INTERCULTURAL OUTREACH

CULTURE GUIDE

Jordan

Series 2
Secondary (7–12)
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**History**

**Conflict and Kings**

Jordan is historically connected to Western countries through its former status as a British Mandate and through its active participation in the United Nations. Jordan’s history continues to define Jordanian foreign policy, and their lack of natural resources leads the country to foreign dependence. As a result, Jordan is one of the most important countries to the foreign policy of the U.S. in the Middle East.

**Starting Points**

1. Compare the maps of modern Jordan and post-World War II Jordan (see History Visual 1 and Map of Jordan). What are the differences geographically? Think about what you have learned about the United States and how its geography has changed over the years. The geographical changes Jordan has experienced have shaped Jordanian attitudes.

2. Look at History Visual 2. What type of occupation do you think this man has? What is unique about his appearance? This is a picture of a man dressed much like the Hashemite warriors that came to rule the country of Jordan.

3. Think about the historical conflicts the United States has had. For instance, think about the conflict between the British and the American colonies that led to the Revolutionary War, or the struggle of the African-American community for rights and freedoms. Throughout Jordan’s history there has been significant internal conflict, which has consequently affected Jordan’s foreign policy. Because internal conflicts can influence foreign policy, internal conflicts in Jordan are of interest to the United States and its foreign policy in the Middle East.

**Information**

**Brief History**

The official name of Jordan is the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. However, Transjordan (as it was formerly called) was under the rule of the Ottoman Turks until the breakup of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. In 1916, Sharif Hussein bin Ali initiated the Arab Revolt to fight against the Ottoman Turks for their independence and to establish a single unified Arab state located between Aleppo, Syria, Aden, and Yemen. This war lasted from 1916 to 1918 and resulted in Arab forces controlling Transjordan, parts of the Arabian peninsula, and southern Syria. In 1919, the League of Nations divided Transjordan into the French Mandate of Syria and the British Mandates of Jordan and Palestine. In 1921, the British gave semi-autonomous control of Jordan to Emir Abdullah.

The Hashemite family was the traditional ruling family of the holy city of Mecca, located in present-day Saudi Arabia. They ruled Mecca beginning in the tenth century C.E. and retained their power during the rule of the Ottoman Turks. After the fall of
the Ottoman Empire, the Saud family (a rival clan of the Hashemites) sought control over Saudi Arabia. The Saudis won control and created Saudi Arabia, while the Hashemites spread out from the region to become the rulers in Transjordan and Iraq. Hussein bin Ali, the patriarchal leader of the Hashemites, sent his son Abdullah to Transjordan at the invitation of the British, and Abdullah soon became the ruler and king of Transjordan.

**King Abdullah**

Previously, King Abdullah shared control with the British over the British Mandate of Jordan (see History Visual 3). He later negotiated with the British for independence. In 1946, the UN approved an end to British Mandated rule in Transjordan, and Abdullah was proclaimed the first king of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Abdullah was a very different king compared to other Middle Eastern leaders. He argued for peace with Israel, but the Arab League strongly opposed a peace treaty. Abdullah also dreamed of creating a Greater Syria that would include Jordan, Syria, and Iraq under the Hashemite dynasty. Because Abdullah had such large dreams of peace and unity, his peers often mistrusted him. However, his ideas have lasted many generations after his reign.

On 20 July 1951, after rumors of a peace treaty between Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, King Abdullah was assassinated in Jerusalem while praying at the mosque located at the Dome of the Rock. Abdullah was in Jerusalem to give an eulogy at the funeral of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Raïd Bey al-Solh, who had also been assassinated. Abdullah’s grandson Hussein was praying next to his grandfather at the time of the assassination and was also shot. Hussein was saved from the bullet by a medal his grandfather insisted he wear on his chest.

**King Hussein**

After the death of King Abdullah, the Crown Prince Talal ruled Jordan for only a short time. Talal started developing a new constitution, but not long after, he abdicated the throne for health reasons. Therefore, a council was appointed until Hussein effectively became king of Jordan on 2 May 1953 at the age of eighteen (see History Visual 4).

King Hussein was a different ruler than both his father Talal and his grandfather King Abdullah. Because Hussein had been educated in Jordan, Egypt, and Great Britain, he had a unique perspective that made his reign extremely controversial. To this day, many historians continue to take differing sides on many of his policies, including how he dealt with events such as Black September.

**Black September**

Black September, a series of armed conflicts that lasted from September 1970 to July 1971, has marred the history of Jordan. This was a period of time when the militant Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) attempted to overthrow King Hussein’s reign, and the violence resulted in large civilian causalities. Most of the PLO and thousands of Palestinians were expelled to Lebanon.

