YEMEN’S TIMES OF TURMOIL

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COVER

A Houthi guard keeps watch over a victory celebration from a rooftop in Tahrir Square, Sanaa, on September 23, 2014. (Polaris Images)
Midway through Barack Obama’s second term as president, there are two Establishment-approved metanarratives about his foreign policy. One, emanating mainly from the right, but resonating with several liberal internationalists, holds that Obama is unequal to the task of running an empire. The president, pundits repeat, is a “reluctant warrior” who declines to intervene abroad with the alacrity becoming his station. The other, quieter line of argument posits that Obama is the consummate realist, a man who avoids foreign entanglements unless or until they impinge directly upon vital US interests.

As usual, the mainstream assessments are more interesting for their unspoken assumptions than their truth value. In both takes, the president of the United States is appointed ipso facto as a world policeman whose job performance is rated almost solely on the basis of how often he orders the Pentagon into action. But the dominant evaluations of Obama are incorrect as well. And, at least in the Middle East, there is no better illustration than Yemen, the terribly impoverished and perennially misunderstood country in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula.

Has Obama hesitated to use force? Not if the explosions in Yemen are any indication.

Until the fall of 2014, Yemen was the primary Arab battleground of the Obama administration’s war on terror—but a firing range rather than a front. According to the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there have been no fewer than 71 US drone strikes in Yemen since 2002, with hundreds of fatalities, including a minimum of 64 civilians. The New America Foundation estimates that US drones and warships have fired 116 missiles at Yemeni territory in the same time period, killing no fewer than 811 people, at least 81 of them non-combatants.

The actual numbers of attacks and casualties are almost certainly higher: Both of these studies rely on methodologies of cross-referencing press reports, and many of the drone strikes occur in remote locales where journalists are few and far between. And the start date of 2002 is misleading. Except for the assassination of alleged al-Qaeda figure Abu ‘Ali al-Harithi in December of that year, all of the strikes have been launched under President Obama.

The White House, indeed, views Yemen as a showcase of its approach toward al-Qaeda and sundry radical armed Islamist groups. “This strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for years,” Obama said in his September to speech extending the war on terror once more to Iraq and Syria. There were querulous rumbles on left and right at the notion that the statistics above constitute “success,” but from the Obama administration’s perspective, the claim is self-evident. The war in Afghanistan occasionally makes headlines, when American soldiers are killed or when the failure of US efforts to build a stable Afghan client state is further exposed. The war in Yemen is prosecuted entirely from the sky, with the odd, top-secret drop-in visit from Special Forces, so the dead bodies are all faceless and foreign and the story stays buried in the back pages.

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Yemen in Turmoil

The Breakdown of the GCC Initiative

Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Sheila Carapico

On September 21, 2014, fighters of Ansar Allah, loyal to the Houthi movement based in the northern highlands of Sa‘ada, conquered Yemen’s capital. Militants occupied the home of 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman, a leader of the 2011 uprising against the regime of President ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih and a member of the Islamist party Islah. When the young men tweeted photos of themselves sprawling on her flowery bedspread with automatic weapons and bags of qat littered around them, the Houthi fighters conveyed a triumphal logic of coercive power, here sexualized for maximum impact. They later apologized, saying that the intent was to “guard” the Nobel laureate’s home. But the takeover of Karman’s house fell into a pattern of attacks on the homes of Islahi leaders, including the villa of the infamous Gen. ‘Ali Muhsin, commander in Salih’s wars against Ansar Allah. Many outside observers reported the advance of a ragtag militia into Sanaa and beyond as a struggle between the “Shi‘i” Houthis and assorted “Sunnis,” among them Islah. More than sectarian animus, though, the autumn turn of events demonstrated the political appeal of key Houthi positions, including critique of the excesses of Yemen’s established elite and rejection of the transitional mechanism advanced by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Western enthusiasts. It was, as journalist and youth activist Farea al-Muslimi observed, “a breakdown of the Saudi-backed order.”

Mainstream Malapropisms

Most English-speaking journalists and policy analysts have advanced one of two main speculations about the Houthi advance. The first, dominant trope emphasizes the Zaydi roots of the Houthi movement, ahistorically framed as an “Iranian-backed Shi‘i militia.” In transposing an all-purpose Shi‘i vs. Sunni

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simplification from Iraq and Lebanon onto Yemen, this storyline deductively misidentifies all of the Houthis’ adversaries—from the government to the tribes surrounding Sanaa—as “Sunni.”

This notion is flat-out wrong. Zaydism is related to the dominant Twelver form of Shi’i Islam institutionalized in Iran in the same way that, say, Greek Orthodoxy is an offshoot of Catholicism—the statement makes sense, maybe, in schismatic terms, but in terms of doctrine, practice, politics and even religious holidays Zaydism and Twelver Shi’ism are quite distinct. Moreover, historically, the city of Sanaa and all points north were the Zaydi heartland. Resistance to the Houthi advance did not come from “Sunni tribesmen,” as so many reporters suggest, but from sons of Zaydi tribesmen who, when they joined the neo-conservative Islah, adopted or converted to a “Sunni” identity inspired by Saudi Wahhabism and/or the Egyptian Society of Muslim Brothers. The al-Ahmar clan, paramount sheikhs of the historically Zaydi Hashid tribal confederation clustered between Sa’ada and Sanaa, and who detest the Houthis, are Zaydi by parentage and Sunni by denominational conversion via partisan affiliation with Islah. On the other side, the majority denomination in the coastal and southern midlands provinces are the Shafi’is, who are Sunni (in the same way that Lutherans or Methodists are Protestant), but rarely identify themselves as such—even if historically they distinguished themselves from the Zaydi regimes in Sanaa. Instead, to the limited extent that this conflict is “sectarian,” it is also institutional: It began with a rivalry between Houthi summer camps and the Saudi-financed salafi institute in the small, historically Zaydi town of Dammaj, which is a story rather more precise and interlaced with contemporary state power than the implied frame of “age-old” dispute between the two main branches of Islam allows.2

The second prevalent narrative, advanced from overseas by “brinkologists,” takes the Houthi advance as fresh evidence of Yemen’s imminent collapse. After forecasting state failure for more than a decade, this line of analysis has focused on micro-events, starting with the late October resignation of Prime Minister Muhammad Basindawa’s government and his technocratic successor Khalid Bahah’s difficulties putting together a viable coalition. The corollary to brinkology is transitivity, confidence in international experts’ ability to engineer transitions from authoritarianism to stable liberal democracy (as in Iraq). In this case the transitologists put great stock in, and were hired as expert consultants by, the so-called GCC initiative to stabilize Yemeni politics. The narrative that emerged went something like this: Yemen is on the verge of disintegration, but the GCC monarchies and Western advisers can save it from itself.

These two angles converged in a cockeyed view of the impact of regional and international forces. Iran is often said to be the bugaboo behind the Houthi militia, seen as a wannabe counterpart to Hizballah in Lebanon. Yet Saudi patronage of salafi elements within Islah and long-standing Saudi backing of the Salih regime have been bracketed off from explanations of purportedly purely domestic machinations. Furthermore, journalistic and think-tank reporting has tended to overlook the deleterious effects of US counter-terror airstrikes against al-Qaeda targets on state sovereignty and regime legitimacy.

In focusing on sectarian divisions, the Yemeni state’s (in)capacity to monopolize the legitimate use of force or stave off Iranian interference, and/or elite bargaining over cabinet positions, the mainstream accounts distract attention from fundamental renegotiations of the nature of the state and the regime as well as the government. The dominant narratives also misstate the threats to Yemeni sovereignty, which abound, but are neither denominational nor purely endogenous.

Endogenous Dynamics and Exogenous Stasis

The Houthi militia’s advance from their base near the Saudi Arabian frontier through Zaydi strongholds in ‘Amran (seat of the Hashid confederation) into Sanaa—and onward into Shafi’i-majority provinces like Hudayda (on the Red Sea coast) and Ibb (in the mountainous midlands)—must be read as positioning, an intent to renegotiate Yemen’s political regime. A regime is an intermediate stratum between the government (which makes day-to-day decisions and is easy to alter) and the state (which is a complex bureaucracy tasked with a range of coercive functions). As such, a regime is understood by political scientists as a system of rules and norms by which power is distributed across and through state institutions. Yemen’s political regime is in the process of being rewritten. By engaging in armed conflict and political maneuvering around the composition of the new government and revolutionary populist appeals, the Houthis have hoped to influence Yemen’s future regime on several fronts.

On another level, Yemen’s convulsions can never be comprehended as separate from the power structures of the Arabian Peninsula, dominated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the other filthy rich petro-kingsdoms of the GCC, which in turn are protected by the US military. With average per capita incomes not much higher than the poverty level in Saudi Arabia, Yemen absorbs both migrant laborers expelled from the Gulf and desperate refugees fleeing East Africa. Millions subsist on less than $2 per day. And things are getting worse.

In some ways the Houthis represented subaltern aspirations. All along they objected to the agreement initiated by the self-consciously Sunni petro-monarchies of the GCC, formalized by the United Nations and facilitated by international experts, with its culmination in the National Dialogue Conference of March 2013-January 2014. The Houthis and other dissidents maintained that the GCC initiative sought to demobilize the mass 2011 revolutionary uprising by sanctifying an elite pact between members of the Salih regime and its formal, multi-party, cross-ideological “loyal” parliamentary opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties alliance, or Mushtarak. The Mushtarak, in turn, was dominated by a conservative northern alliance of Islah, the Sanaa old guard and the Hashid confederation. Given the GCC monarchies’ interest in stability in the most restive quarter of the Arabian Peninsula, the agreement contained a number of provisions to undermine populist demands for a democratic transition.
These measures included extending legal immunity for former President Salih and his family, requiring the uncontested election of his long-standing vice president, ‘Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, as chief executive for the transitional period, excluding both the Houthis and the Southern Movement, or hirak, from the transitional governing coalition, and mandating the division of cabinet portfolios equally between Salih’s General People’s Congress (GPC) and the Mushtarak/Islah. The Houthis’ posture as “outsiders” let them stake out high ground as revolutionary challengers to the insufferable status quo ante. So the Houthis walked into Sanaa largely unopposed, mainly because people were fed up with the GCC’s repackaging of the ancien régime, and secondarily for primordial reasons (because Sanaa remains a largely Zaydi city where historically prominent local families are, like the Houthis, sayyids, or direct descendents of the Prophet). Far from a call for Houthi hegemony, or an appeal to Zaydi identity, the speech given by the movement’s leader, ‘Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, to mark Ansar Allah’s occupation of the capital was full of stirring populist, nationalist rhetoric and widespread complaints about corruption intended to appeal to southerners, other Shafi’is and most Yemenis.

Domestic Power Politics

Surely control of state institutions is crucial. There was credible speculation that President Hadi decided against resisting the Houthi advance into the capital (alongside more conjectural rumors that Salih was encouraging Ansar Allah in order to disrupt the transition). As vice president, Hadi witnessed firsthand the perpetual triangulation that helped to sustain his predecessor’s power. In the 1990s, the GPC and Islah, both based in what had been North Yemen, ganged up against the Yemeni Socialist Party, which formerly governed the People’s Democratic Republic, or South Yemen, and later tried to renege on the unity deal. After vanquishing the south and diminishing the Socialists, Salih turned on his right-wing challengers and erstwhile allies in Islah. In response, Socialists, centrist elements in Islah and several smaller parties forged the Joint Meeting Parties as a unified counterweight to one-man military-based rule. Throughout the 2000s, Salih worked to neuter this parliamentary alliance by chipping away at Islah’s salafi edge and pitting it against the moderate opposition center. Never fully successful, this strategy depleted the energies of centrist members of the Mushtarak, straining the alliance and preoccupying its leadership at the expense of its grassroots. Salih’s triangulation helps to explain why, on the eve of the 2011 uprising, and during over a year of “youth” encampments, the loyal opposition enjoyed so little credibility.

This lesson was not lost on President Hadi. As the largest and most influential member of the Mushtarak, Islah benefited disproportionately from the power sharing deal brokered by the GCC. It was the best organized of the member parties, with the largest popular base and share of parliamentary seats (however moribund the parliament, elected in 2003, may have been), and the strongest backing from nearby petro-monarchies. Having simulated democratic empowerment of “the opposition,” Hadi returned to Salih’s playbook to cut Islah down to size. The Houthis eagerly played the role of long-suffering rivals with a history of conflict with Islahis and associated salafis in far northern Sa’ada. When the GPC needed Islah, Salih’s party protected its religious schools, which were recruiting converts in the Zaydi heartland. When the Houthis protested—and eventually took up arms—some Islahî leaders supported Gen. ‘Ali Muhsin’s scorched-earth campaigns. The Mushtarak’s formal condemnation of human rights abuses fell by the wayside.

In 2011, centrist Islahís like Karman seemed to find common ground with Houthi partisans while camped out in protest squares for months on end to bring down Salih. As the GCC agreement became a reality, however, it was clear...
that conservatives in Islah, burnishing a “Sunni” philosophy favored by the Gulf monarchies and downplaying Muslim Brother republicanism, were rewarded by the transitional terms. Moreover, Salih’s ruling GPC maintained parliamentary and ministerial clout while he held onto party leadership even after relinquishing the presidency to his deputy. The Houthis were mostly excluded, along with the southern hirak and, for that matter, the millennial generation who dominated the 2011 uprising.

Fighting broke out between militias affiliated with Ansar Allah and tribal forces identified with Islah and/or backed by neighboring “Sunni” monarchicaly, first in al-Jawf and eventually during the siege of the salafi school in the village of Dammaj in Sa’ada governorate in the fall of 2012. (These fault lines were on the frontier with Saudi Arabia, which was building a protective wall to contain them across the border.)

Islah’s reaction to the fall 2014 crisis showed its political experience relative to the Houthis, but also revealed its weaknesses during the transitional period. While condemning the Houthi aggression against Islahi infrastructure and leaders, the party nonetheless pledged not to fight the Houthis with force in Sanaa. Rather, leaders challenged the state to restore order by military means. When instead Hadi allowed Houthi militants to overtake security and infrastructural institutions, he signaled his own desire to clip Islah’s wings. Unable (or perhaps unwilling) to generate popular counter-mobilization, Islah quibbled over seats in the new government of Prime Minister Bahhah on the basis of an outmoded (2003) parliamentary portfolio.

The National Peace and Partnership Agreement signed by President Hadi, representatives of the Houthis and other political parties on September 21 called for a new, broadly inclusive and/or non-partisan technocratic government. To Islah’s dismay, space was made for the Houthis and the southern hirak, which includes but is not limited to the Yemeni Socialist Party, and through it to the Mushtarak coalition. Buoyed by the youthful majority, and people who live outside the capital, these groups are ascendant against Islah’s twentieth-century agendas, the despoiled Salih dictatorship and the status quo ante in the Peninsula.

