

Unhappy Yemen

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I left for Yemen as Obama was insisting that 'large chunks' of the country were 'not fully under government control', after Senator Joseph Lieberman had cheerfully announced that it was a suitable target for war and occupation. The sad underwear bomber who tried to blow up the Amsterdam flight on Christmas Day had triggered a new interest in the country, and in al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), by claiming that while he was converted to hardcore Islamism in Britain, his crash course in suicide terrorism, mercifully inadequate, had been provided by AQAP somewhere in Yemen.

Yemen is a proper country, unlike the imperial petrol stations dotted across other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, where the ruling elites live in hurriedly constructed skyscrapers designed by celebrity architects, flanked by shopping malls displaying every Western brand, and serviced by wage-slaves from South Asia and the Philippines. Sana'a, Yemen's capital, was founded when the Old Testament was still being written, edited and collated. It's true that the new Mövenpick hotel in the heart of the city's diplomatic enclave is reminiscent of Dubai at its worst - when I was there it was pushing its Valentine's Day Dinner Menu - but in Yemen the elite is careful and doesn't flaunt its wealth.

The old walled city was rescued from extinction-via-modernisation by Unesco (and later the Aga Khan Trust) in the 1980s, and the old wall rebuilt. The ninth-century Great Mosque is currently being restored by a team of Italian experts working with local archaeologists who are uncovering artefacts and images from a pre-Islamic past. Whether they will manage to locate a small structure said to have been built on the same site during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime remains to be seen. Sana'a's architecture is stunning, like nothing else in Arabia or anywhere else in the world. Its buildings - skyscrapers eight or nine storeys high - were constructed in the tenth century and renovated 600 years later in the same style: lightly baked bricks, decorated with geometric patterns in gypsum and symmetrical stone carvings (wood was unavailable or in short supply). What is missing are the hanging gardens on every floor that gripped the imagination of medieval travellers.]

The net result of the West's worries about the AQAP effect is that the US will send \$63 million in aid to Yemen this year. A fifth has already been earmarked for weaponry, much of the rest will go to the president and his cronies, and some into the pockets of the military high command. What's left will be fought over by the bosses of different regions. (The sum doesn't include the Pentagon's remittance for counterterrorism, which last year amounted to \$67 million.) A Yemeni businessman told me that he'd been taken aback a few years ago when the then prime minister, an apparently respectable and moderate man, demanded a 30 per cent rake-off from a deal he'd been negotiating. Seeing the shock on the businessman's face, the PM reassured him: 20 per cent of that was for the president.

I wondered how serious the threat from AQAP really was. How many members of the organisation were in the country and how many were visitors from the other side of the Saudi border? Abdul Karim al-Eryani, a 75-year-old former prime minister and still an adviser to the president, received me in the large library in the basement of his house. He spoke interestingly and at length about Yemeni history, stressing the continuities between pre-Islamic and Islamic cultures in the region. He complained that the Arabic dialect spoken by the bedouin of Nejd (an area now part of Saudi Arabia) had been the largest single source for the modern Arabic dictionary at the expense of the real root of

the language, the dialect used by the Sabeans (who lived in what is now Yemen), 5000 words of which were excluded by the dictionary-makers. Later he told me that thanks to the Nigerian bomber he had been visited by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Friedman, having asked his questions, went back to the US and told his readers that the city 'was not Kabul ... yet', but that AQAP was a 'virus' that needed urgent attention before the spread of the disease became uncontrollable. He didn't speculate on the cause of the infection. But when I asked Eryani to estimate the size of AQAP, his response was a mischievous smile. 'Three or four hundred?' I pressed. 'At the maximum,' he replied, 'the very maximum. The Americans exaggerate greatly. We have other problems, real and more important.'

