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Middle East

# Yemen's turn

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**Some general characteristics of the imperialist recolonization of the Arab world, which began with that brutal dress-rehearsal, the First Gulf War of 1991, are now clearly visible. Too many people supposed that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US eagle would discard its talons; because they wanted it to be so, they thought it was. [1]**

In the event, Washington has relentlessly targeted national sovereignty in those parts of the Middle East where it still exists. Countries that have resisted total submission to American hegemony, imposed directly or via local relays, are being dismantled. Regime change is accompanied by massive destruction and loss of life, followed by *de facto* partition along ethno-religious lines and the entry of giant corporations—some entrusted with rebuilding cities bombed by the us and its Euro-allies, others going for the oil—and all this in the midst of a generalized political chaos under the watch of the us and Israeli military.

The Arab Spring, numerically strong but politically weak, failed to break this destructive dynamic. With the corpse of Arab nationalism in a state of advanced decay and the principal opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, desperate for a deal with Washington, the 2011 uprisings were easily confiscated by the US to further its own aims in the region. Despite its many national peculiarities, the ruinous war in Yemen has to be viewed in this context. For the past three years, a military coalition spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but with critical diplomatic, logistical and intelligence support from Obama and Trump, has wracked the poorest country in the Middle East, devastating its infrastructure and blockading its ports in an effort to bludgeon the 27 million inhabitants of this mountainous and mostly arid land—who rely on imports for 70 per cent of their food—into submission to the dictates of foreign powers. Helen Lackner's *Yemen in Crisis* opens with a horrific description of the havoc they have wrought. 'By mid-2017 Yemen faced total humanitarian disaster, its first famine since the 1940s and the world's worst cholera epidemic.' The situation was unprecedented and avoidable: both famine and cholera were 'the result of a civil war dramatically worsened by foreign intervention'.

It's been a long journey for Lackner from the hopes and struggles of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the seventies to the neoliberal wreckage that is today's Republic of Yemen. A research associate at SOAS'S Middle East Institute and an independent consultant on rural development, Lackner has lived and studied in Yemen for long periods beginning with her arrival in Aden, capital of the PDRY, as a young SOAS-trained anthropologist and linguist, to practise her Arabic and conduct fieldwork in the only socialist state in the Arab world. Her supportive but not uncritical assessment, *PDR Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia*, appeared in 1985. She also produced a careful study of Yemen's powerful neighbour, *A House Built on Sand: A Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (1978)—written, as she puts it, 'from the point of view of the welfare of the Saudi Arabian population, not that of Western capitalism'. All of this accumulated experience lies behind the matchless geopolitical profile of contemporary Yemen—its political conflicts, its economic structures, and, above all, its people—that she has now provided. She knows the country at least as well, and in some respects better than the gangs in Foggy Bottom and Whitehall, not to mention Mossad operatives or the other spooks of the 'international community' based in Riyadh. *Yemen in Crisis* patiently traces the complex network of influences and rivalries which intertwine on the branching rope that constitutes Yemeni national consciousness—a rope that outside military intervention has now severed.

On a peninsula teeming with petty emirates and the pampered scions of the House of Saud, Yemen has always stood out. It has been under republican rule for half a century, divided into two states until 1990. In the North, Nasserite nationalists triumphed over the Saudi-backed Imamate in 1970 after a tragic conflict. In the South, communists and socialists ejected the British from the port-city of Aden, which commands the entrance to the Red Sea through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Cold War competition resulted in massive inflows of aid from the West and

the Soviet Union, helping to build a strong social infrastructure in both territories. Remittances from the more than one million Yemenis working abroad, mainly in Saudi Arabia, were also vitally important.

The PDRY pushed through land reforms and education for all, breaking the traditional shackles on the advancement of women. When I visited Aden many years after the regime's demise, I met a number of women who mourned for the old state and were angered by the renewed pressure on them to wear the hijab. Lackner's retrospective in *Yemen in Crisis* chimes with their recollections. 'Life for ordinary citizens was reasonably good, with jobs and incomes that enabled them to achieve an acceptable standard of living, to eat correctly and to finance basic necessities.' This comes with a crucial caveat: 'By contrast, involvement in politics was inadvisable and a sure way of reducing one's life expectancy rather substantially.'

