INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Visit to the Tihama

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter;

The following covers two trips I made to the Tihama, the coastal region of North Yemen. The first journey took place from March 19-22, the second from April 2-4. For ease of narration, I have combined the two in my description.

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German explorer Hans Helfritz (see Land Without Shade. New York: Robert M. McBride & Company, 1936) probably said it best.

''Leaving the favoured highlands of Yemen for the plains is rather like leaving Switzerland and suddenly finding oneself planted in the middle of the Sahara,'' he wrote, exaggerating only a little. According to Helfritz, the Arabic root t-h-m (most Arabic words are built around three consonants) implies ''great heat and malodours.''

''Here nothing is to be seen of the rich culture of the highlands: the proud, fortified cities are far off,'' he continued. ''The villages consist of miserable straw huts, shaped like beebaskets, and their appearance is typically African. And the natives, in contrast to those of the highlands, have coal black skins and a high percentage of negro blood.''

Helfritz was able to muster some sympathy for the people, if not for their land.

''They (the Zaramiq tribe) are a good-natured, hospitable people for the most part, with no fanatical prejudice against foreigners, who love their poverty-stricken, unhealthy country, and who fight bravely and obstinately for their freedom,'' he said. ''It cost the Imam great efforts to subject them, and they are forever revolting against his rule.''

Ignore some of his 19th century sentiments, and Helfritz's description is an accurate one, with continuing validity today. In terms of climate, geography, race, and culture, the Tihama is quite different from the rest of Yemen. If cut off from the Yemeni highlands, it could be comfortably affixed to East Africa.

The Tihama plain stretches 260 miles from the Saudi Arabian frontier to Bab al Mandab, the straits guarding the entrance to the Red Sea. The distance from the sea to the mountains varies between 18 and 37 miles.

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

Much of the Tihama is barren, sandy wasteland. Seven major wadi basins, which catch runoff from the mountains, support an agriculture centered on sorghum, millet, sesame, corn, and dates as subsistence crops and cotton, vegetables, and fruits as cash crops.

Temperatures during the summer range from 80-130 degrees F. This is bad enough. But a humidity ranging from 50-70 percent can make the Tihama well nigh unbearable to someone not used to the climate.

During medieval times, Yemen was ruled by a succession of dynasties. Most ruled from the highlands. But one, the Ziadi, established its capital in the Tihama city of Zabid. A famous university grew up in the city and flourished there.

From the 16th to early 20th centuries, the Tihama was occupied by various foreign powers -- the Turks; the Egyptians of Muhammad Ali; and the Turks again.

When the Turks left for the last time in 1918, the Yemeni Imam Yahya (ruled 1904-48) began moving to take control of the Tihama.

Two boys of the Tihama.

The campaigns were fierce, not only because of tribal and racial differences, but because of religious ones as well. Most of the people of the Tihama belong to the Shaefi branch of Sunni Islam. The Imam Yahya's power centered on tribes belonging to the Zaidi branch of Shi'ite Islam.

It took Imam Yahya until 1929 to finally defeat the Zaramiq tribe, the most powerful in the Tihama. Yahya had a bit of a scare during his 1934 war with Saudi Arabia when Saudi forces grabbed all of the Tihama down to and including Hodeidah. A treaty that year restored most of the Tihama to the Yemenis, but they lost a province in the northern part.

* * *

The highland city of Hajja is a good place to begin a tour of the Tihama. It is the capital of Hajja province, which includes the northern part of the Tihama, as well as a large section of the highlands. Abs is the largest Tihama town in Hajja province.

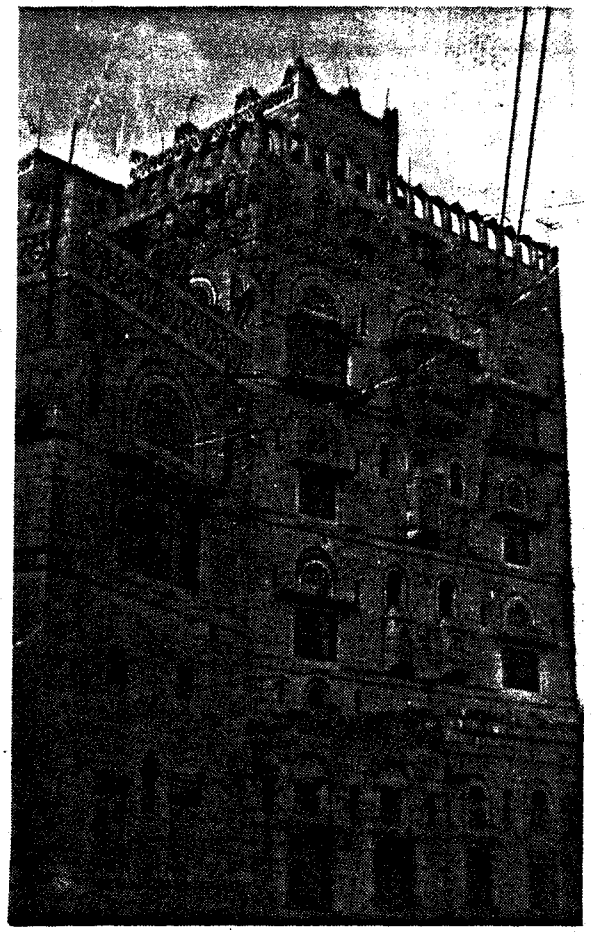
One could well ask why Hajja province includes

any part of the Tihama at all.

