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Nigel Ashton. *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 464pp. ISBN: 978-0300091670 (\$35, cloth).

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

Nigel Ashton's biography of King Hussein of Jordan explores a central figure in Middle Eastern politics in the last half of the tumultuous twentieth century. In 1953, at the age of eighteen, Hussein replaced his father on the throne of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and ruled until 1999. With little time to acquire experience, develop political connections in Jordan and relationships with Arab neighbors, Hussein had to deal with the reluctant retreat of British and French colonialism, the intensification of Soviet and U.S. Cold War competition, conflicts among Arab leaders over leadership of Arab nationalism with Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt as the first contestant, and the enduring Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ashton skillfully develops how Hussein survived and gained insights as to how to lead a country without oil and significant economic resources in the middle of this strife-ridden arena.

The reviewers agree that Ashton has produced a well-written, engaging study from the introduction, which starts with "a funeral procession like no other" to the conclusion on Hussein's controversial handling of the succession. Fifty heads of state including Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and many other diplomats walked with Hussein's coffin to the Raghadan Palace. Israeli leaders including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, General Ariel Sharon, and other leaders walked down a hill from a different direction than the other mourners to the Raghadan Palace for the walk up the hill to the Hashemite family mosque and cemetery. (pp. 1-2) Adversaries, enemies, sometimes allies all gathered to mark the passing of Hussein. As the reviewers favorably note, Ashton brings new sources to his study, most notably access to King Hussein's private papers in the Royal Hashemite Archives, interviews with Hussein's family and close advisers, and research in UK National Archives, and U.S. Presidential Libraries. They do note the absence of Arabic sources beyond translated documents and Israeli archives, and Clea Bunch points out that Ashton refers to "private information" on a number of significant interpretations in his study. (2) In his response Ashton indicates that "private information" refers primarily to intelligence sources.

The reviewers raise important questions about Ashton's overall thesis on Hussein, the strengths and weaknesses of his approach, and Hussein's role in the Middle Eastern conflicts as follows:

- 1) Ashton offers a political biography of Hussein with emphasis on his engagements with Middle Eastern conflicts and foreign policy, and the reviewers agree that overall he manages this task very well. Clea Bunch and Laurie Brand point out that less attention is devoted to domestic affairs, although, as Bunch notes, Ashton "pays significant attention to the ever-present issues of Palestinian identity within Jordan and the civil strife that has accompanied Palestinian assimilation." (1-2) Brand considers Ashton's focus on the challenges that Hussein faced in high politics as appropriate but regrets that the reader will "gain little sense of Jordan itself and its people." (1-2) When Ashton does make assessments on Hussein's domestic

leadership and the nature of the regime, Brand would have favored a more critical evaluation that noted the absence of a meaningful parliamentary system and a domestic system that with a few periods of “greater political openness,” remained a “repressive business-as-usual” regime. (2)

- 2) Ashton’s emphasis on the importance of Hussein’s Hashemite legacy and its influence on his policy decisions results in some reservations from the reviewers. Janice Terry agrees that Hussein hoped to maintain the Hashemite claims in the West Bank and holy sites in Jerusalem but also rebuild an Arab union around the Hashemites that would include a return of Iraq and Arabia with Hashemite claims to the Hijaz. Ashton offers an example of Hussein’s ambition in the context of his maneuverings with Nasser’s United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria in January 1958 and Hussein’s counter-response to create a Jordanian-Iraq union in February. When the Hashemite regime in Iraq led by King Feisal bin Hussein, Hussein’s cousin, and Crown Prince Abdul Ilah, was overthrown and they were murdered in July 1958, Hussein assumed leadership of the Arab Union, sent troops into Iraq, and asked Great Britain and the U.S. for support, but President Dwight Eisenhower refused to support British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s desire to back Hussein’s ambitions on Iraq. (pp. 69-77) Salim Yaqub and Brand do question how much “Hussein’s commitment to fulfilling the Hashemite legacy,” as Yaqub notes, “actually motivated Hussein’s geopolitical decision-making.” (4) Pointing to Hussein’s shift from an alliance with Saddam Hussein in the 1980s to support for overthrowing his regime in the mid-1990s, Yaqub suggests that “Hashemite ideology was the idiom through which Hussein sought to make sense, to others and himself, of decisions arrived at for a host of personal, political, and ideological reasons.” (4) Brand agrees that Hussein’s “*raison de famille* [was] masked as *raison d’etat*. Hashemite Arab nationalism has in fact been whatever was/is required to maintain the Hashemite throne in the Jordanian state.” (4)
- 3) Ashton’s primary focus on Hussein’s efforts to maintain his regime in the face of internal coup plots linked to Arab adversaries, challenges generated by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, external inter-Arab conflicts from Nasser to Hussein and Islamist movements, and Middle Eastern conflicts with Israel is well-received by the reviewers. Starting with Nasser, Hussein had to learn quickly to deal with the shifting alliances of Middle Eastern leaders, the challenges and opportunities posed by the Cold War outsiders, the different groups and agenda of Arab nationalism, and the many wars, insurgencies, and rebellions that erupted. As Terry points out, Ashton is sympathetic but not uncritical to Hussein’s perspective and approaches. In Chapter 6, “The Path to Disaster, 1966-7”, Ashton develops in depth the challenges that Hussein faced in dealing with the PLO in Jordan, the deterioration in inter-Arab relations, increased Fatah raids against Israel and a major Israel reprisal attack on the Palestinian village of Samu. As Nasser maneuvered with Syria and stepped up his actions against Israel in the spring of 1967, Ashton depicts Hussein as a “bystander”, isolated as the Middle East moved towards war, and “faced with two unpalatable choices”: join Nasser and run the risk of war with Israel and the loss of the West Bank, or stand aside and risk a major

domestic uprising as well as war. Ashton views Hussein's decision to join Nasser as the "greatest calamity of his reign" as Jordan lost the most in the brief conflict. (pp. 105-120)

- 4) Jordan's relations with Israel were central to Hussein's concerns throughout his reign. The reviewers appreciate Ashton's detailed development of the personal contacts that Hussein developed with a wide range of Israeli leaders and his frequent efforts to negotiate with Israel reflecting Hussein's evolving perception that the resort to violence brought only greater violence and threats to Jordan and his regime. Yaqub and Brand do, however, question Ashton's depiction of Hussein as being different than other Arab leaders in pursuing an enlightened approach with Israeli leaders. Brand suggests that Hussein's interest in peace was "grounded in exigencies of regime survival" as Hussein never lost his concern that Israel after 1967 might push all Palestinians from the West Bank into east Jordan. (3) Yaqub also notes a similar priority for Hussein when he moved to drive the PLO out of Jordan in 1970 and requested Israeli air strikes against a Syrian tank force that had entered Israel and sought other "accommodations with Israel, and they in turn often entailed significant Jordanian concessions." Again during the October 1973 war, Yaqub points out that Hussein responded to Arab pressure by sending an armored brigade into Syria but secretly asked Israel not to retaliate. (4) Despite all of the risks that Hussein took in private contacts with Israeli officials, he didn't gain very much particularly at critical times such as the aftermath of the 1967 war when Hussein attempted to get back the West Bank in negotiations with Israel. Washington called the covert talks "Sandstorm" which Ashton considers an appropriate name "for over the course of the next eighteen months there unfolded a secret diplomatic process in which the participants found themselves groping forward blindly, without ever arriving at a solution." (p. 123) Ashton depicts Israeli officials as reluctant to negotiate with Hussein, wanting to avoid the withdrawal from the West Bank issue, and dismissive of Hussein. In his response, Ashton emphasizes his view of Hussein as realist and idealist: "Hussein the realist developed a clear and sophisticated understanding of the extent of Israeli power, and the willingness of Israeli leaders to use it.... Hussein the idealist saw the Arab-Israeli conflict as a transitory historical phenomenon, and he believed that through contacts and empathy with the other side a path to reconciliation could be found." (4-5)
- 5) Ashton's study also sheds interesting perspectives on U.S. policy in the Middle East from Eisenhower through Clinton as the U.S. became the leading Western patron and ally of Hussein. Hussein's perspective on the U.S. seemed to be shaped by the importance of having Western support considering the range of challenges he faced from Arab rivals and Israel. At the same time Hussein expressed increasing disillusionment with Washington's unwillingness to support either Hussein's desire for a general Arab-Israeli settlement or to take a firm stance against Israeli reluctance to negotiate agreements with Jordan and the Palestinians until the 1990s. In the aftermath of the 1956 Suez crisis, for example, Ashton depicts Hussein's successful approach to Washington for assistance, but Hussein found himself

