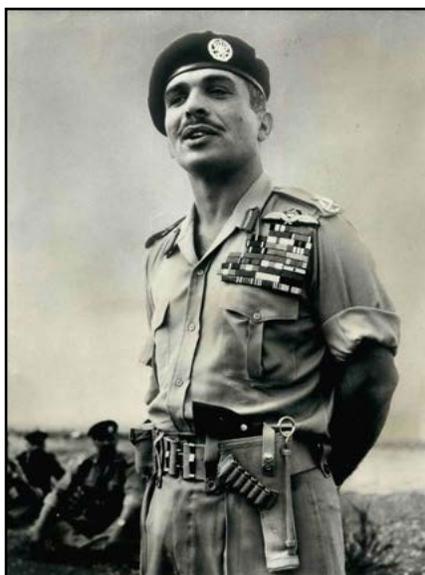


Fifty Years after “Black September” in Jordan

By Bruce Riedel



Jordan's King Hussein inspecting troops along the Israeli frontier in late 1969. Photo © Keystone/Alamy Stock

The Jordanian civil war in 1970, better known as Black September, was decided by an intelligence success led by King Hussein and his chief of intelligence. It was a mystery for years until revealed in the memoir of a former CIA officer serving in the region at the time. President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger took great credit for managing the Black September crisis, but in fact their role was marginal to the outcome of the biggest threat to Hussein's survival, the Iraqi army in eastern Jordan.

King Hussein, then only 33 years old, was at his nadir in early 1969, when Nixon was inaugurated. In the 1967 war with Israel, he had lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem with devastating effects on the Jordanian economy. At least 300,000 refugees had flowed across the Jordan River into new camps around Amman and other cities. The Palestinian fedayeen had become an armed state within the state, controlling much of Amman and ignoring his rule. He was the target of multiple assassination plots. The Iraqi army occupied much of eastern Jordan and was hostile to the king. At the same time, the situation for US personnel had become precarious, with the fedayeen threatening to capture and hold hostage senior US officials.

The king had met with Israeli officials clandestinely on several

occasions since the June war to try to get his land back and make peace with Israel. He got no response to his requests for what Israel wanted in territory on the West Bank and East Jerusalem in return for peace. The Israelis were stalling, they had no desire to give back the West Bank and certainly not Jerusalem. Sometimes they would raise the so called Allon plan, which would annex the Jordan Valley to Israel, a proposal the king rejected adamantly. But even when the Israelis discussed the Allon plan, they did not suggest it was the total amount of territory they wanted to keep.

In May 1969 Hussein invited Jack O'Connell, a senior CIA Middle East expert, to accompany him to his palace in Aqaba. There he told O'Connell that he was going to meet Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and her top aides on a small island in the Gulf of Aqaba to discuss peace. He wanted O'Connell as a witness back in Aqaba if he did not return the next day. When he did return, the king told O'Connell that it was a pleasant evening with a lovely dinner. Did anything get accomplished, O'Connell asked: "No, not really," the king's replied. It was just a way to drag things out.¹ Nixon had no interest in the peace process either. He assigned it to Secretary of State William Rogers, who had no importance in the administration.

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Fortunately, American and British arms were arriving to rebuild the Jordanian army and air force. By 1970, the army was a force of four divisions: two infantry, one armored and one mechanized. The Bedouin core of the army was fiercely loyal to the king and angered by the fedayeen's arrogance. The small Royal Jordanian Air Force had been completely destroyed in the 1967 war; now it was reequipped and back in the air. The army also benefited from a team of experts from Pakistan that helped reorganize the army, improve its training, and prepare it for battle. Among the experts was a young Pakistani officer who would eventually become chief of Pakistan's army and president, Zia-ul-Haq. Pakistan had long been close to Jordan, being one of only two countries that had formally recognized the annexation of the West Bank to Jordan (the United Kingdom was the other). Crown Prince Hassan was married to a Pakistani, Princess Sarvath.

Ironically, Egyptian President Gamal abd al Nasser was now fully behind Hussein. Nasser had tried to oust Hussein several times in the 1950s and 1960s. The old antagonist had been very impressed by Hussein's decision to go to war in 1967 to help Egypt. He also preferred a Jordan led by Hussein to one run by radicals like Yasser Arafat or the Iraqis and Syrians. Nasser's support would be very valuable when a showdown with the fedayeen came.

