The other side of the Hashemite coin

Rabinowitz Danny
Haaretz Op-ED, February 9 1999

King Hussein, one of the most prominent statesmen of the 20th century, has in his death received the respect he deserves. By virtue of his unique personality and extraordinary talents, the king has become a man sincerely mourned all over the world. The danger is that the global admiration of the popular king's character will distract from questions pertaining to the legitimacy of the Hashemite regime. One must understand that there are alternative views of Jordan's history in the Arab world. They are commonly voiced, and apparently do not represent wide swathes of the people. However, they cannot be ignored: In the Middle East, like everywhere else, deeply suppressed feelings can burst through to the surface.

The Hashemite dynasty did not sprout from Jordanian soil, but in Arabia. At the turn of the century Emir Hussein of Hejaz, father of King Hussein's grandfather, was contending for the crown of the Hejaz kingdom against Abed al-Aziz Ibn Saud. Ibn Saud won, with the help of the British and Americans, and established the Saudi kingdom. To assure the stability of the Arabian oil fields, the British promised to give Emir Hussein alternative lands.

Emir Hussein's son Faisal was crowned King of Syria under the patronage of the British. After only a year he was expelled by the French (and went on to become King of Iraq, where the Hashemites ruled until 1958), who then created Lebanon and Syria. During the 1920s another of Emir Hussein's sons, Abdullah, supported the British, who split the two banks of the Jordan river to create two entities - Palestine and Trans-Jordan. In exchange, he was anointed King of Trans-Jordan. But his relations with the West, and with Zionism, cost him his life. He was assassinated in 1951 by a Palestinian extremist in Jerusalem.

His grandson, King Hussein, managed to survive and to establish himself. The House of Hashem found relief and a home in Jordan. Researchers of latter-day nationalism can tell of many peoples who have been manipulated and molded by elites, whether monarchial or republican. Such acts of creativity, which persuade large portions

וויכראב שופיח

תובתכ תשיכר

עדימ וויכראה לע

וובשח בצמ

המסיס יוניש

תוריש

תובוגת

המסיס יתחכש

of the population that they have a common denominator, manage to bridge gaps between social classes, language, life-style and other cultural or regional differences. King Hussein too succeeded, by the force of his personality, to consolidate a people for himself despite the tensions characterizing Jordan - a nation almost half of whose population is made up of Palestinian refugees. The king became a tangible symbol to his people and their untiring spokesman. He convinced them they had a common history and a clear vision.

But at this time of transition the same problem that brought down the absolute monarchies of central Europe - legitimacy - arises anew, and more intensely than ever. Even if all Jordanians concurred regarding the concept of a monarchy by the benevolence of God, the question as to the legitimacy of a foreign dynasty imposed on the territory by the Western powers, surviving with their help ever since, is not a trivial one in the Muslim Middle East at the end of the millennium. History has given us not a few kings who were not born in the territories they ultimately ruled, but they were not exposed to the public as they are today. The question of legitimacy did not smolder like a threatening ember beneath their feet. Abdullah, the son of the Englishwoman Toni Gardiner, a man whose English is far superior to his Arabic, is beginning from a far less advantageous position than did his father.

There have been moments in the history of nations when the monarchy's history loses its significance and the dynasty assimilates into the culture and society of its subjects. In Jordan's case, it is far from clear whether this process has been completed. The prolonged and beloved kingship of Hussein may have deflected attention from the question of its legitimacy. But as the scepter passes on, such questions take on their own momentum and the wheel may begin to turn in reverse. Under such fluid conditions various entities with vested interests may begin to bring such issues back to the center of the public debate and use them to catalyze instability.

The questions already being asked about Abdullah and his future attest to this: Does he have his father's talents? Can he conciliate between a million and a half Palestinians, a million and a half Bedouin and half a million Iraqis? Will he overcome Jordan's economic crisis?

To this list, apparently another question begs to be added, of no lesser importance: Will the new king finally put to rest the lingering doubts about the legitimacy of the regime he has just inherited