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North Yemen: In the news

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Dear Peter;

The Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) is not one of the world's great hot spots for news.

During the 1960s, the civil war attracted some journalists to the country. But coverage was sporadic. New York Times correspondent Dana Adams Schmidt aptly entitled his book Yemen: The Unknown War.

The 1970s saw a fair amount of political turmoil. One president was overthrown by a military coup d'etat, and two others were assassinated. Not uncommon for the Third World, though.

And in 1982, there was an earthquake south of Sana'a. Some 3,000 people were killed and about 400,000 left homeless. The government is trying to rebuild those villages, a story that gets some continuing press attention.

But generally, North Yemen is little noticed by the international (i.e., western) media. The only reporter regularly based here works for the Middle East Times, a regional paper with its headquarters on Cyprus. Tass also has an office here.

When Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yassir Arafat visited Sana'a for five days at the end of last month, after his expulsion from Tripoli, I expected a flood of reporters from big-name organizations. It didn't happen. I still don't know why. Either the YAR government would not grant them visas, or the reporters thought coming here wasn't worth the trouble.

But at least the world did know that Arafat had gone to Sana'a. The PLO has had its military headquarters here since the 1982 evacuation of Lebanon (the PLO political center is Tunis). I imagine a lot of people looked through their atlases to find where the heck North Yemen is. Oh yes, down there at the lower left hand corner of the Arabian peninsula -- puny country, isn't it?

However briefly, Arafat's visit put North Yemen in the news. Most press accounts focussed on the main story -- Arafat's continuing troubles holding the PLO together -- and gave little thought to the North Yemen angle.

Why are PLO/YAR relations apparently so close? What kind of reception did the Yemenis give Arafat? What problems can this cause for the North Yemenis?

I will attempt, on the basis of some rather sketchy information, to answer these questions. Most of my information comes from press accounts and a diplomatic source who has followed this matter closely.

Kenneth Cline is a Village Reporting Fellow of the Institute currently studying peasant life in North Yemen.

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The YAR has had strong ties with the PLO for many years. Contingents of Yemeni volunteers have been sent periodically to fight with the Palestinians in Lebanon. Their military contribution has been insignificant, but they made a strong political gesture for the Yemenis.

Sana'a became the PLO's military headquarters after the Beirut evacuation in the summer of 1982. Some 3,000 PLO men took up residence in a camp located about 20 miles south of Sana'a.

Despite its general support for the Palestinian cause, the YAR government's backing for Arafat personally has waxed and waned. It waned after the 1982 Beirut evacuation, but picked up again when Arafat's forces came under siege in Tripoli by Syrian-backed PLO rebels.

Dislike for Syria might play a role here.

Yemeni-Syrian relations were at their closest during the eight year civil war (1962-70). When royalist forces besieged the republicans in Sana'a during the winter of 1968-69, Soviet and Syrian military aid played a major role in lifting the siege.

But the YAR-Syrian relationship has gone downhill since then. One possible reason is that the Yemenis moved closer to Iraq, a traditional enemy of the Syrians. Exporting manpower, their major natural resource, the Yemenis have sent a few soldiers to fight with Iraq in its war with Iran. The only other Arab country to do that has been Jordan.

The Iraqis, in turn, have been very nice to North Yemen. They played an important role in mediating the 1979 border war between North Yemen and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, or South Yemen).

In that same year, Iraq provided the YAR with a \$300 million loan to construct a new teaching hospital, a women's dorm at Sana'a University, a central health clinic in Sana'a, a hospital and clinic in Ibb, three health centers in Ibb province, and a number of primary schools.

Whatever the motivations, YAR backing for Arafat was strong prior to the Tripoli evacuation. Posters of Arafat and YAR President Ali Abdallah Salih were all over Sana'a. One drawing had Arafat and Salih standing in front of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock, the major Muslim shrine in that city.