The implosion of the PDRY in the late 1980s paralleled the disintegration of its sponsors in the Soviet bloc, albeit in more dramatic fashion. There was a shoot-out at the Central Committee, two rival factions which belonged to different tribal groups literally fighting for power—not unlike the strife in Afghanistan a decade earlier, when an intra-left battle triggered a Soviet military intervention and US-sponsored Mujahedeen resistance, with tragic results for the country: the Americans still grip Afghanistan by the throat. In the Yemeni case, as in the German, disintegration of the communist regime at the endpoint of the Cold War allowed the veteran leadership of the capitalist half of the country to dictate the terms for national unification. Sana'a in the North became the capital of a merged Republic of Yemen, with Ali Abdullah Saleh—a wily and repressive leader of North Yemen since 1978 and a veteran of the 1960s military struggle against the Imamate—as president.

Only a matter of months after the new state came into being on 22 May 1990, it was dealt a huge blow by the Bush administration in Washington for refusing to join the assault on Baathist Iraq, following Saddam's invasion of Kuwait—an invasion which the Americans, for all their pious outrage, had declined every opportunity to discourage. Saddam was an ally of Saleh's and also popular with ordinary Yemenis for his anti-Americanism and his Palestinian sympathies. Yemen and Cuba cast the only 'no' votes against the Security Council resolution authorizing the American onslaught against Baghdad. Secretary of State James Baker's baleful reaction to Yemen's temerity at pursuing an independent foreign policy: 'That's the most expensive vote they ever cast.' The Americans promptly terminated their entire \$70 million aid programme, and the Saudis expelled hundreds of thousands of the country's migrant workers on whose earnings so many Yemeni households depended.

Stripped of external means of support, Yemen's economy was plunged into a prolonged crisis. Its GDP fell each year between 1990 and 1995. Saleh was also confronted with a Saudi-sponsored secessionist uprising in the South, where people felt disenfranchised on every level under his regime. Once that had been put down, Saleh turned to the IMF and World Bank for financial assistance. A series of structural-adjustment programmes hammered the poor and did nothing to boost the productive sector. The Washington institutions looked the other way while the proceeds from foreign aid and investment were snaffled by their client state. All the best jobs and juiciest contracts went to Saleh's cronies; 'no business could succeed without this group's participation as a partner in the profits', Lackner writes.

Then came 9/11 and the ratcheting up of us military intervention in the Middle East. Perceiving an opportunity, Saleh hurried to Washington to denounce al-Qaeda and pledge Bush Junior his full support. He obtained a \$400 million aid package in return for hosting us Special Forces and acquiescing to airstrikes by Predator drones flown from an American military base in Djibouti. The following year, the first us drone strike outside Afghanistan killed six alleged al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen, including one of the suspected ringleaders of the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole. In subsequent years, as al-Qaeda activity dropped off, the Bush administration began to lose interest in Yemen. Saleh, anxious to retain his fee, insisted that the country remained under terrorist threat. As if on cue, there was a mass jailbreak of al-Qaeda fighters in Sana'a, followed by a spate of attacks. Four South Korean tourists visiting the ancient city of Shibam, where Pasolini had filmed his version of the Arabian Nights, were killed by a suicide bomber, along with their guide.

Despite such outrages, many people whom I spoke with during a trip to the country in 2010, both within officialdom and outside its ranks, insisted that the presence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was very limited. Abdul Karim al-Iryani, a former prime minister and still an adviser to Saleh, smiled mischievously when I asked for a rough estimate of AQAP's strength. I suggested a figure of three or four hundred fighters. 'At the maximum', he replied, 'the very maximum. The Americans exaggerate greatly. We have other problems, real and more important.' When I visited Shibam in east-central Yemen and asked the mayor if there was an AQAP base in the town, he whispered in my ear: 'The AQAP base is in Saleh's palace, just next to his office.'

Certainly the 'war on terror' proved most useful to Saleh, providing him with American weaponry and elite us-trained army units for deployment against the far more pressing Huthi insurgency in the far North, which had flickered on and off since 2004. Muhammad al-Maqaleh, a leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party and editor of the party's newspaper, fearlessly documented some of the atrocities committed by government forces as they drove 150,000 villagers from their homes in Operation Scorched Earth, begun in August 2009. For this he was held without trial for four months, tortured and threatened with execution. I wrote at the time that while Sana'a was not Kabul, if the regime continued to use force on this scale, new civil wars seemed probable.

A key factor in Saleh's growing isolation was the postponement of elections, scheduled for 2009 but delayed until 2011. The Yemeni opposition parties were real entities and had to be persistently bullied before they agreed to the change. Saleh added more petroleum to the flames by a crude attempt to alter the constitution that would have enabled him to stand for a third term. By then he had been in power—ruler of the Republic of Yemen and of North Yemen before that—for 33 years. It was hardly a secret that, like his fellow despot in Egypt, he was grooming his son to succeed him. Since multinational contracts involve the greasing of presidential palms, political succession requires careful handling to ensure that the cash continues to flow into the family coffers. Yemen is not alone in this regard.

