

## ONE

### ABDALLAH AND TRUMAN

It was the Jordan Star First Class medal that saved the young prince's life. It was just before noon on July 20, 1951, at the entrance to the al Aqsa mosque in East Jerusalem. King Abdallah had insisted that his grandson Hussein wear his uniform with the medal to accompany him to Jerusalem that morning. Hussein had won the award for fencing.<sup>1</sup> The king and his grandson spent the morning in Nablus, where the mayor urged Abdallah not to go to Jerusalem because of the tension in the city.<sup>2</sup>

The sixty-nine-year-old king, his grandson walking behind him, entered the noble sanctuary in the Old City of Jerusalem around 11:30 that morning and walked to the mosque with his bodyguards and the city's leaders. Hussein saw his grandfather's assassin jump forward from behind the door to the mosque and fire a bullet directly into the king's head, killing him instantly. Hussein lunged at the murderer, who fired his pistol at the prince. The bullet ricocheted off the medal, saving Hussein's life, and the king's bodyguards from the Arab Legion, Jordan's army, killed the assassin immediately.

In England, Winston Churchill, who had created the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in a meeting with Abdallah in Jerusalem in 1921, said that

he “deeply regretted the murder of this wise and faithful Arab ruler who never deserted the cause of Britain and who held out the hand of reconciliation with Israel.”<sup>3</sup> The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) warned the White House that Abdallah’s assassination would destabilize the entire region, which “can only benefit the anti-western elements in the Near East.” The CIA said his death “will most immediately affect the British who rely on the British trained, officered and financed Arab Legion as the only competent and dependable Arab army in the Near East.”<sup>4</sup>

Both the British and American ambassadors in Amman had warned Abdallah against traveling to Jerusalem. They thought the city was infested with enemies of the king who believed he was secretly in collusion with Israel and had done too little to defend Palestinian interests in the 1948 war that created Israel and united the Palestinian West Bank of the Jordan River with the country Churchill and Abdallah had created on the East Bank in 1921, then called Transjordan.

In fact, Abdallah was in Jerusalem for a clandestine meeting with the Israelis, scheduled for the next day. The Israelis included the first director of the Israeli Secret Intelligence Service, Mossad director Reuven Shiloah.<sup>5</sup> This was just the latest in a long series of meetings between the king and the Israelis in which the king tried to reconcile Israeli and Jordanian interests peacefully. His grandson would later continue that tradition.

The assassins reportedly were in the pay of Saudi Arabia. Abdallah and King Abdelaziz al Saud, better known as Ibn Saud, had been mortal enemies for decades. Ibn Saud had driven the Hashemites out of the Hijaz after the World War I. The Saudi embassy in Amman pressed for the partition of Jordan after Abdallah’s murder, with the south going to the Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

---

Transjordan, or the East Bank, was a quiet backwater in the Turkish Ottoman Empire for centuries. The population was small, comprised of a few farmers in the Jordan River valley and nomadic Bedouin tribes in the rest of the country. Amman, the ancient Philadelphia, had a significant population of Circassian refugees who had fled Russia for the safety of the Ottomans. The Turks ruled the Arabs. At the end of the nineteenth century,

they built a railroad from the capital at Constantinople to the holy city of Medina in the Hijaz south of Jordan, and the small railroad stations along the line held Ottoman garrisons.

The Hashemite family then ruled in the Hijaz as the Sharif of Mecca under the authority of the Ottoman Empire, which kept a garrison in both Medina and Mecca as well as the port of Jedda. An old family, the Hashemites claimed to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

Even before WWI, the Hashemites were considering breaking away from the Ottomans and founding their own state in the Hijaz. Abdallah was sent by his father Sharif Hussein to Cairo in April 1914 to sound out the British on whether they would assist Hussein if he sought to make his part of Arabia an independent country. The British obfuscated.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey tried to stay neutral when the First World War began in August 1914, but joined the war before the end of the year on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Hashemites pondered their position for several months before deciding to defect and make common cause with the British and French against the Ottoman Empire. The Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire was the first manifestation of Arab nationalism. The goal was a united Arab state including the Hijaz, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. The Arab Revolt was made famous by the British army officer Thomas Lawrence, but the leadership came from the Hashemites, led by Sharif Hussein. One of his sons, Faysal, led the attack on the railroad north into Jordan, working closely with Lawrence. A younger son, Abdallah, led the operations in the Hijaz, particularly a long siege of Medina.

