

A Royal Disaster

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The *Daily Telegraph*, Britain's conservative paper of record, could barely contain its enthusiasm. A royal wedding was afoot. The mother of the groom "is one of the most stylish women in the world," it gushed. "She once again stood out, wearing a black dress from Dior Couture's most recent winter collection, with a dramatic gold embroidered collar, cuffs and back."

The guests also dressed to impress. Of course, the Prince and Princess of Wales were in attendance: "The Princess wore an embroidered chiffon blush pink gown by Lebanese fashion designer Elie Saab." The average reader could be forgiven for assuming that this was a British nuptial. Or at least the wedding of another European royal. But no. The *Telegraph's* headline explained: "The Princess of Wales, Jill Biden and Queen Rania lead the best dressed at Jordan's royal wedding."

Even the *Washington Post* enjoyed the spectacle. The Imperial City's newsletter treated Jordan's royals as America's own. The paper reminded us that the crown prince and his new wife have been compared to William and Kate, who clearly have bested Harry and Meghan in the battle for hearts and minds in the old North American colonies.

Jordanians enthusiastically celebrated: "Wedding fever took over the streets of the capital, Amman: Buildings were adorned with flags and beaming pictures of the royal couple, while flocks of people were preparing to watch the wedding of the year broadcast live on large public screens. Jordanians have been given a two-day holiday, with free public concerts and fireworks displays to celebrate the occasion."

A beautiful affair filled with beautiful people. What could possibly be wrong with this picture?

Times are hard in Jordan. The celebration occurred "amid a tough period of anemic economic growth, ballooning public debt, high unemployment and withering foreign investment. Jordan is one of the world's most water-stressed countries, forcing the government to urge the public to limit consumption. Last year, a rise in fuel prices set off nationwide protests. Teachers protesting the shuttering of the Teacher's Syndicate were arrested, much to the public's ire."

As the latter incident demonstrated, the government has been punishing *the victims* of economic hard times. Speaking out against the regime is more than frowned upon. Jordan joins its neighbors in crushing any inconvenient aspirations bursting forth from below.

Freedom House ranks Jordan as "not free." Admittedly, the Hashemite kingdom isn't as bad as United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, or Saudi Arabia, all brutal bottom-dwellers on Freedom House's

list, but that isn't saying much. Explained the group: "Jordan is a monarchy in which the king plays a dominant role in politics and governance. The parliament's lower house is elected, but the electoral system and limits on civil liberties put the opposition at a disadvantage; the chamber wields little power in practice. The media and civil society groups are hampered by restrictive laws and government pressure. The judicial system lacks independence and often fails to ensure due process."

Amnesty International offered a similar judgment in its latest report. Those who resist pay a high price. *Foreign Policy* covered the mistreatment of street vendor and activist Anas al-Jamal, arrested last fall for a Facebook post criticizing the UAE, a favorite of the West despite its ruthless domestic repression. Jamal was charged with "terrorism" for "disturbing relations with a foreign country." Unfortunately, his fate is a common occurrence:

"Most activists refrain from directly criticizing the monarchy—a red line that could land them in jail—and simply call for more jobs, better living conditions, less inequality, a more accountable government, and greater opportunities to participate in political life. Yet the state has met growing popular dissent with heightened repression—and when activists are more outspoken, it is usually poor, disenfranchised people like Jamal who face the harshest consequences."

What does the administration think of Jordan? President Joe Biden is now embracing absolute monarchy as the future. He once promised to treat Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has greatly intensified political repression, as a "pariah," but last year the president visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and publicly begged for an increase in oil production. MbS, as the Kingdom's de facto ruler is known, instead *cut* sales.

The president promised "consequences" for this humiliation, but the administration now is offering to turn U.S. military personnel into modern Janissaries to protect the Saudi royal family, taking American submissiveness to new lows. Indeed, Riyadh followed with another production cut. Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently visited, ostentatiously kowtowing to the killer prince and abandoning any criticism of a regime that ranks behind China, Russia, and even Iran on human rights.

In Jordan's case the administration sent First Lady and First Daughter to celebrate autocratic royal rule. And the Bidens lived down to expectations: "Shimmering pastel colors were a popular choice [for dresses]—in iridescent mauve was American First Lady Jill Biden." The latter, reported the *Post*, was a friend of Jordan's Queen Rania. How nice.

The regime knows how to win brownie points and squeeze more money from Washington: *promise* to change. More human rights violations generate more enthusiastic pledges. From *Foreign Policy*:

"Escalation of repression is often followed by high-level promises of reform to show Jordan's supposed commitment to liberal democracy. Last year, Abdullah announced the creation of a committee tasked with advancing political reform, which recommended amending laws on political parties and emphasized the need for 'full respect for human rights and the creation of a safe space for fundamental freedoms that would enable political participation'."

That commitment has not been implemented. And almost certainly never will be, at least by the current king. Washington's failure to stand for human rights is a tragedy for the Jordanian and American people. Alas, the administration's brutal stance is unsurprising. The world is messy, leading policymakers to compromise their professed beliefs. World War II and the Cold War created a plethora of terrible dilemmas, and many people, especially innocent foreign civilians, died as a result.

Today, despite vastly changed circumstances the usual suspects, who fill federal agencies, congressional committees, think tanks, lobbying firms, foreign embassies, and media organizations, insist that America must continue to support the awful to thwart the horrid. Thus, successive administrations have squandered Americans' wealth and lives underwriting odious despots. Whatever U.S. interests in the Middle East in years past, nothing warrants Uncle Sam toadying to such malignant regimes today.

Jordan isn't as repressive, but that is little reason for congratulation. Moreover, the country is no longer particularly important geopolitically. The time when Washington believed that it had to buy peace for Israel is long past: War would be suicidal for Amman. The Hashemite dynasty is no bulwark of stability, with its very existence threatened by its own failings. Abundant allied funds—last fall the administration promised King Abdullah's government more than \$10 billion over the next seven years—are intended to keep the regime staggering along, not yield the sort of deep policy reforms needed for both the government's legitimacy and people's prosperity.

Indeed, Washington's main interest today appears to be to use Jordan as a base for military operations in the region. The money promised Amman is effectively rent for access to the entire country. Per *Foreign Policy*: "In 2021, a controversial US-Jordan defense agreement allowed U.S. forces, aircraft, vessels, and vehicles free entry into Jordanian territory. It also gave U.S. troops permission to carry weapons freely and implied that U.S. soldiers may be immune from prosecution in Jordanian courts." This, at a time when Washington should be ending its role as imperial guardian of the Middle East.

Jordan's royal wedding appeared to be a wonderful social event. Too bad my invitation apparently was lost in the mail. Many observers hoped that Saudi Arabia's prince would make an appearance to seal relations between the two dynasties. Alas, the al-Saud dynasty evidently has little time for its nearby poor relations, hence Amman continues to bang its tin cup in Washington. The administration should reformulate Middle East policy with the American people in mind. It is time to bring the troops home and turn off the financial spigot. What if another Middle Eastern despot sends a wedding invite? *The president should send a card rather than his wife.*

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