

A HISTORY OF MODERN YEMEN

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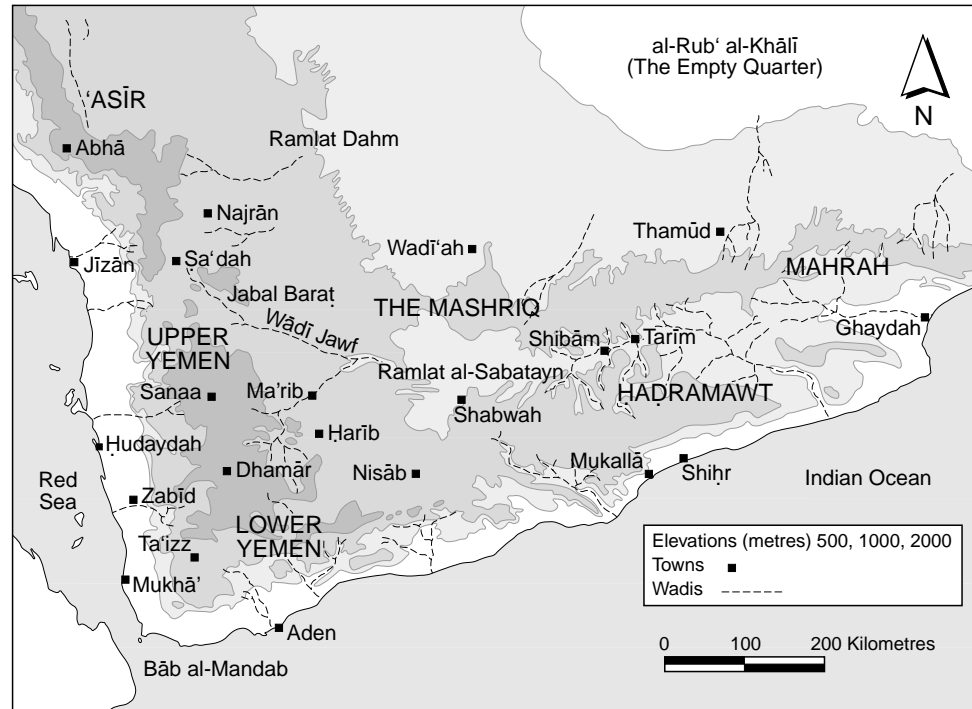
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CHAPTER ONE

Turkey, Britain and Imam Yahyā: the years around 1900

The borders of most states in the Middle East were drawn by colonial powers and many countries such states represent are themselves in some degree inventions. Once invented, they acquire history. Iraq, for instance, before the British produced a state of that name, was little but a geographical expression yet its ruler in recent times has harked back to Babylon; Jordan dates also from 1921, yet Roman and Nabatean ruins form part now of Jordan's past. Yemen is an oddity for the history in a sense is real. Traditions of Yemen before Islam are at the heart of Islamic literature (the collapse of the Ma'rib dam is mentioned in the Holy Qur'ān; references to Yemen in Traditions of the Prophet are numerous), and local works through the centuries since then have repeatedly defined themselves as "Yemeni".¹ Unwritten tradition is as prominent. To do the subject justice would require extensive cross-referencing to imitate at least the "feel" of Yemen, that endless overlapping of local knowledge which makes life there, and not least political life, richly textured.²

Since the rise of Islam, if not well before, the idea of Yemen as a natural unit has been embedded in literature and local practice. Unified power has not. Political structures through the nineteenth century were defined by reference to religion or dynasty, not territory, and a list of rulers would be indefinitely long for their claims overlap in both time and space. The wish for a single Yemeni state emerged in a context shaped by outside powers. Much of Yemen's history through the twentieth century connects with efforts to form that state, which was finally established in 1990. Before that there were two states, North and South, with their capitals at Sanaa and at Aden, each with its view of the country's past and future, and in the years around 1900 there were myriad little centres of power – hence myriad different histories, were there space to give them – and a few great claimants, two of which were foreign empires.



Map 1.1. Yemen circa 1900

IMPERIAL DIVISIONS

In 1839 Captain Haines took Aden for the East India Company's Bombay Presidency. The reasons, as is usual with politics, were muddled. One pressing reason, however, was the presence further north of troops belonging to Muḥammad 'Alī Pāshā, the ruler of Egypt, whose service for the Ottoman Sultan as nominally a vassal, ambitions against the Ottomans, and troubles with underlings whom the Sultan encouraged, led him, after crushing the Wahhābīs in Central Arabia (the ancestors of what later would be a Saudi state), to send his forces south along the Red Sea coast of Yemen. In 1837 he acquired the southern highland town of Ta'izz. The British warned him off from moving further and in 1839 they occupied Aden themselves by force.³ As part of a broader policy that was not to do with Yemen but with grand strategy, the British forced Muḥammad 'Alī back under Ottoman suzerainty, thus aborting the prospect of Egypt as an autonomous Middle Eastern power: in 1840 they forced him out of the Levant and, less directly, out of all Arabia. Despite this, they remained in Aden.

The Ottomans established a presence on the Red Sea coast in 1849. An immediate attempt on Sanaa came to nothing (the Ottoman force, although invited in, was largely massacred) and through the decades following, 'Asīr, further north, was repeatedly up in arms against Turkish rule. Only after the Suez canal was opened (1869) did the Turks make a serious commitment to the central highlands. In 1872 they took Sanaa, the present capital of Yemen, controlling fairly quickly the areas south of there around Ta'izz and with far less success pushing northwards also. Two empires, the Ottoman and the British, thus had lodgements with administrative centres 300 km apart – 450 km or so as the routes then ran – or in terms more appropriate to the time, perhaps two weeks on foot or by mule across the plateaux and the mountains (Map 1.1).