quickly entangled in Washington's Cold War concerns intermixed with inter-Arab rivalries. (pp. 62-70) The Kennedy and Johnson administrations continued U.S. support, but both administrations disappointed Hussein with respect to Washington's efforts to work with Nasser before the 1967 war and Washington's caution on Hussein's effort to negotiate with Israel to regain the West Bank lost in the war. In Chapter 7 "Lost in a Sandstorm: Hussein and the Peace Process, 1967-8," Ashton notes that although Hussein successfully managed the immediate challenges of the October 1973 conflict, he experienced more disillusionment in dealing with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, particularly over their support for Israel and Kissinger's unwillingness to give as much attention and priority to Jordan and the West Bank as he did to Egypt and Syria. Instead of "step-by-step diplomacy," Hussein referred to Kissinger's approach as "side-step" and the King again failed to get anywhere in talks with Israeli leaders. (pp. 179-182) Since Hussein could not afford a break with Washington, he had to make the best of these disappointments and endure more such as his exclusion from President Carter's Camp David negotiations of a separate Israeli-Egyptian peace accord, which contributed to the King's ill-fated cooperation with Saddam Hussein, and Hussein's unsuccessful involvement with Ronald Reagan over Iran and a Middle East settlement before the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada in December 1987 (pp. 201-209, 231-232, 237-239, 250-251). Hussein's only success besides the survival of his regime and Jordan without the West Bank came in negotiations with Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin to achieve a Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty in 1994 with favorable terms for Hussein. (pp. 300-316) But the assassination of Rabin in November and ensuing Israeli actions in Lebanon and conflict with Palestinians ensured that Hussein's quest for a general Arab-Israeli settlement, bringing together the "children of Abraham", would not only not be forthcoming but would be further challenged by militant Islamism, inter-Arab conflicts, Israeli settlement expansion and security concerns, and the repercussions of the expanded U.S. presence in the Middle East and Near East since 2001.

Participants:

Nigel J. Ashton is Senior Lecturer in International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author of *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser: Anglo-American Relations and Arab Nationalism, 1955-59* (Macmillan, 1996), and *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence* (Palgrave, 2002), which won the 2003 Cambridge Donner Foundation book prize. He has also edited *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-73* (Routledge, 2007). His next project is likely to be a survey of the American and British role in the Middle East since the Second World War.

Laurie A. Brand is Professor and Director of the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *Palestinians in the Arab World* (Columbia, 1989), *Jordan's Inter-Arab Relations* (Columbia, 1994), *Women, the State and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences* (Columbia, 1998),

and, most recently, *Citizens Abroad: States and their Expatriates: Emigration and the State in the Middle East and North Africa* (Cambridge, 2006). A Carnegie Corporation fellow for 2008-10, she is currently working on a book on the role of Arab nationalism and Islam in post-independence Arab state narratives.

Clea Bunch is an Assistant Professor of History and chair of Middle East Studies at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, specializing in the Modern Middle East and U.S.-Middle East Relations. She is currently writing a book on the history of Jordanian-American relations, 1948-1970

Janice J. Terry has a PhD. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She is Professor Emerita from the History Department, Eastern Michigan University. She is author of *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Role of Lobbies and Special Interest Groups* (2005) and most recently the co-editor and contributor to *The Encyclopedia of World History*, 7 vols (2008). She is also the co-author of *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History*, 7th. ed. (2008) and *World History*, 4th ed. (2002). She is a former editor of *The Arab Studies Quarterly* and has contributed chapters and articles on the contemporary Middle East to numerous books and journals.

Salim Yaqub received his PhD in U.S. History from Yale University in 1999. He is now Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he specializes in the history of U.S. foreign relations, with a particular focus on U.S. involvement in the Middle East. His first book, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, was published in 2004 by the University of North Carolina Press. Dr. Yaqub is now writing a book on U.S.-Arab relations in the 1970s.

Few could have expected when the young Husayn bin Talal ascended the throne of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1953 that he would become one of the most important Arab leaders of the post-war period. The impact of his 46-year reign was far greater than one would have expected from a monarch governing, as an American official (annoyingly and geologically inaccurately) termed it, “a few thousand square miles of sand” (p.11).

In the introduction to this well-written biography, Nigel Ashton lays out several dichotomies that he sees as having shaped Husayn’s actions over the years, dichotomies that appear periodically throughout the book: the king as realist but also idealist; a man motivated by ideology, but also by interest; and Jordan’s power, limited by any objective standards, versus Husayn’s reach – always frustrated – for a realm of greater territorial and political reach.

Clearly, it was not the size of the territory he ruled, but rather its geographic location, that made Husayn a figure of not just regional, but ultimately international, stature. East of the territory conquered by the Zionist movement for a Jewish homeland; south of the “beating heart of Arabism”; north and west of the state possessing the largest known oil reserves; and west of the perhaps equally oil-rich inheritor state of the Abbasids, Husayn had either to assert his rule or be swallowed up by one of Jordan’s more powerful neighbors. In this context, therefore, it is important to stress that, whether in keeping with or as a result of his particular brand of Arab nationalism, Husayn did not see himself as, nor was he, a Jordanian. He and his family have been and are rulers of Jordan; but in a part of the world where territorial origins serve as the most basic definition of one’s identity, the Hashemites’ origins are in the Hijaz, part of present-day Saudi Arabia. As Ashton stresses throughout, Husayn viewed his mission as involving what he saw as the fulfillment of Hashemite Arab (but not, tellingly, Jordanian or Jordanian Arab) nationalism: closest to home, this meant preserving the throne in Jordan; only slightly farther away it involved ensuring a continuing Hashemite role in Jerusalem and its holy places; and finally, and completely unfulfilled in his lifetime, it aspired to a territorial expansion of his family’s rule. That Jordan survived as a political entity, however, owed in large part to the skill of the king and his advisors in playing the game of regional alignment and realignment, not from an adherence to whatever ideological imperatives one might deduce from “a Hashemite brand of Arab nationalism.”(p. 15)

Ashton’s account of the many challenges Husayn faced during his life is overwhelmingly one of high politics. That is certainly legitimate and valid. It does, however, at times leave events and their context un(der)explained or underspecified. Unfortunately, this means that the lay reader will gain little sense of Jordan itself and its people, Husayn’s realm and subjects, from this work. Even the most expert of Jordan hands will, thanks to Ashton’s unprecedented access to Husayn’s private papers, come away with a better understanding of Husayn and his own interactions with regional politics and actors, but the text does not offer much of a sense of the king’s “political life” inside the country itself.

To give just one example, the tensions and competition between Transjordanians (native East Bankers) and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, which have had such an important impact on the kingdom's domestic (and regional) politics is engaged, and only briefly, in the section on Black September. Ashton does note how critical Transjordanians have been to the regime, as he emphasizes in several places the role of the army, which, particularly after the civil war of 1970, became an almost exclusively Transjordanian preserve. Yet also critical to regime continuity – even in this early period, although its importance increased over time – was a segment of the population of Palestinian origin, the largely Palestinian private sector, that benefited from Jordan's stability and which remained aloof from the 1970 conflict. Ashton provides important insights into a handful of people closest to the king, but offers few reflections on the broader set of actors who have constituted the larger Hashemite *regime*, even though the composition of the regime and the king's ability to maintain it are key to understanding his staying power.

Regarding the nature of the Jordanian regime and state – clearly not the central focus of Ashton's work, but critical contextual elements – I find the author too kind in his descriptions. Ashton argues that in the early decades of his rule, Husayn gave his prime ministers free reins, but as time went on the length of those reins or the number of issues for which they were placed in the prime ministers' hands diminished considerably. In fact, parliamentary life (when not suspended) and the presence of a cabinet have generally served more as an alibi for the monarchy than as deliberative institutions of policy consequence. They gave the semblance of a political system based on institutions and rule of law, thus providing the regime deniability in the event of crises or problems. With the king portrayed as above the fray on all but the most high profile or sensitive of issues, problems could be attributed to particular ministers who were subject to dismissal, regardless of where true responsibility for error or corruption lay.

To be fair, there was certainly greater political openness in the mid-1950s, as well as in the 1989-1992 period, but outside these brief interludes, domestic governance was a repressive business-as-usual. Ashton does note that Husayn was popular with his military; and that he was at times willing to co-opt those who had previously opposed his regime. He does not, however, engage what the security-focused nature of the regime meant for Husayn's subjects, even though harassment (and worse) of those with oppositional political involvements over the years were intrinsic to the operation of the Jordanian state. Its *mukhabarat*, which Ashton mentions only in passing on a couple of occasions, developed a reputation for an intimidating efficiency. This coercive reality of the security state was the daily face of Husayn's regime for a large number of Jordanians.

