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Pulling the Strings: King Hussein's Role during the Crisis of 1970 in Jordan

THE CRISIS THAT erupted in Jordan in September 1970 was a struggle for survival for the Hashemite regime. Had King Hussein not succeeded in defeating the Palestinian guerrilla groups based in Jordan, and the Syrian invasion, he would have lost his throne. In turn, the collapse of Hashemite Jordan would have provoked a wider regional conflict, sucking in Israel, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt with dangerous consequences, including the possibility of superpower intervention.

In the literature, Hussein's survival in the face of this threat is explained in terms of US and Israeli intervention. The US dimension of this thesis is best summed up in Douglas Little's description of Hussein in an earlier article in this journal as a 'puppet in search of a puppeteer',¹ and the Israeli dimension in Uri Bar-Joseph's description of Jordan and Israel during the 1948-9 war as the 'best of enemies'. This dual explanation has found favour with commentators of very different complexions. For some leading Palestinian scholars, it reinforces a conception of the Hashemite regime as an illegitimate, Western-imposed, crypto-Zionist construct.² Meanwhile, some Israeli historians, such as Moshe Zak, have used the crisis to argue that Israel was the long-term 'Guardian of Jordan', even if the relationship did not become apparent until the signature of the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty in 1994.³

Henry Kissinger's account of the crisis, which provides the bedrock for the 'puppet in search of a puppeteer' thesis, portrays it as a cold war confrontation with the Soviet Union in which he acted as the master chess player manipulating the local actors. It leaves little room for Hussein's own initiative, even though Kissinger still expresses a healthy respect for Hussein's political skills.⁴ What is missing in the existing literature is a view of

1 D. Little, 'A Puppet in Search of a Puppeteer? The United States, King Hussein, and Jordan, 1953-70', *International History Review*, xvii (1995), 512-44.

2 See, e.g., R. Khalidi, 'Perceptions and Reality: The Arab World and the West', in *A Revolutionary Year: The Middle East in 1958*, ed. W. R. Louis and R. Owen (London, 2002), pp. 195-7.

3 M. Zak, 'Israel and Jordan: Strategically Bound', *Israel Affairs*, iii (1996), 39-60.

4 H. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979); author's interview with Henry Kissinger, New York, 2 June 2003.

the crisis as it may have appeared to Hussein himself, whose actions precipitated the showdown with the fedayeen. This article will reassess Hussein's handling of relations with the United States and Israel during the crisis. It will contrast his grasp of the intentions of the key regional players with the more limited focus in Washington on cold war interests. It will also show that suspicion was the keynote of the Israeli-Jordanian relationship during the crisis. Despite the stress placed on US and Israeli backing for his regime in the literature, it was Hussein's own forces that repelled the Syrian invasion, and expelled the PLO guerrillas. Hussein is thus cast here more in the role of puppeteer than puppet during the crisis.

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Competition between the Hashemite regime and the Palestinian national movement was not a new phenomenon in 1970. Before the outbreak of the 1948 war, Hussein's grandfather, Abdullah, had made contact with the leaders of the Jewish community in an attempt to settle the political future of Palestine. Controversy surrounds both his motives and the results. Abdullah's critics charge him with splitting the united Arab front and conniving in the creation of Israel in the hope of territorial aggrandizement. Others see him as a realist, who recognized that Zionism could not be defeated and sought a compromise favourable to his own interests.¹ After Israel's victory in 1949, Abdullah both tried to broker a permanent settlement and, in 1950, took the decision that ensured that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would affect Jordan's domestic politics as well as its foreign policy: the Union of the Two Banks, and the granting of Jordanian citizenship to displaced Palestinians, left the Hashemites to solve the problem of how to ensure the loyalty of their new Palestinian subjects. Abdullah paid the highest price for his independent course. On 20 July 1951, he was assassinated by a Palestinian gunman as he left Friday prayers at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

After Hussein ascended the throne in May 1953, the needs and demands of the Palestinians not only constrained his freedom of manoeuvre but also, periodically, threatened the survival of the Hashemite regime.² Israel's

¹ See, e.g., A. Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford, 1988); M. C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain, and the Making of Jordan* (Cambridge, 1987); I. Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-51* (London, 1992); U. Bar-Joseph, *The Best of Enemies: Israel and Transjordan in the War of 1948* (London, 1987); E. Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The 'New Historians'* (London, 2000); J. Nevo, *King Abdallah and Palestine: A Territorial Ambition* (Basingstoke, 1996); A. Sela, 'Transjordan, Israel, and the 1948 War: Myth, Historiography, and Reality', *Middle Eastern Studies*, xxviii (1992), 623-88; E. L. Rogan, 'Transjordan and 1948: The Persistence of an Official History', in *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, ed. E. L. Rogan and A. Shlaim (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 104-24.

² For useful overviews of the early years of Hussein's reign, see U. Dann, *King Hussein and the*

iron-fist reprisals against Palestinian infiltrators who crossed the 1949 armistice lines,¹ including its major incursions into the West Bank – at Qibya on 14 October 1953, Qalqilya on 11 October 1956, and Sam'u on 13 November 1966 – angered Jordan's Palestinian subjects by exposing its inability to protect them. When Britain tried in December 1955 to persuade Jordan to join the Baghdad Pact by offering military aid, the West Bank Palestinian ministers in Fawzi al-Mufti's cabinet threatened resignation.² The view of Britain's envoy, General Sir Gerald Templer, was that they 'are completely blind to any aspect of the problem except the Israel issue about which they bleat continuously'.³ Nor were they unrepresentative. As Templer noted in his final report on his failed mission, 'their lives would be in danger if they accepted Jordanian accession to the Pact without some compensating advantage for the refugees'.⁴

In the early 1960s, Hussein tried again to reconcile Palestinian nationalism with Hashemite rule over the West Bank. In December 1962, a White Paper presented to parliament by the prime minister, Wasfi al-Tall, and drafted by Hazem al-Nusseibeh, a Palestinian from Jerusalem, proposed a 'United Kingdom of Palestine and Jordan'. Little came of the proposal in the short term, but Nusseibeh continued on Hussein's behalf to try to build a bridge to the Palestinian national movement under the leadership of Ahmad al-Shuqayri. In the wake of the inaugural congress of the Palestine Liberation Organization, held in Jerusalem in May 1964, Nusseibeh invited Shuqayri to Amman to discuss how Palestinians and Jordanians could live within the same state. The sticking point, according to Nusseibeh, was Hussein's refusal to tolerate any political authority within Jordan that acted as a rival focus of loyalty for his Palestinian subjects.⁵

Challenge of Arab Radicalism: Jordan, 1955-67 (Oxford, 1989); R. Satloff, *From Abdullah to Hussein: Jordan in Transition* (Oxford, 1994). Further studies that address the Palestinian dimension during these years include Z. Shalom, *The Superpowers, Israel, and the Future of Jordan, 1960-3: The Perils of the Pro-Nasser Policy* (Brighton, 1998); A. J. Bligh, *The Political Legacy of King Hussein* (Brighton, 2002); A. Abu Odeh, *Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process* (Washington, DC, 1999); C. Bailey, *Jordan's Palestinian Challenge, 1948-83: A Political History* (Boulder, 1984).

¹ See B. Morris, *Israel's Border Wars: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford, 1993), and A. Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London, 2000), pp. 90-3, 233-7.

² See Satloff, *Abdullah to Hussein*, pp. 108-25; U. Dann, 'The Foreign Office, the Baghdad Pact, and Jordan', *Asian and African Studies*, xxi (1987), 247-61; N. J. Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan, and the Problem of Nasser* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 61-8; M. B. Oren, 'A Winter of Discontent: Britain's Crisis in Jordan, December 1955-March 1956', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxii (1990), 171-84.

³ UK embassy, Amman, to F[oreign] O[ffice], 10 Dec. 1955, tel. 599 [Kew, United Kingdom National Archives, Public Record Office], PR[im]E M[inister's Office Records] 11/1418.