Beneath and between, or off to one side of, two foreign empires were 3–4 million Yemenis, most of whom were Sunnis attached to the Shāfi'ī school of Islamic law. The next largest group were Zaydī Shi'ites, and in places there were small groups of Ismā'īlīs. A few Indian traders had once been prominent and Yemen's Jews claim roots far preceding the Islamic era, but Yemen overall was a Muslim country and in the view of most Yemenis always had been. The Prophet's own "supporters" at Medina had been Yemeni, which readily elides in the popular view with a general tradition of Arabic letters that Yemenis are the "original Arabs" (*al-ʿarab al-ʿaribah*), all others are people who "became Arabs"

(*mustaʿrabīn*), and a region at the margins of global economy in the nineteenth century was felt by its inhabitants to be the centre of a lost history. Aden, to take a specific case, had a population of only about 1,000 when the British seized it but was said to be the oldest town on earth or “the oldest of the Arabs’ markets”.

Most political language at first was couched in Islamic terms, and its forms were various. In the 1840s Aden was twice attacked in *jihāds* led by men claiming supernatural power. Later Zaydī writers said the first and more famous of these, the Faqīh Saʿīd, claimed to be the Awaited Mahdi – a sure sign of impiety or madness – and a Zaydī Imam of the day had him executed, while twenty years later “Sufi sorcerers”, again in the Zaydī view, had Raymah and Ānis up in arms. Jewish millenarianism had briefly swept up Muslim tribes near Sanaa. But those who claimed to defend more orthodox and Islamic order failed to establish peace.

The mid-to-late nineteenth century is known to Yemeni historians as “the time of corruption”. The coffee trade which had once made the country prosperous had decayed (Mocha is named for a Yemeni town; plantations elsewhere in the world, however, brought the price down sharply before 1800), and the Red Sea ports from which highland rulers continued drawing revenue from local trade had all been lost. Ḥarāz, west of Sanaa and itself a partly Ismāʿīlī region, was dominated by Ismāʿīlīs from Najrān, northeast of Ṣaʿdah; the highland agricultural zone near Taʿizz was in the hands of tribes from Baraṭ. Few places were in the grip of government, for as Muḥsin al-Ḥarāzī said near the time, the State could not be put right without soldiers, soldiers were only ruled by money, and in the treasury there was no money. As early as the 1830s Sanaa was littered with corpses of the starved. The Qāsimī state (ruled by descendants of the Zaydī Imam al-Qāsim, d. 1620), which earlier had held the highlands firmly and been a regional power of some importance, simply fell apart as rival claimants to the Imamate warred among themselves in a maelstrom of shifting alliances and famine and disease ravaged much of Yemen. The Turks’ second move to the highlands, unlike their first, won effective support locally.⁴

When the Turks again took Sanaa, in 1872, al-Mutawakkil Muḥsin moved north and sustained his claim as Imam in accordance with the Zaydī (Shiʿite) school of Islamic law. Though it had once, in the seventeenth century, produced the Qāsimī dynastic state or *dawlah*, Zaydism had usually been a tradition of the anti-state: the collapse of the Qāsimīs, indeed, was rationalised by saying they were less like Imams than Kings. Righteousness had mattered more than power. Nor did

most Zaydī scholars accept dynastic succession. An Imam had to be of the Prophet's kin and a man of learning, but his duty was "coming out" (*khurīj*) against oppression and his legitimacy was in effect by *faḍl*, by God's preference. In Zaydī terms the Qāsimī *dawlah* had been something of an aberration. Yet the shape of that state lingered in people's imaginations still,⁵ perhaps particularly among Sanaanis and those descended from al-Qāsim.

Several claimants to the Imamate were active. In Zaydism it is possible in theory as well as practice to have more than one Imam at once, but in 1904 the Imamate passed to Yaḥyā Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Dīn, whose father before him had claimed the title since 1890, and Yaḥyā took the regnal name al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāh, "He who relies on God". Though none in his particular line before his father had been Imam, the family were descendants of al-Qāsim and, as it happened, Yaḥyā's theology was of Qāsimī form.⁶ His claim in correspondence, like that of all Imams, was to descent from his ultimate ancestor, the Prophet of God; his duty was to wage the *jihād* against oppression. Like his father, he launched a rising in northern Yemen, and all the old calumnies against the Turks from the last time that "Turks" ruled Yemen, in the sixteenth century, were redeployed: that they were corrupt, allowed the drinking of wine, had a taste for small boys, exploited the poor, failed to uphold God's law and, in short, were scarcely Muslims.

The details of the fight were complex. So were the issues fuelling it. The Turks at most points had Yemeni supporters: indeed by then there was something of a local bureaucracy staffed by Yemenis, many judges and clerks spoke Turkish well, several Yemeni delegations had travelled to Istanbul, and not everyone near Sanaa or even among the Prophet's kin supported the Imam.⁷ The little towns far south of Sanaa remained quiet, as too did the countryside around them, while Sanaa itself was by most accounts prosperous and well ordered. The revolt was in the northern countryside. Many tribes there, like many learned persons, had taken stipends since the Turks arrived, but offences against their leaders' status, interference with their land, attempts to tax them, and famine induced by recurrent drought all provoked opposition.⁸

Turkish administration was often corrupt. Yet the Shāfi'ī regions of Lower Yemen far south of Sanaa, which must surely have borne the brunt of excess taxation for there was the only source of revenue, remained quiet while the Zaydī areas of Upper Yemen (around Sanaa and northwards) rose, we are told, "as one man". In the midst of a general famine Sanaa surrendered in 1905: "its markets were destroyed, its houses empty,

and only a few of its inhabitants were left”.⁹ Fighting went on as far south as Qa‘ṭabah, but little towns in Lower Yemen, such as Ibb, mainly stood with the Ottomans even when Sanaa fell. The Turks landed thousands of fresh troops, retook their capital, and pushed north to the mountain stronghold of Shahārah where they were beaten with heavy losses. In the course of that year they lost 30,000 men. Fighting the Idrīsī ruler of ‘Asīr, meanwhile, they lost more troops than their opponent mustered in his whole army. Yemen was “the graveyard of the Turks”.

