CHAPTER 17

Between Washington and Cairo: Imamate Yemen's Foreign Relations with the United States in the Post-World War II Period[1]

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Introduction: The Yemeni Prince in Amarillo

One late-September evening in 1947, in an Amarillo, Texas, hotel room a Yemeni prince settled down for the night. Sayf al-Islām ʿAbd Allāh was the sixth son and foreign minister of Imām Yaḥyā Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Dīn, the King of North Yemen, and he was on the first official visit to the United States by a Yemeni minister in history. Following a presidential meeting at the White House and a stop at the Library of Congress to view Arabic manuscripts, the prince embarked on a tour to take in the wonders of the vast nation. It also gave him the opportunity to meet with some of America's industrial magnates and oil men while he awaited the United Nation's vote on his country's membership application.[2] The US had been the chief sponsor of Yemen's request to join the world government body. According to the Yemeni newspaper *al-Imān*, Prince ʿAbd Allāh found the climate of Amarillo reminiscent of his homeland. The Yemeni royal's trip, which in addition to Texas included stops in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, California, and Tennessee, represented the apogee of friendly diplomacy between the Kingdom of Yemen and the US. [3] In subsequent years, relations between the two nations would cool, and the US would steadily lose influence in Yemen.

Why did this change happen? Offered here is a formative study of the events that transpired in and around Yemen from approximately 1945 to 1962, ending with the death of Imām Aḥmad and the onset of the North Yemen Civil War. It draws primarily on documents from the United States, mostly from the State Department, as these are what are readily accessible and offer the clearest available insight into why Yemen moved away from America in the 1950s. Using these sources, it demonstrates that Yemen's initial shift away from the US was due in part to a scandal involving an American explorer and, more importantly, a lack of developmental aid for the country—including exploiting its possible oil wealth—which a US organization called the Yemen Development Corporation was supposed to provide. Another contributing factor was the

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[1] Note: Small portions of this work appeared in an earlier form on the author's blog: https://altarikhblog.wordpress.com/.

[2] Stokes 1947: 2:1.

[3] *Al-Imān* 1947b: 89–90. My thanks to John Willis for making me aware of the digitized copies of this important newspaper. With regards to the title "Imām," in this case it does not merely refer to one who leads Muslim prayers though he could, of course, do that. Rather, it refers to the paramount religious and political leader of a Muslim society. An Imamate, therefore, is an Islamic system of government in which the temporal and spiritual authority are vested in one person meeting certain requirements. The questions of who the rightful Imām is, what is the manner of choosing him, what are his responsibilities and limitations, and a whole host of others have been perennial in Islamic history. In the case of the *Sunnā* (singular *sunnī*), the largest group within Islam, the Imamate eventually became the institution of the *khilāfa* or caliphate, which is now defunct. While the largest group of Shīʿa, the *Ithnā ʿAshariyya* or "Twelvers" have a dozen Imāms, other Shīʿa groups have had far more. While there is no Imām currently in the Zaydī community, there have been many in the past and, theoretically, there could be more in the future. For a good overview of the history of the Shīʿa, see Halm 2004. For an overview of theological positions, see Haider 2016.

rise to power of President Gamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (Nasser) in Egypt, which changed regional power dynamics. By the mid-1950s, the Yemeni Imām calculated that it was in his best interests to draw politically nearer to Cairo and, with Nasser's encouragement, towards the Communist Bloc, and therefore away from the US. All of these events unfolded against the backdrop of the issue of Palestine, which was a continuously contentious matter between not only Yemen, but all Arab nations and the US.

Figure 17.1: The Dār al-Ḥajr or "House of Stone" of Imām Yaḥyā Outside of Sanʿāʾ (Source Mājid al-Aḥlasī via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0)

North Yemen and the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imamate

The Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms of North Yemen ruled from Ṣanʿāʾ (fig. 17.1) and Taʿizz over a land they officially called the "Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen."[4] Yaḥyā Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Dīn, the founder of the dynasty, attained the Imamate in 1904 via *daʿwa*: solicitation of recognition of authority from the local *sāda*, and *khurūj*: conducting a militant uprising against a tyrannical ruler.[5] In Yaḥyā's case, that ruler was the Ottoman Sulṭān. The Imām's khurūj ultimately forced the Ottomans to grant him a degree of autonomy via the 1911 Treaty of Daʿʿān.[6] Following Ottoman defeat in World War I and withdrawal from Yemen in 1918, Yaḥyā quickly consolidated power in Ṣanʿāʾ, and proclaimed Yemen among the first of the independent postwar Arab polities.[7]

Although Yaḥyā's struggle with the Ottomans legitimized his authority, he continued to use many artifacts of their imperial order to consolidate his control of the state, such as the telegraph system, schools, and a modern standing army.[8] The Imām's forces brought much of northern Yemen into his "domain of obedience" in the 1920s and 1930s, but they could not prevent the loss of some disputed territory with neighboring Saudi Arabia as a result of the 1934 Saudi-Yemeni War.[9] Overall, Yemen began to resemble a rudimentary nation state; Imām Yaḥya became "King" Yaḥyā, the Imamate became a Kingdom, and His Majesty introduced

[4] Imām Yaḥyā took the title "al-Mutawakkil" meaning "the one who relies on, or trusts in, God." Thus, the official name of the country was the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, Schmitz and Burrowes 2018: 212.
[5] Haider 2016: 178. "Sāda" is the plural of "sayyid" and refers to those claiming descent from the Prophet Muḥammad.
[6] Dresch 2000: 6.
[7] Rabi 2015: 15–16.
[8] Messick 1992: 108–09.
[9] Willis 2012: 105–136. For a detailed account of the Saudi-Yemeni War, see Chapter Five in Khatrash 1983.

primogeniture through the designation of his son Aḥmad as heir. Thus, as John Willis has noted, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imamate possessed "dual genealogies" in establishing its rule: one line composed of indigenous Yemeni and Zaydī Islamic tradition, and the other formed of modern statecraft principally Ottoman in character.[10]

One form of statecraft Yaḥyā embraced was diplomacy. The Imamate signed treaties with Italy (1926), the Soviet Union (1928), and Britain (1934) bolstering Yemen's status as an independent nation and maneuvering among great powers active in the Red Sea region.[11] Although Yemen chose to remain neutral during World War II, following the conflict it reengaged with the world, joining the newly-formed Arab League in 1945.[12] Furthermore, the Imamate signaled its intent to participate in the broader international community when it reached out to the emerging global superpower in the region, the US, which was asserting its worldwide diplomatic and military presence and showing a more active interest in the Middle East. After the US recognized Yemen in 1946, the Imamate was, for a brief time, working closely with the Americans and showed a particular interest in gaining US support in matters of trade and development.[13]

Literature on Yemen in the Imamate Period

Despite the fact that the Kingdom was one of only two real independent powers in Arabia for much of the twentieth century (the other being the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), many historians of the Arabian Peninsula have chosen to focus on Yemen under the Ottoman Empire, or on the aftermath of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom's collapse and the long civil war that raged throughout the 1960s.[14] The result has been the repetition of a narrative that North Yemen in the Imamate period was a kind of "forbidden kingdom," where backwardness and isolationism prevailed.[15] It is true that the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms were conservative monarchs, and that Yemen was a relatively closed country during their period. Yet, this simplistic portrayal ignores a more complex reality, and some historians have begun to challenge the isolationist narrative of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. Indeed, Yemen under the Ḥamīd al-Dīns was interested in, and, in its incrementalist way, active in world affairs.

The most recent publication to include a significant study of the international history of the Imamate is John M. Willis' 2012 monograph, *Unmaking North and South: Cartographies of the Yemeni Past, 1857–1934*. Willis dedicates much space to discussing the rise and reign of Imām Yaḥyā, and convincingly argues that he was very interested in world affairs and aspired to become a Pan-Islamic leader.[16] Prior to Willis, historian W. Taylor Fain published an article in *Diplomacy & Statecraft* entitled "'Unfortunate Arabia:' The United States, Great Britain and Yemen, 1955–63."

[10] Willis 2012: 108, 125, 159–60, 107.
[11] Willis 2012: 15, 157 and Degras 1952: 340–42.
[12] Macdonald 1965: 39.
[13] Robert Stein to US Secretary of State, Aden, 4 June 1946: "Memoranda of Conversations with Officialsd of the Yemen Government in Sana'a from May 6–12, 1946," in al-Rashid 1984: 25–29.
[14] For example, see: Kuehn 2011; Farah 2002; Orkaby 2017; and Rabbi 2015.
[15] For examples of this type of characterization, particularly with regards to Imām Yaḥyā, see: Rogan 2011: 331; and Clark 2010: 47.
[16] See Chapter 4 in Willis 2012. Willis has also expanded upon this point in Willis 2019.

This article, while excellent, covered only a portion of the international history of Yemen under the rule of the second Imām, Aḥmad. Therefore, it missed some of the earlier developments of the 1950s, particularly with regard to the search for oil in Yemen, which played an important part in the country's history in the latter half of the decade. Aside from these works, the Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imāms have largely been relegated to introductory chapters of books; a sort of necessary backstory for scholars to dispense with before arriving at more interesting topics.[17]

Accounts which jump to the late fifties or begin with the Civil War elide the Kingdom's first efforts to navigate the postwar world. A careful examination of the history of the relationship between the US and the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen in the mid-20th century helps us to understand better both nations' actions in the post-war/early Cold War period. It shows that the US missed an opportunity to develop a strategic partner in southern Arabia due to a failure to identify a long-term strategy for engaging with Yemen. On the Yemeni side, it shows that the Imāms were, far from being isolationist, very much interested in international cooperation as long as they saw a potential benefit in such actions. Indeed, international partnerships could bring about development and, the Imāms+ doubtless hoped, help preserve their rule.

The Treaty of Friendship & Commerce of 1946 and the Reign of Imām Yaḥyā

This commitment to international affairs revealed itself almost immediately in the postwar period. In 1946, Yemen and the United States signed a Treaty of Friendship. The August 1946 issue of *The American Foreign Service Journal* painted a romantic and straightforward description of the treaty, which the two nations signed on 4 May. It described it as being part of Yemen's decision to begin its "march into the 20th century."[18] The reality was more complicated. Diplomatic sources reveal the Imamate's motives in seeking relations with the US were largely transactional in nature.[19] For unspecified reasons (likely World War II), textile shipments from the British Colony of ʿAdan to the Imamate's territory had stopped, and the Kingdom's negotiators made clear that they hoped the Americans could assist them by helping quickly upgrade the Red Sea port of al-Ḥudayda. The port could then serve as a new *entrepôt* for fresh shipments of textiles from the US.[20]

The agreement also faced a major and abrupt hurdle when events in Palestine intervened in the negotiations. On 30 April 1946, the Anglo-American Commission, which the governments of the two nations had established to study the situation of Jews in Europe after World War II and the fate of Palestine, issued its report. It advised permitting the immigration of 100,000 European Jews to Palestine.[21] Reaction in the Arab world was swift, with the Arab Higher Committee of Palestine calling for a general strike in the country and asking other Arab countries to join in

[17] Examples of this treatment include, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962–68* by Asher Orkaby (2017), and *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* by Jesse Ferris (2013).

[18] Sanger 1946: 45.

[19] Robert Stein to US Secretary of State, Aden, 4 June 1946: "Memoranda of Conversations with Officials of the Yemen Government in Sana'a from May 6 -12, 1946," in al-Rashid 1985: 25–29.

[20] Stein to US Secretary of State, "Memoranda of Conversations with Officials of the Yemen Government in Sana'a from May 6–12, 1946," in al-Rashid 1985: 30.

