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

Afghanistan and the Yemeni Jihad: A Surprising visit to Post-war Aden
Part 1



This photo of Tarek El-Fadly (left) and his father, Sultan Nasr El-Fadly, appeared in the international weekly El-Wasat news magazine.

Dear Peter,

One of the more memorable Islamists I have met since beginning this two-year "Islamic journey" is Tarek El-Fadly, the young tribal and jihad leader from Abyan, the expansive province to the east of Aden. Since my last meeting with him he has been officially named Sultan of Abyan, replacing his father Nasr El-Fadly, who was the Sultan of Abyan before and during British rule in southern Yemen.

The widely respected and influential El-Fadly family fled Yemen to Lebanon and then to Saudi Arabia when the Socialists took control of southern Yemen after the country's independence. After fighting alongside the Afghan rebels against communist

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

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forces the young Islamist El-Fadly took his region by storm when he returned home in 1990 to wage war against communist forces in southern Yemen.

I spent about two days with the young son of the Yemeni sultan and attended a qat chew in which he advised local administrators in his province facing the power vacuum left by the demise of the socialist party how best to handle the problems facing them and their constituents. The new jihad, if there is one, is the fight to develop Yemen economically.

Sitting on cushions on the floor of El-Fadly's humble Zinjibar residence late one afternoon and chewing large shrubs of qat¹, El-Fadly told me how he had decided to go to Afghanistan and how that experience influenced his struggle against the Yemeni socialists.

His story is illustrative of that of a large segment of Yemen's Islamists, who are similarly the hopeful sons of tribal sheikhs facing a modern world largely hostile to the traditional-style tribal social structure. Although Tarek is not a member of the Islamist Islah party, with which he does not agree [he is one of several leading Islamists in Yemen to have signed up instead with the ruling General Peoples' Congress party], it is interesting to note that over 15 percent of the members of the executive committee of Islah is composed of tribal sheikhs, who, besides Speaker of Parliament Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar, are all under 35 years of age.

Whereas the Islamic movement in other parts of the Arab world may be focussed against Western influences perceived as being detrimental to the traditional social fabric, it seems that in southern regions of Yemen, the movement is focussed against socialist influences perceived as being hostile to the traditional tribal structure of society.

This is what El-Fadly had to say about his background and his perception of his region prior to the war here:

I was born in Zinjibar in August 1967, right before southern Yemen gained its independence from Britain. My family left the country in 1968. First we lived in Beirut and then we lived in Saudi Arabia.

When I was 18 years old my older brother was studying in America. When he first went to America he was just like everyone else, but during his visits home in the summers I noticed he was changing and becoming a better Muslim. During the summers he would spend one month with the family in Saudi Arabia and two months fighting in Afghanistan. He was a role model for me and influenced me greatly. He always gave me Islamic books, tapes and magazines. I especially remember the books of Sayyid Qotb and Mawdudi. Soon I started to see changes in myself.

First Thoughts of Afghanistan

I began to change my plans and my way of thinking. I began attending more religion classes and learning the Qor'an by heart. I was a lieutenant in the Saudi army at that time [1979] and I went to train in a military camp in Tabook [in southern Saudi Arabia]. I spent eight months there.

¹A stimulant shrub chewed socially by Yemenis.

My brother continued sending me tapes and magazines about the Islamic jihad. People at that time were all talking about Afghanistan and the *mujahedin*² in Afghanistan. I began considering the idea of going to Afghanistan and I started saving money from my salary. I did not tell anyone about my plans. I asked Colonel Hyder [Hyder Saleh El-Khibari] to be discharged from the Saudi army. Hyder tried to talk me out of it and promised me more training abroad and a promotion if I'd stay in the army. I told him I was determined to go to Afghanistan.

Two days before my departure I told my parents I was really going to Afghanistan. They were worried and concerned for my life. I told them I had no choice because the Saudi *Ulema*³ had issued a *fatwa*⁴ saying it was a duty for me to participate in the *jihad*. I had made up my mind and I felt very comfortable with my decision. There was no way I could change my mind. Finally my parents accepted, but they asked that I keep in touch and write home regularly. I kept my plans to go to Afghanistan secret.

Whenever someone asked me why I was leaving, I told them I was planning to go to school in Pakistan. I'm not sure why I kept it a secret. I didn't have any information about how to go to Afghanistan except what I knew from my Islamic tapes and magazines. I did not know then that the Muslim League could have sponsored me to go. Somehow I imagined there would be restrictions.