To address the difference between Zaydī and Shāfi‘ī can nowadays be difficult and to mention the topic may be held by nationalists to be in doubtful taste. The theologies of power were different, however; the fact that Turks were fellow-Sunnis had its effect also. But the natural ecologies of these regions, as we shall see, are different, and the relation of ecology to power is perhaps a key. In Lower Yemen the Turks co-opted successfully local magnates, dominating systems of inequality on their own ground and granting notables such titles of respect as Pāshā, while in Upper Yemen there is little to exploit.¹⁰ But certain families among the tribes of Ḥāshid and Bakīl in Upper Yemen own land elsewhere. Around Ḥajjah, for instance, in the western mountains, shaykhs from the barren plateau further east own extensive property; so they do in Lower Yemen. When control of such wealth was threatened by the Turkish presence they could call on their tribesmen, who themselves, without a source of patronage in grain or cash, lived on the edge of famine. For tribesmen swept up in Yaḥyā’s following it was war to the knife.

In 1906–7 a mission of religious scholars from Mecca was sent by the Turks to mediate, and Yaḥyā’s reply to them deserves quoting for its mix of Islamic righteousness with proto-national feeling. The Ottoman claim to broader suzerainty is accepted in some degree (the ruler of the Empire is addressed throughout such correspondence as “Sulṭān al-Islām”; the term “Caliph” is reserved to the Imam) but the right of Imams to rule all Yemen brooks no argument.

The land of Yemen was in the hands of our ancestors, the most noble family [i.e. the Prophet’s kin], from the third century [of Islam] to the present, and never has there not been a claimant to that right, whether ruling all Yemen or part of it, as is known from the chronicles of Yemen. There were constant battles between our ancestors and those who opposed them, thus opposing the wish of the people (*ahl*) of Yemen to be ruled by their lords and the sons of their Prophet, may God be pleased with them . . . They have no desire save to order the right and extirpate what is loathsome and reprehensible, to establish the *shar‘ah*, set straight him who strays, and advise the ignorant . . .¹¹



Plate 1.1. Turks and Yemenis before World War I.

The “ordering of what is right” (*al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf* . . .) is a timeless obligation on Zaydīs. The mention of dates – “from the third century to the present” – however, has a ring both modern and dynastic. Similar language had been used by Yaḥyā’s father, and this “nationalist” elision of territory and legitimate rule might provisionally be dated to the period 1890–1910.

In 1911 there was another vast rising and the Turks again had to fight their way back in.¹² The Imam and the Ottomans, both aware that Italy was then invading Libya, agreed a truce, the terms of which were largely those suggested in 1908 by Yaḥyā. The Imam claimed the right to appoint judges for the Zaydī school of law (the government could appoint even non-Yemeni judges for other schools if it wished, though non-Muslims were not to be placed above Muslims); the *waqf*, or property gifted for religious ends, was to be under Yaḥyā’s control; Zaydīs were to pay their taxes to him, directly or through local leaders, and he was to submit a tithe to the Turkish government; neither side was to attack the other’s borders. What “borders” meant is unclear, for the British soon found the Imam’s influence extending to areas beyond the Zaydī fold.¹³ But in practice the Turks retained control of majority

Shāfi‘ī areas such as Ta‘izz and al-Ḥugariyyah, and the Sanaa-based government became something of a condominium.

Yaḥyā appointed new agents to several regions. He retained, however, the Shaykh al-Islām (the highest Zaydī judge but himself) whom the Ottomans had recognised in Sanaa, Qadi Ḥusayn al-‘Amrī.¹⁴ Qadi Ḥusayn, who once taught Imam Yaḥyā, had mediated the truce discussions. He had previously been the Ottomans’ supervisor of *waqf* (religious property) and was now appointed president of the Appeal Court, an institution which perhaps echoes earlier Qāsimī forms but accords more directly with Ottoman views of judicial order and, from 1911 onwards, carries through the discontinuities of political control until our own day. In a small way, a new state administration was taking form. In the countryside, meanwhile, the Imam’s own affairs were simply run. Tiny sums of money were assessed and disbursed by Yaḥyā personally:

[Seal] Commander of the Faithful, He who Relies on God.

Receipt to brother ‘Alī Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī for one quarter, one eighth and a half an eighth of a riyāl in respect of God’s due [the *zakāt*, or religious tax prescribed for Muslims] which God accepted from him. May sundry good things befall him. Issued Ṣafar 1331 [February 1913]

In another scribbled note the Imam complains that the expenses of *jihād* were enormous and people were unwilling to pay even their *zakāt*. The allotment, a month later, of 20 riyāls to his governor in Khamir (the main town of the Ḥāshid tribes, about two days north of Sanaa) has the appearance of a major outlay, while a note goes back to a shaykh near Radā‘, four days journey southeast of Sanaa, acknowledging payment of one riyāl, a quarter *qadaḥ* of red sorghum and an eighth of a *qadaḥ* of barley.¹⁵

