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Revisiting the Hussein Warning to Golda Meir

by

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On 23 September 1973, King Hussein Bin Talal of Jordan sent a message requesting an urgent meeting with Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir. The request did not surprise the Israeli leader but what caused some raised eyebrows was the urgency. The King was prepared to fly to Tel Aviv for the meeting. This was not their first meeting. In fact, they had met the first time in Paris, in October 1965, when Golda Meir was Israel's Foreign Minister, to discuss the issue of American arms deliveries to Jordan. At that time, the King had given his word of honour that the American Sherman tanks, due to be given to Jordan, would not cross the Jordan River in case of a war. Two years later, in the Six Days War they did and Israel captured most of them in the West Bank. This led Golda to mutter on some occasions 'so much for the King's word of honour.'

When Mrs. Meir became Prime Minister in March 1969, their meetings became more frequent, especially after September 1970 when Israel heeded the King's request, delivered through US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and supported by President Richard Nixon, for mobilizing troops and flying reconnaissance missions over Jordan. The King was grateful for the role Israel played in rescuing his kingdom from danger of an internal takeover by the PLO and, on external front, a Syrian invasion.

The King and the Prime Minister grew to like and respect each other and effectively worked out a new *modus vivendi* in the Israeli-Jordanian relations. The King assumed responsibility for assuring that no hostile element operated against Israel from the East Bank of the Jordan, the bridges across the River remained open for trade and third nations' citizens for tourism; Jordanians were allowed to visit the West Bank and Israeli Arabs to cross into Jordan on their

way to Mecca for the Hajj pilgrimage. The two nations cooperated in sharing the waters of the River Jordan, in flood and pest control and other beneficial ties such as Jordan paying the salaries of officials in the West Bank. In addition to the Golda-Hussein meetings, there were also periodic meetings between the King and Israel's Defence Minister Moshe Dayan, Foreign Minister Abba Eban, and Education Minister Yigal Allon. These were held either in London or off shore, on a boat in the Gulf of Eilat (Gulf of Aqaba).

The meetings were considered top secret in Israel, in order not to embarrass the King, but their existence was known to a number of senior officials in Jordan, Israel, the United States and Britain. The Israeli media acceded to the requests of the Prime Minister and rarely referred to these meetings. They were not even discussed in the cabinet, only in what became known as Golda's 'kitchen cabinet', a small number of selected ministers and senior officials who met at the residence of the Prime Minister on Saturday nights to review items that would be discussed at the weekly cabinet sessions held on Sunday mornings. No protocols were followed at the meetings, with the exception of key decisions that were reached in those informal meetings, which Golda Meir later admitted were primarily designed to help her determine major policy decisions.

The existence of the Meir-Hussein meetings was known to some Arab leaders, such as Presidents Anwar Sadat and Hafez al Assad and probably to the Saudi monarch as well, in addition to the Jordanian premier, head of intelligence and the King's younger brother and the then Crown Prince Hassan.

As tensions mounted in the spring of 1973, King Hussein delivered a stern warning to Golda Meir, at the end of April, that there had been extensive movement of troops and equipment from various Arab countries to Egypt and Syria that made war inevitable. The Israeli response was that Sadat knew that his military option was almost non-existent, but Golda may have felt this did not mean that Sadat and Assad would act illogically.

On 9 May 1973, the King and his Prime Minister Ahmad al-Lawzionce again met with Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan and warned of an imminent and inevitable Syrian-Egyptian attack, which the King thought would be a military fiasco. He however, he did not provide a precise date of its commencement. Basically, he said that the 'no war no peace' *status quo* situation was untenable for Sadat and Assad. He added that second tier Arab countries, such as Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, were poised to move ground and air units to Syria and Egypt. Hussein said that he was fighting pressure to allow the stationing of some of these forces on the Jordanian territory. Israel promptly relayed these warnings to Nixon's adviser on national security Henry Kissinger.

Similar warnings came from other sources, among them an American reporter, Arnaud de Borchgrave of *Newsweek*. These warnings were taken seriously by Israel. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) went on an alert called '*Blue White*.' The IDF Director of Military Intelligence Major General Eli Zeira was convinced that the probability for a war breaking out in the spring or early summer was very low. Events demonstrated that he was correct in his assessment. The '*Blue White*' alert and mobilization cost Israel a vast amount of money and the political leadership, now on the eve of a Knesset election campaign, did not want any distraction that would undermine the new Labour Party slogan – 'You never had it so good.' Sadat and Assad postponed the war due to a Nixon-Brezhnev summit they hoped would produce results and because of the IDF alert. The war was now scheduled for the fall of 1973.

