Field Marshal Habis al-Majali

Jordan's greatest military commander

FIELD MARSHAL HABIS AL-MAJALI, who has died in Amman aged 91, was the Kingdom of Jordan's greatest military commander, and led an Arab Legion battalion which inflicted a rare defeat on Israeli forces in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948.

Earlier this year, a Jordanian historian revealed that in the course of this battle, which took place at Latrun in what is now Israel in May 1948, Majali's fourth Jordanian army battalion captured six Israeli soldiers, including the current Israeli prime minister, the then 20-year-old Ariel Sharon.

Soon after Israel signed a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, Sharon sought to get in touch with his former captor, but was rebuffed by the retired field marshal, who determinedly refused to discuss the episode publicly.

Habis al-Majali was born in Karak in 1910 to a notable family — a distant cousin, Hazza' al-Majali, was prime minister — and joined Jordan's Army in 1932.

After the 1948 war, Majali was appointed commander of the royal guard, the branch of the Jordanian tle harm to his career: he later became assistant director of the Public Security Department.

In 1956 King Hussein tightened his grip on power by dismissing the British commander of the Arab Legion, John Glubb, and appointed Majali assistant chief of staff of the Jordan armed forces. The next year Majali became chief of staff after an unsuccessful army rebellion. Majali took full command of the Jordanian army, which was by now a pillar of the regime. In 1958, he was raised to lieutenant general, Glubb's old rank.

After the Six-Day War of 1967, when Israel inflicted a devastating defeat on the armies of neighbouring Arab states, Majali was appointed defence minister. He was critical of the conduct of the war, in which Jordan yielded command of its forces to Egyptian officers who knew little of Jordan's landscape and the relative strengths of the Israeli and Jordanian armies.

In 1970, after King Hussein declared martial law and set up a military cabinet, Majali returned as chief of staff. Under Majali, Jor-

appointed commander of the royal guard, the branch of the Jordanian army charged with protecting the king, then Abdallah I. When Abdallah was assassinated as he emerged from Friday prayers in the al-Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem (then under Jordanian rule), Majali and a Muslim cleric wrapped his body in a carpet and transported it to hospital.

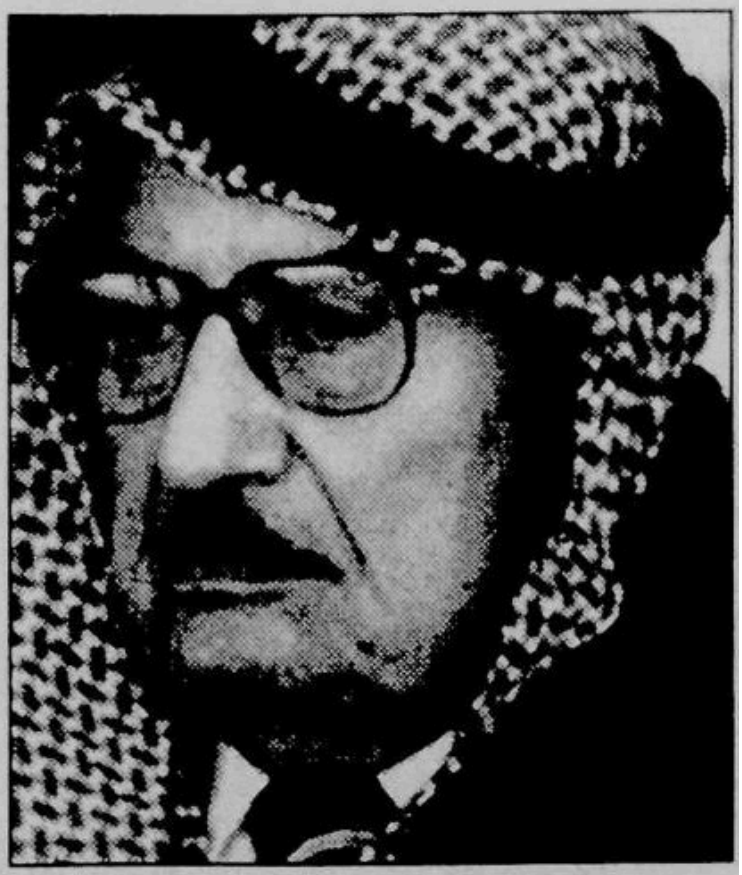
Majali served as one of the panel of military judges in the trial of those accused of plotting Abdallah's assassination. In 1951, during the trial, Majali was among those planning to prevent Abdallah's son, the mentally infirm Talal ibn Abdallah, from becoming king.

The coup plot was discovered before it could be carried out. By this time the youthful Hussein, Talal's son, was king (Talal having been peacefully deposed), and Majali was given the comparatively mild punishment of being ordered to serve as police chief in the remote southern town of Ma'an. None of the other plotters was even arrested, and Majali's role in the affair otherwise did lit-

as chief of staff. Under Majali, Jordan crushed the Palestinian uprising in what became known as the Black September war.

Majali was later appointed to the upper house of the Jordanian parliament.

Majali's wife Bazaa' died in 1971; he is survived by their seven children.



Al-Majali: captured Ariel Sharon

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