Attention to detail should not suggest Yaḥyā lacked wide perspective. He claimed, and doubtless felt on occasion, that the whole Islamic World was threatened, and events close at hand were addressed in these wider terms. His treaty with the Ottomans was not recognised by the Idrīsī, for instance, a separate (Sunni) ruler of ‘Asīr to the north and west. The Idrīsī instead allied with the Italians against the Turks, and in 1912 Yaḥyā issued a proclamation which addressed “all the people of Yemen, Zaydī and Shāfi‘ī, in the highlands and the lowlands”, setting this in global context:

the Christians decided upon taking Islamic lands . . . such as Bulgaria, Crete, Bosnia-Hercegovina, the land of Fez [Morocco] whose ruler was called Commander of the Faithful, a man named ‘Abd al-Ḥafīz, and then Iran, which is the land of Inner Iraq whose ruler is Shah of the Persians . . . Then the

Italians fell upon the land of Western Tripoli [Libya], killing and driving out its people . . . When they failed to take it . . . the Italians asked the Idrīsī for help in Yemen. What is more reprehensible than aiding the unbelievers against the Muslims and Islam?¹⁶

This language of righteousness, of *jihād* indeed, had been used against the Turks themselves before 1911; nor had it prevented Yaḥyā approaching the infidel British for help against them.¹⁷ But when Europe's powers fell to fighting, in 1914, Yaḥyā stood quietly by the Ottomans. Not everyone in Yemen did so.

Astrological predictions to the effect that Britain would replace Turkey had been heard in places as different as the Jawf and Ḥuḡariyyah, and the British in Aden were courted by several factions. Yaḥyā, on the other hand, made no contribution to the volunteer force from Lower Yemen (about 6,000 Shāfi'ī soldiers) which accompanied the Turks on their march against the British base.¹⁸ While the Ḥijāz revolted against the Turks, however, most of Yemen remained quiet; the Imam's position was consolidated. World War I collapsed the Ottoman Empire, with repercussions throughout the Middle East, and when the Turks withdrew from Yemen in 1918–19, Yaḥyā expanded his influence southward with Turkish encouragement into what had been their domain, that is into largely Shāfi'ī areas (we shall look at this in Chapter 2). His predecessors as Imams, not least the Qāsimīs in the seventeenth century, had also expanded southward. But Yaḥyā did so in a politically different world. The rules of this new world order, to borrow a recent phrase, were those of European-style states which identify legitimate power with territory and historical continuity, and part of Yemen, with the Ottoman demise, now had a place in this. A modern Egyptian author identifies Yaḥyā with “the establishment of modern Yemen”.¹⁹ He is right to do so.

In the North tremendous things had happened, pregnant with implications, but in the South at the level of formal politics much less had happened. The East India Company which had taken Aden town in 1839 had given way to the (British) Indian Empire, and the initial lodgement in Aden had been expanded by acquiring water-wells and land across the bay. Apart from that, all the British did was make treaties with outlying notables. In accordance with British–Indian practice, the “rulers” (actually few of them were rulers in an Indian or in a British sense; most were prominent for other reasons) were eventually accorded different ranks and thus salutes of different numbers of cannon as if on a list of protocol around Delhi:²⁰

Name of tribe etc.	Estimated population	Name of ruler	Salute to which entitled
‘Abdalī	15,000	Sultan Sir Aḥmad Faḍl	9 guns
‘Aqrabī	800	Shaykh Faḍl Bā Ḥaydarah	...
Ḥawshabī	6,000	Sultan ‘Alī Manī‘	...
Faḍlī	20,000	Sultan Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad	9 guns
Amir of Ḍālī‘	12,000	Amir Shāyif b. Sayf	...

Agreements sometimes overlapped with and contradicted each other. For most of the notables, however, the only real tie with Aden before World War I was an annual visit to collect a small stipend and presents from the British of rifles and ammunition.

Aden port, meanwhile, had developed as a coaling point on the route to India. With the growth of Suez canal traffic, post-1869, the town itself began to grow, attracting a diaspora-colonial population of, for instance, Indians (already about 40 per cent of Aden’s people in 1856) and the beginnings of a Yemeni migrant population from further north who slaved in the coaling trade. By the 1890s half of Aden’s population was Arab, mainly from Ḥugariyyah and al-Bayḍā’, but few workers came from the immediate hinterland. (This pattern will be important later; between the port and its source of labour there lay a gap.) Near Aden, people grew vegetables and fodder for the town. The port itself, however, connected most immediately in Britain’s maritime empire with Suez and India, London and Singapore, while relations between town and hinterland were largely between officials and what became known as the “treaty chiefs”.

The treaty system, as with most things British, “just grew”, but connections with these notables figured in grand strategy when, in 1873, a note was sent to Istanbul warning the Ottomans off from Aden and claiming nine “tribes” as under British protection. From 1886 formal Treaties of Protection were signed.²¹ The Sultan or Shaykh or Amir (no standard terminology existed) pledged not to alienate territory to any foreign power without Britain’s permission; and Britain extended in return “the gracious favour and protection of Her Majesty the Queen-Empress” or later the King-Emperor. Turkey and Britain, between 1902 and 1904, drew a line dividing their separate areas.²² The line was agreed in 1905. In due course the two imperial powers laid a ruler on the map and drew a further line from near Ḥarīb northeast across Arabia to somewhere near Qaṭar.

The compound line from the coast at Bāb al-Mandab inland was ratified in March 1914. This defined not sovereignty or administration but merely areas where each power, British and Ottoman, agreed the other should not trespass: in other words, “spheres of influence”. In the long term, long after both powers had left, it defined two Yemens. At no point did Yaḥyā accept its validity, claiming always the right to rule all Yemen, and the signatories to the agreement were themselves very soon at war. As of 1915, their border line seemed a dead letter.

