Yemen, al-Qaeda, and the US

THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, SEPTEMBER 30, 2010

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Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes
by Victoria Clark
Yale University Press, 311 pp., $20.00 (paper)

President Ali Abdullah Salih of Yemen deserves some respect. Critics may decry his rule as a scantily gloved kleptocracy, or fret that it has turned his spectacularly rugged and impoverished country into an incubator of jihadist terror. Some cite other ills swelling in Yemen, such as the malnutrition that now afflicts 58 percent of its children, or the festering war against northern rebels that has forced 350,000 people from their homes, or the growing secessionist movement in the south that threatens to split the nation in two. Yet Salih’s talent for survival is clearly formidable.

The sixty-eight-year-old former tank commander has ruled northern Yemen, a long-isolated land of terraced hillsides and misty peaks rising to 12,000 feet, since Jimmy Carter was in the Oval Office. For twenty of those years he has also presided over its union with the South, a bigger but more thinly peopled region that was a British protectorate until 1967, gained independence as a halfhearted Marxist state, and then, in the same year that East Germany reunited with West Germany but with less fanfare, opted to merge with the North. Together, the two Yemens had barely eight million people when Salih came to power in 1978. He now rules three times as many, spread over 150,000 tiny settlements in an area the size of Colorado and Wyoming combined.

As Victoria Clark shows in Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes, her timely, incisive, deftly turned, and sympathetically bemused survey of Yemeni history and politics, Salih’s endurance is an achievement in itself. Rarely has a greater Yemen cohered within anything like its current borders. The land the ancients called Arabia Felix, contrasting its green and therefore “happy” part of the peninsula with the surrounding Arabia Deserta, was more often an amalgam of warring tribal territories. It tended to shake off would-be masters or reduce them to despair.

The Ottoman Turks, for instance, mounted successive efforts to subdue the country, beginning in the sixteenth century. They conquered its blistering Red Sea coast with ease. Pushing up steeply craggy gorges to the populous highlands, they captured its teetering stone-built cities too, and even held them for years at a stretch. But as the Turks vainly sought some taxable commodity to make their stay worthwhile, implacable tribesmen from the remoter hills would harass their supply lines and besiege their garrisons, inflicting such losses that the invaders inevitably retreated.

One can almost hear the sigh of the last Ottoman governor of Sanaa, the northern capital whose older quarters of gingerbread-like fortress-houses look much as they did in 1918 when the Turks departed for good, as he passed this verdict: “In my opinion, this is what happened, from the day we conquered..."
it to the time we left we neither knew Yemen nor did we understand it or learn about it, nor were we, for that matter, able to administer it.”

A half-century later the Egyptians suffered a similar fate. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the pan-Arabist leader of the 1952 coup that toppled Egypt’s King Farouk, cultivated a group of like-minded army officers in Yemen. Their grievances were understandable. North Yemen in the 1950s was a backwater, run in medieval style by a hereditary leader of the Zaydi sect, a uniquely Yemeni branch of Shia Islam that had, for a thousand years, held out in the highlands against foreign incursions. Imam Ahmad, a grossly fat morphine addict who kept the national treasury in sacks of silver coins, was not the most glorious of the line. Eccentric and cruel, he was said, in Clark’s memorable words, “to have drowned his dwarf court jester for a joke and then, overcome with remorse, to have fasted, prayed and played with an electric train for a fortnight.”

Within a week of Imam Ahmad’s death in 1962, republican army officers shelled his palace and forced his son and heir to flee. But neither the beheading of dozens of the imam’s relatives, ministers, and counselors nor the nailing of their heads over Sanaa’s gates succeeded in cowing his tribal allies. Supported by mercenaries paid by royalist Saudi Arabia, they pursued a tenacious guerrilla war in the northern mountains against the new republican military regime.