[21] Institute for Palestine Studies 2021.

solidarity protests. As *The New York Times* reported, "Arabs in general have been stunned by the report and feel that the democracies are working against them."[22] In Yemen, one of the Imām's sons, Prince Ḥusayn, abruptly involved himself in the negotiations with the Americans. He informed them that the talks were at a dead end and, according to one American negotiator, implied that the US "could not be trusted to protect the rights of small nations."[23] It was only because of direct intervention from Imām Yaḥyā that negotiations resumed, and the two nations' representatives signed the treaty. A one-sentence telegram from negotiator William A. Eddy to the State Department on 4 May 1946 simply read: "agreement signed at Sana May 4 owing to personal intervention of Imam overriding Hussein."[24] *Al-Imān* later carried an article optimistically opining that the agreement's purpose was to achieve a "new age" in the life of Yemen.[25]

Possible further negotiations following the treaty stalled when Imām Yaḥyā suffered a stroke in September of 1946.[26] When he began to recover in early 1947, diplomacy with the US picked up again. The highlight in this regard was the aforementioned visit to Washington, DC of Prince ʿAbd Allāh.[27] Internal State Department documents indicated they expected the prince to bring a letter from the Imām pleading the case of the Palestinians.[28] No copy of the letter has yet surfaced, but the fact that US officials expected it suggests that Yaḥyā saw lobbying the American president on behalf of Arab causes to be a good idea and reflected his desire to be a kind of Pan-Arab leader.

Discussions during ʿAbd Allāh's visit included economic topics first broached a year earlier, such as the prospect of modernizing the port at al-Ḥudayda and the start of trade. They also included a newly expressed desire by the Yemenis to convert some gold and silver bullion into US dollars.[29] Whether or not he had a letter, *al-Imān* noted that the prince did raise international concerns to President Truman, stating that "the discussions between His Highness [ʿAbd Allāh] and the President were friendly and included all Arab issues especially Palestine and Egypt."[30] While in Washington, ʿAbd Allāh also spoke with the press and stated that he hoped his visit might persuade Americans to "give a fair hearing to the Arab case in the Egyptian and Palestine controversies" in the summation of one reporter.[31] He subsequently left for his tour of the country. With the support of the US, Yemen was granted admission to the UN on 30 September

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[22] *New York Times* 1946.

[23] US State Department 1946a, Eddy to US Secretary of State, Pt. 1, 2 May 1946. Eddy later went on to help found the CIA.

[24] US State Department 1946b, Acheson to Certain Diplomatic and Consular Offices Circular, 7 May 1946.

[25] *Al-Imān* 1947: 17. The reason that the newspaper did not publish about this event sooner was that it had ceased publication during World War II, and it appears that this was their first issue after the end of the conflict. Information from the Yemen National Digital Archive.

[26] Telegram: James Rives Childs to US Secretary of State, Sana'a, 27 September 1946 (delayed in transmission: original date 2 September 1946), in al-Rashid 1985: 35.

[27] Office Memorandum—USG: Henry S. Villard to SS—Mr. Carter, "Call of Prince Abdullah of Yemen on Secretary Mashall," 11 July 1947, in al-Rashid 1985: 97.

[28] Villard to Carter, "Call of Prince Abdullah of Yemen on Secretary Marshall," in al-Rashid 1984: 97.

[29] For the official schedule as recorded by the State Department, see: "Schedule for Official Part of Visit" in Al-Rashid 1985: 99–100; Villard to Carter, "Call of Prince Abdullah of Yemen on Secretary Marshall," al-Rashid 1984: 98.

[30] *Al-Imān* 1947b: 89. The paper did not specify what the Egyptian issue was that ʿAbd Allāh discussed with Truman, but during this time there were violent demonstrations against the continued British presence in the canal zone of Suez. *Al-Imān* covered these in the same issue where it discussed the prince's visit.

[31] Stokes 1947: 2:1.

1947. ʿAbd Allāh only got to spend one night in Amarillo before he headed to New York to sign the paperwork on behalf of his father.[32]

Figure 17.2: Imām Aḥmad bin Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn (Source: Wikimedia Commons PD-US).

Why the country sought membership in the UN at that specific moment in time is not totally clear from the available sources. However, Yemen's early activity in the UN shows that the Imām had desired to participate in matters at the world government body that concerned events in the broader Middle East. One of the Imamate's first votes in the UN was a "no" on Resolution 181 on 29 November 1947: the plan to partition Palestine, demonstrating that this remained a significant international issue for the Yemeni government. Matters came to a head on 2 December 1947, following the successful passing of Resolution 181, when the Imām cabled President Truman directly, expressing his displeasure with the decision of the General Assembly. In the message, he declared that "we consider that by this decision the General Assembly of the United Nations have extinguished and nullified every hope of the sons of man and of reliance on it." He condemned the decision as completely at odds with the UN's goals and the "beliefs proclaimed at its radiant and cheer-inspiring" founding.[33]

Had Imām Yaḥyā lived much longer, he likely would have been livid at the way matters played out in Palestine in the summer of 1948. However, by the time of the First Arab Israeli War (May 1948–March 1949) the Imām was dead. Members of the Free Yemeni Movement, a dissident group with connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, assassinated him on 17 February 1948.[34] In the days following his death, the press in the Arab world was unable to verify his passing, and conflicting stories circulated that he was dead and also that he was still alive and well. On the ground in Yemen, the assassination ushered in a brief "constitutional" Imamate, under the leadership of Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh al-Wazīr.[35] However, Aḥmad (fig. 17.2), Yaḥyā's eldest son rallied Imamate forces, crushed the uprising in March, and executed al-Wazīr on 2 April 1948. Aḥmad's government was not actually recognized by the US until 1950, and it was not until 1951 that diplomatic activity between the US and Yemen resumed.[36]

[32] *The New York Times* 1947, *al-Imān* 1947a: 90.

[33] Cable: "King of the Yemen, the Imam Yahya to his Excellency, Mr. Truman, President of the United States, Washington, D.C.," 2 December 1947, in al-Rashid 1984: 131–132.

[34] Peterson 1982: 81.

[35] *Al-Balāgh* 1948, 2; *Alif Bāʾ* 1948, 1. *Al-Imān* did not publish news of the assassination and coup as they happened and appears to have been on hiatus. They resumed publishing in May 1948.

[36] Memorandum for the President: Dean Acheson to Harry S. Truman, "Recognition of Imam Ahmad of Yemen," Washington, D.C., 12 January 1950, in al-Rashid 1985: 15–16.

