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**War in Yemen Felix**

*The people of Yemen are the most tender, gentle  
bearded of men. Faith and wisdom are both of  
them Yemeni. -The Prophet Muhammed<sup>1</sup>*

14 May, 1994

Dear Peter,

I was awakened at 4:45 am Thursday by the sound of heavy shelling and chirping birds.

It was another gorgeous day in the mountains of southern Arabia yet something was amiss in Yemen. I rolled out of bed and onto the floor. The sky was full of tracers and the sound of "Triple A" - anti-aircraft artillery. In addition to multiple AK-47 assault rifles and assorted other "small" arms, I discovered that many Yemeni families also have their own

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in the epigram of Tribes, Government and History in Yemen, by Paul Dresch.  
Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.

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anti-aircraft rocket launchers, which can be easily mounted on rooftops or in the beds of Toyota pick-up trucks "just in case".<sup>2</sup>

Per capita, Yemenis have more weapons than any other nation on the planet. Perhaps they figured they always figured they'd need heavy weapons sooner or later.

The economy was in a shambles and the tenuous coalition government, with limited control outside the capital, was being torn apart by a web of regional, tribal and ideological differences, exacerbated by apparent Saudi tinkering.

I heard the heavy rumbling of two fighter planes overhead, but no screams or sounds of destruction. Residents of the Yemeni capital seemed to be faring pretty well against the *Ishtirakis* -- Predominantly southern Socialist forces. The main safety hazard was seemingly the enthusiastic storm of Triple-A falling back to earth.

Residents in or near the capital's Socialist headquarters were not so lucky. Northern forces surrounded the building with armed tanks and fired away continuously for an hour and forty minutes. The building was levelled and witnesses said that later that day they saw a pile of bodies by the side of the road. Unfortunately, there were several buildings in between the tanks and their target, including the Italian embassy and the home of an American couple. That afternoon the Italians were reportedly working out of their basement -- what was left of their embassy.

The Americans decided it was time to leave town after a morning of lying on their bellies "with nothing to watch but the clock on the wall".

By about 10 am the shelling had stopped and calm returned to the capital.

That afternoon as I chewed my shrub of *qat*<sup>3</sup> and sipped my "Canada black" (the local version of Coca Cola), I contemplated the turn of events Yemen. Over the course of the past five weeks, I had watched as complex internal and external forces tugged at the seams of what many have called the Arab world's quiet success story.

Almost exactly a year ago, something amazing happened here. About 80 percent of its 2.7 million registered voters elected 301 members of the legislature from among 3,545

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<sup>2</sup>Many Yemeni women are also armed. Female shepherds sometimes guard their flocks with guns and an Information Ministry spokesman said a large number of women in rural areas are trained in sniping and target shooting.

<sup>3</sup>*Qat* [pronounced GOT] is a mildly stimulant shrub whose leaves are chewed socially usually at gatherings in the afternoon. *Qat* chews extend until around sundown or until a silence and a subtle feeling of well-being sets in. After several hours, the relaxed feeling is replaced by a caffeine-like buzz. Most important negotiations, discussions and business are conducted at chews. Despite its reputation abroad as being a waste of valuable time, *qat* chews are extremely civilized gatherings and often seem to be the most productive times of the day.

Some Yemenis spend the greater share of their income on the shrub, which is cultivated throughout Yemen. A more potent variety of *qat* is found in Somalia and Ethiopia. It is illegal in Saudi Arabia and not found elsewhere in the Arab world.

candidates. Of 50 women who ran, two won. More than 40 parties took part in the peaceful and fair election and results and analyses were freely reported in the local press.<sup>4</sup>

It was the first multi-party election ever in the Arabian Peninsula, and the first in which women could fully participate. The democratic experiment which has caused panic and spawned violent outbreaks in the cosmopolitan climes of Algeria, Egypt and Jordan, was carried forward peacefully in the nation some have called "the Albania of the Arab world".

Yemenis also surprised the world four years ago when they formed a peaceful and unlikely union between the formerly Marxist South and the more populous and religiously conservative North (which until about 30 years ago was ruled by an *imam* who kept the country entirely isolated from the outside world).

Unlike elsewhere in the Arab world, where governments tremble at the growing power of the Islamist opposition, Yemen created a coalition government (a difficult union, but a union nonetheless) in which - until last week - Islamists, former Marxists, and members of the Northern ruling party together ruled the Arabia's most populous<sup>5</sup> country. Yemeni Islamists, accused of supporting and training the most violent Islamist groups in Egypt and in Jordan, are unified Yemen's second biggest party and claim to have played the unlikely role of mediator between the two former governments.

A Toyota pickup truck carrying a rocket launcher and a half dozen armed men zoomed past my window. What had gone wrong in this Arabian paradise?

