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December 5, 2009

Succession Issues

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Last July, almost unnoticed by the international media, Jordan's King Abdallah II nominated his 15-year old son, Prince Hussein, as heir to the throne, ending five years of speculation as to the identity of his designated successor. According to Jordan's constitution, Hussein, whose glasses and gentle appearance have led Jordanians to nickname him “Harry Potter”, can become King only at the age of 18. Considering that teenagers mature slowly nowadays, and that the young prince is expected to follow a family tradition of distinguished academic studies and tough military training, it is unlikely that Prince Hussein will be ready to assume any serious royal responsibilities during the coming decade.

This raises a question that bears potentially worrisome implications for the Hashemite Kingdom: King Abdallah is a healthy, popular and skillful leader, but what would happen in Jordan if anything happens to him in the near future? The constitutional answer is provided in article 28 (g): a regent or a council of

regency will be appointed. But this is no guarantee for stability. The current diffusion of power in Jordan's royal scene suggests that a number of princes might consider themselves as suitable caretakers and perhaps even as legitimate heirs. This is a sure recipe for a period of disunity and confusion.

The late King Hussein was well aware of the fragility of his kingdom, and that it required an able heir to be ready to assume his duties at all times. That was the prime reason he amended the constitution in 1965 and appointed his brother Hasan to the post of Crown Prince, instead of his son Abdallah, an infant at the time. On January 24, 1999, on his death bed and nursing grudges against his brother, Hussein replaced him with his now-adult son. Hussein's last command to Abdallah was that he appoint his 18-year old half-brother Hamza as heir to the throne. It was an emotional command: Hamza was Hussein's favorite son, described by him in his farewell letter to Prince Hasan as the boy who "has been envied since childhood because he was close to me". But not only emotions were involved. Hussein, a sophisticated politician, recognized the need for Abdallah to appoint an heir who would be ready to assume the responsibilities of the crown almost instantaneously if needed.

King Abdallah obeyed his father's command and appointed Hamza as his heir. Yet in 2004 he "excused" Hamza from his position. No confrontation between the two had apparently ensued, nor were health considerations considered to be a factor in Hamza's removal as designated heir. By all appearances, Hamza remained loyal to his half-brother. Jordanian and Arab analysts suggest that Abdallah's motivation was simply that of a proud father who wished to see, one day, his son wearing his crown. But the direct implication of Abdallah's moves is that in the next decade, the Kingdom's political stability is tied to his own fate.

In Syria, the succession question is shrouded in even greater mystery. President Bashar al-Asad has no designated successor. His first born son, Hafiz, is only eight years old. The Syrian parliament demonstrated great flexibility in adopting a republican-monarchist system, when immediately after President Hafiz al-Asad's death on July 2000 it amended article 84 of the constitution and reduced the minimum age for president from 40 to 34, in order to accommodate the 34-year old Bashar. However, even the Syrian parliament will not amend the constitution so as to allow an eight-year old child to become the head of state.

Hafiz al-Asad based his regime on two circles: a broad base of popular support, nurtured by a personality cult, and an inner circle of support from the Alawi community, motivated by the desire of his own sect to safeguard the leadership of one of their own kin. Hence, both emotional and practical reasons convinced him that only a member of the Asad family could sustain both circles. He also feared, with good reason, that the Syrian regime would not be able to endure a power vacuum. Thus, for almost all of his years in power, his designated successor was well known to all, although never officially declared. From the early 1970s, through the middle of the 1980s it was his brother Rif'at. After Rif'at fell from grace, the heir-designate was Asad's eldest son Basil. Immediately after Basil died in a car accident in January 1994, Bashar was called back from London, where he was doing subspecialty training in ophthalmology, and gradually assumed the position of heir apparent.

Bashar did not change the underpinnings of his father's regime, but he handles the succession issue differently. No single member of his immediate family, or any other politician for that matter, can be pinpointed as heir to the presidency.

Bashar and his wife Asma are both personally popular and shrewd tacticians. But Syria's president has many enemies, internally and externally; and should he suddenly be assassinated or die of natural causes, the Ba`th regime would find itself under severe stress as it strove to agree on a successor.

Egypt's problem of succession is likely to be more immediate. It is very clear who the 81-year old President Husni Mubarak wishes to see as Egypt's next president - his 46-year old son Gamal. In recent years, father and son have worked hard to lay the political and popular foundations for Gamal's accession. But there are reasons to believe that Egypt's transformation to the *Gumlukyya* model (the pejorative Arabic neologism referring to a combination of republic and monarchy) will not be as smooth as Syria's was. First, it remains to be seen if Egypt's defense and intelligence establishments will agree to the appointment of Gamal, a businessman lacking in military leadership, or advance one of their own as a candidate. Second, Egypt is a far more open society than Syria. Gamal's ascent to power is likely to draw harsh criticism from the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, from liberal activists, and possibly also from powerful members of the ruling National Democratic Party, who are currently afraid to upset his father, the sitting president of Egypt for 28 years. So far, Husni Mubarak has refrained from any move that would secure son's status as designated successor. Perhaps he calculates that the time is not ripe yet.

The Jordanian, Syrian and Egyptian regimes, all of whom are Israel's immediate neighbors, have maintained a stable hold on power for decades. The 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat in Egypt and subsequent generational changes in Jordan and in Syria at the turn of the new century did not disrupt that reality. However, the current situation is such that the death of any of those three countries' leaders is likely to result in a period of political turmoil that

might affect Israel's interests.

This picture of potential instabilities is complemented by a similar, and even more immediate set of circumstances in the Palestinian sphere, owing to 74-year old Mahmoud Abbas's recent threats not to run for reelection as President of the Palestinian Authority. His move demonstrated that a crisis of succession should be expected sooner, rather than later in the West Bank. No single individual in his governing Fatah movement appears able to mobilize broad support, and Abbas (Abu Mazen) seems to have neither the capability nor the ambition of cultivating an heir.

The leaders of the region give the appearance of feeling very secure in regard to their immediate futures. Or perhaps it is the opposite feeling that stops them from constructively addressing the succession issue.

TEL AVIV NOTES *is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation*