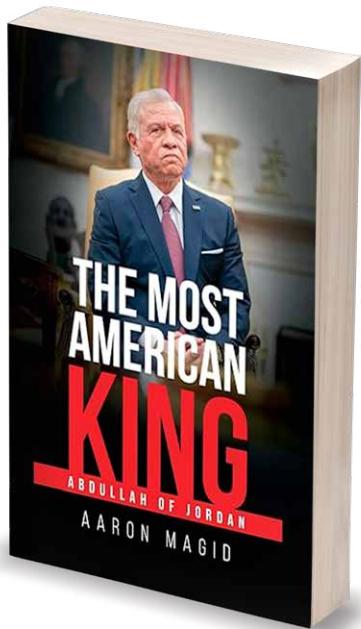




## Book Review



### New Biography of King Abdullah II Reveals What Israel has Missed

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Name of the book: *The Most American King: Abdullah of Jordan*

Author: Aaron Magid

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Jordanian King Abdullah II has been in power longer than any other Arab ruler in the Middle East, yet the first English-language biography of him is being published only now, more than 25 years after he became king. The book, “The Most American King: Abdullah of Jordan,” fills a vacuum in the literature by offering a thorough, informative, and fair analysis of its subject’s life. The biographer is Aaron Magid, an American journalist who worked in Jordan from 2015-2016 and who has hosted the “On Jordan” podcast devoted to the kingdom’s affairs since 2021.

Indeed Abdullah’s success as King may be the very reason why no other biography of him has been published. The King has managed to maintain his kingdom as an island of stability in a stormy sea, while avoiding the kind of drama that inspires books. Jordan’s relative tranquility has stood out in a violent region afflicted by upheavals: the Second Gulf War, the Arab Spring, Israeli-Palestinian clashes, and global economic and health crises. Despite its limited resources, Jordan has averted disaster while sheltering multiple waves of refugees in its territory.

The book is based on over one hundred interviews with Abdullah’s acquaintances, including the king’s school friends, former Jordanian government ministers, and international figures who have worked with him over the years. The book does not specifically mention the challenges and restrictions that encumbered the author in the course of his research. It is clear, however, that the king and his royal family did not provide the author with access to archives and did not grant him interviews.

The book comprises 17 chapters. Four are devoted to formative events in Abdullah’s life: his childhood and adolescence in England and the US, his British military training and enlistment in the Jordanian army, and his coronation as King of Jordan. Six chapters discuss the King’s foreign policy, including his relations with the US, Syria, Israel, Iran, and Iraq and his struggle against terrorism. Five chapters deal with his domestic challenges, among them the Muslim Brotherhood, economic and political reforms, the 2011-2012 protests, and his rivalry with his brother, Hamzah, whom he deposed as Jordanian Crown Prince in 2004. The two final chapters compare Abdullah to his father, King Hussein, and assess his legacy.

The first part of the book includes quite a few fascinating anecdotes that may seem of marginal importance, but which contribute to a deeper understanding of Abdullah’s character.

The first son of Muna, King Hussein's second wife of British origin, Abdullah was born in 1962 and named Crown Prince of Jordan when he was a toddler. He retained this position until 1965, when he was replaced by Hassan, his uncle. Abdullah spent most of his childhood and youth abroad, where his parents hoped that he would receive an excellent education and be safer than in Jordan, which was then engaged in conflict with the PLO. He moved from Jordan to the UK in 1968, where he acquired an English accent. He moved at age 10 to the US, which guaranteed his safety as a gesture to his father.

Abdullah was a good student, albeit not an outstanding one, and did not use his lineage to obtain any favors. He invited his friends and bodyguards to vacations in Jordan, where they were offered entertainment such as hunting. Abdullah's favorite sport was wrestling. His youthful escapades embroiled him in some violent incidents. Misadventures with friends included pranks, such as removing toilet seats from a women's bathroom at school and skipping his Arabic lessons, which would limit his rhetorical prowess when he became king. He integrated well in American society and took pride in his "Americanization" (pp. 5-13).

Upon completing his high school studies, Abdullah, like Hussein, his father, was sent to the British Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. While serving in the Jordanian army, he took courses in Middle Eastern affairs and international relations at Oxford University and Georgetown University. As Commander of the Jordanian Special Forces, he developed good working relations with his colleagues in the US and acquired the reputation of being attentive and professional in his duties. In the 1980s and 1990s, he began taking King Hussein's place when his father and uncle were abroad. At the same time, he enjoyed pursuits popular among people his age—he liked partying and motorcycles and even took a guest role in an episode of the "Star Trek:

Voyager" television program. He also attracted many female admirers.