The mood in the Yemeni capital was edgy and the streets were empty of traffic due to the siege on fuel to the capital, which had been underway for days. Electricity had been sporadic since the previous night, as had phone lines. Few residents could make local calls from their homes and fewer still could get international lines out. Communication to the former south had been cut the previous night and commercial flights out of San'a were suddenly non-existent. A 30-day 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew had been declared and citizens were asked to keep car headlights off after sundown to make the city less visible to Southern bomber planes.

The tension in northern Yemen had been continuously rising for weeks and although I was too much of a newcomer to understand the full history and intricate workings of the mounting crisis, the outlines of the internal and external conflicts behind the war were clear.

## ECONOMIC

Over 80 percent of Yemen's income comes from oil, yet in recent weeks Total and several other major oil companies had decided to pull out. There was not as much oil in the country as previously hoped and for big companies, scanty outputs were just not worth the cost of drilling and further exploration. The problematic security situation didn't encourage companies to stay. An official at British Gas said tribesman had hijacked several

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<sup>4</sup>New York Times editorial published in the International Herald Tribune May 10, 1993.

<sup>5</sup>There are about 14 million people living in Yemen.

hundred new Toyota Landcruisers from the company this year alone. The company was considering subtracting the cost of the vehicles from the amount of oil revenue due the Yemeni government at the end of the year. Yemen Hunt and Canadian Occidental (Canoxy) were about the only two companies which had decided to stay.

The continued absence of repatriated income from Saudi Arabia was adding to the oil concerns. In late 1990, about 850,000 Yemenis returned home in a matter of weeks, increasing Yemen's population by about eight percent. More than 100,000 of those with weakened ties to their villages settled in cities or camps, predominantly in the northwest of the country. The north edge of the Western port city of Hodeida has become a vast slum, populated with thousands of these stranded Yemenis whom Saudi Arabia expelled as a result of Yemen's support for Saddam Hussein during the war. Although some have managed to sneak back into Saudi by returning to perform the *haj* and then staying on illegally, most are now without income and their savings from years of working in the Gulf have dwindled considerably. Estimates are that lost remittances run to about \$600 million per year.

Another economic legacy of the Gulf war is the continuing lack of foreign aid. The U.S. and other Western countries reduced Yemeni development aid to a bare minimum because of Yemen's refusal to join the allied forces. Cancelled foreign aid and Yemen's cost for additional food imports and social services for returnees total at least another \$500 million.<sup>6</sup>

Tourism, the other major income earner, has also come to a standstill due to the growing number of foreign hostages taken by tribesmen angry at the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh. The tribes say he has not built enough hospitals and schools in tribal zones and is not giving the tribes a big enough percentage of oil revenue.

Pre-war inflation of about 100 percent has gone up even higher, and fruit and vegetable prices had gone up by about 60 percent since the start of the war. The price of petrol has also risen sharply, as it does every time gas is cut off to the capital (this is the third major siege on petrol since I moved to San'a in late March). Normally 6 YR per liter, siege prices (now in effect) run at about 60 riyals or more per liter.

Widespread corruption exacerbates the economic crisis. Although the official exchange rate of the north Yemeni rial (YR) is a fixed 12 to the US dollar, the black market rate was 62 to the dollar in late March and 77 to the dollar in early May, after the start of the war. Top ranking government officials have the right to change riyals to dollars at the official rate, which can earn them up to 600 percent profits on their money just by playing the exchange market.

Smuggling is also common, generally from Saudi Arabia and from Somalia, and technological and other luxury goods can be purchased in Yemen (using the black market exchange rate) for about what they'd cost in the US. The most obvious evidence of the dual market is the fact that although Yemen is among the poorest of Arab countries, its streets are lined with 1993 and 1994 Toyota Landcruisers (the most prized of possessions in Yemen, because of the country's rough terrain).

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<sup>6</sup>Estimated losses were published by the US Embassy in San'a in August 1993

## GEOGRAPHIC

Many of San'a's difficulties stem from problems of geography and government control.

About 70,000 barrels of petrol a day are consumed in San'a alone. Yet northern Yemen can only refine about 10,000 barrels a day. The rest must come from former South Yemen, which was <sup>recently</sup> not transporting enough refined fuel to the north because of political differences with President Ali Abdullah Saleh<sup>7</sup>.

Even before the South effectively cut the capital's petrol supply, gas shortages were frequent in San'a due to tribal discord. Nearly all of the oil in northern Yemen is in Mareb, the heartland of the Bakil tribal federation. The President belongs to the the other major tribal grouping, the Hashid, and has little control over Bakil-dominated Mareb. Securing northern petrol therefore depends upon regular payment of dues and bribes to the Bakil, who can refuse to allow petrol into Hashid territory - including the capital - at any time.