⁴ Report, Templer, 16 Dec. 1955 [Public Record Office], F[oreign] O[ffice Records] 371/115658.

⁵ Author, interview, Hazem Nusseibeh, 4 Sept. 2001; Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, pp. 113-18.

Such attempts at compromise were abandoned as Arab politics became more polarized during the months leading up to the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war in June 1967. In a speech on 14 June 1966, Hussein declared that 'all hopes have vanished for the possibility of co-operation with this organization [the PLO] in its recent form.'¹ Possibly the bitterest pill Hussein had to swallow after taking his last-minute decision to join the Egyptian-Syrian alliance, was agreeing to Gamal Abdel Nasser's request that Shuqayri should join him on the plane home from Cairo. Whatever the lip service paid to Arab solidarity, the PLO and the Hashemite regime held irreconcilable views about authority over the Palestinians living in Jordan.

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For Hussein, the most ironic dimension of defeat in the 1967 war was his rationalization, both at the time and subsequently, of his impetuous decision to join the Egyptian-Syrian alliance in terms of the domestic political implications of standing aside. 'At that time I had these options: either join the Arabs or Jordan would have torn itself apart. A clash between Palestinians and Jordanians might have led to Jordan's destruction.'² Yet the defeat opened the way for just such a clash between Palestinians and Jordanians and the most serious challenge to his authority during his reign.

In the wake of the war, Hussein found himself caught between the Palestinian guerrilla groups, or 'fedayeen', based in Jordan who struck at Israel, and Israel itself, which struck back. The more Israel punished Jordan for the guerrillas' incursions into either Israel itself, or Israeli-occupied territory, the more it undermined royal authority in Jordan and Hussein's ability to rein in the fedayeen. Both the fedayeen and the Israelis were thus partly responsible for the crisis of September 1970.

In terms of Israeli policy, as Abba Eban argues, the years between 1967 and 1973 were the era of the defence minister, Moshe Dayan. Dayan's thesis of unrelenting struggle between the Arabs and Israel left little opportunity for accommodation with Hussein. As Dayan put it in an interview with *Haaretz* on 19 January 1968, 'if we are stubborn on all fronts, both against Hussein and Nasser, pressure will not decrease – I said that there is no way to avert a struggle – but it will be easier for us to hold our present positions, at least from the viewpoint of Arab psychology.'³ Dayan's

¹ A. Susser, *On Both Banks of the Jordan: A Political Biography of Wasfi al-Tall* (London, 1994), pp. 100-1; Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, pp. 125-6.

² Avi Shlaim, interview, King Hussein, 3 Dec. 1996. See also, S. Mutawi, *Jordan in the 1967 War* (Cambridge, 1987); L. Tal, *Politics, the Military, and National Security in Jordan, 1955-67* (Basingstoke, 2002).

³ Extracts, interview, Dayan and *Haaretz* board of directors, 19 Jan. 1968 [PRO], F[oreign and]

annexationist rhetoric in relation to the West Bank left little room for the kind of 'land for peace' settlement that Hussein suggested in secret meetings with Israeli representatives in 1967-8.¹ Negotiations with Hussein over the West Bank were not the first choice of the Israeli leadership: the deputy prime minister, Yigal Allon, preferred to work with local Palestinian leaders rather than Hussein. Only after none of them seemed willing to co-operate with Israel did Allon turn to Jordan. In private, Israel's leaders disparaged Hussein. Allon himself remarked that 'today, Hussein is King of Jordan, and I don't know who will be in his place tomorrow ... I would be happier if it was Shuqayri sitting in Amman today and not Hussein.'² The foreign minister, Eban, explained that 'the Israelis' current disillusionment with Hussein derived partly from the too high hopes they had had of him before the summer. No one in Israel had wanted a war with Jordan but when Hussein threw in his lot with Nasser on 30 May the Israelis had been shocked. It was also an important psychological factor that the Israelis had suffered more casualties on the Jordan front than elsewhere.'³

These sentiments match the observations made by informed Western commentators at the time. Hussein's decision to go to war was regarded as an 'act of treachery... for which they [the Israelis] will never forgive him'.⁴ According to the British foreign office, Israel saw Hussein as 'expendable' in 1968.⁵ Should peace efforts fail:

Many Israelis, perhaps the majority, will tend to come round to the view now held by a minority of 'hawks', that it would be likely to make life easier, not more difficult for Israel if Hussein were replaced by an extremist Arab nationalist regime ... The Western nations would be 'off Israel's back', and she would need to take less account of world reactions in determining the type and scale of future anti-terrorist operations conducted inside Jordan.⁶

In these circumstances, in Dayan's opinion, reprisals against Jordan were logical, even if they led to the fall of Hussein, because 'if Israel had not reacted so sharply to sabotage operations undertaken from Jordanian territory, the government of Jordan would have reached a *modus vivendi* with the terrorists.'⁷ Given Dayan's influence over Israel's defence strategy,

C[ommonwealth] O[ffice Records] 17/550.

1 A. Eban, *Personal Witness: Israel through My Eyes* (New York, 1992), pp. 462-6, 496-9. See also US embassy, Amman, to state dept., 30 Dec. 1968, *F[oreign] R[elations of the] U[nited] S[tates]*, 1964-8, xx. no. 373.

2 R. Pedatzur, 'Coming Back Full Circle: The Palestinian Option in 1967', *Middle East Journal*, xlix (1995), 273.

3 Record of meeting, Brown with Eban, 21 Oct. 1967, PREM 13/1623.

4 Hadow to Allen, 25 April 1968, FCO 17/550.

5 FCO to UK embassy, Tel Aviv, 26 Feb. 1968, FCO 17/221.

6 Hadow to Allen, 25 April 1968, FCO 17/550.

7 M. Dayan, *The Story of My Life* (London, 1976), pp. 351-3.

there is little wonder that, despite Hussein's efforts, there was no diminution in the pressure exerted by the Israeli jaw of the military nutcracker in which he now found himself.

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The increasing assertiveness of the fedayeen groups based in Jordan meant that the pressure exerted by the other jaw of the nutcracker only increased. Hussein's problem was crystallized by the battle of Karamah on 21 March 1968, which marked a turning point for both the fedayeen and the Hashemite regime. Here, in retaliation for the bombing of a bus carrying schoolchildren through the Negev Desert by Yasser Arafat's Fatah group, the Israelis decided to raid the refugee camp that also acted as Arafat's headquarters, at the village of Karamah in the Jordan Valley. They ignored Hussein's attempt to forestall retaliation by sending a secret message, by way of the US state department, in which he expressed deep regret at the bombing and asked for any information that would help him to track down the perpetrators.¹ At Karamah, the Israeli forces met stiff resistance from the Jordanian army and Arafat's fedayeen. Jordanian artillery wrecked a number of Israeli tanks, while the fedayeen stood their ground and fought bravely. When the Israelis withdrew after partly demolishing Karamah, the tanks they left behind were later paraded through Amman as symbols of victory.²

More important than the battle itself, however, was the propaganda victory won by Arafat and the fedayeen. Karamah became a symbol of Palestinian national pride, and spurred the development of the Palestinian national movement.³ Arafat burnished his own image with stories of his command of the resistance and heroic escape by motorcycle.⁴ Most observers, including the British ambassador at Tel Aviv, Michael Hadow, argued that the attack had backfired on the Israelis, for it not only dented the image of Israel's military invincibility, but also turned the fedayeen into popular heroes in Jordan.⁵ Israel's permanent representative at the United Nations, Gideon Rafael, later acknowledged that 'the operation gave an enormous uplift to Yasser Arafat's Fatah organization and irrevocably implanted the Palestine problem on to the international agenda.'⁶ At the

¹ UK embassy, Tel Aviv, to FCO, 19 March 1968, FCO 17/625.

