

What is happening in Yemen?

Relations with Britain continue to worsen

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Relations between Britain and Yemen continue to deteriorate daily. On January 25, Yemen made an official request for the extradition of Muslim cleric, Abu Hamza al-Masri, amidst claims that Britain had a long record of harbouring terrorist groups intent on destabilising the Yemeni government. The official Yemeni news agency said a letter from President Saleh addressed to Tony Blair "expresses the discontent of the Yemeni Government with the terrorist activities led by the terrorist Abu Hamza al-Masri and other people from British territory."

This follows a month-long dispute over who was to blame for the deaths of three British and one Australian tourist in Yemen during an abortive rescue attempt. An examination of the events of the past month reads like a Le Carré novel. It raises more questions than answers over what has led to the recent antagonisms.

On December 23 seven men were arrested, including three Britons of Pakistani origin. The Yemeni government claimed they were carrying plans to blow up a church, a hotel and the British consulate. They also say weapons, bomb-making equipment and terrorist training videos were found. Those arrested included Hamza-al-Masri's stepson and an Algerian who is engaged to his sister. His 17-year-son is still on the run. The men and their relatives have denied all charges. Confessions by three of those arrested are said to have been extracted under torture and have been withdrawn.

Five days after the arrests, members of the Islamic Army kidnapped 16 Western tourists in Yemen. Within 24 hours, 200 government troops mounted an attack on the kidnappers' hideout and three Britons and an Australian were killed. This was severely criticised by the British authorities. In response the Yemeni government stated that the Islamic Army was allied with al-Masri and that Britain had prior knowledge of its plans. Britain denied this and a team of four Scotland Yard detectives and ten FBI agents was sent to Yemen to investigate the kidnapping. Within 24 hours the FBI declared that Osama

bin Laden, the Saudi exile accused by the US of masterminding the twin bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last August, was responsible.

The trial of the kidnappers opened on January 13.

It is impossible at this point to verify the conflicting versions of events presented by Yemen and Britain. No hard evidence has been produced to indicate that the arrested men were engaged in terrorist activity, or to back up the accusation of British collusion. Nevertheless, the tensions underlying these charges have their foundation in the constant imperialist interventions in the region. In this, moreover, Saudi Arabia has played a key role.

Yemen incorporates the former British protectorate of Aden relinquished in 1967. With a population of 18 million, it is one of the world's poorest countries. The present regime dates back to 1990, when the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen and the Yemen Arab Republic in the North, unified into a single state--in an attempt to attract the inward investment necessary to develop the oilfields on the border between the two areas.

The old ruling parties in each region maintained their own armed forces, security services and bureaucratic structures. In the 1993 elections the General People's Congress, the party of the more populous North, ousted the previously Moscow-dominated Yemeni Socialist Party.

Ever since, the country has been wracked by economic crisis. It was made to pay a heavy price for its refusal to support the US in the gulf war. After the war, Saudi Arabia expelled 800,000 Yemeni guest workers, severely affecting the country's balance of payments, and the US slashed its aid by 85 percent. In 1994 the crisis sharpened, with a 12 percent decline in the currency in one week. Conflicts between the leaderships of North and South reached breaking point, leading to heavy fighting between rival army units in April that year. Vice-president Ali Salim al-Bid, the former leader in the South, announced the secession of a new Democratic Republic of Yemen

(DRY), but his forces were defeated. He escaped to Saudi Arabia, which had supported him during the conflict.

The economic crisis has worsened with the collapse of world prices for oil. The IMF, World Bank and European Union have approved loan and credit packages, but have insisted on a programme of restructuring. Subsidies on basic foodstuffs have been removed and prices of basic necessities like petrol, wheat, flour and cooking oil have risen by more than 50 percent since last June.

This has provoked widespread opposition to the ruling regime. Last summer 250 people were killed in clashes between armed tribesmen and government forces.

Much of this opposition has fallen under the leadership of rival fundamentalist groups, which are in turn open to outside manipulation. The Islamic Army, which staged the latest kidnapping, originated in South Yemen 15 years ago, in opposition to the Soviet-backed government. Many went on to fight the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan. After the Afghan war ended, it is claimed that military training camps were set up in Yemen by an associate of Osama bin Laden.

Though he has since been recast as a bogeyman by the US government in order to justify its activities in the Middle East, bin Laden was financed by the CIA during the Afghan war. During the Yemeni civil war the Islamic Jihad or "Afghanis" supported the northern army against what they called "the atheists" in the South. When the war ended in 1994, concessions were made in an attempt to neutralise them. The president renewed the hereditary landholdings of Tariqal-Fadhli, one of their leaders, and appointed him a member of his personal advisory body, called the consultative council. A force of between 8,000 and 10,000 militants were allowed to set up training camps near Ibb in the North and Mudiya in Abyan province, where the recent shoot-out with government forces took place. Recently, under US pressure, the government arrested several individuals.

According to the *Financial Times*, the Islamic Army is now financed from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, by members of the ruling families. This is partially motivated by a 64-year-old border dispute, but is also a way of pressuring the Yemeni government to be more compliant with US foreign policy in the gulf.

The Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland last year provided the pretext for the Blair government to enact legislation enabling the conviction of those conspiring within Britain to commit terrorist offences anywhere in the world. Yet despite being anxious to maintain good relations with the oil-rich Arab states, the Labour

government has taken no action against al-Masri's organisation. The security forces have been monitoring its activities for two years and say it has stayed within the law. This is what has led to charges that Britain is involved in or at least condones activities on behalf of Saudi Arabia against the Yemeni government. To complicate matters, Saudi Arabia has formally protested the presence in Britain of al-Masri.

Britain's actions in the Middle East are decided according to its national interest. Following the Labour government's endorsement of the US bombing of the Sudan and Afghanistan, Defence Secretary George Robertson warned that if Britain's interests were threatened in any part of the world there would also be "a price to be paid".

Yemen is in a strategic position at the base of the Arabian Peninsula, at the southeastern entrance to the Red Sea. If the government formed an alliance with Sudan and Eritrea, they could control oil and other commercial traffic through the Red Sea. This could also affect the access of British and American naval vessels to the Persian Gulf via the Mediterranean/Suez Canal. America is at present negotiating with the Yemeni government to lease facilities for its naval ships in the port of Aden. Despite recent bellicose noises, the Yemeni government is anxious to develop relations with both countries and earlier applied for membership of the Commonwealth.



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