It was the local version of the Arab Spring, and the West's panicked response to the unrest, that finally unseated Saleh. In the days after the ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia on 14 January 2011, the tensions long brewing within Yemeni society spilled out onto the streets. Thousands of demonstrators marched through Sana'a demanding that Saleh should quit: 'Irhal!' (Out!). The protests grew rapidly in size and spread to all parts of the country. Since 70 per cent of the Yemeni population is under 25 years of age, it is unsurprising that the movement was led by the country's youth—interestingly, with the participation of large numbers of women, veiled and unveiled.

On 2 February, Saleh tried to ease the situation by cancelling the constitutional amendments and announcing a government of national unity. But it was too late. Lackner was in the Yemeni capital on 11 February when the crowds exploded with joy at the news of Mubarak's fall. After several more weeks of upheaval, on 18 March, government snipers opened fire on a 'Friday of Dignity' march, killing at least 45 and wounding 200. This massacre provoked a split in ruling circles. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, commander of the First Armoured Brigade and formerly a close ally of the president, declared his allegiance to the protestors, as did the leaders of the established opposition parties who had hitherto held aloof.

The sight of such multitudes demanding jobs, incomes, dignity and free and fair elections alarmed the Western powers. Fearful that Yemen might deviate from the 'correct path', i.e. the agenda of the IMF and World Bank, they swung behind a Gulf Cooperation Council initiative which offered Saleh immunity from prosecution if he agreed to stand down. Saleh initially refused to sign. On 3 June, while praying in his palace mosque, he was seriously hurt by a bomb blast. Many expected him to die. He was airlifted to Saudi Arabia for emergency treatment, where the doctors saved his life—ironic, given that he would shortly become a sworn enemy of the regime. Before that, on 23 November, still in very poor health, he capitulated and agreed to hand power to a transitional government headed by long-serving vice-president Abdu Rabbu Mansur Hadi, a Saleh makeweight from the southern governate of Abyan.

The elite factions which dominated the transitional administration, Saleh's republican General People's Congress and the Islamist Islah party, proved supremely corrupt and incompetent. One of their last acts in power was to raise diesel prices at the IMF's behest, thereby further antagonizing the mass of the population. Meanwhile, abandoned by the West, Saleh ganged up with the Huthi rebels against whom he had fought a number of inconclusive wars, and together they made a semi-successful bid for power. *Yemen in Crisis* contains an illuminating chapter on the Huthis, a religious revivalist movement within the Zaydi branch of Shi'ite Islam led by the sons of Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a notable Zaydi scholar, in the Sa'ada province on the Saudi border, where nationalist and leftist political cultures are virtually non-existent. Zaydis account for a third of the population, but religious sectarianism doesn't fit easily into the Yemeni mould. Closer in some ways to Yemen's Sunni majority than to the clerical orthodoxy in Qom, the Zaydi share mosques with the Sunni and accept some of their rituals and the teachings of their legal schools. The distinguishing ideological feature of Huthism is that sadaqa descendants of the Prophet have an innate right to rule: a view, it should be pointed out, that was not espoused by the Prophet, who was in favour of caliphs being elected by the ummah. However, Huthi leaders insist that they do not favour bringing back an imam from the old family, and the assertion of hereditary links to the Prophet is little more than a device to re-empower the Zaydi tribes on whom the old Imamate had been based. The Zaydi were integrated into the power structures of North Yemen, but the Anschluss of 1990 resulted in new priorities and they found themselves frozen out. Though a Zaydi himself, Saleh angered the community by allowing Sunni Salafism to put down roots in Dammaj in the Zaydi heartland, to appease the Saudis.

Even after resigning from the presidency, Saleh retained a lot of support within the security services, which had been shielded from democratic reform by the Americans. In September 2014, Huthi militias took over government buildings in the capital while the army stood by. Hadi fled to Aden and pleaded with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for military assistance. The cash-rich Saudis and Emiratis proceeded to assemble an alliance of biddable Middle Eastern and African states—Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait; Qatar, until it found itself on the receiving end of Saudi wrath; plus Eritrea, Morocco, Senegal, Somalia and Sudan—acting in the name of Hadi's government in exile. The first Saudi air strikes were launched on 26 March 2015 to prevent Aden falling to Saleh's Republican Guards. 'Without the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition', Lackner observes, 'there is little doubt that the Huthi-Saleh troops would have taken control of the whole country in short order'.