The Search for Oil in Yemen and the "Phillips Incident"

The resumption of diplomacy coincided roughly with the search for oil. When it became clear that petroleum was going to play a major role in the world economy of the twentieth century, and when companies began to discover that the Arabian Peninsula held vast quantities of the black gold, the region acquired a new importance to the great powers.[37] The first discovery of petroleum in Arabia was in Bahrain in 1932, followed by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 1938. Oil was discovered in Qatar in 1939 and in Oman in 1964.[38] British and American corporations led all of these petroleum projects. Aside from generating vast quantities of wealth and ushering in a new era of worldwide hydrocarbon dependence, the emergence of oil economies in the Arabian Peninsula, and the potential of yet-untapped reserves, drew the area further into the Western Bloc's sphere of influence.[39] Imamate Yemen, independent like Saudi Arabia, but smaller and less politically connected internationally, nonetheless sought help from Western powers to ascertain the possibility of oil resources within its borders. Indeed, when Prince ʿAbd Allāh had been in the US, he had expressed the Kingdom's interest in oil and visited refineries in California.[40]

However, the first American expedition to locate oil in Yemen was not an official contingent from any firm established in the region. Rather, it was very likely a corporate conglomerate prospecting mission under the cover of, or at least in partnership with, an archeological dig. In 1951–52, an explorer named Wendell Phillips, with only a bachelor's degree in archaeology, managed to secure academic institutional backing from The Johns Hopkins University, the University of Maryland, and many corporate sponsors to establish a foundation that, in turn, funded an archaeological expedition to Yemen. Ostensibly, the goal was to excavate ruins associated with the biblical Queen of Sheba, but the presence of several international oil companies on the board of directors of Phillips's foundation indicates there were likely ulterior motives.[41] Furthermore, British diplomats in the UK's Foreign Office described him as "astute but a publicity-hinter [sic]," and claimed that while he had admitted that "he knows nothing of archaeology," he had "important friends in the United States including the "Allied Mellon Organization and Gulf Oil Company."[42] Indeed, Phillips later became a wealthy oilman thanks to concessions the Sulṭān of Oman, Saʿīd bin Taymūr, granted him.[43]

Phillips's expedition in Yemen ended badly. He carried out excavations at the ancient ruins of Maʾrib (fig. 17.3), but the Yemeni authorities suspected him of stealing artifacts.[44] In February 1952, he fled the country out of concern for his safety, or as the Egyptian paper *al-Ahrām* put it, the expedition "fled Yemen when their armed Yemeni guards threatened them."[45] As he prepared to leave, Phillips published a public chastisement of Imām Aḥmad, whom he blamed for his

[37] Munīf 2007:111–112.
[38] Rogan 2011: 356; Louay, et al. 2008: 36, 154.
[39] Macris 2010: 92–101.
[40] Taiz to UK Foreign Office, 22 October 1952, in Ingrams and Ingrams 1993: 159. Yemenis digging a well at al-Ṣalīf had discovered oil and sent it the United States for testing via the offices of the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO). Stokes 1947: 2:1, *Al-Imān* 1947b: 89–90.
[41] Phillips 1955: 319–320.
[42] Telegram, UK Foreign Office to Muscat, 12 March 1952, in FO 1016/207: "Mr. Wendell Phillips": 17.
[43] Freeman 1975.
[44] *The New York Times* 1952.
[45] *Al-Ahrām* 1952: 8.

experience in the country .[46] The Yemeni response came on the pages of *al-Imān*, where the press office of the Foreign Ministry published a multi-page "official announcement" in which it shared a copy of the agreement that it claimed Phillips had assented to for his expedition to work in Yemen. It then detailed a list of his breaches of the agreement and other misdeeds including arriving in the country after he said he would, failing to secure the proper visas for all members of his expedition, "bad behavior and numerous repeated transgressions" by members of his party, mistreating Yemenis who worked with him, and destroying a number of ruins in Maʾrib. Finally, the Yemeni government announced that it "officially accuses Mr. Wendell Phillips of stealing valuable artifacts, including statues, and demands that he return them." It also claimed he owed various people debts in connection with his expedition.[47]

According to one Foreign Service Monthly Report from Vice-Consul Ralph Clark, "the Phillips Incident" bolstered the anti-foreign elements within the Imām's court. As he put it: "Not only have the supporters of the Imam's 'forward' policy been demonstrated to be wrong in their estimate of American reliability but their very ranks have been thrown into confusion and their leadership discredited." Clark stated that many Yemenis in the Imām's bureaucracy perceived Phillips's behavior, which evidently included "loudly proclaiming in public places" that his sponsoring organization was "doing work on the behalf of various U.S. governmental agencies" as a kind of insult to the authority of the Yemeni government. He also reported that ordinary Yemenis were convinced that Phillips was stealing gold in Maʾrib. Clark's conclusion that "the Imam's most recent experiment with Americans has ended in failure. American prestige in the country has suffered a relapse" summed up the state of affairs.[48]

Figure 17.3: The "Throne of Bilqīs" or Temple of Awām in Maʾrib, partially excavated . (Source: Maʾrib Governorate via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 2.0)

Around the time that Phillips was active in Maʾrib, two official geological expeditions to Yemen also occurred, but without American participation. The first was a geological mission from Germany, under the direction of geologist W. Schott in 1952. It carried out the bulk of its work in al-Ṣalīf , on the coast of the Red Sea.[49] A

[46] Phillips 1955: 323–24.

[47] *Al-Imān* 1952: 8, 12.

[48] US State Department 1952, Clark to State Department, "Monthly Review of Political Developments RE Yemen, February - 1952" 8 March 1952: 1–4. Phillips's actions and legacy continue to be a subject of much debate today. For example, see: Tucker 2019 and Sills 2025.