² See Weston-Simons, 'Report on Operations in Karama YA 4539 and SAFI YV 3535 Areas on 21 March 1968', 24 March 1968, FCO 17/633.

³ See W. A. Terrill, 'The Political Mythology of the Battle of Karamah', *Middle East Journal*, lv (2001), 91-111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵ Hadow to Stewart, 'The Karama Raid', 1 April 1968, FCO 17/633.

⁶ G. Rafael, *Destination Peace: Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy: A Personal Memoir* (New York,

fifth meeting of the Palestine National Council, in Cairo in February 1969, Arafat was elected chairman of the PLO's executive committee. As Adnan Abu Odeh writes, 'to Fatah, al-Karama was a vindication of its strategy, a source of Palestinian pride, and a solid credential for soliciting Palestinian and Arab support'.¹

The Jordanian army, which saw itself as the victor of Karamah, resented the fedayeen's appropriation of the glory. The battle marked the parting of the ways between the army and the guerrillas. Hazem al-Nusseibeh, at the time minister of reconstruction and economic development, later argued that had the PLO been willing to acknowledge the army's role at Karamah, the crisis of September 1970 might have been forestalled. Karamah, he argued, 'could have been the foundation of closer relations rather than of division'.²

The PLO's strategy placed Hussein in a dilemma. As he could neither ignore the groundswell of popular support for the fedayeen, nor afford to alienate the army, whose loyalty was the guarantor of his throne, he tried to straddle and, if possible, close the divide between them. In particular, he stressed that Palestinians and Jordanians were united in the struggle against Israel. Only the 'steadfastness' (*al-sumud*) of all could bring victory.³ This sentiment underlay his oft-quoted comment two days after the battle of Karamah: 'I think we have come to the point now where we are all fedayeen'.⁴

Hussein's attempt to build a common front failed. Under the weight of Israeli attacks, the fedayeen were driven back during 1969 from their forward bases in the Jordan Valley to the main East Bank towns and cities, in particular Amman. Here they acted as a state within a state, ignoring the authority of the local police and antagonizing the army. By the beginning of 1970, Hussein's pleas for steadfastness and unity were redundant. Instead, on 10 February, the government issued twelve decrees requiring the fedayeen to obey the law of the land.⁵ The decrees provoked such huge demonstrations in Amman that, the following day, Hussein instructed the government to suspend them.

The next display of the evaporation of royal authority followed in April. The Richard M. Nixon administration cancelled at short notice a visit to

1981), pp. 202-3.

¹ Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, p. 172.

² Author, interview, Hazem Nusseibeh, 4 Sept. 2001.

³ Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, p. 173.

⁴ S. A. El-Edross, *The Hashemite Arab Army, 1908-79* (Amman, 1980), p. 442.

⁵ According to Yigal Allon, the Israeli government signalled to the king at this juncture that if he wanted to bring troops into Amman to deal with the 'terrorists', 'they would not take advantage of the situation': meeting, Heath with Allon, 26 Feb. 1970, PREM 13/3331. See also Y. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-93* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 246-7.

Amman by the US assistant secretary of state, Joseph Sisco, in the face of street demonstrations mounted by the fedayeen and their supporters. Hussein, who took the decision as a personal insult, implying that his writ no longer ran in Amman, blamed it on the US ambassador, Harrison Symmes, whose recall he now formally demanded.¹ In fact, the Sisco affair was the last in a succession of incidents that had eroded Hussein's confidence in Symmes.² The request for the ambassador's removal in the midst of such a crisis said much about Hussein's strained relations with the United States, which he blamed for indirectly encouraging Israeli aggression against Jordan through the supply of arms.³

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The Sisco affair also led the governments of Syria and Iraq to reassess their estimates of the probability of Hussein's political survival. An Iraqi delegation to Amman in May 1970 promised Arafat support should he mount a coup against the Hashemite regime.⁴ As Iraqi troops had been stationed in Jordan since 1967, their intentions remained an imponderable for Hussein and his advisers throughout the crisis. A threat from Iraq – in the wake of an attempt on 1 September 1970 by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to assassinate Hussein – to the effect that unless the army stopped firing on the fedayeen, Iraq's Eastern Command would intervene, led Hussein to call for a joint four-power statement from the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union condemning Iraq.⁵ Likewise, in the wake of Syria's attack on the 19th, the movement of the Iraqi troops in Jordan caused alarm, although no clash with the Jordanian army.⁶

The possibility of Iraqi or Syrian intervention showed that Hussein could not afford to neglect the broader Arab context in seeking a way out of his dilemma. After the 1967 war, Hussein had had some success in improving relations with Nasser, who felt partly responsible for the problems Hussein faced as the result of placing his forces under united Arab command. Unlike the Syrian or Iraqi leadership, Nasser and Hussein were prepared to accept United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967, which called for the return of occupied territory in

¹ Encl. in US embassy, Amman, to state dept., 16 April 1970 [Washington, DC, United States National Archives and Records Administration], R[ichard M.] N[ixon] P[residential] P[apers, Middle East, Country Files, National Security Council Files], box 614, folder Jordan IV.

² Author's confidential interview source.

³ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., 28 Feb. 1970, RNPP, box 614, folder Jordan III.

⁴ Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, pp. 175-6.

⁵ UK embassy, Amman, to FCO, 2 Sept. 1970, PREM 15/123; Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 598-9.

⁶ Each regime tried to use the other's failure to protect the fedayeen as a propaganda tool in the wake of the crisis: E. Kienle, *Ba'th versus Ba'th: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq, 1968-89* (London, 1990), p. 53.

exchange for peace.¹ Unfortunately for Hussein, Nasser's sympathy did not translate into support for measures to extirpate the fedayeen threat to the throne. Nasser hoped to retain an influence over the PLO by bolstering Arafat's Fatah movement within it.

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The final question in Hussein's mind by the summer of 1970 concerned the intentions of the fedayeen themselves. Had his calls for unity failed because the fedayeen aimed to topple the Hashemite regime, or because they took a different view of the strategy to be adopted in the struggle with Israel? Within the PLO, Arafat's Fatah faction took a more moderate ideological line than George Habash's PFLP and Nawaf Hawatmeh's Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP), which were ideologically committed to the downfall of the Hashemite monarchy. Although the PFLP sponsored the attempts on Hussein's life in June and September, Fatah, with its Palestinian nationalist mission and supporters within the army and security services, presented the greater threat.² Hussein's doubts whether Arafat could be trusted to control the so-called 'synthetic' groups partly explain his decision to opt for the use of military force in September.³

Whether or not Arafat planned to move against Hussein in September 1970 is unclear. Although his deputy, Abu Iyad, later insisted that the last thing Fatah wanted was to take over authority in Amman, Mudar Badran, who, until 2 August 1970, was head of Jordan's General Intelligence Service, and who subsequently became prime minister, insists that a PLO representative in Riyadh told him in 1973 of a Fatah-backed plan to move against Hussein on 19 September, two days after Hussein had decided to take action.⁴ By then, it was clear to both sides that the status quo could not hold. Either the Hashemite regime or the PLO had to take the initiative.

The series of spectacular terrorist acts carried out by the PFLP forced Hussein's hand. By the end of August 1970, the fedayeen movement in Jordan had reached a crossroads. The success of the United States in brokering a ceasefire in the Egyptian-Israeli war of attrition at the end of July seemed to bring Nasser and Hussein closer together in pursuit of a

¹ Nasser confirmed in private that he had told King Hussein he could make a separate settlement with the Israelis if he wished, but that Egypt could only do so if Israel gave up all of its 1967 conquests including Jerusalem (UK embassy, Cairo, to FCO, 9 Dec. 1968, PREM 13/2775).

² Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 244-5.

³ Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, pp. 178-80.

