King Hussein of Jordan

Monarch who steered his kingdom through the treacherous politics of the Middle East

HIS MAJESTY KING HUSSEIN OF JORDAN, who has died aged 63, ruled his country for 46 years, surviving the upheavals of the Middle East through a combination of courage, political acumen, a sometimes shaky base of domestic loyalty, and the strategic support of foreign powers.

From his assumption of the throne until his death, there were many moments when it would have seemed preposterous to predict such political longevity. Yet through force of character Hussein made himself the sole protagonist in the post-war history of Jordan.

Having ascended the throne as a teenager, he was as a young king the target of numerous attempted coups and assassinations. Later, two Arab-Israeli wars and a civil war threatened the existence of his throne and the state itself. He was under threat as much from political enemies among his Arab neighbours as from a militarily superior Israel.

The result of King Hussein's determination to safeguard his position is a country which enjoys a degree of openness, stability and prosperity not widely achieved by other Arab states. The King also secured the prize that had eluded his predecessors: a peace treaty with Israel.

King Hussein was motivated by a strongly mystical, if sentimental, belief in his own destiny as the only remaining Hashemite king. His dynasty traced its ancestry back to the Prophet Mohammed and beyond, and had ruled Mecca for seven centuries until it was seized by Saudi forces in 1925.

In 1916 King Hussein's great-grandfather, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, led the Arab Uprising against Ottoman rule, which began the Arab nationalist movement. The European settlement that followed the First World War dealt a blow to this, by carving up the region into separate countries, with the British establishing dependent Hashemite monarchies in Transjordan and Iraq.

But in King Hussein's mind the ideal of a universal Hashemite monarchy persisted, taking the form of a benign authoritarianism that drew legitimacy from Islam and the traditional values of the desert Arab.

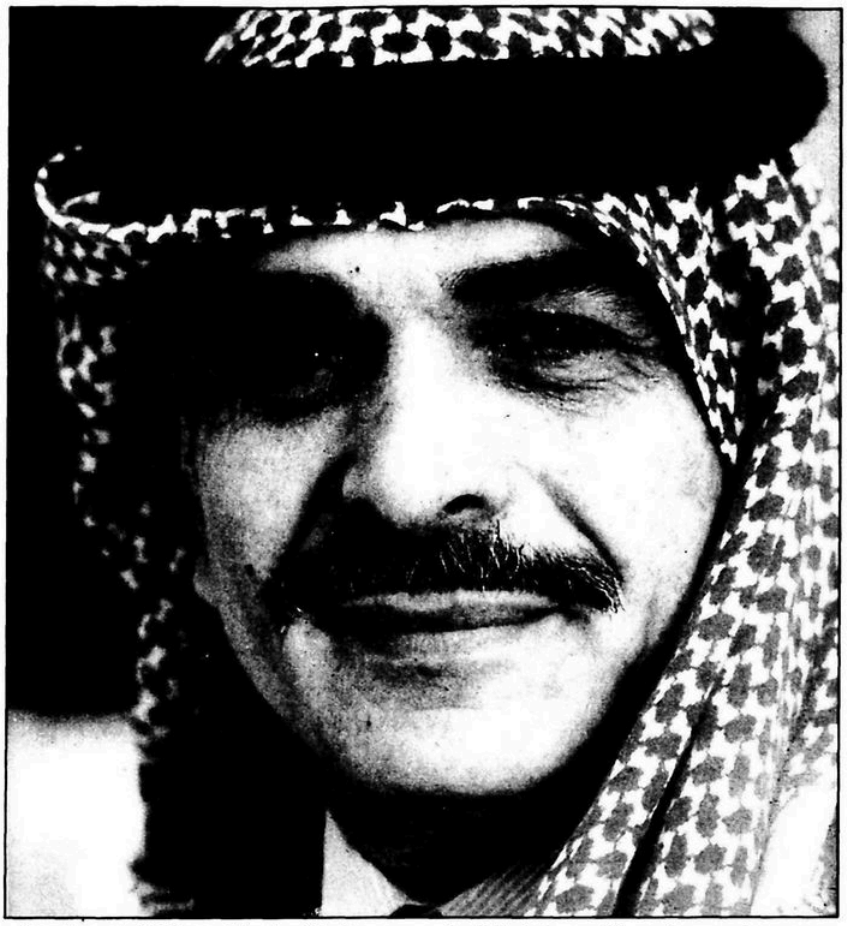
Hussein ibn Talal was born on November 14 1935, in his parents' villa in Amman, in what was then the Emirate of Transjordan.