Debates over government portfolio allocations masked more serious issues related to the nature of the regime. While the privileging of Islah by transitional institutions fomented conflicts in Dammaj and al-Jawf and inflicted
the conflict with a neo-sectarian tenor, the Houthis’ move into the capital coincided with mounting anxiety over the ongoing constitutional drafting process. The six new “federal” districts recommended by the National Dialogue Conference—two in the former south and four in the north—were avowedly designed to devolve some power to subnational units and also to stem the possibility of southern secession. In the abstract, or to outsiders, the federal proposal sounded appealing. Yet it was not anchored in local realities and reflected the advice of international consultants more than local constituencies. It seemed oblivious to the enormous technical, administrative and political difficulties to be faced in dismantling 22 existing provincial structures and creating new seats of authority. Pressure mounted on the constitution drafting committee to reconcile the demands of the Houthis, the hirak, entrenched political parties and external patrons.

As the Houthi military campaign pressed well beyond Sanaa, Ansar Allah fighters amassed heavy weapons in al-Bayda’, the northern province bordering several areas formerly part of South Yemen, and an important site of US drone strikes against al-Qaeda targets. There, Ansar Allah faced off against forces allied with Ansar al-Shari’a, known in English as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP. Residents of al-Bayda’ and southern provinces sided variously with the Houthis, Ansar al-Shari’a or the hirak based mainly on very local allegiances and grievances. To some, the Houthis offered greater political inclusion to the Southern Movement. Yet while southerners, Houthis and millions of other outsiders suffered from the symbiotic relationship between Salih and Islah, they found little common stake in the constitutional redrafting, beyond opposition to the specific parameters of the proposed federal boundaries.

Of National, Regional and Global Power

The transitional government, leaving the old regime untouched, has continued to cede the state’s sovereignty and thereby undermined its legitimacy, fueling the very crisis it has been tasked with addressing. Houthi criticism of US incursions notwithstanding, the movement’s growing influence does not amount to a takeover of the government. Nor is it likely to bring an end to a modus vivendi that has already brought so much death and destruction to Yemeni civilians. But Houthi efforts to fight AQAP on the ground may constitute a bid to “nationalize” resistance of AQAP and legitimize the Ansar Allah’s use of force at the domestic level. Because of the ambiguous relationship of the Houthis to the Yemeni state and transitional regime, the implications of such parastatal defense of sovereignty—against AQAP and against the US drones—were far from clear.

When youths in Sanaa, Aden, Hudayda, Ibb, Ta’izz, al-Bayda’ and other parts of the country took to the streets in 2011 demanding “the downfall of the regime,” they meant the status quo ante dominated by Salih, his family, the GPC, the Hashid tribal confederation, Islahi conservatives, the northern security apparatus and the entrenched corrupt bureaucracy—all rooted in the northern Zaydi heartland and all (nonetheless) backed by the Saudi kingdom, other GCC monarchies and, by extension, the United States. The GCC-brokered transition agreement kept this regime intact while politely inviting Salih to transfer the reins of power to Hadi (a native southerner and GPC member). American airstrikes against what recently seemed the main threat to both the Gulf monarchies and American hegemony in the Peninsula, the Sunni-identified Ansar al-Shari’a, continued or accelerated.

Ansar Allah’s astounding military successes in, and then beyond, the northern Zaydi highlands confused matters—all the more so against the backdrop of the formidable sweep of the nihilist, radically anti-Shi’i neo-Sunni group in Syria and Iraq known variously as “the Islamic State,” ISIS, ISIL or Da’ish, the Arabic acronym for ISIL. Within Yemen, Ansar Allah and Ansar al-Shari’a, both declared by the Saudi kingdom to be “terrorist” (read anti-systemic) entities, have been presented as locked in mortal, antithetical, “sectarian” conflict. At about the same time, Washington called for sanctions against Salih and two Houthi leaders on the grounds that they were spoiling the GCC-sponsored transition plan. US policy in Yemen is, as ever, reactively aiming at a moving target, and strongly shaped by the US-Saudi alliance.

Like the strange selfies of Houthi home invaders luxuriating on Tawakkul Karman’s bedsheets, these events are nearly inscrutable to outsiders—or, indeed, to Yemenis, who are hardly of one mind amidst the dizzying twists and turns. One commentator, Haykal Bafana, described the “jarring bipolarity” between de facto US support for the Houthis via drone attacks on rival AQAP targets in al-Bayda’ even as other organs of the Obama administration appealed to the UN for sanctions against Houthi militia leaders, considering this juxtaposition an “elegant summation” of dysfunctional and probably inef-fectual American policy. Farea al-Muslimi noted with irony that the Houthis have given al-Qaeda even “more legitimacy than [US] drones did in the past.” The Ansar al-Shari’a present themselves as a bulwark “against this new gorilla called the Houthis,” he ventured, opposition to which “now sells” among the general public. Despite its origins in institutional conflicts and regime machinations, the “sectarian issue,” al-Muslimi observed, now has provided “more political capital than AQAP ever dreamed of.”

Endnotes
A Poor People’s Revolution

The Southern Movement Heads Toward Independence from Yemen

Susanne Dahlgren

“This is no longer a movement,” said the young man whose Facebook name is Khaled Aden. “This is a revolution.”

Khaled, whose real name is Khalid al-Junaydi, is a leading activist in the hirak, or Southern Movement, which aims to restore independence to southern Yemen. I met him on a Saturday morning in April 2013 at a street corner in Crater, the old part of Aden, located inside an ancient volcano. Here the liberation front fought some of their fiercest battles against the British colonial forces in the mid-1960s, and here the hirak often confronts the security forces of the government in Sanaa.

The parallels between the two struggles are so striking that Aden Live, a hiraki satellite channel based in Beirut, regularly airs a clip splicing images from the 1960s together with footage from today’s confrontations.

The hirak has declared Saturdays and Wednesdays the days of civil disobedience. Shops, schools and most government offices are closed. This Saturday was one of those days—the security forces had entered Crater and young boys were mounting a challenge, unarmed but approaching the troops nonetheless. I came down to the street when I heard shots and smelled tear gas from my balcony facing the slopes of Mount Shamsan. Khaled Aden and his comrades were patrolling the streets in Crater in search of activists needing medical assistance. While

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taking photographs, I was tear-gassed; Khaled suggested taking me to a clinic to inhale oxygen.

Established in 2007 by southern army officers who were illegally dismissed after the 1994 civil war, the birak has since been joined by unemployed youth and many others. Though suffering from problems of leadership, it has come to represent the “southern cause” (al-qadiya al-janubiyya) or the grievances of the southern people. A Yemeni Center for Civil Rights poll in early 2010 found that the “southern cause” could boast the support of 70 percent of the southern population. According to academics at Aden University, that number is now more like 90 percent. It is impossible to verify these figures, but it is clear that disillusionment with Sanaa’s rule is widespread. Even those who do not wish for independence are highly critical of the corruption and misrule that southerners feel came with the 1990 unification with the north. The 90 percent number has deep historical resonance: When the British left Aden in 1967, they acknowledged that the people supported the anti-colonial struggle by such a margin. The birak is most visible in Aden, whose residents now call it the capital of South Arabia.

The aims of the birak have developed both independently of and in reaction to the crises in Yemeni national politics. Government troops were shooting boys and young men dead from the outset of the demonstrations in the south. The state violence intensified when the uprising in Sanaa and other northern cities started in early February 2011. At first, southern youth activists were eager to make connections with their northern brothers and sisters trying to unseat President ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih, but by the end of the spring the youth protests were overshadowed by elite infighting in the capital. Southerners were alienated by what they saw as mere power struggles between northerners. The turning point for Adeni activists came after a solidarity visit to the square where protests were taking place in the northern lowland city of Ta’izz. According to one youth who went to Ta’izz, northern activists were not interested in reciprocating with support for the struggle in the south. Khaled Aden and his comrades came to believe that they could get rid of structural discrimination only by breaking the link with Sanaa.

In late 2011 Salih was removed. Yemen entered a “transitional period” outlined in a plan sponsored by the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council. One step in the transition was the National Dialogue Conference, which opened with a $24 million budget on March 18, 2013 at Sanaa’s five-star Mövenpick Hotel and concluded its work nine months later. The conference was tasked with negotiating solutions to problems of national relevance, and had considerable southern participation, including from segments of the birak. In Aden, however, it is difficult to find anyone who believed in the National Dialogue. The conference’s recommendation that Qatari money be used to compensate southerners who were illegally fired or whose land was confiscated was too modest to turn the tide of skepticism.

And then in the later summer of 2014 the fighters of the Houthi movement based in Yemen’s northern highlands took Sanaa. The birak is racing to respond to this major new development, but its basic alienation from the north has been a long time in the making.

Khaled Aden is one of the few in the area where I lived wealthy enough to have a car. He is an engineer and runs his own small business, the only way for graduates here to get a job, as public-sector positions are distributed from Sanaa. While driving through the narrow streets of colonial-era neighborhoods, Khaled told me that the gas I inhaled is meant for exterminating animals and not for crowd control. It causes rashes and severe breathing problems. But the gas was not the only reason why he was there every Saturday and Wednesday morning. Demonstrators were being hit by live ammunition every week, and his car was needed to take the injured to the clinic.

When we arrived at the clinic, the owner was himself receiving medical attention—he had been attacked by government troops in a nearby street. Clinics and hospitals in southern Yemen were once functioning parts of the World Health Organization system, but no longer. This private clinic is one of many in town that provides decent care—to those who can afford it. The owner is a supporter of the birak; the activists said he has guaranteed free treatment to demonstrators who have been hurt.

On one occasion, the activists brought an injured plain-clothes member of the security forces to the clinic. People in the street had set upon the security man with fists and handbags after he was identified as the killer of an unarmed activist, based on a video clip. Young boys call him the Blue Ghost, for his blue eyes, a rarity in Yemen. He has a reputation for utter mercilessness, and Khaled told of being criticized by comrades for staging the rescue. Government troops recovered the Blue Ghost from the clinic, and the authorities never investigated the allegations against him.

The following Wednesday morning, the situation was even more serious near my house. There were more gunshots as troops ran into Crater. They had come to trash one of the squares where the birak holds its gatherings. Older men shouted at the troops as one of their number was struck by a soldier’s rifle butt. The troops returned later to finish the job. Two middle-aged women yelled at them, but the confused soldiers left them alone. After the troops left Crater, I heard that two teenaged boys had been shot, one of them fatally. In the square, the photos of previous martyrs were torn down and the modest platform that activists had built totally destroyed.

The next day some 60 residents gathered in the square, men and women, of all ages, mostly very poor. Overnight someone had printed photos of the dead boy, Ahmad Darwish, 17, on posters and distributed them. Ahmad’s mother and grandmother were there to vent their anger amidst their grief. The grandmother, dressed in a worn-out overcoat, asked the emotionally charged questions on everyone’s lips: “Where is the United Nations? Where are our human rights?”
On the Saturday following these dramatic events, older people came into the streets to protect the young boys. Troops arrived in tanks and fired tear gas. But this time there were no casualties—perhaps because of the presence of women in the streets. While women have lost their lives, too, their challenges to the “the occupying forces,” as government troops are called here, are somewhat protected by the culture of men showing respect for women.

For all the similarities to the mid-1960s, there is one clear difference—today’s “anti-colonial” movement insists on unarmed resistance. In the birthplace of the struggle against the British, the Lahij governorate, the fighting has been bloody for years. But in Aden, once the cosmopolitan hub of the Arabian Peninsula, resistance means civil disobedience, strikes, meetings to educate the younger generation in history and the strong presence of women.

The more well-to-do activists say they aim to restore a civil state—one free of domination by the tribal, religious and military elites who rule in Sanaa. They want a multi-party system and a strong focus on services for the poor. For the less well-off, though, the hiarak is a revolution for a decent life. Women’s rights is also a key political goal. As a young woman explained, women want to reemerge from the shadows where they have been since the 1990 unification. At the various gatherings, however crowded, the only seats available are reserved for women and there is no harassment. Men lament the increased prominence of the niqab, the full face veil. There is a general will to restore women to their place “alongside men in building society,” as per the rhetoric of the Yemeni Socialist Party that governed the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) from 1967 to 1990. Intellectuals and schoolteachers complain about the distortion of southern history by the regime in Sanaa. According to the regime narrative, before unification the south was barely developed and Aden was merely a village. Southerners are now more or less unanimous that they will not regain their dignity as long as they are together with the north. Still, while men in the street use harsh words about northerners, the hiarak leadership tries to downplay the idea that the movement is against northerners as people. Such an idea would be racist, one hiarak leader told me.

The political luminaries of the southern past have an ambiguous relationship with the present movement. Some former PDRY leaders, such as ‘Ali Nasir Muhammad and Haydar Abu Bakr al-‘Attas, are outside the hiarak advocating for a federation. Tariq al-Fadli, the controversial “Arab Afghan” fighter who emerged in 2009 to gain a prominent position in the hiarak, has withdrawn from the scene. It is rumored that his son joined the jihadis who took over southern towns in 2011. Some old-guard activists want to see ‘Ali Salim al-Bid, the last Socialist general secretary and Salih’s vice president after unification, at the helm of the hiarak, while their younger counterparts tend to deplore such figures. Al-Bid seems to be popular among the urban poor who long for the steady prices, jobs and access to education of the Socialist era. The one constant theme is to heal the internal divides of the past, as shown at the reconciliation demonstrations held every January 13 since 2008 to remember the victims of intra-party fighting in 1986.
Though the entirety of southern society supports the cause, it is the poor who confront the troops sent by Sanaa. The revolutionaries who brave the bullets are primarily young boys with no shoes. In many squares, meanwhile, it is poor women of all ages who play the most vocal part with their demands for a normal, decent life. It is the poor who organize the demonstrations and attend the lectures in the squares. These places of street-level organizing can be found in almost every district of Aden. The uneducated learn about the city’s history, and the young learn about life before unification, when there were no water and power cuts and every graduate got a job. Occasionally, a preacher is invited, and numerous men of religion have joined the movement, but overall the movement is clear that southerners will not be subordinated with appeals to faith. One of the key demands of the hirak is an apology for the fatwas that reactionary northern clerics have issued against “unbelievers” in the south.  

On October 14 the hirak convened in Aden to commemorate the fifty-first anniversary of the uprising against the British. At the march the movement issued a hasty plan: The Yemeni administration and army is to withdraw from the entirety of southern territory by November 30, date of southern independence in 1967. While the streets are ready for independence, Adeni intellectuals fear that the movement is not. The intellectuals fear a repeat of 1967 when the sudden British exit left behind a new country with almost no resources. Amidst the frenzy the Houthi takeover of Sanaa has created in the south, an Adeni activist commented wisely on his Facebook wall: Southerners did not realize it until weeks later, but the date of separation of north and south was actually September 21, the day the Houthis rolled into the Yemeni capital. And Khaled Aden, the engineer who ferries the wounded in clashes with government troops to the clinic? According to Amnesty International, he was arrested and held without charge in Aden’s al-Sultan prison, twice in 2011 and again in November 2013. He was kept in a small cell without ventilation, lights or a toilet. On August 31, 2014, Khaled Aden disappeared again. He was held incommunicado for nearly three months. Upon his November 14 release, he received a hero’s welcome in Aden’s protest square.

Endnotes
1 See Susanne Dahlgren, “The Snake with a Thousand Heads: The Southern Cause in Yemen,” Middle East Report 256 (Fall 2010).
5 Aden al-Ghad, October 14, 2014.
6 Aden al-Ghad, October 14, 2014.
Chanting for Southern Independence

Anne-Linda Amira Augustin

“O ur revolution is the South Arabian revolution,” shouted five or six men at a march in Crater, a district of Aden, on March 20, 2014. The mass of demonstrators answered in unison: “Get out, get out, o colonial power!” The call-and-response pattern continued: “Our revolution is the South Arabian revolution.” “Against the power of the tyrants.” The stanza concluded with the chant leaders prompting, “No unity, no federalism,” and the crowd again thundering, “Get out, get out, o colonial power!”

