

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Katherine Roth
San'a, YEMEN
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Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4, West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755
USA

WAR AND CHANGE IN YEMEN

Dear Peter,

Lieutenant Colonel Nasser Omar got out of his Toyota Landcruiser to examine the work of his troops, who locals referred to as the *mutawa*.¹ Flames and black smoke leapt from what was only minutes before the only brewery on the Arabian peninsula. Omar looked satisfied with the job.

"This place should burn," he told me.

¹It is striking and significant that residents should refer to those who burned down the beer factory as *mutawa*, a term that carries with it the force of legitimate authority. In most Arab countries the culprits would have been referred to as the *akbwan* (brothers), the *islamiyin* (Islamists), the *chebab* (guys or youths) or even the *arbabiyin* (terrorists). The only Arab country which normally uses the term *mutawa*, or religious police, is Saudi Arabia. The term makes sense in the context of Yemen because, as in Saudi Arabia, the Islamists enforcing alcohol prohibition are armed government authorities.

Katherine Roth is a Fellow of the Institute
writing about tradition and modernity in the Arab world



Smoke from the Seera Brewery could be seen from at least ten kilometers away.

Only two weeks before, the residents of Aden had been permitted to drink vodka and whisky to their heart's content.² Liquor was legal and tolerated. When northern forces closed in and finally took control of the city last week, life changed.

The brewery, located in the Mansurah district in northwestern Aden, was first hit by several rockets before being dowsed with petrol and burned to the ground. Following their entry into Aden the following

day, northern troops also destroyed and burned all the cases of liquor they could find.

Southern authorities decided at the height of the war in late June to turn the brewery to soft-drink production and forbade the sale and consumption of alcohol in southern, and traditionally liberal, Yemen. This decision was seen as a gesture to the more Islamic north, where alcohol consumption is strictly forbidden under Islamic law. The

²Incidentally, the liver and not the heart is the origin of temptation in many early Islamic writings.

move was also intended to counteract northern propaganda which called the south "atheist and beer-drinking." Evidently the symbolism of the brewery had become too important to allow it to remain in any capacity or form.

The religious establishment in Yemen had been lashing out against the brewery for years and this anger came to a peak when "the mujahidin"³ finally took Aden this month.

The brewery employed 200 people and produced a million half-liter bottles per month, under the label Seera, before the war, which has been widely called a *jihad*, broke out on May 4. The factory made a profit of some US\$ 8 million last year alone. Practically all of the beer was consumed in Yemen.

These have been times of war and change in Yemen.

The future of democracy and freedom in a decidedly unified Yemen is being written even as I write this newsletter.

Since returning to Yemen in early June I have watched the number of independent opposition newspapers shrink and the power of the Islamists in government grow. The signs of change started out subtly: More veils, more radical sermons in the mosques and more press coverage of Islamist officials within the government. With the breakaway Socialist party out of the picture, the Islamist Islah party, the third biggest in the coalition government as of April, became the second biggest in the country. Socialists, once the second biggest party in the country, began to be referred to in the official media as infidels. The already hazy line between religion and politics became even further blurred. The division between Islah and conservative elements within the ruling Peoples' Congress Party became likewise nebulous.

The Muslim Brotherhood has influential members in both Islah and ruling Peoples' General Congress parties who seem to work together as a unit across traditional party lines. The Islamist power structure in Yemen is hardly limited to the Islah party. The Islah party was formed about five years ago, while the Islamist movement in Yemen dates to the 1940s and 1950s.

I was in Aden the day the war ended and watched as the elite northern Amalga [*amalga* means "giant"] Brigade moved into Crater, the populous neighborhood to which most civilians from the embattled suburbs of the southern capital had fled. The scene should not have been surprising, but it was. The elite brigade, among the country's most respected and best trained, had become a semi-official *mutawa*. They stopped anyone carrying alcohol and shot apart the offending boxes with assault rifles.

