

## Civil Conflict in South Yemen

Mark N. Katz

In January 1986, fighting erupted in South Yemen (also known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen — PDRY) between two factions of the ruling Marxist leadership. Both of the factions were strongly pro-Soviet, and the group that won said it would pursue the same policies as the group it ousted. What the issues were in the struggle appeared quite confusing, and during the ten or so days when the fighting was at its heaviest, it was unclear what was happening. Reports that the leaders of each side had been killed alternated in quick succession with reports that the leaders of each were alive and were victorious. By the time the fighting ended, the top leaders of one faction had all been killed, but that faction prevailed nevertheless.

At first glance, what happened in Aden, South Yemen's capital, might not seem especially interesting: no matter which pro-Soviet faction defeated the other, the USSR would retain its influence in South Yemen. But skepticism greets the protestations of the new leaders that they will follow the same policies as their predecessors, since the new leaders are associated with a policy that the ousted leader, 'Ali Nasir Muhammad al-Hassani, had ended — namely, the exportation of revolution to South Yemen's neighbors. Hence, predictions as to the probable behavior of the new leadership and their Soviet allies toward the rest of the region are fraught with considerable uncertainty.

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This article will examine the background of the crisis; the crisis itself; and its implications for the future.

### Background of the Crisis

Since the November 1967 victory in which Marxist guerillas led South Yemen to independence, they have undergone several leadership struggles. In the 1969 coup, 'Abd al-Fatah Isma'il became head of the party, Salim 'Rubayi' Ali chief of state, and 'Ali Nasir Muhammad al-Hassani the defense minister; in 1971 al-Hassani also became prime minister. This group of "radicals" actively supported the Marxist rebellion to the east in neighboring Oman. The rebels, who eventually became known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO), won some early victories. But at the end of 1975, the rebellion was defeated by the forces of Sultan Qabus with the help of Britain, Jordan and Iran.

Soon after, the South Yemen leadership was wracked by a new power struggle. The president, Salim 'Rubayi' Ali, who was oriented more toward China, wanted to follow Peking's lead in normalizing relations with America and the West (the radicals had severed diplomatic relations with Washington shortly after they came to power in 1969). However, the party chief, Isma'il, who was strongly pro-Soviet, wanted to hew closely to Moscow's policies. At first, 'Ali appeared to have the upper hand when, in the summer of 1977, he succeeded not only in normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia but also in negotiating a generous aid package from Riyadh. However, when the Ogaden crisis broke out in the fall, 'Ali was powerless to prevent party chief Isma'il (and the Soviets) from using Aden as a trans-shipment point for arms and Cuban troops sent

to help Ethiopia. The Saudis, who supported Somalia in the dispute, were so angered by this move that they cancelled their aid, thus effectively weakening President 'Ali further. He appealed to Washington for aid in order to extricate South Yemen from total reliance on the Soviets. Even as a U.S. State Department mission was enroute to Aden in June 1978, fighting broke out in Aden between the forces of 'Ali and Isma'il. After two days of fighting, 'Ali was defeated and executed; the State Department mission was aborted.

Exactly what role the Soviet Union played in the June 1978 fighting is still disputed. What is certain, however, is that Moscow gained considerably from the upheaval. Having recently lost access to military facilities, first in Egypt and then in Somalia, the Soviets managed to retain and even to expand their presence in South Yemen, thanks to Isma'il's ouster of 'Ali.

After the June 1978 coup, Prime Minister al-Hassani ascended to the post of chief of state, but by the end of the year he was displaced by party leader Isma'il. Isma'il, now clearly the preeminent leader, signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Brezhnev in October 1979.

Isma'il was very keen on seeing Marxist revolution spread to the neighboring states of the Arabian Peninsula. When the Shah of Iran fell from power in early 1979, the last Iranian troops were withdrawn from Oman. Believing that it was mainly foreign intervention that had previously defeated the PFLO Isma'il backed this organization's renewed efforts to incite revolution in Oman. PFLO forces made several raids into Oman, but the PFLO failed completely to revive the rebellion there.

In North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic), Isma'il had greater success. Himself a Northerner, Isma'il wanted to bring about the union of the two Yemens, preferably under his rule. Several coups had already taken place in the North, and the regime of Colonel 'Ali 'Abadallah Salih appeared ripe for overthrow. Isma'il backed the National Democratic Front (NDF), a Marxist group that rapidly gained influence in the southern part of North Yemen (near

the border with South Yemen). In February 1979, fighting broke out between the two countries, but a cease-fire was instituted the following month. However, this did not end the NDF insurgency nor its support by South Yemen.