PREMODERN YEMEN

Traditionally, in Arabic literature, Yemen reached from the Indian Ocean and Red Sea coasts in a huge parabola across the middle of all Arabia, which was roughly the extent of pre-Islamic kingdoms such as Saba’ and Ḥimyar and their client tribes. To anyone well read in Arabic the idea would have been familiar.²³ This was not a world of settled frontiers, however, nor yet of state power in the modern form. In the years around 1900, sundry practical connections made parts of Yemen real and immediate but political uniformity was not among them, nor would legend by itself, no matter how embedded in Islamic learning, explain the course of politics. What, then, was Yaḥyā claiming?

John Wilkinson, the great geographer and historian of Oman, provides an answer.²⁴ Throughout the history of Arabia, he argues, large-scale divisions have been recognised, each attaching to a circulation system. Oman, for instance, faces the Indian Ocean and its history has turned on the combination of oceanic trade to East Africa and South Asia with hinterland support. Central Arabia traditionally is Najd. Its connections face northward through the Syrian *bādiyyah* (countryside, steppe; the place where badu live) and towards Iraq. The Ḥijāz, on Arabia’s western edge, by contrast, abuts the Red Sea and connects primarily with Sinai and Egypt, and even now, under Saudi government, Najd and Ḥijāz are really quite distinct.

Yemen is the Peninsula’s southern part. It is separated from Oman by a sparsely populated belt of territory where people speak languages other than Arabic and pursue ways of life distinct from their neighbours’ (a border in the modern style was drawn amicably between Yemen and Oman in 1991; one could have drawn it a little west or east without upsetting anyone), while north of Ḥaḍramawt and east of Ṣa’dah is a sea of sand. A few specialists were able to cross this but no-one lived there. It cuts the more densely settled areas of Yemen off from those of Najd as clearly

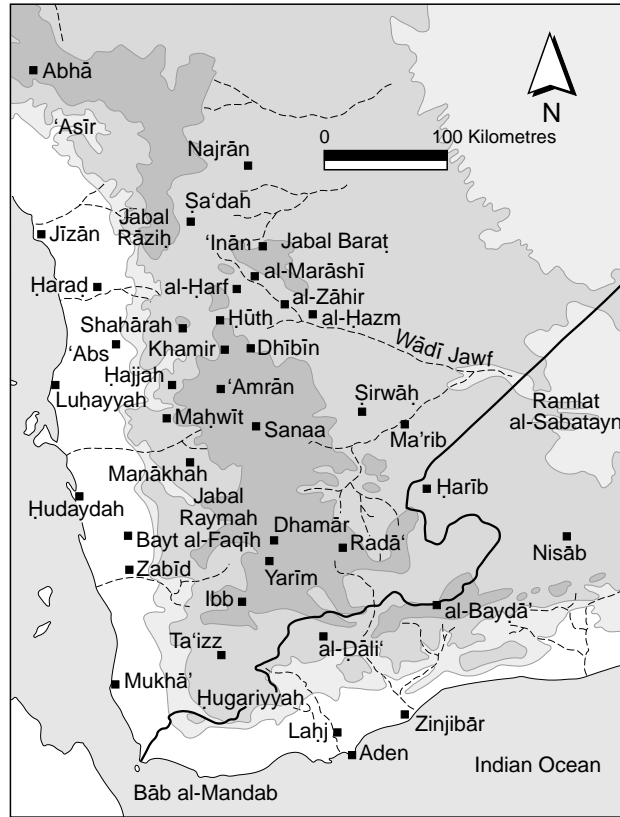


Plate 1.2. The *zaptiyeh* or local gendarmerie.

as the sea cuts Britain off from Holland, and only recently has anyone thought to draw political lines. The Red Sea and Indian Ocean define Yemen's other flanks. The one direction in which Yemen might connect with or merge into something else is along the mountains of Ḥijāz, up the Red Sea coast – but there one comes to Mecca and thus, since the rise of Islam, to discontinuity. The area has usually been held by Islamic empires or local powers standing outside the larger forms of politics.²⁵

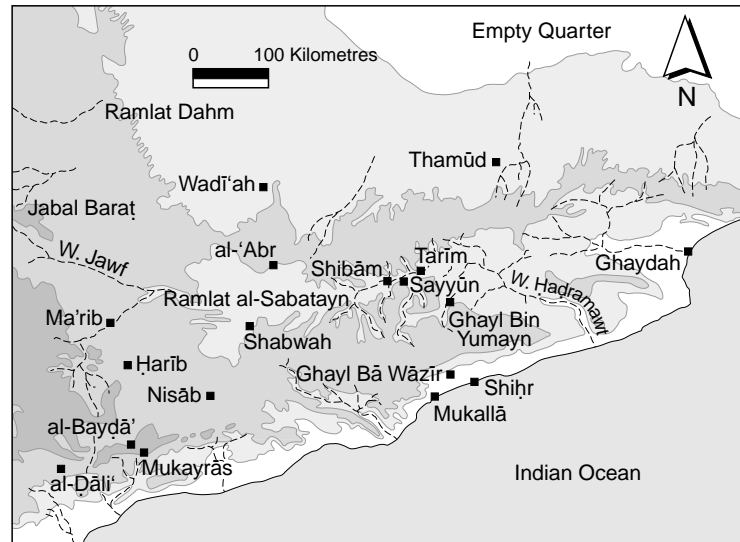
Separated from the Peninsula's other regions by natural and political barriers, Yemen faced its neighbours across the Red Sea. Links with India, the East Indies and East Africa have also been important. Yemen, like Scotland or Ireland, has often exported population, and in Islam's first centuries Yemeni names spread through much of the known world with the result that there are "Yemenis" real or imagined in many places across Africa and Eurasia. Mostly, however, the country's history has been its own. There is just enough there in the way of natural resources to sustain an autonomous history and sufficient mix of ecologies to make this complex.