It was a protest mounted by the Southern Movement, or hirak, whose activists hail from the full spectrum of southern Yemeni society. In 2007, former soldiers, students, state employees and unemployed youth took to the streets of Aden and other towns to demand an end to the marginalization of the south at the hands of the central government in Sanaa since unification of the north and south in 1990. The “southern cause” (al-qadiya al-janubiyya), as southerners call their collective grievances, came to be felt keenly after the war between north and south in 1994, when southern factories were looted, land was stolen and southerners were forcibly retired from the civil service and the army. After the government’s security forces beat back the first protests, the hirak began to sharpen and harden its objectives. It now calls for the complete independence of the territory of the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) from Sanaa. The “southern cause” has become the “South Arabian revolution.”

Slogans are mirrors of a movement’s values and claims. In the Southern Movement’s rhetoric, the territory of the former PDRY is “occupied” by (northern) Yemenis. The term “colonial power” (isti’mar) refers to southerners’ perception of northern domination, compares Sanaa’s control to British rule and evokes the independence struggle of the 1960s.

Moreover, the denunciations of “colonial power” reflect southerners’ rejection of the shape of the political transition in Yemen that began at the close of 2011. Facing popular uprisings and armed rebellions, former long-term president ‘Ali ‘Abdallah...
Salih was compelled to resign from office as a result of an initiative by the Gulf Cooperation Council, made up of Saudi Arabia and the other monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula. One key outcome of the National Dialogue Conference that followed Salih’s resignation was the decision to reorganize Yemen into six federal regions, two of which are to divide the south. The hiraki leadership refused to participate in the conference because the Sanaa elites and their international partners did not recognize the right to self-determination for the south.

On the afternoon of May 21, two months after rally in Crater, the Adeni quarter of Mu’alla was the scene of a mass demonstration (milyuniyya) whose discourse was also revealing of the hirak’s determination to achieve independence. Mass demonstrations in the south normally take place on two consecutive days and bring together groups from inside and outside Aden. The occasion this time was the twentieth anniversary of the announcement of southern disengagement from the north before the 1994 war by ‘Ali Salim al-Bid, the Socialist party head under the PDRY who briefly served as vice president of unified Yemen. An intrinsic part of every rally is the fa’aliyya, a celebration during which everyone in attendance has the opportunity to perform a song, recite a poem or deliver a speech from the stage. Demonstrators fill the short breaks between the different acts with chants.

Journalist Radfan al-Dabis of the Aden Live satellite channel headlined the May 21 event. “We swore by God,” he incanted into his microphone, “we swore.” The crowd of thousands of southerners gathered in Madram Street roared in response, “Sanaa cannot govern us!” The slogan makes explicit that the hirak considers Aden, the former capital of the PDRY, to be the center of legitimate power.

Next came a song whose refrain the protesters repeated over and over: “My country, my country is South Arabia / And the capital of the republic is Aden.” It was an old Yemeni anthem composed by Ayyoub Tarish but with a hiraki twist. The original chorus goes: “My country, my country is Yemen / I greet you, my homeland, in the course of time.” The rephrasing ties today’s movement to the southern Yemeni past. Before 1967, date of the PDRY’s independence, the territory was governed as the Federation of South Arabia (Aden and its hinterland) and the Protectorate of South Arabia (eastern part of southern Yemen) by the British and local sultans and sheikhs, respectively. The revised refrain refers simply to “the south” (al-janub), the popular abbreviation for al-janub al-arabi, or South Arabia. Any reference to Yemen is pointedly omitted.

After a woman gave a speech, the May 21 protesters launched into another set of rhyming slogans: “State of South Arabia / Free it, o struggler / I want our territory / And nothing nugatory (dawlat al-janub / harrarha ya munadil / bafani ardna..."

Umm al-Hirak at an Aden fa’aliyya on April 26, 2014 held to commemorate the beginning of the 1994 war.

Anne-Linde Amira Augustin
"/ ma bafani shay' batih." “Territory” or “land” is a central theme in the Southern Movement’s rhetoric and in local newspapers. After unification in 1990, the command economy of the avowedly Marxist PDRY was liberalized. An investment law opened the country to foreign capital, and the September Directive of 1991 enabled the sale of land had been nationalized in the PDRY’s early days. In the ensuing decade, there was a rush on the former state land. Functionaries in the state bureaucracy and army officers took immense kickbacks from the sales and expropriated some of the estates themselves.1 Southern feelings about the land grab are still raw.

The protesters on May 21 went on to applaud a pro-independence pop song, and then a brass band in PDRY marine uniform provided the soundtrack for a march of women up and down Madram Street. Again, the women sang, “My country, my country is South Arabia / And the capital of the republic is Aden.” After several repetitions, the crowd chanted in rhythm, “Get out (irhal), get out, get out of Aden, get out of Aden.” The target of their ire was clear—northern Yemenis who work in trade or study at the university. Many southerners see it as an affront that they have to compete with northerners for places at the institution of higher education or in the civil service—a competition in which they often lose out.

To the accompaniment of the brass band, young men cried out, “With spirit and blood, we devote ourselves to you, o South Arabia.” It was another resonance with the past—or, more precisely, today’s reinterpretation of the past. In the days of the PDRY, southern children chanted this classic Arab political slogan in school, but to dedicate themselves to Yemen, not the south. The refashioned slogan draws a clear distinction between southerners and northern Yemenis. The “South Arabian identity” is constructed from remembered experiences of life under the PDRY. In the memories of the older generations, and the nostalgia they pass down to the young, southern identity stands for modernity and cosmopolitanism, whereas “Yemeni identity” is seen as backward, tribal and corrupt. Many southerners think of the PDRY as a secure, well-functioning civil state that supplied jobs, education and health care to all. They believe that northerners, by contrast, are unable to build a civil state—hence the failure of the National Dialogue.

At first, the women who had been marching urged on the male youths: “Advance, o men, advance, advance, advance.” After a while, though, the women joined in the men’s devotion of themselves “to you, o South Arabia.”

The next chant on the agenda again rebuked the government in Sanaa. “O South Arabian, raise your voice! Independence or death!” The protesters here expressed the depth of southern distaste for northern rule. They also played on a saying of ‘Ali Abdallah Salih, “Unity or death,” which he had inserted in speeches and emblazoned on placards in Aden’s streets to convey to southerners that any attempt at independence would fail. As this chant resounded, the marching women returned to their seats.

The May 21 milyuniyya finished with another sequence of call and response. “Raise your head,” television anchor al-Dabis exhorted the throngs of southerners, who answered him, “You are a free South Arabian.” This hiraki adaptation of an iconic holler from the Egyptian uprising of 2011—“Raise your head, you are Egyptian”—can also be found scrawled on walls all over Aden.

The rallies of the hirak have the dual function of displaying the breadth of dissent to the regime in Sanaa and informing the outside world about the “southern cause.” The anti-northern stance is obvious. But the protests also have a large impact internal to the Southern Movement, particularly via the PDRY slogans that have been reinterpreted for the exigencies of today. The slogans contribute to the formation of identity and collective memory among hirak activists—and can even constitute instruments of collective power.

The protesters in Aden’s streets are mostly underprivileged—aging southerners who lost their jobs after 1994 or youths who have never been able to find a job at all. Many of the activists lead individual lives of quiet frustration, even desperation, but chanting and marching to music they turn their airing of grievances into a loud, whooping celebration. Together, they can be heard from afar.

Endnote

1 Thomas Pritzkat, Stadtentwicklung und Migration im Südjemen: Mukalla und die hadhramiti-tische Auslandsgemeinschaft (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2001).
Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil, Yemeni political thinker, activist and university professor, was assassinated by gunmen on a motorbike on November 2, 2014 in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa. Iris Glosemeyer and Anna Würth, researchers of contemporary Yemen based in Berlin, were his friends from the early 1990s onward.

Dear Iris,

I always hoped this would never happen again—the late-night phone calls from friends, the rumors, the silence, followed by the hollowness and grief, then another round of e-mails and phone calls with family and friends. Yet another person who we have known much of our adult lives was shot on the street, by “unknown armed men,” as the phrase goes in Yemen. For years we have heard about these “unknown armed men” conducting targeted killings of intellectuals, movers and shakers, men of integrity, vision and capacity to forge alliances among former foes. I hoped that when Jarallah Omar was shot 12 years ago it would be the last such sacrifice Yemenis made for their country. I was wrong. It continued. And now Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil is gone, killed on the street by gunmen, like so many others before him.

When we met him back in 1993, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik, born in 1942, was teaching political science at Sanaa University. That time, three years into unification, was probably unrivaled in Yemen, north and south, for its degree of freedom. People met, talked, debated, sometimes agreed to disagree—northerners and southerners, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, even young and old. As a university professor and writer, and as a father, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil influenced the thinking of the younger educated generation. When Yemenis took to the streets in 2011, youth acknowledged that he may have been older, but his thought was not aging.

I remember a late-night qat chew in 1994, with a dozen friends—researchers, diplomats, foreigners, Yemenis—in the Old City. War was on the verge of breaking out between the elites of the northern and southern parts of Yemen. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik, then a member of the National Dialogue Committee, which took part in drafting a key document to mediate between the warring factions, dismissed our worries about his safety. He said that there was no option but to try to find an agreement. He said he would pay the price, whatever it was. He was, as usual, courageous, though he was rather alone. Among scorpions. We were worried then, relieved later. Did we misjudge the risks to his wellbeing in the coming years?

I have never witnessed so many changes to Yemeni Facebook profiles as when the news came through. His students, his friends, his colleagues in politics, his countrymen—they were all Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik. They are so sick of losing their best to gunmen on motorbikes, and so am I. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik was one of their best.

—Anna Würth

Dear Anna,

When a friend called to tell me about the assassination, I was hoping it would be just another of those many tidbits of news about Yemen that turn out to be rumor or nonsense. I waited for a correction, but it never came.

Gunmen on motorcycles running over or shooting unarmed intellectuals, drugged nutcases firing at helpless people in hospitals—these people are not who I am thinking about. They get too much attention already. They and their families are victims of propaganda that attempts to draw boundaries in our minds and to spread violence among human beings, using slogans that are merely a disguise of power games, and a poor disguise at that. Wisdom is the worst enemy of this propaganda.

You may not remember—or maybe we had not even met then?—but Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik al-Mutawakkil made me contribute to one of his lectures in the early 1990s. Although
I spent weeks on preparation, I was terribly nervous and my presentation was poor. I do not think my remarks contributed to the students’ knowledge of Yemen, if they were able to understand me at all. But that did not seem to matter much. Students were happy that a foreigner in their age bracket came to their class trying to share research findings—even if the findings were not news to them and were presented in funny-sounding Arabic. For Muhammad, who had a classical education and impeccable Arabic, as well as university degrees from Egypt and the United States, it must have been an ordeal.

Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik taught me and his students, at that time and all the subsequent times we shared, to try to reach out to others, no matter how difficult it is. Do not accept the idea of language, cultural, political or whatever other barriers there may be between human beings, because these barriers do not exist except in our brains. Teach each other; learn from each other. If we try, we will find a way to overcome the obstacles, whatever our nationality, religion, culture or language. This stance was reflected in his career, with his specialization in media, education and human rights, as well as in his engagement in politics and civil society. Muhammad was key to the establishment of one of the first major human rights organizations in Yemen.

At the time, Muhammad’s view of life was by no means exceptional in Yemen. All over the country, Yemenis who had no formal schooling or university degree but were educated at heart gave me the same message. The way they said it is very much to the point. Kulluna bani Adam—we are all the offspring of Adam. We are all human beings.

Anna, we heard it so many times, this deep-rooted wisdom about our common humanity that was shared so generously with us. And now the country so precious is getting lost. Political bickering, propaganda leading to ignorance, desperation. It is these factors and the thinking evolving from them that drove the people who ordered Muhammad ‘Abd al-Malik’s assassination. They cannot be fought with guns and drones, but only with wisdom, and that is why they hate it so much. Was Muhammad involved in negotiations between parties to the current conflict, as he had been for decades?

Already in early November 2011, someone may have tried to kill Muhammad. He was doing what he enjoyed the most—walking alone, unarmed, near his family home off Agriculture Road in Sanaa—when he was run over by a kid on a motorcycle. My friends and I visited him in the hospital in Amman when we were there for a meeting, a few days after he was taken there for treatment. I was so relieved when I saw in his eyes that he recognized me in spite of his severe head injury. Comforting his daughters, who had accompanied him to Jordan despite their own commitments at university and in civil society organizations, was almost impossible. I do not know what to do now—based in Berlin.

You mentioned Jarallah Omar, who was acting general secretary of the Yemeni Socialist Party when he was assassinated in 2002. He had a similar vision to Muhammad’s: He overcame political and regional boundaries; he left the past behind; he thought of the necessity of building a new Yemen and the opportunities to do it; and he wanted to give a chance to the next generation. Muhammad and Jarallah worked together on the National Dialogue and the pledge of reconciliation in 1993–1994. Jarallah was shot while addressing an Islah assembly, trying to build a bridge between Yemeni Socialists and Islamists. His murderer had the same mindset as the killers of Muhammad al-Mutawakkil: Erect barriers in our minds and spread violence among human beings. Even Jarallah’s murder, however, could not prevent what in 2005 became the Joint Meeting Parties—a coalition of Islamists of different political shades, Socialists, Nasserists, Baathists and others, including the Union of Popular Forces, of which Muhammad became secretary-general in 2001.

On November 4 Muhammad was carried to his grave in Sanaa by a large crowd that, unusually, included many women. That so many women were there would have pleased Muhammad. Likewise, Jarallah Omar’s funeral in 2002 turned into a mass demonstration. Thousands of people of different political affiliations attended the ceremony. I hoped then and I hope now, just like you, that Yemenis will continue to fight. Not against each other, but for their common humanity and each person’s rights. To me, that is Muhammad’s legacy.

—Iris Glosemeyer
Explosions and Ill Omens
On the Stage at World Theater Day in Yemen

Katherine Hennessey

On October 9, 2014, a suicide bomber detonated himself in central Sanaa, killing dozens of innocent people. Upon reading the news coverage of this terrible event my thoughts leapt back to a series of plays that I had seen performed in Sanaa in the spring. Most of these performances took place under the aegis of the annual celebration of World Theater Day, known locally as the Festival of Yemeni Theater. Five months prior to the explosion in Sanaa, a surprising number of the festival’s plays had made references to suicide bombing.

The festival’s opening production, Marzouq in the Role of the Terrorist, directed by 'Umar 'Abdallah Salih and performed on March 30, is a play within a play. It features an inept actor named Marzouq who is assigned a role as a suicide bomber but struggles to comprehend the motivations of his character. At one point during the performance, Marzouq enters “in character,” so far as he understands it: He is masked and carrying a rifle, which he points in the air, baffling his director. Marzouq explains that he is playing the kind of terrorist who attacks the power station and shoots at the power lines. The director responds furiously that Marzouq must follow the script: “The character wears a suicide belt. That’s so you can blow yourself up, and everyone around you!”

