

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Katherine Roth  
San'a, Yemen  
11 November 1994

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

**The Islamists:**  
**My past six months**

Dear Peter,

The past six months have been pivotal for Yemen and for the region as a whole and there are strong signs that the coming months will determine economic, social and political relationships in this region for many years to come. This has been the most productive and enlightening phase of my fellowship thus far and I feel extremely fortunate to be experiencing events here first-hand.

---

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

---

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.

Recognition of the state of Israel by Jordan has provided a new alternative for change and modernization in the region and a tough challenge to Islamists, who have long focussed their energies against the Jewish state. Although any real peace with the Jewish state remains a long way off, there is no turning back with regard to the grinding peace process. The controversial moves toward peace with Israel have gone a long way toward shifting the conflict here from an Israeli/Arab dispute to what will likely prove a decisive Arab/Arab struggle.

The Palestinian peace treaty with Israel was the starting point for a new era in this region and has resulted in the thawing of the borders, limits and concepts that have defined the Arab world for centuries. In response to these moves, all political, social and religious powers in this part of the world have intensified their struggles for space on the new regional map now being drawn in Cairo, Amman and Jerusalem.

The clearest examples of this turning point are the Jordan/Israel peace deal and the recent Casablanca conference.

As part of the Jordan-Israel peace deal, Israel promised Jordan a special role in Jerusalem, threatening Palestinian hopes for making Jerusalem the capital of a modern independent Palestine. The Jordanian/Palestinian conflict was made public when the Mufti<sup>1</sup> of Jerusalem died and King Hussein and Yasser Arafat each assigned a different Mufti for Jerusalem.

The controversial concept of the "Middle East market" first proposed by the Israeli Foreign Minister in his book A New Middle East was finally discussed at a recent conference attended by over 60 countries and some 1,200 influential businessmen, including Arabs, Jews, and others from the international community<sup>2</sup>. The historic conference was sponsored by the U.S. and Russia and was hosted by Morocco. The purpose of the Casablanca meeting was to discuss the shape and rules of the new market being formed by the treaties with Israel. The meeting resulted in a decision to start an international bank with a capital of \$9 billion based in Cairo to help develop the region and the foundation of an information center in Casablanca to encourage cooperation and development in the new market. Another meeting to continue the work begun in Casablanca is scheduled to be held in Jordan in 1995.

Muslim activists, already in a critical position in their respective fights against existing Arab regimes in the region, are already moving their full focus from Israel to the regimes they feel have betrayed them. As a leader of the Palestinian Jihad recently told me in Khartoum: "The front line is shifting." The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan rejected the peace treaty with Israel and has threatened to resign from parliament. Muslim activist groups across the region also rejected the Casablanca conference.

---

<sup>1</sup>Official Muslim leader

<sup>2</sup>The only Arab nations that did not participate were Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Lebanon.

Further complicating the changing power balance created by improved relations between Arab governments and Israel, two crucial events have occurred in the Arabian peninsula that have a strong impact on the strength of the Islamist movement.

Last month Saudi Arabia experienced popular riots of thousands of Saudis against the Saud regime. These were the biggest of popular uprisings in the nation's contemporary history<sup>3</sup> and occurred at a time when the new generation of Saudi Wahabi Islamists<sup>4</sup> accused of causing the riots<sup>5</sup> are enjoying the strong support of young Muslim activists from Algeria to Yemen.

At Saudi's back door the war in Yemen (perhaps the first traditional-style internal war between Islamist and secular forces in the modern Arab world) has given way to what is in effect the beginning of a modern Islamic state.

Watching Yemen transform during and after the war has been invaluable in better understanding the configuration of the Islamist movement as a whole at this crucial point in history. *Islah* [Reform], the main Islamist party in Yemen, now holds nearly a third of the country's parliamentary seats and a full third of the top ministerial posts. In addition, Islamists within the ruling Peoples' General Congress Party<sup>6</sup> have risen in power and "salafi"<sup>7</sup> Islamists associated with the Jihad movement have become an important part of the security forces in and around Aden.<sup>8</sup> In the expansive eastern region of Hadramaut, the silent third side of the war here, the traditional Islamic power structure

---

<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s oil workers in the eastern, mostly shiite, province went on strike and rioted.

<sup>4</sup> Saudi legitimacy is based on a pact made between literalist religious scholar Sheikh Mohamed Wahab and tribal leader Sheikh Mohamed ibn Saud in the eighteenth century whereby Wahab was to provide religious direction and Saud was rule politically in accordance with Islamic law. The new generation of Wahabis, which became widely influential during the Gulf war, believes that with its continued corruption and unwillingness to reform, the Saud regime has in effect broken the pact and so is somehow illegitimate.