⁴ Author, interview, Mudar Badran, 20 May 2001; Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, p. 180. See also, Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 254-5.

settlement with Israel.¹ At an emergency session of the Palestine National Council in Amman at the end of the month, the radicals called for the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy. Although Fatah did not endorse the call, the moderates were undercut by the PFLP's hijacking of three civilian airliners on 6 September. Two of them were flown to Dawson's Field, near Zerqa, and the third to Cairo. On 9 September, a fourth plane was hijacked and flown to Dawson's Field. The PFLP were left holding five hundred hostages, including US and British nationals. There could have been no clearer demonstration of Hussein's impotence.

The hostage saga provided one of the subplots in the September show-down. While the PFLP released all of the women and children before destroying the aircraft, they held on to fifty-four of the male hostages, including the Britons and the US-Israeli dual nationals. In exchange for the latter, they demanded the release of an unspecified number of Palestinians held in Israeli jails. This caused friction between Britain and the United States; the former willing to be flexible in trying to satisfy PFLP demands, while the latter took a tough line.² Nonetheless, owing to the isolation of the US embassy in Amman, the new US ambassador, Dean Brown, persuaded the state department to designate the British ambassador, Sir John Phillips, as the joint collector of information.³

Britain's communications played an important role in the crisis. The only secure scrambler line to which Hussein had access had been installed by MI6's agent in Amman, Bill Speirs.⁴ Its existence has been confirmed by a key CIA source, by the chief of the royal court, Zeid Rifai, and by Kissinger.⁵ Speirs, who had gained Hussein's confidence, also had a good working relationship with his CIA counterpart, Jack O'Connell. The value of the line was emphasized by Brown's experience. Several times, when trying to telephone Hussein, he found the fedayeen had intercepted his call. He reported that on one occasion they had answered him with the

¹ W. B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington, DC, 2001), p. 76.

² Cf. E. Heath, *The Autobiography of Edward Heath: The Course of My Life* (London, 1998), pp. 322-3.

³ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 4997, 21 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V; state dept. to US embassy, Amman, no. 155208, 22 Sept. 1970, *ibid*.

⁴ Author, interview, Zeid Rifai, 5 June 2002. The British Diplomatic Service List shows 'William James McLaren Speirs (born 22 Nov. 1924)' as having served as first secretary at the embassy in Tel Aviv between June 1970 and July 1972. His presence in Amman during the crisis is confirmed circumstantially by a letter in the foreign office files from the producer of the British Broadcasting Corporation's 'Panorama' program, thanking him for his help in setting up a television interview with King Hussein (FCO to UK embassy, Amman, tel. 418, 28 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1084). His role as MI6's man in Amman has been confirmed to me in private correspondence by another former member of the organization, who added that Speirs died in the summer of 2004.

⁵ Author's confidential interview source; author, interview, Rifai, 5 June 2002; author, interview, Henry Kissinger, 2 June 2003.

words: 'hello, hello King Hussein. This is American Ambassador. How is Prince Mohammad?'¹

In fact, Mohammad, Hussein's brother, indirectly played an important role in the preparations for the move against the fedayeen in September. Initially, Hussein had fixed the starting date for the 16th, and had warned selected British and US officials in Amman.² However, before any action was taken, Mohammad's wife, Princess Firyal, paid a visit to the family fortune-teller in London, after which she warned Hussein that the 16th was an unfavourable date for the Hashemites. He resolved to postpone action until the 17th.³ The last-minute change of plan embarrassed both the British and US ambassadors. Phillips commented ruefully to Brown that the foreign office would no doubt call on him for an explanation that would be difficult to give.⁴ When Phillips questioned Hussein about delay, 'the King laughed and said he was short of sleep.'⁵

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The last imponderable Hussein had to consider in the final stages of his preparations for moving against the fedayeen was the likely response of his neighbours. Although outsiders focused their attention on the Iraqi troops in Jordan, Hussein was equally worried about Syria and Israel. A contingency paper written for Nixon by Kissinger, his national security adviser, made no mention of the possibility of a Syrian threat. It considered only the contingencies of a struggle between the Jordanian army and the fedayeen, or between the army and the fedayeen backed by Iraqi forces.⁶ Although Kissinger claims in his memoirs to have considered the threat from Syria,⁷ at the time both US and British officials, partly relying on Israeli intelligence, paid little heed to Hussein's warnings about the likelihood of Syrian intervention.⁸ In response to a question from Hussein about the United States' intentions in the event of a Syrian attack, Brown cabled the state department: 'I am not sure how serious the King's request is. I can't see any real threat from Syria ... I think the King wants his hand held.'⁹ The failure of the Nixon administration to take seriously the possibility of Syrian intervention, a key dimension of the crisis, calls into

1 US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 4997, 21 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

2 UK embassy, Amman, to FCO, 15 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1043.

3 Author's confidential interview sources.

4 US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 4831, 16 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

5 UK embassy, Amman, to FCO, 16 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1043.

6 Kissinger to Nixon, 'Options in Jordan', n.d., RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

7 Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 605.

8 UK embassy, Tel Aviv, to min. of defence, 19 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1043; A. M. Haig, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World* (New York, 1992), pp. 243-4.

9 US embassy, Amman, to state dept., 16 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

question the notion that the United States acted as the 'puppeteer' of the confrontation.

Hussein's view of Israel's intentions is more difficult to fathom. Kissinger implies that Hussein saw Israel as a possible counterweight to be used to deter intervention by other Arab states, in particular Iraq. He argues that Hussein had asked in early August, and again in early September, for the Nixon administration's views of Israel's likely actions given Iraqi intervention.¹ In a paper written at the time, Kissinger speculated that Hussein might have 'clandestinely reached a tacit understanding with the Israelis that if the Iraqis intervene Israel will attack'.² If true, such an agreement would lend weight to the 'best of enemies' thesis.

Other evidence supports the view that Hussein in fact saw Israel as a threat during the crisis. It might take the opportunity to seize the 'Jordanian Golan' (in the north-west of the country around Umm Qais), and the foothills of the Jordan Valley overlooking Israeli settlements in the Beit Shean area.³ Kissinger, in his contingency paper, noted that if Hussein had to back down in the crisis and accept a weak civilian government that would do the PLO's bidding, the 'chances that Israel would at some point feel compelled to seize more territory in Jordan would increase sharply'. If the Hashemite regime appeared about to fall, the Israelis might well 'intervene on their own or at least seize the heights from which the fedayeen have been shelling Israeli settlements'.⁴ In the days leading up to the showdown with the fedayeen, Hussein's attention was focused on Israeli reconnaissance in the Jordan Valley. Rifai warned Brown on the 15th of Israeli scouting expeditions 'using maps which implied to [the] Jordanians that [the] exercise was a possible prelude to military invasion of this area'. He urged the Nixon administration to take whatever steps were needed to ensure that Israel should not resort to force.⁵

Hussein's handling of the question of Israeli intervention in the wake of Syria's incursion into northern Jordan provides further evidence to this effect. While he was willing to tolerate Israeli air strikes against the Syrian forces in Jordan, Hussein would not allow Israeli ground forces to operate on Jordanian soil. As Rifai notes, Hussein's exchanges with Israeli officials after the previous war had made him suspicious of Israel's intentions.⁶ Indeed, in Rifai's opinion, Hussein had used the exchanges to buy time to

¹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 598-9.

² Kissinger to Nixon, 'Options in Jordan', n.d., USNA, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V. Kissinger told the author that this claim was 'pure speculation', not based on hard evidence from Israeli or Jordanian sources (author, interview, Kissinger, 2 June 2003).

³ Memo for Heath, 'Jordan', n.d., PREM 15/124.

⁴ Kissinger to Nixon, 'Options in Jordan', n.d., RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

⁵ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 4766, 15 Sept. 1970, *ibid*.