For the next eighteen months Hussein tried to avoid a showdown. He did not want a civil war. He did not want the blood of thousands of

Palestinians on his hands. He also knew the Iraqis could easily tilt the balance of power against him in a showdown. So, he dithered. Endless negotiations with Arafat followed as they tried to work out a modus vivendi that both sides could live with. This angered the army which wanted to restore order on its terms. The fedayeen were badly fractured. Fatah was relatively moderate, but other groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine led by George Habbash were far more radical and committed to international air piracy to terrorize Israel. Iraq and Syria each sponsored their own fedayeen groups. It was a chaotic situation.

Washington was deeply divided on Hussein's prospects. Much of the national security bureaucracy had written Hussein off. He had too many enemies, most Jordanians were Palestinians, the Iraqis were going to join the fedayeen, and Syria might intervene as well. O'Connell was one of the few who believed the king would prevail. He told the CIA that the king and the army would get the upper hand. Another senior CIA officer, Robert Ames, disagreed and argued the Palestinians would win, therefore it was wise to start a dialogue with them.² Ames was already in contact with one of Arafat's key deputies, a move that had been approved explicitly by CIA Director Richard Helms and by Nixon.³ O'Connell had better connections with the army which proved to be the decisive factor given its monopoly on tanks and air power.

Hussein went to the United States in April 1969 to see Nixon for the

first time in the White House. He presented a six-point peace plan which Nasser had also endorsed. It would end the state of belligerency and acknowledge Israel's sovereignty and territorial integrity within secure and recognized borders. In return, Israel would withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967. Hussein and Nasser would sign the agreements. The Israelis immediately rejected the plan. Nixon did nothing.⁴

The relationship with the United States hit rock bottom a year later. In April 1970, the fedayeen supported a large demonstration around the embassy. The mob turned nasty and started throwing rocks at the building, and they set embassy cars on fire. One protester cut down the US flag. The Jordanian authorities did not react; no troops or armored vehicles arrived to defend the embassy.

Ambassador Harrison Symmes protested to the government. In Amman since 1967, Symmes was a 30-year veteran of the State Department and a skilled Arabist. He asked for an apology from the king, but none was forthcoming. Symmes then said that, given the unstable situation in Jordan, he would recommend the cancellation of an upcoming visit of Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs Joseph Sisco. The royal court protested vociferously that postponing the visit would be seen as a lack of confidence in the king's ability to protect foreign guests. Sisco canceled anyway.

That evening Symmes was summoned to the prime minister's office, where he was informed that he had become persona non grata, and would have to leave the country immediately. It was an unprecedented

step to PNG a US ambassador in a country receiving millions in aid from the Washington.⁵ It was one in a series of episodes in which the king found the State Department weak and vacillating, which led him to prefer communicating with Washington and the president through alternative channels, including through CIA. The crisis with the fedayeen came to a head a few months later.

Black September

The conventional wisdom about the crisis in Jordan in September 1970, called Black September by the Palestinians, is that the United States and Israel did a masterful job of crisis management to save King Hussein's throne. This version of history has, of course, been vigorously hyped by Nixon and Kissinger in their memoirs.

The facts do not support this interpretation. The Americans and Israelis consulted extensively with each other, but aside from a bit of the normal saber rattling, they did almost nothing to help the king and his army. The king emerged from the greatest challenge to his throne almost entirely because of his own smart decisions, his excellent intelligence service, and the loyalty of the army. A helping hand can be attributed to Zia. Luck played its part as well.

A month after Symmes removal, a senior Iraqi government delegation visited Amman to see Arafat. Iraq was already run by Saddam Hussein, although officially he was only head of the ruling Baath Party. The party also ran Syria, but the two branches of the party were bitter enemies. The Iraqis told Arafat in May 1970 that Baghdad was ready to support any

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move to oust Hussein.⁶ The more extreme Palestinian leaders, including the PFLP's Habbash and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine leader Nayef Hawatamah, were already calling for Hussein's overthrow and for turning Amman into the "Hanoi" of the Palestine revolution. The fedayeen even included a small group of Islamists who often fought against Marxists like the PFLP.⁷

The Iraqis were an existential threat to the king, not only did they already have at least 20,000 troops and 200 tanks in Jordan, they had a large army ready to move from Iraq with an air force that greatly outnumbered the RJAF, and they had excellent relations with the fedayeen.

The Jordanian army totaled around 65,000 troops, but many of them were Palestinians whose loyalty was questionable in an all-out war. Estimates of the number of armed fedayeen are shaky, but they were thought to number between 15,000 and 20,000, mostly in urban areas.