His view was reiterated by Saleh Ali Ba-Surah, the minister for higher education, a grandee educated in East Germany, like many others from what until 1990 was the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, the southern part of the present state. The two parts of what now constitutes the Republic of Yemen – ruled over for the past 20 years by Ali Abdullah Saleh, who, like Mubarak and Gaddafi, is grooming his son to succeed him – were for most of the last century representatives of strikingly different sociologies. While armed tribes dominated the northern highlands where Sana'a is situated, workers, intellectuals, trade unionists, nationalists and, later, Communists were strong in Aden and its hinterland.

The country had been united centuries earlier under the leadership of the Zaidi Shia imams, whose temporal power was dependent on tribal loyalty and peasant acquiescence. Southern Yemen broke away in 1728; an expanding British Empire then occupied Aden and its coast in 1839 (the same year it began its occupation of Hong Kong). The limping Ottoman Empire snatched a chunk of northern Yemen soon afterwards, but had to give it up after the First World War. Under the benign gaze of the British, the imams of the Hamid-ed-Din family took back control of the North. In 1948 the ruler, Yahya Muhammad, was assassinated by one of his bodyguards and his son Ahmad, a fierce isolationist, took over. For him the choice was simple: his country could be dependent and rich or poor but free. As he became more and more eccentric – drugged on morphine and spending most of the day with his cronies in a neon-lit room playing with the toys he had been accumulating since he was a child – discontent mounted. There wasn't a single modern school or railway station or factory in the country and scarcely any doctors.

Bets were placed as to whether the imam's exiled brother would return and bump him off or whether Nasser's supporters in the army would lose their patience first. Ahmad was opposed to Nasser's Arab nationalism and in 1960, at Saudi instigation, had the state radio station broadcast a denunciation of Nasser that was bound to elicit a reply from Egypt. Cairo Radio declared war, but before the issue could be decided Ahmad died. Within a week the chief of the bodyguard, al-Sallal, joined nationalist military officers to seize power. The imamate had ended. In Aden thousands demonstrated their support for the new regime, simultaneously making it clear that Britain's continued colonial occupation of the South would be resisted. Fearful of both radical nationalism and its possible Communist backers, Washington and London decided that the imams must be restored to power. The British, desperate to teach Nasser a lesson to avenge the humiliation of Suez, were far more gung-ho than the United States. The Americans' main worry was that the Yemeni infection might spread to the rest of the peninsula and that, if the Saudi intervention backfired, nationalist currents might sweep Saudi Arabia itself, severely damaging the monarchy. The Saudis began to nurture the imams' supporters and woo conservative Northern tribesmen with a combination of primitive Islamism and cash.

The political and military leaders of the new state in the North were weak and confused. Nasserite intellectuals in the government took advantage of this indecision and finally persuaded the army to appeal directly to Nasser. The Egyptians, with Soviet and Chinese support, dispatched an expeditionary force of 20,000 soldiers. A lengthy civil war fought by Cold War proxies – to put it

simply, Saudis v. Egyptians – followed, costing 200,000 Yemeni lives and leaving the North a complete wreck. The Egyptians were men from the Nile valley and the mountainous terrain was alien to them. Convinced of their invincibility, they failed to take advice, treating their local allies as both inferior and irrelevant; and as the civil war reached a stalemate and opposition to Egyptian methods that included the use of chemical weapons increased, working-class dissent in Sana'a and Taiz was brutally crushed. The war ended in an unsatisfactory compromise in 1970. The Egyptians had emulated the Saudis by trying to buy off the tribes, with the result that their power was greatly enhanced in the new dispensation, as was that of sundry divines and preachers. The war had cost the Egyptians a million dollars a day and the lives of 15,000 soldiers, with three times that number wounded. The subsequent demoralisation of the army may well have contributed to its defeat in the Six-Day War. In any case, Israel's blitzkrieg in June 1967 sounded the death-knell of Arab nationalism.

