

Jordan: Why King Abdullah's Troubles Are Not Over

The king had achieved statements of international and regional support even by those he knew were trying to weaken him, but he no longer trusts those closest to him

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*The real message that **Prince Hamzah**, who [claims](#) he is wrongly accused of stoking discontent in the kingdom, wanted the world and his country to hear after he had been confined to house arrest was this one: [“I am the son of Hussein!”](#)*

In appearance, bearing and speech, the prince resembles his late father, [King Hussein](#), whose life was cut short by illness.

He [wanted](#) Hamzah to inherit the throne. Hamzah was too young at the time, and his half brother Abdullah, the eldest son of Princess Muna, Hussein's second wife, acceded to the throne. Abdullah named his half brother crown prince in line with their father's wishes but soon afterwards stripped him of that title in favour of his own son Hussein.

But Hamzah has never forgotten his father's bequest. He still behaves as if he is the rightful heir to the throne.

Prince Hamzah is popular in the kingdom. He talks to disaffected Eastern Jordanian tribal leaders who are traditionally loyal to the Hashemites. When Hamzah visited the family of one of the patients [who died of Covid-19](#) in the hospital in al Salt because it ran out of oxygen, he was [warmly thanked](#) by relatives. When his half brother the king turns up at the hospital, some in the crowd [reminded](#) him that under his rule, the country is drowning.

The video he sent the BBC soon after the visit by Major General Yousef Huneiti carries the same message. Hamzah positions his face in line with the portrait of his father on the wall. Was it just a happy coincidence that the red keffiyeh his late father wore merges with the 41-year-old's head, so that he appears as the true heir of his father? I don't think so.

But nor is there any concrete evidence – so far at least – of a specific plot to oust Abdullah or to what extent Hamzah is involved in it. Rather, there is an increasingly marginalised head of state, cut off from his main donors, in bad relations with Israel, in charge of a landlocked country being ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regional tensions

The issues on which Abdullah has refused to play ball are stacking up. To his credit, Abdullah [did not accept](#) former US President Donald Trump's "[deal of the century](#)", but he paid a price for that. In [moving closer](#) to Palestinian **President Mahmoud Abbas**, Abdullah has moved away from the two countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which were [channelling funds](#) to Jordan.

At one point, Abdullah was [fully signed up](#) to the plan to anoint **Mohammed Dahlan**, the Palestinian exile living in Abu Dhabi, as Abbas's successor. No more.

Neither of their crown princes, **Mohammed bin Salman and Mohammed bin Zayed**, showed any sympathy or comradeship with Jordan, and Abdullah was at pains to show them their normalisation deals with Israel would have [dire consequences for Jordan](#). Mohammed bin Salman, with Israel's blessing, openly eyed [a hostile takeover](#) of the Hashemite's historic role of guardianship of the holy places in Jerusalem.

The king's relations with Israeli **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** have gone [from bad to worse](#).

Image below: Prince Hamza Hussein (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



When Abdullah's son, **Crown Prince Hussein**, was supposed to visit and pray at Al Aqsa Mosque, over which Jordan has custodianship, [a row broke out](#) between the Jordanian *mukhabarat* and Shin Bet about how many of his bodyguards could carry arms.

Humiliated, the crown prince [cancelled the visit](#). In retaliation, the helicopter which was supposed to carry Netanyahu to Amman, where he would pick up a private jet sent by Mohammed bin Zayed for a photo-op in Abu Dhabi, was [denied](#) permission to cross Jordanian airspace.

In truth, the whole spat was a charade, as Netanyahu may have been under orders to stay at home. His wife Sara was undergoing surgery. After Netanyahu had [an extramarital affair](#), Israel has been flooded with rumours that the prime minister signed a contract with his wife which stipulates that she accompanies him on overnight visits.

In the real world, Jordan is suffering from Israel's cold shoulder. Netanyahu is [prevaricating](#) on a request by Jordan for water. This is the water that Israel pumps out of the river Jordan, and the kingdom under a peace treaty often requests that Israel transfers this water back to Jordan during dry spells. In punishment for the airspace episode, Netanyahu is not doing that, [despite being urged](#) by his security chiefs to do so.

The shortage of vaccines in Jordan is another source of tension with Israel. Jordan is being [ravaged](#) by the virus. Israel is conducting "[vaccine diplomacy](#)", helping out countries as far afield as Guatemala, but not its nearest neighbour Jordan. Israel's neglect of Jordan is all of a piece with its burgeoning relationship with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

This is sheer folly from Israel's own security interests, and if Netanyahu wants to know what will happen to his vulnerable eastern border if Jordan falls apart, his own security chiefs will be only too keen to tell him.

But it is the fashion and follows the logic of everything [Jared Kushner](#), Trump's son in law, and [David Friedman](#), the former US ambassador, did in concocting Arab normalisation deals with Israel. Ignore the Palestinians, trash talk of their state, and go directly over their heads, and Jordan's, and head straight for the Aladdin's cave of cash from Saudi and Emirati sovereign wealth funds.

Saudi links

While no evidence links Prince Hamzah to the alleged coup attempt, it is also significant that Jordan security sources picked out to the foreign media, [the role of two](#) of the 20 or so who have been arrested.

They did so because of their links with Saudi Arabia. They were directing the finger of blame to the Gulf when most of the action is taking place inside the kingdom. The two men are [Hassan bin Zayed](#), a member of the royal family, and [Bassem Awadallah](#).