The subsequent night’s performance, Wa al-Hall? (What’s the Solution?), written and directed by Salih al-Salih, portrayed a neighborhood of ordinary Yemenis—a bookseller, an egg and potato vendor, an owner of a tea and sandwich shop—all trying to eke out a living in an atmosphere of deteriorating economic conditions and fragmenting social relations. Consumed by their own quotidian problems, they fail to recognize the danger in their midst, in the person of a long-bearded youth who accuses them, one by one, of having strayed from the true path of the faith. Though his verbal attacks escalate and his behavior becomes increasingly erratic, the others dismiss him as histrionic but harmless. In the last few moments of the play, to the horror of the other characters, he reappears wearing a suicide vest, at which the stage lights go dark.

Al-Tauhan, directed by Muhammad al-Rakhm, followed a remarkably similar plot, with a group of Yemeni characters going about their daily affairs, oblivious to the dangers of extremism until it is too late. A sinister, shadowy figure who lurks at the margins of the neighborhood eventually turns out to be a suicide bomber who has been biding his time so as to inflict the maximum possible damage with his lethal act.

Still another performance, Irhab ya Nas! (It’s Terrorism, People!), depicted a suicide bombing as one incident in a destructive chain of extremist violence that wreaks havoc on social relations. Here the central group of characters—one again, a set of “average” Yemenis, though this time predominantly young people—are gradually dehumanized by the fear and loss that mount inexorably with every explosion, every slaughter. In a stark departure from the social realism of the two aforementioned plays, this performance experimented with tableau scenes and stylized, symbolic action. At one point, the characters descended into animalistic fury, shrieking wordlessly at each other like monkeys, then snarling and snapping like a pack of stray dogs.

In May, as I watched the festival unfold on the stage of the Cultural Center night after night, the repeated focus on the issue of suicide bombing struck me as odd. Yemeni theater has not shied away from grappling with the issue of terrorism in the past. There are numerous Yemeni plays that show, for example, the aftermath of an explosion, or an act of mass violence, just as there is a subset of Yemeni plays that portray war and revolution. But contemporary theater in Yemen treats a remarkably diverse range of social issues. That four plays in a series of 13 at the Cultural Center would select the same issue as a central theme was surprising, especially given the sadly broad range of threats and challenges facing Yemeni society.

More startling, though, was the repeated implication that suicide bombing was a serious threat facing the average Yemeni in Sanaa. Certainly, the capital had seen its share of violence during the 2011 uprising, and had grown increasingly unstable in the subsequent years. Politicians and military figures ran the risk of assassination; the frequency of extrajudicial executions carried out by teams of two men on motorbikes, a driver and a gunman, even led to a ban on civilian motorbike traffic in the capital in September 2013. Indeed, as the festival ran its course this type of violence continued, most dramatically on May 5, when a French security guard was shot and killed in his car in broad daylight at a busy intersection in the heart of the capital. Yet this murderous violence, by and large, targeted particular individuals, and in that respect differed from a bomber detonating his belt in a crowded public square.

Residents of Sanaa would of course have known about the gruesome violence of suicide bombing in other Yemeni cities, like the attack on South Korean tourists in Shibam in 2009. But this type of violence had rarely occurred in Sanaa: One

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of the attackers killed in the 2008 attack on the US Embassy apparently wore an explosive vest; another in 2009 targeted the South Korean convoy that had come to repatriate the victims of the Shibam attacks, but that time the bomber killed only himself. In May 2012 the deadliest suicide attack in Yemen to date killed nearly 100 Yemeni soldiers as they rehearsed a parade for the annual celebration of Yemeni unification. Yet as frightening as that event was, many Yemenis continued to think of suicide bombing as being directed at particular targets—foreigners, the US Embassy, the military—rather than Yemeni society or the Yemeni everyman.

Clearly, Yemeni theater practitioners viewed the issue in a different light. Despite the fact that various other types of terrorist violence were making headlines and could conceivably have served as material for a play, all four of the plays described above focused on the issue of suicide bombing, as a clear and present danger to all citizens, about which residents of Sanaa needed to be warned.

**Monsters, Murders and Mayhem**

Yemeni actors and directors often describe themselves as educators. In Yemen, theater imparts essential information to a populace that still struggles with basic literacy; it strives to fill in some of the massive gaps left by a failed educational system. Theater is also both a means of and a forum for free and creative expression and for public debate about the myriad challenges facing the nation. To attend a theatrical performance in Yemen is, almost invariably, to witness a particular issue or perspective held up to public scrutiny on stage, embodied with careful consideration and in rich detail, with the aim of provoking social change—political reform, for example, or greater rights for women, or improvements to health care and education.

To attend the annual festival of Yemeni theater, then, with ten or 12 plays staged in the course of a fortnight, is akin to peering at a cross-section of the social problems that Yemenis judge so pressing as to warrant the time and intellectual energy required to write, rehearse and stage a play. Suicide bombing was strikingly prominent as a theme, but the 2014 theater festival also provided audiences with a further assortment of thought-provoking topics running the gamut from human trafficking to preventive medicine.

Yet where in previous years the festival brought an exhilarating range of comedy, tragedy, farce, satire and melodrama to the stage, the 2014 festival instead struck a series of darkly pessimistic notes. Rather than enthusiastic calls to action, the 2014 performances repeatedly staged corruption and stagnation, violence and destruction. And where in the past the Yemeni stage tended toward utopian, wish-fulfilling conclusions in which the honest but downtrodden hero or heroine eventually triumphs and the evildoer is unmasked and punished, the 2014 plays predominantly portrayed villains who escape justice and suffering protagonists powerless to change their fate.

One of the festival’s first performances, *al-Tifl* (The Child) directed by Ha’il al-Salwi, reads very clearly as a parable about the imminent dangers that violence poses to the innocent. The performance culminates in a chilling scene in which a frantic father grabs a rifle and shoots at the ruffian who has been ordered to spirit away his only son—but the bullet strikes and kills the infant instead of the thug. I had attended several rehearsals of the play in the weeks before the festival, but found myself unprepared for the disconcerting experience of watching the
portrayal of the shooting death of an infant in a theater filled with Yemeni families and small children (parents may well have assumed from the title that the play was meant for children).

Al-Tifl was not the only festival play that startled its audience with its subject matter. Barakash wa al-Kash (Barakash and the Cash), written and directed by Luna Yafa’i, took up the issue of human trafficking in Sa’ada, a northwestern province on the Saudi Arabian border, as perpetrated by the greedy and utterly unscrupulous Barakash, who at one point in the play promises a prospective client “whatever you want, a Somali, an Ethiopian, a Djibouti.” Barakash targets the isolated and marginalized, kidnapping a young Yemeni woman, orphaned and with no adult male relatives, as she travels without a chaperone to take up a job to support her brood of small siblings. Barakash and his assistant repeatedly comment on the young woman's beauty, implying that the captive is not merely a commodity for sale but also a potential sex slave.

Even more controversial was Yafa’i’s decision to portray Barakash and his cronies as members of the Yemeni armed forces stationed in Sa’ada. The portrayal of the army is somewhat redeemed by the play’s ending, in which an officer shocked by Barakash’s excesses blows the whistle, and a crack commando unit—whose captain is female—storms in and arrests Barakash’s henchmen. But the title character himself is not the only one to profit from this conclusion seemed to sit with its subject matter. Yafa’i has since complained that the administration of the Cultural Center refuses to provide her with a copy of its script written and directed by Luna Yafa’i, took up the issue of human trafficking in Sa’ada, a northwestern province on the Saudi Arabian border, as perpetrated by the greedy and utterly unscrupulous Barakash, who at one point in the play promises a prospective client “whatever you want, a Somali, an Ethiopian, a Djibouti.” Barakash targets the isolated and marginalized, kidnapping a young Yemeni woman, orphaned and with no adult male relatives, as she travels without a chaperone to take up a job to support her brood of small siblings. Barakash and his assistant repeatedly comment on the young woman's beauty, implying that the captive is not merely a commodity for sale but also a potential sex slave.

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The point of this production, as it turned out, was to educate Yemeni audiences about the disease and about the benefits of screening and early detection. At the conclusion of the play the actors addressed the audience from the stage, explaining that like the monster, cancer is a disease that can afflict Yemenis of all ages and classes. Volunteers passed out pamphlets including lists of risk factors and symptoms, as well as contact information for local clinics equipped to screen patients for various forms of cancer. In addition to its utility as a public service announcement, \textit{Man Anta?} was technically sophisticated, visually appealing and cleverly written; it was an excellent piece of theater, the best in the 2014 festival. Moreover, despite the sobering material it was one of the few festival plays to pinpoint both a problem and a potential solution—a “call to action” in the typical tradition of Yemeni theater.

In contrast, \textit{al-Hafila} (The Bus), which depicts the struggles, fears and petty quarrels of a group of passengers who are stranded in a wasteland when their bus breaks down, seemed like its characters to lack direction and purpose. Written and directed by Yahya Suhayl, it provided some colorful moments—the opening scene, for example, featured a wedding procession with both male and female characters in full regalia, accompanied by a group of musicians playing at earsplitting volume, no doubt titillating spectators accustomed to gender-segregated celebrations—but offered little of deeper significance.

\textit{Hikayat Amal} (Amal’s Tale), written by ‘Adil al-‘Amri and directed by Nabhan al-Shami, achieved a more sophisticated level of character development than Suhayl’s play, then squandered it on a pat ending. The play dramatizes a piece of Yemeni folklore about the \textit{wahsh al-jabal}, the mountain monster, whose lascivious attempts to prey on a young woman are thwarted when her friends and her teacher (all female) and their bus driver (male) band together to save her. They encircle the monster, accusing him of embodying all the social ills that they have endured in their lives (“You are corruption! Fear! Unemployment! Backwardness!”), then beat and execute him. A salutary message of strength in unity, certainly—if only “kill the monster” were a viable step toward a more stable and prosperous Yemen.

\textit{Mukafahat Nihayat Khidma} (End-of-Service Payment), a one-woman show written by Munir Talal and capably acted by Amani al-Dhamari, searchingly explored the struggles of single women in Yemeni society—the pressure to accede to early or arranged marriages, the difficulties of pursuing higher education, the oft-frustrated desire to participate in society beyond the protective walls of the domestic sphere. The protagonist harbors hidden artistic talent, which she expresses by sculpting with her fingers a series of images in a thin layer of sand, constantly rearranging the grains on her makeshift canvas to create new forms out of the previous ones—each as beautiful, fragile and ephemeral as her hopes for happiness.

The festival’s final play, \textit{al-Masir al-Ghamid} (Destination Unknown), written and directed by Adam Sayf, was widely expected to be a rollicking musical comedy, the genre for which Sayf is best known. Yet rather than for the dances and the elaborate jokes, audiences will remember this performance for the moment that Sayf, in the midst of dialogue with another actor, turned to the minister of culture in his front-row VIP seat, and proceeded to mock the Ministry for the funding debacle that had thrown the festival into chaos.

The jokes were arch rather than devastating, and delivered with the sort of teasing tone one might take when ribbing a long-time friend. Nevertheless, it was clearly a moment in which a Yemeni artist had chosen to take his government to task—and the audience joined in, gleefully applauding Sayf’s every line. The lighting technicians even brought up the house lights, allowing the crowd to see plainly that the minister had been caught completely off guard at becoming a part of the play. While amusing, this interlude was also rather disquieting for those concerned about Yemeni government officials’ ability to respond adroitly to the unexpected.

Thus, even in its most bracing and memorable moments, the festival presented a grave, sobering assessment of the state of Yemeni society, and precious little hope for its future. Some of this pessimism no doubt stemmed from the shambolic administration of the festival. Disenchantment with the transitional government and the National Dialogue may have also contributed to the atmosphere of sardonic depression. Yet in hindsight, and in the wake of the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in September and the suicide bombing in the capital in October, the performances also seem strangely prescient, as though, rather than portrayals of the current state of Yemeni society, they were in fact portents of its impending disintegration.
The Long Shadow of the CIA at Guantánamo

Lisa Hajjar

A bd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a designated “high-value detainee” in US government parlance, is on trial in the Guantánamo Bay military commissions. The 49-year old Saudi Arabian is accused of directing the October 2000 al-Qaeda suicide boat bombing of the USS Cole off the coast of Aden, Yemen, which killed 17 sailors and injured 40 more, and a failed plan to bomb the USS Sullivans. Five other high-value detainees, including alleged “mastermind” Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, are being tried together for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. All six could face the death penalty if convicted.

Al-Nashiri’s experiences offer a case study of how the US government has chosen to wage the “war on terror” and the consequences of those choices. The Saudi Arabian represents a hard case, however, because he is a secret. For the four years he spent in the custody of the CIA, he was a ghost. Today, he remains obscured by the long shadow the CIA casts over military detention and commission operations at Guantánamo Bay. He is housed in a secret facility with other former CIA detainees, and has never been allowed to communicate by phone or Skype with members of his family, let alone anyone else (although the government recently indicated that brief, monitored and time-delayed family calls may be a possibility in the future). The American lawyers who represent him are obligated to guard their words when speaking about the years he was “disappeared” or the cause of his diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder.

What makes al-Nashiri “high-value” today is not that he poses a continuing threat to national security (he is under lock and key around the clock) or that he could be tapped for actionable intelligence about terrorist plots. Rather, he, like the other high-value detainees at Guantánamo, is the literal embodiment of the CIA’s rendition, detention and interrogation program, which remains one of the most closely guarded national security secrets despite being drydocked in 2006. That move was prompted by the Supreme Court’s ruling in Hamdan v. Rumsfeld three months earlier that all prisoners have, at minimum, the rights guaranteed by Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which is regarded as a humanitarian baseline in war. Hamdan was a repudiation of President George W. Bush’s February 7, 2002 declaration that the Geneva Conventions are inapplicable to the “war on terror.” Because the CIA’s program of government-sanctioned kidnapping, forced disappearance and torture was in flagrant violation of Common Article 3, at a press conference on September 6, 2006 Bush begrudgingly announced that the CIA detainees would be brought out of the darkness of the secret prisons known as “black sites” and into the “dark gray site” of Guantánamo. (The phrase “dark gray site” comes from attorney James Connell, who represents Ammar al-Baluchi, one of “the 9/11 five,” as Khalid Shaikh Mohammad and his fellow defendants are known.)

Al-Nashiri had actually been to Guantánamo before 2006. He was one of four high-value detainees who were secretly transferred onto the base on September 24, 2003 in an unmarked Boeing 737. That “ghost flight” started in Kabul, where it picked up Mustafa Hawsawi (now one of the 9/11 five) from the black site known as the Salt Pit. The next stop was a black site named Stare Kiejkuty in Szymany, Poland, where Mohammad was picked up, then dropped off at another code-named Britelite in Bucharest. The last pickup was in Rabat—al-Nashiri, Abu Zubayda (the first person turned over to the CIA for interrogation) and Ramzi bin al-Shibh (another of the 9/11 five). According to the Associated Press, “By late summer 2003, the CIA believed the men had revealed their best secrets. The agency needed somewhere to hold them, but no longer needed to conduct prolonged interrogations. The US naval facility at Guantánamo Bay seemed a good fit.” (Although this AP article, like hundreds of others about the CIA’s program, is in the public domain, its subject matter is regarded as classified. Government employees with security clearance who

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have specific knowledge are obligated to neither confirm nor deny the accuracy of such information. Lawyers working in the military commissions are prohibited from remarking upon such open-source material.) The four men were held at a new secret facility named Strawberry Fields. By March 2004, however, the CIA decided that the base was not such a good fit after all because the Supreme Court might rule in Rasul v. Bush (as it subsequently did in June) that the government cannot hold people at Guantánamo incommunicado indefinitely. Al-Nashiri and the other ghost prisoners were transferred back overseas where they remained until after Hamdan.