His family's circumstances were modest. Though heir to the throne, his father, Talal ibn Abdallah, supported his family of three sons and a daughter on an allowance of £1,000 a year. Hussein received his primary education at schools in Amman and then at 13 was sent to Victoria College, Alexandria, an Egyptian boarding school on the British model. He recalled repairing his school uniform with a needle and thread to spare his parents the expense of replacing it.

In 1946, Transjordan was granted independence from Britain, partly in recognition of the contribution of the country's British-led army, the Arab Legion, towards the Allied war effort. Abdallah's title was changed from Emir to King.

King Abdallah was disappointed by Talal (who suffered from schizophrenia) and pinned his hopes instead on his favourite grandson. He took charge of Hussein's education and instructed him in statecraft.

One of the principles that Hussein learned from his grandfather was that the state of Israel, which had come into being in 1948, was determined to survive at all costs.



King Hussein (1983): combined political acumen and polished charm with great personal courage

Prince, had been at Harrow for a year, the Jordanian establishment resolved that he should replace Talal. It was a decision in which Talal quietly acquiesced. In August 1952, while Hussein was staying with his mother at Lausanne, a page brought in a telegram addressed to "His Majesty King Hussein". "I did not need to open it to know that my days as a schoolboy were over," he wrote. He returned home to a rapturous welcome.

Hussein was still only 17, so a three-man regency council ruled until he reached 18. In the meantime, he returned to England to take an accelerated military course at Sandhurst, arranged by the Commander of the Arab Legion, General John Bagot Glubb. Hussein was an enthusiastic cadet, enduring with good humour the discipline, drill, and the bellowing of drill-sergeants who called him "Mr King Hussein, sir!"

At the time of his coronation, on May 2 1953, Hussein was just 18 (by the Islamic calendar). His cousin Faisal was crowned King of Iraq on the same day.

KING HUSSEIN quickly showed that he would be nobody's puppet. He appointed as prime minister Fawzi al-Mulki, who had been Jordan's ambassador to London during Hussein's studies in England, and had befriended him.

But al-Mulki's liberal policies had a dangerously destabilising effect. Since the war in 1948, Jordan's population had been swollen by Palestinian refugees, who now outnumbered the indigenous popu-

December, but MPs who feared losing their seats questioned the legality of parliament's dissolution. There was still more rioting.

Hussein appointed yet another prime minister, who promised that Jordan would not join the Baghdad Pact. The country pulled back from the brink, only for a new threat to present itself. In January 1956, Saudi forces massed at the border, threatening Jordan's Red Sea port at Aqaba. They only withdrew after the British envoy to Saudi Arabia warned that Britain would defend Jordan if it was attacked.

It became clear to Hussein that the prevailing nationalist trend in the Arab world made his own country's obvious dependence on Britain a liability. British subsidies to Jordan — several million pounds a year — were paid directly to the Arab Legion, which had been led for three decades by General Glubb. It was said that Glubb Pasha, as he was known, ruled the Arab Legion, and that the Arab Legion ruled Jordan.

In March 1956, Hussein abruptly dismissed Glubb and the Arab Legion's senior British officers. At first he gave Glubb two hours to leave the country, later relenting and allowing him until the next morning. Hussein then abrogated the Anglo-Jordanian treaty and sought replacement funds from the United States and richer Arab countries.

Glubb retired to England. When he died in 1986, King Hussein delivered a tribute to him at his memorial service in London.

In 1955 Hussein made the first of his four marriages: he wed a distant Hashemite cousin, Dina Abd al-Ha-

strengthened. These domestic controls remained in place, until controlled experiments in limited parliamentary democracy resumed in the Eighties.