The present conflict in Yemen, therefore, is less a civil war than a proxy one. The Huthis receive a modest degree of external support from Tehran in the form of money and training. Saudi military interventionism on this scale is relatively new and linked to the palace coup which has seen Mohammed bin Salman, favourite son of the new king, make a bid for personal power with Washington's strong backing. He has found a willing collaborator in Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Sandhurst-trained crown prince of Abu Dhabi. Obama gave bin Salman the green light to do as he pleased in Yemen in order to salve Saudi grievances over the US nuclear deal with Iran. The Yemeni debacle may well become the first nail in the crown prince's political coffin.

For what ensued was not a Saudi blitzkrieg but a bloody stalemate. 'The military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition failed to restore to power the transitional government, and turned a political and humanitarian crisis into a catastrophe', Lackner argues. 'Liberated' from Saleh-Huthi control, southern Yemen is a morass of competing militias under loose Emirati supervision. There are almost daily protests in Aden at the lack of basic services and the non-payment of salaries and pensions. Trump's defence secretary, James Mattis, hailed the UAE as a 'little Sparta' for the exploits of its special forces in the US's disastrous war in Afghanistan. But since 45 Emirati soldiers were killed on 5 September 2015 when a Huthi missile struck an ammunition depot in the Marib governate, east of Sana'a, the brave Spartans have increasingly preferred to let local paramilitaries and foreign mercenaries, including ex-Colombian military, do their fighting for them. They have built up extremely abusive 'Security Belt' Salafi militias, along with secessionist forces, prompting an impotent Hadi to 'kept under virtual house arrest in Riyadh' to accuse them of mounting a coup against his authority. AQAP has swelled to a force of several thousand amid the chaos, the Saudi Royal Air Force turning a blind eye to the group's stunning capture of the eastern coastal city of Mukalla in the opening stages of the war. Meanwhile most of the more populous north of the country—including the capital, Sana'a—remains under Huthi control, despite the pulverizing of civilian areas by

Saudi bombers. The Saudis are also supporting Islah militias, including Ali Mohsen and the remnants of his First Armoured Brigade, in the northern governorates of Mareb and Al Jawf on the eastern flank of Huthi-controlled territory.

Though the Saudis cry foul about alleged Iranian missile shipments to the Huthis, their own far more formidable military arsenal depends almost entirely on gunrunning from North America and Europe. Drawing on data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute for the period 2001 to 2016, *Yemen in Crisis* establishes the US as easily the largest arms supplier to Riyadh, followed by the former colonial powers, Britain and France. Lackner suggests that all previous arms sales are 'reduced to insignificance' by the \$110 billion worth of deals flaunted by Trump on his visit to Riyadh in May last year, but this is a false comparison: the 'deal' reached by Trump represents merely a Saudi wish-list based on sales conversations dating back to the Obama administration. According to William Hartung of the Washington-based Center for International Policy, Obama offered to sell over \$115 billion worth of weapons to the Saudis in 42 separate deals. For a long time now, Riyadh has been able to buy whatever it wants in the American shop. Obama's record is indistinguishable from Trump's in this respect.

As Lackner points out, both administrations have also provided essential targeting information and in-air refuelling for Saudi-coalition aircraft. By February 2017 the Pentagon had logged 1,800 tanker sorties transferring 54 million pounds of fuel. 'Given that many of the bombing sorties could not happen without this action, the US Air Force must be considered an active participant in the air strikes, most likely including strikes which have killed civilians and destroyed civilian facilities', she comments. A large majority of the 16,400 civilian casualties recorded by the UN between March 2015 and May 2018 are attributed to coalition airstrikes. Scores have also been killed by US aircraft and drones ostensibly targeting AQAP forces. As the penholder for Yemen in the UN Security Council, the British governments of David Cameron and Theresa May have ensured that numerous war crimes go uncensured.

The continuing machinations of the Western and Gulf powers play into a cut-throat competition for cash and other resources on the ground which has fractured the political forces on both sides of the conflict. In late January this year, forces loyal to the Southern Transitional Council, a UAE-sponsored secessionist front, surrounded the presidential palace in Aden to demand the resignation of the Hadi-appointed government on grounds of corruption and mismanagement. Weeks earlier, there had been fierce clashes in Sana'a provoked by Saleh's renegeing on his alliance with the Huthis, in response to overtures from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Saleh and several other senior GPC figures were killed in the fighting. Saleh's nephew Tareq took the remnants of his late uncle's forces over to the Saudi coalition, which is currently attempting to force its way up the Red Sea coast. On 14 June, Saudi and UAE aircraft began pounding Huthi positions in and around Yemen's largest port. Capture of Hodeida would tighten their stranglehold over the 'rebel' north, sealing off the Huthis from the sea.

