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## The Fate of Yemen

Arabia Felix or Saudi Yemenia?

by RAZA NAEEM

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Wars between Muslim countries, and between Arab countries, are quite likely and are already being waged in embryonic and indirect form. The Palestinian question continues to play a role which makes for war, for oppressive conservatism, or both. Its dynamic has pushed the Arab left into internal competition and conflict, in which the least involved are by no means the least aggressive. Israeli intransigence gave the most extreme elements among the Arabs the advantage, but this irredentist extremism did not necessarily coincide with any progressiveness in internal policy. Those for whom peace was most necessary had to subject themselves to capitalist hegemony and to adopt reactionary or conservative internal policies. The terrible catastrophe which destroyed Lebanon did not result from a diabolical Machiavellian conspiracy, it was the outcome of this whole dynamic. Let others rejoice at the huge massacres which civil or international wars bring about. But we have to admit that there are far fewer chances today for relatively peaceful and gradual progress towards the destruction of the Islamic world's most oppressive structures.

These words were written almost forty years ago by French Marxist scholar Maxime Rodinson, now sadly deceased, whose birth centenary is being celebrated around the world, and they give scant comfort today as one surveys the destructive trajectory within the Arab world, since 9/11

and more recently the Arab uprisings: a world battling imperial occupation on one hand and Islamic fundamentalism on the other, or at best trying hard not to degenerate or disintegrate into a bantustan lorded over either by Iran or Saudi Arabia. Rodinson would have agreed however, that a significant contribution to the few chances left for the destruction of the Islamic world's most oppressive structures in our own time has been made by the disastrous role of Saudi Arabia in the last forty years in the Muslim world in general, and the Arab world in particular, as can be witnessed in its latest ongoing adventure in Yemen.

As I write these words, the Saudi bombardment of Yemen is now enjoying a temporary respite, having being bombed for five consecutive weeks, egged on by an essentially monarchical coalition of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, together with Jordan, Oman, Morocco and Sudan, bolstered by Sisi's Egypt and greenlighted by Washington. This unprovoked and illegal intervention has already created a grave humanitarian crisis in the Arab world's poorest country, killed hundreds of innocent civilians and led to severe electricity, food and water shortages. The 'international community' has legitimized and sanctified it by explicitly calling for sanctions against one of the warring parties, the Houthis, but not even mentioning the Saudi bombardment.

Yemen is not only the Arab world's poorest country but also its least understood. It is frequently mentioned in the mainstream media as a country of beards, bombs and burqas, and the birthplace of Osama bin Laden. What is conveniently left out is the fact that it is the only republican country in a sea of royalist dictatorships, having a proud history of both republican and guerrilla resistance going back to the 1930s.

I first wrote about the country five years ago, for CounterPunch in the aftermath of the apprehending in the United States of the so-called 'underpants bomber', a Nigerian who had allegedly received terrorist training in Yemen and was attempting to blow up an American plane to Detroit. This revelation was followed by an open season of ahistorical claims about Yemen and about the purported presence of al-Qaeda there. I decided to visit Yemen soon after in an attempt to understand this fascinating country, which was still under the grip of a longstanding dictatorship, like others in the Arab world. I travelled in both the north and south of the country, struck by the warmth and hospitality of the Yemeni people. Although what I was not prepared for was the fact that the scale of the al-Qaeda presence which the Western media was so concerned about then – even now – had been vastly exaggerated, beginning with the dictator Saleh himself, who just prior to his ouster in 2012, opened his jails to free thousands of al-Qaeda recruits in an attempt to blackmail his Western and Saudi benefactors to continue supporting him. The second thing I was not prepared to acknowledge was the fact that in Aden, a major seaport during the British occupation of south Yemen and later the capital of the Arab world's first – and only – Marxist republic, women without the burqa could no more be found. In the heyday of the socialist republic of South Yemen, I was told, liberated women routinely burnt the burqa as a sign of their oppression. No more. Such was the scale of defeat following the 'unification' of Yemen in 1990.

