INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KWC-11

North Yemen: The Illusion of Development

c/o American Institute for Yemeni Studies
P.O. Box 2658
Sana'a, Yemen Arab Republic
30 November 1983

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, N.H. 03755

Dear Peter;

The following is a kind of overview of the politics, economy, and society of North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic). The purpose is to sketch in some of the major themes. Later reports will explore them in more detail, particularly those that touch on rural life.

Consider this a general introduction to the country.

* * *

If a Yemeni Rip Van Winkle had gone to sleep in 1962, the year of revolution, and reawakened in 1983, he would have found his world an altogether different one.

In 1962, more than 90 percent of the workforce made its living by an agriculture whose technology owed more to the 14th century than the 20th. The farmers tilled the rocky, dusty landscape with ploughblades pulled by donkeys or oxen, lived in their fortress-like stone houses without electricity or convenient clean water, and endured disease and poverty as they always had.

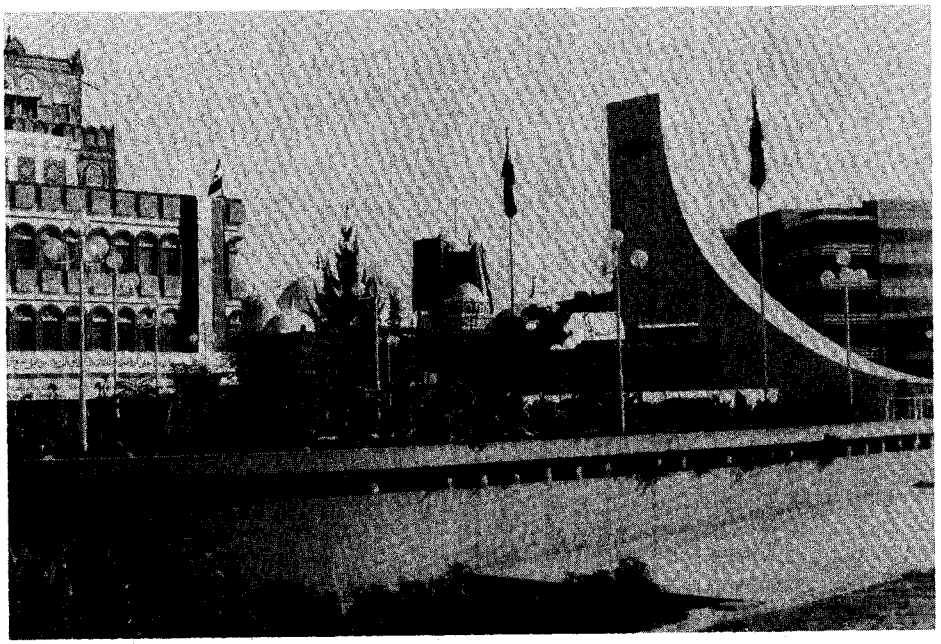
''It was a society overwhelmed with misery,'' wrote one observer.* ''In 1962, there were only fifteen doctors — all foreigners. There were 600 hospital beds in the whole country. Over 50 percent of the population had some kind of venereal disease; over 80 percent were suffering from trachoma. No money at all was spent on education by the state and less than 5 percent of the children attended the traditional Koranic schools. There was not only no North Yemeni doctor, but there were no modern schools, no paved roads, no railways, no factories. The average per capita income was $70 a year. There was nothing romantic about it; it was a very horrible place.''

The traditional rulers of North Yemen, the imams, had made some approaches to modernization. The Ottoman Turks, who departed the country in 1918 after an intermittent and incomplete

---

* Fred Halliday's Arabia Without Sultans (New York: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1979) is a rather strange book. Halliday is fiercely leftwing, almost hysterically so. He not only tells you what happened, but also what he thinks should have happened. He deplores the conservative direction taken by the revolutions in both North and South Yemen.

Kenneth Cline is a Village Reporting Fellow of the Institute studying peasant life in North Yemen.



The monument to the 1962 Revolution in Sana'a's Midan Tahrir (Liberation Square). I'm pretty sure that's a World War II-vintage Soviet self-propelled gun. The Russians supplied weaponry to the Republican side during the war, indirectly through the Egyptians; the Saudis kept the Royalist forces in the field.

rule, left behind a rudimentary telegraph system, which the imams maintained.

The Imam Yahya (ruled 1904-48), the grand old patriarch of the modern imams, installed telephone lines from Sana'a to both Hodeidah and Taiz. This was for government use, which at the time, meant the imam's own use. There was one newspaper, al-Imam, and one short wave radio station, both controlled by the imams.

Before the revolution, the Americans were at work on a road linking Sana'a, Taiz, and the small port of Mocha (once famous for its coffee exports). The Chinese were building a road to link Sana'a and the main port at Hodeidah.* In 1960, the Americans began work on a water system in Taiz, the first in the country.

The imams themselves had modern tastes in consumer goods. They stocked their palaces with such conveniences as radios, electric fans, clocks, hair dryers, bathrooms with running water, walkie talkie sets, telescopes, electric hotplates and gas stoves, and movie projectors.**

It was an exclusive club. Practically no one else in the country had any of these items.