The events of Black September started when a large, displaced population of Palestinians living in Jordan conflicted with the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). This
group of Palestinians had come to Jordan because their homeland had been occupied by Israel. The refugees were given citizenship rights in Jordan, and in the late 1960s, they began to mount a resistant militant movement against Israel. Due to this mounting resistance, people speculated that King Hussein had worked out a secret treaty with Israel, which arranged for the IDF to secretly invade the town of Karameh, considered the headquarters of some of the fedayeen [fed-ah-teen], or armed Palestinian militia. Although there was no proof that King Hussein made this secret agreement, it still created conflict.

The intention of the IDF invasion of Karameh was to neutralize the Palestinian resistance forces, but the IDF failed and tried to secretly withdraw from Karameh. Against Hussein’s orders, the Jordanian military general Mash’hor Haditha attacked the IDF. The IDF suffered twenty-eight casualties and lost several tanks. This event created a public relations nightmare for King Hussein. In the end, the PLO garnered greater prestige in the Arab community and gained more recruits for their resistance movement. Yasser Arafat, PLO chairman, claimed it as a victory of honor. The event became known as the Battle of Karameh.

In November 1968, the PLO instituted their own martial law in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. Hussein negotiated with the PLO, an action that represented a large change in direction from his previous attempt at eliminating them. The PLO violated this agreement with King Hussein, and between mid-1968 and the end of 1969, there were more than five hundred violent engagements between PLO militia and Jordanian forces. It seemed that Jordan was operating as a country within a country. In fact, many considered the PLO similar to a mafia, extorting money from civilians, running different communities and turfs, and attacking Israel from Jordanian soil.

On 1 September 1970, there were a series of airplane hijackings aimed at killing King Hussein. On the 16 September, King Hussein declared martial law, and tanks and troops were placed throughout Jordan. King Hussein sent troops to invade civilian Palestinian refugee camps in four cities in Jordan: Irbid, Salt, Sweileh, and Zarqa. PLO headquarters were bulldozed in Amman, the capital city. Violent urban warfare broke out in small, crowded refugee camps everywhere. Many accused King Hussein of violent and random killings of so-called “Palestinian fighters” without evidence. The inexperienced and destitute Palestinians suffered at the hands of the king and received no help from the fedayeen who had promised to protect them. Others backed King Hussein, explaining that he had little choice.

With martial law increasing violence, Syria threatened to invade Jordan in order to aid the Palestinians. King Hussein appealed to the United States for help, who then appealed to Israel. Israeli forces flew their fighter planes low to the ground, encouraging the PLO to stay out. The U.S. president at the time, Richard Nixon, also sent navy support to back up U.S. interests.

On 27 September 1970, King Hussein and Yasser Arafat met in Cairo, Egypt, to discuss plans to stop the attacks. At the meeting, Hussein recognized the fedayeen’s right to operate in Jordan but insisted that they had to stay away from military actions, particularly along the borders. Not long after the meetings, Egypt’s leader and PLO supporter, Gamal Abdel Nasser, died of a massive heart attack and the PLO
was without Arab protection or backing. King Hussein went back on his agreement and continued martial law in Jordan.

The casualties of Black September and the surrounding conflicts are estimated in the tens of thousands. It is clear that both sides used intentional killings as a fear tactic. Many Palestinian militants were sent to Lebanon, and those that stayed were viewed with increased disdain.

Tensions between Jordan and the United States increased when King Hussein refused to side against Saddam Hussein in the First Gulf War. However, when King Hussein signed a peace treaty with the United States and—most importantly—with Israel, Jordan was re-established as an ally of the West.

Although widely criticized worldwide for his political actions, King Hussein was popular among many Jordanians for his infrastructural and domestic developments. At the beginning of his reign, only 10 percent of the population had access to sewage networks. That had increased to 99 percent by the time King Hussein died. The literacy rate in Jordan rose from 33 to 86 percent and continues to rise today. There was also a dramatic decrease in the infant mortality rate. All of these were seen as signs of progress.

King Hussein died of cancer in 1999. At the time of his death, he was one of the longest-serving leaders in international politics. Before he died, Hussein took the title of Crown Prince and heir from his brother Hassan and gave it to his son Abdullah II. This meant that Abdullah II would reign next as the king of Jordan.

**King Abdullah II**

Despite Hussein’s deathbed change of heir, there was a stable shift of power from Hussein to his son Abdullah II (see History Visual 5). Abdullah II was not originally named the crown prince, so he never expected to rule or have any real responsibility in Jordanian government, and he had never prepared to be king. Despite this, he is generally well loved by his people.