"Watch this, sister," an Amalga Brigade soldier told me just before he blasted away at a box of brandy he had confiscated from a passing car. The owners of the brandy, who had been in the process of looting a carload of vodka and brandy from a nearby warehouse, stood silently and watched.

The next day the beer factory, a symbol of the liberalism of predominantly Socialist southern Yemen, was up in flames. The billow of black smoke could be seen from at least ten kilometers away.

³Muslim fighters.

"The whole war was about that beer factory," one of the few Socialist parliamentarians left in San'a, Othman Abdel-Jabar Rashid, told me at a *qat*⁴ chew yesterday. A number of intellectual Yemenis in San'a said they fear Aden may be an indicator of things to come in the rest of the country, and say they can already feel their liberties slipping away.

"This is a decisive and difficult time. The future is contingent on how the political leadership handles the situation," said Rashid.

He partly blamed the San'a government for the widespread looting in Aden, and said the burning of the brewery and liquor warehouses in Aden could be an indicator of the kind of tactics that might occur in the rest of Yemen later.

"The looting in Aden is partly a result of a *fatwa*⁵ issued by Dr. Abdel-Wahab Dailami several weeks ago saying it was right to take the property of those considered infidels and referring to the Socialists as infidels," he said. "It is also because San'a decided to send the army into Aden even after the Socialists had surrendered. Because the army is there, local law enforcement agencies cannot function. These local authorities are the only ones who know the city and the people enough to enforce the law."

Rashid said his home in the Khormaksar neighborhood of Aden had been looted and that a northern army officer was now residing there. Many Socialist party officials say they lost their homes and belongings to squatters and looters during the war.

The Islamists, whose armed supporters actively participated in the war for Yemeni unity, are now demanding more power in the government. This new Islamic thrust seems to be causing alarm among many of the country's secularist intellectuals.

"There are a few parties, notably the Islah, which are using religious feelings and foment religious fervor for their political gain," wrote Abdel-Aziz El-Saqqaf, chief editor of the independent English-language Yemen Times weekly on the front page of his newspaper recently.⁶

He warned that unless the situation is dealt with immediately, "political confusion and misunderstanding could lead to violence."

"If you analyse Sheikh Zandoni's statements carefully, you can read what we fear. He's a leader of a jihad type movement, and he's gotten more radical since the war started," said a respected San'a professor on condition of anonymity. "The man is a Yemeni Jerry Falwell and with a 70 to 80 percent illiteracy rate in the country, his oratory skills make him most dangerous. This war is a party compared to what we may be facing not too far down the road."

A leading member of Yemen's armed Islamic Jihad told a visitor to Aden recently: "We have gotten rid of the known infidels, and now we must start to weed out the infidels

⁴As I mentioned in my previous newsletter on Yemen, *qat* [got] is a mildly stimulating drug which is chewed socially in Yemen. Many interviews and negotiations take place at *qat* chews. The event is the local version of tea time or coffee hour.

⁵religious decree.

⁶El-Saqqaf and over 15 other Socialist and secularist intellectuals were recently arrested in San'a. Amnesty International has said that some may have been tortured. All but three of the detainees, including El-Saqqaf, have been released.

in hiding." A reliable independent source, on condition of anonymity, said that the Jihad is no longer the fractionalized collection of militias it was prior to the war. It is now organized and under the direct command of Islamic elements in the government, he said.

But apart from a small secularist elite, the moves closer to Islamic law don't seem to worry most Yemenis, who already live in a largely traditional Islamic society and so are not disturbed by the legalization of the values to which they already adhere.

"Neither now nor in the future do the Islamists pose any threat. All they want is that we rule by the book of God. That's reasonable," said a senior ruling GPC official, on condition of anonymity.

Colonel of the 10,000 strong Amalga Brigade Ali Jaifi, who was camped out in the residence of the leader of the separatist movement, Ali Salem El-Baid, put it succinctly. "Our law and constitution is Islam," he said. The troops standing around us nodded in agreement. The truth and justice of his statement seems obvious to many Yemenis.