## TRIBAL

As mentioned above, the effects of tribal discord are frequently felt in the capital. Many of the roadblocks in Yemen are controlled by tribal, not government, authorities, and a recent bulletin by a Yemeni human rights group reported that "private" prisons<sup>8</sup> are still prevalent throughout the country.

Sieges on petrol (mostly produced in tribally-controlled areas) are not uncommon, and hostage-taking remains a favored method of expressing grievances. Haynes Mahoney, director of USIS in San'a, was abducted from his car in the capital and held for several weeks in November by a clan chief in the Mareb desert 75 miles from San'a. The sheikh of the region justified his act on grounds that he had demands to make on the government, including construction of more schools in his people's territory. As recently as several weeks ago, Mahoney said he still received calls from the kidnappers, reminding him that the schools had not yet been built. A number of foreign workers have been similarly taken hostage by Yemenis in recent months. At this writing, two Dutch development workers are still being held in the Mareb region.<sup>9</sup>

The two most powerful tribal confederations in northern Yemen (tribal factors are much less significant in southern Yemen) are the Bakil and the Hashid tribes<sup>10</sup>, both of whom trace their ancestry to the biblical Sheba. The golden age of these tribal kingdoms

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<sup>7</sup>According to Mohamed Yadoumy, spokesman for the Islamist Islah party and editor of El-Sahwa, the party's weekly newspaper. He was interviewed May 4. That evening at 9:50 p.m. the North commenced its attack on Aden.

<sup>8</sup>controlled by individual tribes and not the government

<sup>9</sup>The Netherlands is currently considering dropping aid to Yemen.

<sup>10</sup>Both tribal networks can claim title to the land in northern Yemen since pre-Islamic times.

was over before the event of Islam, and the collapse of the Mareb dam (Qor'an 34:16) marks the mythical moment of Yemen's own collapse, when many of the most famous tribes migrated.<sup>11</sup>

Because of this heritage, numerous Bedouin throughout the Arab world still consider themselves Yemenis and many of them return to Yemen at some point in their lives to visit their ancestral land. I have met such families in Egypt and in Syria. The 'rebuilding' of the Mareb dam was funded largely by the ruler of Abu Dhabi, who's family is supposed to have originated in Yemen.

The Hashid and the Bakil remain as powerful as ever in Yemen. The Hashid are the most unified of the two confederations, whereas the Bakil, the larger of the two, is more divided and has numerous leaders competing for power under the Bakil umbrella. President Ali Abdullah Saleh<sup>12</sup> was asked in a 1986 interview: 'To what extent has Yemen succeeded in moving from the stage of tribalism to that of the state'. 'The state is part of the tribes,' he responded, 'and our Yemeni people is a collection of tribes.'<sup>13</sup>

Political scientists in Yemen say tribal identity has grown significantly stronger since the adoption of a democratic system in the country.

"Putting tribal leaders like Abdullah El-Ahmar in high government posts protects tribal identity, which has already grown a lot because political parties are all competing for support among the tribes," said Abdel-Hamid El-Sharif, a political science professor at San'a University.

When I spoke to San'a residents last week, the tribal threat seemed a greater danger to ~~some~~ than the falling Scud missiles. Tribal sheikhs are said to have more armed men at their command than the northern army, and in areas surrounding San'a, some tribal forces with long-standing hatred of President Ali Abdullah Saleh were reportedly fighting on the southern side.

"The Scuds haven't killed anybody yet, but if the tribes have it out in San'a this could turn into a bloodbath," said a British resident who had lived in Yemen for several years and has since fled the capital.

## SOUTH-NORTH DIFFERENCES

Another important factor leading up to the current crisis is the simple fact that South and North Yemen, although legally unified, remain separate entities. Although the people of Yemen speak the same language and share the same culture, unified Yemen still has two armies, two monetary systems, two education systems and two airlines. Each also retains its own distinct television and radio stations.

When former South Yemen opted to unify with the north, it had a lot to gain. The Soviet Union, its former backer, was no longer in a position to give financial assistance to the country, and joining the north, which was sorely in need of southern oil and oil

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<sup>11</sup>Dresch, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup>a member of the Hashid confederation

<sup>13</sup>Dresch, p.7

refineries, was the quickest way out of South Yemen's isolation. Ever since the Gulf war, however, the south has been losing more than benefitting from the uneasy coalition with the north. Foreign aid has been cut and the north is now just as isolated from the outside world as the south.

A sure sign that politicians in the north had been preparing for an attempted southern secession was the "High Authority Positions" law passed by the Yemeni parliament<sup>14</sup> earlier this year. The law states that any high authority in the Yemeni government who "commits an act leading to the collapse of Yemeni Union or tries to secede any part of United Yemen or joins in any foreign unions leading toward foreign control over Yemen" can be removed from his post or sentenced to death.<sup>15</sup> This law, which specifically applies to government officials and not average citizens, explains how northern forces were able to fire the Vice-President and ban Socialist Party leaders from the country within 24-hours of the start of the war without violating the constitution. It also shows how tenuous the Yemeni coalition government had become in the weeks prior to the outbreak of war.