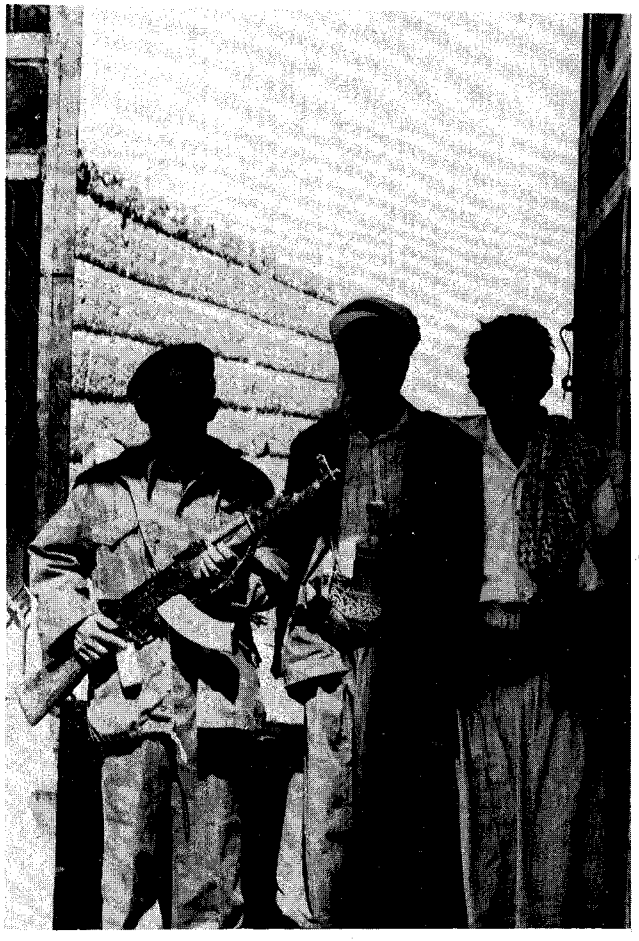
---

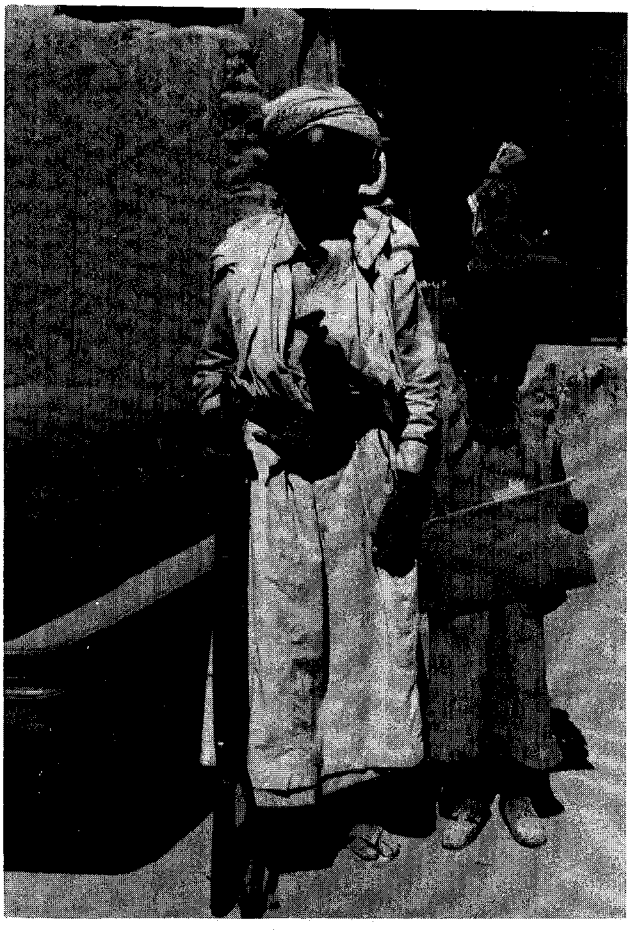
* The Russians completed new port facilities there in 1961.

** These are now on display at the National Museum in Taiz, a restored royal palace. Hypocrisy was rampant. The imams banned movies in the country but watched them in their own palace. They also banned alcoholic beverages but had abundant supplies of St. Pauli Girl's beer and French and Italian wines. They seemed to worry about body odor because there is an entire room filled with unopened bottles of Eau de Cologne Etoile. In a courtyard out back, there were caged baboons and lions. The rather sickly-looking ancestors of the imamic baboons now endure stick poking and rock throwing

The traditional and modern mix it up in Sana'a. The boy is wearing half of a tribal costume, the futah skirt with the curved janbiyya dagger at his waist and turban on his head, but with western shirt and jacket. The plastic sandals were probably made in Taiwan. The three women are all wearing the veil, or abayah, but the two in black are considerably more upper class than the one at top. But perhaps the times are a changing. Note the young girl in the warmup suit. I have seen young girls on their way to school wearing blue jeans under their black veils and capes.

All of that ended on the night of 26 September 1962 when rebellious army officers and troops reduced the imamic palace in Sana'a to rubble with artillery fire and sent the last of the dynasty, the Imam Muhammad al-Badr, scurrying off into the mountains to raise the tribes against the new republic. Eight years of civil war followed, probably killing about 200,000 Yemenis.





Thirteen years after the civil war ended in a Republican/Royalist compromise, all seems to be forgiven as a government soldier and two tribal-looking types pose in front of the Sa'ada police station. This northern city is still the citadel of Yemeni tribalism, but tribal bark might be worse than bite. The gentleman at right, also from Sa'ada, probably carries his bundug (rifle) around more as an ornament, like the janbiyya, than anything else.

Now, in 1983, the Yemeni Rip Van Winkle would see the cities of Yemen clogged with taxis and private cars, where practically no motorized vehicles had existed before. Farmers tool around the countryside in Toyota Land Cruisers. Air Yemenia, the government airline, owns a fleet of modern Boeing jets. Sleek needle-nose air force fighters sport about the Sana'a skies.

Sana'a and Sa'ada boast modern hospitals. A university continues to expand in the capital. All the major cities are linked by blacktopped roads. Electricity and television have come to both town and village. Diesel pumps are bringing irrigated agriculture to arid plains.

Among underdeveloped countries, the YAR now ranks relatively high, with a per capita income of nearly $430. Egypt, by contrast, has a per capita income of $394.

But take another look.

-- The infant mortality rate is 240 per 1,000. Only 20 percent of the population of 6.4 million has access to safe drinking water.

-- The literacy rate is only 18 percent. For women, it drops to three percent. Only 34 percent of children aged six to eleven attend primary school. For preparatory school (ages 12-14) the figure is four percent, for secondary school (ages 15-18) three percent. Eighty percent of all teachers are foreign, mostly Egyptian and Sudanese. There are still not enough teachers to go around so school attendance is not compulsory for children. Less than one-fifth of government employees have any formal education, and only three percent have been to a university.

There has been rapid progress, for sure, in the YAR. But development? That's another story.

* * *

At the root of all of Yemen's problems is the simple fact that the country produces practically nothing of interest to the world market.

Most of the YAR's foreign exchange comes from raw materials — cotton, raw hides and skins, and coffee. But cotton, mostly sold to the People's Republic of China (PRC), prospers only with extensive government subsidies. The Yemeni coffee industry has been declining for decades.

The performance of the embryonic manufacturing sector is even more dismal. In 1978-79, Yemen exported 18 tons of cookies, mostly to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY -- South Yemen); eight tons of candies; 1.5 tons of aluminum products; and 504 million bottles of soft drinks.

People in the YAR have money, mostly earned in the Gulf oil states, but have nothing to buy locally except farm produce; vanilla wafer cookies; two different brands of mineral water; milk and fruit juices; and a brand of laundry soap known as Tite (with a package almost an exact replica of the American-made Tide, which is also sold here).

As a result, an ocean of imports, about $2 billion worth in 1982, floods into the country. Whether it's a National tape deck from Japan or instant Quaker Oats from Holland, virtually everything necessary to sustain a civilized life has to be brought into the country. And people here do have a hankering for a more comfortable lifestyle.

The effect on the economy, though, is disastrous.

-- The balance of payments deficit, which was $350 million in 1982, could reach $400 million this year.

-- The inflation rate had climbed to over 40 percent by the end of the 1970s.

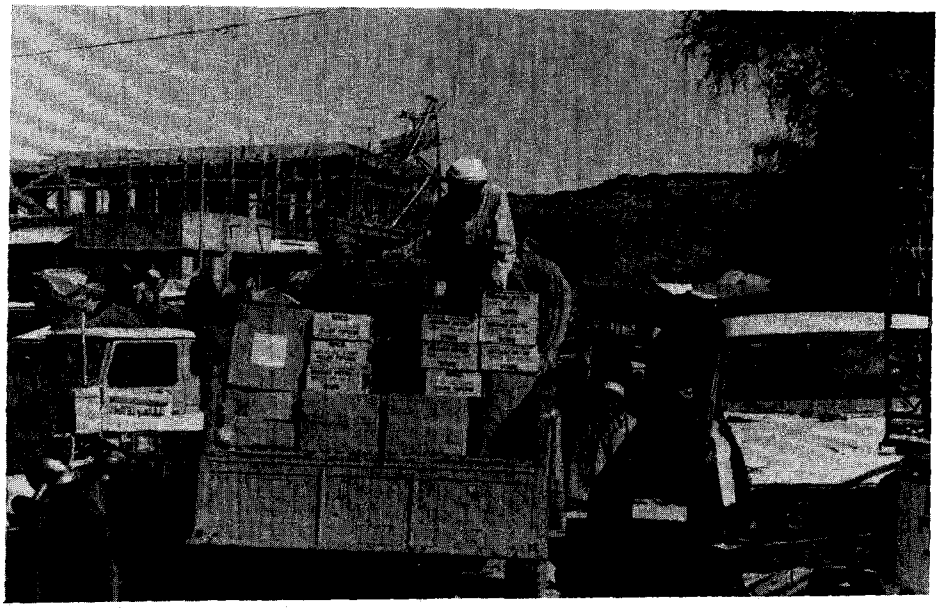
-- The government's budget deficit had jumped to more than 30 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 1981.

In terms of its economy, you might say that the YAR has scarcely developed at all.

''What modest economic growth Yemen has experienced over the 1970s was largely due to the infusion of external capital, as in remittances or development and budgetary aid, and primarily affected the modern sector,'' wrote one historian.* ''The far larger traditional economic sector has not kept pace with these developments and has largely stagnated over time.''

---

* Peterson, J.E. Yemen: The Search For a Modern State. London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1982.