<sup>5</sup> and widely suspected of funding Islamic movements throughout the region

<sup>6</sup> These Islamists are ideologically about in line with the Muslim Brotherhood. They are members of the Muslim Brotherhood who decided to join up with the ruling GPC and change the system from within as opposed to remaining opponents of the government. For this they were expelled from the official Muslim Brotherhood organization, although they remain on relatively friendly terms with the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>7</sup> The modern salafi, or "authentic", school of Islamic thought began in the late 70s and early 80s and is closely associated with the Saudi Wahabi ideology. For salafis, who tend to be literalist and uncompromising in approach, Islamic history stops after the fourth Caliphate. In most parts of the Arab world they refuse to participate in government because they see it as an infidel invention. Salafis in Yemen, for example, commonly refer to the parliament as the "Assembly of Infidels." Although the salafi movement has only recently begun in Yemen, where the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood continues to dominate Islamist thought, and has only a small following, the vast majority of Algerian youths proudly refer to themselves as "salafi." Salafis despise the Muslim Brotherhood and are in constant opposition to the Islamist party here, which is now semi-officially run by the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>8</sup> The salafis became a part of the security ranks after the war because of their important role in beating the Socialist separatist forces. The 2nd Brigade, which was based to the northeast of Aden, was led by Salafis who had fought in Afghanistan. Incidentally the commander of that Brigade was Ali Mohsen, one of the President's brothers and a man widely believed to be "the number two man" in the country.

dominated by families descended from the Prophet Mohamed is experiencing a renaissance.<sup>9</sup> The power struggle there is no longer between old style Islamists and Socialists, but between old style Islamists and the Islah party, referred to in Hadramaut as "Republican Islam."

Because of strong regional identities and overriding tribal loyalties, not to mention the deep divisions between traditional Zaydis, nostalgic of the Imamate which brought cohesion between different tribes and minimized corruption, and Islah members seen as "alien" because of their links to Najdi Wahabism and Turabi's neo-Muslim Brotherhood ideology, Yemen does not risk becoming anything near "another Iran".

Nowhere in the region is the dialogue between Islamists as open and as rich as it currently is in Yemen. Exploring this new wealth in Islamist dialogue has been invaluable in coming to a better understanding of the dynamics of the Islamist movement in the Arab world, although the movement here is somewhat distinctive from that I've explored elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most striking things I've learned from the unique situation here is that differences in Islamist ideology run deeper than previously imagined. Whereas all Islamists are easily grouped together when they have a common enemy and appear as a common conservative block, without this binding enemy ideological hatreds quickly come to surface. In the case of Egypt, for example, many observers argue that extremist groups like the Islamic Group and the Jihad form the armed wing of the banned but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood. While this may be somewhat true when different ideological groups have a common enemy, in the case of Yemen such alliances broke down as soon as that common enemy was gone. Salafis in Yemen, who helped the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced government win the war against Socialist separatists, still refuse to participate in the regime and say if they were forced to join one of the two leading parties they would sign up with the GPC against the Muslim Brotherhood-led Islah party.

---

<sup>9</sup> Because most of the land belonged to these families prior to Socialist rule, the privatization that has come along with San'a's victory means these families have renewed wealth. They are also in a strong position because they are traditional local leaders at a time when many Hadramies feel that, although they are glad the Socialists are gone, they fear what they consider an occupation by strangers from the north.

<sup>10</sup> The Islamist movement in Yemen is distinctive in two main aspects. 1) It is a top-down more than a bottom-up sort of a movement. In countries like Algeria and Egypt, the movement was first social and only later became a part of the political landscape. In Yemen, however, the social part of the movement has only begun in earnest in the past year or two. The main Islamist party was founded four years ago. 2) The movement in Yemen is not reacting to Western influence. Whereas Islamists in countries like Algeria and Egypt are reacting to European influences which appear to contradict Islam, Yemeni Islamists are responding more to the weakening of the traditional tribal structure in the face of an increasingly modern social structure. It is no accident that the leader of the Islah party is a tribal Sheikh, and almost twenty percent of the Executive Committee of the party consists of the sons of tribal leaders. Leaders of the Jihad movement in the South are also predominantly the sons of tribal sheikhs.

Keeping these sharp ideological differences in mind, the next most important lesson experiencing this transition time in Yemen has taught me is that segments of the Islamist reform movement may be the only ones who can effectively combat Islamist terrorism. Within the last eight months Yemen and Sudan<sup>11</sup> both experienced their first internal Islamist terrorist acts by nationals against regimes with a high level of Islamist participation. In Sudan Islamists entered the capital's most important Salafi<sup>12</sup> mosque and opened fire, killing over a dozen worshippers. In Yemen Muslim activists in Aden were accused of blowing up one Sufi-influenced mosque and desecrating the tombs in another Sufi mosque. While such incidents in Egypt, Algeria and elsewhere marked the beginning of a continuing spate of violence, the largely Islamist regimes of Sudan and Yemen seemed to cope with the problem effectively. Khartoum has been free of Islamist violence since the February incident and there have no violent Islamist incidents in Yemen since this summer's mosque bombing.

The Yemeni solution to the problem was especially interesting. In response to the attacks, the regime did not jail those suspected of the crime [members of the Jihad movement]. Instead, these top suspects were among those put on a committee to investigate the terrorist incidents and were called to participate in the law enforcement process. Much tighter security was provided for Sufi mosques in Aden and some public celebrations of mystical Islam - such as traditional pilgrimages to saints tombs in Hadramaut - while more attention was also paid to the concerns of orthodox Muslims, who were encouraged to pursue their complaints through legal channels. No arrests were made as a result of the Aden attacks<sup>13</sup>. Although the Sufis of Aden continue to practice their beliefs, no other terrorist attacks have been carried out against them.