#### EXTERNAL

"There are important regional powers which refuse Yemeni unity. If they wanted a strong and unified Yemen, we would have a strong and unified Yemen," said Islah party spokesman Mohamed Yadoumy told me hours before war broke out in Yemen. When I asked him if he meant Saudi Arabia he sighed heavily and then paused before responding: "It's not necessary to name names."

His long pause spoke volumes. There is still no defined border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia and, until Yemen sided with Iraq in the Gulf War, Yemenis did not require visas for Saudi. Some of the same tribes are present in Saudi and in Yemen and there are frequent border disputes between the two countries. Yemenis still resent the loss of the provinces of Jizan and Najran to Saudi in 1934.

Although Saudi is not fond of formerly Marxist South Yemen, neither can it ignore rumored links between north Yemeni Islamists and Saudi's own Islamist opposition forces, especially at a time when the monarchy is having to tighten its economic belt and is less willing to buy support from its enemies. A strong and unified Yemen at its southern border is also in conflict with Saudi security interests and in time could pose a challenge to the Kingdom of Saud. Saudi Arabia is widely believed in both north and south Yemen to be fueling the current crisis.

But Saudi is not the only foreign player in the Yemeni equation. As the crisis in Yemen deepens it is becoming increasingly clear that within the Arab world Gulf War animosities are still on the boil. Egypt, Syria and the Gulf states, the Arab wing of the

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<sup>14</sup>Presided over by Sheikh Abdullah El-Ahmar, head of the Islah Islamist party and a member of the same tribal confederation as President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

<sup>15</sup>The law also states that any high official violating the Qor'anic norms can be fired or sentenced to death.

former Allied Forces, have sided with southern Yemen. The North, with strong ideological and political links to Iraq, is being supported by Algeria, Sudan and the Palestinians. Jordan, as in the Gulf war, has opted for the slippery role between the two sides.

South Yemen radio now refers to Ali Abdullah Saleh as "Little Saddam". In the North the impression is that the entire world has joined together in an attack against the true geographic and ideological heartland of the Arab world, in which the keepers of the holy land are on the enemy side. The war toys in Yemen might be older, but much of the political jargon is a mere continuation of where things left off when the Gulf war subsided.

## IDEOLOGICAL

Ideological differences between north and south became increasingly apparent in the first days of the war. In the North Yemeni media, former South Yemeni President (and now-former Yemeni Vice President) Ali Salem al-Baid, is frequently referred to as Ali Salem al-Marxisti or Ali Salem al-Facisti. San'a television also shows footage of Communist leaflets being discovered and burned in southern Yemen as northern forces push closer to Aden. To accompany the image of soldiers walking over Communist leaflets the newscaster points out the horror of these findings in a unified, democratic and Islamic Yemen,<sup>16</sup> the implication being that unlike the good believers in the north, southerners are infidels.

The undertones are strongly reminiscent of Afghanistan, where some of the northern fighters got their training.

There are also sharp ideological divides within north Yemen. Yemeni Islamists have made big headway since unification and have penetrated the military, government security and the political system<sup>17</sup>, and many academics accuse them of being fundamentally anti-democratic.

"They are dangerous to the country and will have to be dealt with at some point," said one San'a University political analyst. Yet there are divisions even within Islamist ranks. Yemen is perhaps the only Arab country in which Shiites are a majority and even Yemen's Shiite sects, hatreds run deep. Further complicating the equation is the fact that there are many important Yemeni families who claim to be descendents of the Prophet Mohammed.

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<sup>16</sup>There are no secular political parties in Yemen and even the former-Marxists apply aspects of Sharia law. The country's Islamist party, The Yemeni Rally for Reform [*Tajammu' Yamani lil-Islab*], makes a point of leaving 'Islam' out of its name. "Yemeni society is already an Islamic society. Religion is a major part of life here and it's nothing we lost and have to get back. We simply stand for reform. The northern and southern governments spoiled Yemen with corruption and mismanagement. We simply want to set things right," said Abdullah al-Akwa, spokesman for the Islah party.

<sup>17</sup>Five of North Yemen's ministers are Islamist, as is the speaker of parliament.

These families are largely aligned with a different Islamic party, el-Huq, and many have resisted joining the Islah fold.

Polarizing attention toward the south has put these differences on the back burner and seems to be buying President Ali Abdullah Saleh more time to deal with differences on his own side of the country.