Al-Nashiri’s journey of extraordinary renditions through the CIA’s secret gulag began in November 2002, a month after agents of the United Arab Emirates arrested him in Dubai. It included stays in the Salt Pit; a black site in Bangkok, where he experienced the panoply of White House-approved CIA interrogation tactics, including waterboarding; and Stare Kiejkuty, where, naked and hooded, he was subjected to mock execution with a power drill and an unloaded semi-automatic handgun. From Poland, he was transferred to Morocco until the 2003 move to Guantánamo. In 2004, he was sent back to Morocco, then to Romania where he remained until the Washington Post reported in November 2005 that there were black sites in “eastern European democracies” (which Human Rights Watch revealed several days later as Poland and Romania). In the CIA’s scramble away from Europe, al-Nashiri was sent somewhere—that location is still a secret (although Afghanistan would be a good guess). According to Dick Marty, author of the 2007 Council of Europe investigative report on secret detentions and illegal transfers of detainees involving member states, there are “formidable obstacles…to get to the truth about the CIA [program] of secret detentions in Europe.” The Open Society Justice Initiative has documented 54 foreign governments that cooperated in some manner with the CIA’s rendition program.

Since September 2006, al-Nashiri has been housed at Camp 7, a maximum-security facility that is as close to a black site as remains. Its 15 residents are isolated not only from all other prisoners at Guantánamo (the current total is 142) but most of the time from each other as well. The camp is run by Task Force Platinum, a unit composed of reservists.

Camp 7 is so secret that no journalist has ever been permitted to tour it. There is no public information about when it was built or how much it cost. In fact, the existence of the camp was a secret until it was revealed, by accident, on December 8, 2007, when a line about the facility was preserved in the declassified client meeting notes of Gitanjali Gutierrez, a Center for Constitutional Rights attorney who represented Majid Khan. That revelation, according to the Miami Herald's Carol
Rosenberg, created a crisis for military spokespeople because they were not permitted to talk about Camp 7 and did not know how to respond to journalists’ queries. Among the defense lawyers in these two cases, only one, James Connell, has visited Camp 7 (for 12 hours) to gain a firsthand understanding of the conditions of confinement for his client al-Baluchi, but he is not permitted to provide any details about what he saw, and the photos and maps produced during his visit are classified.

The Evolving Process

On March 14, 2007, al-Nashiri had a hearing before the Combatant Status Review Tribunal, the administrative body set up after Rasul to determine whether individuals at Guantánamo met the American-made criteria of “unlawful enemy combatant” to justify their continued detention. Al-Nashiri’s hearing was closed to journalists, and the transcript remains heavily redacted, including most details that he provided to the tribunal about his torture by the CIA.

In December 2008, during the lame duck period of the Bush administration, al-Nashiri was charged to stand trial before the military commissions. His arraignment was scheduled for February 9, 2009. In January, the government requested a 120-day postponement while the new Obama administration figured out what to do about Guantánamo. The judge, Col. James L. Pohl, denied that request, and accepted a motion from al-Nashiri’s attorneys for a hearing immediately following the arraignment to introduce evidence about his treatment by the CIA. Hours later, the government withdrew the charges, thus removing al-Nashiri from the jurisdiction of the commissions.

In October 2009, Congress passed a revised Military Commissions Act. In November, the Obama administration announced its plans about how and where prisoners at Guantánamo would be tried. The 9/11 five were designated for trial in federal court because terrorism is not an offense under the laws of war. But that plan fell apart for domestic political reasons and in 2011 their case was reassigned to the military commissions. Al-Nashiri was tapped from the outset for trial by military commission because the main charges against him relate to his alleged role in the bombing of the USS Cole, which is a military object. (Similar reasoning was applied to Omar Khadr, whose main charge, “murder in violation of the laws of war,” was connected to the death of a soldier during a firefight in Khost, Afghanistan, in July 2002.) On April 20, 2011, prosecutors submitted capital charges against al-Nashiri to the Convening Authority of the commissions, and hearings commenced on January 17, 2012.

But to say that al-Nashiri is “on trial” is a bit of a misconception. His case, like that of the 9/11 five, has not moved beyond the pre-trial motion phase. Attorneys in both cases have been battling with prosecutors over the discovery of materials relating to their clients’ ghost years, as well as the legality and legitimacy of using military commissions to prosecute the offenses for which their clients are charged.

One of the legal questions that the al-Nashiri case raises is when the United States was “at war.” The USS Cole was bombed the year before the September 11 attacks and the launching of the “war on terror.” Was the United States at war in 2000, and if so, with whom? Because military commissions are supposed to have jurisdiction over law of war offenses in wartime, the government has crafted an ex post facto claim that the country was at war with al-Qaeda from 1996 when Osama bin Laden issued a fatwa calling for jihad against America. Another question then arises: If the US was at war in 2000, is the bombing of a military object a law of war offense? According to David Glazier, a preeminent expert on the military commissions and the laws of war:

I was in command of a Navy frigate at the time of this attack [on the USS Cole], and I can say with certainty that no one considered
themselves at war either immediately before or after this attack; indeed the crew of the Cole very much had a peacetime mentality, contributing to the attack’s success. Unlike a number of previous terrorist attacks, this one did not provoke any US military response—there simply was no government consideration of this constituting an act of war. And it is better that it did not as far as our ability to prosecute it because naval warfare has always permitted approaching the enemy under ruse or false colors, and unlike the use of civilian airliners as a weapon, this attack comes close to being permissible if it took place in an armed conflict. So this trial absolutely belongs in federal court as an ordinary act of terrorism.

Thus, the question of when and where the war started will be one of many complex legal matters to be argued before and decided by the officers who compose the panel (the military term for a jury) whenever the al-Nashiri case goes to trial.

**Trying High-Value Secrets**

The defense attorneys who represent high-value detainees compare the challenges of doing their work to litigating in the dark with their hands tied. The protective orders that govern their handling of classified materials—and attach criminal penalties for violations—including obligations to neither confirm nor deny any details relating to their clients’ ghost years, even if those details are in the public domain as a result of investigative journalism or leaks. They are barred from showing certain classified materials to their clients—even information about them—because the latter do not have security clearances. They are required to treat everything their clients say about their CIA years as “presumptively classified,” and not just “ordinary” classified information but TOP SECRET//SCI level, which requires extremely stringent security measures, such as use and storage only in highly secure rooms certified as Sensitive Compartmented Intelligence Facilities (SCIFs) and limiting its possession to a very small number of individuals with the requisite clearances. Access to SCI information also requires agreement to a strict non-disclosure agreement which the government keeps on file for 70 years, as well as detailed reporting requirements on substantive contacts with foreign nationals.

The high-security courtroom where the hearings take place is rigged with a mute button should anyone say something about the CIA program that might be heard by journalists, who observe from a separate room in the back that has a 40-second delay on the audio feed. What those looking into the courtroom can see is a legal process that runs on two tracks, one public and another shadowed by blackouts, closed sessions where secrets can be discussed, and “no comment” responses by government spokespeople. Also visible is a fundamental contradiction between due process, which would include the presumption of innocence, and the treatment of those on trial as guilty. JTF-GTMO personnel who bring the shackled defendants to the courtroom work off a standard operating procedure script where they are—in the present tense—“terrorists” and “enemies picked up on the battlefield” (despite the fact that almost no one at Guantánamo, certainly not al-Nashiri, was picked up on a battlefield).

Prosecutors—who function as representatives of the government—must balance on the tightrope strung between their duty to act in a manner that persuades the world that the military commission process is transparent and fair, and their other duty to keep secrets secret by fighting defense team motions for discovery of information about their clients’ ghost years. When asked about his role in guarding the CIA’s secrets, Brig. Gen. Mark Martins, chief prosecutor for the military commissions, explained that there “still are important sources and methods that need to be protected” for national security reasons. For example, although it is public knowledge that al-Nashiri was held and tortured in Poland (among other places), the government still treats it as a classified secret. Fighting the defense on discovery of classified information is not, Martins
insisted, about shielding the CIA from embarrassment for past “mistakes,” but rather because “we don’t want information to get out that will aid bad guys still on the run. Also, we don’t want something to come out that will prevent accountability” for the crimes being prosecuted in the commissions.

In this context, the phrase “prevent accountability” reflects a concern that evidence and testimony about torture might put the government’s goals of conviction and execution at risk, and would also, in essence, put the CIA on trial. Given that the official position of the US government under both the Bush and Obama administrations has been to prevent accountability for the crime of torture, the military commissions represent the last front where that battle is being fought.

Lawyers who represent al-Nashiri and the 9/11 five do want to make CIA torture part of these capital cases, and for legally valid reasons. For the trial phase, they need evidence and witness testimony about what happened to their clients during their years of pre-trial detention—including the infliction of great bodily injury and psychological abuses—in order to challenge evidence that the government claims incriminates them. Martins and other prosecutors insist that no statements gleaned from torture will be introduced at trial. Yet the admissibility of secret evidence and hearsay (e.g., by others who perhaps were tortured by the CIA or agents of a foreign government) should, according to defense lawyers, be offset by their access to—and use of—information about outrageous government conduct. Such information is also crucial to the sentencing phase. Part of the work of a good defense in any capital case involves conducting investigations in order to prepare mitigation arguments. If the defendants in these cases are found guilty, their lawyers want to be prepared to argue that years of deliberate torture by government agents and further years of harsh confinement should mitigate death sentences.

Al-Nashiri’s defense team is headed by Richard Kammen, a civilian death penalty lawyer (“learned counsel”) from Indianapolis who has been on the case since 2008. Al-Nashiri’s first military lawyer, Cmdr. Stephen Reyes, left the team in 2013 to study at Harvard. Now al-Nashiri’s military lawyers are Cmdr. Brian Mizer, who defended bin Laden’s driver Salim Hamdan in his 2007 commission trial, and Maj. Tom Hurley, who had been part of Pfc. Chelsea Manning’s court-martial defense team.

Nancy Hollander, a civilian lawyer from Albuquerque, has also been part of the al-Nashiri team since 2008. In 2013, however, the Department of Defense altered her security clearance to gain access to classified materials and to meet with her client from “approved” to “disapproved.” Why? Cmdr. Mizer argued at hearings in February and April 2014 that the change was an arbitrary and illegitimate move to retaliate against Hollander for representing al-Nashiri in cases before the European Court of Human Rights against the governments of Poland and Romania for permitting the CIA to run black sites where he was tortured. In response to the defense motion for an evidentiary hearing to discover why Hollander’s clearances were pulled, the lead prosecutor in the al-Nashiri case, Cmdr. Andrea Lockhart, argued that the military commissions do not have the power to investigate security determinations by executive branch experts acting within the scope of their authority, nor should their motivations be subjected to second-guessing.

The FBI and the Justice Department carry water for the CIA. In the spring of 2014 it was revealed that FBI agents
had attempted to persuade or intimidate several non-attorney members of the 9/11 five’s defense teams to inform on their colleagues. The motivation for this spy operation was a suspicion that people might be mishandling classified information. The operation was exposed when a linguist on the Ramzi bin al-Shibh team disregarded the non-disclosure instructions and told his colleagues. Other lawyers asked their team members, and learned that the FBI had attempted to turn others into informants as well. The exposure raised serious conflict-of-interest concerns, which derailed the case. To put the case back on track, a Justice Department special prosecutor was appointed to look into the matter. In June, he argued in the military commission that the FBI was “no longer” pursuing a criminal investigation of the defense teams. Because the investigation was “closed,” he urged Judge Pohl to deny the defense motions for further hearings in which FBI agents would be called to explain who had ordered the investigation in the first place and why. The defense teams were not assuaged by the special prosecutor’s whitewashing assurances, so Pohl canceled the hearing scheduled for October in an order that remains sealed.¹³

The FBI’s operation is the latest in a series of spying incidents. First was the revelation that government agents were reviewing legal mail between lawyers and their clients. Second was the revelation that the CIA was remote-controlling the courtroom itself; on January 28, 2013, David Nevin, Mohammad’s lead attorney, was addressing the scheduling of a motion pertaining to secret prisons. As soon as he said the word “secret,” flashing red lights and white noise filled the courtroom. The alarm had been triggered not by the judge or the court security officer, but by someone off site.¹⁴ In the aftermath came a third revelation when lawyers figured out that the microphones on the defense tables in the courtroom were set to pick up any sound, even a whisper, and parties unknown were listening in. Fourth was the discovery that the rooms in Camp Echo where lawyers meet their clients were bugged with microphones disguised as smoke detectors.¹⁵ The last, a real accident rather than a calculated move, occurred when the prosecution gained access to hundreds of thousands of confidential e-mails on defense computers as a result of a sloppy set-up on a single server.¹⁶ Dealing with these events has consumed the work of the commissions, and goes a long way toward explaining why the cases are nowhere near trial.

**Political Gridlock**

In April 2014, Judge Pohl issued a ruling on a discovery motion in the al-Nashiri case (which has implications for the 9/11 five case as well) ordering the government to provide the defense with the top secret details they seek about their client’s ghost years. These details include a chronological accounting of where al-Nashiri was held between his capture in 2002 and his transfer to Guantánamo in 2006; the names, employment records and training manuals of all government agents, medical personnel, guards, contractors and others who were involved in his renditions and interrogations; and all records, photos, videos, interrogation logs, assessments and other materials about al-Nashiri and any other current or former prisoners who might have been interrogated about the USS Cole bombing. Judge Pohl concurred with the defense that, in a capital case, all of this information—in its “raw” (not redacted or summarized) form—should be made available to them, not just those materials that the prosecution thinks are relevant.

In his motion asking the judge to reconsider the ruling on discovery, Brig. Gen. Martins made two main arguments: First, he urged Judge Pohl to dial back the scope of the order to give the government time to complete its declassification review of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s 6,300-page report on the CIA’s rendition program. That report, which was completed and voted for release by the Committee in December 2012, is apparently such a scathing indictment that former CIA head George Tenet has offered his services to the current director, John Brennan, for a media counterattack when the information becomes public.¹⁷ In January 2014, frustrated Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Carl Levin (D-MI) wrote to President Barack Obama urging him to resolve the declassification delays because enduring secrecy about the CIA’s “now defunct” and “misguided” program adversely affects the work as well as “the reputation” of the Guantánamo military commissions. In April, the week before Brig. Gen. Martins submitted his motion to reconsider, then-White House counsel Kathy Ruemmler wrote to Feinstein that “the president and this administration are committed to working with you to ensure that the 500-plus page executive summary, findings and conclusions of the report…undergo a declassification review as expeditiously as possible, consistent with our national security interests.” Over the months since then, however, the declassification process, which the CIA effectively controls, has hit a political wall in Washington, and it is now anyone’s guess when—or if—any part of the report will be released.