Yemeni society is so thoroughly traditional and Islamic that is difficult to call the desire for a strictly Islamic state extremist. Words like "fundamentalist" ring hollow here, where most men, Marxists included, wear impressive mustaches, unkempt beards and traditional daggers and where women don't feel comfortable in public without a *shirshaf*, a black cloth that covers the face so that even the eyes don't show. In Egypt or Algeria or Syria, some people stand out as being obviously Islamist. In these countries there is an un-Islamic influence against which one can rebel. This is not really so in Yemen.

Only a generation ago most Yemenis lived under the rule of the Imam, perhaps the last of the traditional style Islamic leaders, who was overthrown in 1962.⁷ Although San'a is now a modern city and the superficial pattern of daily life here is not greatly different from that in most other Arab countries⁸, social life here and the manner in which most Yemenis regard authority has not changed a lot since the days of the Imam.

Moves toward making Yemen more Islamic are hardly noticed by many Yemenis. The hair salons in the capital have been closed since the war started and show no sign of reopening⁹, but very few women here cut their hair at salons anyway. There's still only one movie theater in the Yemeni capital, but most Yemenis feel more comfortable passing the time playing the *oud*¹⁰ or smoking a waterpipe with their friends or chewing qat and telling stories. I ask myself and everyone I know what a fundamentalist is. The answer remains far from clear.

⁷Like the almost caliph-like leaders of Morocco and Jordan, the Imam was a Hashimid, and therefore a descendent of the Prophet Mohamed. No other leaders in the Arab world can claim that seal of traditional Islamic legitimacy.

⁸In fact, the infrastructure in San'a is more efficient in that in many other Arab countries. Water here is never shut off as it is on a daily basis in Algiers, and electricity is much more dependable here than in Syria or Lebanon. Many of the roads in Yemen are new and are in much better condition than those I've seen in many other Arab countries.

⁹Elements within the government said that hair salons in the capital were being used as covers for Socialist rebels. Officials claim to have discovered tens of thousands of weapons stashed in San'a salons, more often frequented by southern Yemenis than by northerners.

¹⁰The Arab lute.

"Until about 1975, when television was introduced to San'a, this was a city living in the Middle Ages. Yemenis thought Yemen was the center of everything and that they were better than other countries. About the same time, foreigners started coming to San'a, mostly Ethiopians and Somalians. The roads were improved and people started to come from different parts of the country. Everything changed in an instant," an Italian friend told me. His father was the last Imam's personal doctor and so my friend spent nearly all his life in Yemen. He has converted to Islam and taken a Yemeni wife and can easily pass for a native, which he very nearly is.

A University of San'a political science professor recently told me that the easiest way to know whether a Yemeni is a fundamentalist is to ask what he thinks of Sheikh Zandoni, an imam and Afghan veteran now serving on the presidential council and as a leading member of the Islah party. "If they like Zandoni, they're fundamentalist," he said.

But the matter hardly seems as clear as that.

"A religious authority figure like Sheikh Zandoni feels comfortable to Yemenis. He reminds them of the Imam, he is almost like a parent," said my Italian friend. "That doesn't mean Yemenis are fundamentalists, it just means they are vulnerable to all these new foreign influences coming into the country."

As the battle around Aden heightened and the number of religious images surrounding the war increased, I put the question of who was technically Islamist and who was simply a conservative Muslim on hold in favor of tracking down the meaning of the war in Yemen in terms of the Islamist movement.

Hard-line religious leaders around the region had already begun referring to the battle as a holy war¹¹ and Yemen television came close to doing the same.

At a press conference June 16 Speaker of Parliament, Head of the Islah party and tribal sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar told journalists: "We consider this a holy war. Our slain soldiers will go to heaven and their slain soldiers will go to hell. We consider unity as part of Islam and those who retreat from Islam are infidels."