### TWO-EDGED SWORD

The Arab Revolt is central to the legitimacy of the Hashemites. It is the centerpiece of their argument that they are the natural leaders of the Arab World. This was the first time the Arabs acted as a nation seeking its liberty. Hussein and his sons and descendants are the beneficiaries of the war for independence waged by their ancestors. The Arab Revolt features prominently in Jordan's history. Indeed, much of the revolt was fought in the territory that is now Jordan. The key battles of the Arab Revolt were in

the cities of Aqaba, Ma'an, and Dera, along the Hijaz rail line from Damascus to Medina. Amman was not liberated by the Arabs, however; instead, it was seized by a British army commanded by a New Zealander.<sup>8</sup>

Lawrence favored Faysal over Abdallah, whom he regarded as too ambitious. In turn, Abdallah was critical of Lawrence.<sup>9</sup> Hussein and Abdallah feared the British would sell the Arabs out when the war ended; they were right. The stain of having supported the British only to have London usurp the rights of the Arabs to independence is a key argument against the Hashemites by their enemies, including Nasser in the 1950s and al Qaida in the 2000s. So, the Arab Revolt is a two-edged sword for and against the Hashemites.

At the end of the war, the Allied powers divided the Middle East between them. France got Syria and Lebanon, Britain took Palestine, which included both banks of the Jordan, and Iraq. These were mandates from the League of Nations, a more politically correct form of imperialism that made some concession that the mandated colonies would someday become independent. The British also promised that the expanded Palestine, including Transjordan, would become a safe haven and homeland for Jews and, ultimately, a Jewish state.

The United States did not declare war on the Ottoman Empire when it went to war with Germany in 1917. President Woodrow Wilson met briefly with Prince Faysal, who represented the Hashemites at the Versailles peace conference in February 1919, but had little interest in the future of the Arabs. Nonetheless, the prince made a favorable impression on Wilson and Secretary of State Robert Lansing. Lansing later said Faysal was very dignified but "of a religion that has been a curse."<sup>10</sup>

Faysal briefly ruled in Damascus after the war but was driven out by the French. Back in the Hijaz, the Hashemites were on the defensive trying to save their hold there from the Saudis, who held the center of the Arabian Peninsula and also had fought against the Ottomans in the war. Abdallah lost a crucial battle of the war at Turaba in May 1919 to Ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi state, and Abdallah gradually moved his forces north to Amman.

Winston Churchill was put in charge of the British empire's colonial

affairs after the war. In March 1921, he convened a conference of Britain's leading political and military figures in the region in Cairo to decide how best to govern the new mandates. Churchill decided to separate the East Bank from the Palestine mandate and created Transjordan. He traveled from Cairo to Jerusalem to meet with Prince Abdallah. On March 28, 1921, Churchill offered Abdallah the post of emir of Transjordan, which would be separate from Palestine and explicitly not part of the homeland for the Jews. As Churchill later said, "the Emir Abdallah is in Transjordan where I put him one Sunday afternoon at Jerusalem."<sup>11</sup> The British made Abdallah their appointed ruler in Transjordan, and Faysal got Iraq. Real power, of course, remained in the hands of the British. Small detachments of the British army and the Royal Air Force ensured their control.

Abdallah chafed at his little, barren kingdom and plotted incessantly to expand it to include Syria and Palestine. He suggested to the Jewish Zionists that he could rule all of Palestine and be the protector of the Jews. Abdallah also had to fend off the Saudis, who regarded southern Jordan, especially Aqaba and Ma'an, as part of the Hijaz and, thus, rightfully theirs. The British built the Arab Legion to defend the tiny emirate and provided the officers to run it.

In World War II, the Arab Legion was employed in fighting the Vichy French in Syria and a pro-German coup in Iraq. The Legion was an important instrument for the British in securing their hold on the Middle East. Sir John Bagot Glubb, a career army officer wounded in the First World War who had much experience in the Arab world, became commander in 1939 after serving as chief of the Legion in the south facing the Saudis. When the war ended in 1945, he and his British officers leading the Legion were the most experienced and capable army in the Middle East.

Abdallah sought to work with the Jewish minority in Palestine. He hired a Jewish architect to build a new home for the family and built a close relationship with him.<sup>12</sup> Other Jews visited the sites in the country. David Ben Gurion visited Petra with his wife, for example, in 1935, to see the magnificent Nabatean ruins.<sup>13</sup> Members of the Haganah, the forerunner of the Israel Defense Forces, fought alongside the Arab Legion in 1941, when the British used both to defeat the Vichy French army in Syria. Moshe

Dayan famously lost an eye in that campaign. Abdallah met secretly with the Jewish leadership to try to broker a solution to the future of Palestine.

