

Queen as working girl



Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

Queen Noor of Jordan has achieved the improbable — she's a dutiful Arab wife who says what she thinks. But the former Sixties radical admits it wasn't easy at first

A FEW years ago, as Queen Noor was racing out of her Washington hotel to give her first political speech, the phone rang. "It was my husband. He said: 'I've just realised the position I've put you in and I've taken a Valium.' And for the first time I got very nervous because I thought: 'My goodness, if he's feeling nervous...'"

The speech, at Georgetown University, was a success, if a surprise. "It went down as a bit of a shock because the assumption was I would be talking about fluff — *The Washington Post* sent a style section reporter to cover it."

Since that day, Queen Noor has assumed an increasingly political role, becoming a spokeswoman in the maelstrom of the Middle East for the tiny desert Hashemite kingdom she adopted upon her marriage to King Hussein of Jordan in 1978. She has sought to prove herself as hardworking and serious, fighting to correct the original tabloid impression of her, as she puts it, as an "imperious, frivolous, irresponsible jet-setter".

Last week she was in England to address the Cambridge Union on the Middle East peace process. Dressed in a severe pinstripe trouser-suit, it was clear she meant business. Her speech was articulate, even entertaining at times, and she coped well with the questions — some of them tortuous — put to her by the undergraduates.

The role of Queen Noor al-Hussein (her name means "Light of Hussein") is unprecedented in every way. As the first American-born queen of an Arab Muslim country, she has shared some of the duties of her husband to an extent unheard-of in the region and even elsewhere in the world. "At that time you wouldn't have found any other non-elected wife of a head of state speaking out on any of the political issues that [my husband] has encouraged me to speak out on... The only person who has really come close is Mrs Clinton."

Although the Jordanian royal family prides itself on its accessibility, this does not necessarily include the media. Organising an interview with Queen Noor is a complicated business — partly because she is surrounded by the usual hullabaloo of royal protocol and partly because she is so busy. After weeks of negotiation, I had arranged to interview

her during her visit to England. My questions were vetted through several stages — I was strongly encouraged not to ask anything of a personal nature — and I was interviewed at length by her press secretary. Hoping that the Queen herself would be more relaxed, I had gone along with the process.

The morning of the proposed meeting dawned and still I had no idea when, where, or even whether, it would take place. Eventually the phone rang and I was told to get myself to a central London hotel where a car would collect me and take me to Her Majesty's house in the country — on one condition. For security reasons, on no account was I to reveal where her house was located or anything about it — not its shape, its colour or anything about its internal decoration. "You can say it's in England if you like," her press officer said.

ON OUR arrival the photographer, his assistant and I were hurried through the building into a spacious sitting-room. It is 11.30am and we are told that Her Majesty will greet us at noon. We are left with a bowl of nuts and some Arabic coffee. Midday passes, then 1pm then 1.30. Various characters drift in and out.

After two hours, we have registered every detail of the room but are reminded once again to reveal nothing. "Can I just say there's a xxxxx?" I ask the press officer. "No," she says. "Can I say 'Her Majesty sat on a sofa' — if she does?" Permission is granted.

Eventually, soon after 1.30, Her Majesty slips unobtrusively into the room through a side door. No one accompanies her. Dressed in a pistachio-coloured soft-wool twinset, knee-length skirt and high heels, she is slim and elegant with firmly lacquered hair, these days of a darker blonde. She is effusively apologetic. "My son arrived from the United States at five in the morning for a small break from school," she says, in her strong American accent. "He was just beginning to surface from his jet-lag when you arrived and I thought you would probably understand that I would want to start the day with him..."

We move to the table — not the sofa — for the interview. A silent minion delivers pineapple juice and a plate of raw vegetables. Instead of insisting on the list of prepared questions, Queen Noor allows a normal conversation, focusing on her work but also permitting discussion of her family and her feelings.

Only 26 at her marriage, she inherited eight stepchildren and a way of life that was completely alien to her. I ask her how she managed to



Queen Noor, formerly known as Lisa Halaby 'We were a relatively normal, moderately dysfunctional late-20th-century family'

adapt: "I didn't think about it too much. I followed my instincts and my husband showed enormous confidence in me and just set me free. On occasion, in the early days, I would seek out a little bit of guidance and he would say: 'I have complete trust in you.'"

I suggest to her that this may be the best way of learning; she looks slightly doubtful. "It's a rough way of learning because you learn everything on your own in the hard way and, in my case, there was no structure and no guidance, and no very specific and rigid code of conduct or protocol... I began by establishing an office just after I married. Having always been a working woman, it seemed to be a natural and logical first step. But it was unheard-of."