By 1965 the Egyptians, supporting the republican officers, had committed some 55,000 troops bolstered by tanks, artillery, and Ilyushin bombers that showered remote hamlets with poison chemicals. Yet the republicans failed to subdue the tribesmen who hid in caves and sprang devastating ambushes. After losing more men than in the 1967 war with Israel, whose six-day victory owed much to Nasser’s preoccupation with Yemen, the Egyptians retreated. Their republican allies sued for peace with the royalists who had, fortuitously, been similarly abandoned by their Saudi patrons. The deal they reached in 1970, still a key underpinning of Yemeni politics, stripped the old ruling family of power but awarded other prominent clans a stake in the republic.

Egyptian chroniclers likened their debacle to America’s misadventure in Vietnam. Summing up the experience, Egypt’s then minister of defense, Abdul Hakim Amer, remarked that it was only in the end that they realized it had, all along, simply been a war between tribes. Egypt had stumbled into this “without knowing the nature of their land, their traditions and their ideas.”

It was not only foreign invaders who faced a rough time. Amin Rihani, a Lebanese-American reporter whose Arabian travel trilogy from the 1920s is both witty and acute, described northern Yemen as being in a permanent state of war, with short intervals of peace. Its ruler then, and until his assassination in 1948, was the Imam Yahya, Ahmad’s father. Capricious and fiercely conservative (he closed Yemen’s only girls’ school, which had been started by the Turks), Yahya sustained his grip by the effective expedient of forcing every tribal sheikh to surrender hostages. There were said to be four thousand in all, housed in comfort or chained in dungeons depending on the behavior of their kinsmen.

Even so, Rihani gives a picture of constant threat to Yahya’s rule:

He is at war openly with the Idrisi, at war secretly with the Shawafe; at war periodically with the Hashid and Bakil; at war politically with the English—also with those Arabs around Aden who enjoy English protection—to say nothing of the Saiyeds, his cousins, who aspire to his high place. Not at all soft is the royal couch.

This litany of dangers deserves explaining in detail since, oddly enough, nearly all of them remain serious to this day.
The Idrisi family was a powerful clan from the far north, in what is now the Saudi Arabian province of Asir, that harassed Yahya’s territory until 1934. A brief war that year between the imam’s forces and the expanding new Saudi kingdom ended in a treaty. The Idrisis faded away as vassals of the al-Sauds, but the oil-rich and conservatively Sunni kingdom to the North has continued to intervene in Yemen. As Clark reports, Saudi Arabia’s founding king, Abdul Aziz, is said to have croaked a deathbed warning never to let Yemen be united.

The term “Shawafe” refers to the Sunni Muslims who predominate on the peripheries of Yemen’s highlands. Strife between the Shia Zaydis and the Sunnis, who form a slight majority overall, has been rare, but extremists on both sides have often stoked trouble. The Zaydi rebels who have fought a six-year insurrection in Yemen’s northernmost province, Saada, accuse President Salih of turning a blind eye to the expansion of Saudi-influenced Sunni radicalism. He in turn charges the rebels with being a fifth column for Shia Iran.

The Hashid and Bakil are the two main tribal groups in Yemen’s mountain heartland, each comprising both Sunnis and Zaydis. No would-be ruler can hope to maintain control without their assent; the Bakil, as well as some Hashid clans, fought on the royalist side in the civil war between 1962 and 1970, and the Bakil are also prominent among today’s northern rebels. President Salih, himself from a subclan of the Hashid, has survived largely due to a consummate skill at flattering, bribing, and privileging tribal sheikhs, or playing them off against each other.

The Saiyeds (more properly spelled Sayyids) are aristocratic descendants of the Prophet Muhammad’s family. The main leaders of the ongoing Saada rebellion, the Houthis, are Sayyids. They contest Salih’s rule partly on the grounds that although he too is nominally a Zaydi, he is a mere commoner. Unhelpfully, the right to depose unjust rulers forms a central part of Zaydi teaching.

As for the English, their star has clearly faded since Imam Yahya’s time. Others, however, still fill the role of the powerful and potentially dangerous foreign meddler, as we shall see. But first a further digression into history.