The clamour of mass protests these days is often drowned out by aerial bombing and constant drone attacks. Despite all this, a famished and tormented people still mobilize in large numbers to protest against the Saudi onslaught and against those who supply the coalition with the latest in military hardware: the giant monopolies of the global arms trade in Europe and America; the politicians who lobby for them—including the hundred or so Labour MPs who recently refused to support their own frontbench's resolution demanding an end to this bloody trade; and the English judiciary which stamps its imprimatur on the weaponry.

The closing chapters of *Yemen in Crisis* zoom out from the present destruction to analyse longer-term trends in the country's social evolution: the genesis of southern separatism; the warping of social structures under Saleh's patrimonial rule, as access to central-government patronage overrode traditional tribal authority; the mismanagement and over-exploitation of natural resources—ground-water reserves could run out in Sana'a at any moment; the gutting of the economy by Washington-consensus austerity; the dynamics of uncontrolled urbanization and rural impoverishment. The discussion has a developmentalist tenor, patiently setting out the myriad challenges that any future Yemeni government will have to confront—assuming, that is, that the country holds together. But as the concluding section acknowledges, 'it is very unlikely that Yemen will, at the end of the war, resemble the Republic of Yemen which existed since 1990'. Instead,

it is more likely that an internationally backed peace agreement will, at best, put an end to the external military intervention, while within Yemen itself, fighting will continue at greater and lesser intensity between numerous small entities over access to the country's very limited natural resources. This could lead to fighting between small groups in the south-west, reminiscent of the rival emirates of the Protectorates period, a Shafi'i-Zaydi split in the northern parts which lack major economic resources and support; while the resource-rich areas might become one or more separate fiefdoms.

Across the Middle East, the imperial powers have seen to it that the democratic gains of the Arab Spring—what a misnomer that seems now—proved short-lived. The principal demand of the mass movements was for an end to autocracy. Anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, cross-border Arab solidarity and freedom for Palestine were scarcely on the agenda, and even this minimal programme has been quashed—except in Tunisia, cradle of the Revolution, although here economic sovereignty has been ceded to the G8 and IMF under the erroneously-named Deauville 'partnership'. In Egypt, a military bloated with billions of dollars from the Pentagon is firmly back in the saddle. Field Marshal Sisi receives a warm welcome in Washington and all the European capitals while presiding over a state if anything more deeply implicated in torture, arbitrary imprisonment and institutionalized sycophancy than it was in Mubarak's time. In Libya, the original movement for democracy was rapidly taken over by the NATO powers, who bombed the country for seven months, propelling a chaotic conflict which claimed between 20,000 and 30,000 lives. Qaddafi was publicly and brutally lynched without even the show trial put on for Saddam, but to Secretary of State Clinton's obvious satisfaction: 'We came, we saw, he died.' Seven years later, the country remains torn between warring governments and militias, including jihadi groups.

In Syria, likewise, the US flanked by Britain, France, Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia moved in very quickly after the irruption of a mass uprising, arming al-Qaeda and other jihadis to take on the Baathist regime. Within weeks, secular forces had been shoved aside. They fled to neighbouring countries or attempted to reach Europe; many drowned in the Mediterranean. With backing from Moscow and Tehran and a surprising degree of local support, given his record, Bashar al-Assad held on. Much of the countryside and all its major cities are back under Baathist control, but Syria has been devastated and the scars go deep. Kurdish illusions that the Pentagon would protect them against reprisals from Turkey, a NATO ally, have been cruelly dispelled.

The speed with which friends become opponents and then friends again, according to the changing priorities of empire, has made some nostalgic for the simpler dichotomies of the Cold War. These days Russia and China are half-enemies, half-friends. Too large to swallow, their sovereignty is more or less intact. When it comes to the states surrounding them, it is a different matter altogether. Here the route to American hegemony is mapped: any wayward country can be reduced to the abject condition of Yemen. Despite many acts of resistance to the New World Order at one level or other, in various parts of the globe, any structural alteration to us-centred capitalism remains only a hope. Centuries ago, Goethe's Faust posed the question of agency:

Who shall achieve it?

Gloomy question

To which destiny wears  
a mask;

When on the day of great  
misfortune,

Bleeding, all mankind falls dumb.

But revive yourselves with new songs,

Stay no longer bowed:

For earth engenders them  
again

Just as always it has done.

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[1] Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of a State*, Saqi Books: London 2017, Â£25, hardback 330 pp, 978 0 86356 193 1