This image, then, is to be contrasted with Ashton's quite accurate portrayal of Husayn's response to the Daqamseh incident, in which an apparently deranged Jordanian soldier opened fire on and killed a group of Israeli schoolgirls. Husayn's gesture – going to Israel, condoling the parents, etc. – was quite moving for Israelis, and for many outside the region. Inside Jordan, however, where those with relatives in the West Bank or Gaza regularly saw (and still see) scenes on the news of friends and family members brutalized, killed or dispossessed by the Israeli occupation, this was a particularly bitter experience. Whatever

the king's intention, his message to average Jordanians was that while Israelis merited his personal attention and sympathy, his own people and other Arabs did not.

Ashton's presentation of Husayn's contacts with Israeli leaders over the years is interesting and provocative throughout this work. The king's image in many parts of the Arab world, including among many in his own kingdom, was long that of a lackey of the West, if not a traitor for his willingness to deal with successive Israeli leaders. His long-standing contacts with the Jewish state, building on the ties his grandfather had had with the Mandate era Yishuv, are often cited to underline what has been argued to be a greater Hashemite flexibility toward the enemy. Israeli or Zionist scholars have often used the long-standing contacts between the Hashemites and the Zionist (and, subsequently, Israeli) leadership to in effect argue that Husayn long sought peace because of a different, basic disposition toward Zionism or Israel than that of other Arabs. The implicit, and insidious, message in such an argument, of course, is that if the Hashemites could deal with the Israelis, there could be no concrete or rational (as opposed to irrational and unjustified) basis for other Arabs' rejection of Israel or its policies.

While there is no question that Husayn was long interested in peace, it is clear from Ashton's discussion that the interest was grounded in the exigencies of regime survival, not affective inclination (except perhaps in his relationship with the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin). Thus, the use of Husayn as the exception to prove the rule regarding Arab intransigence is simply inaccurate. While it was long rare in the Arab world to tout examples of leaders who had sought peace, in fact, there are many examples of overtures from the Arab parties that came to naught, were ignored, or rebuffed by Israeli leaders. The focus on Husayn has no doubt been because he was seen as, and indeed was, the weakest, as well as the most direct, link to the core of the conflict: Palestine and the Palestinians. While his temperament may well also have played a role, the imperative for the survival of his family's realm in Jordan was the primary driving force. With the longest border with Israel, and with no buffer, Jordan was the most exposed and the most potentially vulnerable of the so-called "confrontation states."

Ashton's treatment of Husayn's relationship with Saddam Husayn further reinforces the point. It would be an odd "brand of Arab nationalism" indeed that would lead a Hashemite monarch to be the Arab leader both closest to the Israelis and most supportive of the Iraqi strongman. The presentation of the 1995-96 episode of Jordanian cooperation with US efforts to overthrow Saddam is fascinating, but it leaves unexplained why Husayn, who had been such a strong backer of Saddam in 1990-91, was convinced four years later to support his overthrow. Had Husayn's earlier Arab nationalism manifested in his refusal to join the international coalition against Iraq somehow dissipated? More likely is that this interlude, like others before it, demonstrates the ideology/interests dichotomy mentioned in the introduction. Husayn's Arab nationalist ideology, if that is how his approach is best characterized, could operate as long as the kingdom was well supplied by Iraqi largesse; however, once Jordan faced challenges on that front, regime survival interests loomed large, and Husayn was able relatively quickly, if hardly gracefully, to change course. When all is said and done, this is *raison de famille* masked as *raison d'etat*. Hashemite Arab

nationalism has in fact been whatever was/is required to maintain the Hashemite throne in the Jordanian state.

Two additional episodes covered by Ashton deserve special mention. The first is the food riots of 1996. His conclusion, deduced from interview material, is that these protests were deliberately triggered to serve as an excuse for the government of Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Kabariti to round up Ba'thists and other pro-Iraqi or Arab nationalist elements in the country. I fear I find this implausible. That this regime, long been preoccupied with domestic stability, which had been taken by surprise and badly shaken by the riots of April 1989, would deliberately set a fire that could easily have burned out of control seems highly unlikely.

Finally, and more importantly, is the question of succession. Ashton probably does well – particularly given the sensitivities involved in having been given access to the late king's papers by the winner in the succession struggle – to avoid trying to weigh the various accusations and rumors of intrigue surrounding Husayn as his health deteriorated. What he does portray clearly are some of the key players and events, as then-Crown Prince Hassan sought both to lead the country and reinforce his position. That Hassan had not previously succeeded in cultivating a power base sufficient to ensure his ultimate ascent to the throne probably did owe to inferior political acumen, as Ashton suggests. I also believe, however, that it was a product of his deep loyalty to his brother. Of course, once given the reins of power, when the king left Jordan for treatment, Hassan did seek to rule: he should not have been expected to do otherwise, certainly not by the brother who had preserved the throne for so many decades.

It may well be, as Ashton and others have suggested, that in the end, Husayn's decision turned on his desire to ensure that his direct line, i.e. his own son, would continue to reign. Nevertheless, the letter changing the succession, penned in secret and intended for a brother who had served loyally for so many years, was, whatever one's assessment of Hassan and his disposition to rule, ugly and cruel. The only other example of similar pique from Husayn was his 1956 surprise dismissal of Glubb, accompanied by the insistence that he leave the country within hours. But Glubb was a colonial officer, whose loyalty, despite his professed love for Jordan, was first and foremost to another master. Hassan, on the other hand, was family. Ironically and poignantly, that he had, contrary to the tales of those who plotted against him, in fact been deserving of Husayn's trust, was subsequently demonstrated by his reaction to the "coup." He accepted his unexpected and unceremonious replacement by Abdallah, as well as multiple subsequent indignities, silently and without rancor.

Was this final act of Husayn's one of realism or idealism? Did it serve the Arab nationalism he had so often professed? Or was this, like so many other decisions he made, fundamentally a question of *raison de famille* – this time in the narrowest possible sense? What is certain is that his final act, like many of his other decisions throughout his reign, underlined not only dichotomies in approach, but very real contradictions. Throughout this fine text, Ashton has done an eloquent job of presenting this central figure in twentieth century Arab politics in all of his political and human complexity.

Drinking the Tea

There is a predictable familiarity to Presidential archives in the United States; it is this familiarity that facilitates the work of numerous historians. On entering U.S. archives, scholars expect to fill out applications, receive a researcher number, and spend hours – typically days – quietly thumbing through finding aids, boxes, and folders. To make the process even more efficient, historians often peruse archives online in advance; when admitted to an archive, they follow well-established rules to keep documents in order and diligently record their progress on laptop computers. The greatest challenge to working in U.S. archives is typically presented by the copy machine.

Research in the Middle East bears almost no resemblance to the above description. In my experience, it might involve spending hours in a dimly lit room trying to take digital photos of an obscure document collection, or perusing small dusty book shops for a rare out of print memoir. Interview skills are essential to conducting research in the Middle East: making political connections and chasing various leads, smiling and tolerating repetitious stories, and inevitably drinking vast quantities of hot, sugary tea, which is the social lubricant of Arab life. Persons conducting research in U.S. archives need to be organized and thorough; Middle East researchers need tenacity and the ability to consume large amounts of liquids with few bathroom breaks.

Few authors span both worlds comfortably, but Nigel Ashton has done an admirable job of gathering materials from both Middle Eastern and Western archives. His biography of King Hussein bin Talal, which utilizes documents and interviews from the United States, Great Britain and Jordan, is extremely impressive. He is one of a few authors who have used recently declassified sources in the United States and significant materials in Jordan to reveal new details about the history of the Hashemite Kingdom. By combining such diverse sources, Ashton provides us with a fuller, more nuanced biography of the Jordanian monarch.¹

Ashton seamlessly weaves a narrative of King Hussein's life, which is no easy task. The political history of Jordan is sufficiently complex that it defies the linear nature of biography, but Ashton relates the life of Jordan's third king with grace and facility. As the title implies, this is primarily a political biography and the focus is on foreign affairs; those looking for the details of palace life or the intricacies of Jordanian tribal politics should look elsewhere. That is not to say that domestic politics are excluded from Ashton's work; he pays significant attention to the ever-present issue of Palestinian identity within Jordan and the civil strife that has accompanied Palestinian assimilation.

¹ Avi Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Clea Lutz Bunch, "Strike at Samu: Covert Diplomacy and Shifting Alliances Prior to the Six Day War," *Diplomatic History*, January 2008.

Sifting through conflicting accounts of Jordanian history, Ashton synthesizes diverse sources – which include CIA contacts and members of the Jordanian Royal court – into a detailed and impressive description of Hussein’s life. The author restrains his presentation by checking and cross-referencing sources; he relates a version of Jordanian history that is both familiar and verifiable, but provides enough tantalizing new information to keep the reader interested. His ability to filter sources is significant; relaying differing accounts without assessing their merit can give historical works the tone of middle school gossip. Yet at times Ashton’s filter seemed to be a little too fine, omitting details of the narrative – like the Israeli attack on Hussein’s palace during the 1967 War – that are historically significant. There are a few similar oversights in this work, but their impact is minimal.

It is clear that Ashton thoroughly reviewed recently declassified sources in the United States, the most fruitful coming from the papers of presidents Johnson and Nixon. Due to the Freedom of Information Act (and the lack thereof in Jordan), U.S. documents often provide sincere vignettes of the king that are not found in the papers of the Royal Court. King Hussein had a close relationship with several U.S. ambassadors and some of his most candid statements are recorded in State Department documents. Thus, Ashton’s work represents an exceptionally detailed account of Hussein’s life and the political milieu of his reign.

I do have a few criticisms of Ashton’s work. First of all, he neglects Israeli archives which do contain important information about the king and his tempestuous relationship with Israeli leaders. Similarly, while Ashton makes ample use of Jordanian interviews, some contacts in Syria or Egypt could have added dimension to his work. Without those sources, it is difficult to compare Ashton’s account to another significant biography of King Hussein that appeared in recent years, Avi Shlaim’s *Lion of Jordan*.

Secondly, many of the key revelations of Ashton’s work rely exclusively on “private information.” Numerous times the author mentioned a critical point – such as Hussein’s knowledge of the impending Israeli attack on Egypt of June 5, 1967 – only to cite “private information” in the footnotes. While I understand that these historical events are by nature politically sensitive, the lack of citations makes it impossible for the reader to verify Ashton’s assertions and, more importantly, difficult for other historians to assess and reinterpret crucial events. One key issue that remains to be determined is the nature of Hussein’s relationship with the CIA; on this subject, Ashton strikes a moderate tone, acknowledging that contacts existed, but not giving credence to rumors about suitcases filled with cash. Yet the basis for his account: private information. Almost every point that I found remarkable, unique, or new relied on opaque sources.

My final criticism relates to style; in this I am (admittedly) excessively demanding. I have yet to read an account of Jordan that gives a sense of the texture and color of Jordanian life. Jordan is not an Arab Belgium, yet Ashton, like other authors, fails to adequately convey the poverty and simplicity of the kingdom. Hussein maintained a complex balancing act by living in two distinct worlds; the chief struggle of his life was transforming Jordan from a society loosely based on Bedouin traditions, to one that could function in the global political arena. Without turning biography to hagiography, authors should not

underestimate Hussein's achievement. Ashton's work provides one of the best narratives that I've seen to date, but at times I find he neglects Hussein's "voice" at the expense of synthesizing political details. Much of the character and drama that permeates Jordanian life is missing from Ashton's work.

These small criticisms aside, I find Ashton's work to be clear, detailed, and comprehensive. His biography of Hussein will be useful to scholars who are trying to untangle the complex politics of the region and it provides new insight into the remarkable life of the Jordanian king. His work is probably not the final word on Hussein, but it is the most complete one that we have to date – that is, until new revelations about the Jordanian king are discovered over a glass of extremely sweet tea.

King Hussein of Jordan answers the question of how the ruler of a small, resource-poor nation surrounded by potential enemies not only managed to survive but to become a major player in the complex drama of diplomatic negotiations among Arab states and Israel. Ashton has made good use of his remarkable access to King Hussein's private papers in the Royal Hashemite Archives to trace the often convoluted and tangled relations of Jordan with its neighbors and Hussein's role in the long and still unresolved Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ashton also consulted materials in Presidential Libraries, the UK National Archives as well as printed materials on the Foreign Policy of Israel, 1947-60. The Israel State Archives or other unpublished materials in Israel are not cited in the bibliography. With the exception of Prince Hassan, Ashton interviewed most of the king's close associates and advisers including: King Abdullah II, Queen Noor, Adnan Abu Odeh, Abdul Salam al-Majali, Zeid Rifai, Zeid bin Shaker and Henry Kissinger.

Ashton used Arabic tutors and research assistants for translations of Arabic documents but no Arabic sources are listed in the bibliography. Hence Jordanian newspapers or works by Arab historians who have dealt with Jordanian politics or Islamist movements, are not cited. Although their work would help to explain more fully Arab or Jordanian views of the King's rule, Ashton's work stands as a scholarly and important analysis of the unique contributions of King Hussein both to his nation and to the peace process.

Ashton emphasizes that in spite of his access to the royal family and government documents, *King Hussein of Jordan* is not an official biography. The study is largely a diplomatic history of King Hussein's rather extraordinary involvement in the contentious and complex inter-play among Arab leaders, Israel and the West, particularly the United States, over a time span of almost fifty years. Domestic, political and economic developments in Jordan are largely ancillary to this narrative.

The narrative follows a strictly chronological order beginning with a brief overview of the creation of Jordan and the installation of the Hashemite monarchy by the British after World War I. Following his grandfather Abdullah's assassination in 1951 and his father Talal's removal from the throne for reasons of mental illness in 1952, Hussein became king and was crowned when he reached the age of majority at 18 in 1953. He was immediately thrust into the vortex of inter-Arab rivalries. He also had to deal with the declining power of Great Britain formerly Jordan's main military, financial and political ally. Subsequently, the United States, which saw the king as a conservative, anti-Soviet and pro-Western leader, became Jordan's most important Western ally.

On one hand, Hussein was often caught between the mounting pressures from Arab nationalists backed by the charismatic Gamal Abdul Nasser and the conservative Arab monarchies, especially the House of Saud. On the other, he had to contend with rivalries and demands from his own family, particularly from his mother, Queen Zein. For those unfamiliar with the Hashemite family, a genealogy provided as an appendix would be a welcome addition to the study. Zein, known for her strong will, was an important influence

on her son during his early years in power. A fervent monarchist, Zein maintained close ties with British officials and, behind the scenes, was a political force in her own right. Given the stress of having to cope with these competing forces, it is no wonder that the King enjoyed the freedom offered by fast cars, boats, and planes. Avoiding the pitfalls of tabloid journalism, Ashton's account of Hussein's personal life and his four marriages is brief and to the point.

Given the extensive research into primary documents and archives upon which Ashton's previous books, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser: Anglo-American Relations and Arab Nationalism, 1955-59* (1996) and *Kennedy, Macmillan and The Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence* (2002) are based, it is no surprise that he hits his stride in the chapters dealing with Jordanian diplomatic history under King Hussein's rule in the 1950s and 1960s. Ashton is on firm ground when discussing U.S. foreign policy during this period. In the aftermath of the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) and Iraqi revolution in 1958, Hussein feared both a coup d'état in Jordan and possible Israeli advances into the West Bank. As Ashton notes, Israel was ambivalent given that the overthrow of the King might provide the opportunity for a "pre-emptive move into the West Bank" (75). In any event, the King survived this and subsequent crises during which he displayed considerable personal courage.

In keeping with his grandfather Abdullah's ambitions, King Hussein never gave up hope for the return of Iraq to the Hashemite fold or for the extension of its rule. The survival of the Hashemite dynasty and the creation of an Arab union around the Hashemites was a recurrent theme throughout his reign. Ironically, strong U.S. support for the Saudi monarchy prevented Hussein from pushing for Hashemite rule over Arabia, especially the Hijaz, where the family had the strongest historic claims. Hussein also maintained Hashemite claims over the West Bank and the holy sites in Jerusalem. Although nationalist pressures from Palestinians eventually led the King to cede control of the West Bank, he never dropped the family's legitimate claims regarding the holy sites in Jerusalem.

Hussein's long term ties with Israeli leaders and intelligence officers, some of which dated back to Abdullah, are another consistent theme of his rule. Ashton documents these contacts which were much more extensive than either most Israelis or Jordanians have admitted. These contacts were not just with Prime Ministers, but with a wide variety of Israeli politicians. Hussein sometimes opened up channels on his own as, for example, with Binyamin Netanyahu. For a number of years, Hussein also had his own contact within Mossad, Efraim Halevy, who described his relationship with Hussein in his memoir *Man in the Shadows* (2006).

Hussein maintained similar "back channels" with the CIA although in his memoir *A Look over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (2003) Richard Helms devoted a scant two pages (303-304) to the agency's relations with the King. Ashton fleshes out the details of Jordanian relations with the CIA noting that information passed on by Jordanian officials was sometimes ignored by the agency. For example, through his own secret agent operating in Syria, the King learned about the impending 1973 attack on Israel and passed this information to the CIA; presumably the United States relayed the information on to

Israel (171-174). Whether from arrogance or hubris, both the U.S. and Israel ignored the warning. Subsequently, the king was particularly sensitive to claims that he had assisted Israel by warning it of the impending attack. Although the King was correct in maintaining he had not directly warned the Israelis, it is impossible to imagine that he did not know that the U.S. would pass along his information thereby, at least indirectly, giving the Israelis a “heads up.”

