

Reviewed by Roger Green

Yemen is an obscure and impoverished country that has for a long time been an enigma to Western countries. Victoria Clark was born in Aden, the daughter of the BBC's South Arabia correspondent, and this accident of birth gave her the motivation to write this eponymous book. Over the years she has made several visits to the country and has met most of the influential leaders as well as many ordinary people. She paints a graphic pen picture of the cultural and social heritage of the country.

The book is arranged in two parts. The first part is concerned with the history of Yemen from the 16th century, whilst the second part concentrates on more recent events revolving around the jihadists. Yemen is essentially a tribal country where for years the northern tribes have dominated the life and fortunes of the country by holding the government to ransom. The younger population of Yemen is fuelling radical Islam as it becomes increasingly discontented with the lack of progress and fragile economy. After the 9/11 attacks the situation was made worse by President Salih's pledge to stand alongside the US in the war on terror but his motivation was to extract more aid money from the US whilst instigating totally ineffective measures to hoodwink President Bush. This resulted in thousands of Yemenis travelling to Iraq to fight the coalition troops.

Despite the modernisation of the principal towns, the increasing wealth of the leading Yemenis, and a fragile stability as a result of the long-term reign of President Salih, tribal loyalties are the main force in the country and continue to override political ideology. The tribes have long been for hire to the highest bidder to fight internal conflicts or to support the aspirations of the occupying nations over the centuries. This exploitation started with the Ottomans, and more recently the Egyptians and the Russians have all tried to profit from Yemen, and all have failed at great cost to themselves.

Yemen is essentially two countries, the tribal north and the Protectorates in the south. The tribes in the East and West Aden Protectorates enjoyed the protection of the British but in 1967 the unseemly haste of the British withdrawal from Aden left them exposed to the militant Marxists. Aden became the seat for the Marxist movement that later formed the breakaway Yemen Arab Republic. This triggered an ongoing series of civil wars and although these have largely faded out with a number of attempts to unite the country, these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. This is due principally to the long-standing and deep-seated distrust between the north and south as well as an ongoing imbalance in investment to the detriment of the south.

The situation is exasperated by the lack of effective law. The tribes in the north continue to operate like the imams and Ottomans of the past who bought their justice directly but the Marxists, who retained a lot of the British legacy, do not allow this in the south. The oil and latterly the natural gas deposits discovered in the north and exploited by the Yemen produced

great wealth but it mainly went to the President and the northern Sheiks who used it for arms and bribes to buy loyalty instead of it benefiting the country as a whole. Now these deposits are running out and President Salih having frittered away this short-term wealth is finding it increasingly difficult to bribe and retain the loyalty of his supporters.

An important aspect of Yemen's fortunes is its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Economically Saudi Arabia has provided jobs for Yemenis for many years and that wealth has found its way back to Yemen and was a principal source of cash income for the country. There has always been a diffuse relationship between the two countries rather like the Yemen northern border with Saudi Arabia. The northern border has never been recognised by the northern tribes or those tribes living on the Saudi side of the border. Hence many Saudis such as Osama bin Laden refer to Yemen as their ancestral homeland. Yemen has always sought outside aid countries that would offer it without any strings attached and Saudi Arabia has fulfilled that role on many occasions.

It is the cultural and social history of Yemen that has led to the current state of affairs where the country is a safe haven for al-Qaeda and fellow traveller jihadists. However, the weak government of President Salih must also share much of the blame through its focus on the pursuance of aid and turning a blind eye to corrupt policies on the security situation. The principal state security office with responsibility for controlling the jihadists is the Political Security Office (PSO). It was the US investigation into the attack against the USS Cole that revealed that the PSO is deeply infiltrated by jihadists and many of its senior officers are sympathetic to the jihadist cause.

It is the long-term failure of the PSO to control the jihadists together with the lack of effective law in the country that has made the Yemen a safe haven for al-Qaeda members fleeing from Afghanistan and Pakistan as the Afghan war and actions within Pakistan make their continued presence untenable. Once in Yemen they coalesced with Yemen jihadists returning from Iraq to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP). Because President Salih is in an increasingly weak position there is little that he can now do about the situation and it is likely that an increasing number of jihadists will base themselves in Yemen.

It is worthy of note that the majority of the 9/11 terrorists were of Yemeni background and Yemenis account for half of the remaining prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay. With this dismal record of encouragement for jihadism and little prospect of change from within, the Yemen needs to have a much higher profile for Western political leaders and intelligence agencies.

This book is an excellent reference for the detailed history of Yemen and provides a unique insight into the social and cultural heritage that has turned the country into a safe haven for jihadists. Unfortunately, the style adopted by Clark makes the book quite difficult to read and undoubtedly it would have benefited from more rigorous editing. However readers should not be deterred, as they will be rewarded with a depth of understanding of this complex society and its unique culture. Indeed, recent events such as the bungled attempt at suicide bombing on the Northwest Airlines flight on Christmas Day 2009, have highlighted to Western politicians the dangers posed by Yemen based jihadists and this was reflected in the London meeting in

January this year on Yemen.

There is no doubt that this little known and backward country, already well established as a haven for AQAP, has a great potential for exporting terrorism in the coming years.

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