The British arrived on Yemen’s southern littoral in 1834 seeking access to the deepwater harbor at Aden, conveniently placed on the route to India. This they captured in 1839, after hostile local sheikhs refused to lease it. To protect the port, Britain signed some ninety separate treaties with neighboring tribal potentates. In exchange for British stipends and “protection,” these local rulers left Aden alone. They enjoyed near-total autonomy in their own fiefdoms, stretching eastward through the string of oases known as the Hadramut, as far as Oman.

This arrangement, enforced by the dispatch of biplanes to bomb recalcitrant sheikhs, was cheap, sparing the British much need to invest in schools or dams or roads. It was only in 1963 that Britain, ignoring resistance from the now-polyglot citizens of Aden, incorporated the port and the tribal lands within a single federation. Victoria Clark, who was born in Aden and later covered Yemen as a reporter, describes a continuing disconnect: “The tribes distrusted and scorned the cosmopolitan bazaar cum army camp that was modern Aden while Adenis, for their part, both feared and despised the archaic and xenophobic tribesmen who encircled them.”

Just four years later, in 1967, Britain abandoned South Yemen, leaving a messy wake as rival leftist guerrillas struggled for control. The new government eventually declared the southern federation a people’s republic, banned all parties but the Yemen Socialist Party, and tried to enforce secularism. An anti-feudalist campaign ousted “collaborationist” aristocrats in the interior, sending many into exile in Saudi Arabia.
Aden’s fortunes declined, too. The blockage of the Suez Canal by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war diverted shipping for a decade, while “scientific” socialism put capital to flight. The people’s republic enjoyed free public schools and hospitals staffed by Cuban doctors, as well as women’s rights and jobs for life. But by 1989 South Yemen was exhausted, having endured two border conflicts with the North and a series of bloody coups that were ostensibly inspired by ideological sparring but looked more like gang wars. Without patrons any longer in the crumbled Soviet bloc, its leaders grabbed for the lifeline of union with the North.

By that time President Salih was ready to listen. He had come to office in 1978 by a process of elimination. His two immediate predecessors died within less than a year, the first mysteriously shot dead in his bed along with a pair of foreign prostitutes, the second felled in his office by an exploding briefcase. (Sent by the then president of South Yemen, the Samsonite was apparently expected to be filled with cash, and so was not searched. The bomb’s dispatcher was then also murdered by rivals, in one of the South’s Jacobin rounds of bloodletting.)

Salih, who headed the army, consolidated power by a mix of persuasion, sparing use of force, and the appointment to key posts of a tight circle of loyalists, many of them members of his family, clan, or tribe. What resources he had went into building his army and security service, and into the creation of a party structure to bolster his rule. To general surprise, the bull-necked, raspy-voiced president proved effective both as a folksy popular leader and as an arbitrator between tribes.

In the 1980s Salih lucked into a double windfall. A million or more Yemenis had migrated to wealthier Arab states during the 1970s oil boom. Their remittances, accounting for 40 percent of Yemen’s economy, brought rapid growth without straining state coffers. North Yemen itself discovered modest oil reserves, and began exporting in 1986. Salih thus enjoyed what no Yemeni ruler had since the decline of the lucrative frankincense trade in late antiquity: cash to equip his army, recruit men into his security services, and extend his tribal patronage.

The South’s offer of unity must have seemed another stroke of luck, particularly since larger reserves of oil and gas had just been found, right across the southern border. Salih seized the chance. His party and the socialists quickly agreed to a power-sharing deal that left him as overall president, with a southern deputy. Each side took a share of senior posts, and each was to station army units in the other’s territory. Unity was declared in May 1990, and elections were scheduled for 1993.

But Salih then blundered. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, he declined to support UN action against Saddam Hussein. The move was popular. Ordinary Yemenis resented the comparatively obscene wealth of states such as Kuwait. Salih himself bridled at the intrigues of Kuwait’s main ally, Saudi Arabia, which was said to keep hundreds of Yemeni tribal leaders on its payroll. Yemen’s republicans also had close ties to the Iraqi Baathists. Iraq helped train and equip Salih’s army, while Yemeni soldiers fought on Iraq’s side during its murderous war with Iran between 1980 and 1989.