Abdullah met his future wife, Rania, a Jordanian of Palestinian origin born in Kuwait, in 1992. On their first date, Abdullah took her home and cooked her a traditional Japanese meal with shrimp, chicken, and beef. They became engaged and were married in 1993; their son, Hussein II, the current Crown Prince, was born a year later. Abdullah regards his son's half-Palestinian origins as a symbol of his kingdom's inclusive character (pp. 15-24).

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One intriguing question discussed in the book is just when King Hussein decided to depose his brother, Crown Prince Hassan, and appoint Abdullah in his place. Hussein announced this change when he was on his deathbed. In contrast to the prevailing opinion that Hussein made this decision shortly before his death because of Hassan's elitist public image and Hussein's anger at Hassan's behavior behind the King's back during his illness, the book cites evidence that the decision to replace Hassan with Abdullah was actually taken in the 1980s. In any case, Abdullah's preparation for the monarchy was rather inadequate. He did not give his first speech to the Jordanian public until he was crowned in February 1999. Abdullah himself admitted that he had initially refused the monarchy, adding that this was the actual reason why his father had chosen him as his successor (pp. 25-35).

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Reading the chapters that discuss Abdullah's rollercoaster relations with Israel sadly only highlights the gap between Abdullah's basically positive attitude when he became king and the current state of relations between Israel and Jordan. Abdullah's first contacts with Jews and Israelis occurred in the U.S., where some of his school friends were Jews. One of his papers at Georgetown University was written under the guidance of Alon Pinkas, later Israel's Consul General in New York. In this paper, Abdullah went so far as to express understanding for Israel's military actions against armed Palestinians in Jordan in 1968. Pinkas gave Abdullah an "A" on the paper (pp. 9-10,20).

**Relations between the two countries and their leaders have faced additional challenges since the October 7, 2023 massacre. According to evidence cited in the book, Abdullah expressed support for defeating Hamas in a talk with the American Secretary of State but also criticized Israel for allowing Qatar to transfer millions of dollars to Hamas, saying that Israel "should never have been in bed with them [Hamas] in the first place."**

Even before being crowned king, Abdullah met secretly with Israeli army officers, who made a good impression on him. At the beginning of his reign, Abdullah spoke publicly about his personal trust in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and praised Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon and its commitment to the peace process. When CNN's Larry King asked Abdullah if his children might marry an Israeli one day, Abdullah replied: "Anything is possible. Yes. You know, you look at our part of [the] world now, and when we talk about peace and stability, we're talking about people breaking down barriers." Around that time, Abdullah's wife, Raina, expressed empathy for the security threats facing both Israelis and Palestinians (p. 84).

But the warm peace between Israel and Jordan gradually chilled. The King's friendly tone towards Israel became more critical—a

process that began with the Second Intifada and accelerated with the collapse of the Oslo Agreements and the prolonged deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Jordanian disappointment with the economic benefits of the peace agreement with Israel also had a negative impact on relations, but the book hardly discusses this factor. At the same time, covert security coordination between the two countries in countering terror organizations such as Hamas, ISIS, and pro-Iranian militias on Jordan's borders with Syria and Iraq, remained close. In an interview with the author, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that cooperation with Jordan on security "was greater than [what] Israel had with any country in the world" (pp. 86-91).

The book indicates that another major factor in the deterioration of Jordanian-Israeli relations was personal distrust between Abdullah and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who have been in power simultaneously for over 15 years. The Jordanian antipathy for Netanyahu began during Hussein's reign with the attempted assassination of Khaled Mashal in Amman in September 1997. Other events subsequently added to these hard feelings. One of these was the official reception held by Netanyahu in 2017 for the former security guard of the Israeli embassy in Amman, who had killed two Jordanians on the embassy grounds after being attacked and wounded by one of them. Hussein took this reception as a personal affront after having agreed to allow the security guard to return to Israel. In response, Jordan expelled the Israeli Ambassador to Jordan. In 2019, Abdullah decided not to extend Israel's lease for the Naharayim and Tzofar enclaves granted under the Israeli-Jordanian 1994 peace treaty, stating that the "Jordanian-Israeli relationship had deteriorated to an all-time low" (pp. 95-98).

