

THEIR JORDAN

The world's youngest queen is a Palestinian in an ethnically divided country, a modern woman in an ancient role.

Jan Goodwin explains the royal paradox of Queen Rania.

Photographed by Patrick Demarchelier

It was a spectacle worthy of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Jordanians from every corner of the country flooded Amman to line up along the flower-strewn, 12-mile route that snaked through the capital city. Troops on camelback appeared as mirages through the shimmering dust their mounts churned up. Tribal bedouins in full desert dress followed, eager to pay their respects. They had all come to celebrate the ascension of King Abdullah II to the throne, which he unexpectedly inherited after the death of his father, King Hussein, four months earlier. But as Abdullah, wearing a ceremonial uniform replete with gold braid and a chestful of medals, stood waving to his cheering subjects from the back of a convertible, the crowd was equally captivated by the radiant woman at his side. Rania, who at 28 was about to become the world's youngest queen, was the very picture of a monarch: beautiful, elegant, regal, her model's figure shown off to perfection in a traditional silk *thaub* gown the color of desert sand. Her \$2 million diamond-encrusted tiara flashed in the June sun.

Only those closest to Rania knew the tiara was borrowed goods, lent by her sister-in-law, Princess Haya. "Why should I spend a vast amount of money on something I will not wear very often?" explained Rania at the time. And when Throne Day finally wound to a close, Their Majesties Abdullah and Rania retreated not to one of the eight royal palaces scattered around the capital but to their four-story home on the outskirts of Amman.

An ordinary house instead of a palace, a borrowed tiara. What kind of queen is this?

Rania has been queen for one year, and already she is drawing comparisons to Princess Diana. Yet while Rania clearly has the photogenic looks, the glamour, and a talent for reaching out to ordinary people, she is no protocol-jarring rebel, nor is she hampered by the neuroses that tormented Diana. More significantly, Rania and her husband are not figureheads-in-waiting: They are actual rulers who now must attempt to lead one of the most troubled Middle Eastern nations into the modern economy.

Although Rania is a hands-on wife and mother, with two small children and another baby due in September, she is fast becoming a central power broker in Jordanian political affairs. Queen Rania, in fact, has big ideas for the future of the country. She has become a champion of child abuse causes and women's rights—both taboo topics in the traditional Muslim state until now. She has advocated that every child be taught English so that Jordan can compete in the global market. She has lobbied to introduce computers into classrooms—in a country where many schools lack even basic furniture. And with her Palestinian heritage, she has become a symbol for the healing of intense ethnic divisions—Palestinians, despite the fact that they make up an estimated 65 percent of the population, are still denied many basic opportunities.

"The king chose as a bride someone he considers to be an equal," says Prince Zeid bin Raad, whose father was cousin to King Hussein and who was virtually raised with Abdullah. "He listens to her ideas. They feed each other's intellectual curiosity. They're a perfect match, two people very comfortable together, who think along the same wavelength, who ►



FACING THE NATION

Queen Rania is renowned for her beauty, elegance, and intelligence—and for her determination to overthrow Jordan's status quo.

have the same kind of temperament. He always has a twinkle in his eye and a sense of mischief. And while she has poise and dignity, she can match him in this. They have a wonderfully warm and mutually supportive relationship."

In many ways, the king and queen have one foot in the future and one firmly planted in Abdullah's ancient family heritage, which dates back 1400 years, directly to the Prophet Mohammad, the founder of Islam. Although so far Rania's performance, in Jordan as in the West, is winning her raves, her life is—and will increasingly become—the kind of balancing act Princess Diana could only have imagined. If Diana felt ill-trained and ill-prepared for her role in a more benign Britain, can Queen Rania survive a much more delicate and difficult position in ultraconservative Jordan?

Despite her regal bearing, Rania comes from relatively modest beginnings. She is the daughter of a Palestinian physician who emigrated to Kuwait in 1967 from the West Bank—Jordanian territory until it was annexed by Israel—in search of better economic opportunity. Rania grew up with her brother and sister in a second-story apartment on Baghdad Street in Kuwait City. Her father enrolled them all in the very formal New English School, where Rania managed A's in the sciences, math, and languages (she's

Everybody kept trying to reach their families by phone."

Nevertheless, Rania continued her studies at AUC, where she was a rather bookish student. "She had a couple of boyfriends," says Toukan, "one Palestinian, one Egyptian—fellow students, nothing serious, just lunch, dinner, or a movie. But mostly, she went out in groups of friends." Toukan was surprised when Rania approached her during their senior year and suggested that the two of them become models. "She told me she'd met some French guy from a modeling agency who asked her," recalls Toukan, who thinks they were selected because they are both five feet seven inches—tall for Arab women. "But at the last minute, Rania had to back out. Her parents wouldn't let her do it."