Yemen's "bread basket" was the mountainous region around Ta'izz, Ibb, and Jiblah: together with the less fertile area of Ḥugariyyah, this is



Map 1.2. Yemen in detail, north and west

Lower Yemen (Map. 1.2). Rainfall near Ibb is almost 1,000 mm per annum. The mountains are terraced, the productive capacity is immense, and the agricultural wealth of the region, if nothing else, makes this the “real” Yemen. It was here and in the mountains west of Sanaa that coffee was once so important. People further north will often say Yemen and mean Lower Yemen, which etymologically is easy to follow for “Yemen” once perhaps meant “to the right of” and hence usually “south of” Central Arabia.²⁶ But people further south again may also say Yemen and mean the same mountain farming area around Ibb and Ta'izz. Further still to the south lies the port of Aden, the “eye” of Yemen as it was sometimes called, which potentially ties southwest Arabia into oceanic trade.²⁷ States that held the port and the agricultural zone would



Map 1.3. Yemen in detail, south and east

have the makings of a solid tax-base, though no-one since the fourteenth-century Rasūlid dynasty had exploited that potential to have Lower Yemen dominate other areas.

Northwards is Upper Yemen, an ecologically much poorer region that includes Sanaa; and Ṣa'dah, seven days' march north again of Sanaa, was the original centre of the Zaydī Imams. Much of Yemeni history concerns the north–south axis along the mountain spine from there to the agricultural zone near Ta'izz. Sometimes northerners had invaded the south; more often they had drifted south under pressure of scarce resources (average rainfall at Ṣa'dah is a quarter of that near Ibb) and simply integrated into Lower Yemen. People did not move the other way, however. The relation between the highlands' two poles was not symmetrical, and among the great landlords of Lower Yemen in the years around 1900 were families from further north.

To the east of the mountain chain lies Wādī Jawf and Ma'rib, the site of a great pre-Islamic city but in 1900 hardly more than a village on the edge of the nomad, desert world (Yaḥyā claimed control of Ma'rib in 1909), and further east again lies the valley system of Wādī Ḥaḍramawt (Map 1.3). The plateau through which the valley runs is barren, but the wadi itself allows intensive cultivation and Ḥaḍramawt's particular

history ties in closely with India and Southeast Asia: the Foreign Minister of Indonesia for many years, ‘Alī al-‘Aṭṭās, came from an old Ḥaḍramī family. Such connections go back to the fifteenth century. The number of Ḥaḍramīs in the Dutch East Indies, and then also in Singapore, rose enormously in the nineteenth century, however, and made parts of the wadi rich, while other Ḥaḍramīs were elsewhere in the Arab World, East Africa or India. Perhaps a quarter of the population (nearly all of them male) were overseas. Without migrants’ remittances, states in the area were not viable, but with those remittances certain families were wealthy by European standards.²⁸

The less productive areas of Ḥaḍramawt were the site of a vigorous tribal system, as too were the areas around Sanaa and northwards which for centuries were dominated by Zaydī (Shi‘ite) Imams. The crux of Zaydism was that legitimate rule descends through the Prophet’s line, the line of his daughter Fāṭimah and son-in-law ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib. Such descendants of the Prophet are usually called *sayyids* (also sometimes *sharīfs*; or ‘Alawīs, after ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib). Their venture in the northern parts of Yemen was launched in AD 896 around Ṣa‘dah by the first Imam, al-Hādī, and on occasion they had ruled enormous areas, Imams being properly men of the sword as well as of the book and righteousness: the Qāsimīs in the seventeenth century had briefly held most of Yemen (even Ḥaḍramawt for some years), and certain earlier Imams less enamoured of state forms had also been conquerors. The *sayyids* were important further south too, especially in Ḥaḍramawt. There the *sayyid* presence was established in AD 952 by a migrant from Iraq named Aḥmad ‘Īsā, but the venture he began was very different from that in the far north and the Shāfi‘ī (Sunni) style of Islam, unlike the Zaydī, launched no great bids for power: *sayyid* influence was local, often built around mediation and sacred tombs, although family connections and connections of learning reached beyond particular towns or tribes. Lower Yemen (Ta‘izz, Ibb and Ḥugariyyah) was Shāfi‘ī also.²⁹ When families moved there from Upper Yemen they often simply became Shāfi‘ī, and doctrinal markers such as forms of prayer were seldom a great issue.³⁰

Along the Red Sea coast runs a plain called the Tihāmah which now is marginal to Yemen’s politics (a standing joke runs, “Name an important Tihāmī politician”),³¹ yet highlanders who have worked there enthuse, shamefacedly, about Tihāmī honesty and kindness. These people too are Shāfi‘īs. One of their towns, Zabīd, was still through the early twentieth century a centre of religious learning. It was famous also

for its weaving and its indigo dyeing, and quite prosperous by the standards of the time with a population of perhaps 8,000, though its trade was being drawn towards Ḥudaydah port.³² Certain lowland tribes, most importantly the Quḥrā and the Zarānīq, were powerful and the Turks never did control them, but they had not for a long time posed a threat to highlanders as the highlanders did to them.