⁶ Author, interview, Rifai, 5 June 2002.

ward off Israel. Kissinger, too, suggests that Hussein's reluctance to use the secure telephone line to communicate directly with the Israelis during the crisis, and his use of British and US intermediaries, arose from his suspicions of Israel's intentions and preference for Anglo-American witnesses to the exchanges.¹

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The final prelude to the launching of military action against the fedayeen occurred on 15 September, when Hussein formed a military cabinet under the leadership of Brigadier Muhammad Daud. Although Daud was a moderate West Banker, and hard-liners such as the former prime minister, Wasfi al-Tall, were left out of the cabinet, the choice of a military solution to the crisis was clearly signalled. According to Adnan Abu Odeh, the new minister of information, Tall helped to co-ordinate action behind the scenes.² Certainly, Tall, in uniform, remained at Hussein's side throughout the campaign.³ The response from the fedayeen was unequivocal. Arafat refused to deal with the new cabinet and, according to Abu Odeh, implemented a contingency plan that involved simultaneous attacks on the key enclaves of the security forces in Amman on the morning of 17 September. Whether or not the fedayeen also planned to move remains a moot point, as the army began operations against fedayeen positions in and around Amman at dawn on the same day. Most accounts suggest that the army took the initiative, although the fedayeen offered determined resistance.⁴ By the end of the first day's fighting, the army was a long way from achieving its key objective of securing the capital.

At this point, a number of concerns were pressing on the mind of Hussein, who was trying to keep up with events from his base at Hummar. If he pushed forward with the operation, would the army itself split, dividing into Jordanian and Palestinian factions? If he called off the offensive, could he hope to retain the loyalty of the predominantly Jordanian officer corps? Would the storm of criticism that his action had provoked in the Arab world translate itself into military intervention on the part of either Iraq or Syria? If so, what would Israel do? And finally, could he rely on the Western powers, principally the United States, for support should the attack seem likely to fail? Rifai, who was with Hussein at Hummar, conjures up a picture of an isolated monarch unable to obtain accurate information about what was happening.⁵

¹ Author, interview, Kissinger, 2 June 2003.

² Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, pp. 181-2.

³ Susser, *On Both Banks*, p. 138.

⁴ J. Lunt, *Hussein of Jordan: Searching for a Just and Lasting Peace* (New York, 1989), pp. 136-8.

⁵ Author, interview, Rifai, 5 June 2002.

By the end of the second day of the operation, Kissinger's assessment of the army's progress, based on reports from the US embassy in Amman, was pessimistic. While the army was methodically rooting out the fedayeen and had gained the upper hand in the battle in and around Amman, it was still meeting stiff resistance. Elsewhere in the country, especially in the north, the fedayeen were strongly entrenched: the PLO had declared a 'liberated area' in and around Jordan's second city of Irbid. At the same time, Hussein faced increasing pressure from other Arab states to end the fighting. Rather than face a protracted struggle, Kissinger estimated, Hussein might be willing to compromise with the PLO.¹

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Just after midnight on the 19th, matters for the Hashemite regime took a turn for the worse. Units of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), a Syrian-backed guerrilla group, crossed Jordan's northern frontier. They were followed on the morning of 20 September by a Syrian armoured brigade, whose tanks had been hastily repainted with PLA markings. The outnumbered Jordanian forces were soon compelled to fall back. The event which Hussein had feared, and about which he had warned both the British and US governments, had taken place. Early in the evening of the 20th, Hussein called a cabinet meeting at Hummar. According to Abu Odeh, who attended it, Hussein explained that 'Jordan might need the help of foreign friends' in order to defeat the Syrian invasion. The cabinet agreed with 'some reluctance' that he might seek it.²

Meanwhile, Rifai had telephoned Brown with the news of the Syrian invasion,³ and, on Hussein's behalf, asked for US help. Brown replied that he could promise nothing at this stage, as the United States had no forces in the vicinity able to carry out such an operation. Brown told the state department that the 'Syrians would pull back if they were well spooked.' Israel, he argued, could accomplish this by massing its forces on the Syrian border and by low-level air reconnaissance over Damascus.⁴

Unknown to Brown, at around ten that morning, Hussein, without consulting the cabinet, had contacted the British embassy, calling for 'Israeli or other air intervention or [the] threat thereof'. He repeated the request at 6.30 p.m.⁵ In London, the foreign secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home was puzzled by the request, as he knew that Hussein had the use of

¹ Kissinger to Nixon, 18 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 165, folder Jordan V.

² Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, pp. 185-6.

³ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 4970, 20 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis.

⁴ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 4973, 20 Sept. 1970, *ibid*.

⁵ FCO to UK embassy, Tel Aviv, 201000Z, 20 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1044; Middle East Crisis SITREP at 0700 hours [London time], 21 Sept. 1970, PREM 15/123.

a secure telephone line to Israel. After a special cabinet committee meeting at 7.15 p.m.,¹ he asked Phillips: 'Did the King ask us to pass this request to the Israelis or was he passing it himself through other channels?'² After receiving confirmation from Phillips of the request, the cabinet committee, called for 10.30 p.m., decided that, to avoid being dragged too far into the crisis, Britain should consult the Nixon administration. As to Israel's intentions, 'doubt was expressed whether the Israelis would go to extreme lengths to ensure the survival of the Hashemite regime; they might consider that Hussein's fall and his replacement by a blatantly pro-Fedayeen successor government would at least end what they regard as the West's "schizophrenia" in its present tolerant attitude towards Jordan.'³

The permanent under-secretary at the foreign office, Sir Denis Greenhill, who was deputed to pass on Hussein's request by telephone to Kissinger's staff, explained that Hussein had asked the British government to 'pass on to the Israelis a request for an air strike on the Syrian troops which are massing'. He added that the cabinet committee thought that the Nixon administration was better placed than the foreign office to act, as Israel's prime minister, Golda Meir, was visiting Washington: 'We think it is important to handle the matter in this way since you are closest to the Israelis and will be able to influence them on whether or not to act upon the King's request.'⁴

Shortly before midnight, Rifai clarified for Brown the terms of Hussein's request.⁵ When Brown asked specifically whether Jordan had called for an air strike, Rifai replied 'not in those exact words'. 'What he thought [the] King had meant when he discussed [the] matter with [the] British ambassador was that [the] Government of Jordan wanted to explore this possibility with [the] UK.' Rifai himself did not request an air strike, although Brown concluded that the Jordanians were hoping for one if the situation got out of hand. Rifai told him that Hussein was convinced that the Syrians were heading for Amman.

In fact, Syria's intentions at this point are difficult to read owing to the struggles for power within the ruling Ba'th party. The two key players by September 1970 were the defence minister and commander of the air force, Hafez al-Asad, and the party's deputy secretary-general, Salah al-Jadid. The most commonly accepted interpretation of Syria's actions in September 1970 is that Jadid, the more radical of the two, ordered the army into

¹ 'The Situation in Jordan', GEN 14 (70) 1st Meeting, 20 Sept. 1970 [PRO], CAB[inet Office Records] 130/479.

² FCO to UK embassy, Amman, 202041Z, 20 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1044.

³ 'The Situation in Jordan', GEN (14) 70 2nd meeting, 20 Sept. 1970, CAB 130/479.

⁴ Conversation, Greenhill and a member of Kissinger's staff, 21 Sept. 1970, PREM 11/123.

⁵ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 4984, 20 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis.