I wondered who the troops of this maybe holy war were and whether they indeed thought they were fighting for God.

I headed to the front in search of soldiers and images of Islam.

The driver of the Toyota Landcruiser headed to the front was also employed with Yemeni television. He wore a beige head scarf and two-day stubble to accompany his army uniform, and kept what he said was an Iran-assembled Kalashnikov by his side at all times.

The military guide, Captain Hussein, rode beside him. The captain was a round man in a camouflage uniform who spoke fluent Russian and had a taste for vodka and a decidedly bawdy sense of humor. His wife hailed from Azerbaijan, he said, and although

¹¹The kidnapping of the Yemeni ambassador to Algiers, who was a Socialist and in favor of separation between northern and southern Yemen, by the Algerian Armed Islamic Group immediately after religious authorities in Yemen again decried the separatists as infidels offers some testimony to the highly developed Islamist communication network. Among the Yemeni middle class faxes are as common as telephones and although international commuter networks have not yet come to Yemen, they are now available in most Arab countries.

his official title was Captain in the Department of Moral Guidance, Hussein's identification card listed his profession only as: Sheikh. In addition to his work for the Department Moral and Political Guidance¹², Hussein was the tribal chief for 29 Bakil¹³ villages in the Hadda area.

We headed for the front line near Zinjibar¹⁴, the capital of Abyan province and an old slave trading town on the Gulf of Aden just east of Aden. Zinjibar was a dusty outpost and had been without electricity since the first day of the war. All its electricity had previously come from Aden. Zinjibar was also low on diesel fuel, which had also previously come from Aden. Farms were rapidly drying up in the rich agricultural area surrounding Zinjibar because water pumps could not operate to irrigate fields. The World Health Organization has estimated that it could take years to get the desimated fields back to normal production levels.

After a humble lunch of vegetable stew and Arab bread on the floor of the governorate headquarters, we headed west along a desert track which followed what had been a major water pipeline to Aden. The heavy thud of shelling could soon be heard but there was little to see but sand dunes and the occasional cloud of black smoke in the distance as southern bombs landed in northern positions.

Soldiers of the 56th Brigade who sat under a thistle tree near the front told me they did not see the war as a religious war, but neither as a war between north and south. "It's a war between Yemen and a small group of infidels who want to destroy Yemen," one soldier told me.

He ate cookies donated by the people of San'a. On the box was scrawled in red pen: "If you make a victory for God, he'll make a victory for you."

Before heading back to San'a we stopped at the Amalga Brigade camp to get petrol. A large sign in the central roundabout just inside the entryway read: "Think not of those who die in the name of God as dead. They are alive. In God they have provision."¹⁵

Although these slogans do not in themselves imply anything concrete about the politics behind the war, it is interesting to note that the latter slogan is most often associated with the Lebanese Hizbollah.

On July 7, the day the war officially ended and Aden fell to northern forces, namely the Amalga Brigade, I headed to the scene to see what I could. On the way to Aden we stopped at El-Anad base for petrol.¹⁶

¹²Idaret al-towjia al-maanawia wa al-siasia: The propaganda wing of the Defense Department. Like many army officers in both northern and southern Yemen, this officer was trained in Russia.

¹³The Bakil tribal group is one of the two most important tribal confederations in Yemen. The other main tribal confederation, to which President Ali Abdullah Saleh belongs, is the Hashid confederation.

¹⁴*Zinji* and *Zanzi* were early terms meaning "black" and *bar* previously meant market. Thus Zinjibar and Zanzibar.

¹⁵The Holy Qor'an. Sura 3: v. 169

¹⁶Petrol was in short supply during the war, especially in war-affected areas. For this reason, we had to go to military bases to fill up the gas tank. These gas stops were a wonderful window into how the troops loyal to San'a lived and what the atmosphere was among the northern troops.