On June 3rd, the Palestinians rocketed the Israel town of Beit Shean in the Jordan valley, Israel responded with an air strike on Irbid, the largest city in northern Jordan near Syria and a Palestinian stronghold. The Jordanian army in turn shelled the Israeli city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. It was an extremely dangerous escalation in the conflict, which Washington sought to defuse.

Hussein was the target of an assassination attempt on June 9th, when his motorcade came under sustained attack. In retaliation, the army shelled the Palestinian refugee camps around Amman, killing civilians as well as fedayeen. The fighting escalated in the second half of June. The PFLP took 68 foreigners' hostage in Amman. Holding them in two hotels, they demanded Hussein fire two senior military aides known to be hardliners: his uncle Sharif Nasser and his cousin Sharif Zaid. To get the hostages released, Hussein removed them, and in the process antagonized his loyalists in the army.⁸

Events elsewhere in the region added to the tension. Egypt and Israel had been fighting a war of attrition along the Suez Canal for months, with Russia actively assisting the Egyptians with advisors and even pilots. On July 24, Nasser accepted an American proposal for a ceasefire. The king endorsed Nasser's decision. The Palestinians condemned the ceasefire and focused their animosity on the king. The ceasefire took place in early August.

A second assassination attempt on the king took place on September 1st as he was riding to the airport to see his daughter, Princess Alia. The PFLP was responsible. Fighting erupted again, and the Iraqis, on alert and in control of much of eastern Jordan, publicly threatened to intervene to support the fedayeen.⁹

US Navy arrives in Force

The PFLP then took the precipitous step of simultaneously hijacking

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four commercial jetliners and landing three of them at a remote airfield in Jordan called Dawson's Field near Zarqa. The aircraft were evacuated and blown up in front of journalists and cameras. Some of the passengers were released, but 54 were kept as hostages. The PFLP demanded the release of Palestinians in prison in Israel, Switzerland, Britain, and Germany. A fourth jet liner was hijacked to Cairo, where it was also blown up. And on a fifth flight, an El Al jet, the hijackers were foiled by the security. In the White House, Kissinger began crisis meetings of the National Security Council in the Situation Room. The aircraft carrier USS *Independence* and its accompanying task force was moved to the Eastern Mediterranean in a show of force. It could launch 200 sorties a day.

Into the chaotic situation, a new US ambassador arrived, Dean Brown, to whom the king appealed to have Washington take steps to restrain the Israelis from aggravating the situation. He also advised that he might need outside help.¹⁰ Communications between the royal palace outside Amman, and the Americans was difficult. Only the British intelligence service, MI6, had reliable and secure communications with the king over a radio they had previously, and presciently, installed in the palace.¹¹ O'Connell, the most experienced American on the scene by far and the one Hussein trusted the most, offered the most authoritative account of the situation on the ground and how the king saw it.

On 15 September, the fedayeen took control of Irbid. The king

formed a martial law government with a loyal Palestinian in nominal command. The king's uncle and cousin were reinstated in the military. The king decided it was time for "recapturing" his country, as he later put it. He postponed action on the 16th because the fortune teller of his sister-in-law in London said the day was inauspicious, Hussein ordered the army to attack on September 17, 1970. The 60th Armored Brigade attacked the fedayeen headquarters in the refugee camps in Amman. Kissinger moved another carrier battle group, the USS *Saratoga*, to join the *Independence*. Other navy assets moved to join the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.

Hussein was at great personal risk. The Basman Palace compound came under heavy fire from the fedayeen, and the commander of the Royal Guard discovered that one of the palace cooks was signaling Hussein's whereabouts to the PLO in order to kill him.¹²

In this building crisis, it was crucial to neutralize the 20,000 Iraqis, an endeavor in which the Americans were not involved. But Nixon and Kissinger were aware of how important the Iraqi connection was to the fedayeen. Indeed, the Jordanians discovered when they arrived at Dawson's Field after the hijacking that the Iraqis had already been there. The Iraqis had colluded with the PFLP in staging the hijackings. The king told the Americans he believed the Iraqis were working with the PFLP to overthrow him.¹³ Moreover, DCI Helms told the NSC working group on the crisis on September 10th that the

Iraqis were providing the fedayeen its ammunition.¹⁴

An elaborate Jordanian con job

The Jordanians had a complex intelligence operation underway long before the September crisis to keep the Iraqis from actively fighting on the side of the fedayeen. The central figure in this operation was an Iraqi defector, Abud Hassan, who had flown a MIG fighter out of Iraq to Jordan in the 1960s. Hassan then spent some time in Cairo with other Iraqi exiles. He had been a roommate of Saddam Hussein's and became friends with the future dictator. Returning to Jordan, Hassan went on to become the head of Jordanian military intelligence.¹⁵

