

# COULD KING HUSSEIN HAVE STOPPED SADDAM HUSSEIN?

By Nick Gier



Queen Noor, Former King Hussein, Queen Rania, Princess Raiyah  
(Noor's youngest daughter), King Abdullah II

As we approach the 19th anniversary of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, I'd like to focus on the role that King Hussein of Jordan played in trying to avoid this disastrous turn of events.

President George H. W. Bush "drew a line in the sand" and insisted the Iraqi forces be withdrawn. Saddam Hussein resisted all efforts to change his mind, so in early 1991 the U.S., along with 33 other countries (including 11 Muslim nations), restored Kuwaiti sovereignty during a 42-day air and ground campaign.

Because of fear that Saddam would invade Saudi Arabia as well as Kuwait, the Saudi government allowed the stationing of U.S. and British troops in the country. On August 6, 1990, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney assured the Saudis that "after the danger is over, our forces will go home."

No formal agreement was ever signed with the Saudis, and U.S. forces, rising to 10,000 during the initial invasion of Iraq, were not withdrawn until the end of April 2003. In the run-up to the Iraq War, U.S. planes at Saudi bases,

without letting the government know, bombed installations in and around Baghdad.

The presence of foreign troops in the land of Islam's holiest shrines caused consternation among millions of Muslims, not just those with jihadist inclinations. Osama bin Laden was particularly upset by the American troop presence. In a May 1997 interview he declared: "We have focused our declaration of jihad on striking at the U.S. soldiers inside Saudi Arabia." Of the nineteen September 11 hijackers fifteen were from Saudi Arabia.

Even before then, terrorist bombings killed five American troops at a base in Riyadh in November 1995, and 19 American airmen were killed in a bombing at the Khobar Towers in June 1996. During the Gulf War Saddam sent 44 Scud missiles into Saudi Arabia. One Saudi and 28 U. S. soldiers were killed and over 100 were injured.

In her recent memoir *Leap of Faith: An Unexpected Life*, Jordanian Queen Noor al Hussein, once known stateside as Lisa Halaby, recounts with great dismay about how her husband's efforts to stop Saddam's invasion of Kuwait were thwarted by the U.S. and Britain, as well as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and other Arab leaders.

U.S. and Jordanian relations had been strained because King Hussein opposed the 1979 Camp David Accords in which Egypt signed a separate treaty with Israel. The King was particularly concerned that no provisions had been made for Palestinian self-determination.

Even though his father had been assassinated by a Palestinian extremist, King Hussein kept principle ahead of personal revenge in his dealings with the Palestinians. When the Palestine Liberation Organization tried to overthrow his government in 1970, Hussein reluctantly called out his army to put down the insurrection.

In 1989 Hussein allowed the first free elections in the House of Deputies, and 34 of the 80 of the seats in were won by the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood. Even moderate deputies were in favor of preserving the kingdom's economic ties with Iraq, and Hussein certainly did not wanted to go against the newly enfranchised voters of his country. The result was that Jordan remained neutral during the Gulf War.

Jordan received oil at a discount from Iraq and 40 percent of its trade was with its much larger neighbor. Iraq counted on the Jordanian port of Aqaba for much of its imports, especially when its only port Basra was restricted during the Iran-Iraq War.

Of all the Arab leaders King Hussein was in the best position to convince Saddam to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the issues he had with Kuwait. There was a legitimate border dispute, and Saddam also charged that the Kuwaitis were drilling laterally into Iraq's oil fields.

On July 17, 1990, King Hussein flew to Baghdad and urged Saddam to reach an agreement with the Kuwaitis. He then called President Bush and asked that the U.S. mediate the discussions, but the request fell on deaf ears.

On July 25, April Glaspie, U.S. ambassador to Iraq, told Saddam that "we have no opinion on your Arab-Arab conflicts, such as your dispute with Kuwait." Some have defended Glaspie's actions as standard American Mideast dipolamcy, but critics say that she, as Iraqi forces were massing at the Kuwaiti border, essentially gave tacit approval to the invasion. In later exchange with journalists, Glaspie stated: "Obviously, I didn't think, and nobody else did, that the Iraqis were going to take all of Kuwait." Did that mean that it was OK for Iraq to take some Kuwaiti land for Persian Gulf access?

Even after the invasion began, King Hussein worked tirelessly to get Saddam to withdraw his forces. He obtained assurances from the Arab League that they would not condemn the invasion until he tried once again to talk to Saddam.