So angered were the Saudis by Salih’s embrace of Saddam Hussein that they promptly expelled as many as 800,000 Yemeni workers. The move swelled Yemen’s population by 8 percent overnight while slashing its income by a quarter and sending united Yemen’s new currency into a tailspin. America also took revenge by canceling its modest aid program.
Partly as a result of the economic collapse, the union quickly soured. The north’s five-to-one population advantage left southerners feeling swamped, while the southern Socialist Party’s lack of cash left it vulnerable to inroads by Salih’s better-funded party machine. Cultural gaps proved wider than anticipated, the most obvious being the clash between the South’s socialist austerity and the corrupt and chaotic tribalism of the North. But mostly the breakdown reflected the haste of leaders to conclude a deal. Their power-sharing pact quickly unraveled amid well-deserved suspicions.

The civil war that erupted in 1994 was bloody, complete with mutual MIG and Scud raids, but mercifully brief. Despite a cynical Saudi bid to arm and fund the southern Marxists, the South was outnumbered and outgunned. The years of infighting among their leaders had left many southerners disgusted, and Salih skillfully exploited the whiff of complicity with the hated Saudis to sour opinion further.

Salih held another trump card. In the 1980s he had heeded American whispers and encouraged radical Muslim youths to join the anti-Soviet Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Exiles from the Marxist South proved especially enthusiastic volunteers. Hundreds trained in the camps set up by Osama bin Laden, who held added appeal to Yemenis because his family hailed from the Hadramut. Following Russia’s exit from Afghanistan in 1989 many of these fighters headed home, keen to pursue jihad in their own backyard.

The 1994 war provided a nice opportunity. General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, a cousin of Salih’s and long his shadowy second in command, had been cultivating links with Sunni Islamist radicals. (Muhsin married a sister of Tariq al-Fadhli, a leader of the powerful Fadhil tribe who had been exiled from the South, and served in Afghanistan.) As the northern army swept toward Aden it unleashed ex-Mujahideen, along with graduates of the new Islamist madrasas that Salih had allowed to proliferate in the North. When Aden fell in July 1994 these irregulars sacked the city, smashing Yemen’s only brewery and enforcing vigilante law against “un-Islamic” female attire.

The war brought Salih full control of a united Yemen, including the oil riches of the South. For the next decade he enjoyed relative calm. To be sure, there were the usual small troubles of a fiercely tribal society. With a ratio of firearms per capita second only to America’s (but weighted toward rockets and Kalashnikovs rather than handguns), with rapid population growth straining meager resources of land and water, and with the cash-strapped state ill-equipped to enforce its writ, a degree of lawlessness was to be expected.

The Wild West atmosphere made even the occasional attack by jihadist terrorists seem to Yemenis like familiar background noise. There were rumblings of al-Qaeda activity in Yemen in the 1990s, but it was only starting in October 2000—with the suicide-speedboat assault on the USS Cole in Aden harbor that killed seventeen American sailors—that the pace of its strikes increased alarmingly. Diplomats in Sanaa, foreign tourists, oil installations, and Yemeni security personnel were all targeted by terrorists in the ensuing decade. The attacks often proved unsophisticated, but their persistence, scope, and the relatively polished publicity that accompanied them suggested the continued ease with which jihadists have been able to recruit followers and move freely within Yemen.

Still, it is only in the past year or so that Yemen’s link to global jihadism has come under harsher scrutiny. In March 2009, successful police work in Saudi Arabia prompted the remaining leaders of al-Qaeda’s franchise there to slip to the relative safety of Yemen and announce a merger with its branch, under Yemeni command. In December it was revealed that Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, the Nigerian student who failed to down a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit using explosive underwear, had received training and instructions in Yemen. In recent months the teachings of Anwar al-Awlaki, a
radical, American-born cleric now hiding in Yemen, have repeatedly been linked to terrorist plots, most notoriously to the slaying of thirteen US servicemen at Fort Hood last November. Yemenis remain the single largest group of detainees at Guantánamo, and Yemen’s arms bazaar continues to fuel nearby troubles, such as the ongoing chaos in Somalia.