But after Arafat began sailing off to North Yemen from Tripoli, a curious thing happened. The YAR press fell silent until the actual day of his arrival. A mood of uncertainty seemed to take hold of the Yemenis.

On Dec. 26, Arafat was met at Hodeidah port by the Minister of Local Administration and the governor of the province, hardly a royal welcome. He was immediately flown to Sana'a, while his men were transported there in trucks. Arafat was not met at the plane, but was taken from the airport to the president's palace.

Salih and the prime minister, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani, were on hand to welcome Arafat.

Both Arafat and Salih uttered, as my diplomatic source put it, "tons of words about Arab unity." They spoke in Arabic.

The Yemeni president talked about the importance of maintaining an independent PLO "removed from hegemony and containment." He did not mention Syria by name, although the implication was there. He did, however, refer specifically to

'Zionist and imperialist plots.'

Arafat also declined to mention the Syrians, but did say that American and Israeli plots were bringing the Arab nation to 'the error of factional kings.' This striking phrase apparently meant that Arab leaders were seeking to enhance their own power at the expense of the Arab nation, whatever that is.*

Before he left Sana'a for Tunis on Dec. 30, Arafat met with Salih three more times. He also convened a Palestinian council here which adopted some resolutions and discussed benefits for families of Palestinian fighters.

Although the YAR press was silent before Arafat's arrival here, it did give extensive coverage to his visit when he was in town.

But foreign observers noticed a certain lack of enthusiasm, compared to the last time the Palestinians came. In 1982, the PLO men were apparently greeted with much fanfare. That was absent this time. I am not aware of any public ceremonies held for Arafat's men.

One can speculate that Arafat's Dec. 22 meeting with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak might have given the Yemenis some pause.

YAR foreign policy has always been fairly cautious. The country is indebted to so many nations that it can't really afford to go out on a limb on international issues.

In terms of Arab issues, it has to be careful not to go too far from the Arab mainstream. The YAR's dependence on its big neighbor to the north, Saudi Arabia, is virtually total.

But the YAR's backing for Arafat at such a delicate time in the PLO's history does tend to nudge the Yemenis into the shoals of controversy.

From press reports, it seems that Arafat's decision to meet with Mubarak was a personal initiative on his part. One day after the meeting, Palestine National Council Chairman Khaled Fahoum condemned Arafat for acting 'unilaterally,' and without consulting the PLO's executive committee. Abu Iyad, one of Arafat's closest aides, declared from Tunis that the meeting was 'contrary to the decisions of the Fatah central committee and of the PLO executive bureau.'

That must worry the Yemenis. Being on one side of a PLO factional dispute can be dangerous.

How dangerous depends on how far the rest of the Arab world goes in its rapprochement with Egypt. The Yemenis could soon find themselves back in the Arab mainstream. Jordan signed a trade and economic accord with Egypt last month, and an Egyptian delegation is now in Saudi Arabia to discuss trade ties.

But the Yemenis must also worry about gun battles between PLO factions on their soil. If these occur, do the Yemenis intervene, or let the PLO men shoot it out? What if some of these groups begin to seek allies amongst the local population? The YAR

* This seems to be a deep feeling among many Arabs. A couple of months ago, I met an English-speaking Yemeni in a restaurant in Ibb. He said he had spent 26 years in England translating for Arab defendants in English courts. He was very bitter about how the Arabs have been kicked around by the Great Powers. He blamed all Arab problems on Arab leaders. The Arab people want to be united, but are prevented by rulers who 'will do anything for a dollar,' he said.

is not the most politically stable country in the world.*

One thing the Yemenis probably won't have to worry about is paying for the upkeep of the PLO men. The YAR government is, for all practical purposes, bankrupt. The usual pattern is for the Saudis or other rich Arabs to foot PLO bills.

Based on past experience, it is possible that the increased PLO presence in North Yemen will have little effect on the country.

After their 1982 arrival in Yemen, many Palestinians began to drift away from their camp. Men with families settled in Sana'a. Some drifted off to other Arab countries, or went back to Lebanon to get back into the fight. It would not be surprising if many of the PLO men who came to Yemen with Arafat had been here before.