Led by Hassan, Jordanian intelligence recruited a European military attaché in Amman who would be stationed in NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, where he stole some planning documents. The Jordanians used these to fabricate a US plan for intervention in a crisis in the Middle East. These forgeries were then given to another Iraqi agent, who sold them to the Iraqi embassy in Turkey. The forged plan foresaw a buildup of US military assets in the Mediterranean before a lightning air attack on Iraqi troops in Jordan and their bases inside Iraq.¹⁶

Having carefully set the groundwork, when the crisis came, Abud had the commander of the Jordanian army, Zaid bin Shaker, call in the Iraqi military attaché. He told him the Jordanians were fully informed of the Iraqis involvement with the fedayeen, had detailed information on their deployment, and were ready to work with the Americans to destroy them. The Americans allegedly had

a team in Amman preparing for the attack. In fact, the Americans knew nothing about the fabricated plan. Jack O'Connell only learned about the elaborate con job from Abud Hassan years later. As he noted, "Abud succeeded through this grand deception in paralyzing the Iraqis." The gravest danger to Hussein never materialized.¹⁷

In Amman, the Jordanian attack quickly put the fedayeen on the defensive. With tanks in the lead, the Jordanian army got the upper hand in fierce house-to-house fighting. The Jordanians also controlled the south and quickly isolated the fedayeen in Irbid and a few other northern towns and cities. The Iraqis were now isolated in the east around Mafraq.

Indecision in Washington, Israel, and Jordan

On September 18, a small number of Syrian tanks crossed the border and entered Jordan with the insignia of the Palestine Liberation Army on their turrets. The 40th Jordanian Armored Brigade engaged the Syrians. The crisis in the north got worse as Syria deployed a large number of tanks into the engagement. This was the crisis the Nixon administration focused on, and it consulted closely with Israel on how to respond. Nixon wanted any outside intervention to be that of the United States; Kissinger was more favorably disposed to having Israel fight the Syrians.

The Israelis hesitated to act. Some thought air power alone would not be enough. This raised the prospect of Israel using ground troops to occupy northern Jordan, the so-called Jordanian Golan. Would they ever leave if they went in was the question. Others were not enamored of the idea of

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saving Hussein. Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban told the US ambassador to the UN, that "the world would not come to an end if King Hussein departed the scene." He implied that it would be easier for Israel to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians if they "dominated the state of Jordan."¹⁸ Eban was not alone, as others in the Israeli establishment, including Ezer Weizman and Ariel Sharon, thought the same way: let Jordan be Palestine.

King Hussein vacillated about outside involvement too. In the darkest moments on September 21st, he seemed to welcome help from any quarter. But he absolutely did not want Israeli boots on the ground in Jordan.¹⁹ Mostly the king saw the Israelis as a complication and a threat that could make a bad situation worse. He was above all worried that they would grab the Jordanian Golan.²⁰

In the end the Americans and Israelis spent a long time debating what to do, and the Israelis never gave Kissinger a definitive answer. Meanwhile, Hussein sent Zia-ul-Haq to the scene to make an on-the-ground assessment of the situation. Zia reported that the situation was serious but not dire. Jordan could handle the Syrian tanks with its own forces and prevail. Zia effectively took charge of part of the Jordanian counterattack, as Crown Prince Hassan told me years later.²¹

Assad decides to stand aside

The tide was turned by September 22. The key was the decision of

Hafez al Assad, then defense minister and the commander of the Syrian Air Force, to stay out of the conflict. The Syrian government was badly factionalized. The Baath party leader wanted to intervene to set up a Syrian-dominated Palestinian fedayeen zone in the north of Jordan around Irbid. Assad opposed the idea and kept his planes grounded.

In the Nixon narrative, the threat of US and Israeli intervention played the crucial role in deterring Assad. In short, the buildup of US naval assets and Israeli overflights on the battlefield for reconnaissance purposes scared him.