A long chapter is devoted to the 1967 war. Ashton characterizes Hussein’s alliance with Nasser and the war as the “worst calamity of his reign” (120). Although Israel had advised the King that it would not attack Jordan if the King stayed out of the fight, it is debatable whether, when the opportunity to take East Jerusalem and the West Bank presented itself, that Israel would have lived up to the commitment not to attack Jordan. In any case, Hussein sought to avert the war and warned Nasser of the probability of an Israel offensive. Likewise, the U.S. knew that Israel would launch pre-emptive strikes (116); both the King and U.S. officials expected Israel to win but Hussein did not expect the scale of the defeat (117).

Immediately after the disastrous defeat in which the rest of historic Palestine was lost, Hussein sought a “comprehensive political solution” (122). He secured Nasser’s support for negotiations with Israel as long as they were kept secret and that they were conducted through the United States (p.126). Hussein used his contacts with the Israelis, the British, and the CIA to facilitate these negotiations. Ashton blames the failure of this peace initiative at least in part to “inter-agency rivalry over what the State Department saw as a CIA initiative in its own territory.” (125). Israel’s failure to submit a formal peace plan (132) as well as inter-Arab conflicts were stumbling blocks in the many subsequent peace initiatives.

Ashton describes Hussein’s contentious relationship with the Palestinians and the PLO in some detail. After the 1967 war, the PLO led by Yasir Arafat emerged as the main voice for Palestinian national aspirations and Jordan whose population was about one half Palestinian became its main base of operations. Anyone who saw check points manned by armed Palestinians in 1969 or 1970 knew that a confrontation between the Jordanian army and the PLO was inevitable. When the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) skyjacked three planes and landed them in Jordanian territory, the King ordered the Jordanian army, which had been eager to move against the PLO, to attack. In describing the run-up to what became known among Palestinians as Black September more emphasis could have been placed on the ideological differences between Fatah with its broad based membership and the Marxist-Leninist organizations such as the PFLP. Whereas Fatah sought to work with Arab rulers and opposed the overthrow of any Arab regime, the PFLP and similar groups viewed the Arab leaders, especially the conservative monarchs such as King Hussein, as part of the problem. Their mantra was that the way to Jerusalem was through the Arab capitals. Hussein viewed the war on the PLO as a “cancer operation” (157) necessary to save Jordan and, of course, his regime. Needless to say the Palestinians never really forgive him for the 1970-1971 war that pushed the PLO out of Jordan.

In spite of his difficult relations with Arafat, Hussein continued to push for an overall settlement to the Arab Israeli conflict. Hence he was opposed to Sadat breaking from the united front to deal independently with the Israelis and to the Camp David Accords which, as he feared, did not resolve the basic source of the conflict, namely the issue of Palestinian self-determination (Chapter 11). After the Arab states' recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians and the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987 the political balance shifted. King Hussein's acceptance of the two-state solution came gradually and, one might add, with some reluctance. Ashton's description of the King's decision in 1988 to announce Jordan's "disengagement" from the West Bank (250-253) is detailed and well documented.

Jordan played a key role in the Madrid negotiations but, according to Ashton, was hampered in bilateral negotiations with Israel by its lack of lawyers; as a result two European lawyers were retained (290). As the Madrid talks dragged on, Hussein began to suspect that secret channels had been opened between the Israelis and Arafat's hand chosen representatives. When asked the Mossad agent Halevy, who questioned Rabin about secret talks, told the king not to worry (299). The PLO representative Abu Mazen also knew that the king would be justifiably angry when he eventually learned of the secret negotiations. These negotiations resulted in the Oslo Accords of 1993. The king felt betrayed by the Oslo agreements and for a short period his relationship with Yitzhak Rabin soured. Fences were soon mended as Hussein respected Rabin as a strong military man with whom he could relate (304) and in 1994 a full Jordanian-Israeli Peace Treaty was signed.

The discussion of Hussein's contributions to the Hebron agreements in 1997 and at the Wye River summit in 1998, when the King was already seriously ill, is detailed and objective. Ashton also devotes considerable attention to Hussein's struggle to assure some recognition of the right of return for the Palestinians (310-312, 335). Hussein, as well as most PLO and Arab leaders, recognized that the majority of Palestinian refugees would not actually return to historic Palestine, but argued that under international law their rights ought to be recognized and some compensation paid. Hussein, who was "sensitive to slights and honors" (306), felt that the Palestinians were not sufficiently grateful for his frequent intercessions on their behalf. However, since the Palestinians were frequently not direct partners in the negotiations their disgruntlement is somewhat understandable.

Hussein's relationship with Israeli leaders also had its ups and downs. He established a close personal relationship based on mutual respect with Rabin but concluded that Rabin's successors, especially Binyamin Netanyahu, were not fully committed to the peace process and the two state solutions. Martin Indyk in *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy* (2009) also notes the difficulty of negotiating with Netanyahu. King Hussein and most Jordanians feared that Israel would force, one way or another, the Palestinians over to the East Bank thereby further destabilizing or possibly destroying Jordan and the Hashemite monarchy.

The King's rather amazing friendship with Saddam Hussein in the 1980s is also described in some detail. This relationship was at least in part based on Jordan's dependence on

trade and petroleum from Iraq. It can also be explained by the king's adherence to the old adage to keep one's friends close but enemies closer. Eventually, the king turned against the Iraqi dictator to support some disastrous attempts to overthrow him in the 1990s (Chapters 12 and 14).

The Chapter "Fishing in the Dead Sea" is a sly allusion to President Reagan's gaffe of asking King Hussein "about the quality of fishing in the Dead Sea" (231). Known for his good manners, King Hussein gently deflected the question and went on to focus on his real interest, the peace process. In correspondence (cited by Ashton) with the King, Reagan also admitted his role in the Iran-Contra affair for the sale of weapons to Iran during the long Iran-Iraq war (222-227).

Although Ashton discusses Hussein's attitudes toward the Islamist forces in Jordan, more detail based on what the documents in the Hashemite archives reveal might underscore the extent to which the King permitted the Islamists just enough political freedom to demonstrate to the public that they did not have all the solutions to Jordan's economic or social problems. Throughout his long reign King Hussein relied on a small group of close advisers. Cabinet ministers were often recycled or shuffled from post to post. This small coterie amassed power and wealth. Frequently accused of cronyism and corruption, the old guard, with either the king's tacit or overt support, was reluctant to reform the political system along more democratic lines. Ashton acknowledges these problems. In 1996, a shift occurred under Prime Minister Abdul Karim Kabariti whose cabinet members were predominantly newcomers. Yet, Ashton brands this premiership as "one of the strangest" in Jordan's history (343). King Hussein's government was not by any stretch among the most repressive in the region but neither was it transparent or democratic.

The issue of succession to the throne became of overwhelming importance in the last years of King Hussein's life. A thorough analysis of the various individuals and forces that pressured the king either in favor of the long time Crown Prince Hassan or for alternative family members is given, but Ashton emphasizes that the final decision was the king's. During this time old familial rivalries, especially among the wives, re-emerged and rumors ran rampant within Jordan. The basic personality and temperamental differences between the king and the crown prince were also factors in the final decision. In *The Arab Center: the Promise of Moderation* (2008), Marwan Muasher, the Jordanian ambassador to the U.S. during Hussein's final weeks of medical treatment in the States, suggests that Hussein's desire to close the generation gap by selecting his younger first-born son Prince Abdullah was also a factor. Setting personal considerations aside, there is almost universal agreement that the survival of the monarchy was Hussein's primary objective. In that regard the opinion of the army was probably paramount. Historically, Crown Prince Hassan had not enjoyed close relations with the army whereas Abdullah was known to have strong support within the armed forces. Hence the choice of Abdullah to succeed was probably the correct one.

Beyond noting that Hussein's desire to fulfill the Hashemite destiny as the leaders of the Arab world was unattainable and that under King Abdullah II that desire has been scaled back to a "Jordan first" (367) approach, Ashton refrains from sweeping judgments

regarding Hussein's legacy. He concludes simply that Hussein proved to be a remarkably effective leader, not only for Jordan, but for the peace process, especially given the weakness of his position as ruler of a country as beleaguered as Jordan.