[49] Herman Frederick Eilts to US State Department, Aden, 3 December 1952, Foreign Service Despatch: "Monthly Review of Political Developments Re Yemen–November, 1952" in al-Rashid 1985: 87.

year later, a group of French geologists from the Société Lyonnaise des Eaux et de l'Éclairage visited Yemen in order to search for petroleum and to carry out geological surveys.[50] The German expedition was actually awarded a concession in al-Ṣalīf by the Yemeni government and, by the summer of 1953, there were over 70 German technicians in the coastal city searching for oil, which Imām Aḥmad was confident would be found beneath his kingdom's soil.[51] Unfortunately for the Imām, oil was not discovered at that time, and by 1957 the Germans had become inactive in al-Ṣalīf, although they retained the rights to the concession.[52]

In the two years following the Phillips incident, diplomatic interaction between the US and the Mutawakkilite Kingdom was limited to polite meetings between the American Consul General, some of the princes, and occasionally the Imām. Nonetheless, Aḥmad continued to seek expertise that might help him exploit his country's presumed riches and, several years after the Phillips affair, he turned again to the United States.[53]

The Mystery of the Yemen Development Corporation

In the 5 December 1955 issue of the American popular magazine *Life*, an alliteratively titled article called "Forbidden Yemen Yields to a Yankee's Offer" appeared.[54] It concerned the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, a country that was likely unfamiliar to most Americans, and it described the creation of a new US commercial venture: the Yemen Development Corporation (YDC). The enterprising capitalist behind this project was a man named Walter S. Gabler, whom the article described as "a Virginia farmer who turned international promoter." Gabler, along with an attorney named Jack Jessen, and a geologist named Jack Crichton, spent less than a month in Yemen and, with capital from George E. Eliot—whom the anonymous *Life* columnist called a "financier and crony of presidents"—they negotiated an oil and mineral concession from Imām Aḥmad. The terms of the concession were a 50/50 split of the profits from any revenue generated from the exploitation of minerals and oil from roughly 2/3 of the territory.[55]

Life declared that Yemen's mineral wealth might include copper, gold, and possibly even uranium. As for oil, the article added excitedly that there was "shale so saturated with oil that it blazes at the touch of a match." The column was, like most articles in *Life*, surrounded by photographs, including one of Gabler, Jessen, and Crichton posing with a seated Imām Aḥmad, gazing into the distance.[56]

The YDC is something of a mystery. *Life* cast it as a private venture and Fain has also described it as such.[57] On the other hand, Orkaby asserts it was nothing more than a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) shell company, set up to conduct espionage in Yemen.[58] There is

[50] Brown 1970: 76.
[51] Eilts to US State Department, Aden, 6 August 1953, Foreign Service Despatch, "Monthly Review of Political Developments Re Yemen–July, 1953," in al-Rashid 1985: 125.
[52] US State Department 1957d.
[53] *Al-Imān* 1954a: 60–61.
[54] "Forbidden Yemen Yields to a Yankee's Offer" in *Life* 1955: 52.
[55] *Life* 1955: 53. The 50/50 split was common for the time period. See Fuccaro, Nelida, "The Oil Company's Fields of Vision: Public Relations and Labour Images in the Arab World" in Fuccaro and Limbert 2023: 90.
[56] *Life* 1955: 52.
[57] Fain 2001: 149, n 18.
[58] Orkaby 2017: 25–27.

certainly evidence to support this claim. Jack Crichton was a geologist, as *Life* claimed, but he had also been a spy. In fact, he had served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, precursor to the CIA) during World War II.[59] Shortly before his death in 2007, Crichton, who went on to become a successful oilman, self-published, with the help of another Texas businessman named E. J. Anderson, a book entitled *The Middle East Connection (Yemen)* in which he details his work to secure the concession and to help found the YDC. While his words should be taken with a grain of salt, his timeline and characters (although given aliases) do line up with real events and people.[60] In his book, he explicitly states that he was a CIA agent, and that the CIA wanted a presence in Yemen out of fear that the Soviets were seeking to infiltrate the country.[61]

Yet, it is unclear to what degree the YDC was *only* a CIA spy station in Yemen, and to what degree its administrators actually hoped it would turn a profit by finding resource wealth in the country. On the one hand, Orkaby points out that the company never found any oil and, by 1957, had run out of funds because, in his estimation, it was only concerned with spying.[62] On the other hand, US government documents paint a more mixed picture. Officials seem to have hoped that the YDC would actually achieve tangible economic results. George Wadsworth, the US ambassador to Yemen on his way back to the US from the Middle East in October 1955, after meeting with the Crown Prince and other Yemeni dignitaries, telegrammed the State Department with a positive report. He declared that a "Development program based on known agricultural resources and assumed great mineral wealth could not fail, especially if undertaken with American financial and related technical assistance." Furthermore, he compared the decision of the Imām to grant the concession to the YDC to the decision by the Saudis to sign the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) concession in the 1930s.[63] In other words, the ambassador believed the venture had real economic potential.

It appears that the private American investors in the company were interested in both potential profit and national security. When the YDC's monetary problems raised the possibility of closure in 1957, Wallace S. Whittaker, the chairman of the corporation, told National Security Council (NSC) member Bromley Smith that the "U.S. government, despite strenuous efforts extending over many months has never stated whether it believes the continuation of the Corporation's concession in Yemen is important to the national security." The potential closure of the YDC would result in "the personal loss of a relatively small amount of money put in by a group of private investors" who were motivated by personal gain but also by "a patriotic interest in insuring [sic] the continuance of a U.S. corporation in an area that appears to be attractive to the USSR." Moreover, Whittaker asserted that "a group of people not connected with the Government, but knowledgeable because of their interest in the corporation" felt that Yemen

[59] *Dallas Morning News,* 2007.

[60] On the first page of the book the authors state that "this story is based on an actual happening. Some of the characters are fiction, as are some of the incidents." See Anderson and Crichton 2005: 1.

[61] Anderson and Crichton 2005: 9. See also Orkaby 2017: 26, 224: Another participant on the expedition, a Lebanese American named Hatem El-Khalidi, published a book about his time in Yemen entitled *Sojourn in a Dreadful Land (Yemen Chronicles)*, in which he also identified Crichton (under the alias of "Eric") as being a CIA agent. El-Khalidi further asserts that Crichton ("Eric") was active in attempting to assassinate Yemeni crown prince Muḥammad al-Badr for being too pro-Soviet. See: El-Khalidi 2011: viii.