On August 3, one day after the invasion, Hussein said that Saddam told him that he would withdraw if the Arab League sponsored a conference to negotiate his differences with Kuwait. Hussein was able to get a statement from Saddam that promised the following: "If there are no threats against Iraq or Kuwait, Iraqi forces will start to withdraw tomorrow."

But it was too late. The Arab League broke its promise to wait, and at its meeting in Cairo it voted to condemn the invasion. Jordanian Queen Noor submits that "this undercutting of King Hussein's mission to achieve an Iraqi commitment on withdrawal would bring Western troops into the region and sow the seeds of radical Islamist terrorist attacks on the U.S. more than a decade later."

For some unknown reason, perhaps to curry favor with the U.S., Prime Minister Mubarak of Egypt spread lies about King Hussein receiving bribes from Saddam and forming a joint military command for the invasion. As a result, Hussein's reputation with the British, the U.S. Congress, and President Bush suffered a bruising body blow.

The British *Daily Mail* published reports that Jordan was shipping weapons to Iraq and showed a picture of shipping crates on which "The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan" was stamped. Hussein was able to prove that these pictures were of secret CIA shipments to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war that the U.S. disguised as Jordanian. *The Daily Mail* printed a retraction but the damage had already been done.

King Hussein did persuade Saddam to release 260 British hostages that he was holding in Baghdad. Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic Airlines flew out 60 hostages piloting his own jet, and he also provided invaluable help in air lifting relief supplies to Jordan in the aftermath of the Gulf War. During the conflict over one million (including 300,000 Jordanian citizens from Kuwait and the Gulf States) fled into Jordan, putting a severe strain on its already weak economy.

King Hussein tried one last time to get Saddam to bring his troops home. Saddam's response was: "Yes, the whole world is against me, but God is with me and I will be victorious." Queen Noor had been distressed by Saddam's megalomania in previous trips to Iraq, so she and her husband were probably far too optimistic that they could talk reason to a person with delusions such as his.

Scholars are divided on whether King Hussein was actually neutral on Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Hussein did publicly condemn it and he repeatedly demand that Iraqi forces be withdrawn, but how much he agreed with many of his subjects' support for Saddam will be impossible to determine.

In August 1991 the Jordanian government published a "white paper" defending its actions, and Hussein biographer Avi Shlaim states that "a critical scrutiny of all the available evidence invalidates the American version on a number of counts without fully substantiating the Jordanian one." Scholar Debra Schulman concludes that "the perception of Jordan being in the Iraqi camp is a fair one."

Regardless of the outcome of the debate about King Hussein's neutrality in the Gulf War, no one doubts the value of his overall record to bring peace to the Middle East. He negotiated a peace agreement with Israel in 1994, and in 1998 he left his sick bed (he died of cancer in 1999) to mediate between President Clinton and Prime Minister Netanyahu. These negotiations led to the Wye Memorandum, which returned 13 percent of the West Bank to the Palestinians. For his life-long efforts King Hussein was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998.

Except for the disputed claim that he sided with Saddam, King Hussein was consistently the cool-headed mediator for the Middle East's warring factions. His greatest virtue was that he held no grudges, even against those who had betrayed him, and he persistently held to the basic principle that the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians, regardless of the reckless actions of their leaders, must be fully acknowledged.

Hussein's greatest failing, however, is that he trusted key players-- Menachem Begin, Yasser Arafat, Hosni Mubarak, Saddam Hussein, and Benjamin Netanyahu--far too much. I am sure that Hussein regretted that he ever described Saddam as "a person to be trusted and an Arab patriot in the eyes of many."

The sad truth is that no one could have stopped Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. After the Gulf War the no fly zones protecting the Kurds in the North and the Shias in the South could have contained him. Saddam stopped actions to produce nuclear weapons in 1998, and no other weapons of mass destruction have been discovered. All the countries bordering Iraq were solidly against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The U. S. charge that Saddam was a threat to its neighbors was essentially unfounded.

Ironically, however, once the war began, Jordan, under the leadership of Hussein's son King Abdullah II, was very supportive of the Coalition Forces. U.S. and British forces were stationed there, two Jordanian air bases were used for sorties into Iraq, and three Patriot anti-missile batteries were installed.

In August 2008 King Abdullah was the first Arab leader to visit Iraq, and the talks focused on continuing the flow of discounted oil and the repatriation of 750,000 Iraqis who fled to Jordan during the war. In Baghdad Abdullah declared that "Jordan is ready to stand at the side of Iraq to realize the wish of the Iraqi people for security stability and prosperity." I believe that King Hussein would be very proud of his son.

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