An excellent paved road links Hajja with the highland cities Amran, Sa'dah, and Sana'a. An equally fine paved road connects Abs with Hodeidah port in the Tihama. But connections between Hajja and Abs are abysmal. One must reach the Tihama by way of a roughly-graded dirt road snaking down the mountains. The ride is bumpy enough to rattle your brains out.

But since the people of the northern Tihama have to make the arduous journey to Hajja to conduct any governmental business, they are constantly reminded that the highlanders rule them.

Historically, Hajja had been a stronghold of the Zaidi imams, who built a citadel, underground prisons, and a palace there. When Imam Yahya was assassinated in 1948, his son Ahmed fled to Hajja, rallied the tribes to his standard and swept on to defeat the rebel forces and sack Sana'a.



The imamic palace in Hajja.

Situated 1,700 meters above sea level, Hajja is a typical Arab highlands city. Being the capital of a province, it is perhaps more prosperous than many. Paved streets, schools, and government buildings are abundant in Hajja.

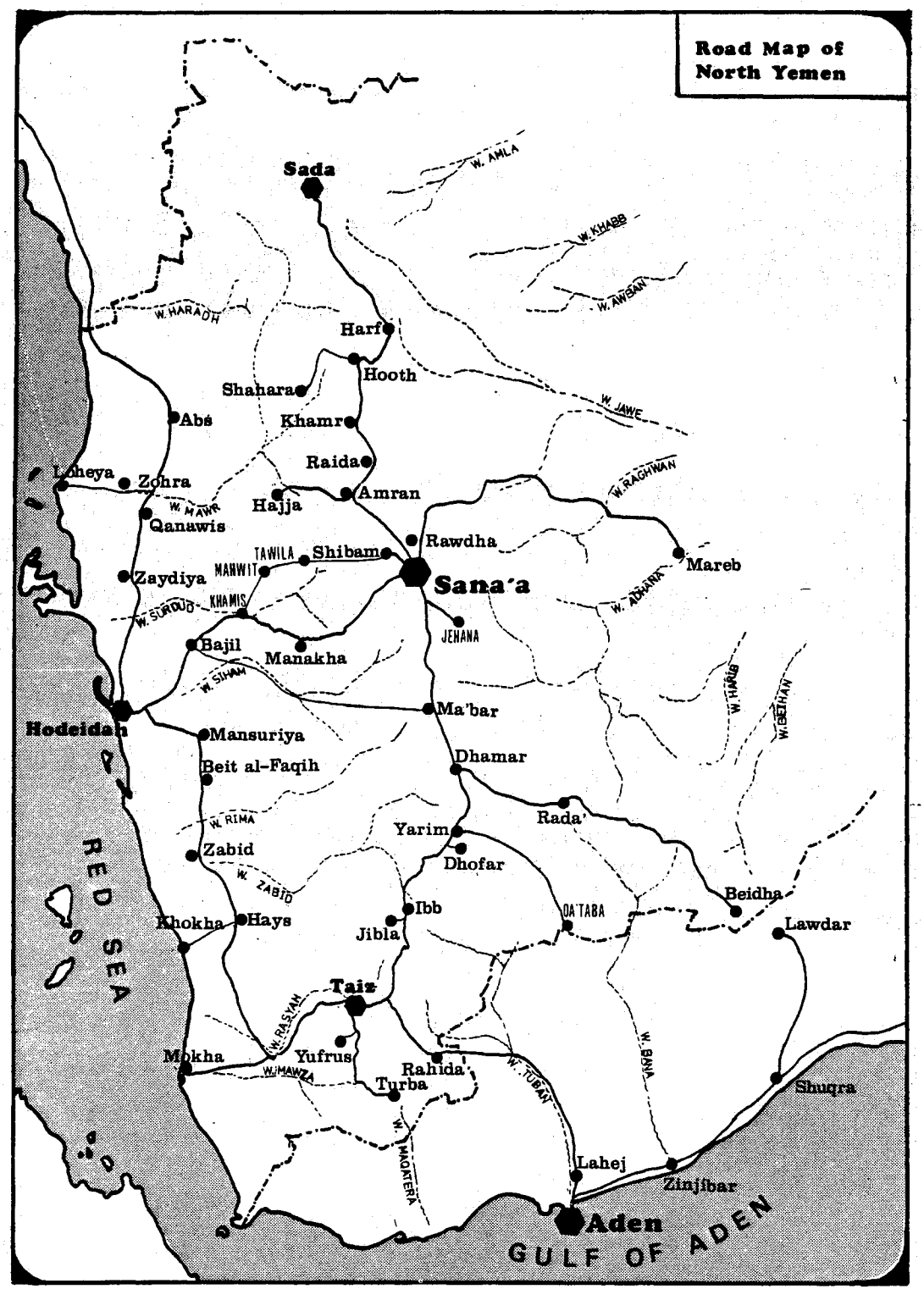
The city features one curious amenity not seen anywhere else in Yemen -- large concave mirrors set up at intersections to warn drivers of other cars coming around a blind turn.