[62] Orkaby 2017: 27.

[63] US State Department 1955: 749.

was vital to US interests and that the "loss" of it to the Soviet Union would require efforts costing many millions of dollars to reverse.[64]

The picture at the State Department was also complicated. According to the records of one Executive Secretariat meeting in November 1957, the group discussed a myriad of issues related to the corporation. First, since the YDC had run out of money, it would be unable to make its payments to the Imamate unless a group of new investors purchased it. Second, the Soviets were believed to have military personnel stationed in Yemen. Third, the Yemeni *chargé d'affaires* in Washington wanted the concession to continue because, if it lapsed and the Americans quit Yemen, it might entice further Soviet involvement in his country. The Department's record states that Standard Oil of New Jersey was interested in purchasing the YDC, "but they insist this would be only to preserve the US position on the Arabian peninsula [sic] and not for commercial reasons."[65] However, State Department officials in the meeting appeared to believe that aiding Yemen, specifically with infrastructural development, would be a good idea. William Roundtree, the Assistant Secretary of State pointed out that a recent ICA [Independent Cost Analysis] survey mission in Yemen had been "very successful and had recommended a $5 million program" of development including an aerial and geologic survey (which could help oil companies determine the presence of crude in Yemen), help with building roads, and providing technical assistance in agricultural and air transport development.[66] Thus, at least some in the State Department still thought developmental assistance to Yemen was a good investment.

In the end, the YDC folded, but American encouragement of private enterprise in a quest for Yemeni oil continued. In 1959, the American Overseas Investment Corporation (AOIC) acquired a new concession in the country.[67] In 1961, at least a part of the territory was awarded to the Mecom Company, which had developed oil projects in other areas of the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Oman.[68] However, any prospects for Americans finding oil in Yemen were cut short when civil war erupted in the country in September 1962.[69]

In sum, it is quite likely that the YDC was sheltering CIA agents, but it was not unusual for private corporations concerned with profit to take a few "company men" along for the ride. After all, ARAMCO had harbored many CIA personnel, but it was undoubtedly interested in finding petroleum and profiting from it above all else.[70] Moreover, the YDC arose from a particular

[64] US Central Intelligence Agency 1957. The memo is from Bromley Smith of the National Security Council. He was detailing a conversation he had the Chairman of the YDC, Wallace S. Whittaker. This message appears to have taken place within the NSC, so it is unclear why it is in the CIA's records.

[65] US State Department 1957d: 769. We should be skeptical of the Yemeni chargé d'affaires expression of concern regarding increased Soviet involvement in his country. As we shall see below, Crown Prince al-Badr had visited the Soviet Union on a diplomatic mission in 1956, and the USSR was providing arms to the Kingdom in 1957. It is most likely the Yemeni Chargé d'affaires was attempting to play up the "threat" to spur the US to get the YDC to do more.

[66] US State Department 1957d: 770. *Al-Imān* 1954b: 57. Several years earlier, the paper refers to an "American expert representing the American Department of Technical Assistance" who was going to tour the country and provide a report to the Yemeni authorities. This may have been a person (perhaps one of several) who helped conduct the ICA that Roundtree referenced.

[67] US State Department 1959b: Amlegation to the Department of State, Taizz, 9 November 1959, "Mineral Concession in Yemen Obtained by American Company."

[68] Orkaby 2017: 26–27. *New York Times* 1981. It is unclear if the AOIC awarded the entire area in its purview to Mecom, or just part of it. The original concession to the AOIC was for "the entire country."

[69] Dresch 2000: 87.

[70] Vitalis 2007: 27.

historical context, one in which government officials perceived the interests of American business, and capitalism more generally, as synonymous with the interests of the American nation.[71] The YDC is best understood as existing in this paradigm.

Yet, if American capital and national security interests were working together in Yemen, they never developed an effective strategy for delivering projects that satisfied Imām Aḥmad. In fact, the Imām expressed "grave concern at the company's lack of activity in exploiting its concession" to Assistant Secretary Roundtree through his chargé d'affaires during a meeting in August of 1957.[72] This lack of activity opened the door to Soviet involvement in Yemen. Indeed, YDC President Gabler had written to the State Department in early 1957 claiming that the corporation's inactivity was facilitating just such events. In his view, the US government was acting under the assumption that it was solely the responsibility of the Yemeni government to ask for assistance, and thus the Russians were taking advantage of the situation by simply providing aid (in this case, arms) with no strings attached. As a result, "penetration by the Soviet Union and Communist influence is greater in Yemen than any other single middle eastern [*sic*] country" and "our government is insufficiently aware of the critical nature of this situation."[73] In addition to the torpidity of the American government and the YDC contributing to the Imamate's shift away from the US, the other important factor was the emergence of revolutionary Egypt during the same decade. This development changed the political landscape of the Arab World.

Nasser, Revolutionary Egypt, and the Imamate's Turn Towards the Eastern Bloc

]In many ways, Egyptian President Nasser and the various movements he championed represented policies hostile to the leaders and states in the Arabian Peninsula.[74] Whereas the Yemeni Imamate defined itself through an Islamic identity with an institutional history stretching back centuries, Nasser became the promoter of a mostly secular Pan-Arabism that advocated rapid political and economic change and supported certain revolutionary causes. In fact, from its earliest days in power, the new regime was permitting anti-Imamate groups to conduct their activities in Egypt.[75] For example, in the summer of 1953, the year after the Egyptian Revolution, the new government granted permission to the Yemeni Unity Association (an organization that advocated for the union of north and south Yemen as one country and was avowedly anti-Imamate) to open a new branch in Cairo, much to the consternation of Aḥmad.[76] Nonetheless, the Imām perceived that the political winds were blowing in Egypt's direction, and he began to bring Ṣanʿāʾ closer to Cairo.

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[71] For a discussion of how American corporate and security interests overlapped in the Cold War in the context of the developing world, see: Schlesinger and Kinzer 2005 and Wharton 2004. To be sure, this attitude has not entirely disappeared.

