

The Plot Against Jordan's King Abdullah

Abdullah fell foul of the axis of Mohammed bin Salman and Benjamin Netanyahu after refusing to go along with the Trump plan to push West Bank Palestinians into Jordan

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For once, just for once, US President Joe Biden got something right in the Middle East, and I say this conscious of his abysmal record in the region.

In accepting the intelligence he was passed by the Jordanians that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was up to his ears in a plot to destabilise the rule of King Abdullah, Biden brought the scheme to a premature halt. Biden did well to do so.

His [statement](#) that the US was behind Abdullah had immediate consequences for the other partner in this scheme, Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel.

While bin Salman was starving Jordan of funds (according to former Foreign Minister [Marwan Muasher](#), the Saudis have not provided any direct bilateral assistance since 2014), Netanyahu was starving the kingdom of water.

This is water that Israel siphons off the River Jordan. Under past agreements, Israel has supplied Jordan with water, and when Jordan asks for an additional amount, Israel normally agrees without delay. Not this year: Netanyahu refused, allegedly in retaliation for an incident in which his helicopter was refused Jordanian airspace. He quickly changed his mind after [a call](#) from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to his counterpart, Gabi Ashkenazi.

Had former US President Donald Trump still been in power, it is doubtful whether any of this would have happened.

Without Washington's overt support, King Abdullah would now be in serious trouble: the victim of a two-pronged offensive from Saudi Arabia and Israel, his population seething with discontent, and his younger half-brother counting the days until he could take over.

The problem with Abdullah

But why were bin Salman and Netanyahu keen to put the skids under an ally like Abdullah?

Abdullah, a career soldier, is not exactly an opposition figure in the region. He of all people is not a Bashar al-Assad, Recep Tayyip Erdogan or Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Abdullah was fully signed up to the counter-revolution against the Arab Spring. Jordan joined the Saudi-led anti-Islamic State [coalition](#), deployed aircraft to target the Houthis in [Yemen](#), and [withdrew](#) its ambassador from Iran after the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consul in Mashhad were sacked and Saudi Arabia consequently cut diplomatic relations.

He attended the informal summit on a yacht in the Red Sea, convened to [organise the fight](#) against the influence of Turkey and Iran in the Middle East. That was in late 2015.

In January 2016, Abdullah told US congressmen in a private briefing that [Turkey was exporting terrorists to Syria](#), a statement he denied making afterwards. But the remarks were documented in a Jordanian foreign ministry readout passed to MEE.

Jordan's special forces trained men that Libyan general Khalifa Haftar used in his failed attempt to take Tripoli. This was the pet project of the UAE.

Abdullah also agreed with the Saudis and Emiratis on a plan to [replace Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas with Mohammed Dahlan](#), the Emirati- and Israeli-preferred choice of successor.

Why then, should this stalwart of the cause now be considered by his Arab allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, an inconvenience that needs to be dealt with?

Insufficiently loyal

The answer partly lies in the psychology of bin Salman. It is not good enough to be partially signed up to his agenda. As far as he is concerned, you are either in or out.

Under Abdullah, Jordan never quite managed to be fully in. As one former Jordanian government minister told me:

“Politically, Mohammed bin Salman and his father were never very close to the Hashemites. King Salman does not have any affinity to the Hashemites that his other brothers might have had. So on the political front, there is no affinity, no empathy.

“But there is also a feeling [in Riyadh] that Jordan and others should be with us or against us. So we were not completely with them on Iran. We were not completely with them on Qatar. We were not completely with them on Syria. We did what we could and I don't think we should have gone further, but to them, that was not enough.”

Abdullah's equivocation certainly was not enough for the intended centrepiece of the new era, Saudi Arabia's [normalisation of relations](#) with Israel.

Here, Jordan would have been directly involved and King Abdullah was having none of it. Had he gone along with the Trump plan, his kingdom – a careful balance between Jordanians and Palestinians – would have been in a state of insurrection.

In addition, Abdullah could not escape the fact that he was a Hashemite, whose legitimacy stems in part from Jordan's role as [custodian](#) of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy sites in Jerusalem. This, too, was being threatened by the Al Sauds.

The importance of Aqaba

But the plan itself was regarded by both bin Salman and Netanyahu as too big to stop. I personalise this, because in both Saudi Arabia and Israel, there are experienced foreign policy and intelligence hands who appreciate how quickly this plan would have destabilised Jordan and Israel's vulnerable eastern border.

The plan has been years in the preparation and the subject of [clandestine meetings](#) between the Saudi prince and the Israeli leader. At the centre of it lies Jordan's sole access to the Red Sea, the strategic port of Aqaba.

The two cities of Aqaba and Ma'an were part of the kingdom of Hejaz from 1916 to 1925. In May 1925, Ibn Saud surrendered Aqaba and Ma'an and they became part of the British Emirate of Transjordan.

It would be another 40 years before the two independent countries would agree on a Jordan-Saudi border. Jordan got [19 kilometres of coastline](#) on the Gulf of Aqaba and 6,000 square kilometres inland, while Saudi Arabia got 7,000 square kilometres of land.