The western mountains, which are Zaydī in the north, Shāfiʿī in the south, overlook the Tihāmah, and along the terraced mountain ridges run little villages built of stone, usually the same three- or four-storey fortified houses that characterise the highlands from Ḥūth down through Taʿizz and ʿAwdhalī: grain and livestock were kept on the ground floor, while the family crammed in to little rooms of the upper storeys. Northwest to southeast behind this, from Ṣaʿdah and Najrān out to Ḥaḍramawt, runs a multi-storey architecture of packed mud. Along the Red Sea coast runs a third architectural complex where low mud and coral houses or compounds built of brush and thorn resemble dwellings on the coast of Muslim East Africa. Nowhere were there many tents, however. Some tribes in the east, such as Dahm of Bakīl, overlap with the North Arabian nomadic world, and certain tribes of North Arabia claim Yemeni origins, but Yemen was primarily a farming country and most pastoralists were subordinate or marginal to farming tribes who themselves often owned significant amounts of livestock.

In Wādī Ḥaḍramawt and at a few sites elsewhere date-palms were grown intensively. The Wādī was spate-fed (that is, run-off came as flash floods), as also were the wadis running south to Lahj, east to Maʿrib, and westward from the mountains to the Red Sea coast, where a major crop was often millet (*dukhn*) or sorghum (*dhurah*). Sorghum is drought resistant. One finds it nearly everywhere in Yemen, including the highlands, for nearly everywhere the rains are unreliable and drought was a constant fear. In the highlands one also finds wheat and barley. Besides small quantities of vegetables, sesame for oil, indigo for dye, some tobacco in the lowlands as a cash crop, Yemen depended largely on grain, and bread or porridge was what most people lived on. Around the coast people fished. In the mountains the better off ate mutton.

In the highlands one other cash crop deserves noting, *qāt*. This is a mildly narcotic leaf which Yemenis have been chewing among themselves for centuries, and as the value of coffee declined so *qāt* sometimes took its place. Around 1900, probably, most people lacked the means to chew all that much, but if they could, men chewed as they always had done at afternoon parties where affairs of all kinds are discussed and

one's contacts maintained with kin and neighbours. Such a party is called a *maqīl* (or *maqyal*, as some have it), an occasion for "talk", and it was customary before lunch and *qāt* to make a *dawrah*, a "round" of the neighbourhood to admire the view and work up a taste for chewing.

Women's parties were sometimes called *tafrīḥahs*, and we hear little of them. Nor are we meant to, for the privacy of women was a key motif in manners. Muḥammad al-Akwa's mother, for instance, who died young in about 1908, was remembered by her husband as a paragon of virtue and wifely competence, and he told a story about her against himself, recounted here by their son Muḥammad:

He used to say his noon prayers each day at the appropriate time in the mosque at the upper end of Dhārī village, and sometimes he would hear the sound of my mother laughing, really very clearly. The mosque in question was some way off. He was shamed and embarrassed in front of people . . . My father would come back embarrassed and upset, and he'd blame her and tell her off. He used to say to her that a woman's voice is shameful . . . She would face him, laughing out loud still, and laugh even more, saying jokingly, "Chastity's guarded [Dear?] and your secrets are safe with me".³³

The idea that a woman's voice was shameful occurred in jurisprudence: in an ideal male world, women's voices should not have been heard by unrelated men. "Wishful thinking!", says Martha Mundy. One imagines that a hundred years ago Yemeni women were as forceful as they now are, but to turn history inside out and write in a female voice would require sources no-one yet commands.

Separation of the sexes, forms of greeting, conventions of dress and deference, made up an elaborate moral order in the countryside and towns alike. That order rested on weak foundations. Al-Akwa^ʿ, remembering Turkish times from the vantage of old age, relates how the major grain harvest came all at once in late summer, when as the saying went, "there is nothing yet and nothing left"; before the harvest was gathered, all last year's may have been used up. People fell into debt. A rich landowner might open his grain-pits (*madāfin*), weighing out and writing down all that was loaned to poorer farmers, and in the process perhaps gaining lien on their land, but "if it happened that the shaykh did not open the grain-pits, there was great commotion and grief, and they would return broken-hearted, dumb-founded, overcome with sorrow and misery . . ." ³⁴ In many years people starved. When the rains came, by contrast, people celebrated: everywhere in rural areas star-lore, work-songs and proverbial wisdom about crops and animals formed the texture of everyday life, and the chronicles, with an eye to the towns and

the state of the country generally, often mention grain prices. The sale of produce was handled through middlemen. But all over Yemen were rural markets, each held on a particular day of the week, and al-Akwa‘ remembers one near his own village where thousands of people would gather each market day: “the road was like a village of ants”.

The variety of tradition and practice in Yemen was immense. Yet the regions were tied together. The routes where local trade ran were the same routes along which incense moved in pre-Islamic times and dates, salt, and pilgrims have moved at most times since; the traditions, partly set in literature, of South Arabian genealogy were known in fragments everywhere (the names of places and of major groups, save the Prophet’s kin, all attach to Qaḥṭān, “the father of the Southern Arabs”). More than this, there were similar institutions in different areas. In most of the southern and eastern parts of Yemen, for instance, all the way out through Ḥaḍramawt, there used to be protected towns and markets called *ḥawṭahs*, which often were associated with saints or holy families. They provided a kind of neutral space in which people from different tribes could meet freely, and around them were built systems of trade and arbitration. North of Sanaa one found *hijrahs*. Saints there were not the norm, for veneration of the dead was often thought anathema by Zaydī scholars, but the *hijrah*, like the *ḥawṭah*, was a protected place where tribes used to meet and trade and arbitration centred.³⁵

POLITICAL CONNECTIONS

From the Imam’s point of view, soon after 1900, there were few natural limits to his ambition. Historically, Zaydī Imams had occasionally held all Yemen and seldom more than that, but the high pan-Islamic hopes of their ancestors circa AD 900 lingered still in their title “Commander of [all] the Faithful”. The Ottomans, while their presence lasted, never formally ceded their own right to rule the Islamic World, of which Arabia, including Yemen, formed a vital part as the “cradle of Islam”. The British in Aden hardly aimed so high. They wanted a strategic base, then as it turned out a coaling station, then a prosperous port, and then, at the end of their time (in the 1960s), a strategic base again. Their tenure throughout was fraught with trouble over who in the British system decided policy. But they also faced brute geography.