But even with such arrangements, Hussein was still at risk. In July 1958, the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq was overthrown in a bloody military coup. The royal family, including Hussein's friend and cousin King Faisal, were massacred. The revolt threatened to spread to Jordan. Uncertain of his army's loyalty, Hussein turned in desperation to Britain and America. Three days after the Iraqi coup, Britain sent two battalions of paratroops to Amman.

By October 1958, it seemed safe to withdraw the paratroops, though a few weeks later Hussein had yet another narrow escape. He decided to take a holiday in Switzerland, and chose to fly his own aeroplane, accompanied as co-pilot by his flying teacher, Wing Commander Jock Dalgliesh, formerly head of the Jordanian air force.

While flying over Syria, their aircraft was intercepted by two Syrian Mig-17 fighters, and ordered to land at Damascus. Hussein disregarded the order, and outmanoeuvred the Syrian jets, which had tried to force him down.

Over the next 18 months, Hussein survived two assassination attempts and a further attempted military coup. His prime minister was killed by a bomb in his office. One assassination attempt against Hussein was foiled because the cook who was to have been carried it out unwisely tested his potion on cats in the palace grounds. Another plot involved putting powerful acid

War brought a new influx of about 200,000 Palestinian refugees into the East Bank. By now the Palestinians had a credible political leadership in the newly-formed Palestine Liberation Organisation, led after 1967 by Yasser Arafat. A relationship of enduring mutual distrust between Hussein and Arafat began at this time.

Not only were Palestinian guerrillas making raids into Israel from Jordan, bringing severe Israeli reprisals, but under PLO leadership the Palestinian refugee population was becoming a state within a state, threatening Jordan's delicate political equilibrium.

PLO officials disregarded Jordanian laws; armed commandos swaggered through the streets; and Palestinian factions were calling for the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy as a first step in the liberation of Palestine.

When the King went to investigate an outbreak of fighting, his Jeep was caught in intense machine-gun fire. His bodyguards threw him into a ditch, but as they then ran back to the Jeep, Hussein realised he had left his beret behind. He calmly walked back to recover it, and then advised his terrified driver that the stalled vehicle would move more quickly if he engaged the gears.

By this time the royalist core of the Jordanian army, the Bedouin units, were growing impatient and were spoiling for a fight with the Palestinians. After some hesitation, the King formed a military government and on September 16 1970 began the attack on the PLO bases that became infamous among Palestinians as Black September.

The civil war lasted 10 days, and 3,400 people were killed. Hussein once again consolidated power around himself, and the PLO in Jordan ceased to exist.

For many years thereafter, Hussein and the PLO contended for the political representation of the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. The PLO sought an independent Palestinian state, while Hussein continued to assert Jordan's claim to the West Bank.

This state of affairs persisted until Hussein renounced his claim to the West Bank after the outbreak of the intifada, the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza.

Stable relations with Israel remained a Jordanian priority throughout the Seventies. Jordan's participation in the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 was minimal, though Hussein made a secret visit to Golda Meir to warn her that an attack was imminent. But in 1977, the rise to power in Israel of the Likud Party, led by Menachem Begin, dramatically reduced Hussein's chances of achieving a settlement with Israel.

When Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt, signed the Camp David Agreement in 1978 — Israel's first peace treaty with an Arab state — King Hussein was furious to have been excluded.

As a Western-oriented monarch without the security of oil wealth, and with a large Palestinian population whose views had always to be taken seriously, Hussein was in a weak position whenever an Arab leader called for defiance of the West. Having for years been troubled by the influence of Nasser, Hussein had then to weather the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

There was a side of Hussein that admired these populist Arab strongmen, though it was an attraction which always proved disastrous for Jordan. The King's reluctance to condemn Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait in 1990 brought heavy retribution from the

had come into being in 1948, was determined to survive at all costs. Rather than imagine — as did most Arab leaders — that Israel would be wiped off the map in due course, King Abdallah believed that Jordan had to come to terms with it. The same principle guided Hussein throughout his reign.