Imports, imports. These men are trying to sell a truck-load of Bango Popcorn (from Schaller Iowa) at a suq outside Sa'ada. Many of the goods sold at this suq are smuggled in from Saudi Arabia to avoid the Yemeni import taxes. Legal or not, you see an awful lot of crates marked ''Jeddah.''

Looking at this statement in detail, remittances from Yemeni workers in the oil countries provide the major support for the YAR economy. It is estimated that the approximately 1.4 million Yemeni workers abroad (compared to about 1.2 million workers at home) sent back about $1.4 billion in 1978-79.

But that was the peak year. With the oil boom in the Gulf countries on the wane, worker remittances will drop in the future.

As far as external aid is concerned, Saudi Arabia provides the lion's share. Each year, the Saudis contribute SR (Saudi riyals) 345 million ($99 million at the current exchange rate of SR 3.48 to the dollar) in budgetary assistance to the YAR. The current YAR five-year plan anticipates nearly SR 20 billion in aid.

Needless to say, this gives the Saudis an enormous leverage over YAR politics, which is why they do it.

Next in line is the United States with its $28 million aid program, most of it devoted to agricultural development.

The Soviets provide very little in hard currency aid, but they have equipped the YAR military by way of concessionary loans. Most North Yemeni officers are trained in the Soviet Union or Eastern bloc countries.

Everyone else is here too. The PRC builds roads all over the place; the Kuwaitis operate a hospital in Sana'a; the West Germans and Dutch have major agricultural projects; the British also have an agricultural project and have put a health team in the Tihama; the South Koreans are undertaking some construction projects; and the French provide teachers.

But even with all this help, ''the state remains poverty-stricken,'' wrote Peterson. ''The government's inability

The traditional economy in Yemen is still oriented toward subsistence production. Above, a produce market outside Sa'ada. At right, butchers outside the city walls of Rada preparing to wrestle a cow to the ground before slaughtering it.

to meet its own budget without outside assistance, let alone underwrite development requirements, is chronic; its control over the economy remains only marginal.''

The YAR government is not even able to collect all the money due it. The country does have an income tax, but it is estimated that only 37 percent of the taxes due in 1982 were actually collected.

Most government revenue comes from customs duties. But smuggling, particularly from Saudi Arabia, takes a big bite of that. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated the

revenue loss from smuggling at about YR (Yemeni riyals) 600 million a year (about $130 million at the current exchange rate of YR 4.60 to the dollar).*

The government cannot get any help from the traditional agricultural sector of the economy where about 80 percent of the workforce is still employed. Over 90 percent of the cultivated area in the YAR is devoted to sorghum, millet, wheat, and barley. But this is all grown for local consumption, not for export.

Even so, Yemen has to import more than half of the grain it requires for bread.**

There is evidence that the migration of workers overseas and the flood of cheap food imports has hurt the agricultural sector. Between 1975 and 1980, 7.5 percent of the area under cultivation was abandoned, mostly in mountain terraces. Grain production fell by 14 percent during the period.

The government is now attempting to encourage domestic production by halting certain imports. Apples and oranges are presently being kept out of the country, to the disgust of the Yemeni consumer, in order to encourage grape cultivation in the north and banana growing in the Tihama. But I have seen imported apples for sale in the Sa'ada suq (the north is truly a lawless region).

It all seems pretty hopeless when you consider that Yemeni farmers cannot even produce enough eggs for the local market. Most eggs you find in the cities are from France, as are the frozen chickens, for that matter.

* * *

While Yemeni agriculture is generally in a holding pattern, or actually stagnating, one crop is booming. The only problem is that it is strictly for local consumption and does not earn any foreign exchange.

The crop is qat (Catha edulis, pronounced ''gat'' because the Arabic letter qaf has a hard ''g'' sound in Yemen), a mildly narcotic plant grown only in the mountainous regions of Yemen and East Africa. Somalia has recently banned qat and the somewhat Marxist region in South Yemen restricts its use. But in the YAR, it is perfectly legal, a genuine cultural institution.

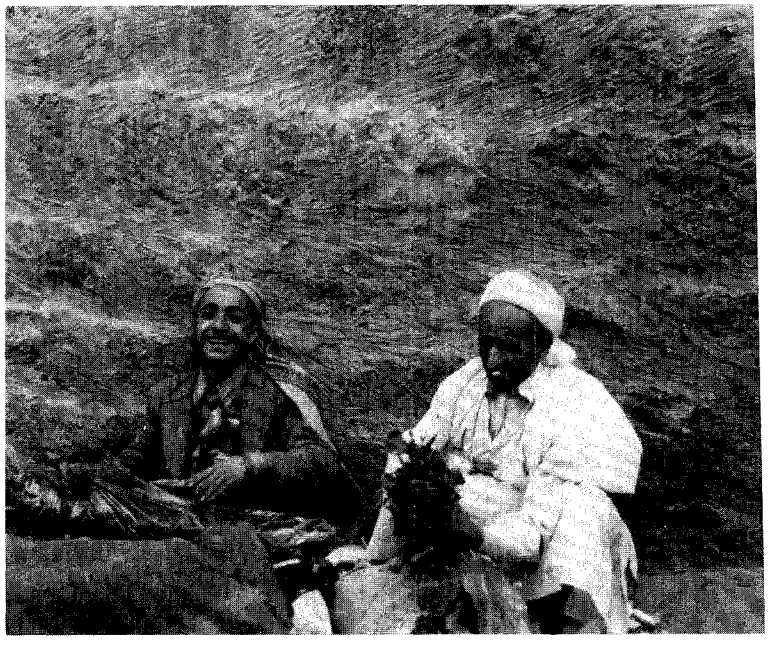
The use of qat in Yemen is, quite simply, universal. There are no distinctions between rich and poor, urbanite and peasant, or even male and female.

Every day around 1 p.m., men begin to leave their government offices or shops to prowl the suq for their daily

---

* The northern area around Sa'ada is notorious for this. Most cars used in this area do not have license plates because they are smuggled in from Saudi Arabia to avoid government taxes. In fact, this practice is prevalent throughout the country except in Sana'a, where the government exercises tighter control. I know a peasant family near Amran, about 60 kilometers north of Sana'a, that bought its Toyota Land Cruiser in Saudi Arabia. They said it was cheaper and less trouble than paying the customs tax and dealing with the Sana'a bureaucracy.

** According to a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) official I talked with, the Yemenis have considered establishing a big, irrigated wheat-growing project in the Jawf region (the arid northeast). The Americans have argued against it, pointing out that wheat can be bought at rock bottom prices on the world market and that high value fruits and vegetables would be a better investment.



Qat sellers in the town of Shibam, about 50 kilometers northwest of Sana'a. They wrap the harvested bushes in plastic for the convenience of their customers.

supply. Farmers put down their plows and scythes and head for their own qat terrraces to pluck some choice leaves.* The women wait for their men to bring some home.

By mid-afternoon, most of the population of Yemen is sprawled in their cushioned mufrajes (the traditional Yemeni living room for entertaining guests) or shop floors, golf ball-size wads in their cheeks. Even when the government offices and shops reopen around 4 p.m., the balls remain and continue to get bigger. The man behind the post office counter and the soldier guarding the foreign embassy both continue to suck the juice from the leaves. If they talk to you, their lips and teeth seem to be sprinkled with light green seaweed.

Qat chewing can go on long after dusk, whether it's done by a solitary shopkeeper or groups of men and women at their (strictly) segregated parties.

I've only met one Yemeni who professed not to like qat, and he is a western-educated (Vienna) agricultural technician from Aden.

My other Yemeni acquaintances seem to be compulsive qat consumers. Once I was negotiating with a young English-speaking Yemeni, a former Sana'a University student and now part-time taxi driver, for his services as a translator. We had arranged to visit his family's village one morning. He never showed up.