The civil war caused many left-wing nationalists and Communists in North Yemen to flee to Aden. There, British soldiers, French veterans from Algeria and Belgian mercenaries were recruited by Colonel David Stirling's company, Watchguard International Ltd, for operations behind enemy lines. In the South too the nationalists were divided, with Cairo backing the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY) and more radical groups congregating under the banner of the National Liberation Front (NF). Both were determined to expel the British, while the British, determined to hang on as long as they could to a strategically important base, increasingly resorted to imprisonment without trial and torture. In 1964 Harold Wilson had said that British forces would remain in the region but that power would be handed over in 1968 to the so-called Federation of South Arabia, in which he hoped that the Adenese would be kept under control by sultans from the hinterland.

The plan backfired badly after whole villages were bombed into oblivion by the RAF. As Bernard Reilly, a long-serving colonial officer who had spent most of his life in Aden, put it: 'Pacification of a country unaccustomed to orderly government could not be effected without collective punishment of collective acts of violence such as brigandage.' The leaders of these tribes were unwilling to be pacified. A ferocious struggle now began in the streets of the Crater, one of the oldest areas of Aden. By 1967 the NF were using bazookas and mortars in Aden and targeting military and RAF bases. The Labour government decided to cut its losses and withdraw. 'Regretfully,' a letter from the Colonial Office informed its native collaborators, 'protection can no longer be extended.' The Israeli victory in June 1967 did not help the British since the NF was not an Egyptian pawn, unlike FLOSY, which was gravely weakened. An NF-led general strike paralysed Aden and guerrilla attacks compelled the colonial administration to cancel the celebrations scheduled to mark the queen's birthday. Six months later, on 29 November 1967, with the closure of the Suez Canal depriving Aden of much of its value to the British, the British finally left, after 128 years. As Humphrey Trevelyan, the last high commissioner, waved a hurried farewell from the steps of the plane returning him to London, the Royal Marine Band from HMS Eagle played 'Fings Ain't Wot They Used To Be'.

The National Liberation Front had won, but they had no plan for rebuilding the country. Its members came from different currents of the left: pro-Moscow, Maoists, supporters of Che Guevara, a few Trotskyists and orthodox nationalists. All immediately agreed to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and this was done on 3 December 1967. But disputes soon began. The NF Congress passed a motion put forward by the radicals that demanded agrarian reforms, an end to illiteracy, the formation of a people's militia, a purge of the civil and military apparatus, support for the Palestinian resistance and close co-operation with Russia and China. The new elected leadership was dominated by the left. An attempted putsch by the army almost led to civil war as armed guerrilla detachments surrounded the military camps and disarmed the officers. By May 1968 it was clear that the right wing of the NF had no intention of implementing the conference resolutions. A 14 May

Movement was created to mobilise support for the reforms. There were clashes with the military followed by a strange hiatus reminiscent of the July Days of 1917 in Petrograd. The right thought it had won and boasted that 'the organisers of the 14 May Movement, having read a lot of Régis Debray, imagined that they were carrying out "a revolution within the revolution".' But within a year the left had triumphed.

The 1970 constitution proclaimed the country a socialist republic – the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen – against the advice of both China and the Soviet Union. (In October 1968 the Chinese foreign minister, Chen Yi, himself then under siege by Red Guards, had told a visiting South Yemeni delegation that 'your every claim about constructing socialism and raising slogans which are impractical and provocative offer, by their nature, sharp weapons to your adversaries.') What followed was tragically predictable. An economically backward state embarked on creating structures that institutionalised austerity and universalised scarcity. Promoting industrialisation via state enterprises might have been helpful had it not been for the imposition of a total ban on petty-commodity production. To this was added a state monopoly of all modes of communication, strict control over what was allowed to be said or published, and the exclusion of all parties other than the Yemeni Socialist Party. It was a mockery both of socialism and of the promises made during the anti-colonial struggle. What is undeniable is that the new system of universal education and healthcare as well as the advancement of women marked a huge step forward for the region. Saudi Arabia was not pleased.