The only indication in Hajja of the proximity of the Tihama is the large numbers of black-skinned men working as laborers in road repair and construction.

I spent one night in Hajja at the very comfortable tourist hotel. A good place to gather my energies for the lunge down the mountain the next morning.

It cost me 50 YR (about $10) and a splitting headache to take a service taxi from Hajja to Abs. Rattling down the mountain in a crowded Datsun jeep, I bumped my head on the metal ceiling a couple of times.

It seemed that these taxis rarely carry western passengers because I found myself to be an object of curiousity. I heard repeated references in the conversation to Amrika, Israel,


Road Map of North Yemen
Sada
W. AMLA
W. KHABB
W. AWSAN
W. HARADH
Harf
Hooth
Shahara
Khamr
Abs
W. JAWF
Raida
Luheya
Zohra
Amran
Hajja
W. RAGHWAN
W. MAWR
Qanawis
Rawdha
TAWILA
Shibam
Mareb
Zaydiya
MAHWIT
Sana'a
W. SURDUD
KHAMIS
W. ADHANA
JEHANA
Bajil
Manakha
W. SIHAM
W. HARIB
W. BEIHAN
Ma'bar
Hodeidah
Mansuriya
Dhamar
Beit al-Faqih
Rada'
W. RIMA
Yarim
Zabid
Dhofar
W. ZABID
Beidha
Ibb
Khokha
Hays
DA'TABA
Lawdar
Jibla
Taiz
W. RASYAN
W. BANA
Mokha
Yufrus
Rahida'
W. TUBAN
W. MAWZA
Turba
Shuqra
W. MAQATERA
Lahej
Zinjibar
Aden
RED SEA
GULF OF ADEN

and the Yahudiin (Jews). The driver put on a tape of Koranic recitations and an enthusiastic passenger asked me tamam (very good), tamam? He also asked me some question about sallih (praying).

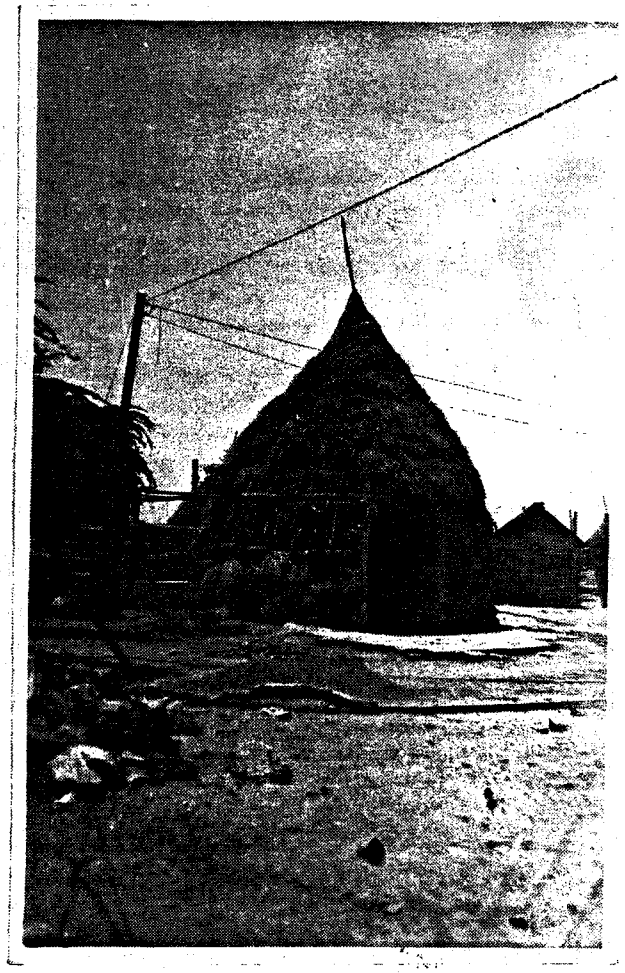
My response to this kind of behavior is to pretend I don't know what they're talking about and look the other way.

Altogether, I spent a very long 2½ hours in that bouncing taxi.

Coming out of the mountains, we followed a wadi into the Tihama. Patches of tall, green plants, either sorghum or maize, appeared. Also, conical thatched huts and unveiled black women.