Brig. Gen. Martins’ other argument in his motion to reconsider is that Judge Pohl overstepped his authority by ordering the government to make classified information available to defense attorneys. That was not what Congress had in mind when it created the commissions in 2006. When Judge Pohl ruled on the appeal in June, he stood by his order, although he did grant prosecutors some “leeway in redacting, ‘anonymizing’ and summarizing the details.”¹⁸ As a consequence of preserving such “derivative classification,” the regime of secrecy shielding the CIA remains intact.

In July 2014, Judge Pohl passed the al-Nashiri case to a new judge, Col. Vance H. Spath, while keeping the 9/11 five case for himself. When the matter of classification and discovery was revisited during the August 2014 hearings, attorney Kammen expressed his frustration about the “trust-free zone” of Guantánamo: “We have all the [top security] clearances in the world, but we are still not trustworthy enough” to see the underlying documents. One problem, he claimed, is that

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the summaries, which are produced by the prosecution, are “reasonably useless if not outright false.” He conceded that it is not the prosecution’s fault, assuming that they are faithfully following the classification procedures; the problem is in the accuracy or lack thereof of the underlying documents that were produced and are “owned” by the CIA. Given the CIA’s robust record of lying, deception and misrepresentation, even to other sectors of the government, the “just trust us” posture of prosecutors, who function as stand-ins for the CIA in the discovery process, presents an irreconcilable point of contention. The problem is compounded by defense attorneys’ relative powerlessness against governmental discretion. As Kamen argued, “They have already removed one lawyer [Hollander] from the case on a pretext…. Do I think they are going to prosecute me? No. Do I think they might try and get rid of me? Yeah. Do I trust them on this? No.”

Keeping CIA’s secrets secret goes to the heart of what is perhaps the most fundamental question: Is the military commission a “real court”? As Kamen pointed out to the new judge in August, if at the end of the day al-Nashiri is acquitted, the government has claimed the right to continue to detain him because he is in possession of classified information—his memories.

When people ponder why Guantánamo is still open or whether it will ever close, al-Nashiri is one embodiment of the answer: There is no exit until the CIA’s secrets are declassified or until the classified memories die with the man.

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13 Miami Herald, October 11, 2014.
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The Yemeni UFW Martyr

Nadine Naber

In the summer of 2014, director Diego Luna released Cesar Chavez, a feature-length retelling of the story of the 1973 grape pickers’ strike in California that inspired an international grape boycott and made Cesar Chavez a household name. In the film, the first person killed on a farm worker picket line was a Mexican bracero named Juan de la Cruz. In fact, de la Cruz was the third of five “United Farm Worker martyrs” to die violent deaths struggling for social justice in the vast fields of American agribusiness. The first was Nan Freeman, a young Jewish student helping a sugarcane strike in Florida, and the second was a Yemeni migrant called Nagi Daifallah.

In the wee hours of August 15, 1973, Daifallah was with fellow UFW members at a café when a sheriff’s deputy named Gilbert Cooper moved to arrest a picket captain, Frank Quintana, on trumped-up charges of disturbing the peace. When the other workers protested, Cooper began harassing Daifallah and the young Yemeni ran away. At six feet and 200 pounds a full foot taller and 100 pounds heavier than Daifallah, the burly deputy caught up with his quarry and swung a long metal flashlight at his head. The blow struck the Yemeni in the back of the neck, severing his spinal cord from the base of the skull and killing him. He was 24. Thousands of UFW workers and supporters followed the casket at his funeral in Delano, the heart of grape country in California’s San Joaquin Valley. Afterward, his body was flown to Yemen.

According to official UFW papers, Nagi Daifallah “was known as a leader of the Arab workers” in California. He had learned English and served as an interpreter for UFW organizers. Yet there is little knowledge of the role that Daifallah and his fellow Yemenis played in the farm workers’ struggle.

Often mistaken for Latinos, as Arabs in America still sometimes are today, hundreds and perhaps thousands of Yemenis labored in the fields of rural California alongside Latino and other migrants. Since there are no official records, and since the workers shuttled back and forth between the United States and Yemen, there is no accurate count of how many were there at any given time. A high estimate is close to 2,000. Yemeni farm workers often came to the United States expecting to stay no more than five years but many ended up returning to California for work. In his 1988 book Sojourners and Settlers, Jonathan Friedlander explains, “Some Yemenis have spent 20 to 30 years in the farmlands of California and still cannot speak a word of English. For many, the bleak, isolated labor camps located miles out of town in the middle of endless grape or asparagus fields are preferable to a typical American town’s intensely bewildering socioeconomic pressures to acculturate and, hence, spend money.”

In total, according to 2011 data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, there are some 35,000 persons of Yemeni birth or ancestry in the United States. The migration began in the 1920s. Yemenis worked in the automotive, steel and related industries, placing them in significant numbers in Detroit and environs, especially Dearborn, as well as in Buffalo. In the 1950s their presence in farm work in the San Joaquin Valley increased. Many live in Delano, and also Oakland and San Francisco. There are also many Yemeni small business owners in New York. A smaller community lives in Chicago. Some work in steel-related industries; some own liquor stores. Initially, it was primarily men who migrated and today, a majority are men, with families living in Yemen. Men tend to come and go for 3–6 months at a time.

Some of the Yemeni farm workers in rural California later moved to the Bay Area to become grocery store owners or service workers. Ahmad Yahya Mushrih, a grape picker and UFW member at the time of the 1973 strike who now works as a janitor, remembered Daifallah to the San Francisco Chronicle in 2002: “He was one of the leaders with Cesar Chavez and very well recognized,” he said. “He was very courageous, encouraging us and telling us, ‘This is democracy, and if you want your rights, this is how you do it. You fight for your rights. This is the United States.’”

Yemenis in San Francisco played a significant role in the local Justice for Janitors campaign, run by the Service Employees International Union, which peaked in California at the turn of the twenty-first century. Yemenis make up 20 percent of the 3,400 members of SEIU Local 87. In 2002, they celebrated Daifallah’s legacy as they mobilized for their contract talks the following year.

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Starvation, Submission and Survival
Syria’s War Through the Prism of Food

Brent Eng and José Ciro Martinez

On December 23, 2012, following a week of imposed scarcity, the Syrian town of Halfaya received 100 sacks of flour from an Islamic charity. The town’s main bakery started churning out bread, an all too infrequent occurrence since violence between the Asad regime and opposition forces escalated earlier that year. Hungry citizens began to queue.

Two hours later, just after 4 pm, a Sukhoi-22 ground attack plane bombed the bakery, killing at least 60 Syrians eagerly awaiting their daily bread. A YouTube video taken shortly after the attack shows loaves of bread and bloody body parts strewn on the street. The images are horrifying, the screams haunting, yet there is more to the carnage than meets the eye. The provision of food to some and the deprivation of others are military tactics deeply connected to the claims of warring parties to sovereignty and legitimacy.

Until 2007, Syria stood out for its successful food policy. Improvements in dry land farming achieved through international assistance, state subsidies and centralized economic planning made the country self-sufficient in strategic products such as wheat. Over the next five years, a combination of economic liberalization, persistent mismanagement of natural resources and severe drought devastated the Syrian countryside. According to conservative UN estimates, more than 300,000 people left the northeastern governorates by 2009 due to drought, poor harvests and increased costs of production. This exodus contributed to an unprecedented migration to cities and intensified popular anger toward the government.

It is hardly a coincidence that the rebellion against the regime of Bashar al-Asad began in Syria’s rural towns. Pressure on food supplies and rising prices fed popular discontent. Protests quickly proliferated in the rural provinces most affected by government neglect—Dar’a in the southern wheat-producing Hawran region and the governorates of al-Raqqa and al-Hasaka in the northeast.
In times of peace, food is endowed with a host of symbolic, material and political meanings. When war breaks out, food becomes enmeshed in further webs of significance. Farms and flour mills are transformed from sources of livelihood into bombing targets. Vegetables and fruits cease to be mere nourishment and become fuel for soldiers. Homemade dishes and family meals are no longer communal rituals—they are rations for perseverance. Whether as weapon, welfare or outside aid, food is a crucial thing to control, as forces on all sides of the Syrian conflict understand. Humanitarian agencies should accordingly abandon their delusions of neutrality and impartiality.

**Food as Weapon**

Food is a central component of the Asad regime’s wartime strategy—and the opposition’s, too.

The first and perhaps most palpable way in which the regime weaponizes food is the purposeful destruction of the infrastructure for producing and distributing the means of sustenance. Concurrent with the initiation of large-scale artillery operations against the insurgency in January 2012, Syria’s armed forces began to shell and bomb food stocks, livestock and agricultural machinery in areas where rebels are active. The army also blocks or damages transportation routes key to food shipments. The violence and disruption interrupts harvests and drives farmers off the land, slowly turning temporary food shortages into long-term insufficiencies.

Hundreds of rural towns and vast tracts of rich agricultural land now lie deserted. Some 50,000 small-scale farming households cannot cultivate their land without international assistance. The production of wheat in Syria is now 52 percent below the 2001–2011 average. A UN-sponsored report released in May 2014 noted that “the absence of safety and security in conflict zones resulted in farmers having infrequent access to their lands,” adding, “in these areas, there was widespread destruction to storage facilities, irrigation infrastructure, crops and trees, while there is significant pillage of livestock.”

A UN Food and Agriculture Organization report published the same month predicts that poor seasonal rains, in conjunction with the ravages of war, will further reduce the total farming area by 21 percent relative to the wartime average.

The prolific use of this tactic is tied to the erosion of the regime’s military capacity. The regime does not command enough troops to amass them in all the contested areas of the country—and the numbers are declining due to attrition and desertion. Hence the regime has resorted to strategic bombing of areas beyond its control.

Bakeries in particular have been systematically targeted. In August 2012, the New York-based Human Rights Watch reported at least ten aerial attacks on the bakeries of Aleppo, the center of opposition resistance at the time. Previous shortages of flour in the city had forced many bakeries to close, concentrating customers at the remaining outlets. Bombings often occurred during peak hours to maximize casualties. “Day after day, Aleppo residents line up to get bread for their families, and instead get shrapnel piercing [in] their bodies from government bombs and shells,” said Ole Solvang, a Human Rights Watch researcher. “Ten bakery attacks is not random,” he added. All of the bakeries were located in non-contested neighborhoods, precluding the possibility that the attacks targeted combatants. Almost all the causalities were civilians.

Another investigation by McClatchy verified 80 attacks on bakeries between August 2012 and January 2013. The two opposition groups who first reported the strikes both noted that the bakery bombings “have grown in frequency, coinciding with the growing success of the rebels.” In August 2012 there were 18 bakery attacks, 16 of which struck parts of Aleppo, and another 41 attacks occurred in the city over the next four months. When the Free Syrian Army began to thrive in the regions of Idlib, Homs and Dayr al-Zawr, bakery bombings quickly followed. In the fall of 2014, the regime shifted its attention to the successful bread-making operation of the Islamic State, or Da’ish, bombing one outlet in the city of al-Raqqa in a September 6 air raid that killed at least 11 civilians.

Regime attacks hit other parts of the food supply chain, such as rebel-captured silos of wheat. In February 2013, the Syrian air force bombed one of the two major silos not under government control, located in the northern city of al-Bab and holding 43,000 tons of locally produced wheat. When rebels later took control of 20 state-owned flour mills in Aleppo, the center of milling in Syria before the war, the government responded by halting wheat deliveries. Since then, milling capacity in the has dropped by almost half.

The regime also destroys food where it is grown. In May 2012, for instance, the Syrian news source al-Mukhtasar noted that “Asad’s forces punish the rebels by burning their agricultural crops” in Dayr al-Zawr, Homs and Hama. In November 2013, various farmers told Al Jazeera of the Syrian army’s practice of torching agricultural fields in opposition-controlled areas. “The Syrian army burns [the field] with the aim of besieging the town,” said Hajj Adib, a farmer from Hama, to the pan-Arab channel, “eliminating the source of livelihood for the majority of those who work in agriculture.” In June 2014, according to the Dubai-based network Akhbar al-An, the regime attacked the town of Jisrin in eastern Ghouta—an opposition-controlled area in outer Damascus—by shelling nearby wheat fields, burning away the areas that supplied local bakeries.

Opposition groups have responded with efforts of their own to weaponize food.

In June 2014, Da’ish seized control of the Siyasiyya bridge, the last entrance to the city of Dayr al-Zawr it had not previously controlled, to prevent food from coming in. Food insecurity skyrocketed, forcing both civilians and combatants from other opposition groups to flee. Similarly, the Da’ish checkpoints at crossings between Iraq, Syria and Turkey reflect not only the ideological imperative to establish a borderless caliphate but also the mundane wish to control food supply lines. Da’ish jurisdiction over cross-border trade has limited
agricultural commerce crucial to the regime. Food prices in Syria have risen as a result.

The second food-related maneuver is the siege. Much of the fighting between the Syrian army and opposition groups is over hills that overlook villages or roads that serve as supply routes. Once the strategic position is gained, the targeted area is encircled to cut off access to food, medicine and other needs. The sieges can last for months at a time. Ceasefires and surrenders often transpire when communities are exhausted by hunger.

The siege of the Yarmouk refugee camp is a prominent example. Once a bustling district of 160,000 residents, the camp has been a desolate landscape since the regime tightened its blockade in July 2013. Situated just a few miles from the capital’s old city, Yarmouk is now home to fewer than 20,000 residents, most of whom face the daily specter of starvation.

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The refugee camp became a nexus of unrest in June 2011 when the pro-Asad Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command shot and killed 14 anti-regime Palestinian protesters, igniting a major skirmish. In December 2012, militant groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army entered Yarmouk and helped pro-opposition Palestinians expel regime-affiliated militias. Opposition groups used Yarmouk’s strategic location to launch rockets into Damascus, which prompted the regime to surround the camp’s perimeter and cut off supplies.

Even as opposition groups won military victories inside the camp over the next year, the blockade effectively crippled Yarmouk’s residents. The dire humanitarian situation allowed the Asad regime to control truce negotiations, forcing the militants to offer concessions before they were expelled entirely. In a February 2014 deal that followed the death of nearly 100 residents from starvation, rebels cited their obligations to the welfare of Yarmouk’s inhabitants as the basis for their concessions. The regime’s message to other rebellious districts was clear: Surrender or starve.

The informal name of the Yarmouk campaign—“starvation until submission”—offers a glimpse into the logic of regime actions. The word “submission” suggests that siege can achieve more than the surrender or flight of opposition forces. It also discourages future militancy. By forcing residents to focus on survival, the regime can subdue entire towns and discourage prospective recruits to the opposition cause. Military victory is not enough—the Asad regime must break the spirit of resistance and it has bet that food is the best means of doing so.

The tactic has proven brutally effective. In February 2014, the UN estimated that 240,000 Syrian citizens were encircled by military blockades, the vast majority by government forces. In addition to the Yarmouk camp, the regime can count a number of other Damascus suburbs and small towns scattered throughout Syria as victories won mainly through the time-honored method. “What I have seen since leaving the siege is that Homs’ civilians have begun to distance themselves from the revolutionary mindset; they are now simply trying to live, nothing more,” said activist Orhan Gazi, who left the old city of Homs in accordance with a truce in May. The regime’s control
over access to food has helped it reach places that conventional weapons could not. “They hit the place with missiles, but we didn’t leave; they shelled us with mortars, but we didn’t leave, they used tanks and snipers but we didn’t leave. But now there is no food left,” said Abu Jalal al-Tallawi, a butcher before the war who departed Homs in February. “Hunger defeated us.”