In a particularly suggestive passage of his splendid new biography of Jordan's King Hussein, Nigel John Ashton commends to his readers George Antonius's classic work *The Arab Awakening*, which was first published in 1938. The Lebanese-born Antonius was a scholar and diplomat who championed the cause of Arab national independence even as he helped administer the British Mandate in Palestine. Antonius was especially close to King Hussein's great-grandfather, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, founder of the modern Hashemite dynasty. As Antonius stirringly chronicled in *The Arab Awakening*, during World War I the elder Hussein gave his blessing to an Arab uprising against the Ottoman Empire, Britain's wartime enemy, in exchange for a British pledge to support Arab independence once allied victory had been achieved. Alas, Hussein's nationalist aspirations were thwarted. In the aftermath of the war, the League of Nations awarded Britain and France mandates over Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, deferring the dream of Arab independence for a generation (and, in the case of Palestine, indefinitely). The mystique of the betrayed Arab Revolt, along with the claim of direct lineal descent from the Prophet Muhammad, lay at the heart of Hashemite identity and formed the basis of the dynasty's subsequent claim to pan-Arab leadership. The younger Hussein, born three years before Antonius's book first appeared, took this legacy as his own and, in Ashton's view, never abandoned the quest to fulfill his Hashemite destiny.

There is another connection between Ashton's book and Antonius's, and that concerns the two authors' use of archives. In a journalistic and historical *tour de force*, Antonius drew on Arab repositories and sources (including Sharif Hussein) to reconstruct the legendary Hussein-McMahon correspondence, which helped set the Arab Revolt in motion, at a time when most of those crucial documents remained sealed in British archives.¹ By publishing the correspondence in the appendix of *The Arab Awakening*, Antonius forced English-speaking readers to confront the contradiction between Britain's wartime promises to the Arabs and its postwar policies in the Middle East. Similarly, in researching his biography of King Hussein, Ashton gained access to the king's correspondence files in Jordan's Royal Hashemite Archives. Unlike Western archival sources, which tend to get more candid the further back in time one goes, Hussein's files are richest after the late 1970s—the very point at which British and U.S. official archives become frustratingly sparse. Thus Ashton is able to share with his readers the candid musings of such near-contemporary figures as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Saddam Hussein, Yasser Arafat, and King Hussein himself. It will be years before Western archives give us comparable glimpses. Both cases, Antonius's and Ashton's, make for a marvelous inversion of the standard research pattern. Typically, scholars are obliged to plumb Western archives to gain insight into the workings of Middle Eastern societies. Here, Middle Eastern archives shed light on Western actions and views.

¹ The Hussein-McMahon correspondence was an exchange of letters in 1915-1916 between Sharif Hussein and Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, concerning the future political status of the Ottoman Empire's Arab holdings.

Relying on these and more conventional historical sources, Ashton sketches a rich life of Hussein, naturally focusing on his subject's four-and-a-half decades on the Jordanian throne. This was an improbably lengthy reign. The kingdom Hussein inherited upon his youthful coronation in 1953 was, to say the least, an unpromising venture. A recent creation of Britain, it seemed to lack historical justification or political legitimacy. It was surrounded by stronger neighbors, each harboring historical claims or newfound designs on portions of its territory. It was impoverished and wholly dependent on outside support, and yet its primary patron, Britain, was rapidly losing standing in the Arab world. Most destabilizing of all, two-thirds of Hussein's subjects were Palestinians, either settled inhabitants of the West Bank, which Jordan had annexed in 1950, or refugees who had arrived after Israel's creation; few of these Palestinians had much attachment to the Hashemite idea. By the late 1950s, the smart money was on Jordan's eventual dissolution.

To Jordan's vulnerability could be added that of Hussein himself, who over the years endured numerous threats to his person. He was standing next to his grandfather, King Abdullah I, when the latter was shot to death at Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque in 1951. One of the bullets struck the fifteen-year-old Hussein but was deflected by a medal pinned to his chest. Abdullah was succeeded by Hussein's father, Talal I, who was soon forced to abdicate on account of mental illness, but not before attacking Prince Hussein with a knife. As king, Hussein survived about a dozen assassination attempts, some of them quite bizarre. In 1960, a would-be assassin tried to substitute acid for the king's nasal spray. That same year a royal cook attempted to poison the king, but the plot was foiled, Ashton writes, after the cook "first elected to test his wares out on a number of feral cats living in the palace grounds" (p. 83). Shortly following the Six-Day War, at a party at his holiday home in Aqaba, Hussein became violently and nearly fatally ill after one of his guests, the Hollywood actress Linda Christian, surreptitiously spiked his drink with LSD. (Christian's motives appear to have been experimental rather than homicidal. This was the summer of '67, after all.) Hussein narrowly escaped two assassination attempts in the summer of 1970, when Palestinian gunmen fired on his motorcade near Amman. During one of those attacks, Hussein jumped out of his car and shot back at his assailants.

That Jordan and Hussein were able to surmount these daunting challenges was due, in no small part, to the shrewdness and initiative with which the king ruled his troubled realm. Hussein was a master at hedging his bets, and thus at winning a measure of indulgence from friend and foe alike. After Britain's discrediting in the 1956 Suez affair, Hussein refashioned himself as an ally of the United States, thereby securing long-term financial support for his kingdom. From the early 1960s on, he conducted secret talks with Israeli officials, in the hopes of sparing Jordan the worst consequences of Israel's increasingly violent confrontation with radical Arab nationalism and Palestinian irredentism. At the same time, Hussein appeased local and regional opinion by offering rhetorical, and occasionally substantive, support to Palestinian and Arab nationalist causes. Hussein performed this balancing act most exquisitely during the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973. Although the king had hoped to stay out of that conflict, he faced overwhelming pan-Arab pressure to enter the fray and reluctantly sent an armored brigade into Syria. Secretly, Hussein informed the Israelis that he was acting under duress and sought assurances that there would be no retaliation against Jordan. "Only in the Middle East," a bemused Henry

Kissinger recalled in his memoirs, “is it conceivable that a belligerent would ask its adversary’s approval for engaging in an act of war against it.”² But the gambit worked, and Hussein emerged from the October War with his territory largely unscathed and his regional standing considerably enhanced.

On a handful of occasions, the balancing act failed and Hussein was forced to choose, with results that were tragic for others but not fatal to the king. In 1967, Hussein faced the grim choice of either joining his fellow Arabs in a quixotic war against Israel or courting domestic upheaval by standing aside. He went to war, lost the West Bank, and kept his throne. In 1970, to prevent the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from consolidating a state-within-a-state on Jordanian soil, Hussein brutally crushed and expelled the PLO, a move that further radicalized the Palestinian movement and damaged his reputation in the Arab world. In 1990-1991, following Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, the king bowed to domestic opinion and supported Iraq, deeply alienating the United States and conservative Arab regimes in the Gulf. Hussein survived these setbacks. In the late 1960s and again in the early 1990s, he reaffirmed his value to Washington by falling in with U.S.-sponsored peace initiatives. Following his 1970 showdown with the PLO, an event that became known as Black September, the king endured a more extended period of regional isolation, eventually mitigated by his deft handling of the October War and by a subsequent rapprochement with Syria.

According to the standard Arab nationalist critique, Hussein was far too beholden to the United States, and far too accommodating to Israel, to serve the true political interests of his Jordanian and Palestinian subjects. Ashton challenges this characterization. While chronicling Hussein’s extensive relations with both countries, the author stresses the limitations of these ties and notes the extent to which Hussein’s interests often diverged from those of his American and Israeli counterparts. True, Ashton writes, from 1957 to 1977 Hussein was on the CIA’s secret payroll, but the sums involved were hardly sufficient to buy the king’s loyalty to Washington. (That may be so, but it’s hard to take much solace from Ashton’s insistence that one of the later secret arrangements, far from being a “lurid personal pay-off,” was in fact earmarked “for a private security firm, run by the son of ex-President Gerald Ford, to provide twenty-four-hour-a-day protection for the King’s children at school in the United States” (p. 190) On the level of policy, Ashton makes good use of Hussein’s private correspondence to show the intensity with which the king sometimes opposed U.S. initiatives. In November 1986, Hussein was outraged to learn that the Reagan administration had secretly sold arms to Iran, especially as the revelation came just days after the administration had sought Jordanian support for “Operation Staunch,” a U.S. effort to block the flow of arms to Iran. In a letter dripping with sarcasm, Hussein berated Reagan for his hypocrisy. How, the king demanded, was he to explain to his own people “the refusal of the United States to sell arms to Jordan, its traditional, moderate and ‘staunch’ friend and ally for three decades, when American arms are widely and freely distributed to terrorists (or are they freedom fighters?) in Latin America, Africa and Asia?” (p. 225).

² Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 502.