A Yemeni Tribesman in Afghanistan

Anyway, I went to Afghanistan on my own.

One of my friends told me I should go first to Islamabad airport in Pakistan, where I would be met by delegates of the mujahedin who would take care of my transportation to Afghanistan and my stay there. On the flight to Islamabad I made friends with an Afghan who was studying in Mecca. He told me he knew the guest house of Abdullah Azzam where the new mujahedin were received. I went with this Afghan to Peshawar even though I found the delegates of the office of Sheikh Azzam at the airport.

In Pakistan I met lots of other Arabs. Each group – Algerians, Egyptians, Yemenis – were housed separately. There were also people coming in from the U.S. and from Saudi Arabia.

The northern and southern Yemenis were also in separate groups. In my group I met people from all over southern Yemen – Shebwa, Hadramaut, Abyan, Aden... – who had all come to Afghanistan for the same purpose. All of us wanted to fight alongside the Afghani mujahedin. There were a lot more northerners than southerners, but we southerners seemed more closely bonded in that we came from a situation similar to that in Afghanistan. We were Muslims oppressed by a Communist, Russian-supported government. Many of the people I met were inspired to come by the stories of miracles that happened to the mujahedin in Afghanistan. We thought we

²*Mujahid*, singular and *Mujahedin*, plural. Literally one who participates in a *jihad*, or holy war.

³Religious scholars [see newsletter #19]

⁴Religious decree.

could learn a lot from Afghanistan and that we could do something like what the Afghanis were doing in our own country. We could get Saudi Arabia and America to support us in launching a jihad against the Communist government in Aden.

Unfortunately we could not get support in this endeavor from our brothers in northern Yemen. They thought it would be very difficult to do something like that. We knew that Islamists would never receive support to launch a war against the Communists in the south even though the north had supported the nationalist movement in the south. The gap between us and our northern brothers widened. The north just wanted us to become a part of them without admitting that we were in a completely different situation.

Anyway, I went for three months' training in a town called Sada on the Pakistan-Afghan border. [After he had completed some military training in Pakistan he passed from Peshawar, the Pakistan headquarters for Afghan rebels and their supporters, across the border into Afghanistan.]

When I finally entered Jaji, Afghanistan, where the Arabs had a front, I found a brigade of different Arabs led by Ossama ben Ladden⁵. He had a special interest in southern Yemenis, especially those from Hadramaut. His family was originally from Hadramaut and he felt closer to and more relaxed with southern Yemenis. I spent three months with that brigade. It wasn't serious fighting and I told Ossama I wanted to go further into Afghanistan. I left the camp for Midan Wardak, south of Kabul. There was a Malaysian man with me and together we went with delegates of the office of Sheikh Abdulla Azzam to investigate the needs of that particular front and to supply them with weapons. It took 15 days to get there. I spent seven months there and participated in a number of operations. One of them was to release prisoners from Kabul. Before winter I went back to get more supplies for the front. We contacted Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's office, the Muslim World League and the Red Crescent. We got money, a car, medicine and weapons. I gave the supplies to the Islamic Party and went back to the front with another south Yemeni and two Malaysians.

Tribal Talks

I started to learn more about the structure of Afghan society and the politics there. It was a very tribal society. As a whole, each tribe would side with a particular party. Many of the tribes had long-standing political differences. With the political situation and the divisions and the weapons, these tribal differences grew even greater. I encouraged them at that time to form a committee of elder Afghans to sort out these differences. They called it "the white-bearded committee". I worked with them to try and sort out problems, especially between two particular tribes who were fighting each other. I benefitted a lot from the experience and I spent my whole second year in Afghanistan with these people. I became close friends with some of the

⁵Ossama Ben Ladden is a wealthy Saudi of southern Yemeni origin who set up Islamic training camps for Arabs in Afghanistan and helped fund Arabs, especially southern Yemenis, to go to Afghanistan. Because of his continuing opposition to the Saudi regime ben Ladden's Saudi passport was recently revoked. He continues his activities in the international Islamist movement and is now based in Khartoum, Sudan.

tribal leaders, party leaders and military commanders there. It was a good education for me.

The Afghans came to respect the Arab volunteers for their versatility. We would mediate and teach and fight. They were surprised at our ways of doing things. The Afghans do not work like that. A teacher does not fight and a fighter does not mediate.