The current battle raging in Yemen is not a civil war, it is a war between two nations with two separate armies that never completely unified. One of Yemen's armies must be defeated before the country can be truly unified. Only then will the underlying civil conflict between ideologies and tribal confederations surface.

As I listen to news of the Arab League <sup>trying to</sup> hammering out differences between North and South, I wonder how negotiations are going between North and North. Have the three Dutch hostages been released? Are the residents of San'a still as worried about Northern tribesmen siding with the Socialists down south as they are about the socialists themselves?

Until the North's own internal differences are dealt with Arab League intervention on South-North political differences are unlikely to solve the Yemen crisis. The problems run much deeper than that.

As I climbed on the C-130 military plane bound for Riyadh<sup>18</sup> along with nearly a hundred other weary American refugees from San'a, I remembered the sound of chirping birds the day the war started.

Yemeni birds seem more persistent than those elsewhere in the region and my strongest memory of that day is not so much the sight and sound of heavy weapons, but the defiant chirping of Yemeni birds and the feeling that maybe, just maybe, the Scud missiles were just a dream.<sup>19</sup>

The prognosis for Yemen seems grim, but wonders in the land of Sheba are more the rule than the exception and I can't help thinking that Yemen just might surprise the world yet again.

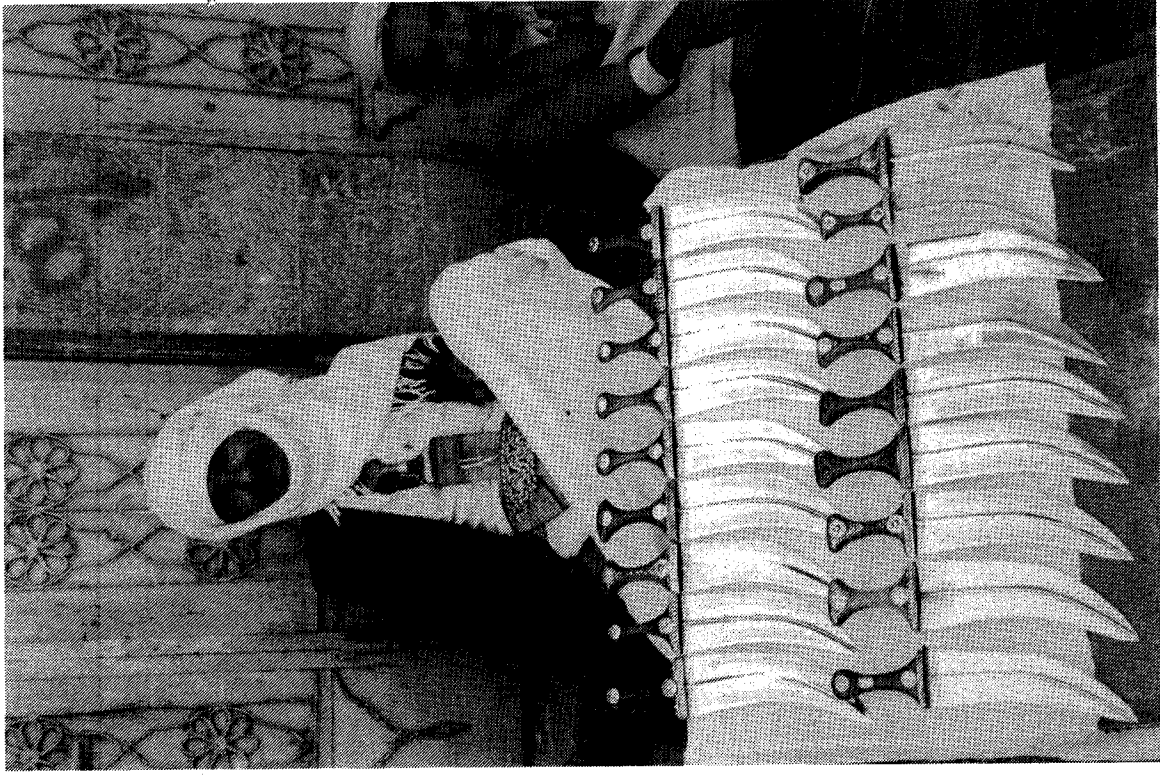
Best regards,

  
Katherine

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<sup>18</sup>At least 10 US military planes were sent to evacuate American citizens stranded in war-torn Yemen. Other foreign nationals followed. The Egyptians, flown out on Aeroflot planes, were among the last to get out. With San'a airport closed and Aden airport *reported damaged*, it's impossible to know when civilian flights will resume.

<sup>19</sup>An average of five Scud missiles a day were reported in San'a the first four days of the war.