Jordan, while Asad, the more pragmatic, withheld the air force. The army's resulting defeat is said to have cleared the way for Asad's seizure of power in mid-November.¹ In a biography of Asad, Patrick Seale advances the alternative interpretation that before the Jordan crisis broke out, Asad was already master of Syria in all but name and had the officer corps and the PLA brigades almost wholly in his hands: 'There could have been no armed intervention in Jordan of which Asad did not approve.'² Its purpose, in Asad's eyes, was not to overthrow Hussein but to prevent the massacre of the Palestinians, perhaps by setting a safe haven in northern Jordan under Syrian protection. The 'reluctant and circumscribed' intervention explains why Asad withheld the Syrian air force. As Asad later explained: 'It was a difficult predicament. I was distressed to be fighting the Jordanians whom we did not think of as the enemy. I didn't bring up our own much stronger air force because I wanted to prevent escalation. My feeling was that as long as we could achieve our goal of protecting the guerrillas without committing the air force, there was no need to do so.'³

Whether or not one accepts Asad's explanation, the reasons for Syria's intervention in Jordan were clearly more complex than the simple Soviet-backed invasion the Nixon administration perceived.⁴ Just as it had misread Syria's intentions and so failed to predict the invasion, the administration later misread the reasons for Syria's withdrawal. Nixon and Kissinger credited Israel with helping the United States to win a cold war victory in what was, in reality, an inter-Arab struggle.⁵

* * * * *

Kissinger's response to the news of the Syrian invasion, which arrived on the morning of 20 September, mirrored this cold war mindset. If the United States did not respond, 'the Middle East crisis would deepen as radicals and their Soviet sponsors seized the initiative.'⁶ After discussions between Kissinger, the secretary of state, William Rogers, and Nixon, the administration condemned the invasion, and at the same time delivered what Kissinger describes as a 'blistering message' to the Soviet chargé

1 P. Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship since 1955: A Troubled Alliance* (Boulder, 1990), pp. 54-6; N. van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (London, 1996), pp. 67-8; Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, p. 264.

2 P. Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London, 1988), p. 158.

3 Ibid., pp. 158-9.

4 Kissinger now argues that the Soviets 'tolerated' Syria's intervention in Jordan 'but did not sponsor it': author, interview, Kissinger, 2 June 2003.

5 Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 630-1; Y. Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Boston, 1979), p. 189. See also Alexander M. Haig's memoirs for a classic expression of the Jordan crisis seen in cold war terms (*Inner Circles*, pp. 241-51).

6 Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 618-19.

d'affaires in Washington, Y. Vorontsov. The administration also increased the readiness of US forces in case Nixon should decide to order intervention in Jordan. But when the foreign office passed on Hussein's request for an air strike, Kissinger records that it 'reinforced the predisposition in favour of standing aside for an Israeli move'.¹ The United States lacked the target information to enable it to respond rapidly itself.

With Nixon's approval, Kissinger telephoned the Israeli ambassador, Yitzhak Rabin, at about 10.00 p.m. on the 20th to pass on Hussein's request, and to ask Israel to reconnoitre northern Jordan. Rabin, at a dinner in New York in honour of Meir, replied that he was 'surprised to hear the United States passing on messages of this kind like some sort of mailman'.² He told Kissinger that he would not pass on the request to Meir until he knew whether the Nixon administration was recommending Israel to act. In fact, as soon as he put down the receiver, Rabin called Meir away from the party and told her the news. She then telephoned both Allon, the acting prime minister, who was willing to act, and Dayan, who was uncharacteristically cautious. At 10.35 p.m., Kissinger in Nixon's presence again telephoned Rabin. Nixon authorized him to say that if the Israeli reconnaissance confirmed a major Syrian invasion, the United States would 'look favourably upon an Israeli attack'.³ As Rabin relates the conversation, Kissinger advised Israel to take action 'subject to your own considerations'.⁴

* * * * *

The following morning, after air reconnaissance confirmed that the Syrians were massing additional forces near the Jordanian border, Israel submitted a list of its own 'considerations' to the Nixon administration. These took the form of seven questions that the administration took twenty-four hours to answer.⁵ Although most of the questions were straightforward, and concerned the degree of public political support the United States would give to Israel, the Nixon administration could not answer the key question, 'will the King agree to request our assistance and to undertake to institute methods of communication and coordination between us?'⁶ Since the Israelis believed that air strikes alone would not drive out the Syrians,⁷ the

¹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 621.

² Rabin, *Memoirs*, p. 187.

³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 623.

⁴ Rabin, *Memoirs*, p. 187.

⁵ State dept. to US embassies, Amman and Tel Aviv, no. 155166, 22 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 626; Rabin, *Memoirs*, p. 188; Rafael, *Destination Peace*, pp. 246-7.

⁶ State dept. to US embassies, Amman and Tel Aviv, no. 155203, 22 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

⁷ US embassy, Tel Aviv, to state dept., 21 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis; state dept.

key dimension of the question was whether Hussein would allow Israeli ground forces to operate on Jordanian territory. Kissinger argues that the question was asked indirectly of the Nixon administration rather than directly of Hussein because the Israelis, like Hussein himself, were suspicious and wanted the United States to witness any agreement.¹ In a bid to clarify the US position, Rogers asked Brown by cable whether, in his judgement, Hussein's request applied to ground forces as well as air strikes.² Brown replied bluntly: 'the answer is negative.' The 'request for air is "from any quarter" but land action [is] requested of [the] US and UK. I have had no intimation in any of my talks with [the] King or Rifai of any thought of Israeli ground action ... Ground and air activity are two very different things in [the] King's mind.' Brown asked Rogers to warn Israel to avoid any 'premature, unilateral movement on [the] ground or in [the] air'.³

Within an hour of the dispatch of Brown's cable, Rifai telephoned him to let him know that the Syrians, having occupied Irbid, were advancing into the surrounding villages, and that Hussein now requested an immediate air strike. Brown, in reply, asked whether Hussein wanted this 'from any quarter', adding that Rifai would know who was in a position to act. Rifai asked if this meant 'a unilateral strike on the part of the neighbor'. When Brown said he was not sure, but assumed that this would be the case, Rifai explained that Hussein would 'much prefer a co-ordinated response' or, better still, a US strike, but given the urgency, 'the most important thing is to hit the Syrians now.'⁴ He implied that, although Hussein was reluctant to agree to an Israeli air strike, in the absence of an alternative he would do so.

In the meantime, the state department had received a message from Allon for Hussein, which was forwarded to Brown. Rogers instructed Brown to encourage Hussein immediately to arrange a meeting with the Israelis to discuss co-operation.⁵ Later in the afternoon of 21 September, Dayan sought out the US chargé d'affaires, Owen Zurhellen, as they awaited the arrival of the plane bringing Meir home from New York. Dayan complained that he had warned the Nixon administration in April that, in the event of political unrest in Jordan, Israel was the only other state able to bring force to bear. The administration had failed to respond to his suggestion for joint contingency planning and had 'right down to the

to US embassy, Amman, 21 Sept. 1970, *ibid.*

¹ Author, interview, Kissinger, 2 June 2003.

² State dept. to US embassy, Amman, no. 154462, 21 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis.

³ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 5008, 21 Sept. 1970, *ibid.*

⁴ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 5015, 21 Sept. 1970, *ibid.*

⁵ State dept. to US embassy, Amman, 21 Sept. 1970, *ibid.*

last few days ... constantly urged Israel to refrain from any kind of intervention in Jordan'. 'Now,' said Dayan, 'when it is too late, you come to us with [a] proposal for action.' Intervening immediately afterwards, Rafael explained that Dayan's remarks referred only to the question of advance planning and not to the current US proposal for intervention that was still under consideration.¹

As the Jordanian army lost ground during the afternoon of the 21st, Hussein issued an appeal to the permanent members of the United Nations security council to try to halt the Syrian invasion.² Hidebound by cold war rivalries, though, there was little chance that the security council would act. The cold war considerations that dictated US policy were underlined in a meeting at lunchtime on the 21st between Sisco and Rabin, at which Sisco passed on the Nixon administration's formal response to the Israeli question about its view on an air and land operation against the Syrians in Jordan, which Kissinger had answered informally the previous evening. On the issue of Hussein's assent, Sisco's comment is instructive: 'if [the] King disagrees, we must take this into account.'³ In other words, turning the remark around, if the Nixon administration felt the situation to be serious enough, it would not allow Hussein to block an Israeli incursion into Jordan.⁴ The exchange highlights the considerations of prestige and credibility that underlay US policy-making. The Soviets' Syrian clients could not be allowed to overthrow the US-backed Hashemite regime. In the last resort, Hussein's wishes would not be allowed to stand in the way of whatever the Nixon administration might decide to be in the best interests of the survival of his regime.