We investigated the reasons for all these tribal and party differences and we found out that there were mujahideen who were double agents. They would shoot from the side of the Islamic Jihad at the Islamic Party, for example, and then the Islamic Party would retaliate against the Jihad Islamic. In this way these agents would inflame internal conflicts among the mujahedin. We finally succeeded in bringing the main Afghan leaders together, but we found that the differences between different tribes and different Islamic groups were almost irreconcilable. Some of these differences dated back many years. We failed to negotiate a lasting truce between them, but we suggested that they try a temporary truce for three years. We also suggested that the elderly Afghans form a permanent committee to investigate all wrong actions by any party. They accepted the temporary truce and they also accepted to work together for the common cause of winning the war against the Communists and Russians and to share the cost of the battle. They liked this solution.

Brief Return to Saudi Arabia

I went to Saudi when the Russians started pulling out. I started looking for a wife there, but most women seemed reluctant to get involved with a mujahed. They always feared I would go back to Afghanistan and get killed or something. I refused to promise I wouldn't return to Afghanistan, so after three months in Saudi I returned to Afghanistan without getting married.

Back to the Afghan Front

At that time, in 1990, there was heavy fighting to capture the city of Jalalabad. When I returned to the Arab camps I discovered they had become much more organized and that their front was better established than that of any Afghan party. This time we made a committee of seven commanders to fight with the Afghans. We succeeded in capturing a city about 40 kilometers from Jalalabad. We fought our way all the way to the airport and then we entered the airport. Unfortunately most of the Afghan mujahedin did not follow us because they were too busy looting the town. The bombing was heavy and by nightfall we heard the sound of tanks advancing toward the airport so we withdrew.

In another battle I was in a group of different Arabs. We crossed a minefield on another side of Jalalabad. The three mujahedin with me were killed and two others and myself were seriously injured. I went back to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment and stayed for about eight months. Then I heard the news about Yemeni unity and I began to consider returning to Yemen. I remembered all the stories my father and other relatives had told me about our town in southern Yemen.

My friends and I thought whatever happened in the south would be better than the oppressive rule of the socialists, so I and most of the Afghan veterans from south Yemen decided to return home to our country.

The Yemeni Mujahedin return their Socialist Homeland

I went back with my cousin, who had stayed in Abyan until 1985. I imagined Zinjibar would be an impressive place. I knew it was near Aden and was the capital of Abyan. When I arrived I was shocked by its backwardness. I was in the car with my cousin and I asked him: "Where's Zinjibar?". He said we just passed Zinjibar. I had no idea that this little town was the capital of the Sultanate of my father.

I was furious with the Socialists when I saw what they had done to my country. When I saw how hard life was for the people here my anger grew. I spent the first two months just travelling around the country and getting to know the place. The word spread that the son of the sultan was back. No one imaged the son of the sultan would ever return and everyone started wondering what I was doing. It was big news here.

The Socialist party maintained their power here even after unity. It never gave up its power. The police was here [in Zinjibar] and the security was here and they started to keep a close eye on me. They started spreading rumors that I was back to reclaim the sultanate.

'They started calling me a Fundamentalist'

They said I was a fundamentalist and a terrorist.

I didn't like that, because I don't want people to distinguish between Muslims in Yemen and divide them into fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists. We are all Muslims here. The only difference I see is between a practicing Muslim and a non-practicing Muslim. There are those who follow the rules of God and those who don't follow the rules of God. It all depends on how you understand Islam. If I started calling myself Islamist people wouldn't like that. They'd start asking me: "Are you trying to say you are Muslim and I am not Muslim?" The term *multathim* is probably better. It specifically refers to one who practices the religion.

First Conflicts with the Socialists

Anyway, I began to have problems with the socialists. I also began to talk with people and remind them that there is no difference between Muslims and that we all should be good Muslims and that the only difference between us is between those who obey God and those who don't.

The borders were open between the north and south and we could all compare between the north and the south. The difference was enormous. Roads, houses, clothing, the way of talking and thinking about things. Life there was fine and life here was miserable.

I decided I had to settle down here and do something about it.

I began to understand that the Socialist party was holding the entire south hostage to gain certain demands in the interest of the party. I had fought in Afghanistan against all kinds of Russian commanders, so I was not afraid to face the Socialist army here.