Abdallah had made a secret deal with the leaders of the incipient state of Israel, by which Jordan would take possession of the part of Palestine to be granted to the Arabs under the partition scheme when British rule in Palestine came to an end in 1948. The plan was realised after the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, which followed British withdrawal from Palestine. Jordan claimed the West Bank of the River Jordan.

Although the combined armies of the Arab states bordering Israel were defeated, Jordan now held both banks of the river. Accordingly, the country changed its name from Transjordan to Jordan. For the next 19 years, Israel and Jordan co-existed in a state of armed détente.

Three years after annexing the West Bank, King Abdallah was assassinated as he entered al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. He had aroused widespread opposition from Arab nationalists for taking the West Bank in a manoeuvre seen as being exclusively in the interests of Jordan.

Hussein was standing only a few feet away when his grandfather was murdered, and saw the king's bloodstained turban roll across the floor in front of him. The 16-year-old only escaped death himself by what seemed a miracle: a bullet aimed at him struck a medal on his uniform. He was thrown backwards but otherwise unhurt; his grandfather had given him the medal only the day before.

Much of the public criticism of Abdallah had come from Egypt. So Hussein continued his education in England, at Harrow, where his cousin, the future King Faisal II of Iraq, was also a pupil. In the meantime, Hussein's father, Talal, had become king, although his mental condition had deteriorated.

But after Hussein, now Crown

by Palestinian refugees, who now outnumbered the indigenous population of East Bank Jordanians. Palestinian guerrillas were determined to carry out raids into Israel, and these provoked heavy Israeli retaliation on Jordan.

In one of these raids, led by a young Israeli officer named Ariel Sharon, 66 people were killed in the village of Qibya, which was reduced to rubble. Opposition politicians in Jordan complained that the Arab Legion, led by British officers, was unwilling to fight the Israelis.

Demagogic speeches by the new Egyptian leader Jamal Abd al-Nasser called for pan-Arab independence from Western powers. Realising that al-Mulki's government was losing its grip, the King, now 19, dismissed him and appointed in his place Tawfik Abul Huda, a staunch royalist.

Hussein supported Abul Huda's risky strategy of seeking to consolidate the King's power by holding elections to a new parliament in October 1954. With the country's political parties in disarray, Abul Huda's nominees won a majority of seats. The result was achieved through clumsy vote-rigging, provoking street protests. Hussein salvaged the situation temporarily by asking the prime minister to rule at the head of a coalition.

For the next 12 years, the fiery Nasser posed the greatest threat to Hussein's rule. Time and again, the King tried to accommodate the powerful popular appeal of Nasser's rhetoric, but without success.

In 1955, Britain put pressure on Hussein to join the Baghdad Pact, a defence coalition formed by Turkey and Hashemite Iraq, designed to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East and the might of Egypt. But Hussein hesitated to do this.

Nasser's influence in Jordan was so strong that the proposal to join the Baghdad Pact caused the worst riots since the beginning of Hussein's reign. The Arab Legion was sent into the streets and a curfew was imposed to restore order. The crisis lasted for the whole of 1955; three prime ministers came and went. The King was compelled to announce new elections that

his four marriages. He wed a distant Hashemite cousin, Dina Abd al-Hamid al-Awn, who was seven years his senior. Queen Dina was an urbane Egyptian intellectual, with a degree in English from Girton College, Cambridge; King Hussein preferred fast cars. When, after only 18 months of marriage, Dina travelled to Cairo to visit a cousin, Hussein wrote from Amman to tell her that the marriage was over. They had one daughter, Alia, whom Hussein kept with him in Amman. Dina was not permitted to see her until she was six.

In early 1957, Nasser was once again stirring up trouble for King Hussein: an ambitious royal adviser, Ali Abu Nuwar, attempted a military coup d'état, with financial backing from Egypt.

Hussein survived the coup because of his sheer physical courage. Intelligence reached him that army units were surrounding the capital. When a Bedouin unit in the town of Zerqa defied orders from subversive officers, a battle began between loyalist and pro-Nasser units. Abu Nuwar was in the King's office when word of the confrontation reached him. Hussein cunningly ordered Abu Nuwar to accompany him in a drive to Zerqa, where the royal presence restored order. He was mobbed by loyal soldiers, while Abu Nuwar sat cowering in the car beside him.