After graduating in 1991, Rania moved to Amman, where her parents had relocated. She worked briefly in marketing at Apple Computers, and then at Citibank. Then, one evening in January of 1993, a friend from Apple invited her to a dinner party that just happened to be thrown by Prince Abdullah's sister, Princess Aisha. There she was introduced to the prince. Although Abdullah had a reputation as a ladies' man—"How much of one?" asks Prince Zeid with an embarrassed chuckle. "Let's just say Abdullah was loved by many, er, people"—the future king immediately fell hard for Rania.

King Hussein, thrilled about his son's new romance, wanted

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fluent in English and speaks a passable French) but only B's in English literature, art, and music. "She was very quiet and well behaved," recalls Linda Saba, Rania's best friend, who rode home on the school bus with her every day. "Our biggest crime was sneaking a transistor radio into school, which was absolutely forbidden, so we could listen to the latest pop music on the FM station during break time."

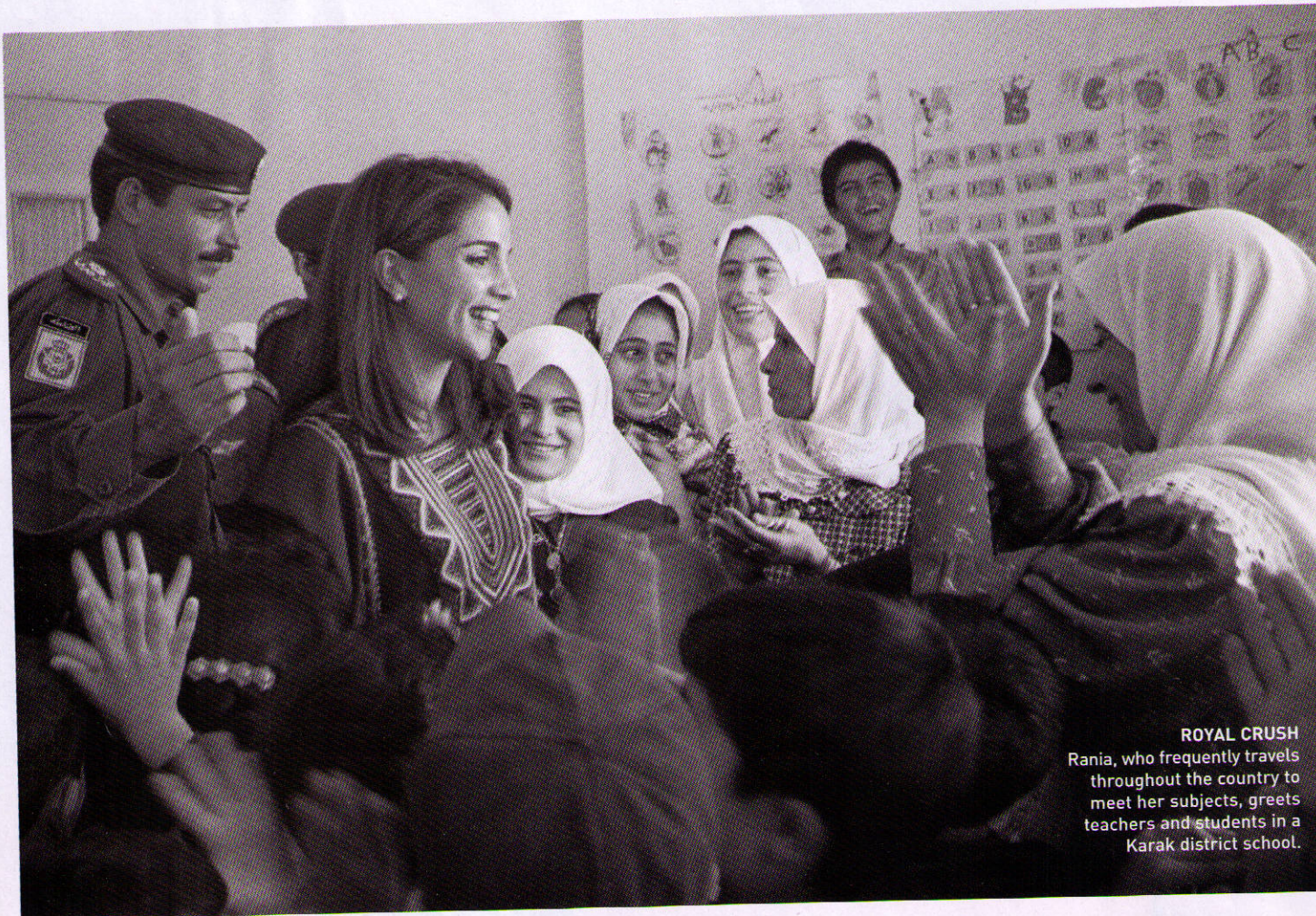
During summer vacations, Rania traveled back to the West Bank to stay in Tulkarm with her aunt and uncle, Fadwa and Khaled Yassin, a retired schoolteacher turned bookstore owner. "She played basketball and chess with my children," her uncle recalls. It was in Tulkarm, then an overgrown village of orange groves, that Rania came to understand what it meant to be a disenfranchised Palestinian. At the time, Israeli troops frequently forced Arabs from their homes before promptly demolishing them with bulldozers to make way for Jewish settlements.