Hitting the flat plain, the driver picked up speed. The landscape reminded me of the Wadi Juba in the eastern part of the country — gently undulating wasteland spotted with scrub bushes, some fruit tree groves behind terraces and some green fields.

Once we reached the north-south Tihama highway, it was a short drive to Abs and, for me, a long-awaited escape from that taxi.



Thatched hut in Zohra.

My main purpose in visiting this northern part of the Tihama was to see the Red Sea port of Loheya. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Loheya had been one of the two most important ports in the country, Mocha being the other one. Today, Loheya is only a sleepy fishing village. But some distinguished looking villas from its glory days remain. The American ambassador had supposedly bought an entire carved wooden door from a Loheya house. So I wanted to see it. But getting there is tough.

The Tihama's major north-south road misses Loheya by some 40 kilometers. The only way to get to the coast from the main road is by way of a sturdy four-wheel-drive vehicle over some very bad dirt roads. Four-wheel-drive taxis are common in the Yemeni countryside. I figured I could get one going to Loheya.

I took a taxi to a road junction south of Abs and waited for a taxi to turn up. One young man offered to drive me to Loheya for 800 YR ($160). I was outraged. Did he take me for a fool? I sat at the small roadside restaurant for a couple of hours, waiting for something better.

Various men approached me, all with the same story -- fuel costs a lot of money, the road to Loheya is terrible, and you can't get a service taxi (one with many passengers) going there. When one fellow offered to take me to Zohra, supposedly on the way to Loheya, for 50 YR ($10) on his motorcycle, I agreed.

A distance that looked quite reasonable on the map produced a two-hour ride under a sweltering late morning sun. But I saw a lot of the countryside from the back of the motorcycle. Parched, dusty tracts were broken by green irrigated fields. I could hear the chug-chug of the motorized well pumps. Men, women, and children were out harvesting crops. Most had black skin. The women wore brightly colored dresses, purple being a favored color.

When I arrived at noon, Zohra was prostrate in the shimmering heat. I paid off the motorcycle driver and looked about me with some anxiety. Zohra was a sprawling shanty town of thatched huts and corrugated tin fences. Few people were stirring.

The motorcyclist had let me off in front of a group of buildings on the outskirts of town. A sign out front identified this as the Wadi Mawr Water Project. Sounded civilized. A couple of boys told me I could find an American mohandes (engineer) there.

I didn't see any Americans, but I did find an English irrigation expert named John Pavey. A slender, light-skinned young man, Pavey said he had been to Loheya only once. Didn't think much of it. Said it wasn't the sort of place you'd want to visit "unless you have a good reason for going there."

During the last six months, two German men had dropped by the project at different times asking about the way to Loheya. The first guy was in his own car and apparently made it. Pavey took the second fellow to a village a short distance up the wadi. He said the German hung around all day without finding a car going to Loheya, gave up, and returned to Hodeidah.

The one time that Pavey had driven to Loheya, he had not seen any other traffic going either way.

Fortified by these encouraging words, I decided to take a walk around Zohra. Maybe something would turn up.

My first impression had been correct. Zohra was not particularly interesting. Although the heat was overpowering, I walked through the town taking photos. A group of small boys began following me.

At first, the boys seemed to want me to take their picture. But when I pointed the camera at them, they scattered. Bizarre. So I walked on. Gradually, they became abusive, calling out after me. I knew I was in trouble when they began chucking a few rocks my way.

This is the worst hazard a foreigner faces in a Yemeni village or town. Children do not receive a strict upbringing in Yemeni society. Until they reach puberty, they tend to run wild. If they live in an isolated community where strangers are a rarity and one does show up, they act as if they've encountered ET.

I tried to chastise them as best I could. But shouts of ayb (shame) and references to the hakuma (government -- I thought they might have some respect for the Wadi Mawr project) produced no results. All I could do was reverse course and head back to

the project. Dodging the rocks as I walked, of course.

I encountered a middle-aged woman who appeared to sympathise with my plight. After I passed her, I heard her scolding the boys. Soon, they stopped following me.

I was nearing the project when a group of young men standing on the verandah of a two-story brick building called to me. "Come here," one of them said, in English.

A short man with a black mustache and suspicious eyes asked me if I had a tasrir (permit) to take photos in Zohra. Who are you? I replied. He said he worked for the government. Well, where's your paper? I asked.

I had hoped this maneuver would leave him at a loss. But instead he said his paper was back at his house and he would go get it.

While I waited, I chatted with the other young men about the hot weather. They were quite friendly.

Their zealous comrade returned with his laminated card identifying him as belonging to some sort of government organization. "We go to the office now," he said.

Dropping back to my last line of defense, I produced my paper from the Yemen Center for Research and Studies. This identified me as a researcher and asked Yemenis to assist me.

It had the desired effect. My interrogator said asif (sorry). No problem, I said, shaking his hand, and those of the other fellows.