In due course the neighbouring powers – North Yemen, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia – set to work with Reaganite encouragement on a counter-revolution from within, of the sort then being attempted in Nicaragua with the Contras. In Ali Nasser, a crude, semi-literate apparatchik obsessed with absolute power, who became the PDRY's president in 1980, they found an instrument. For more than a year the president plotted against the charismatic Abdul Fateh Ismail, his predecessor as president and a leader of the struggle against the British, who had resigned for 'health reasons' and taken a long break in Eastern Europe. Ismail still had many supporters among the leadership when he returned from Moscow in 1985, and was soon re-elected to the PDRY Politburo, where he commanded a majority.

On 13 January 1986, Ali Nasser's car was seen outside the Central Committee building (a replica of similar monster structures in Eastern Europe), where a meeting of the Politburo had been scheduled. But Ali Nasser didn't appear at the meeting. Instead his well-built bodyguard, on heavy drugs and carrying a Scorpion machine-gun, entered the room and shot dead the vice-president, Ali Ahmed Antar, before shooting everyone else in the room. Four key Politburo members, including Ismail, were killed, together with eight Central Committee members. Elsewhere, Ali Nasser's men were creating havoc: Ismail's house was destroyed by mortar shells and there was wild shooting around the city. At 12.30 p.m. Aden radio and TV broadcast that the president had circumvented an attempted coup by the right and that Ismail and his collaborators had been executed. Three hours later the BBC Arabic Service announced that the 'moderate and pragmatic' president of Yemen had foiled a coup attempt by hardline Communists. This was the line adopted by most of the Western media, which wrote of it as the defeat of a Moscow-backed attempt to further radicalise the country, this despite the fact that Gorbachev was now in power. As news of the killings spread in Aden crowds began to gather and troops recaptured the Ministry of Defence and its operations room from Ali Nasser's men. Battles raged throughout the night. Numerous unarmed Party members, trade unionists and peasant leaders were killed by Nasser's troops: lists had been prepared well in advance. But after five days of heavy fighting, the 'pragmatic moderates' were defeated. Ali Nasser fled to North Yemen and later Dubai. He now runs a 'cultural centre' in Damascus, where he has various business interests.

The shoot-out at the Central Committee meeting was the beginning of the end for the PDRY. The

Western proxies in the region who had organised the whole affair now spoke of the socialist gangsters who were running the country. As the Soviet Union was collapsing negotiations began with the North and the country was quickly unified in May 1990 with a five-member presidential council representing both sides. The following year a new constitution lifted all restrictions on freedom of speech, press and association.

The unification did not work out well. The Southerners felt their interests had been betrayed, and constant bickering did not augur well for the future of the coalition government created after the election. Socialists from the South accused gangs backed by Ali Saleh, the former North Yemeni president, now president of the united country, of attacking their supporters in Sana'a and elsewhere. Relations rapidly deteriorated and there were skirmishes in the South between the remnants of the PDRY army and Northern troops. A short-lived but full-scale war erupted in 1994, with the full participation of jihadi groups and Osama bin Laden, who lent his support to Ali Saleh. The Southerners were crushed, not just militarily, but their culture and economy too. There were land grabs, urban property was stolen, women were pressured to veil themselves from head to foot ('If we didn't they called us prostitutes and there were many rapes. We were brutalised into this,' a woman whose face was uncovered told me in Aden).

When I arrived in Aden I realised that AQAP was the least of the country's problems. Most people in South Yemen are desperate to regain independence from the North. 'This is not unification but occupation,' I was told on numerous occasions. The people are leaderless and there are strong rumours in Sana'a that the old killer Ali Nasser is being readied for a political return by Ali Saleh, who sees him as a 'unifying figure'. Meanwhile demonstrations in villages and small towns see the Yemeni flag and Ali Saleh's portraits defaced and the old PDRY standard raised. Repression inevitably follows, further increasing the bitterness. On 1 March the security forces surrounded and destroyed the house of Ali Yafie, who had publicly burned an effigy of the president on the previous day. Yafie and eight members of his family, including his seven-year-old granddaughter, were killed. Government propaganda accused him of being an AQAP member.

