

# THE YEMEN ARAB REPUBLIC

Development and Change  
in an Ancient Land

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Manfred W. Wenner



Westview Profiles / Nations of the Contemporary Middle East

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**WESTVIEW PROFILES • NATIONS OF THE  
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## Preface

*Modern Yemen 1918–1966* was published in 1967, and in that book I reviewed the modern political history of North Yemen and presented to contemporary students of the Middle East an overview of some aspects of the country. At the time, North Yemen was in the middle of a civil war, which had begun in 1962 and was to last until 1970, and although some correspondents had covered aspects of the conflict, the country was almost as little known then as it had been a decade, two decades, or even five decades earlier.

It is difficult to impress upon people who are not acquainted with this fascinating land the incredible changes that have taken place since that earlier book was written. Of course, the civil war has ended (in the hoped-for compromise), and now literally legions of tourists visit the country. An incredible variety of development programs have been completed or are in the process of being so, and one can obtain an array of modern goods and services in the major cities (while staying, if one chooses, in a modern Sheraton Hotel). In many ways, North Yemen has joined the modern community of nations, which its previous rulers had tried so hard to prevent.

In this present book, I hope to acquaint a larger audience with some of the characteristics of the country that account for its fascination. (Indeed, as I have discovered, no one who has been to North Yemen is not enchanted by it, for one reason or another.) This book is not a sequel to the earlier one, and in fact I doubt that such a sequel is even possible. The amount of research and scholarship concerning North Yemen that has been published in every conceivable discipline since the mid-1960s has reached the stage where no single individual could hope to synthesize and summarize it all in a coherent fashion. Instead, it is my hope, and my goal, to introduce people interested in the modern world to a unique country, to provide them with an adequate introduction to many of its facets, to have them understand (if not always appreciate) its character-

istics, and finally, to make North Yemen and its people and their culture better known to, and perhaps better understood by, more people.

I would like to thank the writers of the various works I have read and consulted in order to try to keep up-to-date with Yemeni affairs and the rapidly changing characteristics of the country. Naturally, if I have made any errors of fact or interpretation, these should not be attributed to these scholars or to those individuals who have worked hard on various development projects in the country and various government officials with whom I have come into contact over the years.

*Manfred W. Wenner*

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# 1

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## *The Land*

### **BACKGROUND**

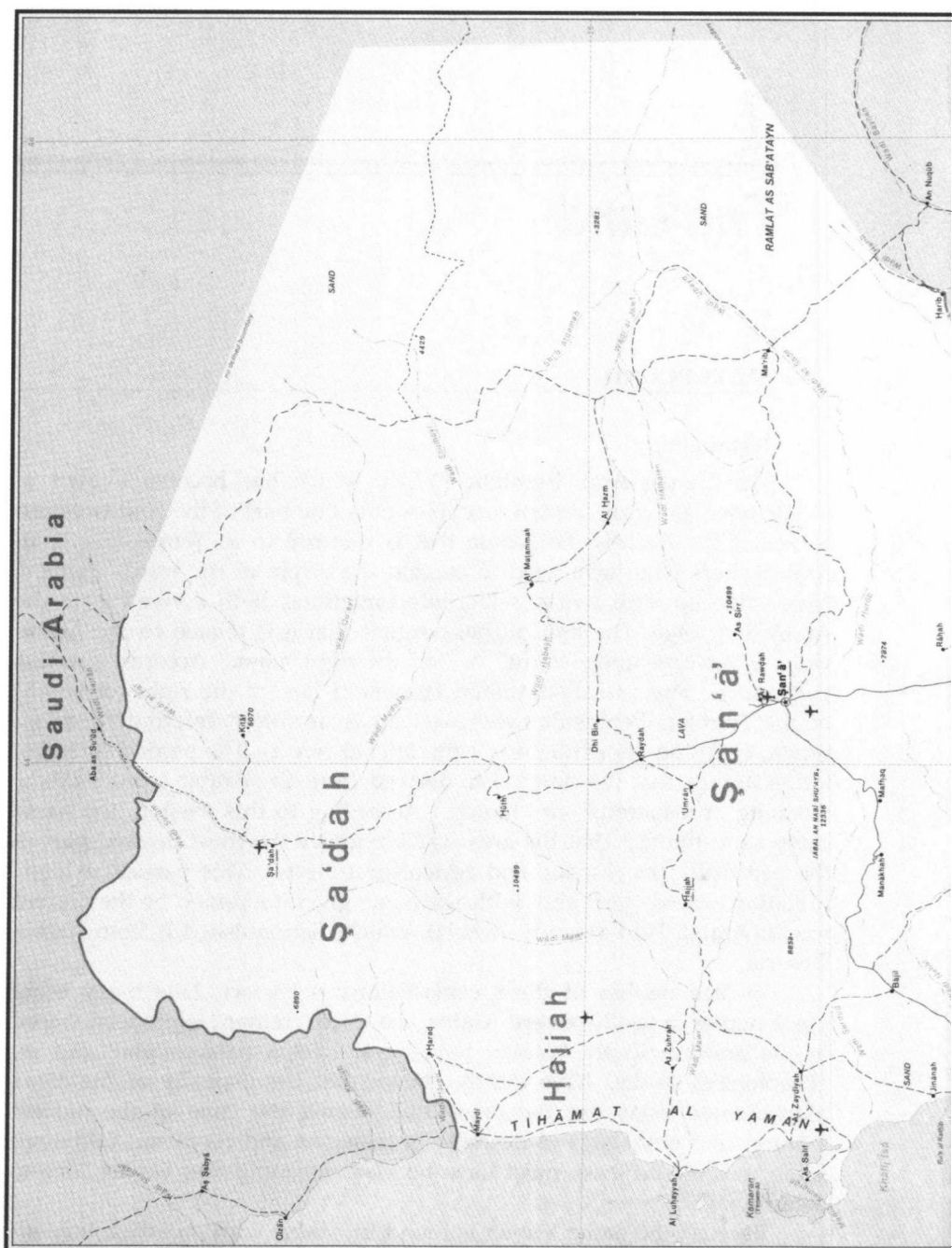
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#### *Terminology*

The Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), which has become known in recent years as North Yemen, occupies only one part of the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula that is referred to as Yemen (Fig. 1.1). Arab writers who have tried to explain the origin of the word "Yemen" have come up with two possible interpretations, both derived from the Arabic language. The first of these argues that it is related to the Arabic word *YaMiN*, meaning "right" or "on the right hand." According to this version, the area is called Yemen because it lies on the right (or south) of the Arabian Peninsula whereas Damascus (often referred to as al-Sham, meaning "north") lies on the left (or north). The second interpretation argues that the name was derived from the Arabic word *YuMaN*, meaning "prosperous" or "happy." According to this version, the name came from the fact that the area was obviously the most favored part of the peninsula (in climatic and agricultural terms). This particular interpretation accords favorably with the name given to Yemen by the ancient world: Arabia Felix (Happy Arabia), which distinguished it from Arabia Deserta.

In fact, neither of these explanations is correct. Like many other place-names in southwestern Arabia, the word "Yemen" is properly traced to the ancient South Arabian languages. Recent paleographic and archaeological studies have clearly shown that the majority of the area's place-names today are the ones used during the time of the ancient empires and city-states to describe possessions and conquests (although some were descriptive, most have no clear meaning that we are able to determine).<sup>1</sup>

Because the name Yemen is found in Arabic with an article, i.e., *al-Yaman*, it became the fashion among early European explorers and writers