Abdullah II was largely educated in the United States, and this upbringing has affected his politics. It is partially due to the influence of Western philosophy that King Abdullah II is seen as a dynamic, young-at-heart king. He has focused on economic development in Jordan. An example of this is his olive-tree-planting campaign. A large portion of Jordanians do not have access to arable land to grow either sellable goods or goods needed to sustain their families. King Abdullah has campaigned to remedy this by planting a large number of olive trees on open, private, and public land. These trees are then cared for by the community, and the community is allowed to harvest the olives, bark, or anything else that is marketable. So far the project has been successful in helping give Jordanians a chance to improve their economic status.

King Abdullah has also worked to increase foreign investment, to develop the private and public sectors, and to initiate social reform. However, despite all his pushes for economic and social reform, he has been criticized for his opinions and policies on human rights because of violations within his country. The international community continues to scrutinize his policies today.
The Geographic Borders of Jordan Today

Jordan has experienced a series of border changes, resulting in the geographic boundaries it has today. In 1950, Transjordan annexed a portion of the West Bank of the Jordan River, formerly possessed by Palestine. In 1965, Jordan traded a large piece of desert inland from the border with Saudi Arabia in return for a small piece of coastline on the Gulf of Aqaba. This water access was critical to Jordanian economic success. In May 1967, Jordan fought the Six-Day War with Israel; Jordan lost control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In 1988, Jordan officially renounced its claim on the West Bank and ceded the territory to Israel. Through a series of UN Security Council Resolutions, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan came to have the geographic boundaries it has today.

Activities

1. As a class, have a debate about King Hussein’s leadership policies. Divide into two teams, with one team arguing for the benefits and advantages of King Hussein’s leadership in Jordan and the other team arguing for the drawbacks and problems. Support your arguments with examples.

2. Create a list of words, names, and events that have to do with the brief history of Jordan that was just covered. Focus especially on listing Arabic words, names, and political terms. Using your classmates, parents, or the Internet, research the definitions or explanations for terms you do not know and write them down. Defining these terms can help you understand the news and media better.

3. Pretend you are a news reporter covering one of the events that happened within a conflict in Jordanian history (e.g., the murder of King Abdullah or the Battle of Karameh). Write a brief one- to two-minute news report on the event. Remember that a news report is intended not only to share information with the public but also to draw emotion. Be convincing.

4. Separate into small groups and prepare a decorative timeline of events. You may organize it a number of ways. For example, you may pick the reign of one king and follow the events that happened during his rule. Organize your timeline as you see fit, and be sure to include as many pertinent details as possible. Keep it interesting by using names and pictures where possible.

5. Poetry and literature from the times of violence in Jordan are particularly moving. Whether written by suffering Palestinians in refugee camps (with no water or safety) or by Jordanians living near the borders with Israel and Syria, everyone had much to say about living in such turmoil. Imagining you are a Jordanian and think about what your life would be like in the violent days of Black September or in the tumultuous days of change during the rule of King Abdullah II. Write a poem or short story in response to your violent surroundings. Try to be true to your imagined character and to what you know of the conflict.

6. Pretend you are someone very important in the Jordanian government. Write a letter either to a news source or to the Royal Family about an event such as the assassination of King Abdullah, the death of King Hussein, or the announced change of King Abdullah II as future ruler.
Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Abdullah II must have felt when he found out that he would be the next king? Remember that he would not have had much time for any sort of preparation. If you were in his position, what changes and preparations would you make to ensure that you were as ready as possible? Would these be personal changes, or would you attempt to make changes within your family, in the people’s perception of you, and so forth?

2. King Abdullah’s dreams and goals for a more united Middle East were unique during the time of his reign. In fact, as you learned in the lesson, many of his colleagues were unsure about Abdullah because of these goals. Do you think Abdullah’s goals and dreams were passed on to any of his successors? How so? Were any of his goals ever realized? Which ones?

3. The awful events and battles of Black September affected many people; innocent civilians on every side were killed. What do you think could have been done to prevent these atrocities? What do we need to do to make sure they do not happen again?

4. The underlying issue in many of the violent conflicts that Jordan has faced is disrespect and even hatred between different national and ethnic groups within the population. What can be done to help remove this intolerance? How can modern Jordanians hoping for peace and equality work to stem the anger and change people’s attitudes? In your answer, consider U.S. history and how U.S. citizens have dealt—and continue to deal—with issues of anger, intolerance, and inequality.

5. Discuss the importance of the Israeli–Jordanian Peace Treaty. It is unique in the Middle East for an Arab state to have such a treaty with Israel. What could be the long-term importance of this treaty? For instance, how could it influence other Arab states to be less hostile towards Israel? Or could Jordan end up being isolated by Arab states because it has supported Israel?

6. Do you see Jordan’s future as one full of economic and social progress? Why or why not? All the kings from Abdullah I to Abdullah II have promoted growth, development, and change. Do you think Jordan is continuing down this road? Why or why not?