

ERIC
MARGOLIS

Exotic Yemen

When asked to name my favorite foreign country, I inevitably reply, Yemen. Not Marxist Aden which confused nearly everyone by changing its name to South Yemen, but wild, exotic North Yemen which was recently described as "just staggering into the 12th century".

If you ever wanted to see and feel the Arabian Nights, go to Yemen. At dusk, ram horns herald the closing of town and city gates. Turbaned, bearded tribal warriors straight out of the time of Harun al-Rashid proudly wear their wicked, curved daggers as a sign of manhood. Women are veiled from head to foot.

In the walled capital, Saana, open sewers, medieval architecture and open-air markets — the Souk of Salt, the Souk of Daggers, the Souk of Leather — make you half expect to meet Sinbad and his crew. Instead, Yemen's latest visitors are Americans and Russians, playing out the Great Game along Arabia's southern edge.

The two Yemens, along with Ethiopia and French Djibouti, control the southern mouth of the Red Sea. Ethiopia is now under strong Russian and Cuban influence. South Yemen has become a virtual Soviet colony, the first and only Arab state to go communist.

Russian naval and air units based on Ethiopia's Dalak Islands and in South Yemen are challenging Western control of the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the vital Persian Gulf. Western analysts are convinced that Russia is determined to expand its growing regional influence into Yemen and Oman, creating an arc of vassal states stretching from Ethiopia to Afghanistan.

Perform menial tasks

Besides its strategic location, Yemen offers another tempting prize. One million expatriate Yemeni workers perform much of Saudi Arabia's menial work. Living in extreme poverty and treated with contempt by the wealthy Saudis, these workers represent a silent time bomb, waiting to be triggered by Soviet or revolutionary Islamic agitators. By latest estimates, Yemenis make up 23% of Saudi Arabia's population.

Both the U.S. and the conservative Arab states are deeply worried by the prospect that the unstable, nominally pro-Western government of Yemen might fall to a communist coup, thereby turning the Yemenis in Saudi Arabia into a lethal fifth column.

This is a very real worry. Torn by complex tribal disputes and lacking any history of national government, Yemen has, since 1965, suffered civil war and a dizzying series of plots and coups. If you asked me what my least favorite job would be, I would reply, to be the president of Yemen.

Col. Ali Saleh currently runs Yemen. He has put down at least four recent coups and survived numerous attempted assassinations, the most recent in January, 1983. His unfortunate predecessor, Lt. Col. Ahmed Ghashmi was blown up by a briefcase bomb carried by a South Yemeni envoy during talks on "brotherly Arab unity." Ghashmi's predecessor, Lt. Col. Hamdi, was murdered in 1977.

Back in the simpler days of happy tribal warfare, before outsiders became involved, Yemen was ruled by a sultan. This epic villain was known to his less than adoring subjects as "Ahmed the Devil". Old Ahmed jailed his son for 10 years in a dark room, and amused himself by nailing his enemies to doors or indulging in drug-crazed orgies with his harem.

Ahmed was not the only Yemeni given to drugs; Yemen is the living proof of why narcotics should not be legalized. Virtually the entire nation ceases work from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. and settles down to chew *qat*, a narcotic shrub, the effects of which are a cross between marijuana and coca leaves. *Qat*, which must be served fresh, deadens the appetite while making its chewers talkative, jolly and quite stoned.

Yemenis love *qat* so much they have uprooted their main export crop, coffee — which originated in Yemen and was shipped from the port of Mocha — and planted *qat*. The result: A trade deficit, widespread malnutrition, pervasive lassitude, wild driving and a nation full of foggy minds.

To take over Yemen, all you have to do is march in at 3 p.m.: Everyone would be too high to notice.

Cash for the asking

Since nobody works very much, Yemenis support themselves by the traditional pastime of banditry or by soaking money out of the Americans and Saudis. Whenever the treasury begins to run dry, the artful Yemenis raise the cry of an imminent communist takeover. Washington and Riyadh usually respond with instant cash that is used to keep the warlike mountain tribes loyal and quiet.

This process has been lately aided by the Russians and South Yemenis who regularly stir up the volatile border tribes in a manner strikingly similar to the Great Game on the northwest frontier of the former British Indian raj.

Local sheiks are given bags of silver Maria Theresa thalers. These large coins, prominently displaying the ample bust of the Rubenesque Austrian empress, are much favored by Yemenis. Emboldened by *qat* and silver, the tribesmen then launch raids on Saana. The Americans and Saudis usually respond by rushing in arms and dollars — George Washington is not as popular as Maria Theresa in Yemen — and so the game goes on.

As fanciful and romantic as all this sounds, there is a serious side. One day soon, Yemen may fall to some dour communist regime that will put an end to tribal chaos and force the anarchic tribesmen onto collective farms. The Saudis and their oil will be in serious jeopardy. But, until then, this land of the Queen of Sheba remains the world's most interesting, exotic land and one of our few remaining gateways into the past.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)