To hindsight there were only two valid alternatives: either the whole hinterland should have been subjected to outright occupation and imperial disciplines, or Aden should have been isolated from it but rendered impregnable, leaving the

interior to its own (or Ottoman or Yemeni) devices. Neither alternative was adopted.³⁶

The second option would have been difficult. Aden, the rock fortress, has no water supply. Nor can one grow much in Aden town. One has to be involved with the hinterland to survive, and the “Aden hinterland”, to adopt a view from this tiny foothold the British held, in fact connects with all of Yemen.

The man Captain Haines opened talks with in the 1830s was the Sultan of Laḥj, a town just north of Aden (properly the town is al-Ḥawṭah, the protected place). The Sultan used to own the port. Negotiations before the British seized Aden involved the ‘Abdalī Sultan of Laḥj requesting arms to see off his neighbours, the Faḍlī Sultans and tribes; a later Laḥj proposal was that stipends they had paid to outlying tribes should now be paid by the British through them, thus affirming their paramountcy. Haines was drawn willingly into Laḥj politics. But even these were not strictly localised. In 1871, for instance, a sultan of Laḥj asked for British help to occupy Ta‘izz and Ḥugariyyah, which were coffee areas north of the later Anglo-Turkish line. Laḥj depended heavily on trade revenue. Why not cut out the middleman, own the coffee, own the route, and also have access to a major port? To advance his scheme he secured a vast loan from Muḥsin al-‘Awlaqī.³⁷ The ‘Awlaqīs are a tribe to the east and north of Aden, and Muḥsin himself was then a *jemadar* (officer) with the Nizām of Hyderabad in India. The British note to the Ottomans in 1873 claiming nine “tribes” was an expression of a Laḥj sphere of influence; but the mention of India suggests how far abroad others within that sphere had their own connections. And none of this mapped as concentric circles.

In the 1840s, the British Resident in Aden conspired with an Imam of the day against Sharīf Ḥusayn of Abū ‘Arīsh, who held much of the Tihāmah, the land along the Red Sea coast. Abū ‘Arīsh is enormously far north, nowadays in Saudi Arabia. The Imam, in dire straits, had offered Captain Haines the whole of Tihāmah, Ta‘izz and Ḥugariyyah. Later Imams held Lower Yemen (the object of Laḥjī and ‘Awlaqī designs) with tribesmen of Dhū Muḥammad and Dhū Ḥusayn from Jabal Baraṭ, a region at almost the latitude of Abū ‘Arīsh but inland near the desert. The Yāfī‘ī tribes, much nearer to hand and south of the Anglo-Turkish line, had also an interest in Lower Yemen: often they were used as mercenaries against Dhū Muḥammad and Dhū Ḥusayn. They spread the other way too, west to east into Ḥaḍramawt, while Ḥaḍramī merchants and scholars had themselves migrated east to west

into towns such as Ibb and Ta‘izz. Within “Natural Yemen” there were simply no natural boundaries.

There were, however, certain shapes of history, and the map of Yemen around 1900 shows the calcified trace of earlier upheavals. The great shaykhly families of Upper Yemen (the leading families of major tribes named Ḥāshid and Bakīl), for instance, date to the early Qāsimī period, circa 1700; Imams had then overrun most of Yemen, their troops had been tribesmen, and the shaykhs won land beyond their own sparse territory. That non-tribal land they often still owned. As the Qāsimī state collapsed it was northern tribes who fought for the rival claimants, but the tribes’ leading families did not claim power in their own names and in this respect the South was different. The *dawlahs* or petty states of the South had split off from the Qāsimīs (the ‘Abdalī Sultans of Laḥj did so in 1728) and had been there ever since, as had their connections with specific tribes. Yāfi‘, for instance, had a memory of expelling the Imams:

Your fathers before you,
Who passed on in early times,
Red of cheek expelled the Turks and Zaydīs.
Qaḥṭān took it all
From Ma‘ṣāl to the coast of Aden.³⁸

The Sultans of Yāfi‘, intermarried with the ‘Abdalīs of Laḥj, claimed descent from learned rulers of the sixteenth century. The Amirs of Ḍālī‘ held documentary proof of their importance from the same period.

There were long established families in the North too, and the Sharaf al-Dīns, who just predate the Qāsimīs, were still addressed as “princes” of Kawkabān, a little north and west of Sanaa. But no-one else in Upper Yemen claimed to be a *dawlah*. Nor did anyone in Lower Yemen, the region around Ibb and Ta‘izz. There one had certain great families who controlled wide areas, as most still do, but the *dawlah* in their world was the Qāsimī Zaydī *dawlah* and many people loathed its memory: in Ibb, for instance, the Faqīh Sa‘īd, whom a Zaydī Imam had executed as in effect a heretic, “is a popular figure in local oral history . . .”³⁹ There were no recent *dawlahs* well spoken of in Lower Yemen save that of the Ottomans. What there were instead were Sufi orders and tombs of saints. Ibn ‘Alwān near Ta‘izz, for instance, was venerated far afield (well south of the Anglo-Turkish line) and his devotees were everywhere known by their drums and iron-shod staves. He died in 1267. Many thought he had ruled a *dawlah*. In Ta‘izz itself are the tombs of several