Despite ever-mounting pressure from foreign aid donors, Salih’s government has been cautious in confronting al-Qaeda. One valid excuse is the logistical difficulty of mounting and sustaining big policing operations in Yemen’s ideal guerrilla terrain, where tribal customs provide jihadists a degree of protection. Al-Qaeda also exploits the passive sympathy of ordinary Yemenis, who tend to share the view that Muslims are victimized by the West, if not the conviction that this justifies murderous counterstrikes. They like the romance of rebel gunslingers, but resent the cost of hosting them.

Clark captures this ambivalence neatly in the person of a taxi driver she meets in Sanaa. Friendly, helpful, and the proud new holder of a degree in marketing, he happens to be not just an Afghan veteran, but Osama bin Laden’s former bodyguard. He praises September 11 as a great thing. But his big ambition is to secure a US government contract to “deprogram” returnees from Guantánamo.

In 2002, when a missile fired from an American drone killed six alleged jihadists in the Yemeni desert, the angry backlash came not only from the street but from within the President’s inner circle. Al-Qaeda detainees started receiving milder sentences from Yemeni courts. Twice, numbers of them, including suspects in the USS Cole bombing, “escaped” from prisons run by the Political Security Organization, an internal intelligence agency widely thought to be packed with jihadist sympathizers. Only recently, after much cajoling and larger doses of military aid, has the Yemeni government restored intelligence cooperation with the US to its pre-2002 level.

Last December, Yemeni troops launched a joint operation with US intelligence, striking an alleged al-Qaeda hideout in the remote southern region of Abyan. Embarrassed Yemeni ministers later admitted that of the forty-three people killed, all but two were civilians. More recently, Amnesty International has released photographic evidence suggesting that they were the victims of cluster bomblets, delivered by an American BGM-1090 Tomahawk cruise missile. In May, an errant missile strike, which could only have been carried out by US forces, killed Jaber al-Shabwani, the deputy governor of Ma'rib province, along with three bodyguards. They were on their way to a meeting with al-Qaeda leaders, whom the slain official had reportedly been trying to persuade to surrender. In response to the killings, members of al-Shabwani’s tribe promptly blew up oil pipelines and a power plant, forcing blackouts in the capital. They only relented after a week of furious negotiations, which reportedly ended with a government promise to hand the tribe two hundred automatic rifles.

The mediation effort in Maarib appears to have borne some fruit. On June 5, an influential al-Qaeda leader in the region did turn himself in to authorities. This may have come in response to tougher government action, which has included raids across the historically bandit-ridden region, and the arrest in Sanaa of dozens of foreigners suspected of association with the extremists. But Ma'rib remains far from pacified. The very day of the militant’s surrender, a senior army commander in Ma'rib was killed in an ambush, and in the interim oil pipelines have again been sabotaged.

Further south, the government’s troubles have intensified lately. On June 19, al-Qaeda launched what may have been its most successful attack in Yemen since the Cole bombing, with a brazen raid on the internal security service’s headquarters in Aden that freed an unknown number of detainees, and left as many as thirteen people dead. Police stations and patrols continued to be targeted through July and into August with more than a dozen government men killed across southern Yemen. Statements
from AQAP leaders, meanwhile, underscored their determination to punish the state for its “subservience” to Western powers.

A recent report in the Washington Post suggests that the jihadists may soon be making more claims about the Yemeni government’s supposed perfidy. Top Obama administration officials are said to be pushing for a big expansion of American counter-terrorist operations in Yemen, including a reintroduction of CIA-run aerial surveillance and rocket attacks using Predator drones. A Yemeni official is quoted as rejecting a return of the drones, which have apparently not been used in Yemen since 2002. There is little doubt, nonetheless, that the footprint of US involvement is set to expand well beyond the current official level of cooperation in training and logistics.

