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ABDALLAH'S SCOLDING OF ARAFAT: THE COMING OF AGE OF A HASHEMITE KING

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The interview by Jordan's King Abdallah II on 3 August on the *al-Arabiyya* Satellite TV channel reveals much about the reign of Abdallah, the Kingdom of Jordan's strategic predicament, and the state of play in the always awkward relationship of Jordanians and Palestinians.

Abdallah has been on the throne for five and a half years, since the passing of his father King Husayn in February 1999. From the outset, despite the unusual circumstances of his succession (for which he himself was hardly prepared), he has been determined to be his own man. Initially surrounded by his father's appointees, he fired them all within two years and replaced them with men of his own choosing. With the passage of time he has proved to be a calculating, astute and decisive head of state.

But he had at least one noticeable shortcoming - after having spent so many years of his childhood and adolescence in Britain and the United States, his command of Arabic was less than perfect. Abdallah was conscious of his impediment and tended to shy away from public speaking. This had the negative consequence of

diluting the public presence of the monarchical institution. But Abdallah put his mind to it, took a tutor and has steadily improved his language skills. The *al-Arabiyya* interview was an impressive display of linguistic self-assurance and of political finesse. He seems to have mastered his problem to a large degree and asserted his monarchical authority, just as he did a few weeks ago when he sent a stern directive to his Prime Minister, Faysal al-Fayiz, urging him to pull up his bootstraps in dealing with Jordan's domestic problems.

The key segment of this interview was Abdallah's scolding of Yasir Arafat. He was crystal clear, justifying international impatience with Arafat for not delivering on Palestinian institutional reform and for mismanaging the peace process. The Palestinian leadership, Abdallah complained, was not only inconsistent, but not quite patriotic enough either. The Palestinians want the Arabs to help them, but the Arabs have no idea what they want. "At the beginning, the talk was about retrieving 98 per cent of the occupied Palestinian territories. Then the talk was on less than 50 per cent of these territories. Who knows what percentage they

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will be talking about in a year or two? As for the refugee question, the talk was about return and compensation. Then we discovered that the talk now is about the return of a small percentage of them. We expect the Palestinian leadership to define for us what it is exactly that they want, and not to surprise us every now and then with decisions, accepting what in the past had been rejected. It is regrettable to see that what was once rejected ... [and] regarded as treason, has ... in the eyes of some become a demand and a great achievement."

In this interview, Abdallah was settling historical scores on behalf of the Hashemites. Born in 1962, he matured into adulthood in the 1980s, times of almost incessant competition, suspicion and mistrust between Jordan and the Palestinians in general, and between King Husayn and Arafat, in particular. On many occasions, Abdallah must have heard his elders raving on about Arafat's duplicity and Palestinian ingratitude. For decades, as Abdallah noted, the Hashemites had been on the receiving end of accusations by Arab nationalists in general, and Palestinians in particular, of disloyalty and even treason.

But now it is payback time. This is a confident Abdallah, sitting securely on his throne, pontificating to an Arafat who is past his prime, holed up in the Muqata'a in Ramallah, as the Palestinian Authority around him degenerates into a chaotic shambles. In the Arabic political lexicon, this is known as *muzayada* (outbidding), of which the Jordanians, more often than not, were the traditional victims. Now Abdallah is giving Arafat a dose of his own medicine on the question of loyalty to the cause of Palestine.

For the Jordanians, Arafat has become a liability and they would be relieved to see him go. Arafat's incompetence and Israel's unilateralism leave the Jordanians in a situation of acute uncertainty about the future of the conflict and the consequences for Jordan. But Jordan has no

intention of intervening in the West Bank for the Palestinians' sake, nor for Israel's. Jordan will only offer assistance if and when the Palestinians explicitly ask it to do so. Otherwise, as Abdallah argued, it is "Jordan First," focusing on Jordan's own affairs is more important for him than anything else.

Abdallah, as a product of the post-Nasser generation, is a lot more direct than was his father in the pursuit of narrow territorial, as distinct from pan-Arab, nationalism. And, again unlike his father, he has little emotional attachment to the West Bank. Jordan is just like any other Arab state with respect to Palestine, says Abdallah. He was only five years old in 1967, when Jordan lost Arab Jerusalem and the West Bank. The scars of that defeat in King Husayn's mind are not part of Abdallah's psyche. His interests in the West Bank are not motivated by any dynastic ambition but solely by the needs of Jordanian national security on the East Bank.

At present, the Jordanians, perhaps more than ever before, feel surrounded by anarchic insecurity. To the east is Iraq, in chaotic transformation into what will probably be some form of Shi'ite-dominated state. Neither the Jordanians nor anyone else, for that matter, have the slightest notion of what that might mean for the neighborhood. To the west, Israel and Arafat's Palestinian Authority are still locked in combat. The ultimate consequences of this encounter for Jordan are also anyone's guess.

Jordan's troubles, therefore, are far from over. Nevertheless, the country is at least in the hands of another capable Hashemite monarch who, after five years on the job, has come of age politically, who is ruling and reigning, and of whom it can now be said that he is beginning to fill the shoes of his father. That is no small achievement, especially compared with the situation in Ramallah or Riyadh, in Damascus or Baghdad.