Of the 5,000 Palestinians who came in 1982, it is likely that much fewer remain. This drifting away process could occur again.**

It is hard to see how the PLO men could be very happy here. For men used to the more liberal lifestyle of Beirut, puritanical, family-centered Yemen must be quite a bore.

Also, with "the front" so many thousands of miles away, how will they be able to retain any military edge? They are not going to want to spend year after year here simply training.

With the PLO leadership in such disarray, it will be very difficult for the soldiers here to maintain their discipline (never a very strong point with the PLO anyway). One can conceive of groups of them making mischief in Yemen.

But the government will be watching that closely. As it is now, PLO men are allowed to wear their uniforms and carry guns in their camp. But they are disarmed when they leave camp. The Yemeni army and police should be able to control them, at least outside the camp.

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Another recent story from North Yemen that may have received some international press attention is the reports of a possible oil discovery in the country's northeastern Jawf region.

The Yemeni press apparently got rather excited when the Hunt Oil Company announced this fall plans to drill exploratory wells in the Jawf about 70 kilometers west of Marib. Marib was the capital of Yemen's pre-Islamic Sabaean Kingdom, but is now a very small town in an arid and desolate region.

One can understand the Yemenis' excitement. The YAR government is so impoverished and dependent upon foreign assistance -- the Saudis alone provide nearly \$100 million a year

* The Americans here were already worried about the Beirut and Kuwait bombings. Security at the embassy in Sana'a has increased greatly in the past month. Concrete obstacles are presently being erected in the embassy's front drive. The arrival of the PLO has made embassy personnel just a little more edgy. They're not worried about the PLO per se, but they are concerned that, if PLO discipline breaks down, the PLO leaders won't be able to control their men.

** An Arabic-speaking American was stopped in the street ^{a few days ago} by a uniformed PLO man. The Palestinian said he was 18, had been fighting since he was 10, and was tired of it. He wanted help in getting to the United States. Because he speaks no English and has no family in the States (they're still in Lebanon), his chances are dim.

in budgetary assistance to the YAR -- that any hope of supplementing government revenues would be greeted with paeans of joy. Also, the YAR currently imports all its petroleum needs, mainly from Kuwait. With a balance of payments deficit expected to reach \$560 million for 1985, any help in converting some imports into exports would be a blessing.

Several Yemenis have told me there is oil in Yemen, but the Saudis prevent the Yemenis from getting at it. Most observers dismiss this as typical Yemeni paranoia about their big neighbor to the north. (Ah, but see Appendix)

But is there oil in Yemen? I put that question to Dan Edwards, Hunt's general manager in Sana'a.

"Nobody can answer that until the wells are drilled," he replied.

Edwards said the Hunt company has had a concession in North Yemen since 1981. A Hunt subcontractor began a seismic geological survey at that time and finished the work in early 1985.

"It was promising, to say the least," said Edwards, explaining that such a survey cannot prove the existence of hydrocarbons (oil or gas), only indicate the possibility of them being present.

This survey turned up two positive factors. The thickness of some sections of rock strata indicated a potential for holding oil. Secondly, the rocks were from the Mesozoic era (between 70 million and 220 million years ago), the same age as those found near the great oil deposits in Saudi Arabia.

Edwards said that across the Persian Gulf, in Iran, oil is usually found near rock strata from the Tertiary era (one million to 70 million years ago). But in the Arabian peninsula, "we think the Mesozoic is the most promising," he said.

Hunt was encouraged enough by this survey to commit about \$8 million to the drilling of the first test well. The oil rig for this test is now in the country, the company has established a camp on the site, and work should begin by the end of the month, said Edwards.

Companies rarely strike significant oil with their first well. But the drilling and testing will yield much information, said Edwards. Even if the results from the first well are not promising, the company will probably begin drilling a second well later this year, he said.