Years later, while Rania was an undergraduate at the American University in Cairo, studying business administration, her family was forced to leave Kuwait when that country, outraged at King Hussein's decision to align himself with Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, expelled all Palestinians. "We were all very upset," says Dima Toukan, 30, whose dorm room was two doors down from Rania's. "We were all so scared it would become a war that would engulf the entire Middle East. We spent all the time huddled around Rania's TV set. Rania and the rest of us were alternately sobbing and consoling one another.

to hasten an engagement, and two months later, he drove Abdullah to the apartment building where Rania lived with her parents. In front of the king, as is Muslim custom, Abdullah asked Rania's parents' permission to marry their daughter. In June, the couple was married. In the middle of the wedding party, one of Abdullah's army buddies dramatically parachuted into the palace garden to cut the cake with a sword—and life was never the same for either of them again.

Until last year, neither Abdullah nor Rania ever knew they would be thrust into the roles of king and queen of Jordan. Although Abdullah is the eldest son of the late King Hussein, he had been removed from the royal succession at the age of three, when King Hussein named Abdullah's uncle Hassan crown prince. (This move was reportedly intended to ensure that Jordan would not be ruled by a small boy in the event that King Hussein was assassinated.) It was only two weeks before King Hussein died of cancer that he switched the succession back to Abdullah. Virtually without warning, the 36-year-old heir—and to a significant extent, Rania—were handed responsibility for all of Jordan.

It's not a small job, even by the standards of heads of state. Jordan is hobbled by a \$7 billion international debt. Studies commissioned by Abdullah last year found that



ROYAL CRUSH
Rania, who frequently travels throughout the country to meet her subjects, greets teachers and students in a Karak district school.

while the country's economy is one of the smallest and poorest in the Middle East, it is supported by only 15 percent of the workforce because so many Jordanians work for the huge and bloated government bureaucracy. Thirty percent of the Jordanian population lives in abject poverty, which is not surprising since one in three citizens is unemployed. Living conditions are made worse by perennially acute water shortages that have been exacerbated by a two-year drought. In Amman, homes receive water only two or three times a week. Outside the capital, food production—always low because only 4 percent of the land is arable—has been devastated.

Since being crowned, the royal couple has logged more frequent-flyer miles than any U.S. Secretary of State to meet with world leaders in a quest for debt relief and investment aid. Heads of state can be moved by people's suffering, says Hasan Abu-Nimah, Jordan's ambassador to the United Nations in New York, particularly when the emissaries are as personable and as charismatic as Jordan's king and queen. "Their Majesties receive a lot of support and sympathy and promises of financial aid," he says. "But we have received very little in practical terms. This is the way of politics." With tangible aid results thus far negligible, the king and queen are left to solve their country's problems with their own limited means.

Rania is as driven and goal-oriented as her husband (who often works 12 to 16 hours a day). While she frequently surprises interlocutors with the depth of her knowledge on

topics ranging from osteoporosis (she's the new patron of the International Osteoporosis Federation), organ donation, and blood diseases to global economics and evolving business practices, a significant amount of the queen's work involves meeting her subjects and listening to their many problems. At least once a month, she visits schools, health-care centers, and individual homes throughout the country. When she can, she tries to direct needed medical equipment to a desperate hospital, or scare up supplies for a deprived classroom.

Much of Queen Rania's most pioneering work falls under the umbrella of the Jordan River Foundation, a group she founded herself in 1995. Particularly important to her is the Child Abuse Prevention Project—the first of its kind anywhere in the Arab world—which is currently planning to erect a prevention center that Rania hopes will be replicated in other countries. "There wasn't even any terminology for child abuse [when I got involved with the problem]," Rania told *The Boston Globe* in December. "It was a taboo subject."

Indeed, the challenges facing Rania are exacerbated by rigid Islamic tradition. For instance, a quirk in Jordanian law dictates that only a father or male guardian can report a case of abuse or incest. It is these family members, of course, who are frequently the abusers. Another major stumbling block, according to Leah Harrison at the Child Protection Center of New York's Montefiore Medical Center, who was flown to Jordan to consult with the queen on the project last year, is that children in Jordan ➤180

There are about 10 other girls—pretty girls with perfect skin, perfect figures, and perfect hair—grabbing excitedly at the racks of clothing; they're darting in and out of dressing rooms, chatting and giggling. It's a fantasy come true: They're models today.