Without Abu Nuwar's leadership, the coup evaporated. When Abu Nuwar pleaded for his life, the King magnanimously allowed him to leave the country. Within a few years he was permitted to return — and was appointed ambassador to France. This was not the last time Hussein disarmed his domestic political adversaries by co-opting them.

After Abu Nuwar's coup attempt, Hussein dropped all pretence of parliamentary government and consolidated power in his hands. Hundreds of people were arrested, newspapers were closed, and political parties banned. The last restriction was never fully lifted. Thereafter, Jordanian governments were answerable only to the King. The army was put in charge of keeping public order and its intelligence arm was

plot involved putting powerful acid into the king's bottle of nose drops.

In 1961, King Hussein was married for the second time, to Antoinette ("Toni") Gardiner, a 19-year-old English girl from a military family. Unlike Dina, Toni Gardiner was sporty and informal. "It was the Amman Go-Kart Club that really brought us together," Hussein wrote later.

His new queen became a Muslim, and took the name Muna. They had two sons — the eldest of whom, Abdullah, was named heir to the throne this year — and twin girls. However, their marriage ended in 1972, when Hussein divorced her to marry Alia Toukan, a vivacious Palestinian.

She bore a son and a daughter, and was an active and popular queen until she was killed in a helicopter crash in 1974.

As Nasser, belligerent and overconfident, led his Arab allies (Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia) towards the disastrous Six Day War with Israel in 1967, Hussein took the extraordinary step of agreeing to place Jordanian forces under Egyptian command. His aim was to bring Jordan back into the Arab mainstream by making a gesture of solidarity, even though he knew that the Arabs had no hope of winning the conflict with Israel.

WHEN WAR broke out, the decision cost Jordan the West Bank and East Jerusalem, seized by a victorious Israel. The Arab war effort had been a military fiasco, not least because Nasser's blustery promise of air cover never materialised.

"I saw all the years I had spent since 1953 trying to build up the country — all the pride, all the hopes — destroyed," said Hussein. "I have never received a more crushing blow." He lived with the consequences for years to come. Despite numerous secret meetings with a series of Israeli prime ministers, the King failed to secure a peace agreement with Israel whereby the West Bank and the Arab sector of Jerusalem would be returned to Jordan. The Six Day

brought heavy retribution from the Arab states of the Gulf, which ended their subsidies to Jordan. Furthermore, Kuwait expelled its large Palestinian population, many of whom came to Jordan, adding to the strains on its economy.

The United States then submitted a political invoice. Seizing the moment, the American Secretary of State, James Baker, demanded that Hussein send a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation to a peace conference with Israel. It was a debt that Hussein was more than willing to pay, and it began the elaborate process that led to the Israel-PLO peace agreement of September 1993. This was followed the next year by the first formal treaty between Israel and Jordan.

King Hussein signed the treaty with Yitzhak Rabin. Early on in his clandestine contacts with Israel, Hussein had marked Rabin down as a man with whom he might do business. After Rabin's assassination in 1995, Hussein delivered a eulogy at his funeral.

Hussein ibn Talal lived unpretentiously for a king. He was happiest when with his family in their small but comfortable compound in Aqaba, where he could water-ski and take meals when he chose.

He charmed all who met him with his courtesy, and had a disarming habit of addressing men as "Sir", regardless of their rank. He was never a man to spend more time than he had to behind a desk, and the daily routine around him followed an informal pattern.

He rose late in the morning, and continued work until late into the night, often keeping visitors awake long past their usual bedtimes by screening films at midnight.

He married, in 1978, as his fourth wife, Lisa Halabi. Queen Noor, as she became, was the daughter of the Arab-American president of Pan American Airways. She quickly assumed a high profile in Jordanian affairs and worked hard to gain the affection of her husband's people. They had two sons and two daughters.

King Hussein's successor is Crown Prince Abdullah, who was born in 1962.

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