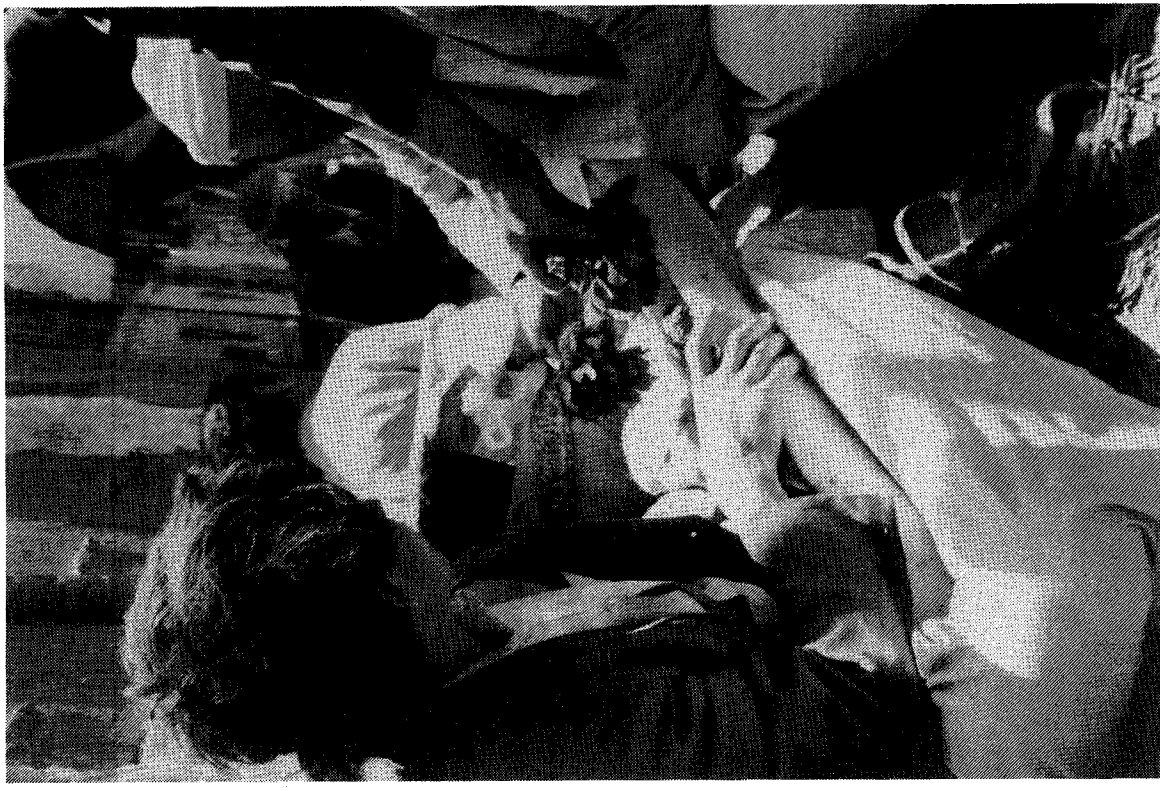
A *jambias* salesman in the old section of San'a. *Jambias* and *qat* remain the two main cultural symbols of both northern and southern Yemen.



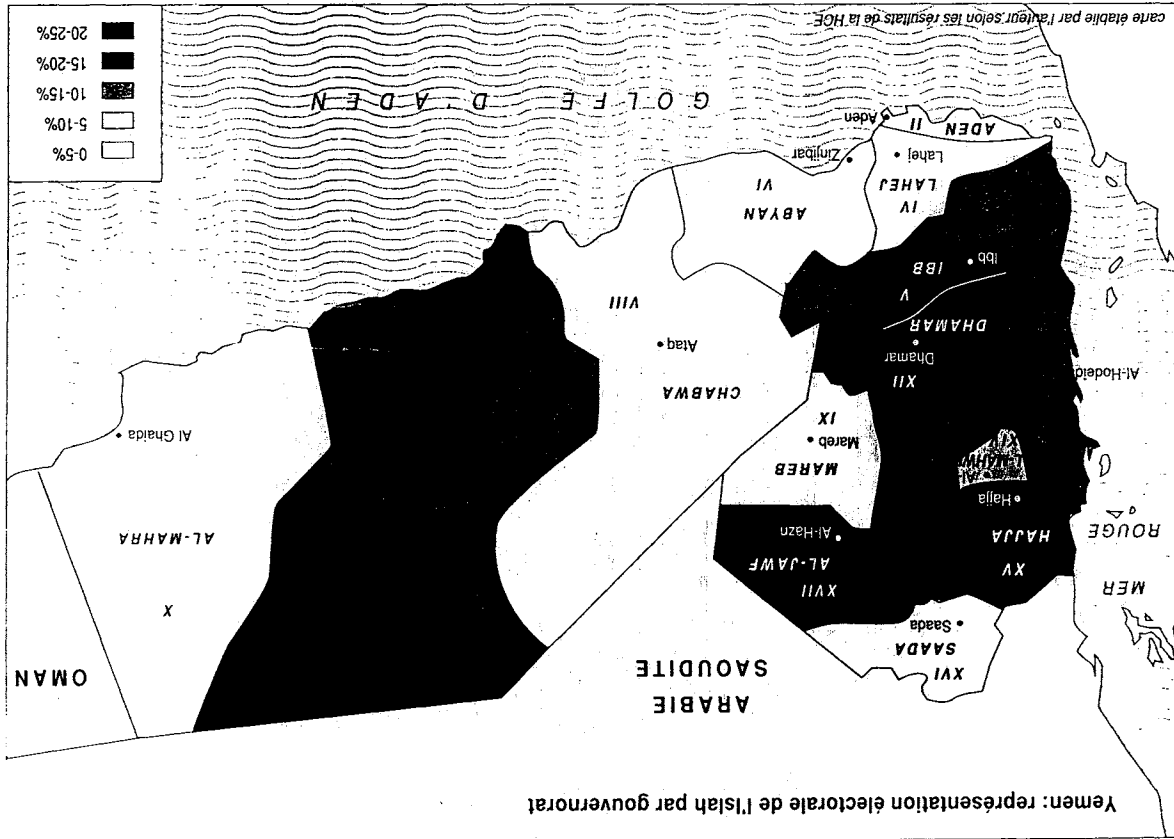
Yemeni boys sporting their *jambias*. Boys often begin wearing the traditional daggers at five or six years of age.