At the project, I said goodbye to Pavey and flagged down a car heading back to the Hodeidah road. One of the two men in the four-wheel-drive Toyota, an old man with grey whiskers and a faded grey coat, asked me what my country was. When I said Amrika, he was pleased. He said Amrika had the best agriculture in the whole world.

Making a gesture to take in the dry countryside around us, he said something along the lines of: "And what's this? Not much."

Galil moya hina (only a little rain here), I observed sympathetically, and he agreed heartily with that.

I asked him about his home.

"Loheya," he said.

Medina kwayyis (a nice town), I remarked. Aywa, medina kwayyis, he replied.

The two men were stopping at a village a short distance from Zohra. Luckily, another Toyota passed us heading for the main road. The driver raced to catch up with it.

A Sudanese engineer working for the Yemeni government and his driver were on their way to Hodeidah. I accepted the comfortable ride I had with them as a reward for my trials and tribulations earlier in the day.

* * *

Hodeidah is one of North Yemen's three largest cities -- the other two being Sana'a and Taiz. As the country's major port, it is its economic lifeline. It achieved this stature only during the last century.

When the Danish explorer Carsten Niebuhr visited

Highland affectations in the Tihama. Hodeidah women, like this one, commonly wear the black sharshaf veil favored by urban Arab women in the highlands. It is a sign of high class status.

Yemen in 1763, he described Loheya and Mocha as the two most important ports. He mentioned Hodeidah only casually.

For Helfritz, Hodeidah in the early 1930s was a horrible place. At that time, the whole of the city's drinking water had to be carried 50 miles from the mountains on the backs of donkeys. Malaria was "gradually killing off the local population."

The Russians made Hodeidah great by building a modern port there, completing the facilities in 1961. Hodeidah today can service medium-sized ships and has a special wharf, with storage tanks and a pipeline, for oil tankers.

Great it may be. But Hodeidah is a city only a native could love.

Architectural styles are more 20th century utilitarian than traditional Yemeni. The same concrete block apartment complexes one finds all over the world have found a home here. If you do find a structure built before 1960, it is decrepit, dirty, and ready to fall down.

No Yemeni city can rival Hodeidah in terms of trash and filth. In Sana'a, an army of street sweepers is at hand to correct the damage done by citizens who deposit their garbage in the streets. In Hodeidah, the trash just piles up.

Hodeidah is a town where one transacts commercial affairs and then gets the heck out.

One night in Hodeidah is enough — there are a few decent hotels — and then it's south to Zabid via the Russian-built road (destinations are marked in Arabic and Russian).

Zabid has everything Hodeidah lacks -- history, interesting architecture, and character.

Zabid was founded in 819 A.D. by Yemen's Ziadi dynasty. A complex of mosque schools located in the town gradually

developed into the al Asha'er University, a famous center of Sunni scholarship. Students could study free there and live in special quarters. The educational system was funded by the waqf, or religious tax.

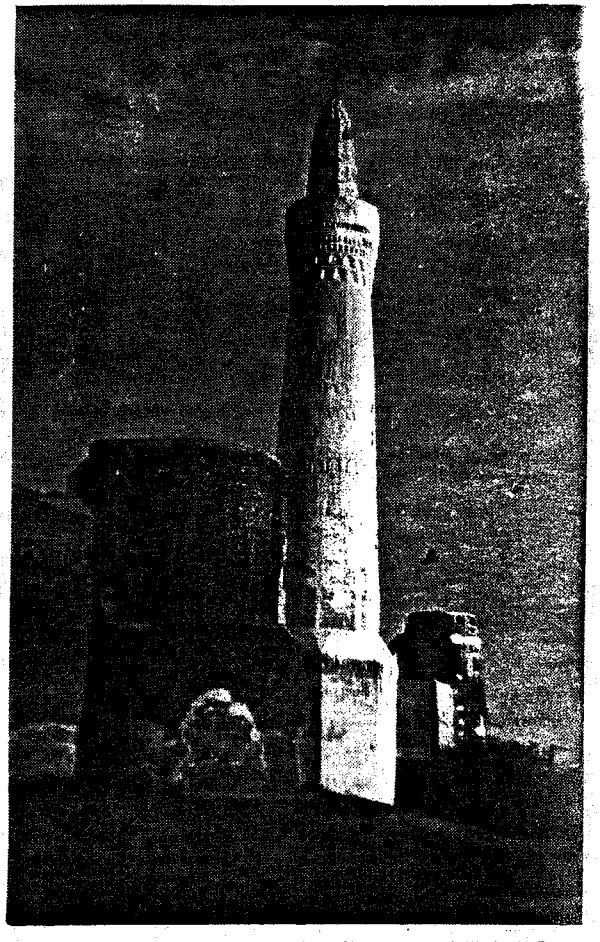
When Egypt's famous al Azhar University opened in 971 A.D., some of its first professors came from Zabid.