Food as Welfare

In wartime, provision of food works in tandem with deprivation. Welfare programs are prominent in the calculations of all the forces hoping to rule Syria—and the supply of bread stands at the forefront of these concerns.

In a large swath of territory under regime jurisdiction, most basic goods are available. It is no accident: The regime has imported large quantities of wheat from Ukraine and Russia while increasing spending threefold on the long-standing bread subsidy. The website of the General Company for Syrian Mills describes the welfare policy as an unassailable government obligation, a “red line” the regime will not cross in spite of Syria’s rapidly deteriorating economy.

Interviews with residents of Damascus and Ladhqiyya reveal that subsidized bread is still widely available. One source from the Bab al-Sharqi neighborhood in the capital commented, “Bread is still much cheaper than in Lebanon or rebel-held areas.” Skeptical of the regime’s demonization of its opponents, but thankful for the security it offers, the source added, “Although there are more lines and black markets than before, we do not want when it comes to basic foods.” A close friend in the capital’s al-Midan district affirmed over Skype: “Food has gotten more expensive but bread is still available and relatively cheap. I do not know how we would survive without it.” The provision of foodstuffs has become an instrument with which the regime placates weary civilians while subtly reminding them of the benefits of state power and administration.

Unlike the regime, the now fractured Free Syrian Army (FSA) became notorious for neglecting welfare responsibilities. The FSA’s military failures turned many Syrians against the group, but its dismal track record in civil administration arguably played a greater role in its decline. Widespread shortages of basic necessities in areas under its control led to massive price increases and thriving black markets throughout 2012. FSA groups were accused of capturing wheat silos and selling the grain abroad rather than distributing them among the citizenry. The shortages strained local bakeries, leading to lengthy lines and disgruntled, demoralized customers.

Conversely, the success of jihadi groups comes not only from ideology or military triumphs but also from achievements on the food front. In December 2012, fighters linked to Jabhat al-Nusra took over the four main grain compounds in Aleppo province. Bread production subsequently accelerated, quickly establishing for al-Nusra a reputation for discipline, honesty and efficiency.

Da’ish makes similar efforts to win hearts and minds through various social services. Again, bread is deemed crucial: Da’ish has reopened bombed bakeries and resupplied idle flour mills. In early August 2014, according to the al-’Arabiyya satellite channel, Da’ish seized nearly 750,000 tons of grain from government silos in the Nineveh and Anbar provinces of Iraq. The organization then transported much of the grain into Syria, distributing it under its name to bolster local supplies. Da’ish pamphlets emphasize the group’s intent to “manage bakeries and mills to ensure access to bread for all.”

Locals, however, regularly accuse Da’ish of exerting unilateral control over production and distribution. In Dayr al-Zawr, for example, an opposition spokeswoman claimed, “Most of the time there is no bread.” Previously one of the main wheat-producing provinces in the country, Dayr al-Zawr now grows little due to the bombing of fields and the migration of farmers. The regime considers the province to be under terrorist control and, as such, distributes nothing. When bread does appear, the spokeswoman said, it is because Da’ish “either distributes the flour in bags, or puts the flour in the bakery and provides it with fuel to operate.” She went on to describe bread as “the essential ingredient in gaining popular support.” Having firm control of bread supply allows Da’ish to feed its own fighters, to be sure, but it also robs rival factions of the chance to win the sympathies of residents.

Food as Aid

Indeed, food is never apolitical, even when it appears in the guise of “neutral” humanitarian aid. Too often, the aid agencies working in war zones forget that who gets what, when, where and how is key to determining the winners and the losers.

Over the past three years, the UN has escalated its distribution of emergency food aid in Syria. But the process has been far from smooth or universally beneficial. Until mid-2014, following legal restrictions placed on humanitarian activities within member states’ borders, UN agencies sanctioned aid distribution only in areas agreed upon with the regime in Damascus. Although several NGOs ran risky operations to reach besieged locations near the Turkish border, the vast majority of humanitarian aid was funneled through regime-friendly channels. By maintaining food security in government-controlled areas, supposedly apolitical food aid played into the regime’s wartime calculus, as well as its welfare rhetoric.

A series of Security Council resolutions during 2014 attempted to mitigate the clear imbalance in distribution. UNSC 2139 adopted on February 22 demanded that the regime allow humanitarian workers greater access to those in need. Documents obtained by Foreign Policy reveal that the UN’s World Food Program (WFP) distribution scheme increased its reach from 3.7 million to 4.1 million Syrians following the resolution. But the rise did not mean compliance with the resolution. The UN’s own report in March indicated that the increased reach “was to a large extent a result of large population movements from non-government controlled areas” to areas under regime jurisdiction. WFP reports state clearly that the organization’s capacity to
distribute was still heavily dependent on the regime. In June, the number of Syrians reached plummeted back to 3.4 million. Rebels were starved while “loyal” Syrians were promptly fed.

The WFP and other major humanitarian organizations face a fundamental question: Do they distribute in opposition-held territory and risk being expelled from regime-controlled areas? Overwhelmingly, the UN and others have chosen to cooperate with Damascus to maintain access to those already reached. Many Syrians outside government jurisdiction see this decision differently. For them, the message is clear: When it comes to international aid, lives are more valuable in regime-controlled areas.

Spurred by the continuing disparity in distribution, the UN sought to boost its claim to neutrality by circumventing Damascus. UNSC 2165, passed on July 14, sanctioned “cross-border and cross-line access for the UN and its partners to deliver humanitarian aid in Syria without state consent.” Previously, cross-border operations from Turkey were facilitated by the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs and implemented by various NGO partners. Security concerns limited these efforts. The UN’s goal was to increase the number of Syrians the WFP, by far the largest emergency food aid distributor, could reach by authorizing entry to opposition-held territories. In a report released in September 2014, the WFP claimed to have reached 580,000 people in cross-line operations over the six-week period following the resolution, as opposed to 137,000 beforehand.

Over the course of these changes, the WFP has maintained that it is merely trying to save lives. “Our goal is simple—to deliver food assistance to the whole of Syria, reaching anyone and everyone who needs it, regardless of where they are located,” said WFP spokesperson Dina El-Kassaby in an interview following passage of UNSC 2165. For El-Kassaby, the resolution strengthens the WFP’s case that its work is politically neutral. “Hungry, homeless children don’t know or care whether they are in a government-controlled area or an opposition-controlled area,” she added. “They just want food and a safe place to live.” All true, yet attachment to the language of neutral humanitarianism can make one blind to aid’s political implications.

The WFP works closely with “local partners” to distribute the food aid, says El-Kassaby. The agency now enters hard-to-reach areas in Syria through the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa crossings on the Turkish border and the Ramtha crossing from Jordan. Yet her remarks do not recognize how working with local groups can bolster their legitimacy. Aid deliveries that require the consent of armed actors have political repercussions, because those actors gain recognition from the international community and provide nourishment for the locals. The result is not necessarily negative. Humanitarian aid can be emancipatory or deeply repressive depending on the political configurations in which it is located. But these decisions should be discussed and debated, something the language of “neutrality” does not allow.

Interestingly, the WFP’s approach seems to mark a move away from the explicit politicization of aid in the late 1990s. That period was marked by international efforts to support externally brokered peace deals, which in turn organized aid around the enactment of such accords. But there is no deal on the horizon in the Syrian case. The WFP’s mission in Syria appears to be a return to the negotiated access programs that characterized interventions during the early post-Cold War years. The principles underlying those missions were geared toward working under conditions of ongoing conflict, privileging the principles of non-alignment and impartiality. This change may or may not be linked to the international community’s inability to bring about a political solution. By containing and managing suffering inside Syria and refugee camps in neighboring countries, the international community can avoid directly addressing the roots of the conflict. Food aid soothes the global conscience while implicitly contributing to international political inertia.

What humanitarians fail to understand, or cannot admit publicly, is that in Syria, nothing is apolitical, especially not food. Humanitarian action is, by its very essence, a political intervention. Technically perfect projects and concise best practices do not exist. These mantras only serve to delude donors. Humanitarian agencies and Syrian citizens would be better served if the aid industry directly confronted these realities rather than mourn them.

The urgent need to reintegrate food into empirical and theoretical concerns is not just a scholarly preoccupation. The political economy of food illuminates the concerns and machinations of those fighting in Syria, as well as the daily difficulties and multifaceted choices faced by those suffering through the war. With food integrated into understandings of war, the actions of besieged populations, the calculus of battlefield commanders and the incongruous choices made by local activists become clearer. The fog of war dissipates, if only ever so slightly. Be it as weapon, welfare or aid, food will remain central to the conflict.

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**The Wretched Revolution**

**Yasmin Moll**

“We live in a country where liberals renege on democracy, Islamists harm Islam and human rights activists champion oppression,” an Islamic television producer cynically remarked three months after Muhammad Mursi was ousted from Egypt’s presidency in July 2013. That summer, the televised images of multitudes of flag-waving protesters were uncanny in their resemblance to those of the 2011 revolution that forced Husni Mubarak from power. The arc of the unfolding political drama, it seemed, was also strikingly similar: The people took to the streets peacefully; the president was unmoved, vowing to complete his term and threatening chaos if removed; the military decided to side with the people; the revolution was saved.

But in 2013, as in 2011, this narrative was just one of many about the events transpiring. Broadcasts from the Muslim Brothers’ satellite channel Misr25 insisted that the footage being aired on Egyptian state television showing a seemingly unending stream of people marching against Mursi was in fact footage of people marching in his support. Experts opined on air that these were “Photoshop protests,” the spectacular results of a skilled manipulation of image and sound, rather than real people with real grievances. Even before the mass killings, the mass arrests, the mass trials, what was in dispute were facts. What happened? What did not happen? Who did what when and to whom? How can we know?

These disagreements over “reality” continue: Were the events of the summer of 2013 a coup? A revolution? Or were they something in between, a “revocouption” or a “coupolution”? In the meantime, facts on the ground pile up like tired monuments to an authoritarianism that is wearily familiar: more than 40,000 political prisoners according to one estimate; journalists convicted in sham trials; the systematic use of sexual violence by security forces against activists and detainees. Bombs routinely appear in subways and near government buildings, and more and more Egyptians, fearful and fatigued, mutter about this wretched revolution.

In the days after Mursi’s ouster, many ordinary Egyptians were unsure, unclear, about what was transpiring and what it meant for them and the country. Even at one of the region’s leading transnational Islamic satellite channels, where I had worked and done research from 2010 to late 2012, the producers and television preachers were divided about unfolding events. This channel defined itself primarily against the more recent salafi entrants into the Islamic satellite sector, including the channels that were closed down following the coup. One editor sounded subdued, tired. “I don’t know what to think,” she said slowly. “I sit with a pro-Mursi person and he convinces me. Then I sit with an anti-Mursi person, and he also convinces me.” She said that at the channel these three camps—pro, anti and undecided—had each carved out a little space for themselves. In the end, though, what distressed her most was not the severed friendships and truncated collegiality, but the new risks that were becoming commonplace. Making the long commute to work every day had become a perilous obligation, with gunshots ringing out and fights erupting without warning. Her husband was walking to the mosque one evening when a man, “a thug,” suddenly appeared brandishing a knife and asked him, “What do you think of the Brothers?” Her husband noncommitally shrugged his shoulders because he was unsure which answer would save him the pain of the knife.

When I visited the channel the following week, the two distinct political spaces and an uncertain one in between were apparent immediately. Those against the “coup” were congregating during their free time around a television tuned to Al Jazeera, while those for the “revolution” watched one of the private Egyptian channels together. In the meantime, a few unhappily drifted in and out of these two groups. One person in this group said that what saddened her most is the fact that women on the floor were no longer all praying together as we used to. It has become very hard to have a simple conversation, she said in a half-whisper.

By this time, the second week of July, sordid stories about the Muslim Brother/anti-coup encampment at Raba’a Square were circulating fast and thick. Tales of torture tents where fingers were routinely chopped off; of tents dedicated to wanton fornication hypocritically legitimized in “jihad marriages”; of disease and uncleanness; of the poor being bribed with food and a few pounds to stay, of the less poor going in and not being allowed to come out; of the brainwashed many and the manipulative few.

These stories were grittier versions of those that circulated about Tahrir Square in the 2011 revolution, before Tahrir was recuperated in the official state narrative following Mubarak’s ouster as the utopian space protesters claimed. Such were the stories that when I told a few people that I planned to visit the sit-in in Raba’a, they thought I was either unbelievably heroic to be risking life and limb to document the “truth,” or that I was extraordinarily reckless, needlessly endangering my life

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to be among a group of “thugs.” Raba’a Square, until now a largely unremarkable and perennially congested intersection among the non-descript high-rises of middle-class Nasr City, seemed like a different country.

### The Other Egypt

Being in Cairo that summer was surreal—two dominant parallel realities existed on the ground, each with their own facts in the making. In a sense, Raba’a was indeed a different country, an imagined community complete with its own founding myths, fallen martyrs, unifying symbols and charismatic leaders. Before visiting, I had morbid images running through my head of being gunned down by a sniper hiding atop one of the tall buildings surrounding the square. These mental images were more vivid versions of the grainy violence circulating on YouTube. In one such video, a protester approaches a group of soldiers holding a poster of Mursi. Suddenly, he crumples on the asphalt, blood spurting from his skull as the traffic whizzes by in the midday sun.

I did not go to Raba’a until I found someone to go with me. Haroun was a friend of a friend, and his Facebook page showed reassuring “notes” about his experiences in Raba’a, where he had been going almost daily, on top of taking part in the anti-coup marches. He told me that the real danger is in the marches, not inside the square itself. Haroun is an engineer, as is his wife. He loves traveling—Amsterdam is one of his favorite cities. He goes dancing in the nightclubs there as well as in Cairo, although as an observant Muslim he will not drink. He recently went on a trip to the United States when his wife attended a conference in the Midwest, and he got a visa at the last minute. America impressed him, all big and shiny.

Haroun said he was never, and is not currently, a member of the Society of Muslim Brothers. In fact, his way of
thinking is very far from their ideology. Yet he found himself voting for them in the 2012 presidential election because they offered something his fellow youth activists from Tahrir did not—the ability to mobilize through the ballot box and achieve power in order to get things done. He felt a vote for the Tahrir activists was a wasted vote. Ideologically, he mused, he would be closest to the thought of ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Abu al-Fotouh, the centrist Islamist candidate, but he did not vote for him because he realized that to fight someone like Ahmad Shafiq, the military candidate, you need a well-oiled machine behind you. The Brothers were certainly that.