Similarly, Ashton brings out the tensions and mistrust that often attended Hussein's dealings with Israel. Whereas standard accounts of Black September tend to stress Hussein's covert cooperation with Israel, Ashton argues that "the King saw Israel as a threat" during the crisis (pg. 146). Hussein did secretly request Israeli air strikes against a Syrian tank column that had entered Jordan to assist the Palestinians, but he adamantly opposed the introduction of Israeli ground forces, fearful of providing Israel with an opportunity to annex portions of his kingdom – a well-founded concern, as Ashton convincingly shows. In later years, Hussein worried that the Israelis might try to "solve" their demographic problem by forcibly transferring large numbers of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan. Again, Ashton lends credence to Hussein's concern, this time by noting Israel's ongoing reluctance to provide unequivocal assurances on the matter. Yet such misgivings on Hussein's part, while no doubt sincere, seldom prevented the king from reaching accommodations with Israel, and they in turn often entailed significant Jordanian concessions. Those inclined to see Hussein as "soft on Israel" are unlikely, therefore, to be appeased by Ashton's treatment.

Other critics may question the emphasis Ashton places on Hussein's commitment to fulfilling the Hashemite legacy. There can be little doubt that Hussein was immensely proud of his dynastic heritage and invoked it as often as he prudently could. The real question is how much the desire to vindicate Hashemite claims—whether materially or symbolically—actually motivated Hussein's geopolitical decision-making. When Hashemite restoration becomes an explanation for Hussein's alliance with Saddam Hussein throughout the 1980s (pgs. 260, 281-2) *and* for the king's attempts to undermine Saddam's regime in the mid-1990s (pgs. 340, 342), one starts to wonder if the author has overburdened his case. A more plausible interpretation would be that Hashemite ideology was the idiom through which Hussein sought to make sense, to others and himself, of decisions arrived at for a host of personal, political, and ideological reasons.

That said, Ashton's book is a superb addition to the growing literature on King Hussein and to the international history of the modern Middle East. The materials excavated from the Royal Hashemite Archives are especially valuable, but readers will also benefit from the shrewd insights into Hussein's character and from the crisp recreation of the many challenges that beset his turbulent reign. Ashton's sympathetic account is unlikely to win over many of Hussein's critics, but they, too, will profit from this intimate and vivid portrait of one of the most fascinating monarchs of postwar era.

It was early evening when the car with military driver finally deposited me at the back steps of the Basman Palace in Amman. The day up to the point had been pretty typical of eight years of research in Jordan. It began with a promising phone call from the Head of the Royal Hashemite Archives to inform me that a car would be arriving at 1pm to take me to the palace where the royal archive, or, more properly, the working office of the king, was located. The morning was spent in pacing round my hotel room wondering if this time it would really happen. There was reason to hope so, not least because of a very promising conversation the previous day with the director of the office of King Abdullah in which he had agreed to grant me access to the archive. But earlier false dawns gave me good reason to be cautious.

1pm came and went. I called the Head of the Archives: "the car is on its way: it should be with you shortly", he told me. 2pm came and went: I made another phone call. The Head of the Archives promised to check what was happening. 3pm came and went: I made another call: "there is a mix up in the car pool: they have sorted it out and the car will be with you shortly". 4pm came and went: no news, no car. By this stage the Head of the Archives seemed to have turned off his cell phone so I had to try to reach him through the palace switchboard. Finally at 5pm, I succeeded. "I'm afraid there has been a mistake", he announced. "It is possible for the car to come and get you now, or you might prefer to wait until tomorrow." At this point I almost lost my cool: "I'm coming there this evening", I said rather too abruptly.

It was after 6pm when we negotiated the various military check points and I surrendered my passport before entering the royal compound. The Head of the Archives was waiting to meet me. We walked down the steps into the basement of the Basman Palace and he showed me into a side office. There, laid out on a conference table, were stacks of ring binders. From the far side of the room I could begin to decipher their Arabic titles: "Iraq file", "Syria File", "Egypt File", "President Reagan File"... After eight years of effort, I was finally in.

No doubt the urge to begin my response in this way to the well-informed and thoughtful reviews of my book provided by the roundtable contributors, is in part the function of having just written narrative political biography. But it was also prompted by Clea Lutz Bunch's observations on the challenges of carrying out research in the Middle East. Her experiences resonate with my own. Having cut my teeth working on well organized and predictable British and American archives, a steep learning curve was involved in adapting to the challenges of research in Jordan. At least the day I described above ended in success. I might just as well have described one trip in September 2000 which involved the loss of my suitcase containing all my clothes at Queen Alia airport; a series of phone calls to potential interviewees none of whom were available; endless waiting for return calls; and the contraction of amoebic dysentery. The trip was rounded off with a visit to the house of a former Jordanian Foreign Minister who, rather than conducting a business meeting, invited me instead to sample his collection of malt whiskies. The cultural demands of

hospitality made this invitation impossible to refuse, although the amoebae in my stomach protested considerably.

But, despite these challenges, the rewards of my work in Jordan were considerable. The sweet tea which I, like Clea Bunch, learned to drink in industrial quantities over the years, tastes all the sweeter when it is presented to you in the Basman Palace over files containing the secret correspondence of an Arab head of state. Here, at least, is one perk you won't find in U.S. or British archives. Similarly, the hours passed in small talk with senior regime figures were ultimately rewarded when they eventually turned the subject to political history. Since, one way or another, all of the reviewers have touched on the question of the sources used for my book, it seems appropriate to expand on this issue first. I am pleased that all of the reviewers acknowledge the significance of the archival breakthrough I achieved in gaining access to King Hussein's files. To my knowledge no other historian has been accorded access to the private papers of a contemporary Arab head of state, which in itself is significant. But Hussein's files were substantive, extensive and revealing. One of the things which made him unique was that he kept channels open to everyone. So, for example, even the Soviet file, where one would not have expected to find much material of interest, threw up at least one gem in the shape of Mikhail Gorbachev's intervention with Hussein urging restraint in the wake of the first Iraqi Scud missile attack on Israel during the 1991 Gulf War.

There were two other huge bonuses in working on Hussein's papers. Firstly, the documents had not been sifted in the way that declassified U.S. presidential materials or British prime ministerial materials are for security sensitive information. Thus, while it was clear that the main Jordanian intelligence archive was elsewhere, Hussein's private papers threw up several interesting pieces of information on intelligence operations. To take one example, I do not believe that the letter which I quote in the book from the Head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, Sir David Spedding, to Hussein in August 1995, about the arrival of the Iraqi defectors (Saddam's son-in-laws) in Jordan will be open to researchers in British archives during my lifetime.

Secondly, as Salim Yaqub observes in his review, perhaps the biggest bonus of working on Hussein's papers was that due to improving archival practices, they become fuller the closer to the present they come. In effect, they are richest for the 1980s and 1990s (and 2000s), decades for which we currently lack significant declassified Western sources. I am obviously flattered by Yaqub's comparison with George Antonius, who blazed a trail in using Arab sources to illuminate Western deeds and misdeeds before the Western archives were open. But, to pick on only the most prominent example, I was astonished by what Hussein's files revealed about the duplicity involved in the Reagan Administration's handling of relations with Jordan before and after the 1986 Iran-Contra scandal. It is essential to understand the way in which the United States used and abused its relationship with King Hussein to facilitate contacts with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war before we can understand King Hussein's own response to the subsequent Gulf crisis of 1990-91.

The access I gained to Hussein's papers also threw up certain ironies in terms of my pursuit of Western sources through Freedom of Information legislation. In Britain, after several years of effort, I secured access to the prime minister's office files of meetings with King Hussein up to and including the year 1984. At that point, the Cabinet Office dug in its heels and refused to go further, citing a provision in the British legislation which precluded releasing material which might damage relations with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The irony here was rich, since by that stage in Amman I had acquired a full set of Hussein's correspondence with British prime ministers right up to 1999. Likewise in the U.S., the response from the Reagan Library archivists that it would take up to 7 years to secure declassification of any material about relations with Jordan (and then, probably not much), contrasted with the full and rich set of Hussein's exchanges with President Reagan which I had already acquired in Amman.

While acknowledging the importance of these papers, some of the reviewers raise questions which I would like to address about my citation of certain sources and my decision not to consult others. Clea Bunch raises an important issue about my citation of 'private information' in support of certain claims in the book. Those who have worked in the field of intelligence history will be aware that it is unfortunately often not possible to name intelligence officers as sources. In my book, on almost every occasion where 'private information' is cited, the source was an intelligence officer. I agree with Bunch that this makes it difficult for others to verify these claims. The test I have applied to information used from such sources in this book is whether the individuals concerned were in a position to know or do what they claimed, and whether their information tallies with that available to me from other sources. Ultimately, there is always an element of judgment involved here. In a number of cases, I was in fact given more information which gave greater credence to the claim made, but I was asked by the source concerned not to use it.