In September, the skies over the Middle East were again clouded and there were indications from various sources of massive troop build-up and movement along the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights cease-fire lines. On 13 September, Israeli fighters shot down 11 Syrian jets over Lebanon and tensions once again mounted alarmingly. On 10-12 September 1973, King Hussein held extensive talks in Cairo with Presidents Assad and Sadat during which they stressed to him that they were no longer prepared to acquiesce with the *status quo* and that war was inevitable. They also asked him if he would be prepared to join them in attacking Israel from the East if war breaks out. To this he apparently answered them saying 'leave me in peace.'

He related all this to Mrs. Meir when he met her in the evening of 25 September 1973 at the *Mossad* guest house north of Tel Aviv, the venue of similar meetings in the past. He was accompanied by his new Prime Minister, Zeid A Rifai. Accompanying Golda Meir were the Director General of the Prime Minister's office Mordechai Gazit and her personal aide Lou Kadar. Listening in on the talks were senior Intelligence officers from the IDF. The King said that a highly sensitive source in Syria relayed information that the Syrians were now poised to attack and that the Syrian army and air force were on full war alert. The King was not sure how to interpret this information, but said it had to be taken as a fact. In replying to Mrs. Meir's question if Syria would attack alone without Egypt, the King said that he thought there would be full collaboration. In the course of the meeting Mrs. Meir rang Defence Minister Moshe Dayan and relayed to him what the King told her. Dayan shared her concern and advised that he was going to visit the Northern Command the next day in order to strengthen its defences.

Once again the King did not provide a specific date for the start of the war. Golda Meir may have been impressed, but the higher echelons of the IDF Intelligence Corps were not. The next day was the eve of the Jewish New Year, and for the next three days the country was celebrating this holiday. On 30 September 1973, Prime Minister Meir travelled to Strasbourg to address the Council of Europe. She came back four days before Egypt and Syria launched their surprise attack on Yom Kippur, 6 October 1973.

Why did Hussein feel it necessary to deliver three warnings to Israel between April and September 1973? Was he not aware that he would be seen as a traitor to the Arab cause for warning Israel of such an attack and destroying the surprise element? There are a number of possible answers to his behaviour.

The first was his enormous fear of being dragged once again into war against Israel, a war he was convinced the Arabs had no chance of winning. He laboured under the cloud of his earlier decision in May and June 1967, to join in the war against Israel and the loss of West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the fact that his army was shattered. This haunted him ever since, as he explained more than once to Israeli leaders whom he began to meet again shortly after the 1967 War. He was afraid that once again his army would be placed under Egyptian command and he would lose control over events. He was also fearful that, in case of war, the IDF would undertake a flanking move through Jordanian territory to attack the Syrian army from the south. In case of such a move happening, he would not be able to prevent it.

He was also afraid that, at some point, Iraqi forces would cross the border and enter Jordan to help in creating a possible Eastern front against Israel. He knew full well, and he was often warned by Israel since the mid 1950's, that the entry of Iraqi forces into Jordan would be seen by Israel as *casus belli* requiring an Israeli military operation against Jordan. This has been a cardinal point of the Israeli military doctrine. On the eve of the Operation Desert Storm over Kuwait in January 1991, in a secret meeting in London, King Hussein was again warned by Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir that the entry of Iraqi forces into Jordan would invite an instantaneous Israeli strike.

The most likely explanation for the King's behaviour has to do with his fear that in case of war, Israel would use it as an excuse to drive out the Palestinian population from the West Bank, across the River Jordan in to the East Bank, thus swelling the Palestinian element of the population of Jordan. He recalled very well that in the previous two wars, both in 1948 and in 1967, there was a flood of Palestinians escaping or being pushed out across the River. In 1948, there were several hundred thousands, while in 1967 the numbers were around quarter of a million. He realized that there would be a short lived international outcry, but at the end of the day, he would be left with a huge, bitter and desperate Palestinian population that would undermine the delicate balance between the Bedouins, who were the core and assurance of the continuation of his rule over Jordan, and the Palestinians, bent on revenge and angry at his dealings with the Israelis.

The fear of transfer of Palestinians haunts Jordan to this very day and may well explain the repeated warnings of Hussein's son and heir, King Abdullah of Jordan, of an impending Arab-Israel war unless there is an urgent Israeli-Palestinian settlement. This time Abdullah fears that if Israeli cities and hinterland were to be attacked by missiles from Syria, by the Hamas in Gaza

and by Hezbollah in Lebanon, as an act of desperation, it will not hesitate to expel the Palestinian population from Gaza and the West Bank even at the price of scuttling the peace treaties that Israel has signed with Egypt and Jordan.

Such thoughts may well have been on the mind of King Hussein when he repeatedly warned Israel's leaders of an impending war in the spring and fall of 1973. Wisely, he stayed out of that war, barring a token participation of some of his armour on the Golan front, but only after warning the Israelis in advance and asking for their forgiveness and understanding. The fact that he did not open a third front against Israel in the Yom Kippur War was seen by Israel as a huge favour that allowed them to concentrate on pushing back the Syrians on the Golan Heights and crossing the Suez Canal barely nine days after the start of the war.

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