As we waited for the local authority to okay our petrol ration, the driver sat in the car listening to Yemeni music on the radio. The singer was a woman from Taz.

Suddenly a soldier sauntered over to the car and said gruffly; "Turn that music down before the brothers over there come over and shoot your radio apart. Nobody here listens to music."¹⁷

After the driver had turned the music down, he turned to us¹⁸ and muttered: "Mujahideen, mujahideen. As soon as we get rid of these damn separatists we'll have to deal with the mujahideen."¹⁹

"There are a lot of them. It won't be easy," I said.

"No. There's just Zandoni. We'll get him out somehow," he said.

Although the war in Yemen was far from being a religious crusade waged solely by Islamists, some elements of the northern leadership certainly appeared keen to invoke the name of God in battle, and that propaganda doubtless had an impact on the troops.

A soldier at El-Anad base told an Associated Press reporter in mid-June: "There's only God to be afraid of, and he's on our side."



The logo of Sheikh Zandoni and his supporters, who have their own weekly newspaper, The Faith. The motto is "The Qor'an and the Sunna are above the law and the constitution." I have seen this motto scrawled as graffiti on walls throughout Yemen.

The war strengthened and clarified the position of the Islamists within Yemen's government and brought to surface the deep divisions within the ruling Peoples' General Congress party that had been less evident with the socialists on the scene and the Islamists in distant third place in the political line-up.

Yemen's somewhat accomodating stance toward the movement is certainly part of the reason why so many Afghan veterans and other political "misfits" find themselves here,

¹⁷Conservative Islamists believe music is forbidden in Islam.

¹⁸Two journalists were with me in the car.

¹⁹Mujahideen literally means those who wage a *jihad*.

but watching the Yemeni parliament while keeping in mind that force has not yet proven successful as a means of stopping the movement anywhere, it is difficult not to have a glimmer of hope.

Yes, there are problems here. There are deep problems. But in San'a an amazing and hopeful event occurs on a regular basis as tribal sheikhs, Islamists, socialists and just about every political flavor in between show up for a session of the Yemeni parliament. Men [and two women], most dressed as they might have been in the age of Mohamed, put aside their differences to talk and argue and sort through the daily business of running the country.

The freedom and sense of safety here, while far from complete, is in some ways greater than that I have felt elsewhere in the region, where Islamists and secularists are having it out in the streets and not on the floor of the parliament.

Yemen is possibly the only Arab country in which Islamist elements have been brought into the government instead of being forcibly repressed, and because of this little Yemen may still serve as an important model of how Arab Islamists can cope with democratic principles and how tolerant they can be of secularists once in power.

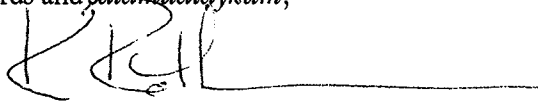
So far the coalition government, while admittedly uncomfortable, has succeeded in sparing Yemen from the terrorist-type activities now common in many other Arab countries where the Islamist movement is a serious contender for political power [Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan...] but is being shunned and violently silenced.

"The battle to win the peace may be a lot more difficult and more decisive than the battle to win the war," an insightful Arab journalist friend told me recently.

I remember the look of conviction on the face of Colonel Nasser Omar as he watched the brewery burn. I remember a similar look on the face of another army officer who sipped an ice cold beer in a back room of the destroyed Aden Hotel and said Sheikh Zandoni and "the crazy fundamentalists" would suffer the same fate as Ali Salem El-Baid. I remember that these two men serve the same army in the same town at the same time.

The real struggle in Yemen, as elsewhere in the region, may just be beginning.