A San'ani *qat* seller wearing his prayer beads on his dagger.



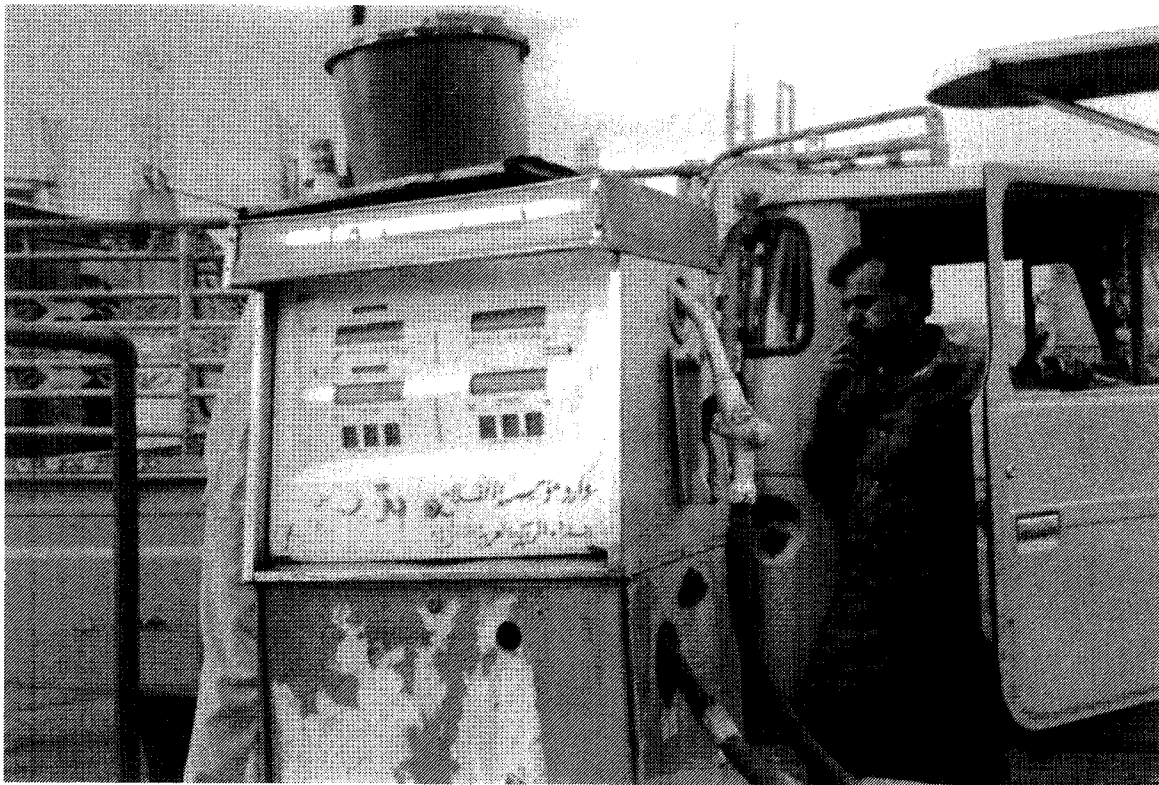
Yemenis throng to buy *qat* the day after the war began. *Qat* prices, already steep by Yemeni standards, have skyrocketed since the start of the war.