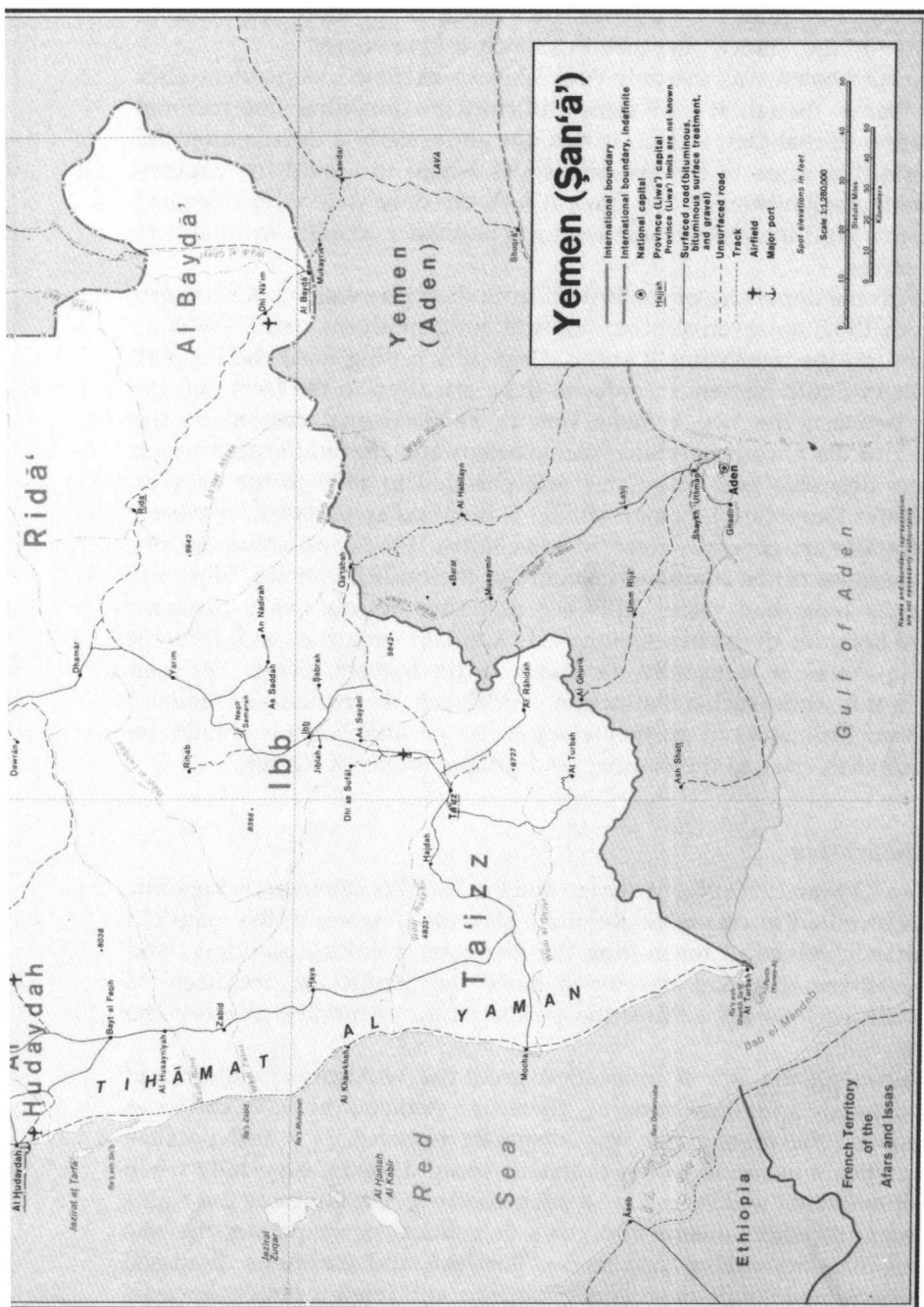


FIGURE 1.1 The Yemen Arab Republic

to refer to "the Yemen." However, this usage is no more logical than referring to "the France" because in French it is *la France*.

North Yemen was the only Arab state to become independent after World War I, though it had some difficulty in obtaining international recognition of that fact; in fact, it was not until nearly a decade after the war's end that some of the Western states began to accord the country diplomatic recognition. At the time, it was the only state with "Yemen" in its name, and therefore it was then not necessary to add any qualifiers or adjectives.

With the departure of the British from their possessions in southern Arabia in 1967, however, another political entity with the name "Yemen" appeared on the international scene. Originally calling itself the People's Republic of South Yemen, in order to draw attention to the facts that the border between the two Yemens was an artificial one (created by the British and the Ottomans many years earlier) and that unification was a mutually desirable goal, the name was changed in 1970 to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). In popular parlance, however, the two states are generally referred to as North Yemen and South Yemen, if only because of the complexity/length of their official names. Since the two states have had rather different domestic policies, very different political histories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and different foreign policies, it is usually necessary to distinguish clearly between them. In this work, such a distinction is made for the countries; "Yemeni" and "Yemenis" without further elaboration or qualification should be understood to refer to the country and people of North Yemen.

### *Unification*

On 22 May 1990, North Yemen and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen united to create the Republic of Yemen. Aware of the manifold difficulties involved in integrating the divergent political, economic, and social systems that had developed since the 1960s, the architects of unification established a transition period of thirty months to effect the merger.

Although the fact of unification produced widespread elation and enjoyed nearly universal support, there are elements in both countries who oppose the merger (for very disparate reasons). It is still possible that significant implementation problems could develop, especially when difficult decisions will be made on such controversial issues as the rights of women, the mechanisms and goals of political participation, the role of Islam in policymaking, and so on. The facts and traditions discussed in this book will continue to affect domestic and foreign policy for years to come.