---

* Most of the qat bush is actually discarded during a chew. You only pick the small, soft leaves, not the dried-out larger ones.

A couple of days later, he came over to explain. He said he had been struck by a case of qat poisoning the night before we were supposed to leave Sana'a and had been taken to the hospital. He described the symptoms as losing control of his body and acting abnormal. He said it was caused by either insecticides on the leaves or just bad qat. He said this mishap had befallen him once before.

Of course, the entire time he was talking to me, he was maneuvering his speech around a big wad of qat.*

Every taxi or bus ride I've ever taken out of Sana'a for more than an hour's duration has been interrupted by qat hunts. At some point in the afternoon, the driver will pull over at a roadside suq so that he and virtually every other passenger can search for qat. During a taxi ride from Sana'a to Hodeidah, my driver stopped three times within the first hour looking for good qat, reasonably priced. He finally hit it right on the fourth try.

That was just before we descended the mountains into the Tihama. The hairpin turns and precipitous drops were one thing, but the driver took these at a rollicking speed. You see, qat tends to encourage an optimistic view of things.

The only other time in Yemen I have experienced such terror was on the way back from Hodeidah. The taxi had stopped at a gas station. But there were no pumps. Instead, a tanker truck was parked in front of a rundown shack and a man was filling up plastic canisters from a hose attached to the truck. A small boy filled up the vehicles from the canisters.

What was wrong with this picture? The man filling the canisters was squatting with the hose and calmly smoking a cigarette as he worked. The lighted end of the cigarette was not more than 12 inches from the canister. I could see the shimmering vapour trail rising from the canister to dance in front of the man's self-absorbed gaze, practically teasing him to lean forward and consign us all to instant oblivion.

I was paralyzed with indecision. I was sitting near the window. Should I wrench open the door and sprint for safety? Sometimes the fear of making a fool of oneself is stronger than the fear of death, so I just sat there and stared.

After a few minutes, the man calmly flicked away his cigarette. The passengers in the taxi exploded with a sigh of relief. Caustic comments, in Arabic, were directed at the station attendant. He was quite unruffled by the abuse.**

---

* When this fellow did not show up for a second appointment, I suspended my dealings with him.

** Lest you think I'm an alarmist, let me point out that gasoline stations are prohibited within the densely populated inner city of Sana'a. The reason? A careless smoker once blew up himself and a gas station.

Qat is best described as a mild amphetamine, in terms of its effects. After an hour of chewing the leaves, one begins to feel unusually alert. There is a mild sense of euphoria and one's problems become less important as the afternoon wears on.

Perhaps the secret of qat's social acceptance in Yemen is that it stimulates conversation. I have seen this effect in myself and others. You babble away with what appears to be admirable lucidity.

Qat is not addictive in the physiological sense, but there seems to be a definite psychological dependence. There are also physical side effects. Heavy qat use does produce constipation and, reportedly, temporary impotence in males. Unless you drink some strong tea or coffee afterward, you might experience a mild headache. Some people spend a sleepless night after chewing qat, but I have never had this problem.

The qat leaves themselves are bitter. Yemenis take frequent sips of water while chewing. I find a Pepsi to be a perfect antidote to the bitterness.*

The controversy over qat in Yemen has nothing to do with its health or psychological effects. It's the economic effects that give cause for worry.

Yemenis who like qat will often deplore the fact that the average Yemeni might spend between 50 and YR 100 a day on his habit. A hotel manager in Sa'ada, who had worked for 20 years in British factories and spoke English well, told me that all the money used for qat could be better spent on building factories. The previous day, he had invited me to chew qat with him.

Qat cultivation is often blamed for the decline in Yemeni grain production. There is no question that ''on moderately watered terraces, including many irrigated by traditional technology, no crop offers higher cash returns than qat ... farmers are more assured of realizing a profit from qat than from tomatoes or vegetables or even fruits.''**

But there are natural limits to qat cultivation. It requires regular irrigation and is extremely susceptible to ground frost. For that reason, it grows best in mountain terraces where it is protected from the winter wind. These terraces constitute a marginal agriculture at best.

Unlike the money spent on Japanese tape decks, the riyals used for qat stay in the country. Qat affects the country's trade deficit only in a very indirect way, i.e., to the extent that it displaces some traditional food crops, it encourages some more food imports.

On the other hand, some scholars have argued that qat cultivation helps stem the abandonment of terraces.***

The debate goes on. But it does not appear that qat can be blamed for a major share of Yemen's economic ills.

* * *

* My own use of qat is not entirely hedonistic. Social researchers in Yemen find they do most of their work during afternoon qat sessions, when people are relaxed and talkative. I only use qat if the social situation requires it.

** Tutwiler, Richard and Sheila Carapico. Yemeni Agriculture and Economic Change: Case Studies of Two Highland Regions. Sana'a: American Institute for Yemeni Studies, 1981.

*** See ''From Arabia Felix to Arabia Deserta?'' in the September 1983 issue of The Middle East magazine.

The YAR is one state that does not monopolize the means of coercion. These ordinary citizens, out for a Saturday morning stroll in a suq near Sa'ada, carry Russian Kalashnikovs slung from their shoulders. Most of their fellow tribesmen in the area do too.

North Yemen is a country with a very visible military. Armed soldiers in green fatigues, usually wearing red, blue, or green berets, are common sights in the major cities, whether guarding buildings or just walking around.

Army roadblocks, where drivers and passengers are scrutinized and passports of foreigners examined, slow down traffic on all the major roads. Military camps are often located just off these roads.

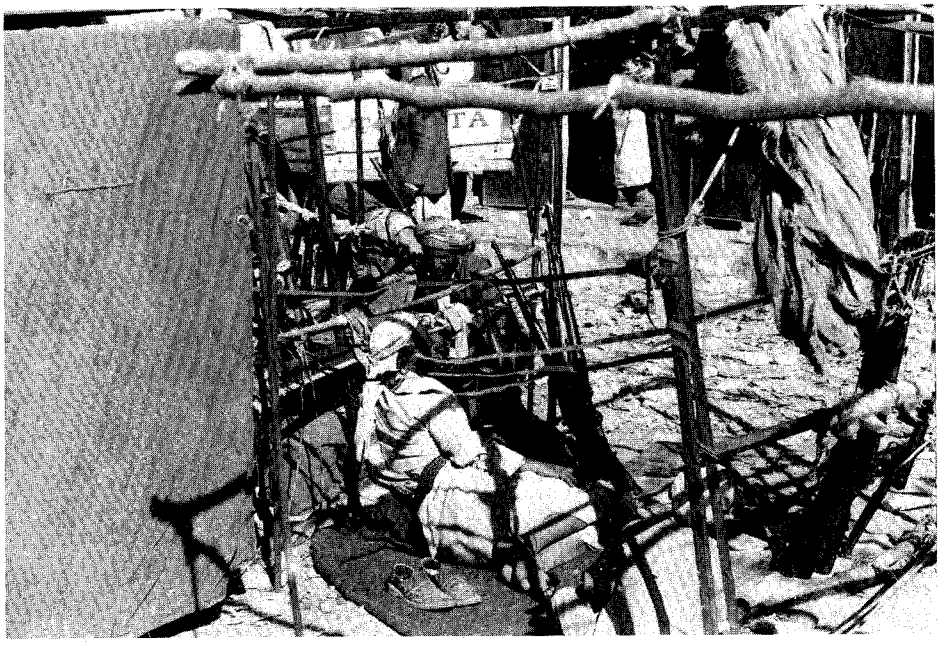
Jet fighters and helicopters display themselves frequently in the Yemeni skies.

The very picture of a strong central government keeping a close watch on things, right? Not quite.

In most important matters, the writ of the YAR government does not extend much farther than Sana'a. Yemen has always been characterized by political fragmentation and a weak central government. The post-civil war republic has not really solved that problem.

One can start by looking at the different regions and peoples that make up the YAR.