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American Secretary of State but also criticized Israel for allowing Qatar to transfer millions of dollars to Hamas, saying that Israel “should never have been in bed with them [Hamas] in the first place.” While Jerusalem and Amman maintained the peace treaty and cooperated in repelling Iranian missile and drone attacks against Israel, many people in Jordan identified with Hamas and the suffering of Gazans, and the Jordanian government had to take this into consideration. Queen Raina took the lead in opposing Israel and even denied the murder of Israeli children in communities bordering the Gaza Strip (pp. 98-100).

A dominant theme in the book concerns Abdullah’s affinity with America. Its title, however, “The Most American King,” is open to misinterpretation. He was educated in the U.S., where his adult identity was formed, and he regards relations with America as an important anchor in Jordan’s foreign policy and defensive and economic capabilities. Nevertheless, he has never been an obedient American puppet. The strained relations between “the most American” king and the “most American” Israeli prime minister are another proof that Abdullah’s American orientation should not be exaggerated or treated as the key to deciphering the entirety of Abdullah’s character and policies.

The book itself demonstrates effectively that Abdullah’s strategic alliance with Washington has always been subject to limits and reservations—and still is. The King has never flinched from confronting American presidents when their policy conflicted with Jordan’s agenda. For example, Abdullah opposed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and warned of its consequences. He later criticized the Bush administration’s decision to dismantle Saddam Hussein’s army in Iraq, which induced its soldiers to join terrorist groups, likening it to firing policemen, firefighters, and ambulance drivers in New York because of dissatisfaction with the city’s mayor (pp. 52-54, 110-117).

The book further describes Abdullah as nearly having a heart attack when President

Trump offered him a “great deal” in 2018—the return of parts of the West Bank to Jordanian rule. In addition to rejecting the offer, in the same year Abdullah also condemned the relocation of the American Embassy to Jerusalem and the decision to cut off US funding to UNRWA (p. 64). At the start of Trump’s second term, Abdullah was the first Arab ruler invited to the White House, but he politely rejected the American president’s request to allow a large number of Gazans to take refuge in his kingdom (p. 68).

The author lists the achievements of King Abdullah, who achieved for his country security, peace, and freedom of worship at a time when its neighbors were undergoing wars, revolutions, waves of immigration, and terrorism. Magid writes that the secrets of Abdullah and Jordan’s ability to cope with external and internal challenges have always been (and still are) solid international and regional support, loyal security forces supported by Transjordanian tribes, avoidance of violent repression liable to encourage insurgency against the regime, and a homogeneous Sunni majority immune to religious and ethnic tension (pp. 128-132).

At the same time, the author cites at least two factors that may jeopardize the kingdom’s stability. The first is the Muslim Brotherhood, whose commitment to its pan-Islamic ideology takes precedence over its loyalty to the Jordanian nation state. The book was written before Jordan outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood in April 2025, but it does discuss the measures taken by Jordan since the Arab Spring to weaken and divide the movement (pp. 133-143). Another destabilizing factor is the economic distress prevalent in Jordan despite the King’s privatization and reform policies. Magid asserts that Jordan’s high poverty and unemployment rates are causing social unrest and detracting from the monarchy’s popularity. In a 2022 survey, 63% of young Jordanians expressed a wish to immigrate from the kingdom (pp. 145-156).

Although the 63-year-old king is likely to remain on his throne for many years, he is

already engaged in training his son, Hussein II, to take his place. The 31-year-old Crown Prince accompanies his father to meetings with dignitaries and sometimes also meets with them alone. He is granted royal authority when his father is abroad and utilizes popular social media accounts to appeal to young people.

The Crown Prince exercises caution in his media interviews; he has yet to clarify his views on fundamental issues such as relations with the US and Israel. Like his father and grandfather, he completed his academic studies in Great Britain and the U.S. and his outlook likely corresponds to the home in which he was raised (pp. 210-211).

To conclude, the biography written by Magid is essential reading for anyone interested in

Jordanian foreign policy and internal politics during Abdullah's 25-year reign. For Israeli readers, the book provides not only a more thorough understanding of the Jordanian king, but also a perspective on relations between Israel and Jordan during his reign, which began with open friendship and are now in deep crisis, but which still can and should be healed.

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