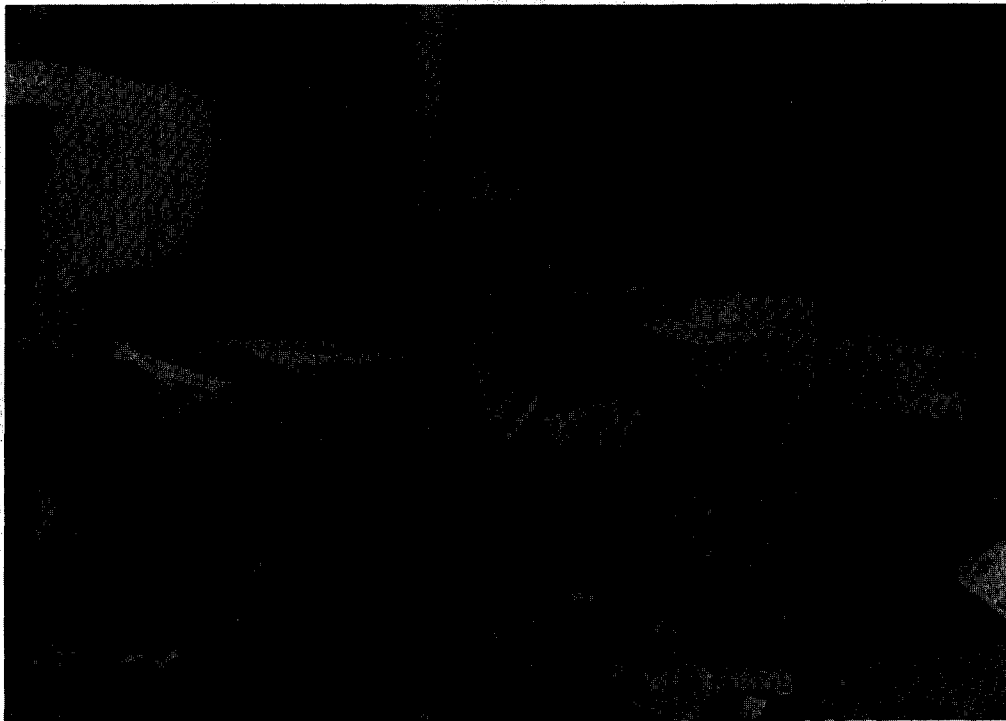
Best regards and *salamualaykum*,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Katherine', followed by a long horizontal line.