The political core of the YAR is the central highlands, which extends some 250 miles from the southern borders of Saudi Arabia to the northern border of the PDRY. The hilly, desert-like Hijaz gradually rises in elevation as it moves south from the Saudi border to form a central core of ancient volcanic mountains, the most distinctive feature of Yemeni geography. These mountains can rise to an altitude of 12,000 feet. The region's three major cities are Sa'ada in the north, Sana'a in the middle, and Taiz in the south.



The arms suq near Sa'ada. There are rows of stalls like this one with men selling rifles and submachine guns. I have been told that heavier weaponry is available as well, if you know who to ask. The government, of course, knows about this. Does it sleep well at night?

In April and May, the highlands receive monsoons from the Indian Ocean, and again from July through September. Because the rains are carried by northwesterly winds, the rainfall decreases as it moves north. The area around the southern city of Ibb, the richest agricultural region in the country, receives 40 inches a year, comparable to the American midwest. But northern Sa'ada gets only about eight inches.

Sorghum, wheat, barley, maize, and qat are the major crops in this region, all grown for local consumption rather than for export.

Historically, tribalism has been the dominant political and social mechanism in this area.

Like the Bedouins, the Yemenis think of their tribe as a group of families descended from a common ancestor. But the Yemeni tribe is better understood as a territorial grouping, based on villages and groups of villages.

Tribalism is strongest in the north, around Sa'ada, and weakest in the south, around Taiz and Ibb. The south has a long history of commercial relations with the former British port of Aden, now capital of the PDRY.*

---

* As western feudalism did, Yemeni tribalism tends to weaken with the rise of new economic classes. The tribal farmer owes his loyalty to his family grouping and to his tribal sheikh. But market forces give wealth, and then influence, to other men, men who might have before ranked rather low in the tribal hierarchy.

Sana'a, the seat of imamic power, has been the stronghold of the Republic since 1962. Whatever tribal feelings remain in this area, they have long since been overawed by the government's military power.* Any tribal threat to the Republic would most likely come from Sa'ada.

The tribes received a great boost from the civil war. When Nasser's Egyptians poured into the country to protect the new republic from the royalist counterrevolution, the Saudis, fearing Nasser's designs on their own country, subsidized the royalist tribes lavishly with guns and money. The Republicans subsidized their own tribal allies. Not a few sheikhs took money from both sides.

After the war ended in a Republican/Royalist compromise in 1970, and the Imam al-Badr departed for exile in England, the tribes did not have to give any of those weapons to the government. There are rumors that some sheikhs actually have tanks stashed away in the hills.

Some writers maintain that the Saudis discontinued their subsidies to the tribes after 1970. But a hotel manager I met in Sa'ada, who spoke English because he had worked 20 years in British factories, told me the sheikhs still receive the payments ''so they will be friendly (to the Saudis) if there is trouble.''

I have heard that the Yemeni government is extremely mistrustful of the Saudis, even though it accepts wagon loads of Saudi riyals.**

But just as the YAR government has become utterly dependent on Saudi aid, the tribal sheikhs and their followers might have become dependent on the oil boom prosperity that has come to Yemen since the mid-1970s.

The Sa'ada hotel manager said he doubted that the sheikhs would be effective fighters against the government nowdays. ''They've become too rich,'' he said, obviously meaning that men with much to lose do not undertake desperate military adventures.

Even if organized opposition to the government does not materialize in the north, a kind of individual anarchy still reigns there. The government has a police station perched on a hill in the middle of the old city in Sa'ada. But virtually every man walking the streets carries a submachine gun or ordinary rifle.

A few miles northwest of the city is a market known as the Suq at-tal. Along with Yemeni produce, Japanese television sets, and American popcorn, you can buy the firearm of your choice. There are stalls selling everything from Kalashnikov submachine guns to German Lugars. The merchants selling these items go about their business quite calmly, but will shoo you away if you try to take their picture.

These weapons are not just for show. There are many stories of foreigners who venture into the north and have their vehicles taken at gunpoint. This recently happened to a British

---

* Sana'a is the only place in the YAR where the government feels secure enough to prohibit citizens from carrying weapons. Police inspect cars at night looking for them. But I have been told that many Sana'a residents have guns in their homes. I have seen armed civilians strolling through the corriders of the Agricultural Ministry, and sometimes on the city streets. Once I took a taxi from Sana'a to Sa'ada. Two men concealed their submachine guns in the car before we set off.

** Ordinary people are too. A farmer I know near Amran told me that there is oil in Yemen, but the Saudis prevent the Yemanis from getting at it, obviously to kept them dependent.

aid team. Their Yemeni insurance company apparently balked at paying up.

An American woman I know discussed this incident with her own insurance agent before she bought insurance for her car. The agent assured her that his company would indeed pay up if her car was taken at gunpoint. He mentioned that a South Korean construction company working in the north had two of its cars stolen in that manner.

The atmosphere is a lot different in the southern portion of the central highlands. Cities like Taiz and Ibb come as close to bourgeois respectability as you will find in the highlands, outside of Sana'a. An industrious merchant class and a prosperous agriculture distinguish the south.

During the late 1970s, there was an insurrection in this area by the PDRY funded and supplied National Democratic Front (NDF). This led to a brief border war between the two Yemens in 1979. But the YAR mended its fences with South Yemen, which then withdrew its support for the NDF. The insurrection was crushed.

Except for this episode, the south has tended to to be amenable to the central government. During the civil war, there was little Royalist activity in this area. People from the south tend to see themselves as more modern and civilized than their ruder cousins to the north. During a taxi ride from Sana'a to Taiz, a young government employee from Taiz told me the people around Sa'ada have never learned to appreciate the Revolution, despite all that the government has done for them. The situation was different in the south, he said.

Although tribalism is no longer very strong in the Taiz area, there are religious differences that set it apart from Sana'a and Sa'ada.

Most Yemenis in the central highlands belong to the Zaydi branch of Shi'a Islam. The imams were Zaydi. But the Shafi'i branch of Sunni Islam is strong in the south and in the coastal Tihama.

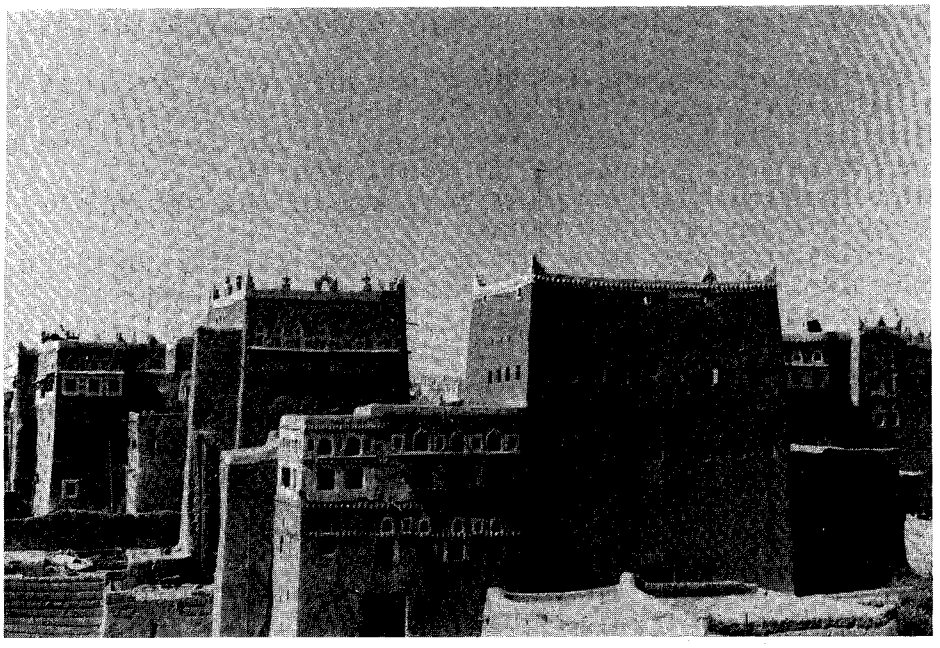
The theological differences between the Zaydis and the Shafi'is are actually not very great. The Zaydis are the most moderate of all Shiite groups and, on some matters, are closer to the Sunnis than to other Shiite sects. But political tensions between the two groups have been a problem in Yemeni history.