For the new kid on the block, bin Salman, a prince who was always sensitive about his legitimacy, reclaiming Saudi influence over Aqaba in a big trade deal with Israel would be a big part of his claim to restoring Saudi dominance over its hinterland.

And the trade with Israel would be big. Bin Salman is spending [\\$500bn](#) constructing the city of Neom, which is eventually supposed to [straddle](#) Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. Sitting at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, the Jordanian port would be firmly in Saudi sights.



This is where Bassem Awadallah, the former chief of Jordan's royal court, comes in. Two years before he definitively broke with King Abdullah, and while he was still Jordan's envoy to Riyadh, Awadallah negotiated the launch of something called the [Saudi-Jordanian Coordination Council](#), a vehicle that Jordanian officials at the time said would "unblock billions of dollars" for the cash-starved Hashemite kingdom.

Awadallah promised that the council would invest billions of Saudi dollars in Jordan's leading economic sectors, focusing on the [Aqaba Special Economic Zone](#).

Awadallah was also close to the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, who had his own agenda in Jordan. He wanted to ensure that the Muslim Brotherhood and the forces of political Islam were permanently eradicated from the country, something Abdullah has refused to do, although he is no supporter.

The money, of course, never materialised. Saudi support for the kingdom diminished to a

trickle, and according to an informed source, Muasher, Saudi funds stopped almost completely after 2014.

The price for turning on the tap of Saudi finance was too high for Abdullah to pay. It was total subservience to Riyadh. Under this plan, Jordan would have become a satellite of Riyadh, much as Bahrain has become.

Netanyahu had his own sub-agenda in the huge trade that would flow from Neom once Saudi Arabia had formally recognised Israel.

A confirmed enemy of the [Oslo plan](#) to set up a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, Netanyahu and the Israeli right have always eyed [annexation of Area C](#) and the Jordan Valley, which comprises 60 percent of the West Bank. Under this new Nakba, the Palestinians living there, denied Israeli citizenship, would be slowly forced to move to Jordan. This could only happen under a Saudi-oriented plan, in which Jordanian workers could travel freely and work in Saudi Arabia. As it is, remittances from the Jordanian workforce in Saudi Arabia are an economic lifeblood to the bankrupt kingdom.

The money pouring into Jordan, accompanied by a mobile workforce of Jordanians and stateless Palestinians, would finally put to bed grandiose visions of a Palestinian state, and with it the two-state solution. On this, Netanyahu and bin Salman are as one: treat them as a mobile workforce, not citizens of a future state.

Hussein's favoured son

That Prince Hamzah should be seen as the means by which Jordan is enlisted to this plan represents the final irony of this bizarre tale.



If the Hashemite blood runs deep in any veins, it is surely in his. He was King Hussein's favoured son. In a [letter](#) sent to his brother Prince Hassan in 1999, King Hussein wrote:

"Hamzeh, may God give him long life, has been envied since childhood because he was close to me, and because he wanted to know all matters large and small, and all details of the history of his family. He wanted to know about the struggle of his brothers and of his countrymen. I have been touched by his devotion to his country and by his integrity and magnanimity as he stayed

beside me, not moving unless I forced him from time to time to carry out some duty on occasions that did not exceed the fingers on one hand.”

Abdullah broke the agreement he made with his father on his death bed when he [replaced](#) his half-brother with his son, Hussein, as crown prince in 2004.

But if Hashemite pride in and knowledge of Jordan’s history runs deep in Hamzah, he of all princes would have soon realised the cost to Jordan of accepting bin Salman’s billions and Netanyahu’s tacit encouragement, just as his father did.

Hamzah’s friends ardently dispute they are part of this plot and downplay connections with Awadallah. Hamzah only owns up to one thing: that he is immensely concerned at how low Jordan has fallen under years of [misrule](#). In this, Hamzah is 100 percent right.

It is clear what has to happen now. King Abdullah should finally see that he must completely overhaul the Jordanian political system, by calling for free and fair elections and abiding by their result. Only that will unite the country around him.

This is what King Hussein did when he faced challenge and revolt by Jordanian tribes in the south of the kingdom; [in 1989](#), Hussein overhauled the political system and held the freest elections in the history of the kingdom.

The government that emerged from this process led the country safely out of one of the most difficult moments for Jordan: Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War.

The real villains

Biden, meanwhile, should realise that letting bin Salman get away with the murder of Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#) has a cost.

Bin Salman did not learn anything from the episode and carried on in exactly the same way, reckless and swift, against an Arab neighbour and ally, with potentially disastrous consequences.

The new foreign policy establishment in Washington should wean itself off the notion that US allies are its friends. It should learn once and for all that the active destabilisers of the Middle East are not the cartoon villains of Iran and Turkey.

Rather, they are the closest US allies, where US forces and military technology are either based, or as in the case of Israel, inextricably intertwined: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel.

Jordan, the classic buffer state, is a case in point.

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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 MEE)*

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