Awadallah was once very close to King Abdullah. Awadallah served as economic secretary to the Jordanian premier from 1992 to 1996. He was appointed head of Jordan's royal court in 2007, before being sacked from the position less than a year later. When he left Jordan, Awadallah moved to Dubai, setting up a company called Tomouh. Awadallah shuttled between the Emirates and Saudi, where he still acted as Jordan's special envoy.

Awadallah's role was terminated in 2018, when the king was persuaded that his envoy was closer to Riyadh than he was to Jordan. Awadallah holds both Saudi and Jordan citizenship.

Awadallah had meanwhile set up a network of prominent businessmen and was working as a consultant for the Saudi crown prince. He became Mohammed bin Salman's economic adviser and is helping the planning of his [futuristic city Neom](#). He also forged strong ties with bin Zayed and was appointed to the board of directors of the University of Dubai. According to sources inside the Emirati court, Awadallah is more important to MbZ than the exiled Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan.

Some news media outlets [called](#) Awadallah one of the masterminds of the privatisation of Aramco. Mastermind is a curious epithet as this has largely failed. But Awadallah appeared alongside his new master bin Salman at the annual Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh, the so-called [Davos in the Desert](#), in January.

Arresting Awadallah is the biggest one finger sign Abdullah could have made to both bin Salman and bin Zayed.

But Jordan cannot confront Saudi Arabia openly. If they did, and accused Saudi of sending messages to Hamzah through Awadallah to mount a coup d'état, it would mean the expulsion of Jordanian workers and businessmen from Saudi which would spell economic ruin for the kingdom.

Within hours of the news of Awadallah's arrest, a Saudi delegation headed by the foreign minister requested permission to visit Amman. According to an intelligence source of an unnamed Middle Eastern country monitoring these events, which was quoted by the Washington Post, the Saudis requested the release of Awadallah. "The Saudis were saying that they won't leave the country without him," the official said. "It would appear that they are worried about what he would say," the Post [reported](#).

Nor can Jordan confront Israel directly. It was the Israeli media that delved into the past of [Roy Shaposhnik](#), the Israeli living in Europe who offered a private jet to Hamzah, so that his wife and children could leave the country.

Shaposhnik [denied he was a member of Mossad](#), but he worked for **Erik Prince**, established his own company RS Logistical Solutions which provided services to Prince's company for training Iraqi soldiers in Jordan. He met Hamzah through mutual contacts and their families became close friends.

These connections explain why Abdullah is suspicious. Hamzah has ambitions, and the Saudis, the Emiratis and Israel all have an agenda to weaken Jordan.

Desperation

Abdullah must feel he is running out of options. He no longer trusts those closest to him. He has been prepared in the past to tack with the prevailing wind, just as long as Jordan got the money. He was quite willing to join the condemnation of Turkey and Qatar when the counter revolution against the Arab Spring was in the ascendance.

As conditions in the kingdom have worsened, there is a political impasse: there are huge [unresolved problems with teachers](#), with [the tribes](#), and [vast numbers unemployed](#) – Prince Hamzah who has never abandoned his ambitions is looking increasingly attractive as a possible alternative.

There was possibly no specific coup involving Hamzah. But his popularity was growing and that of the king weakening. If anything, Hamzah's international profile and his domestic popularity has increased since Saturday. Before, few outside the kingdom knew anything about him. Now, he has been dramatically elevated to leader of the opposition.

Last night [a mediation effort](#) hosted by Abdullah's uncle Prince Hassan was underway. Ironically, the man picked to mend family fences was displaced by Abdullah himself and left the kingdom. Hassan was the crown prince under his brother, late King Hussein, for many decades and considered his successor.

A letter was signed in which Hamzah agreed to stand behind the king.

“In light of the developments of the past two days I place myself in the hands of his Majesty the King. I hereby affirm that I shall remain observant to the covenant of the forefathers and loyal to their legacy, walking their path, sincere to their history and mission and to his Majesty the King, adhering to the constitution of the dear Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. I shall always be and aid and support for his Majesty the King and his Crown Prince,” the letter read.

By Tuesday at least, King Abdullah had achieved statements of international and regional support even by those he knew were trying to weaken him, and he also got the verbal backing of Prince Hamzah for his rule and that of his son, the crown prince.

But internally things are less clear. Hamzah’s popularity will, if anything, have increased, and none of the dramatic entrances and exits of the last 48 hours have changed things in the kingdom one iota. Abdullah is still sitting on a pile of domestic discontent.

Above all, it is not the letter that Jordanians will remember but the audio of the meeting between the army chief and Hamzah, which has gone viral overnight.

“Sir, I am a free Jordanian, the son of my father, I have every right to mingle with the sons of my people and country and to serve my country as I promised him and made an oath to him while he was on his death bed. And now you come, sir forgive me, where were you twenty years ago? I was the crown prince in this country by order from my father, may Allah have mercy on him. I made an oath to him that I would continue to serve my country and people so long as I am alive. And now, you, after all the muddling that is taking place, and that is not because of me, and that I have nothing do with, you come to tell me to adhere?” Hamza says.

Abdullah’s troubles are not over.

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Featured image: Portraits of late King Hussein (M), Prince Hamzah (L) and King Abdullah of Jordan (R)
(Illustration by Hossam Sarhan via Middle East Eye)

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