There are two other religious minorities in the highlands. Near the town of Manakha, west of Sana'a on the road to Hodeidah, there are groups of Isma'ili Muslims. Remnants of Yemen's ancient Jewish community, which probably numbered 65,000 before the 1948 exodus to Israel, live in Sa'ada and Raydah, a town north of Sana'a.*

Most people living in the highlands are of solid Arab stock. But there has recently been an influx of muwaldin (half castes — children of Yemeni fathers and Ethiopian mothers) into the major cities. For generations, Yemeni men have travelled to East African countries to improve their fortunes. The revolution in Ethiopia in the late 1970s drove many families back to Yemen.

---

* I have never seen a Yemeni Jew. But people who have say the women cannot be easily distinguished from Muslim women, since both are veiled. The Jewish men have distinctive curls in their beards. The remaining Yemeni Jews apparently still practice their ancient crafts, particularly silversmithing.



Aside from the physical beauty of its mountains and deserts, the glory of Yemen is in its architecture. Above, the skyline of Sa'ada as seen from the city walls.

While searching for a translator in Sana'a, I met a few of these muwaldin. They had learned English in the Ethiopian public schools. They strike me as a rather unhappy lot, suspended precariously between two cultures. The segregation of women in Yemeni culture irritates them as much as it does us. The Yemeni-Ethiopian I know best can't wait to get to the United States to resume his studies in English literature.

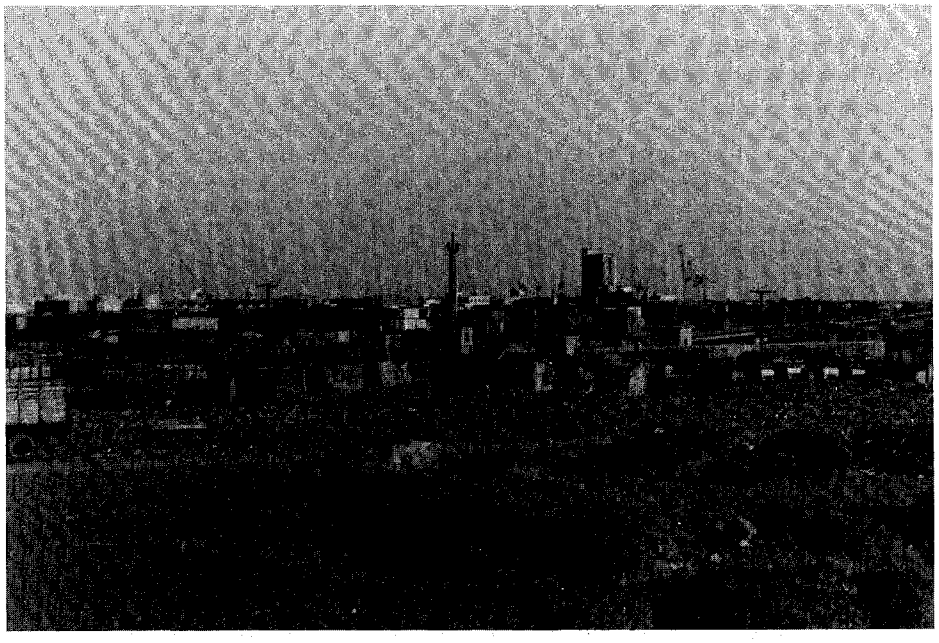
Yemen's Red Sea littoral is a landscape quite different from the central highlands. This region, known as the Tihama, seems to be a detached piece of East Africa mistakenly affixed to mountainous Yemen.

As one descends the Yemeni mountains on the Chinese-built road connecting Sana'a and Hodeidah, the vegetation in the wadis of the foothills becomes lushly tropical with ferns and banana trees.

In the arid Tihama plain itself, straggly clumps of brush are sprinkled sparingly across the rippled sand dunes. In the wadi basins, where there is some cultivation, villages of conical thatched huts are inhabited by black-skinned people.

Hodeidah, Yemen's major port, also has a large population of blacks, but struck me as largely an Arab town. It seems to be the most run down of Yemen's three major cities (the other two being Taiz and Sana'a). A filthy garbage-strewn waterfront, crumbling buildings, and listless poverty dominate my impression of Hodeidah.

North of town, the modern Russian-built port facilities provide a sharp contrast. This is the economic lifeline of Yemen, the funnel through which the flood of imports is directed to Sana'a and Taiz and then to the other towns and villages across the land.



Hodeidah port. The modern facilities were built by the Russians in the early 1960s.

Except for the commercial activity at Hodeidah, and the manufacturing efforts of a few government-run factories, the economy of the Tihama struggles along on the strength of an agriculture concentrated in seven major wadi basins. Cotton, oats, and millet are the major crops grown in these basins.

The wadi agriculture depends on runoff from the mountains because rainfall in the Tihama averages less than 10 inches a year, much of which evaporates quickly. Temperatures average 80 degrees F in the summer (compared to the lower seventies in Sana'a), but occasionally rise to 130. Humidity ranges from 50 to 70 percent.

Despite the harsh environment, some observers believe the Tihama holds the best prospects in Yemen "for future land development based on irrigation from surface and groundwater draining from the western slopes of the high mountains to the east of the Tihama."*

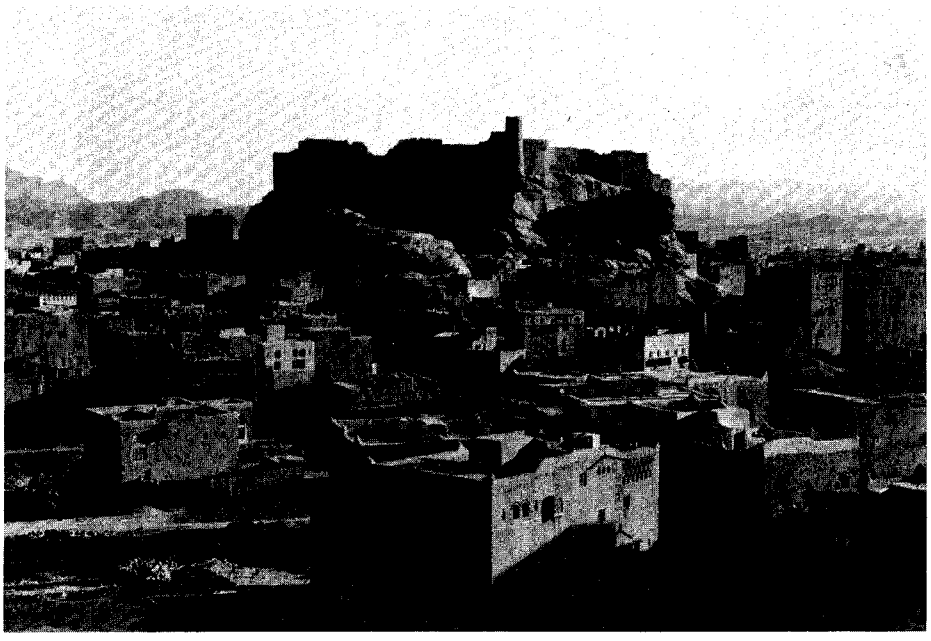
The government seems to favor the Tihama as a site for industrial development as well. The YAR's major industries -- textile and cement plants -- are located in the Tihama.

Politically, the Tihama has always been dominated by the governments based in the highlands. Geography alone would seem to ensure that. It's easy for an army to descend from the highlands into the Tihama, but far more difficult for one to march the other way.