Despite Socialist propaganda that I was a terrorist, people gave me a warm welcome here. I saw people cry with joy when they saw me for the first time. Our family was much kinder and better for Abyan than the Socialists. I remember a tribal meeting where someone read a poem saying: "Hail the light of the earth, the one who did not kill any innocent people and did not steal anyone's money, the one who did not deform the honorable tribes." It was a reference to the misdeeds of the Socialists and the fond memory of my family.

People were afraid of the socialists. Socialist security agents used to go to the house of any person who invited me in, and warn the people that they were putting themselves in danger.

The socialists would say: "This Tarek can leave the country any time but you are stuck here with us."

I had to convince the people that I would never leave this land and that the fear of the socialists was just a hallucination in their mind. I used to criticize the Socialist party in front of everyone. I got financial support from Yemeni merchants in Saudi Arabia to establish development projects here like wells and mosques and charity funds to help the poor and the elderly. The Socialist party did not like that and they accused me of challenging their authority. They accused me of making a government within a government. They would transmit these complaints to leaders in San'a.

I supported democracy and I told the people that democracy means everyone has the right to work and serve the people and promote their ideas freely. I told the people: If the Socialists come to you to question my work, ask them what they have done to improve the country. If I had money left over from any projects I would spend it to build the armed forces of the El-Fadly tribe to make it as strong as the tribes in the north.

The officials here in the south had a different idea. They said this was a modern state without a tribal system and that it should stay that way. Not only that, but they also wanted to export the idea [that the tribes had no place in a modern nation] to the north. They were very much against the revival of the tribal system here. That used to make me furious.

I think that it is ridiculous when people tried to say there is no tribal system in the south. It makes me angry when they claim to be civilized and modern say we have to get rid of the tribal system. There's no reason you can't have a modern democratic country with strong tribes.

The Socialists said private ownership of weapons was dangerous. My argument was that people in the north all have weapons. Weapons are an important part of our culture. Far fewer people die in armed feuds in the north than died at the hands of the Socialist leaders of the south.

Somehow Afghanistan strengthened my belief in a strong tribal system. The Socialists tried hard to get rid of the tribal system here, but people still respect the tribal elders and go to them to resolve problems.

Jihad in the South of Yemen

A year after my arrival in Yemen I began to consider the feasibility of a jihad against the socialists. I saw that they still kept an iron grip on the country and rejected any change. They continued with the same Communist propaganda. They made the mistake of trying to import a foreign system from Russia to Yemen and implementing it here fully, regardless of anything else. They ignored Yemeni culture completely. They didn't even try to impose this system gradually. They forced it down the throats of the people.

Even we we try to implement Islam, which is natural here, we do it gradually. We don't try to change everything in one day. We take things step by step. The socialists wanted the world and north Yemen to think the jihad system here was forceful like in Algeria and in Egypt. The situation is completely different here. Why should we implement foreign ideas from Egypt and Algeria? Sure, everyone reads Sayyid Qotb. Everyone understands his ideas differently, though. Sayyid Qotb came out with his ideas from his understanding of the Qor'an and the Sunna and the life of the Prophet Mohamed and his companions. Some of these ideas are idealistic, and some people interpret them in the extreme, like the idea of establishing a caliphate.

These interpretations are not in keeping with the tradition of the Prophet, who built his state gradually and step by step. The Prophet educated the people and taught them how to establish themselves as Muslims. That made it easier for him to finally establish a perfect Islamic state. The state of the Prophet Mohamed and his companions was not established by force, it was established through convincing and understanding. He let the tribes decide for themselves whether to join him or not.

I see nothing in the Qor'an and the sunna that justifies the actions of extremist groups like those in Egypt. Many people abuse the concept of jihad. Abdullah Azzam called for jihad only in particular cases, like in Afghanistan, where you have a foreign country and a foreign regime oppressing a Muslim country. There was a foreign power invading Afghanistan and the jihad was acceptable in that case. It was like the case in south Yemen with the Socialists, who forced the people to be Socialist whether or not they wanted to. The people weren't allowed to practice their belief in Islam or any other ideology. Our goal was to make the Socialists accept the rights of the people to practice their individual beliefs. We should thank God that we now have room for democracy.

Jihad is a movement to allow a person to gain or regain his political rights. He can defend himself through jihad. If someone keeps me from obeying Islam, which is my right, then I am entitled to use jihad to defend my rights.