Looking back in hindsight, after watching Assad in power for three decades after 1970 and negotiating with him on a possible peace deal with Israel, I think it is easier to believe he was not interested in advancing the cause of Yasser Arafat or the fedayeen in general. Assad used military force against the PLO on more than one occasion after he took power later in 1970, including often in the Lebanese civil war. Assad was a ruthless dictator who wanted to control the Palestinian movement, and he was quite prepared to sell them out in 2000, when he tried to get the Syrian Golan back in a peace conference in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Moreover, Assad's immediate objective was to humiliate his rival in the Baath Party to take complete control of Syria. The decision to send armor into Jordan was that of Salah Jadid, a far-left party member who

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supported the concept of a people's war against Israel. By leaving Jadid's forces alone in Jordan, Assad fatally weakened his rival, who he ousted later that fall.

Crucial to the king's success was the army's loyalty. Only 300 soldiers and one senior officer defected to the fedayeen.²² The Palestinian prime minister in his martial law government later defected to Libya, but he was a figurehead anyway.

Nasser played a key role in the denouement of the civil war. He summoned Hussein and Arafat to Cairo on September 26 to agree to a cease fire. Nasser witnessed its signing on the 27th and then died of a heart attack the day after. The cease fire cemented Hussein's gains on the ground, and Nasser's involvement helped to keep Jordan from being completely isolated in the Arab world, which sympathized with the fedayeen.

The 1970 crisis was the darkest moment in Jordan's history. The country barely survived intact. It was the brilliance of Hussein's intelligence chief in bluffing the Iraqis into staying on the sidelines that saved the monarchy.

The Aftermath

Over the next half a year, the king gradually drove the fedayeen out of Jordan. It was done in stages. In October 1970, his most trusted civilian advisor, Wasfi Tal, was made prime minister, and he relentlessly tracked down the remaining fighters, pushed them into a corner of Jordan around Ajloun and then expelled

the remainder in July 1971. Hussein told the media Jordan was "quiet." He told O'Connell that the "cancer operation" was over, although the war had been costly.²³ Between 3,000 and 4,000 fedayeen died, 600 Syrians were killed or wounded, and the Jordanian army reported 537 killed in action. Civilian casualties are unknown but were sizable.

In his memoir, O'Connell is blunt: "The truth of the matter is, the Americans sat on the sidelines during the crisis, talking mostly to themselves. They never answered the king's request for military intervention. You didn't even answer our cables, much less do anything."²⁴

The civil war transformed the king. He matured greatly during the crisis. He dithered and procrastinated for months but then acted decisively in September. He came to grips with the fact that the West Bank was lost forever and that the Israelis were only stalling in meeting with him. He had gained the loyalty of his people even as he used force against some of them. It was his defining moment.²⁵

The fedayeen regrouped in Lebanon. Fatah vowed revenge. On November 28, 1971, Wasfi Tal was murdered by four terrorists at the entrance to the Sheraton Hotel in Cairo. After their arrest and trial, Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat freed them. It was the opening in a campaign of violence Fatah carried out under the codename Black September.²⁶ It was also the beginning of what would prove to be a very sour relationship between Hussein and Sadat.

The civil war also transformed Hussein's marriage. The bitter outcome of the 1967 war and the long months of preparing for the showdown in 1970 took their toll on his relationship with Princess Muna. An English woman, the daughter of a British officer stationed in Jordan. Named Antoinette "Toni" Avril Gardiner, she met Hussein while working on the film set for *Lawrence of Arabia*. She and the children spent most of their time in England for security reasons, so they were apart during the king's toughest hours in 1970. She is the mother of Hussein's oldest son, today's King Abdallah. Their divorce in late 1972 was cordial. The couple remained friends, and Muna stayed in Amman, as she does to this day. Interestingly, queen mother Zayn opposed the divorce and urged the king to stay married to Muna. His decision to go ahead with the divorce over Zayn's objections was another sign of his coming of age as his own man.²⁷

The new love in Hussein's life was Alia Toukan, who was from a prominent Palestinian family from Nablus. Born in 1948 in Cairo, she was the daughter of the then Jordanian ambassador to Egypt, Baha Uddin Toukan. Alia was one-year old when she first met Hussein, and he was a frequent visitor to the family home while he studied in Alexandria. Her father went on to be ambassador to Ankara, London, and the United Nations in New York. She got a M.A. in Business and Public Relations at Hunter College in New York City.

When Alia returned to Amman and took a job with Royal Jordanian Airlines, Hussein was smitten. They married on December 24, 1972; he was 37 and she was 24. She became

Queen Alia al Hussein. It did not hurt that she was Palestinian at a time when Hussein desperately needed to heal the wounds between

his Palestinian subjects and the East Bankers. Alia was immediately popular and greeted warmly.²⁸ She lobbied her husband to extend the

vote to women and to allow them to be elected to the legislature. In 1974 women were enfranchised.



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