The Obama administration’s acknowledgment that it has placed Anwar al-Awlaki on a hit list, despite his holding US citizenship, has created further unease in Sanaa. Although al-Awlaki is largely unknown in Yemen (he preaches mostly in English), he comes from a prominent clan in the Awlaki tribe. Tribal leaders may abhor al-Qaeda, but they have vowed to protect their kinsman. The Awlaki lands lie in Shabwa province, at the strategic center of South Yemen, where a secessionist movement is gaining strength. They straddle even more crucial oil and gas export pipelines. Not surprisingly, Saleh’s ministers bluster that in the absence of an extradition treaty or evidence provided by the Americans, they cannot touch the fugitive preacher.

Nevertheless, America earlier this year announced a doubling of aid, to $150 million a year, and has recently promised a further hike to as much as $300 million. Britain, too, is boosting its substantial aid program, and the IMF recently announced that it would loan the Yemeni government some $370 million. Awlaki, in a recording released over the Internet in July, issued a sarcastic congratulations to Salih’s government for having again succeeded in “swindling” Western donors.

Still, no conceivable rise in donor funding can match the losses Yemen has already suffered from declining energy exports. Oil earnings account for three quarters of state revenues, but have shrunk dramatically as oil reserves have diminished, and wary foreign investors have shied from exploring for more. Oil production has almost halved since 2002, and oil income last year dwindled to a puny $2 billion, barely enough to pay the salaries of Salih’s bloated bureaucracy.

Yemen’s president is caught in a vise. He needs money, but must stamp out the jihadists to get it. He needs peace, but must accommodate southern secessionists, northern rebels, and perhaps also Islamist Sunni radicals to secure it. His reluctant foreign backers face a similar conundrum. They know that his regime is corrupt and unreliable, but the alternatives look even darker, beginning with all-out civil war and famine. In both Aden and Sanaa on a recent trip, Yemenis repeated to me an ominous warning. Without radical, wrenching political reform, including an open dialogue with the full opposition and, preferably, Salih’s resignation, Yemen’s descent into chaos would make Somalia look like a picnic.

Salih, ever the nimble operator, is fully aware of such pressure. Since the spring he has engaged sporadically in secret talks with a range of opponents, including exiled southern separatists. Some Yemeni commentators assert that Western powers have advised him to parry southern demands by proposing a form of federalism, so as to be able to concentrate his overstretched security forces on other threats, most importantly, for them, al-Qaeda.

Yet aside from its political woes, Yemen faces other looming crises. With population growth unchecked, demand on scant water resources is rising at an alarming pace. Groundwater levels are dropping by twenty to sixty-five feet a year, according to the World Bank, and prices for trucked water, which some 70 percent of Sanaa’s residents rely on, have quadrupled since 2005. That represents a huge
added burden in a country where 45 percent of people live on less than $2 a day. This is one reason for another problem, a shocking rise in the rate of malnutrition. According to the World Food Program, one in three Yemenis now suffers chronic hunger. Globally, only Afghanistan has a higher proportion of stunted children. Dealing with these problems alone is an immense challenge.

Salih himself describes his job as "dancing on the heads of snakes." A common Yemeni joke resorts to a different animal allegory to describe the state of the country. The President’s son, who commands the Republican Guard, demands to rule. Salih says fine, but first take a sack full of rats and set them all loose. "If you can put them all back in the sack, you can be president," he promises. Try as he might, the younger Salih cannot catch all the scampering, biting rodents. Laughing, his father grabs another rat-filled sack and swirls it briskly around his head. The rats stagger out, dizzy and disoriented. The President scoops them up with ease and pops them one by one back into the sack.

Yemen’s troubles are certainly dizzying. But rats, as is well known, learn every trick in the end.

—August 31, 2010

1. The Shafi’i school is one of four accepted Sunni interpretations of sharia law, the others being Maliki, Hanafi, and Hanbali. Differences between them are minor. The Shafi’is (or "Shawafe" in Rihani’s spelling) predominate in Yemen and Egypt, while Saudi Arabia follows the stricter Hanbali school.