It is believed that a man named Ahmed Abu Musa al Jaladi developed a mathematical system in Zabid which he called al Jabr.

The university declined in the 16th century during the years of the first Turkish occupation of Yemen. Today, only the al Asha'er mosque remains.

Zabid is also notable for the facades of its houses -- brick covered with gypsum and decorated with elaborate geometric patterns.

Only one paved road leads into Zabid from the Russian road. It stops at a plaza dominated by the Nasser Palace, a medieval building used as a government complex today. From the plaza, twisting narrow lanes lead off in all directions.



Medieval walls of Zabid.

The ethnic diversity is rather startling. One finds not only Tihama blacks in their brightly-colored futahs (a skirt worm by Tihama men) but Arab qabilis (tribesmen) wearing janbiya daggers as well. The black women wear casual dresses of bright patterns, while other women, whether black or Arab you can't tell, walk about like nuns in their black sharshafs.

I did not notice any modern industrial or commercial activity in Zabid. The city seems content with camping out in the ruins of its past splendour. The fine old houses are slowly dissolving in the stifling humidity.

I left the town and walked a couple of kilometers into the countryside. The agriculture seemed quite prosperous. I saw many well pumps and green fields behind high-banked terraces. The crops included corn; cotton; cherry tomatoes; and okra.

Coming across a group of men standing outside a village, I chatted briefly with them. They said their village was called Hagi Shamira. A boy escorted me around the village while I took pictures.

He took me into one of the beebasket-type huts that functioned as a small grocery store. I bought him a Pepsi and

Hagi Shamira, a village a few kilometers outside Zabid.

talked to some of the men in the store. One asked me the inevitable question about religion in America. I told him the United States contained both Muslims and Christians. He seemed satisfied with that.*

Altogether, I very much enjoyed my walk around Zabid. But the accomodations were grim.

I arrived in Zabid in a service taxi just before dark. People told me the only hotel was located near the taxi stand. This was a baladi fonduk (country hotel) of the type used by lower class Yemeni travellers. It consisted of one room filled with cots and mattresses. No bathroom facilities. I had previously stayed in a similar place in a highlands town and had slept well. But because of the Tihama mosquitoes, I got little sleep here.

It was not a total loss. I did get to see some South Yemeni television.

We had been watching a North Yemeni soccer match. This ended, to be followed by women singing religious songs. A man turned the channel to South Yemen TV, which can be picked up in this area. The South Yemenis were showing short clips -- perhaps a preview of coming attractions -- from Indian, Egyptian, European, and American movies (there was Barbara Streisand in ''A Star Is Born''). All very lively and very secular. You would never see these shots of scantily-clad women on North Yemeni TV.

News programs are similar in the two Yemens. Endless shots of officials and bureaucrats busily working for the people. The main difference is that women have found a place in some

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* Yemenis generally don't seem bothered if you say you are Christian, although a man in a taxi once pestered me to answer the question: fi Mohamed (roughly, ''Is there Mohamed'')? But they do disapprove of atheism. A man in the northern Tihama asked me fi Allah in America? He was pleased when I said yes. He said there wasn't any God in the Soviet Union.

South Yemeni governmental organizations.

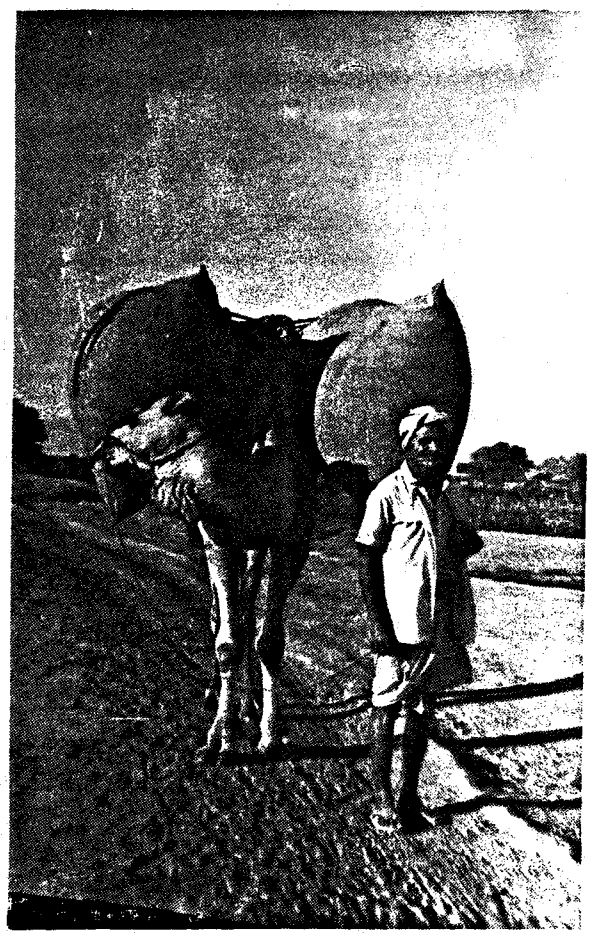
From Zabid, I took a service taxi to the junction of the Russian road from Hodeidah and the American-built Mocha-Taiz-Sana'a road. A peaceful meeting of the superpowers, you might say.

