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Hussein

As a people, Arabs tend to grow up short. Jordan's King Hussein's slight stature still caught me by surprise in 1967 when he travelled to the West, seeking a negotiated settlement to the June War. I interviewed him in Rome for CBS.

As all the world knows, Hussein fell on his crown on that mission. The Israelis ducked negotiations in favor of claiming all their gains, especially the West Bank. The seeds for future war and the Palestinian uprising were sewn.

Now the king has emerged from the latest Middle East crisis, wearing his negotiator's robes again. This time in Washington he means to patch things up between his nation's closest friends, Iraq and the United States.

There may not be enough patches in the world. Hussein has no choice but to try.

Americans have long been accustomed to harboring kind thoughts toward the little monarch. His impeccable English gives him an immense advantage over other Middle East leaders, including most Israelis, in overcoming our natural xenophobia.

Nothing more epitomizes Hussein's special relationship with this country than the children by his U.S.-born wife. This mingling of his blood with ours merely further cemented the bonds of mutual need that unite these mighty United States with the relatively puny Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

By comparison to this one state the kingdom's natural resources, industrial capacity and other measures are even less than the disparity in population. And it contains 25 percent fewer people than Maryland's population. By any measurement, except national pride, it is a piddling poor excuse for a nation.

In fact, the only reason why Jordan continues to exist is because it serves the world's purposes by being there. Hussein's chief role is to remind the world what would happen if his country was wiped out. Let me explain.

In simple terms, the present king's

family was set on a throne in Amman, to make up for its loss of Islam's holy places, Mecca and Medina, to the Saudis. Hashemites, as his family is known, trace their ancestry back to Islam's prophet. They fought alongside Lawrence of Arabia against the Turks, on his promise of independence for the Middle East when the war was over.

Instead, England and France divvied up the region. The present kingdom was "invented" by the Foreign Office after World War I on land that was considered part of Syria under the Ottoman Empire. Transjordan, as it was then called, was supported by Britain's colonial petty cash. Palestine was the other slice received by London when Paris took over Damascus, devising Lebanon into a separate colony.

Another member of the displaced Hashemite family was "awarded" Baghdad, but kept under close supervision by Whitehall, England's Foggy Bottom, because his kingdom was so rich. In those years Iraq was the Middle East's major oil source. Wells did not come up in other parts of Arabia until the following decade.

In a region overloaded with ironies, on his Washington visit King Hussein finds himself attempting to mediate

for a regime that owes its existence to the bloody 1958 assassination of his cousin.

Although Iraq's Saddam Hussein (no relation) did not hack his way into Baghdad's big chair until 12 years ago, as a young man Saddam participated in the revolution that murdered the nation's last Hashemite ruler and brutally massacred every royal family member and their friends.

In the region's most honored ancient tradition, Hussein should have launched unremitting war against his cousin's killers, a war that could not have ended until at least one side was wiped out.

But the king's willingness to accept what he cannot change is the obvious secret to his survival. He is the Middle East's ruling dean. He ascended the throne in 1952, after his

grandfather was stabbed to death for dealing with the Israelis.

Hussein's head has never worn the crown easily. His grandfather's kingdom of bedouins and their camels was already crowding up with refugee Palestinians at the time of the old ruler's death.

After the 1967 war, the crowding became a mob rush that threatened to topple the monarchy. Hussein reasserted his control only by turning his bedouins loose on the Palestine Liberation Organization three years later. However, there is still no love lost between the PLO and Jordan's king.

Furthermore, Syria's Hafez Assad has made it plain that he wants to put his country back together, the way it was before the British and the French carved it up. Having lost all chance of regaining Palestine, now Israel, the tyrant in Damascus would be all too willing to annex Jordan, to regain at least that much.

Hussein's friendship with Saddam is firmly rooted in the Iraqi leader's protection against a takeover of Jordan. The king has no other option.

The Israelis say they would prevent the Syrians moving in. But look what happened when the king's grandfather looked in that direction. At any rate, the Palestinian problem firmly blocks any possible accord between Jerusalem and Amman.

And despite his special relationship with this nation, does anyone seriously believe Washington would be willing to risk American lives for Jordan's worthless (no oil) sand?

In agreeing to act as messenger for Saddam, I can't imagine that the monarch had any hope George Bush would believe any promises from the Iraqi leader. Those pictures of Jordan's king embracing the Iraqi were ready-made for people who want to trash the mediator and his mission.

Nevertheless, despite his impeccable English and his American wife, Hussein is very much a creature of the Middle East, where few have a chance to select and reject their friends. The king's choices in the region don't exist, as I have tried to explain.

If Jordan's ruler manages to find a way to bring the Americans home from Saudi Arabia, he will have justified both this country's past regard and the continuing existence of his kingdom as a nation, however puny.

The Middle East has more than enough warriors, what it needs most of all is one good peacemaker. The whole world can only pray the little king succeeds this time around.