For the purposes of further illustration of this point, let me take probably the most important example in the book, which Bunch also cites: the claim that Hussein received a warning about the impending Israeli attack in June 1967 which he subsequently passed on to Egyptian President Nasser. For the benefit of readers of this roundtable, let me be rather more specific about this claim than I was able to be when I completed the book manuscript. Hussein received a warning in person on the evening of 4 June which was specific, not only about the date of the planned Israeli attack on Egypt, 5 June, but also about its time, 8am. He asked his interlocutor whether there was any information about a planned Israeli attack on Jordan and was told "no", but was advised that it would be prudent to take further defensive precautions, which he did. He also passed this warning on twice via a channel to Nasser. Nasser did not react for the simple reason that he did not believe Hussein: there was no trust between the two men. The warning as it transpired was entirely accurate. But, since it was delivered to Hussein verbally, and not in any fashion committed to paper, the only evidence for it will likely remain oral history. If my information is accurate, though, it must be assumed that American, Israeli and British eavesdropping agencies, which all had the means to intercept communications sent from Amman to Cairo, would have picked up the warning as it was subsequently passed on to Nasser. We will have to wait to see whether information comes to light from any of these sources to verify this claim further.

Bunch also notes that I have not used Israeli archives or consulted sources in other Arab countries such as Syria or Egypt. Janice Terry also makes a similar point in relation to other printed Arabic sources. There are two main reasons for this. First of all, there is already a substantial body of work by Israeli scholars illuminating Israel's relations with Jordan, and Israeli perspectives on Hussein. I self-consciously set out in this book to do what I believed had not been done before: to illuminate Hussein in his own words, through his own papers, and to seek Jordanian perspectives on him. Ultimately, in writing a biography of an individual it is his own papers which are the most important source. The work involved in pursuing these sources in Jordan, and also conducting extensive research in the U.S. National Archives, every U.S. presidential library from Eisenhower through Carter, the British National Archives, together with other oral history work, constitutes the second main reason why I did not travel even further a field in seeking sources in the Arab world or Israel. As matters stood, research for this book already occupied the best part of a decade of my life: and I found a decade living with Hussein's problems was quite long enough.

Thinking of Hussein's problems, the roundtable reviewers highlight three further important areas for debate: his relations with the CIA, with Israel, and with the Palestinians. The question of the King's relations with the CIA is best understood within the fabric of his broader relationship with the United States. The CIA was only one channel for this relationship, albeit arguably the most important one. As explained to me by one former U.S. ambassador, when relations between the U.S. and Jordan were good and the region was quiet, the king would use normal diplomatic channels. When problems came up, or a crisis struck, he would go through the CIA. The frequency of such problems or crises in the region meant that the CIA channel predominated.

The controversial side of this relationship concerns the claim that the King personally received money from the CIA. This dates back to a poorly researched and sensationalized article written by Bob Woodward in the *Washington Post* in February 1977. In the article Woodward claimed that Hussein had received "millions of dollars" from the CIA across the decades, in effect as a pay off for pursuing policies which served US and Israeli interests. What I determined to do in my research was what Woodward neglected to do: to check out the accuracy of this story with some of those intelligence officers who were supposed to have passed the money to the King. It quickly became clear that although money had changed hands, the sums involved were considerably smaller, and the purposes for which they were used considerably less sensational than Woodward implied. In effect, the CIA inherited a British financial commitment of funds to the monarch in 1957 which had originally been termed a "subsidy for the tribes". The regular monthly sum passed by the agency from then on until the beginning of the 1970s was small (\$14,000), and was almost entirely used by the King for the establishment of his own intelligence services. In the 1970s, the situation changed. The King's children came to school in the United States and, after the State Department refused to continue to pick up the bill for their security, the CIA had to step into the breach: largely because it could access funds which were not subject to the same congressional scrutiny. While Salim Yaqub finds only limited solace in this revision to the sensationalized Woodward tale, I think my corrective helps undermine the

claim that Hussein was somehow being bought off through these payments over the decades. The sums involved were relatively small and they were used for purposes considerably less compromising than Woodward's claims about the funding of a playboy lifestyle might suggest.

Much has already been written about Hussein's covert relations with Israel across the decades. I am grateful to Laurie Brand for her characterization of my own contribution on this topic as 'interesting and provocative'. Janice Terry also discusses this aspect of the book, focusing in particular on what turned out to be the accurate information Hussein passed on to Tel Aviv and Washington about the planned Egyptian-Syrian attack in October 1973. Meanwhile Salim Yaqub finds merit in my attempt to bring out the 'tensions and mistrust' which characterized this relationship, in contrast to standard accounts of events such as "Black September" 1970 which stress Hussein's cooperation with Israel. It is clear that these reviewers through their own work have developed a similar sense of skepticism to mine about the gap between the rhetoric of peace espoused by Israeli leaders over the decades, and the realities of the projection of Israeli power in the region. It is here that I found my twin characterizations of Hussein as idealist and Hussein as realist most helpful in deciphering his own handling of relations with Israel. On the one hand, Hussein the realist developed a clear and sophisticated understanding of the extent of Israeli power, and the willingness of Israeli leaders to use it. In this context his covert contacts with Israel were a defense mechanism. On the other hand, Hussein the idealist saw the Arab-Israeli conflict as a transitory historical phenomenon, and he believed that through contacts and empathy with the other side a path to reconciliation could be found.

Hussein's relations with Israel were part of what has often been termed a triangular relationship with the Palestinians. Laurie Brand argues that I might have given more space in the book to a discussion of the tensions between Transjordanians (or East Bankers) and Jordanians of Palestinian origin within the Hashemite Kingdom. By contrast, Clea Bunch commends me for paying 'significant attention to the ever present issue of Palestinian identity within Jordan', and Janice Terry notes that I describe this relationship 'in some detail'. I was made aware of the importance of this question in no uncertain terms by one of my earliest interviews with Adnan Abu Odeh, one of Hussein's former advisers and a Jordanian of Palestinian origin. Coincidentally, just before I met him, Abu Odeh had lost his position at the royal court as he told me because of official unhappiness at the arguments about discrimination against Palestinians within Jordan which he advanced in his book *Jordanians, Palestinians and the Hashemite Kingdom* (United States Institute of Peace, 1999). I am bound to say that I do think I devote sufficient space to this issue in the book, showing in particular the way in which Hussein's concerns about a 'demographic threat' posed by possible Israeli actions in the occupied territories conditioned his handling of the peace process in the 1990s.

Expanding on the theme of the Jordanian domestic context, both Laurie Brand and Clea Bunch argue that to contextualize the politics of Hussein's reign, I might have endeavored to provide more of what we might term "a sense of place": that is, more of an idea of the nature of Jordan and its people. During my many visits to the country, I traveled extensively through it, and met and was entertained by a great number of people ranging

from members of the royal family through politicians down to ordinary people. I have endeavored to weave my own sense of place into King Hussein's story where appropriate. Ultimately, though, I found that the politics of Hussein's reign were so complex that in order to explain them satisfactorily within a manageable volume I had only limited room left over for the broader social and cultural background.

Finally, let me address questions raised by several of the reviewers about two controversial issues which arose towards the end of Hussein's reign. The first is his involvement in the CIA-backed plot to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 1996. The second is his handling of the question of the succession during the final year of his life. Laurie Brand questions my claim that the regime deliberately provoked the food riots of August 1996 in order to provide cover for the round up of Baathists and other Saddam sympathizers. The key movers in this scheme were the Prime Minister Abdel Karim Kabariti and the Head of General Intelligence, Samih Batikhi both of whom also played important roles in the succession struggle during 1998-9. Although my claims are primarily based on oral history it is interesting to note that on p.166 of Martin Indyk's recent book, *Innocent Abroad* (Simon and Schuster, 2009), he confirms that the anti-Saddam coup was indeed scheduled for August 1996, which would have coincided with the food riots. I understand Brand's difficulty in believing that the regime could have risked the deliberate stoking of domestic unrest but to my mind it is vital to recognize that Batikhi and Kabariti were the prime movers. It was their role in this coup plot which had gained both of them high office, and it was their personal agendas more than any rational calculation of regime or national interests which drove the plot forward.

The succession question is discussed by both Laurie Brand and Janice Terry. Of course there are considerable family sensitivities to be negotiated by any writer on this topic. The essence of my account is to put Hussein himself at the centre of the drama, and to deduce the factors which most influenced his thinking. There were certainly political machinations at work in the background, but ultimately Hussein's choice boiled down to a judgment about who was best placed to lead the country and preserve the Hashemite regime.

I would like to conclude by thanking all of the reviewers for the considerable insights they offer in their commentaries on my book. I am very grateful to them for taking the time to read my work and for highlighting a number of important areas for further debate. I am also grateful to the H-Diplo editors for hosting this roundtable. I trust that this discussion of the reign of one of America's closest allies in the Arab world will also have been illuminating for specialists in other areas of contemporary U.S. foreign policy.

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