But the cooperation broke down in 1948 with the declaration of the independence of Israel. The Arab Legion entered the West Bank to defend Arab and Palestinian interests. When it came into conflict with the Israelis in Jerusalem, the conflict became very intense, and the Jordanians were the only Arab army that acquitted itself well in the war. A truce came into effect in July 1948, and, on November 15, 1948, King Abdallah of Jordan was crowned king of Jerusalem in the Old City by the Coptic Christian Bishop of Jerusalem. The king gave the Palestinian inhabitants of East Jerusalem and the West Bank Jordanian citizenship; no other Arab country offered its Palestinian residents citizenship. In December, the Jordanian parliament approved the union of Palestine and Transjordan.<sup>14</sup>

After the ceasefire, Abdallah reverted to clandestine contacts with Israel, meeting secretly with key officials of the new state to try to move from ceasefire to a full peace treaty. That was the purpose of his visit to Jerusalem in 1951.<sup>15</sup>

#### INDEPENDENCE OF A SORT

Britain declared Transjordan independent in January 1946. The United Nations General Assembly unanimously welcomed the announcement in the following February, but the United States did not recognize the new state until January 31, 1949, three years after its independence and a year after it had expanded to include the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In pointed contrast, the United States recognized the state of Israel *de facto* eleven minutes after it declared its establishment.

This delay was unusual for the United States, especially regarding the independence of a country certain to be on Washington's side in the Cold War with Russia that dominated American foreign policy after 1945. Several factors accounted for the long delay. First, Transjordan was independent in name but still very much under British domination. Glubb ran the army and the intelligence service. More importantly, the Zionist movement in the United States raised several objections to recognizing Trans-

jordan. The more extreme parts of the movement with links to the Israeli far right, the Irgun and the Stern Gang, objected because they still wanted the East Bank to be part of the new Israeli state. More moderate elements with links to the Haganah, the mainstream Israeli underground militia, were less concerned about maintaining a claim to the East Bank than using recognition as leverage to get the United States and the United Nations to support the creation of Israel.<sup>16</sup>

President Harry Truman made little secret that his priority in the Middle East was Israel. He was an avid supporter of the Jewish state, overruling his advisers, who warned that Truman's close support for Israel would antagonize the Arab world. Truman correctly argued that the Arabs, especially Saudi Arabia, would continue to export oil to the United States because it was essential to their economic wellbeing.

The United States saw the Middle East as the responsibility of the British after World War II in the Cold War with the Soviets. They had colonies and former colonies throughout the region, and troops deployed, especially in the Suez Canal zone in Egypt. Only in 1947 did London announce that it was financially unable to continue to defend much of the empire due to the enormous cost of the two world wars. The United States announced in the Truman Doctrine that it would defend Turkey and Greece against Soviet aggression. Still, the Truman administration did not recognize Jordan.

Abdallah sent emissaries to Washington to try to get recognition, either *de facto* or the more formal *de jure*. They were politely received but got nowhere, even after the partition of Palestine was approved by the UN and Israel was created. The Arab states condemned the partition and sent troops in 1948 to assist the Palestinians. Abdallah tried to work out a quiet deal behind the scenes to allow him to occupy most of the territory allotted to the Arabs without fighting the Israelis, but it failed when the fighting in Jerusalem became so intense Abdallah had to send the Arab Legion into the city. A ceasefire in late 1948 ended the combat.

President Harry Truman finally agreed to recognize Jordan *de jure* in January 1949, and at the same time upgraded Israeli recognition from *de facto* to *de jure*.<sup>17</sup> The recognition struggle was an early insight into Amer-

ica's relations with the Hashemites. Washington always had more important friends than the Jordanians.

### PALACE INTRIGUES

The assassination of Abdallah in 1951 created the first major crisis in the internal affairs of the new Kingdom. Abdallah's oldest son Talal suffered from mental illness, which sometimes manifested in violent behavior. Abdallah and Talal were never close. Talal was the son of Abdallah's first wife, who resented deeply that the king was closer to his second, Turkish, wife, and the boy inherited his mother's disdain for his father. In turn, Abdallah could never cope with his son's mental health problems.<sup>18</sup>

When his father was assassinated, Talal was in Switzerland getting treatment for his health in a sanitorium. For a week after the killing, Talal stayed in Switzerland with only the vaguest understanding of what was going on in Jordan, where his younger half-brother Nayef was acting as regent.