On the night of 4 January the security forces in Aden surrounded the house of Hasham Bashraheel, the publisher-editor of Al-Ayyam: the newspaper, founded in 1958, had regularly reported on and published photographs of state atrocities. It had, for example, carried photos of the dead after security forces opened fire on ex-soldiers demanding their pensions, and the paper was banned in May 2009, although its offices continued to be a meeting place for journalists, intellectuals and civil rights activists. When the security forces surrounded the building supporters of the paper gathered there too, and shots were fired in the air to disperse them. Then mortar shells were fired: the publisher and his family, including two young grandchildren, were inside. Miraculously they survived by sheltering in a basement room. The next morning Bashraheel and his two sons surrendered in public view, to make it harder for the army to kill any of them. A local activist informed me that 'friends in the police' had told him that the security forces had two unidentified corpses in the boot of an unmarked car. If Bashraheel and his family had been killed, the other bodies would have been planted inside and identified as AQAP members shot during the raid. One guard employed by the family was shot dead as he tried to surrender. His father was arrested at the funeral a few days later. The publisher himself was charged with 'forming an armed group'. The British ambassador, Tim Torlot, has apparently sent a memo to the Foreign Office suggesting that the irresponsible independent media are the problem. My informant in Sana'a claims to have seen this document. Torlot is notorious in Yemen for having left his wife for a glamorous American who worked for the Yemen Observer, owned by Ali Saleh's press secretary.

I travelled through the South, from Aden to Mukallah, and when I saw Shibam I forgot about politics for a moment. This walled city of mud-brick skyscrapers, some of them more than a hundred feet high, is a living museum. No wonder Pasolini filmed much of his Arabian Nights here. He did more.

On his return to Rome he raved about the architecture till Unesco declared the city a World Heritage site. Last year, while they were photographing it from a hill overlooking the town, four South Korean tourists were killed by a suicide terrorist from the North. I asked locals about AQAP. One of them came close to me and whispered: 'Do you want to know where al-Qaida are based?' I nodded. 'In an office next to the president.' In both Sana'a and Aden I encountered similar views. On Christmas Eve the regime dropped bombs and released drones (with US guidance) on two Southern villages where, they claimed, Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American preacher who trained the underwear bomber, was hiding. They didn't find him but more than a dozen civilians were killed.

The regime has also faced a rebellion in the Northern province of Sa'ada, which borders Saudi Arabia. The highland population there is irritated by Wahhabi encroachments and, getting no help from the Sana'a government, decided to defend themselves. Tribal militias captured a few Saudi soldiers with the result that on 5 November last year the world caught its first glimpse of the Saudi Air Force in action (it should be the most powerful air force in the region after the US and Israel, but its planes usually rust away in desert warehouses). Ali Saleh obligingly describes the revolt as a Shia rebellion backed by Tehran, which had to be put down with force. But few believe this. The Yemeni army had embarked last August on Operation Scorched Earth, which destroyed villages and drove 150,000 villagers from their homes. Because of the news blackout and banning of relief organisations, the scale of government atrocities is unclear. Muhammad al-Maqaleh, a leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party and editor of the party's paper, the Socialist, managed to get some eyewitness reports and put them up on the web last September. He described a military air strike that killed 87 refugees in Sa'ada, and accompanied the reports with photographs. He was held without trial for four months, tortured and threatened with execution. Finally brought to court, he revealed what had been done to him. Sana'a is certainly not Kabul, but if the regime continues to use force on this scale new civil wars seem probable.

Tariq Ali

I See The Architecture of Yemen: From Yafi to Hadramut by Salma Samar Damluji (2007).

P.S.

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<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n06/tariq-ali/unhappy-yemen>