Within minutes, a taxi carrying two middle-class Yemenis from Taiz, Aniz and Amin, picked me up and took me into Mocha.

Mocha has given our language the term ''Mocha coffee.'' During the 17th and 18th centuries, Mocha was Yemen's major port for coffee exports.

The first English and Dutch trading houses opened there in 1618. As coffee became more popular in Europe, the trade boomed. By 1720, 90 percent of all Dutch coffee imports came from Mocha.

But as the centuries wore on, Indonesian and South American coffee took over more of the trade. By the end of World War I, Mocha fell into swift decline as its harbor silted up and its great villas and mosques disintegrated in the damp salt air.



On the path to Hagi Shamira. The man is bringing his harvested crop to the market in Zabid.

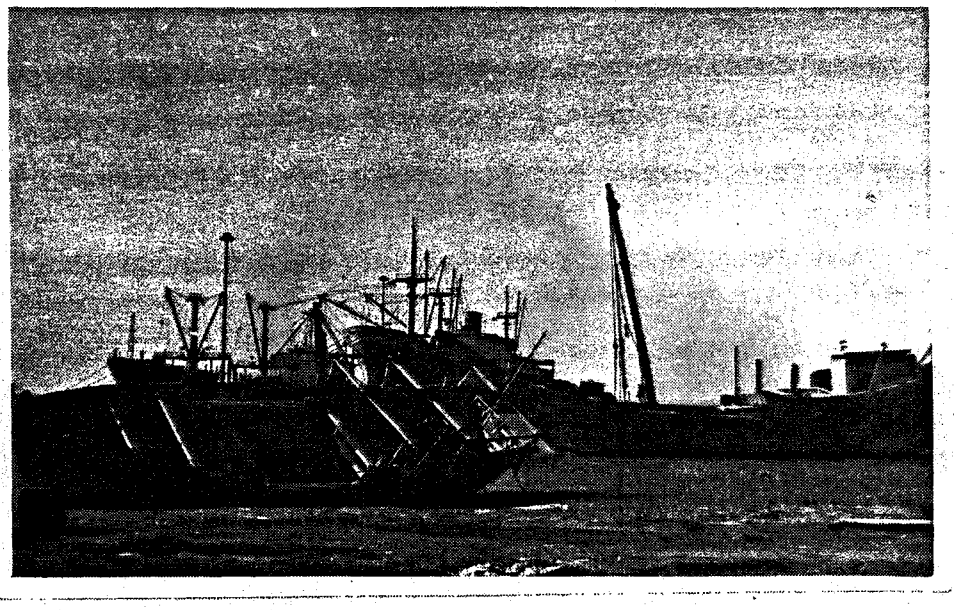
In recent years, the Yemeni government has made some improvements to the Mocha harbor, which continues to service small freighters. The day I visited Mocha, two small ships, one Greek and one South Korean, were unloading at the wharf.

Aniz and Amin had come to Mocha for an afternoon holiday. Both young men in their 20s, they wore western shirts and slacks and spoke some rudimentary English. We had lunch together in the town and then walked out to the wharf.

A terrific wind blew into our faces blasting us with sand. To protect your eyes, you had to cup your hand around them and look sideways.

When we reached the wharf, Aniz suggested I take a picture of the South Korean ship. Against my better judgement -- one gets careless sometimes -- I pointed my camera at the ship. Immediately a Yemeni soldier standing on the bridge waved don't-do-that and called us over. Aniz talked to him and seemed to handle the situation well. The soldier waved us on.

While Aniz and Amin went for a swim, I walked around the town taking pictures. It reminded me a lot of Zabid -- once-



Above, the old and new in Mocha port. Below, Aniz, left, and Amin, right.

grand buildings falling slowly into ruin -- but worse. Fewer people live in Mocha than in Zabid. Zabid at least is the center of a prosperous agricultural area. Mocha is surrounded by sandy wasteland and depends entirely on the small port.

Around 5 p.m., I met up with Aniz and Amin again and we set about the business of finding a taxi to Taiz. The offers we received were outrageous -- $30 per person -- so we starting walking down the road hoping somebody would pick us up.

We were lucky. Two men in a truck took us all the way to Taiz.