Here is what I had written back in 2005:

What is really happening in Yemen today is the unfolding of unfinished historical baggage from Yemeni unification. The Huthi uprising in the north is led by former allies of Saleh who were used as mercenaries in the reconquest of the south in 1994 and have now fallen out with the ruling elite. Far from being a religious revolt, the aim of the rebellion in the north is not the establishment of a Zaidi/Islamic heavenly kingdom on earth as the alarmist media would have us believe; in fact what started as an old-fashioned bar-room brawl over resources and political influence has now taken on greater proportions because of Saleh's vicious military campaigns against the rebels, midwived since last year by the US and now by its chief proxy in the peninsula, Saudi Arabia, whose interventions in the country (as everywhere else) have always been self-serving and expansionist.

The problem in Yemen has nothing to do with sectarianism, as many would have us believe. It has everything to do with the fact that that Yemen today is a fractured country, its 'unification' seen as a sham by both the Houthis and the southerners. For southerners, long accustomed under the old socialist republic to cosmopolitanism embracing emancipated women, access to free health, education and housing, as well as land, it only meant the conquest of the south by the north, with the looting presided over by Saleh. Saleh, though not as much of a murderous dictator like his enviable counterparts in Cairo and Tunis, became a much-valued ally in the West's 'War on Terror', as he turned over his country to a twin US-Saudi influence. Wikileaks cables graphically convey the extent to which the dictator and his allies would go to lie to their own countrymen about who was really in charge of drone attacks against fellow Yemenis. A greater threat to his rule came not from al-Qaeda, but from southerners demanding nothing short of independence. Saleh fought six brutal wars against the Houthis, his ex-allies, from 2004 to 2010, in an attempt to exterminate them, but failed. Wikileaks cables from the time again detail his futile attempts to prove to his American benefactors that the Houthis were militarily supported by Iran, but to no avail. Meanwhile mainstream media continued to ignore Yemen and the largely secret American war the country's ruling elite had signed up to fight.

Buoyed by the success of the Arab uprisings elsewhere, Yemenis took to the streets against their own dictator in 2012, the country quickly becoming the only Arab country where protests in the capital Sana'a became a *daily* occurrence. These protests were enthusiastically joined by a vibrant student movement, women, Houthis as well as a courageous human-rights activist by the name of Tawakkol Karman, who was later co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that year, bringing rare good news to the country.

After renegeing on his promise several times, Saleh finally resigned in 2012 after guaranteeing immunity from prosecution for himself, and was succeeded in a one-man referendum by his deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansoor Hadi, an outcome predetermined with Saudi-American agreement, thus bypassing hopes of a radical change in Sana'a entertained by the largely youthful anti-Saleh protesters. Hadi did not have a real power base in the country, because even after the departure of Saleh, the latter continued to be powerful, with his son controlling a sizable portion of the national army. A National Dialogue Conference was also begun across the country, ironically funded by Washington, and orchestrated by the United Nations, largely in the only five-star hotel in Sana'a, where attendees were lavished with generous largesse, in order to resolve the country's problems in the south as well as in the north (where the Houthis originate). It bears mentioning that al-Qaeda hardly figured in this entire situation as a major 'problem'.

The Conference failed to reassure or give a sense of participation to the southerners or the Houthis, and merely strengthened the traditional entrenched social order in Yemen buttressed by Saudi Arabia. Additionally, it failed to prosecute Saleh, which was one of the key demands from both north and south. It was only after the failure of this ‘consultative’ process that the Houthis began to mobilize support from across the north and a largely peaceful movement of Zaidi Shias turned militant and gathered enough traction to capture the capital, forcing Hadi to flee and ask the GCC for assistance. Hadi, though a southerner himself, enjoys very little legitimacy, not just in his area of origin, but the country as a whole, since he is associated with the discredited coterie of Saleh and his cronies, and as per the terms of the Conference was to have resigned at the end of 2014 to make way for a democratically-elected successor. Ironically, Saleh, one of the central actors in the Yemeni drama and now allied with his erstwhile *bête noire* – the Houthis – is a Zaidi himself. The Zaidis in Yemen not only live in the north, mainly in the Saa’dah governorate but are also powerful near the capital Sana’a.