### *Location*

The location of the two Yemens—at the southern end of the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula—has been the cause of conflicting claims and the subject of political disputes for many centuries. The politico-economic disputes of recent years have involved, to a greater or lesser degree, such countries as the United States, the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Oman, Ethiopia, Iran, France (which retains an interest in its former colony of Djibouti, formerly the French Territory of the Afars and Issas), and the Arab states of the Gulf, as well as a number of guerrilla movements (e.g., the Eritrean Liberation Front and the now-quiescent Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf). In fact, it is impossible to explain the current concern with developments in this region without reference to some traditional geopolitical concepts: control of sea and air access routes, energy resources, alliance patterns, and even the area's potential military advantage and possibilities for coercion because of communications patterns, terrain, and logistical requirements. The relevance and importance of these factors will be analyzed in greater detail later.

Although the relevance of geographic location has been slighted in recent years (in part because of a confidence in modern forms of communication), I believe that, at least in part, the influence of such smaller states as the two Yemens is indeed a function of their location. Furthermore, the interest of the major powers in these two states often results from the perception that they could disrupt or interfere with established patterns of trade and communications that are in or near their location (e.g., the Strait of Bab al-Mandab [Bab el Mandeb]).

Certain features of North Yemen provide a reminder that its location (on the Red Sea and on major fault lines that stretch up the Red Sea from Africa's Great Rift Valley) is not geologically peaceful. For example, plains to the north of Sana'a (the capital) are littered with the fossilized remains of various kinds of fish, including shellfish, while immediately west of the city one can find sizable geodes with little or no effort. Of more immediate concern, however, are events such as the great earthquake of December 1982, which destroyed dozens of villages and cost thousands of lives. More benignly, the foothills contain numerous hot springs and mineral baths, which the Yemenis (like Europeans) value for their curative properties.

### *Frontiers*

North Yemen is one of the very few countries in the contemporary world without clearly demarcated frontiers to distinguish its territory from that of its neighbors. This situation is partly owing to the difficult terrain that characterizes this portion of the Arabian Peninsula, but it is also the



result of some recent political events that have involved the two Yemens and of their relations with former and present political powers in the area.

In the north and east, the Yemen Arab Republic borders on Saudi Arabia; in the north, specifically with the Saudi province of Asir. A border was demarcated in this area between the two countries in 1934 after a short war, which Yemen lost. The most important consequence of this conflict was that Yemen had to renounce its claims to Asir in general and to the Najran Oasis in particular. Actual border markers were laid down only as far as the Najran Oasis; to the east of that location there are no internationally or locally recognized markers. In effect, there is a *de facto* "no man's land" between North Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the extent of which varies depending upon the ability of either state to exercise its authority. Today, this situation is primarily of economic rather than political significance, but it should be noted that most Yemenis have not given up hope of regaining Asir, a fact that has added to the many other frictions which have arisen between the two countries ever since the end of the Yemeni civil war in 1970.

To the south, North Yemen borders South Yemen (the PDRY). Here again, a frontier has been demarcated only to a specific point, which appeared to be an important position at the time. This frontier was originally platted in the early years of the twentieth century, when Great Britain was in control of the south and the Ottoman Empire controlled the north. In 1934, after numerous disputes between the imams of Yemen and the British authorities, a treaty was signed to minimize the possibilities of armed conflict; this treaty essentially confirmed the earlier frontier. It perpetuated the informality of the frontier past the original end point (at Qa'tabah), so disputes over territory in this region have continued. Until recently, the difficult terrain and the lack of any obvious resources over which more serious conflicts might arise muted the extent of such disagreements. However, the recent discovery of high-quality oil deposits in the Ma'rib region, and in the Hadhramawt region of the PDRY, has intensified the claims to these ambiguous territories which have, suddenly, become more important economically.

To the west of North Yemen is the Red Sea, which means the country has access to that body's resources, one of the world's major transportation routes. It also means involvement in a number of political disputes and strategic issues, however. Probably the most serious of these is over title to the Kamaran Islands, which were assigned to Great Britain when it was in control of the south and therefore passed to the PDRY upon that country's independence. Since North Yemen never recognized what it regarded as an illegitimate occupation, it occupied the islands in 1972 and has administered them since that time. The local population approved