We made a plan to meet on July 24 on the multi-lane road leading to Raba‘a. I parked my car behind a long row of others against the curb of the median and waited for Haroun. Two cars ahead, a family slowly piled out into the street. The husband was wearing a gray tracksuit and plastic flip-flops, the wife a floor-skimming jean skirt and paisley scarf, and trailing right behind them was a little girl in pigtails clutching a plastic bag filled with snacks. My eyes followed them until they disappeared under the banner announcing one of the main entrances to the sit-in, just next to a shuttered gas station. Later, I would wonder if this family was there two weeks later, the day security forces dispersed the sit-in, killing over 700 people in a few hours, and if they had managed to escape the bullets and the horror. They could easily have been. Later still, I would see on YouTube a video of a small boy sobbing uncontrollably in the arms of a man, maybe a stranger, imploring his mother to wake up. The camera swiftly pans down to the sleeping mother, lying dead in a pool of blood.

“Welcome to the new Tahrir Square,” Haroun says with a broad smile and a firm handshake when he finally arrives to fetch me. He carries a backpack filled with overnight supplies, and over his arm a blanket and pillow. He regularly spends the night in Raba‘a, going directly to his day job at a small design firm from the encampment. After being lightly frisked and having our national identity cards checked by volunteers at the entrance, we walk into a maze of tents, wooden structures and improvised footpaths. To the left and right are neat rows of men and women performing the special Ramadan prayers. Haroun walks to a little spot covered by a striped canvas canopy in front of a shuttered store and says he usually camps out here. He carefully places his blanket and pillows on the floor and we resume our walk, crossing a corner.

I ask him if he has made any new friends in Raba‘a—he shakes his head, saying that he does, however, meet with many of his old friends here. He says you never know who you are talking to—there are many mukhbirin (undercover agents) walking around. Can he tell who those are from their appearance? “No,” he says, “from their actions. I will have a conversation with him and he will agree with me, and then I hear him having a similar conversation with someone else during which he disagrees. And they always overdo it—they are the ones asking to be carried on shoulders to lead the chants.”

We stop in front of a pastry shop doing brisk business and order two teas from a makeshift stall an enterprising young man has set up just outside. We find two empty plastic chairs, and I sit after removing a glossy color poster of Mursi from one. We sip the sweet tea and watch the many children running around and playing tag while their mothers converse nearby in small groups. If it were not for the chants coming from the loudspeakers, it would be just another warm Cairene night during Ramadan.

Haroun describes the motivations that led him to come almost every day to Raba‘a. Most important is a political
pragmatism that refuses the false choice between military authoritarianism and the purity of total revolution that can only criticize, never build. He sees the members of the Brothers first and foremost as builders. His tone is adamant as he describes how the people of Raba’a see theirs as a religious struggle (sira’ dini). People here feel that what is under attack, what is in danger of being eradicated, is Egypt’s Islamic identity, he says. They feel that if they leave the square without reinstating Mursi they would be returning to a world of dawn raids and repression. Over the past three years, it has been exhilarating to live without that fear, and they do not plan on going back. So they are here to defend their religion, not only their president.

Haroun says the people of Raba’a believe Mursi was removed because he wanted to apply God’s laws. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Muslim Brother preacher, would later say in a sermon from Qatar that Mursi was removed because he prayed, fasted and recited the Qur’an. Residents of the “other Egypt” resent the idea that the people in Raba’a are more religious, more Muslim, than the people outside. Haroun is familiar with these complaints—half of his own family is against the sit-in and against him coming here so regularly. They ask him sarcastically if people are praying over a big statue of Mursi, their new prophet. Later, in a speech an Azhari scholar would liken Gen. Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi and Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim, saviors of the other Egypt, to the prophets.

Haroun had never been interested in the history of Islamist movements in Egypt, but since June 30 he learned it quite well. While he was initially skeptical of some of the Islamists’ ideas, he decided that they are quite logical and attractive once properly explained. Take the caliphate—we should not be afraid of it, he says. All that it means is that Muslims will not need passports anymore to travel between Muslim countries—something like the European Union.

After the tea, we take a tour of the different stages set up around the square. We stop at one projecting onto a sheet a video montage set to sad music. The images pass by slowly—dead men with still, slack mouths, purple-red skin. The image of a pudgy teenage boy in glasses and a black and white kaffiyah wrapped around his neck comes up. It is Mahmoud, a soccer fan and avid drummer who was killed in a march two nights ago. His drum is on the stage, his portrait perched on top with a black ribbon in one of its corners. A young man in a purple t-shirt and scruffy jeans starts leading the crowd gathered below the stage in chants: “Sleep, Mahmoud, sleep and rest. We will continue the struggle.” Many of the men and women in the crowd are crying.

By now it is almost 11 pm, and Haroun offers to walk me back to my car. There are even more people packing the square. Haroun recounts the crowds of July 9, the day after pro-Mursi protesters were gunned down by security forces as they performed the dawn prayer in front of the Presidential Guards Club. He filmed the streams of people marching into Raba’a for 20 minutes before running out of batteries. He could not stop crying because up until then he felt it was so easy to kill them because they were so alone. One night while everyone was praying, they heard rapid gunfire that sounded nearby. His heart pounded and he was very frightened, but all around him the women remained calm and concentrated on their prayers—the imam even made the supplication extra long as the guns continued firing.

A young woman approaches us with a smile. “Excuse me, I don’t mean to bother you,” she says, “but would you be willing to go to the Media Tent and record your reaction to Sisi’s declaration?” The day before, Sisi in his black sunglasses had made a speech asking Egyptians to take to the streets en masse to authorize him to “fight terrorism.” “We want to show people that many different kinds of people are here,” she continues, “including people with hair.” She means women who do not wear a headscarf. I suddenly realize that I have not seen another bareheaded woman since entering the square. I decline with what I hope is the same politeness.

As we are about to turn away from the stage, the young man in the purple shirt introduces a former member of Parliament affiliated with the Muslim Brothers’ party. The woman begins by telling us not to cry—Mahmoud is a martyr in the highest heavens of God now. She asks for a joyous ululation and several are offered from the crowd. This square, she tells us, is different from Tahrir because the people here have a righteous cause. The people here have religion and ethics. A woman in this square can walk its whole length and not be sexually harassed once, while girls are being gang-raped in Tahrir. Haroun had never been interested in the history of Islamist movements in Egypt, but since June 30 he learned it quite well. While he was initially skeptical of some of the Islamists’ ideas, he decided that they are quite logical and attractive once properly explained. Take the caliphate—we should not be afraid of it, he says. All that it means is that Muslims will not need passports anymore to travel between Muslim countries—something like the European Union.

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On the billowing sheet behind her is projected a scene from The Lion of the Desert, starring Anthony Quinn. The dubbed scene is the famous interrogation of Quinn, who plays Umma Mukhtar, the Libyan freedom fighter, by an Italian colonial officer. With increasing frustration, the general tries to persuade Mukhtar to stop his rebellion, alternately threatening him and negotiating with him. Mukhtar defiantly tells the Italian, “We will never surrender. Either we win, or we die.” Allahu akbar, the woman cries into the microphone; God is great, the audience echoes.

A Secular Coup?

A few days before I went to Raba’a, I had iftar with one of my former colleagues in Islamic television production, Nawal, and her neighbor. Nawal is a pious woman even by the most exacting standards. She attends weekly lessons in Qur’anic recitation and interpretation at a mosque a full 45-minute drive from her home because she thinks the teacher there is particularly learned. She donned the headscarf at puberty, and over the years swapped her form-fitting pantsuits for wider and looser skirts and knee-length jacket ensembles. She reads the Qur’an daily, and during Ramadan shuns the television in favor of a marathon 20-cycle prayer set at the mosque. If she is very tired, she will do eight cycles, but she will not miss

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a young woman who was often good-naturedly teased by other employees for this choice.

As we ate, Nawal told us about a bad argument she had had with her good friend Amal. Amal is also a very pious woman—they had met during mosque lessons ten years before. Over the years, Amal started shunning her own suits in favor of monochromatic cloaks and most recently covered her face with a semi-sheer black cloth, a sartorial marker of salafi leanings in Egypt. Her husband lets his beard grow to his chest and shaves his mustache, also in the salafi style. Amal supports the Muslim Brothers, and had gone a few times with her husband to the sit-in at Raba’a. As Nawal told it, Amal believed that those against Mursi were in fact acting against religion. Not only that, they were being supported by the Copts and the Shi’a, who are infidels.

Nawal’s neighbor, who protested for the first time in her life not on January 25, 2011 against Mubarak, but on June 30, 2013 against Mursi, immediately started clicking her tongue against her teeth in disapproval. This Amal, she declared, is from the people that God speaks about in al-A’raf, the seventh chapter of the Qur’an. She recited the specific verse: “A group [of you] He guided, and a group deserved [to be in] error. Indeed, they had taken the devils as allies instead of God while they thought that they were guided.”

Nawal started laughing, shaking her head at the irony as she told us that this verse is the very one that Amal used to describe her. Her face puckered, suddenly serious. “Amal is my best friend. She told me she has to stop speaking to me because her husband asked her to cut off ties with anyone against Mursi. Can you believe that?” What did you say to her, I asked. “I told her that I don’t want to know her, either.”

Nawal and others in the social world of Islamic media who supported Mursi’s ouster are not “secular liberal elites” as most accounts would have it. To the contrary—they explicitly believe that secularism cannot be legitimately justified or reasoned from within an Islamic frame. For them, Islam guides and makes normative claims on every aspect of human life, including political life. They were not against the Muslim Brothers because of the movement’s similar commitment to
the “comprehensiveness” (shumuliyya) of Islam, but because they perceived it as arrogant and incompetent, nepotistic and exclusionary. The fact that the Brothers claimed to be acting in the name of Islam while behaving badly only made it so much worse.

Visions for a “New Egypt”

“I am against those using religion for their own personal gain,” one Islamic media producer explained when asked why she was anti-Mursi. “Islam is not new to Egypt. It wasn’t introduced into Egypt by the Brothers. In fact, the Brothers have tarnished the image of Islam. They do outrageous things, and when we tell them that this is not Islam, they call us infidels.” This producer’s support for the military’s removal of Mursi in no way hinged on seeing the military as a bastion of secularism.

To contend, then, that the widespread condemnation of the Brothers indicates a “reversal” of Islamization presumes as descriptive the one prescriptive political claim that unites both secularists and pro-Brother Islamists in Egypt at this moment—that Islamization equals Brotherization. The Muslim Brothers’ narrative that whoever is against them is actually “against Islam” is one that many pious Egyptians find infuriating. Like Nawal, these Egyptians passionately contest the Brothers’ narrative using the same rhetorical strategies and authoritative citations of the Islamic tradition that the Brothers’ supporters use to make their own claims.

While posing secularism against Islamism is useful for a plethora of social actors—from the Brothers to Mubarak’s allies and for both liberal and leftist activists alike—it does not clarify what is actually at stake for many Egyptians who are active participants in the country’s long-standing Islamic revival, but refuse to conflate a commitment to Islamic principles, including political ones, with supporting the Muslim Brothers. The position of these Egyptians, including the Islamic media producers I worked with, is lost in framing the popular discontent and subsequent coup against Mursi as a binary opposition of Islamism and secularism.

Indeed, even those Islamic media producers who were against Mursi’s removal expressed their support for the former president in terms that were highly contingent and not at all predicated on accepting the claim that his party represents “Islam.” For example, a few weeks before the scheduled June 30 protest, one producer wrote the following post on Facebook: I support the president in finishing his term, but I am not happy with his performance until now on many issues. I am among those who defend the right of the president and the Muslim Brothers to take their full chance in governing, but I don’t give them this support without criticism nor do I follow them blindly. I dream of a strong opposition with a real presence on the street that offers a real alternative to the ruling regime, but I am not for an opposition that destroys without offering something constructive in return. I am one of the sons of the revolution and its supporters, but I don’t feel that the revolution has a right to do anything anytime and anywhere and however it wants under the cover of revolutionary legitimacy. I believe that the Islamic trend should exist in the political field, but I don’t sacralize the parties within these trends or treat them like they represent Islam. I am prepared to vote them out for being incompetent, and vote in non-Islamist parties if they are better able to govern.

These sentiments illustrate that not only do some Egyptians not see the Islamism of the Muslim Brothers and secularism as the only two options available to them in organized political life, but also that these two ideologies do not exist in the world as their proponents insist (or wish) they do. Instead of subscribing to an either/or logic, many media producers within the “Islamic trend” evinced an activist sensibility that was largely indifferent to the competing ideological claims of organized Islamist groups and their secular liberal counterparts of what the “new Egypt” should be like.

Instead, they articulated a sociopolitical vision that, while incipient and not always coherent, was explicitly committed to the task of creating a shared space (masatha mushatarika) between Egyptians of different political orientations and moral sensibilities, including between those who identify themselves as pious and those who do not. With the military’s increasingly brutal repression of all dissent following Mursi’s ouster, speaking the language of a shared space became a radical act, a way of working to realize the revolutionary demands for “bread, freedom and social justice.”

Talk of solidarity and common action can seem at best naïve amidst the militaristic vitriol that marks much of public speech in Egypt today, and at worst complicit in occluding the pain of destroyed lives and loved ones. But, for these Islamic media producers, it is the indifference of ordinary citizens to the silencing of those with whom they disagree, or dislike, that gives counter-revolutionary forces strength. Indeed, many of them were disturbed that so many Egyptians, including some of their friends and even close family members, could feel gleeful at reports of the killing or imprisonment of the “other side.” Outrage should not be stingily measured and doled out according to who is killing or who is being killed, they reasoned.

Trying to create this shared space, let alone inhabiting it, can feel arduous and uncertain. It can feel wretched. But for the Islamic media producers I came to know, insisting on both is necessary to overcome those who would make the “new Egypt” a more brutal version of the old.

I support the president in finishing his term, but I am not happy with his performance until now on many issues. I am among those who defend the right of the president and the Muslim Brothers to take their full chance in governing, but I don’t give them this support without criticism nor do I follow them blindly. I dream of a strong opposition with a real presence on the street that offers a real alternative to the ruling regime, but I am not for an opposition that destroys without offering something constructive in return. I am one of the sons of the revolution and its supporters, but I don’t feel that the revolution

Endnotes

2 See the search results for “#coupvolution” on Twitter.com.
4 All names are pseudonyms and identifying information has been changed.
5 Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU7zQbRbbho.
6 Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAkJm6slBM.


B’Tselem. The Invisible Walls of Occupation: Burqa, Ramallah District—A Case Study (Jerusalem, October 2014).


Piper, Karen. The Price of Thirst: Global Water Inequality and the Coming Chaos (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

Underlying the unrest is the severe maldistribution of wealth. In 2012, according to UN data, Yemeni per capita income was under $1,330, less than $2 per day. For decades, Yemenis have sought more remunerative work abroad, particularly in the oil-rich monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. But as the citizenry of those countries grows larger, relative poverty rises, there, too, leading the regimes to tighten the screws on foreign labor. Over the course of 2013, Saudi Arabia expelled more than 550,000 Yemeni workers, along with tens of thousands of Somalis and other Africans. Yemen is a major transit point for Africans seeking employment in points north. The mix of desperate migrants, frustrated returnees, opportunistic traffickers and nervous, despotic governments is a human rights nightmare.

This gloomy picture suggests the real problem with Obama administration policy in Yemen, if not the Middle East and the rest of the world. Technocratic, tempted by top-down visions, tepid at best toward bottom-up change, the administration is content with the illusory “stability” created by constant crisis management. Absent structural improvements to the lot of the majority, the search for real stability is akin to a hunt for a unicorn.
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