In fact, the Soviet Union seems to have had no interest in a superpower clash over Jordan. Although Soviet advisers accompanied the Syrian tank forces as far as the Jordanian border, the political direction for the attack came from Damascus. It is not surprising, therefore, that late in the afternoon of the 21st, Vorontsov called on Sisco to deliver a conciliatory reply to the US *démarche* calling for the Soviets to urge the Syrians to pull back.⁵

With time pressing, and communications with Amman and between Brown and Hussein uncertain, the Nixon administration gave its answer to Israel's seven questions to the Israeli minister at Washington, Shlomo

¹ US embassy, Tel Aviv, to state dept., no. 5232, 21 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis.

² US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 5020, 21 Sept. 1970, *ibid*.

³ State dept. to US embassy, Tel Aviv, no. 154558, 21 Sept. 1970, *ibid*.

⁴ Kissinger told the author that it is conceivable that there could have been circumstances in which he would have approved action by Israel over King Hussein's objections, for instance if a Syrian takeover of Jordan was judged to be imminent: author, interview, Kissinger, 2 June 2003.

⁵ State dept. to US embassy, Moscow, no. 155169, 22 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 627.

Argov, at 10.30 p.m. on the 21st, without waiting to learn more of Hussein's views about the deployment of Israeli ground forces in Jordan. Rogers, having stated that the administration did not know the answer to this question, detailed what it did know:

Israel is aware of the informal exchange of messages between Deputy Prime Minister Allon and the King which we conveyed. With respect to ground operations, the only indication we have of the Jordan attitude on this question was a statement of Zeid Rifai to our ambassador that Israeli *QUOTE* ground operations are fine in the area so long as they are not here in Jordan. *UNQUOTE* We are seeking clarification on this question from the King. Israeli air strikes have been requested or approved on several occasions by the King.¹

In response to Rogers's message, Brown cabled his own view of the problem. In his opinion, the army had recovered the initiative in northern Jordan, making Israeli intervention less imperative. An Israeli ground offensive might, in fact, result in some units of the Jordanian army engaging the Israelis rather than the Syrians. The consequences of an Israeli invasion would be dangerous. Even if limited in scope, 'its aftermath would strain [the] King's personal standing with [his] subjects and fellow Arabs. Israel's action would confirm in Arab eyes [the] libel spread by radicals for twenty years that [the] Jordanian monarchy [is] crypto-Zionist at heart.'² The best possible outcome from the US point of view would be if Hussein could, 'basically on his own ... make his way to shore'.

Brown further speculated that the Israelis 'may have their own reasons for preferring a Jordan target to a Syrian one'. Hussein wished to see the Syrians 'so hurt that they will withdraw', but Israel's objective 'may be broader: to so smash the Syrians that they won't rise again for a long time. If this is indeed [the] Israeli aim I can see why they are massing for [a] grand attack at Irbid where [the] Syrians are stupidly open to real defeat. If [the] aim, on the other hand, is to give help to Hussein, then either [a] feint or short attack into [the] much easier country north of Tiberias would have [the] same effect without side dangers here.'

Despite his scepticism about Israeli motives, Brown discussed the question of Israeli intervention with Rifai in a telephone conversation later in the afternoon of the 22nd. His attempt to pin down what Hussein wanted was made more difficult by the use of an open phone line, meaning that the two men had to use 'double talk all the way'. According to Brown's account, Rifai agreed that the question of Israeli intervention would have to be discussed in a face-to-face meeting with the Israelis. Rifai reiterated,

¹ State dept. to US embassies, Tel Aviv and Amman, no. 155203, 22 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

² US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 5049, 22 Sept. 1970, *ibid*.

however, that if Israeli ground troops were to intervene, they should act 'elsewhere than Jordan'.¹ Rifai, who promised to ring back once he had spoken to Hussein, confirmed several hours later that Hussein's position was unchanged. As Rifai reported it, Hussein 'prefers action from up high. If anything is to be done down low it should not be here but away'.² He remained suspicious of Israeli intentions should they move into Jordan.

While Brown was clarifying Hussein's views, the Israeli cabinet discussed the issue during a five-hour meeting after Meir's return from Washington. The key ministers had not changed their minds. A British report of the discussion based on sources close to Meir noted that 'no decision was taken other than to keep options open.' Dayan, among others, remained 'reluctant to intervene in present circumstances on the ground that Israel's security was not threatened and that there was no reason why she should risk incurring international odium by intervening on King Hussein's behalf'. The report also cautioned that 'this may of course be a smoke-screen to cover some more positive planning'.³ The suspicion remained that one of the reasons for the redeployment of Israel's forces to the north was 'to ensure that if Jordan is carved up, Israel gets a slice'.⁴

The British estimate of Dayan's reluctance to intervene to save Hussein chimes with what we know from other Israeli sources.⁵ Dayan stated publicly on Israeli television on the 23rd that 'we will not mourn if Hussein is replaced by someone willing to make peace with us'.⁶ Dayan believed that if Israel were to intervene, its goal should be to take and hold a large slice of Jordanian territory: 'If we go into Irbid, it will be difficult for us just to return it'.⁷ The divisions within the Israeli leadership as to what action to take were summarized by General Mordechai Gur, who commanded on the Syrian-Lebanese front during the crisis:

One opinion backed the strengthening of Hussein's position and the continuation of his rule. They felt that Israel's bond with the Hashemite Kingdom was better than that with any other Arab country and that the Six Day War was a tactical error on the part of Hussein. It was impermissible to damage the positive relationship between the two countries, and in the future Hussein would be Israel's best peace partner.

The opposing opinion supported the transformation of Jordan into a Palestinian state. The extremists in this perspective recommended that Israel offer prac-

¹ US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 5061, 22 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

² US embassy, Amman, to state dept., no. 5065, 22 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis.

³ UK embassy, Tel Aviv, to FCO, 23 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1044.

⁴ Middle East Sitrep, 7.00 a.m., 23 Sept. 1970, PREM 15/124.

⁵ Raphael, *Destination Peace*, pp. 244-7; Rabin, *Memoirs*, p. 187.

⁶ Quoted in Zak, 'Israel and Jordan', p. 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

tical assistance, in different ways, to realize the ambitions of the Palestinians in Jordan. Yasser Arafat's declaration of independence in Irbid strengthened the hands of those who held this opinion. They suggested allowing the guerrillas to achieve their aims and to take control over all of Jordan. In this they saw the ideal solution to the issue of the Palestinians.¹

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What Israel might have done, had the Syrians broken through to Amman, remains an imponderable, because, during the 22nd and 23rd, Jordanian air and ground forces drove back the Syrian armour.² Israel seems only to have played an indirect role in this process, through strengthening its forces on the Syrian front and the supply of IDF intelligence to Hussein about the retreat of the Syrian forces. This appears to have been done both directly, by means of the secure telephone line, and indirectly through the British and Americans.³

At the same time, concerns resurfaced about the movement of the Iraqi forces in Jordan. Hussein asked Britain and the United States to pass along his information about Iraqi movements to Israel, perhaps with a view to gathering their own intelligence estimate.⁴ To judge from the British reports, however, the Israelis were as puzzled as everyone else about Iraq's intentions.⁵ Hussein speculated in hindsight that Baghdad had not intervened because it distrusted its own troops, fearing that if they acted successfully in support of the fedayeen, they might be encouraged to take similar action against their own government on their return home.⁶ There seems to be some substance to the claim that Iraqi domestic politics, more in the shape of the rivalry between the deputy chairman of the revolutionary command council, Saddam Hussein, and the deputy commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Hardan al-Takriti, lay behind the non-intervention of the Iraqi forces. Saddam subsequently spread the rumour that he had favoured intervention and had been thwarted by Hardan. In the event, Hardan was exiled to Algeria in October 1970, later taking refuge in Kuwait, where he was assassinated in 1971.⁷

1 Zak, 'Israel and Jordan', pp. 48-9. Kissinger told the author that he knew nothing of the debate at the time. But he argues that the Israelis would have been aware that any move to undermine Hussein would have provoked a crisis in their relations with Washington: author, interview, Kissinger, 2 June 2003.