Electoral representation of the Islamist Islah party in the 1993 elections. Islamists are playing an increasingly vital role in Yemeni politics. Map published by Bernard Lefresne in the July-Septembre 1993 issue of *Monde Arabe: Maghreb-Mashrek*.



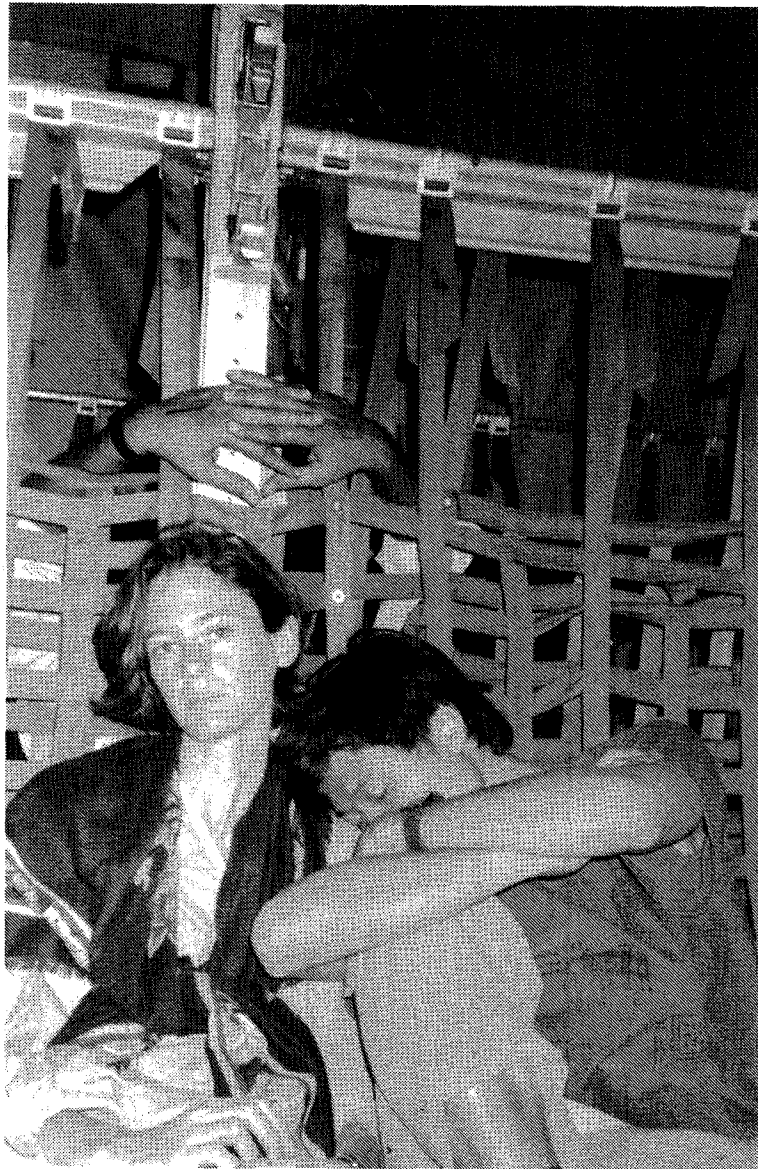
Yemeni girls in the northwestern countryside.



A Yemeni chews qat and waits in line for petrol at a gas station just north of the former border between north and south Yemen. Petrol seiges on the north by the southern regime or by various tribes were common well before war broke out in early May.



Yemenis in the north of the country wait hours or days for petrol during increasingly common petrol seiges. North Yemen is dependent on the south for the vast majority of its refined petrol.



An exhausted American couple evacuated from San'a by the US military heads to Riyadh aboard a C-130 aircraft. As of May 5, the Aden airport was reported damaged and the San'a airport closed to civilian flights, leaving residents of war-torn Yemen stranded.



*Al-Moharer* newspaper, 27 December 1993.

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## Algeria: What went wrong?

22 May, 1994

Dear Peter,

The already-grizzly violence in Algeria is still on the rise. Heads have literally been rolling in Blida market and the use of napalm in Kabylie has now been confirmed. Three of my personal acquaintances, a Berber shopkeeper and two French clerics, have been assassinated in the Casbah recently, bringing the reality of the guerrilla war again close to home. I have been out of Algiers for over six months now, but Algiers is still not out of me.

Algeria remains the only real example so far of a Sunni Islamic revolution and it continues to send chills throughout the region.

What went wrong in that glittering white port city just across from the Côte d'Azur?

Algeria's current crisis is rooted in the very birth of the nation itself. The problems that have surfaced since the 1988 riots, which brought down Algeria's facade of a civilian government, are the result of issues left stewing on the political back burner since the start of Algeria's struggle for independence from France.

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