The present conflict in Yemen thus has nothing to do with sectarianism, rather it is yet another attempt by Saudi Arabia to control its plucky little republican neighbor, perhaps to replace what the Romans used to call Arabia Felix (‘Happy Arabia’) with a Saudi Yemenia, another Saudi-American protectorate in a region already awash with them. Saudi intervention in Yemen goes back to the very foundations of the Saudi state itself, when the Treaty of Taif in 1934 established borders between the two countries. Likewise, Yemen became a playground for inter-Arab rivalry in the 1962-1970 period when following a military coup against the Zaidi imamte ruling northern Yemen by republican military officers, the Saudis attempted to restore the deposed imam, assisted by the Shah of Iran and initially by Israel, with the republican forces aided by a 70,000 military presence from Nasser’s Egypt. The long war ended with the end of Egyptian involvement following its defeat by Israel in 1967 and a victory for republican forces in Yemen in 1970. The irony of yet another Egyptian involvement in Yemen is rather too sweet to go unnoticed, yet it is Saudi Arabia for whom the latter could become a Saudi ‘Vietnam’ should it choose to send ground forces to contain the Houthis. Saudi attempts to undermine the Marxist southern Yemeni republic on its border continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and it was with great reluctance that the former and its royalist neighbors in the GCC accepted the establishment of a republican and united Yemen in 1990. So there is a firm historical precedent for the latest round of Saudi intervention in Yemen.

The myth of Iranian involvement in supporting the Houthis beyond diplomatic support is as risible (in a country already listed internationally as third in terms of per capita ownership of guns in 2014) as the one making out the latter as a military threat to Saudi Arabia. Yemen has had no history of sectarian conflict and certainly Iran has no interests to defend in Yemen on the scale of say, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon or Syria, where it is in alliance with significant state and/or civil society forces. On the other hand, Saudi intervention in Syria and most successfully in Bahrain (where a popular uprising was crushed with massive human rights violations) ensured that non-sectarian conflicts rapidly degenerated into sectarian ones. Hence in Yemen too, the fact that Iran has sought to assure neighboring countries like Pakistan and has actually put out a peace plan may already imply the transformation of an essentially non-sectarian conflict into Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

It is also hard to dissociate what is happening in Yemen with Iran's recent success in Lausanne in attempting to negotiate a favourable nuclear treaty with Washington and forestall yet another disastrous conflict in the region, which has caused a lot of consternation in every Middle Eastern capital from Riyadh and Ankara to Tel Aviv. Saudi intervention in Yemen and its fiction of Iranian involvement will put pressure on Washington not to grant further concessions to Iran over its right to develop nuclear weapons.

A ray of light emerged earlier this week when Pakistan's parliament soundly rejected the government's proposal to send troops to aid Saudi intervention in Yemen. This may prove to be a sensible decision in the long run, especially if it helps to wean the country away from its longstanding fealty to Saudi largesse and oil, and a long history of unnecessary involvement in the Middle East (right from the time of the Baghdad Pact to Black September in Jordan in 1970) to improved relations with Iran, another major oil producer in the region and a country with which Pakistan shares far more ancient and continuous geographical, religious, economic and cultural links than Saudi Arabia, and a rising power of the future.

As Saudi domination of Yemen continues and the fate of the country hovers between an Arabia Felix and a Saudi Yemenia, it is to saner, humanist voices like Rodinson that we must return to amidst the cacophony of war:

But when it is patently obvious that unacceptable calamities are the direct result of fundamental oppressive and exploitative structures, then the remedy must be radical; it must, as Marx put it, go to the root of things. And in that case there is but one valid stand for those unable to resign themselves to accepting humanity's avoidable suffering: to be a rebel.

Amen to that!