The third major area of North Yemen is the mashriq.

---

* Nyrop, Richard F. Area Handbook for The Yemens. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977.



Rada, a city of the mashriq. The fortress dominates the center of town, probably built by the Turks. Some children warned me not to venture up there because of the boleess.

It is the eastern slope of the central highlands. At its northeastern edge, it melds into the great Rub al Khali (Empty Quarter) desert.

Like the Tihama, agriculture in the mashriq is dependent on runoff from the wadis. It probably receives less rainfall than the Tihama. But at 3,000 feet above sea level, it is more comfortable than the Tihama.

With no industry and only a marginal agriculture, the mashriq is the most underdeveloped area of the YAR.

Tribalism is still strong in this area. During the civil war, it was a major Royalist stronghold.

Considering its present arid and sparsely populated condition, it is ironic that the mashriq was once the site of a major pre-Islamic civilization. The Sabaean kingdom established its capital at Marib. Dams were built to catch the runoff from the wadis during the infrequent rains. The famous Marib dam irrigated over 4,000 acres.

Arab historians usually attribute the decline of South Arabian civilizations to the bursting of the Marib dam in 600 A.D. But the loss of the Indian Ocean trade was probably just as important.

Early in the Roman period, Greek sailors discovered that they could use the monsoon winds to travel from Alexandria to India and back. This eliminated the overland journey to Yemen by camel to pick up the spices, silk, textiles, and precious stones deposited there by eastern merchants.

The final blow was struck when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire in 325 A.D. The west no longer had need of the vast quantities of incense, the frankincense and myrrh grown in South Arabia, once used in pagan rituals.

* * *

A boy in the Ibb suq selling small toys and photographs of the Republic's president, Ali Abdallah Salih. There is a wide variety of Salih photographs to choose from in the YAR. You can have your deified president in military uniform or civilian clothes. He is usually shown bursting with joyous optimism, as here, although one might wonder why, given the problems of the country and his own precarious hold on power.

If tribalism is a largely theoretical threat to the government, political factionalism is not.

Yemen's modern political history has been exceedingly dismal. Three Yemeni rulers have been assassinated within the last 40 years -- the Imam Yahya (ruled 1904-48); President Ibrahim al-Hamdi (1974-77);* and President Ahmad al-Gashmi (1977-78). Since 1962, six prominent opposition politicians, government ministers, and tribal sheikhs have been murdered as well.

Three rulers, the Imam Muhammad al-Badr (1962), President Abdallah al-Sallal (1962-67) and President Abdal Rahman al-Iryani (1967-74), were deposed by military coups.

In fact, only one modern ruler, the ferocious Imam Ahmad (1948-62), ended his term by expiring of natural causes. Even he narrowly escaped assassination.

The great mystery in the country now is how the current president, Ali Abdallah Salih, has managed to remain in office since 1978.

When you first arrive in North Yemen, you wonder if

---

* Hamdi is a great favorite of western scholars. A young idealist, Hamdi seems to have been the only modern Yemeni ruler with a real commitment to economic development. Many of the projects that have come to fruition under Salih had their orgins in Hamdi's time. Several Yemenis have told me Hamdi was their favorite president. They felt his death (murdered by unknown assassins) was a great loss to the country.

Salih is a kind of Yemeni Mao Tse-Tung. His rugged, optimistic countenance is omnipresent, beaming down at you from the walls of government buildings, from taxi windows, from the windows of private shops and from the front pages of all Yemeni newspapers and magazines.* The man must have done a lot to deserve all that attention, you might think.

But far from being the Father of His Country, Salih led a relatively undistinguished career before Gashmi's death catapulted him into the top post.**

Salih comes from a modest background within the Sanhan tribe, north of Sana'a. He has minimal formal education. He began his military career as an enlisted man. His rise through the ranks seems to have been aided by his attachment to a patron -- Gashmi. When Gashmi was assassinated, Salih emerged as his successor.

Yemenis are beginning to give Salih credit for being shrewd. He has placed his seven brothers and fellow tribesmen in key military and security positions. I have not heard any talk in Sana'a about rumblings of discontent among the military.

But it would not be suprising if Salih spends a lot of time looking over his shoulder.

There is a popular joke in the country about Salih's prospects for dying a natural death.

Hamdi and Gashmi are in heaven. Hamdi says, ''I've brought the breakfast.'' Gashmi responds, ''I've brought the lunch. Where's Salih?'' ''Oh,'' says Hamdi, ''he's bringing the qat.''

My first day in Yemen, I got a ride into Sana'a with a young man who worked at the airport and spoke some English. I asked him if Salih was a good president.

''You know what the Yemen people do with their president if he's not good?'' he said. ''They kill him.''

* * *

Modern Sana'a consists of two distinct parts -- an old city of narrow, winding lanes and traditional architecture, and a new city sprawling outward from the old consisting of paved streets, traffic lights, and more modern structures.

In the center of town, where the old city ends and the new begins, is the Midan Tahrir (Liberation Sqare) containing a military monument to the Revolution, a wide plaza and fountain.

When I arrived in Yemen in the middle of September, the public was barred from the square by a fence running around its circumference. Behind the fence, workmen were scurrying to complete construction of the plaza and fountain in time for the Revolution Day ceremonies on the night of September 25.

The masons and laborers even worked through the

---

* This all seems designed to create an illusion of political popularity and legitimacy. I have decided that the most prominent feature of Arab politics is a hopeless confusion of appearances and reality.

** Salih does not appear to have had any role in Gashmi's death. Gashmi was killed in his office by a bomb, apparently planted by PDRY agents.

afternoons and into the early evenings, something unheard of in a country that cherishes its afternoon qat sessions.

Of course, the workers making this patriotic sacrifice were not Yemenis at all. They were PRC Chinese, unmistakable in their blue cotton Mao jackets and wide-brimmed straw hats. They worked like beavers and they got the job done, just in the nick of time.

On the night of the celebration, thousands of men gathered in the parking lot next to the square. Women fortunate enough to live near the square watched from their windows or rooftops. It was something like our own Fourth of July. Politicians made speeches, a band in green uniforms played martial music, acrobats performed and patriotic floats paraded around.

At the end of the ceremonies, the crowd surged into the plaza to see what the Chinese had built for them. They seemed to like the fountain the most. Men and boys stared mesmerized at the streams of water cascading through prisms of flashing colored lights. Every night now a large crowd gathers when the fountain is turned on.

The Yemenis have every reason to be grateful to the PRC Chinese. Not only did the Chinese build them a nice plaza and fountain, they also built the road from Sana'a to Hodeidah and the one from Sana'a to Sa'ada.

Other foreigners have built the rest of Yemen's paved roads, its few water systems, its medical facilities, and supplied its schools with teachers.

My question is: what have the Yemenis done to deserve all this attention?

The Saudi presence is the easiest to explain. Ever since Saudi King Abdal Aziz al-Sa'ud unified the Saudi tribes in the late 1920s and established the modern Kingdom, the Saudis have been concerned about their southern border.

