

An Internet Palace Coup

Jordan's royals indulge in lèse majesté online

Christopher Dickey

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IMPETUOUS YOUNG PRINCE HAMZEH AND HIS OLDER, WISER COUSIN, PRINCESS Basma; the quiet, thoughtful Talal and his beautiful princess Ghida. The names may sound like characters from the latest sword-and-sorcery fantasy on CD-ROM, but, no, they're quite real, quite serious people, and quite regularly online in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Rarely have so many royals been so available, in fact, or so attentive, on computer forums anywhere. Certainly not in the Arab world. "It's the elite of Jordan," says an executive at NETS, Jordan's biggest server, though it has little more than 1,000 subscribers. "It's a different way of discussing all the opinions on people's minds."* adds Sally Khalaf, spokeswoman for king Hussein and Queen Noor.

But of late it's also gotten out of hand. The original idea, says NETS general manager Marwan Juma, was to draw in a more conventional crowd from Jordan's Western-educated middle class. But like many middle-aged cybemerds, Jordan's leading figures were slow to learn. Their kids, however, weren't—and some were quick to "flame" everyone in sight. Whether princes or privileged scions of royal servants, once at the keyboard they tended to say exactly what they thought. And the results could be brutal.

Over the school holidays at the beginning of the year, for instance, there was a missive from one young royal who thought an imprisoned opponent of King Hussein should cease to exist. Coming from a prince and heir, that's a serious posting. The original has since disappeared from the public record, and the offending prince is back in school. But in the ensuing controversy the second tier of royal kith and kin have taken up the cyber-cudgels, sometimes turning them against each other.

On bulletin boards with anodyne names like "Better Jordan," we find Thamer Obeidat, son of a once powerful secret police chief and prime minister, writing of blood and war and vengeance, even in this time of peace. When suicide bombings rocked Israel, Iliamer called the man behind many of them "a hero in the hearts and minds of millions." It's the assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who was the real terrorist, he says. One- rummunrr, picking up the pro-terrorist theme, even used the unfortunate phrase *Bon Appétit* to conclude a posting after the suicide attack in Tel Aviv last month.

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And in Jordan these days, hostility to peace verge* quickly on hostility to the King who made it. How to restore order in the online ranks? The question became urgent

a few weeks ago when N EI'S. which had been limited to its local subscribers, finally stitched itself into the global Net. And to the Hashemites' credit, the flaming was doused not with repression, but rhetoric. "It seems that there is a lot of bad feeling out there simmering below [the] surface and (it) has finally come to a boil." said Nasser Judeh. husband of Princess Sumayya and director of Jordan Television. In several avuncular postings. Judeh rallied his cyberforces before finally concluding that "the majority" is opposed to terrorism.

"Obviously it's not representative of everybody in Jordan." says the palace's Khalaf. But in a country that claims to be the most democratic in the Arab world-as much or as little as that says - Jordan's elite bulletin boards and one way the regime hopes to turn royal free speech into a popular reality.

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