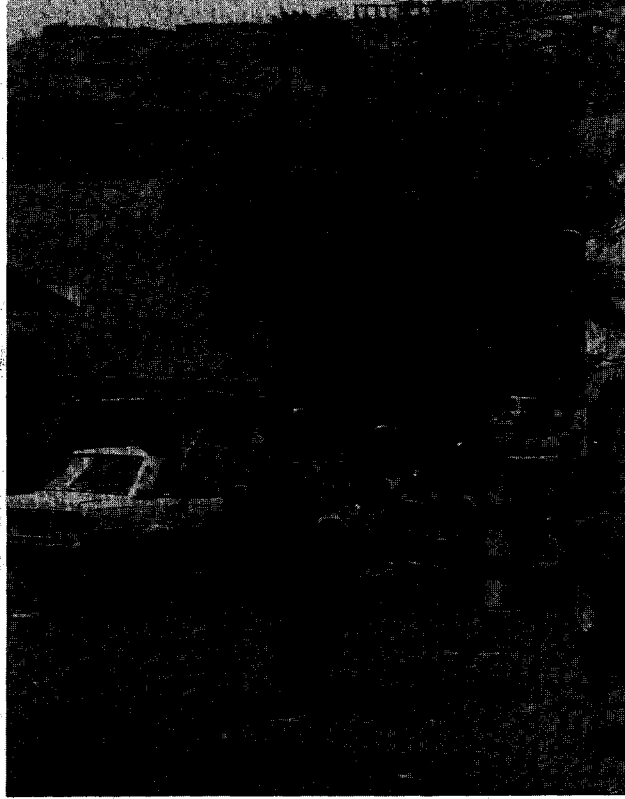
Katherine



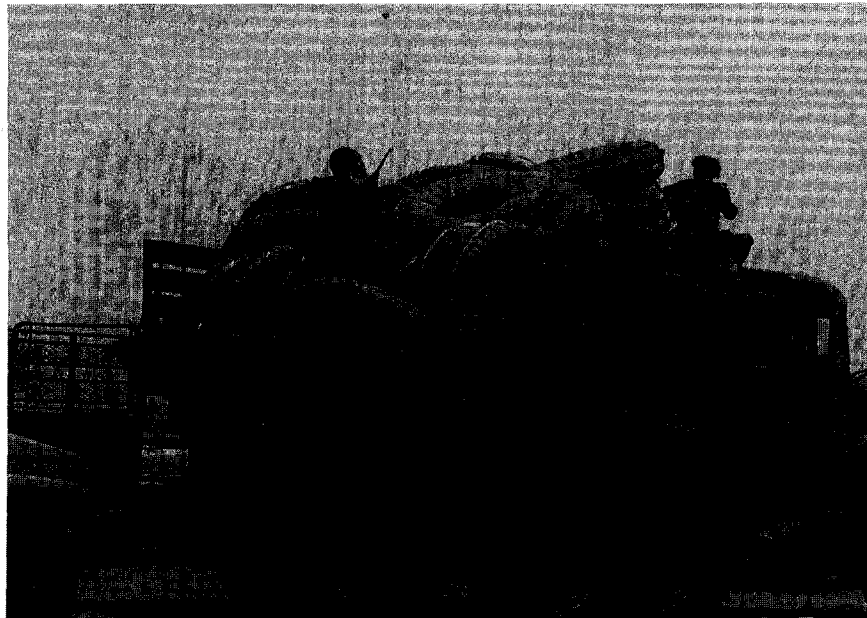
Members of the northern special security forces in Aden standing in front a poster showing the faces of former leaders of southern Yemen.