The Yemeni government was apparently impressed enough by these plans that it extended Hunt's concession in the Jawf another two years. It now runs to January 1986.

If Hunt does strike what Edwards calls a "world class find," the YAR government will benefit. Hunt is bearing all the exploratory costs. But the company is working on the basis of a "production-sharing agreement." Edwards would not say what percentages of production would go to Hunt or the government. But he did indicate that Hunt expected a good return on its investment if there is a major find.

I asked Edwards if this was a good time to be looking for oil, since world prices are depressed.

"I don't consider \$29 a barrel a low price," he said. At their peak in 1981, oil prices were about \$55 a barrel. Edwards added that the Hunt company "once made good money when

oil was at \$3 a barrel."

He did agree that "the cost could be fairly high to get it out."

There are no paved roads west of Marib, so the company or government will have to build some. There is no refinery in North Yemen (there is an old one in Aden, capital of South Yemen), so the crude will have to be exported to a refinery in another country. But there is presently no pipeline to carry the crude.

The Yemen Oil and Minerals Corporation (YOMINCO) has plans to build a pipeline from the small Red Sea port of Salif, north of Hodeidah, to Sana'a. This would be for imported finished petroleum products now brought into the country by trucks.

Edwards said this pipeline could be used to pump crude toward Salif, but only when it wasn't being used for the imports. Because this pipe will be rather small, the Hunt company would have to build its own, he said.

Edwards was emphatic that if Hunt found "world class" oil in Yemen (meaning a really big field), the company would be happy to make the necessary investments to get the crude to market.

There are some skeptics in Sana'a who say Hunt is doing only enough work in the Jawf to keep its concession alive. These people also wonder if the perennially foreign exchange-starved YAR government can muster the resources for infrastructure improvements a major find would require.

Only time -- and an actual oil discovery -- will tell.

If tests in the first well are positive, the results could come as early as this May, said Edwards.

The Yemenis will surely be waiting with baited breath.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

Appendix: Rumors of War?

I am writing this at an inconvenient time -- January 12. The embassy is closed today and tomorrow, so I have no way of checking the rumors I am about to repeat.

Yesterday, I heard from two people with good contacts here that there has been some serious skirmishing on the North Yemeni/Saudi Arabian border. Sometime about the first of the year, so the story goes, the Saudis grabbed some Yemeni villages near the border. The Yemenis then moved troops up there and grabbed some Saudi villages.

So far, neither the Yemeni nor Saudi press has said a word about this.

This is the sort of situation countries with controlled news media get themselves into. For political reasons, the government won't tell you what's going on. But people in the streets know something is up. So the rumors do fly.

Apparently, Yemeni/Saudi border incidents are not uncommon. This could be just one more minor one in a long series. It could also be something a bit more serious.

The most convincing explanation I've heard is that, whatever really happened, the Yemenis are using it as an excuse to move more troops up to their northern frontier. Why would they want to do that? To protect their new oil discoveries, of course.

Oh no. Round and around we go, back to where we started -- those stories about how the Saudis are out to prevent the Yemenis from getting at their oil.

Diplomats scoff at this idea. Why would the Saudis begrudge the Yemenis a bit of oil revenue (once again, assuming there is oil in Yemen)? Do they want to keep paying the Yemenis enormous subsidies forever?

The usual story is that Saudi-subsidized sheikhs (many tribal sheikhs were in the pay of the Saudis during the civil war; some people think they still are) have been trying to discourage the oil exploration efforts.

I know one person who actually talked to someone from the Hunt geological survey. The story is that the survey team was shot at and some of its vehicles vandalized. The incidents did not seem designed to actually hurt the surveyors, but just to scare them off.

I put the question to Dan Edwards. Has anyone tried to prevent Hunt from exploring for oil? Oh Lord no, he said, in fact, such-and-such a sheikh has gone out of his way to be helpful, etc., etc.

In light of the border skirmish rumors, I'm beginning to wonder.