Some of their mothers are here, too, looking on, bemused. They are not models today. One of them is trying on a turquoise jacket and regarding herself in a mirror.

"How do I look?" she asks.

A girl whips around. "Terrible," her daughter says flatly.

The mothers are wearing jeans and juicy tees; they're wearing short black skirts and knee-high, high-heeled boots. They're wearing expensive-looking leather jackets and Gucci sunglasses. The daughters are pretending that their mothers aren't there and the mothers—rather than looking hurt—are trying to look bored.

"Mom!"

And then there's one girl who wants her mother's help. She just doesn't seem to look good in anything—she's tried on item after item, but nothing can hide her shape. She turns on her mother and says, "Why are you making me wear all this shit? I look huge!"

"I ... I just want to find something that looks flattering on you, honey," her mother stammers.

"Well, find something then!" the girl wails.

"Mom.... Mom? Andrea?"

It's Ashley Stark, trying to get her mother's attention.

Andrea perks up. "Yes, honey?"

"I want to buy that," says Ashley, tossing her mother a fuchsia tank dress.

Andrea catches it fast against her chest. "Fine! Oh, I like this dress a lot! Great!"

Andrea holds up the dress like a trophy and looks it over approvingly. "See what I told you? Ashley has such an eye.... I could wear that." ■

HEIR JORDAN (continued from page 163)

have no rights, especially female children. "There are few laws, if any, to protect girls," she says. "And if a girl is sexually abused and she tells, she is penalized. Once the family's name is dishonored, they usually kill her, I was told by the foundation. Under such circumstances, why would a child come forward and report abuse?"

Honor killings—the custom by which women and girls are murdered by their male relatives because they have been raped, are accused of not being a virgin, or have challenged male authority—is another cause that Rania has bravely and energetically campaigned against. In Jordan, where one in four homicides is an honor killing, men serve only three to 12 months for the crime. And in recent months, Jordan's Lower House of Parliament has twice rejected a law proposing to treat honor killings like other murders and punish them accordingly. A spokesman for the opponents declared that to change the status quo would be "a violation of the values and dignity of the Jordanian family."

As if these struggles were not enough, Rania is also seen by many as the best hope to soothe the long-simmering

friction between Jordanians and Palestinians. Though they are the majority, Palestinians have rarely held positions of power in Jordan, and to this day remain grossly under-represented in the military, the civil service, and Parliament. Much of their hope lies on the shoulders of the Palestinian queen. "She will play a good role in building unity between the two sides," says her uncle, Khaled Yassin.

The king and queen's limestone house, covered in vivid pink and purple bougainvillea, in the Hummar district of Amman, is not far from the burial shrine of Queen Alia. Perched on a hill overlooking the capital, the house was a wedding gift from King Hussein. On a clear day, you can see the glittering gold cupola of the Dome of the Rock Mosque and the white limestone roofs of the Old City of Jerusalem. The residence is not large, and it is considerably less ostentatious than many houses in the city. Even security is subtle, with military guards seemingly confined to the gatehouse at the foot of the long drive. Only the royal standard, flying out front, sets it apart.

When their regal duties are over for the day, Rania and Abdullah often opt for a quiet dinner here at home, their sanctuary. The airy house is furnished in the queen's preferred neutrals: white, beige, and pastel blue, shades that offer the eye a respite from the searing desert sun. Sharing space with the more formal Eastern wooden chairs and tables, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, are cozy, plump-cushioned Western sofas. That it is foremost a family home with children is evidenced by the toys strewn around the small, lush garden and beside the pool. There is a swing set, popular with towheaded Princess Iman, and a trampoline, a birthday gift to Prince Hussein, who was named for his late grandfather—still keenly missed. And everywhere are silver-framed family photographs—of the kids being tossed in the air or nuzzled by their parents; of the king and his son, both in football jerseys, excitedly cheering on their favorite team at the Pan Arab Games last summer.

Here, it might be easy to mistake the royal couple for your average well-to-do working parents. Like many an executive mom, Rania tries very hard to be there for her children at bedtime. "I make it a point, and find comfort in tucking them into bed at night, reading their favorite bedtime stories and reciting verses from the Koran to them as they sleep," she has said.

Abdullah, on the other hand, likes to unwind, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, by cooking. "You name it, he can cook it. Steak, fish, Chinese, Japanese.... He's a very good cook," says Prince Zeid. "He had to learn when living alone during various military training courses abroad. And he loves to whip up something for his friends."

On Fridays, the one-day Jordanian weekend, the family escapes to the royal seaside residence on the Red Sea in tiny Aqaba, an ancient city once preferred by Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Here, they water-ski, ride motorbikes into the desert, or the queen jogs on the beach. "It's part of my job," Rania has said, "to make sure His Majesty gets some peace and time off."

And what about Rania's peace and time off? A queen's work, apparently, is never done. ■