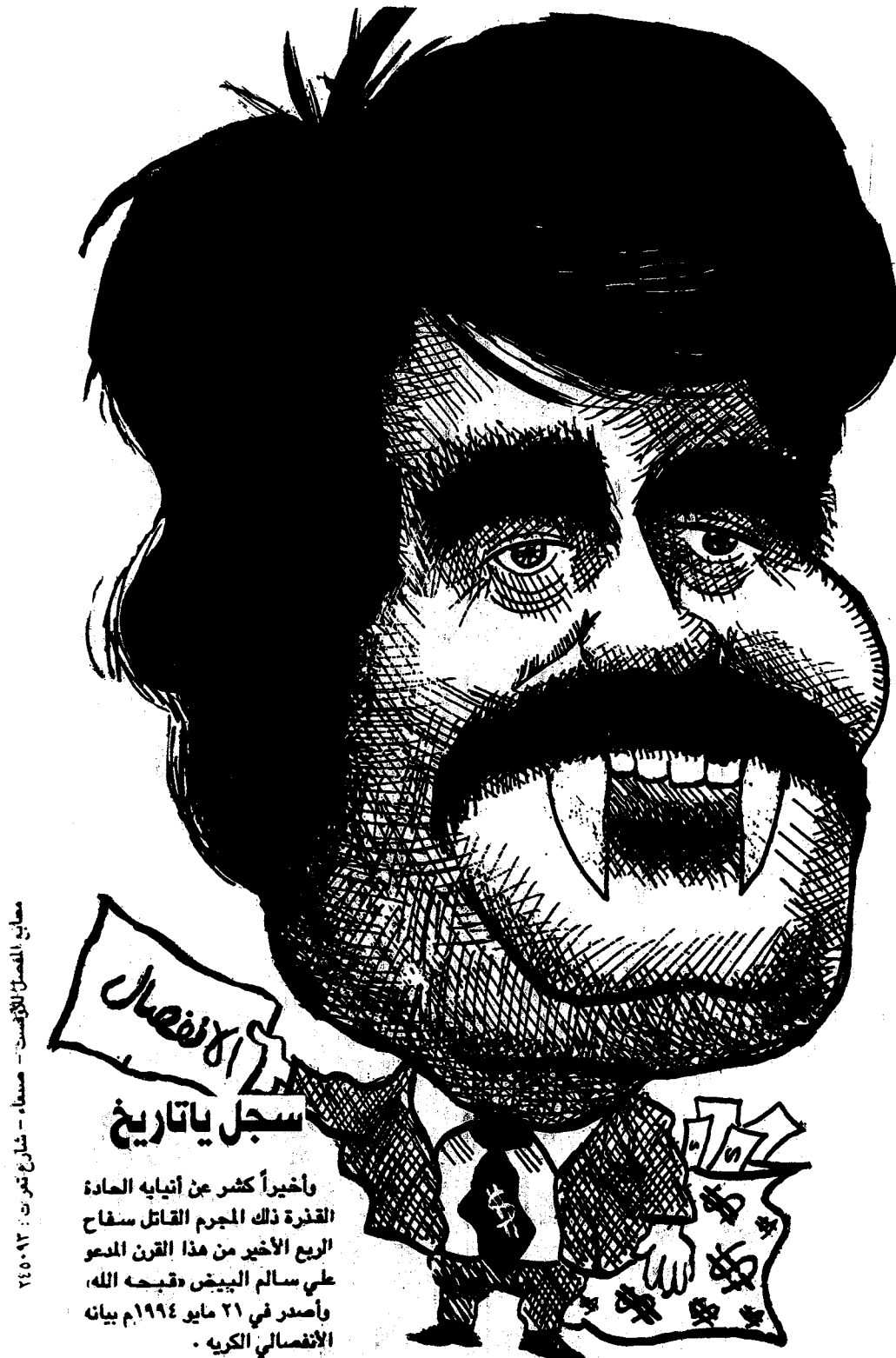
A bonfire of vodka and whiskey started by the Amalga Brigade just after they entered Aden.



An Aden resident carries chairs away from the Ministry of Oil in Aden.



Although most of the Aden looting after the war was done by residents, northern army trucks were seen carrying away loads of new tires, most probably looted.



The above caricature of socialist separatist leader Ali Salem El-Beid appeared on the front page of *The Opinion* weekly newspaper during the war. El-Beid holds a sign reading "Separation". Below the paper demands that the history of Beid's actions be written.

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Katherine Roth
San'a, YEMEN
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Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755
USA

Islamic: The Other Chic

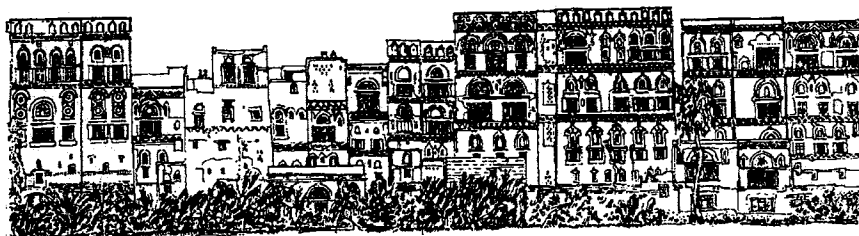
There we sat at around the breakfast table, my Islamic fundamentalist English student, his wife – in a short red negligee, crimson lipstick and heavy black eyeliner – and me, dressed as ordered in a black ankle-length skirt, long-sleeved blouse and no make-up.

My hosts served what they took for an American breakfast: Buttered coffee and cornflakes boiled in milk.

"Well," said Mohamed nervously, "let's start." I glanced uneasily at Soraya.

"You see why she covers herself on the street," said Mohamed.

The teenage Soraya brushed back her long curly hair, blinked her sultry eyelids at me and giggled encouragingly at big Mo.



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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.