Miriam M. Müller

A Spectre is Haunting Arabia

How the Germans Brought Their Communism to Yemen

From:

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Radical ideologies may manifest differently at first, but they do follow a similar logic: truth claims, promises of salvation and a unifying common enemy. In Yemen's transition process today, the secessionist movement Al-Hirak has summoned the spirit of South Yemen, the only Marxist state in Arabia. This book meticulously describes how East Germany supported the implantation of this alien ideology in Yemen through its policy of »*Socialist state- and nation-building*«. In the same breath, the analysis captures the GDR's activities in the Middle East and their vital role in Moscow's Cold War strategy. Last but least, the study provides one of the few compact overviews of East German foreign policy in the English language of today.

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> "To the desert, and the Bedouin, the coming of the British
> was a small whim of God. There is something enduring about
> the huge sand dunes, the endless empty horizons, the foul
> water and solitary wandering camels and the sublimely
> arrogant Bedouin soul. The Romans, the Abyssinians, the
> Turks, the British have all in their turn come, and in their
> turn have gone. Whoever comes next will leave as shallow
> an imprint."[1]
>
> ALFREE, "THE HAWKS OF HADRAMAUT", 1967

Of all the possible successors it was the politically dwarfish German Democratic Republic (GDR) following in the footsteps of the giant that was the British Empire. Even though officially without a mission to colonize, or the means to do so, the GDR and its leading party SED[2] without doubt aimed to leave a substantial "imprint" in Yemen, or more precisely, its southern region. The GDR's foreign policy in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)[3] was designed to reproduce its very own state- and nation-building process, the "planned development of Socialism."[4] Until its accession to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990,[5] the GDR had been expanding this strategy step by step and, with the Kremlin's approval, maintained intensive contacts to the South Yemeni regime throughout the existence of the PDRY.

So why does the impact of a demised state's foreign policy on another long-gone state and nation even matter? First, as this analysis will show, the GDR's engagement in South Yemen's state-building process is highly underrepresented

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1 | Alfree, 1967, 192.

2 | Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands.

3 | The People's Republic of South Yemen renamed itself in 1970.

4 | German: planmäßiger Aufbau des Sozialismus. Schroeder, 2013, 110ff.

5 | For example, a visit by a South Yemeni delegation of the Ministry of Interior in the GDR in August 1989, in: Bericht über den Aufenthalt einer Delegation des MdI in der VDRJ, July 25 to August 1 1989, in: BStU MfS HA VII7954, 43ff.

in today's foreign policy history narratives of the PDRY, the GDR and the USSR alike[6] – mostly due to remaining gaps in archival research. As a consequence, this case study also aims to complement recent research on the role of the Arab states in the Cold War. Second, current analyses and assessments by the Western media on the Yemeni transition process after 2011 and the abrupt termination of the internationally mediated National Dialogue in the wake of large-scale armed conflict in Yemen in early 2015,[7] tend to ignore the complexity of Yemen's social and political structure and the resulting conflicts. Especially since the launch of Saudi Arabia's "Decisive Storm" operation against the Houthi movement, Western media and self-declared experts appear to be in favor of more accessible but regularly oversimplified explanations for the current escalation of violence in Yemen. The popular focus on the Sunni-Shiite nature of the struggle, swiftly reinterpreted as a "proxy war"[8] between Riad and Teheran, is only one example among many.

Almost invisible in Western media coverage of Yemen is the history of half the country: the deceased Marxist state in the south and its remnants in today's Yemeni society.[9] In Yemen, the new interpretation of a separate southern identity has been gestating for almost a decade now. Waving the PDRY flag and commemorating the anniversaries of British withdrawal from Aden in 1967 or secession from the north in 1994,[10] the identity of the Southern Movement draws from integrative symbols and memories of the former PDRY. This case study claims that South Yemen's state-building process and its actual manifestation as a state cannot be explained in a comprehensive way without taking into consideration Moscow's and East Berlin's intensive engagement and presence there. Whether the East German "imprint" has to be considered just as "shallow" as the preceding foreign powers' is another question of this analysis. This book is not about today's struggle for peace and stability in Yemen. First and foremost, it is an historic case study of the German Democratic Republic's activities in South Yemen, the only Marxist state that ever existed in Arabia[11] and at times the closest and most loyal ally to the Soviet Union in the region. However, this book also aims to raise awareness of the roots of one of today's major internal divides in Yemen, the identity rift between north

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6 | Usually, the GDR's activity is mentioned in relation to the presence of other states of the Eastern Bloc in South Yemen, such as the ČSSR. Halliday, 1990, 207. The same may be said for overviews on the GDR's foreign policy. Wentker, 2007, 286.

7 | Steinvorth, 2015; Stenslie, 2015.

8 | Avenarius, 2015.

9 | "Yemeni" is an onomatopoeic approximation to the Arab adjective "yemenī".

10 | Madabish, Divisions within Yemen's Al-Hirak delay announcement of Southern independence, in: Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, December 1 2014; Augustin, 2015, 53.

11 | Historic Term; "Arabia [...] is that great peninsula formed by the Arabic Gulph [sic!], the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulph[sic!]," in: Niebuhr, 1792, 5.

and south. The main transition mechanism, the National Dialogue, was the first attempt to acknowledge the different interests of the major factions, but it failed to equally include and bind all parties, among them the Southern Movement. Hoping against hope that Yemen as a state will survive this crisis, Yemenis with the will and the ability to build a new Yemen will have to achieve the impossible: the integration of all social forces into the process of political transition, so that each and every one of them can claim this process as their own. We remember former President Ali Abdallah Saleh's[12] famous quote: ruling Yemen was "like dancing on the heads of snakes."[13] Today, Saleh wants the world to believe that he is the only leader able to get Yemen back on track.[14] But by perpetuating his system of patronage and corruption, Saleh has turned out to be very much part of the problem. Thus, with the serpent charmer Saleh gone, the key for Yemen's transformation is not only to leave the old basket and flute behind, but the decision of each and every snake to be part of this transformation, to shed its skin and become a very different kind of political animal for the sake of a common goal: a happy Yemen.

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12 | Arabic: Alī Abdallah Ṣāleḥ; The Party's leading figure Saleh had already been head of state in the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) since 1978 and had kept his power position in unified Yemen as well.

13 | Clark, 2010.

14 | Schiavenza, Yemen's Wily Puppet Master. Ali Abdullah Saleh, ousted in the Arab Spring protests, has re-emerged as the country's most influential man, March 29 2014.