The removal of Talal and the placement of Hussein on the throne was tumultuous and played out over more than a year. Talal wandered between lucidity and incompetence, and between wanting to be king and recognizing his best choice was abdication. The British and the Iraqi branch of the Hashemite family played crucial roles in the turmoil, both wanting to protect their own interests. The Saudis, traditionally the mortal enemy of the Hashemites, also played a deft role behind the scenes. Hussein played virtually no role. His mother Zayn was probably the most influential figure in the end, acutely aware of Talal's instability and eager for her own son to ascend to the throne. At one point, the regent, Talal's half-brother, considered seizing the throne in a coup, a real option, as he controlled the Hashemite Regiment, the palace guard.<sup>19</sup> Glubb Pasha blocked him by ensuring that larger and loyal units were in Amman.<sup>20</sup>

Talal returned to Jordan and formally ascended the throne on September 6, 1951. He was initially very popular and seen as a more rigorous defender of Arab interests against Israel and the British than his father. He advocated a "more confrontational approach to the British and developing



stronger ties to the Saudis.<sup>21</sup> In November 1951, he became the first Jordanian ruler to visit Mecca, Medina, and Riyadh, ending the dispute with the Saudis and being warmly greeted by his fellow monarch, King Abdelaziz al Saud, better known as Ibn Saud.<sup>22</sup>

But Talal's honeymoon did not last. In May 1952, he had a serious mental breakdown and left for Paris and then Lausanne, Switzerland, for treatment. His behavior toward his wife and children was occasionally violent, and they took refuge in the British embassy. At one point, Talal indicated that he wanted to travel to the United States by booking passage on the *Queen Mary*.<sup>23</sup> The Iraqis, who were eager to ensure that a pro-Iraq member of the family was on the throne, sent their very capable Prime Minister Nuri al Said to Switzerland to try to convince Talal to abdicate, perhaps opening the door to unification of the two kingdoms under the Iraqi king. Talal was strongly opposed to an Iraqi takeover. He considered abdication and moving to Mecca. Ibn Saud said he was welcome. Instead, on July 3, 1952, Talal returned to Jordan.<sup>24</sup>

It was a tumultuous time in the region. On July 23, the king of Egypt, Farouk, was deposed in a coup led by the military. Gamal Abdul Nasser would emerge in time as the new leader of Egypt. This was a warning shot to all the other monarchs in the region and to the British who had controlled Egypt through Farouk. On July 27, Talal agreed to abdicate and move to Saudi Arabia. On August 11, the parliament formally divested Talal of the throne and, surprisingly, he moved to Cairo. Later in the month, Talal moved to Istanbul, Turkey, where he would live until his death in July 1972. Hussein was a regular visitor, checking on his father's condition over the twenty years. The Jordanian government got financial help from Ibn Saud and Saudi Arabia for the costs of Talal's home and treatment.<sup>25</sup>

Hussein was born November 14, 1935, to Talal and Zayn in Amman, the eldest of three brothers and two sisters. The family was poor, as the state had no money to pay for its king. As Hussein later wrote, "We were at times very poor. For our family life was far from easy." When he was only one year old, his baby sister died from pneumonia in a cold Amman winter because they could not afford to heat the house. Hussein's bicycle, a gift from his much wealthier cousin Faisal in Iraq, was sold at one point to help

pay for expenses.<sup>26</sup> But they had their pride. He was a fortieth-generation descendant of the prophet Mohammad.

Hussein's mother Zayn was his strongest supporter and adviser. "All through my life, with its crisis after crisis, her encouragement has given me strength," he wrote in 1962.<sup>27</sup> It was Zayn who told Hussein they had to sell his bicycle to raise money, and she sold her last piece of jewelry to buy him a teddy bear. It was a hard start to life.

Hussein's education began in Amman. His grandfather took great interest in his education, probably because Abdallah was disappointed in his own son, Talal, who was sickly and ill. Hussein was in Alexandria, Egypt, studying at Victoria College when Hussein came to visit with his family and was almost assassinated in Abdallah's murder. The family decided to send him to England for further education, first to Harrow and then to the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst for a six-month course. Hussein eagerly took to soldiering and the life of an officer.

Hussein was enthroned on May 2, 1953, when he turned eighteen. His cousin, Faisal II, was enthroned on the same day in Baghdad as king of Iraq. The two were very close, having studied in England together. By then, America had a new president, Dwight David Eisenhower, the hero of World War II, who had commanded the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Eisenhower appointed John Foster Dulles to be his secretary of state. Dulles was an experienced diplomat and an avid proponent of a tough line in the Cold War with Russia. He embarked on a trip to the Middle East in May 1953 and asked the embassy in Amman to arrange an appointment with new King Hussein. The embassy wrote back: "the King is only a boy and while anything he may say may be interesting, it can't be of any importance."<sup>28</sup> The embassy correctly assessed that Zayn was the power behind the throne, calling the shots while her son grew up.