Arafat cannot stop violence by Hamas, but a segment of Hamas has expressed willingness to negotiate with Israel. If the track records of Yemen and Sudan are any indication, these Islamists may be the only people who CAN stop the violence and it is essential that we better understand their place on the ideological map of the Arab Islamist movement.

Unprecedented changes are underway in the region and the only thing that seems to remain the same is the bloodshed. The violence in the Arab world, both by Islamic

---

<sup>11</sup> In mid-October I accompanied a delegation of leading Yemeni Islamists to Khartoum, the capital of the Islamic State of Sudan, where I discussed the meaning of the Islamic movement with Hassan Turabi (the creator of the Sudan's brand of Islamism), Saddek El-Mehdi (an opponent of Turabi's, whose grandfather founded the first-ever Islamic state in Sudan prior to British rule), and a number of Islamist intellectuals in Khartoum's leading Islamic think-tank.

<sup>12</sup>As elsewhere in the region, salafis in Sudan oppose the government that rules their country. The fact that theirs is an Islamic regime does not seem to make much difference. The difference is in how they are dealt with by the regime.

<sup>13</sup>Although there are reports that the secularist militia of Ali Nasser Mohamed expelled young Salafis from a police station the day after the incident and held them prisoner for a short period.

reformists avoiding regional change by reaching out to the Arab masses<sup>14</sup> and by Arab regimes escaping their domestic turmoil by reaching out to Israel, is escalating.

These are decisive times and it seems clear that (a) Islamist ideological differences run deep and determine how various imams and groups of followers deal with different situations and (b) Islamists may be they only ones who can stop Islamist terrorism.

When I began this "Islamic journey" a year ago I realize now that I committed a fault many observers continue to make in lumping all "Islamists" in the same category. Differences between Islamists are in fact so deep that it would be possible to draw a sort of ideological map of the Islamist movement I have watched evolve in the Arab world.

Had I known the difference between Sururi Salafis and the Salafis I used to see attending the mosque of Sheikh Abdel-Malek in the Algiers suburb of Hydra, for example, I would have understood why the Islamist family I knew best in Algiers and which lived by the teachings of Abdel-Malek was never tempted to join violent groups such as the Armed Islamic Movement. If diplomats here in Yemen had an ideological map of the region they might know that the Salafi institute near the Saudi border with Yemen attended by throngs of enthusiastic young Algerians, Egyptians, Yemenis and other Arabs is not a terrorist training camp but an anti-Sururi school in which young Islamists were taught the proper criteria for jihad and the falacy of violent groups like the Egyptian Jihad and Islamic Group. If an ideological map existed, outsiders could better understand why the Algerian Hamas and Yemeni Islah organizations were so enthusiastic in participating in government and other Islamist groups were not. Ideological borders are just as important as national ones. Such an indispensable ideological map does not yet exist, however, and most people continue to group all Islamists together as terrorists even as the price of this generalization grows higher.

The various ideological branches of the modern Islamist movement can be traced from 1928, when the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood<sup>15</sup> was founded, to the present Wahabi

---

<sup>14</sup>It is important to remember that as Arab governments sign on with Israel they may be losing the last remainders of support they enjoyed from many of their citizens. Arabs are tired of their largely inefficient governments and for many the peace deals with Israel are final proof that they have been abandoned by their leaders. Reform movements, both secular and Islamic, are sweeping the region.

While the language and actions of the secularists invariably fail to win popular support, however, the symbolic language of Islam continues to prevail. In situations where the literacy rate is low and the most easily understood signs of intelligence and education are Classical Arabic pronunciation and literary allusion to poets of the Middle Ages, those educated in the Qor'an have a distinct advantage in public relations. Where a group of upper class women driving in a Saudi parking lot failed to mobilize the masses, young imams crisply enunciating the Classical Arabic vowels of the language of God are making history in the Arab world.

It is the age of domestic reform here and if terrorists succeed it is not because they are popular, but because Arabs are no longer willing to defend the governments which they no longer perceive as representative. The Islamists Arabs vote for when given the chance, are the very Islamists most able to stop the violence.

<sup>15</sup>now an international Muslim sect more than an organization per se

revival. There are also important non-political segments of the movement such as the Jama'a Tabligh, which is the door to the Islamic reform movement for many Arab youths. Although the concept seems straight-forward, such a map of the movement does not yet exist and would be an invaluable tool for understanding and coping with these pivotal times.

For now, though, I head for Jordan -- the last stop on my "Islamic journey" -- with a renewed consciousness of the depth and variety of the Islamic movement and the knowledge that as I end my journey and recommence my professional life as a journalist, I can no longer approach Islamists - or fundamentalists as they are still often called - as a homogenous ideological block.

Times have changed too much for that.

*Assalamualaykum wa rahmat Allah wa barakatu,*



Katherine Roth