2 There seems to be no foundation for Haig's claim that the Israeli air force participated in this process: Haig, *Inner Circles*, pp. 250-1.

3 UK embassy, Amman, to embassy, Tel Aviv, 23 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1044; teleprinter conference with Amman, 1400Z, 23 Sept. 1970, PREM 15/124; Moon to Heath, 23 Sept. 1970, *ibid*.

4 US embassy, London, to state dept., 1100Z, 22 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis.

5 UK embassy, Tel Aviv, to FCO, 1100Z, 22 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1044.

6 Record of meeting, Heath with Hussein, 4 Dec. 1970, PREM 15/540.

7 M. Farouk-Sluglett and P. Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London, 2001),

With the retreat of Syrian forces on the 23rd, the crisis passed its point of greatest danger. Notwithstanding US and Israeli manoeuvres, the victory on the battlefield was won by Hussein's own troops. As if to underline the point, Israeli defence forces sources confessed themselves to be 'very impressed with [the] fighting quality and achievements of [the] Jordan Army', and expressed 'unqualified praise for their conduct of operations against [the] Syrians'.¹ On the morning of the 23rd, Hussein also received a personal message from Nixon, expressing admiration for 'what you are doing to preserve Jordan's integrity in the face of both internal and external threats. Your courageous stand has impressed the entire free world.'²

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If the tactics used to turn back the Syrians had been successful, those employed to clear the fedayeen from Amman were far less effective, and led to criticism of Hussein throughout the Arab world. In an attempt to broker a ceasefire, the president of Sudan, Gaafar Mohamad Numeiry, met with Arafat in Amman on 24 September. The following day, Arafat broadcast his acceptance of Numeiry's ceasefire terms, then flew to Cairo to meet with Nasser in preparation for the summit of Arab heads of state, which Nasser had called for the 27th.

Hussein's decision to fly to Cairo for the meeting was courageous, given his isolation in the Arab world. Whether it was sound politics is another matter. Without allies at the conference table, Hussein was forced to accept terms brokered by Nasser which both Western and Israeli commentators initially judged to be more favourable to Arafat. Both sides were required to withdraw their troops from the cities and to abide by a ceasefire. A Truce Supervisory Commission led by the prime minister of Tunisia, Bahi Ladgham, was established to ensure the compliance of both parties. The Israeli view was that Hussein's agreement to mutual withdrawal gave the fedayeen the advantage since they would be able to re-enter the city clandestinely to rebuild their bases. CIA analysts also described the Cairo agreement as no more than a stop-gap measure.³

This description was accurate, although not in the sense envisaged by Israeli and US intelligence sources. On 28 September, the day after brokering the deal, Nasser died of a heart attack. Although in his last years he had become less hostile to the Hashemites, his role as the sponsor of Arafat's Fatah movement within the PLO meant that Arafat's position was

pp. 134-5; Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 264-5.

¹ UK embassy, Tel Aviv, to min. of defence, 0950Z, 24 Sept. 1970, FCO 17/1044.

² State dept. to US embassy, Amman, 0251Z, 23 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 619, folder Jordan Crisis.

³ Kissinger to Nixon, 'The Situation in Jordan', 28 Sept. 1970, RNPP, box 615, folder Jordan V.

now weakened. Hussein was unlikely to have to contend again with the united opposition he had faced at the Cairo summit.

Hussein soon signalled his determination to restore his authority by appointing Wasfi al-Tall as prime minister on 28 October. A firm believer in law and order, Tall probably intended from the outset to crack down on all fedayeen activity. However, he approached the task with skill, protesting publicly that he sought a partnership with the mainstream Fatah faction, while warning that certain elements within the PLO did not mean to honour the Cairo agreement.¹ Exploiting the differences within the PLO, Tall manoeuvred them out of the town centres and away from major lines of communication.² By May 1971, they had been driven back to the remote wooded areas in the north-west of the country around Ajloun and Jerash. On 2 June, Hussein praised Tall for the measures taken to 'safeguard the homeland', and added that 'if there is in our soil today a handful of people who make plotting their profession and treachery their vocation ... then we wish our opposition to them to be firm, decisive, and valiant, allowing no room for hesitation, tolerance, or compromise.'³ In his reply, Tall promised that 'we shall ... purge the ranks – all the ranks – of those professional criminals who pose as fedayeen.'³

On the morning of 13 July 1971, the final onslaught against the fedayeen was unleashed. Most of the fedayeen in the Jerash-Ajloun area were either captured or killed by the army, while the rest fled to Syria or Israel. Taking full responsibility at a news conference on 19 July, Tall explained that the presence of the fedayeen around Jerash and Ajloun had created 'an occupied area subject to the harshest conditions of evil and terror', a situation that the government could no longer tolerate.⁴ Tall thus presented himself as the lightning rod for criticism of the regime, although there are doubts as to whether he or the army high command had ordered the final assault.⁵ In any event, the action was supported by Hussein and the East Bank political establishment.

Tall paid a high price for his actions. During a visit to Cairo to attend the Arab Defence Council at the end of November 1971, he was gunned down by members of Black September, a group set up to avenge the attack on the fedayeen. Tall's death was a personal as well as a political blow to Hussein.⁶ Nevertheless, by the autumn of 1971, he had re-established his authority within Jordan, even though he remained isolated in the Arab

¹ Susser, *On Both Banks*, pp. 141-3.

² See Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 268-74.

³ Susser, *On Both Banks*, pp. 151-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁵ Abu Odeh, *Hashemite Kingdom*, p. 188.

⁶ See Eliot to Kissinger, 29 Nov. 1971, RNPP, box 616, folder Jordan VII, 1 January-31 December 1971.

world. Despite this isolation, Hussein's own view was that the conflict had been unavoidable. It was, he believed, 'a cancer operation that had to be performed to save Jordan's life'.¹

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The notion that Hussein was saved in September 1970 by a combination of US and Israeli actions needs to be qualified. While the Nixon administration offered moral support, its focus on the cold war dimension of the crisis led it to misread the intentions of the key players. Syria's intervention took the administration by surprise. Thereafter, Kissinger's assumption that Syria had acted upon instructions from the Soviet Union led to an excessive focus on warning off Moscow. At the same time, the encouragement given to Israel to deter the Syrians ran the risk that the Israeli government would choose to occupy strategically important territory in Jordan, rather than try to preserve Hussein's regime. While Kissinger insists that Israel would never have taken such action against the wishes of the United States, for fear of jeopardizing bilateral relations,² Hussein and his advisers were well aware of the potential threat from Israel should the Hashemite regime appear to be on the point of collapse. The crisis thus shows that while Israel and Jordan were the 'best of enemies' in the region, they nonetheless remained enemies. Mutual suspicion, more than co-operation, was the keynote of their relationship in September 1970. Similarly, the 'puppet in search of a puppeteer' thesis misrepresents US-Jordanian relations during the crisis. Hussein's reading of the regional balance and the motives of key players proved more supple and sophisticated than that framed in Washington. Perhaps, therefore, the real puppeteer during the crisis was Hussein himself, while the Nixon administration, as Rabin suggested, played more the role of an errant postman, persistently delivering local mail to a Moscow address.

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¹ Teleprinter conference with UK embassy, Amman, 0930Z, 24 Sept. 1970, PREM 15/124.

² Author, interview, Kissinger, 2 June 2003.