[72] US State Department 1957c: US State Department, Memorandum of Conversation, "Yemeni Chargé Reports on Discussions with Yemen Development Corporation", 12 August 1957.

[73] US State Department, 1957b: The Yemen Development Corporation, Gabler to Roundtree, 22 January 1957: 2–3.

[74] Alexander 2004: 35.

[75] Ferris 2013: 33. In 1953, Nasser was not yet officially President of Egypt, however he was the real power behind the "Free Officers" movement.

[76] Orkaby 2017: 15. Eilts to US State Department, 30 May 1953, Foreign Service Dispatch, "Monthly Review of Political Developments Re Yemen–May, 1953" in al-Rashid 1985: 119.

Figure 17.4: Crown Prince Muḥammad al-Badr in 1962 (Source: Wikimedia Commons PD-US).

In 1954, the Mutawakkilite Kingdom signed a mutual defense pact with Egypt. Shortly thereafter, Aḥmad sent a contingent of young army officers to Egypt for training.[77] The same year, Crown Prince Muḥammad al-Badr (fig. 17.4) spent two months in Egypt having many discussions "with those responsible" for the country, meeting "important Arab individuals" and touring factories.[78] In 1956, at the encouragement of Nasser, al-Badr visited several communist countries and established diplomatic contact with China and the Soviet Union.[79] By 1957, Egyptian military personnel were in the Mutawakkilite Kingdom helping train Yemeni officers on how to use newly purchased Soviet weapons. These developments concerned the State Department's Director of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Fraser Wilkins, and resulted in the Department informing its embassy in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, that Egypt and the Soviets might be collaborating with Yemen to threaten the British position in ʿAdan.[80] Communist involvement in Yemen continued to grow and at the end of 1958 five hundred Russians were overhauling the port at al-Ḥudayda, and one thousand Chinese were working on a road to connect that city with Ṣanʿāʾ.[81] Thus, by the late-1950s, Egypt and communist countries were actually carrying out training and development projects in Yemen, while the US had failed to initiate any programs of substance, the very thing YDC President Gabler had worried would happen in his letter of 1957.

The Union of Arab States

Nasser also successfully influenced Yemen to partake in his ambitious project for a unified Arab Middle East. His successful nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, followed by the war in which he took on the French, Israelis, and British and won a political victory, made him a hero across the Arab World. In 1957, Syria, fearing a growing communist threat within its borders, approached Nasser about the prospect of the unification of the two countries. Though Nasser was initially hesitant, he eventually embraced the idea, and on 1 February 1958, Egypt and Syria became one country: the United Arab Republic (UAR).[82] Shortly after the proclamation of the UAR, Yemen announced its intentions to join with the new entity in a less formal manner by founding a loose

[77] Rabi 2010: 27.
[78] *Al-Imān* 1954c: 51.
[79] El Mallakh 1986: 7. See also Dresch 2000: 82.
[80] Dresch 2000: 81–82; US State Department 1957a.
[81] El Mallakh 1986: 7. See also Dresch 2000: 82.
[82] Tucker 2013: 217–21.

federation with the UAR known as the Union of Arab States (UAS).[83] Crown Prince al-Badr traveled to Egypt to meet with Nasser and negotiate the specifics of Yemen's affiliation.[84]

The UAS had a short and unremarkable existence. Still, Imām Aḥmad appeared to have believed that it had some propaganda value. Likely referring to the British in ʿAdan, he announced on Radio Ṣanʿāʾ that "the Arab giant will drive imperialism into the pit."[85] Ultimately, Yemen's participation in the UAS was a marriage of convenience and a calculated maneuver for survival on the part of the Imām. To put it another way, it was better to be with Nasser than risk being against him.[86]

For the US, the UAS represented another setback for possible American activity in Yemen. In the view of Raymond Hare, US ambassador to the Mutawakkilite Kingdom, Yemen was a victim of the UAR's propaganda and was therefore likely to share its leadership's general dislike of the West. He lamented in a 1959 telegram that "we [are] definitely losing ground and [the] situation [is] more precarious than at any time during past two years."[87] Although the Imām cooperated with US rivals, he continued to affect a generally favorable attitude towards America. Yet, the precarity of his reign, including his chronically poor health, complicated his ability to manage foreign policy. In 1959, he became ill and went to Rome for treatment.[88]

Crown Prince al-Badr & the Last Years of the Imamate in Yemen

The process of negotiating the founding of the UAS brought cooperation between Nasser and Crown Prince al-Badr. Their relationship proved to be consequential in the political developments of the final years of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom. This relationship between Nasser and al-Badr would also shatter American hopes of working through the Crown Prince. While a US diplomat had once noted that al-Badr's father, Imām Aḥmad, had "middle of the road tendencies" in his political outlook, the Crown Prince seemed even more liberal minded, and some US officials thought he could develop into a reformer.[89] For example, in 1955, Ambassador Wadsworth had commented that during a meeting with al-Badr, the Crown Prince had "listened intently to my exposition US policy aims, and effort contribute towards area stability and progress." The ambassador went on to state that any plan for a Yemeni "modernization program must center on his person."[90]

However, by the latter half of the 1950s, al-Badr had grown to admire Nasser. According to Orkaby, al-Badr travelled to Damascus in 1958, where he met with the Egyptian President who broached the idea of staging a coup in Yemen. Nasser told al-Badr that he envisioned Yemen as a beachhead of Arab nationalism in the Arabian Peninsula and as a bulwark against the imperialist machinations of the West. Supposedly, the Chinese and Soviets were aware of the coup plan and

[83] Cotran 1959: 350.
[84] Orkaby 2017: 19.
[85] Imām Aḥmad bin Yaḥyā, as quoted in Dresch 2000: 82.
[86] Ferris 2013: 33.
[87] US State Department 1959a.
[88] Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*: 83.
[89] J. Rives Childs to US Secretary of State, Jidda, 10 July 1950, "Government Organization in the Yemen," in al-Rashid 1985: 21.
[90] US State Department 1955: 748–49.