In 1991, after I'd been back for a year, I decided it was time to break the people's fear of the Socialist party even if I had to use violence to weaken the socialist grip on people's lives here. I began to have serious problems with the Socialists. I encouraged everyone around me and the tribes here to defy the Socialists. I continued until the elders of the Fadly tribe agreed to have a meeting to make me a Sheikh.

Sultan's Son becomes Tribal "Sheikh of Sheikhs"

We decided to have this meeting [to make me a Sheikh] in Shuha, which was the capital of the Fadly tribal zone before Zinjibar. On the night that the tribal meeting was to take place the Socialists distributed leaflets claiming that I was planning to arm the Fadly tribe so that they would fight the Yafeh tribe and that the result of the tribal meeting would be a renewed outbreak of tribal fighting in the area. The meeting could not take place.

The tribes of Marakashe, the largest branch of the Fadly tribe, agreed to make me a Sheikh independently. They had a meeting and I was turbaned there. Later more branches of the Fadly tribe followed and I became Sheikh of Sheikhs in Abyan.

Violent Clashes with the Socialists

The Socialists continued calling me a terrorist. It was in this tense atmosphere that I began to receive many young men who were with me in Afghanistan. Frankly, I was preparing for the worst with the Socialists. The fight began with gestures of force. I would ride through town with 60 armed men or some of my young men would walk around heavily armed.

Then a decision was made in the cabinet to return nationalized property to its rightful owners. The socialists failed to implement this decision and they fired the secretary of the party here in Abyan who was ready to implement that decision. Ali Saleh Obad Moqbel became the secretary of the party here in Abyan, and he told people to refuse to take their land back unless they were given high compensation from the government. He didn't want the land to return to its original owners.

Because of the situation with Moqbel *mujabedin* from our camp shot at him when he was in his car. The *mujabedin*, including Abu Bakr Sayid, were arrested. The story spread in Abyan that the men who shot at Moqbel were tribesmen, and the Socialist demanded my arrest since I was a Sheikh. I hid out in the Marakasha mountains and the Socialists surrounded me. I refused to surrender and said I would never accept to be tried under the Socialist system. I would only accept a trial in which my deeds could be compared and weighed against the deeds of the Socialists. The socialists had no right to demand my arrest when they refused to be punished for the crimes they had committed over the course of many years. Moqbel himself was accused of committing many crimes in Yafeh and he was well known for having committed those crimes.

The socialists started to play dirty tricks on us. They convinced one of my men to plan an operation against the Americans, who were here in Aden in 1992. They provided the weapons for him and they assisted him in the operation to attack the hotels where the Americans were staying. I was against this operation because I thought we should concentrate our efforts against the Socialists and not start fighting against anyone else. The Americans helped us a lot in Afghanistan, especially when they sent us Stinger missiles, which were a great help to the *mujabedin*. I don't think the American interests are in line with the Socialist interests. American interests seem more compatible with President Ali Abdullah Saleh's interests. I thought we

could benefit from the Americans and that we shouldn't create a hostile relationship with them.

Unfortunately, the person to whom I gave the message to stop the operation did not arrive in Aden in time, so the operation went ahead. After this operation the Socialists sent more military force to the Marakasha mountains.

The tribal leaders tried to convince me to surrender but I refused. I promised them I would not fight unless the Socialists arrived at my house. I refused to leave the mountains because that's exactly what the Socialists wanted me to do. If I had done that I never would have escaped alive.

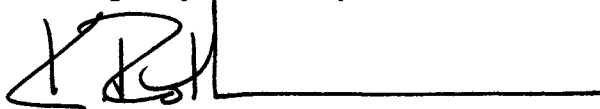
House arrest in San'a

Finally we agreed on a committee to resolve the crisis between us and the Socialists. We refused to be tried by the Socialists but agreed to surrender and go to trial in San'a. I explained in court that the Moqbel case was a case of revenge, a normal thing in Yemen. I explained that I had nothing to do with the hotel bombings and that I had even tried to stop them. I settled down in San'a under a sort of house arrest awaiting trial until the war started. When war broke out I was released to participate as commander in the 2nd Brigade, which was a combination of mujahedin and tribesmen.

Since the war in Yemen ended with San'a's July 1994 victory, Tarek El-Fadly has announced that with the end of the reign of the Socialist Party the jihad against them is officially ended.

El-Fadly now has a close relationship with Yemeni security forces in the Aden area and has become a member of the ruling Peoples' General Congress party.

All best regards from Yemen felix,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Katherine', followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Katherine