Although much is made of her all-American upbringing, the former Lisa Halaby does, in fact, have Arab roots. Her father, who served in the Kennedy Administration and is the former President of Pan American World Airways, is of Syrian descent. Because of the nature of his work, the family moved often as Lisa, the eldest of three children, was growing up.

"We were a relatively normal, moderately dysfunctional late-20th-century family. We were not terribly, terribly close. On the other hand we were not the other extreme either. Because there were so many moves and changes in our lives, we learned to adapt in different ways... I had to become self-reliant, I had to be able to move between different com-

'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'. That often runs through my mind when I'm thinking of how my family and my friends are looking at me, never having time to see them /

munities and to fall back on my own individual resources... I grew up with a very strong set of values and work ethic."

Her childhood imbued her with a resilience that has served her well in subsequent years. Intelligent and independent, she passionately espoused the causes of her time, demonstrating against the Vietnam War and marching with Martin Luther King.

After her graduation from Princeton University, where she studied architecture and urban planning, she left the United States, first to work for an architectural firm in Australia and then for a British firm which was re-planning the city of Teheran. "I had a rich and diverse working experience before I married... so when I began my life with my husband and his family, I already had an identity of my own... I could feel secure in myself and not dependent and helpless."

She met King Hussein, who had ruled the kingdom since she was one year old, while working in Jordan on a blueprint for an Arab air university. His third wife, Queen Alia, beloved to the king and the country, had recently been killed in an air crash, and at first her replacement was viewed with some suspicion. Seemingly overconfident, Queen Noor was criticised by the more conservative elements of Jordanian society. I ask her if she responded by just getting on with the job in hand, realising that she could not please everyone all the time?

"Yes," she laughs. "I've actually said it in those words, sometimes even a little bit more colourfully."

Nevertheless, I prompt, she must have found it all very isolating at times. "I was used to being on my own and that was excellent preparation, because otherwise I could have felt very isolated and very cut-off and even under siege at times..."

It is hard to convey the extent of her work. Her entry in *International Who's Who* does not even attempt to list all of the dozens of organisations for which she works, simply mentioning her "numerous" honorary doctorates and awards for promotion of environmental conservation and awareness, the economic and social development of women, children and communities, cross-

cultural exchange, international understanding and world peace.

Of course, this could mean anything. She could be little more than a nominal figurehead, sitting at home polishing her nails all day and grazing through the occasional grand lunch. In fact, she describes herself as a workaholic, taking virtually no holidays and often working an 18-hour day. "Our lives are pretty dull by comparison to what people would like to think. I really do spend a disproportionate amount of time sitting at a desk... There are times when I worry — what's that expression? — 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'. That often runs through my mind when I'm thinking of how my family and my friends are looking at me, never having time to see them..."

Now 45 and the mother of four children, she still works incessantly. I ask her whether she ever craves an hour to herself. "Yes," she admits bluntly, "but even if it means that I am overworked and unfit and even a frustrated — well, a less than ideal — parent, I feel that I'm far more fortunate to be able to be involved as I am and I feel and I hope and I pray that that is also going to be of greater benefit to my children. It has been of immeasurable benefit to the quality of my marriage as well and the partnership, if you will, that my husband and I have. So it's less than ideal in many respects, and not entirely comfortable much of the time, but I feel while I have the physical energy and the intellectual resources that I should use them to the maximum."

No one these days doubts her dedication and commitment to Jordan. The Gulf War, while temporarily damaging King Hussein's reputation in the West due to his refusal to condemn Saddam Hussein, actually soldered Queen Noor's position. Despite her background, there was no question that she would support the US stance and she earned respect as a woman loyal both to her husband and her country.

There is no false modesty about Queen Noor. She is well aware of the impact she has had on her adopted country. "I am very gratified that some of the initial efforts I made, however unconventional for a person in my position, have become a part of the fabric of the country."

The Noor al-Hussein Foundation occupies most of her time. Through it she oversees development projects, many of them addressing the causes of poverty and unemployment. It seems that she is driven not only by a desire to "make a positive difference" but also by a determination to prove to Jordanians that she deserves her role. If she projects a slightly over-saintly, formidably serious image at times, it seems to be a price she is prepared to pay. "Having been raised in the United States, I felt that my title and my position within the Royal Family was a responsibility, not an entitlement."

So you felt you needed to earn your place? "I certainly felt I needed to earn it. I always will feel that way. That's just the way I was brought up."

Feeling almost ashamed to draw any comparison between this sober monarch and some of the more colourful elements of our own Royal Family, I wonder aloud how she has managed to avoid the pitfalls to which her British counterparts have been prone. She accepts the analogy with dignity, carefully choosing her words. "The celebrity component is nowhere near as strong in our society, simply because the nature of the struggle of our country... is so compelling."

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