approved. An al-Badr-led uprising never materialized but, allegedly, the Crown Prince and Nasser conspired on-and-off over the next four years to kill Imām Aḥmad, and al-Badr became a virtual protégé of Nasser.[91] As the 1950s drew to a close, US officials worried that al-Badr had not only become pro-Nasser, but felt "active hostility" towards the United States, and they were concerned about him pushing Yemen further in the direction of the Eastern Bloc.[92]

In addition to al-Badr's potential perfidy, there were other schemes within the royal family to overthrow Imām Aḥmad. In 1955, two of the Imām's younger brothers, Prince ʿAbd Allāh (he of the official US tour) and Prince ʿAbbās, launched a coup against Aḥmad. It failed, and the Imām had them executed.[93] In January 1958, supporters of another prince, Ḥassan, attempted a coup but were unsuccessful.[94] Orkaby asserts that, at some point after 1959 and into 1961, the Imām forced al-Badr to remain inside Yemen because of his pro-Soviet leanings. Nonetheless, Nasser secretly contacted him in 1961 and asked him to kill his father.[95]

Yet, despite the potential dangers of a Nasserist/pro-Soviet Imām of Yemen to their interests, the US's policy regarding the country remained largely unchanged in this period—even as the regional order began to shift. In September 1961, following a revolution, Syria seceded from the UAR.[96] In December of the same year, Aḥmad announced, via a poem published for the world to read (including Nasser), that the Imamate was leaving the UAS.[97] Two weeks later, Radio Cairo began broadcasting calls for a revolution in the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen.[98]

In the end, however, Imām Aḥmad did not lose his throne to rebellion but died peacefully on 19 September 1962.[99] The next day, al-Badr announced his father's passing and declared himself Imām. The new leader of Yemen proclaimed in a speech on Radio Ṣanʿāʾ that he would work to "guarantee citizens their rights," and that he would "assiduously study a way to set up a civil system to determine reforms and responsibilities in decisions of administration." Expressing his Pan-Arab inclinations, he added that Yemen would "work in solidarity with its brother Arab states to establish the structure of a unified Arab nation."[100] He did not have a chance to implement these promises. Shortly afterwards, on 26 September, a group of junior army officers overthrew al-Badr, and the North Yemen Civil War began.[101]

Between the death of Imām Aḥmad and the beginning of the revolt, the US showed no interest in action. In a State Department paper dated 20 September 1962, Talcott W. Seelye, the Officer in Charge of the Arabian Peninsula for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, stated "we do not believe that we should involve ourselves in a Yemeni power struggle unless Yemen should

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[91] Orkaby 2017: 20–22.

[92] US State Department 1958b. Al-Badr's increasingly pro-soviet/anti-US attitude was all the more concerning to the State Department because the Imām's recurrent illness resulted in him being out of the country frequently for treatment. In his absence, al-Badr appeared to be taking an larger role in the nation's foreign policy.

[93] Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, 78, also see Rabi, *Yemen*, 28.

[94] US State Department 1958a.

[95] Orkaby 2017: 21–22

[96] Jankowski 2002: 170.

[97] Dresch 2000: 86.

[98] Ingrams 1964: 124.

[99] Ferris 2013: 29.

[100] *Falasṭīn* 1962: 1, 3.

[101] Ingrams 1964: 127–30; Dresch 2000: 89.

veer too far in the direction of the Soviet Union."[102] In the end, the Kennedy administration decided to recognize the revolutionary forces of the Yemen Arab Republic on 19 December 1962. They did so in a bid to maintain American influence in the region against communism and with a guarantee from Nasser that he would remove Egyptian troops—which were aiding the revolutionary forces in Yemen—to help stabilize the situation.[103] Nasser did not fulfil his part of the bargain, and the war dragged on until 1970.[104]

Conclusion

Following World War II, the leadership of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen hoped that the US would support them in their quest to join the global community of nations, develop the country, and exploit natural resources including oil. Early successes in the relationship, like the US-sponsored admission of Yemen to the UN, were soon followed by difficulties, including those caused by the situation in Palestine. The assassination of Imām Yaḥyā in 1948 delayed developments, and the Phillips affair in 1952 set back relations. The US did execute a half-hearted attempt to help the Yemenis prospect for oil in the 1950s, but because of bureaucratic indecisiveness or lack of interest, the YDC—the one major American effort to execute development schemes in Yemen—failed, and its efforts to rectify the situation were insufficient. However, it is likely that the US would have continued to send aid to Yemen in a sporadic manner, accompanied by promises to improve in the future, had Nasser not arrived on the scene when he did. Even though Imām Aḥmad and his style of governance were seemingly at odds with the swaggering and charismatic Egyptian colonel-turned-president, the Imām sensed which way the political wind was blowing and understood that the balance of regional power had shifted towards Egypt.

Nasser's relationship with and influence upon Crown Prince Muḥammad al-Badr were another factor. Al-Badr led the Imamate closer to both Egypt and the communist bloc, and Aḥmad, making a calculated political maneuver, went along by joining Yemen with Egypt via the UAS. Thus, the promise of natural resource exploitation and geopolitical interests brought the US and Yemen together in the late-1940s and early-1950s, but lack of progress in development created a gulf between the two nations. Egypt, the Soviets, and the Chinese stepped in to fill that void. What they had to offer Yemen proved more attractive than any promises the US officials were willing to make, and Yemen moved out of the US sphere of influence. American politicians and diplomats would have to build future policy on the foundation of these disappointments.

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[102] US State Department 1962. Seely suggests that al-Badr might have been rethinking his pro-soviet stance in the months before the death of the Imām.

[103] Orkaby 2017: 51. It is worth asking why Nasser, who had seemed to be al-Badr's friend throughout the 1950s, so quickly turned against him after Aḥmad's death. There is no definite answer, but historian Jesse Ferris argues that Nasser's inclusion of Yemen in the UAS was simply to "generate momentum behind an expanding Pan-Arab entity," and this outweighed the possible embarrassing political incongruities of a revolutionary movement paired with a conservative Islamic monarchy. By implication, the friendship was never sincere. Ferris 2013: 33.

[104] Dresch 2000: 115.

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