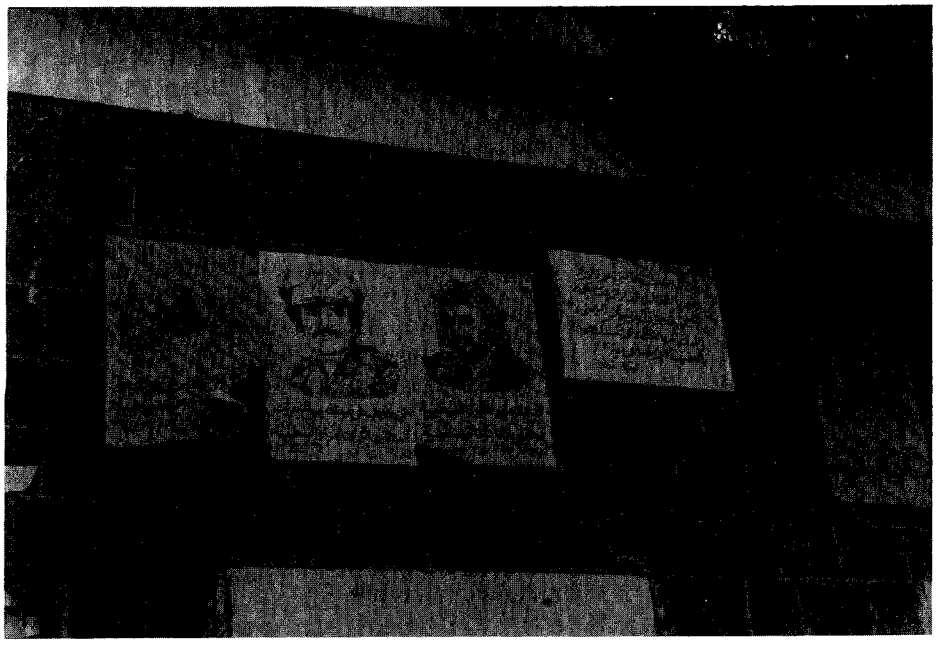
In 1934, the Saudis fought a war with the Imam Yahya and wrested the northern Yemeni provinces of Najran and Asir from him. The Yemenis never got the territory back.

It has often been noted that the 1962 Republic would never have survived without massive Egyptian military intervention on its side. The Egyptians came in soon after the Republic was declared and stayed until after their disastrous defeat in the 1967 war with Israel.

But at the same time, it was Saudi aid that kept the Royalist forces in the field. The legacy of Saudi involvement in Yemeni affairs continues to this day.

''During the civil war, the scope and direction of Yemeni politics was largely orchestrated from Riyadh and Cairo,'' wrote Peterson. ''Ever since, Riyadh has considered Yemen to lie within its sphere of influence and has acted accordingly. Saudi policy in the YAR suffers from an inherent paradox in goals. Riyadh would like to see a Sana'a government strong enough to serve as a buffer between itself and the PDRY radicals. But at the same time, it attempts to minimise the potential threat of the Peninsula's most populous state, and one culturally if not politically tied to South Yemen, by keeping the YAR weak and subservient.''

I have it from a good source that American policy



Foreign policy in the YAR.

in the YAR is largely ''derivative.''*

''It's a derivative policy because the US relationship with the Saudis is so vital that the Americans don't want to do anything to disappoint them,'' said one expert. ''The US government is trying to pretend they're not Saudi agents, but they're here in large measure because of the Saudis.''

In the late 1970s, anxious to demonstrate American ''resolve'' after Iran and Afghanistan, the US sold the YAR about 16 F-5 fighters and some M-60 tanks. The USOMC (United States Office of Military Cooperation) administers the program, but the Saudis actually paid for the equipment on behalf of the Yemenis. There is no other American military assistance program quite like that.

Most Foreign Service officers dealing with Yemen also have responsibilities for Saudi Arabia. The State Department desk officer for the YAR is also a political/military officer on the Saudi desk.

There is another aspect to the American role in Yemen.

''The Americans don't want to match the massive Russian presence here, so they play a spoiler role,'' said the source.

In 1979, the Russians concluded a massive $700 million arms deal with the Yemenis. They supplied military hardware by way

---

* This interview was granted to me on the condition that I keep it ''deep background.''

of concessionary loans. They have extended the forgiveness period several times, which ''gives them a lot of political leverage.''

A few Yemeni military officers go to the United States for training, but most go to the Soviet Union.

The Russian commitment to the YAR is not open-ended either, however. The Soviets have to be careful not to do anything to disrupt their close relationship with the PDRY, or antagonize the rest of the Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia.

One can assume that the PRC Chinese are here to play a spoiler role against the Soviets also.

The massive foreign presence in North Yemen does not leave the YAR government much manuevering room to conduct its own foreign policy. ''Usually, they're the last ones to make a statement on foreign policy matters,'' said one source. ''They usually wait for the other Arab countries to say something.''

The only issue the Yemenis seem to take much of an interest in is a relatively ''safe'' one -- the Palestinian struggle against Israel. Yemeni ''volunteers'' have been sent periodically to fight with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). After the PLO evacuation of Beirut, some of the Palestinians came to the YAR. The walls of Yemeni cities are presently decorated with posters demonstrating YAR solidarity with embattled PLO chieftain Yassir Arafat (Syria, after all, is far away).

The United States received a lot of criticism in the Yemeni press after Israel's invasion of Lebanon. This was a rare departure for the Yemenis.

Soviet embarrassments, the Afghanistan war and the shooting down of the Korean airliner, are scarcely mentioned in the YAR media.*

* * *

All the foreigners in Yemen going about their business against the backdrop of the New Cold War gives Sana'a an interesting flavor, rather like Madrid or Istanbul during World War II.

There is a saying among Americans here that if you hang around long enough, you will be approached by both western

---

* It could be simple politeness towards me, but I have received the impression from several Yemenis that the Americans are more popular here than the Russians. One day, I was walking along the top of the Sa'ada city walls. A man sitting on his roof invited me over for a cup of tea. We conducted a conversation in pidgin Arabic. He had a plastic globe with him and asked me to show him where Grenada was. I did. ''Reagan tamam (very good),'' he said enthusiastically, giving me a thumbs up sign. ''Sovieta, Cooba, mush kwayyis (no good).'' He even joked about how the Russians can manufacture weapons, but precious little else. Farmers in a village near Amran have told me that ''Yeman Gaenubi'' (South Yemen) is mush kwayyis because of the Soviets there. The Russians can print all the magazines they want about happy Soviet Muslims in Uzbekastan, but they still have a bad image in the Arab world.

and eastern intelligence services.

I have already had an encounter with what I fondly imagine to have been an agent of the KGB.

The French Institute in Sana'a, for what must have been the 100th time, was showing a 1936 movie about a French research expedition into Yemen. Aside from its historical interest, the movie is noteworthy because it was shot in color.

After the film, I was approached by a slender young man with close-cropped black hair and a slight black mustache. He spoke English with an accent and wore a stylish tan jacket. I assumed he was German.

We both marvelled at the quality of the color in the movie. I observed that ''Gone With The Wind'' and ''The Wizard of Oz'' had been shot in color before World War II. He said that his own country, Russia, had not had color until after the war.

Well, a real live Russian. I was intrigued.

I graciously commented that the Russians had done a lot of sophisticated filmwork in the 1930s, and gave Sergei Eisenstein's ''Ivan the Terrible'' as an example.

''Ivan the What?'' he asked.

He introduced himself as Victor and said he worked for Tass.* He asked me about my affiliation. I said the Institute of Current World Affairs.

As we walked down the stairs, he quizzed me closely about the Institute and my work in Yemen. When we reached the ground floor, he asked, ''Oh, what was the name of your institute again?''

I repeated the name.

He seemed to have trouble with the word ''current.'' What does that mean? I said it meant ''contemporary.''

''Let me write that down,'' he said, patting his pockets.

Luckily, I didn't have a pen either. Deciding that this had gone too far, I turned my back on him and joined another conversation. I was much relieved when he wandered off to talk to someone else.**

And I suppose, tucked away in some file cabinet in Moscow, is my name, probably spelled ''Klein,'' with a notation about the Institute of Contemporary World Affairs appended to it and a question mark next to that.

It's kind of flattering, in a way.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

Received in Hanover 12/22/83

---

* I've read enough John Le Carre novels to know what Tass and Novosti correspondents really do.

** Victor was very active that night. Before the film began, he conducted an inquisition on a Peace Corps volunteer I know. After talking to me, he offered to drive two USAID consultants back to their hotel. They accepted but only exchanged pleasantries with him, they told me. For what it's worth, I also know that Victor has had dinner with the French Cultural Attache.