insiders lament however that opinion even amongst [the] majority of their colleagues remains heavily pro-Saddam. They worry [the] King has lost his touch and that despite high profile attempts to promote negotiations, he has made little effort to influence domestic opinion toward moderation.”

Given this situation, the question has been often asked, was the “plucky little king” responding as he must to survive? Had he instead lost his sense of direction under pressure? Or was he playing a double game? Afterwards he claimed he had no choice: “There would have been an eruption ... we couldn’t have done it any other way.”

It is interesting to compare the King’s behavior with that of his son ‘Abdullah’s on the eve of the second Gulf War in 2002. Despite emotional street opinion, a second Intifada in the West Bank and Gaza, and a White House-manufactured confrontation with Saddam, Husayn’s untried son unambiguously supported the Americans. Jordanians knew, despite the official denials, that ‘Abdullah had agreed to the stationing of US troops and aircraft in the Kingdom’s eastern desert and yet, while there was talk, there was no serious threat of an uprising.

The argument is made that the days of Nasserist and Ba’thist challenges to the regime had long since passed, that they were distant memories for the young ‘Abdullah rather than current nightmares, as they may have been for his

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father. It may also be that the outcome of the first Gulf war and its stultifying effect on Jordan, led the country's new monarch and his inner circle, to believe they could afford no further star-crossed adventures.

'Abdullah came to the throne without the Hashimite territorial dream. He avoided the strategic overreach to which his father so often fell victim. The new King's foreign policy became first and foremost an unswerving alliance with Washington. During his June 2000 visit to Canada, he told Canadian officials that he had warned both Bashar al-Asad and Saddam Husayn that the Americans would be taking a hard military approach with regimes cutting across their interests. They should, he said, greet a more muscular approach from Washington with approbation, in their own interests.

Husayn himself had shown on other occasions, over the course of his remarkable life, that he was made of very tough stuff. He had a long record of reacting forcefully to internal disturbances. He had acted brutally against Palestinian nationalists during the Black September uprising, when his position had been far weaker. He had concluded a highly unpopular peace treaty with Israel in 1994. He had forced through widely resented legislation when it suited him. He had openly interfered with the judiciary, sacking judges when decisions were not to his liking. In 1989, he forbade street demonstrations designed to oppose the austerity program imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

The King may have calculated that should the Americans be victorious in the Gulf, his charisma and the absence of regional alternatives would restore him to favor in the West. He was in many senses proven correct. He also knew that in the Arab world, things would not be so simple. He knew the Saudis, Kuwaitis, and other Gulf Arabs would not be prepared to forgive and forget. Whether he personally realized the consequences at the time or not, the economic costs were staggering: no transfers, no remittances from Kuwait where over 100,000 Jordanians had worked, no soft oil. After the war, in an effort to recoup what little he could, Husayn tried to embrace Saudi King Fahd in the traditional Arab manner before the television cameras. In response, Fahd straight-armed Husayn, an action understood all over the Arab world as rejection.

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Gulf umbrage was such that rebuilding Jordan's ties with the peninsular states came only nine years later following his death. The new King 'Abdullah was quick to move on this front. At Husayn's funeral, before his body was even in the ground, most dignitaries, including Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Jacques Chirac were left to mill about uncomfortably for three hours, awaiting the entourage. Saudi and Gulf royalty, however, were taken to an opulent separate room, seated, and served. This treatment sent a profound signal respecting his 'Abdullah's desire for reconciliation. Soon afterwards, 'Abdullah made a state visit to Kuwait, the Gulf state which had suffered most from Saddam's fist and resented most what Kuwaitis saw as Husayn's betrayal.

During the first Gulf war the Jordanian "street" favored support for Saddam, but there would have been little danger to the Kingdom or the King with a more even-handed stance. Saddam badly needed a stable Jordan for access to the outside world. It was his only lifeline, and he could not risk it being cut off by threatening Husayn. Indeed, Baghdad's only workable port was Aqaba and the Americans condoned Jordan's massive transgressions of UN sanctions. Despite his protests at the time, there was no strategic need for Husayn to support his pariah neighbor in such a flamboyant and highly public fashion. Nor was there a need for him to have opened his territory to Iraqi intelligence operations.

For a meaningful appreciation of what happened in the months preceding the first Gulf war one must go beyond Jordanian revisionism. One must accept that not only the street but emotion, wounded pride, and thwarted dynastic ambition drove the normally prudent King to ally himself with Iraq. Husayn was not only a charismatic leader; he was also a lucky man, forgiven his most grievous mistakes. His sense of self and filial obligation played a significant role in his life's work and led him to exaggerate, often dangerously, the limits of the possible. The first Gulf War was only one such case. Emotion and imagined memory provided him with a conceptual framework which resonated beyond cognitive criteria. James Morris' aptly stated words about the grandfather, paraphrased here, applied equally to the grandson: Jordan was indeed a very small principality for so ample a prince.