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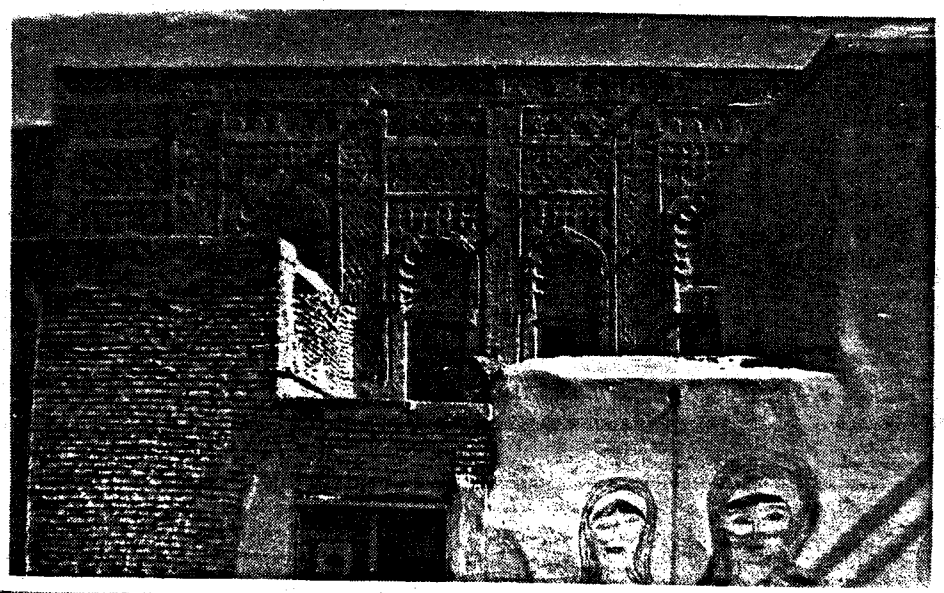

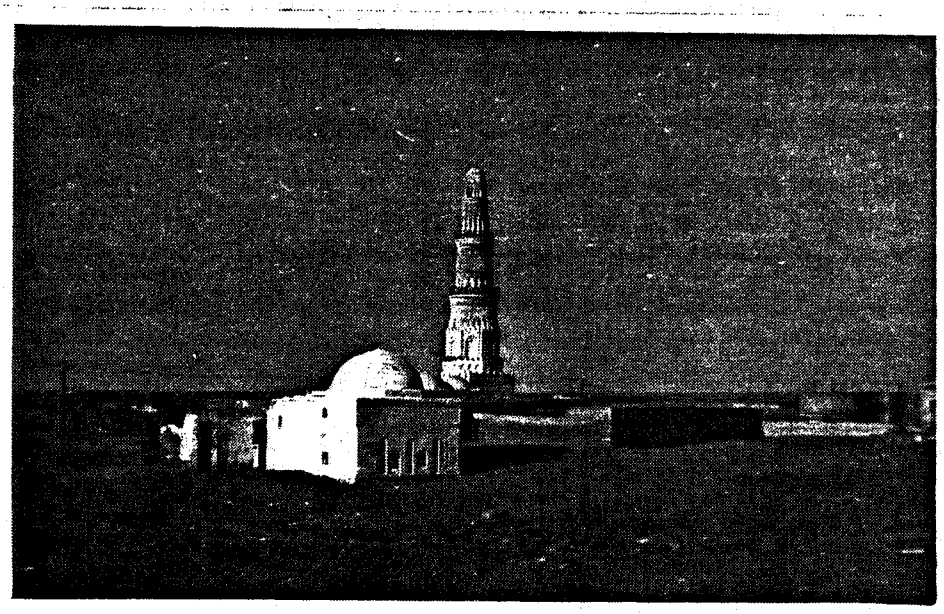

Fading grandeur in the Tihama. Above, a house in Zabid. Below, a mosque in Mocha.

After my second trip to the Tihama, I left not by the Mocha-Taiz-Sana'a road, but by the Chinese-built Hodeidah-Sana'a highway.

A very western-looking Arab couple, a young man and a woman, got on the bus at Hodeidah. The man was wearing a white shirt and jeans, standing out from the Yemenis in their futahs. The woman wore a dark red dress. She was so light-skinned I at first wondered if she was a westerner. But the two spoke Arabic to each other.

At the Sana'a checkpoint, a blue-bereted soldier came

aboard. He did not even glance at me, the only non-Arab on the bus, but marched straight up to the young couple. He examined their passports for several minutes. I heard references to Falestine.

Later that day, at the American Institute in Sana'a, I learned that Yassir Arafat was back in town to open a conference of Palestinian writers and journalists. Since the PLO's 1982 evacuation of Beirut, Arafat has maintained his military headquarters in Sana'a. Security at this conference was reportedly very tight, with truckloads of Yemeni soldiers parked outside the hotel.

The soldier's concern about the young couple made sense then. But not for the first time, I wondered at the phenomenon of Arabs distrusting each other more than anyone else.*

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

* After my first trip to the Tihama, I took a service taxi from Taiz to Sana'a. We passed through at least 10 police and military checkpoints, a record in my experience. The soldiers took no interest in me at all. Nobody even asked to see my passport. But at one of the checkpoints, two Yemen qabili types were taken out of the car and frisked. The soldiers poked around in the car looking for weapons.

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