Ironically, Isma'il's efforts to promote revolution in Oman and North Yemen did not meet with Soviet approval. Although the Kremlin was not averse to Marxists coming to power in these countries, it found that unsuccessful Marxists were an embarrassment. The Soviet Union has traditionally had a dual policy toward Third World countries: support Marxist revolution in those countries where revolution seems feasible; otherwise, work for good relations with the government in power (even if it is conservative) in hopes of loosening its ties with the United States. Thus, South Yemen's backing of unsuccessful Marxists in Oman, not only did little to advance the cause of revolution in that country, but also eroded the Soviet Union's diplomatic efforts to improve its relations with the oil-rich Arab monarchies.

The prognosis for the NDF in North Yemen was much more promising in 1979 and 1980 than for the PLO in Oman. This was not particularly pleasing to the Soviets, for they knew that the NDF's appeal was limited mainly to the Sunni Shafi'is of southern North Yemen, who resented the rule of the Shia Zaidis to the north. The ongoing insurgency was also hampering Soviet efforts to establish diplomatic relations with the Saudis (Soviet hopes in this regard had been spurred by Saudi displeasure over America's arranging the Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel). Further, the Soviets were so fearful of driving North Yemen (with its population about four times that of the South) into closer relations with the West that Moscow actually sold Salih's government the weapons it used to combat the Marxist NDF.

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The Soviets were therefore not displeased when in April 1980 Isma'il was overthrown in a bloodless coup by al-Hassani. Al-Hassani became head of the party and chief of state while keeping the prime ministership — the first time that the three top posts were occupied simultaneously by one person. Al-Hassani also moved quickly to reverse Isma'il's policy of attempting to export revolution. Instead, the new leader embarked on a campaign to have good relations with South Yemen's neighbors while remaining close to the USSR.

This policy, however, did not please Isma'il's close associates, who still remained in powerful positions. One of them, 'Ali 'Antar, was the defense minister, but al-Hassani was able to remove him by promoting him to the post of deputy chief of state in 1981. 'Ali 'Antar was then replaced as defense minister by Salih Muslim Qasim, who also wanted South Yemen to support the NDF. On a number of occasions cease-fires were arranged by al-Hassani between the NDF and the North Yemeni government. None of these lasted very long, partly because 'Antar and Qasim were able to continue providing support to the NDF. But in the spring of 1982, Colonel Salih launched an offensive that succeeded in crushing the NDF; the remaining rebels either defected to him or crossed over into the South.

Al-Hassani quickly moved to establish close relations with Colonel Salih's government. Furthermore, in the fall of 1982, al-Hassani normalized relations with the Sultan of Oman and prohibited the PFLO even from making radio broadcasts out of South Yemen. Al-Hassani improved his ties with all the neighboring states, and the richer ones renewed their economic assistance to South Yemen. This new, friendly South Yemeni policy toward its neighbors also furthered Soviet efforts to improve ties with these countries.

In October 1984, North Yemen signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Moscow. In September 1985, Oman (which has traditionally been more anti-communist than even the conservative

Saudis) agreed for the first time to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR; the United Arab Emirates followed suit in November 1985. Soviet contacts with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar (none of which has yet established diplomatic relations with the USSR or any other communist country) also increased.<sup>1</sup>

### The January 1986 Crisis

Al-Hassani's foreign policies furthered Moscow's aims in the region, but his domestic policies caused the Soviets some alarm. Although extremely pro-Soviet, al-Hassani was also interested in promoting economic development in his poverty-stricken country. Having been prime minister since 1971 and having dealt since then with the Soviets regarding their economic assistance to Aden, he realized just how little the Soviets either could or would help him. Indeed, part of al-Hassani's reason for improving relations with Oman and North Yemen was to encourage the Saudis, Kuwaitis, and other wealthy Gulf states to give him the economic assistance that Moscow would not. Further, al-Hassani began to open the country to investment by Western companies. He particularly encouraged Western oil companies to come and explore for oil; the Soviets had been trying to find it since the early 1970s, but had failed.

The hardliners remaining in Aden who had been associated with Isma'il were not pleased with this economic opening to the West. They were concerned that this would lure young people away from Marxist principles, especially if foreign corporations operated more effectively than the usually unsuccessful Soviet-sponsored enterprises. The Soviets appeared to share their concern that Marxist rule would somehow be jeopardized by the influence of Western and conservative Arab money.

In May 1984, it became evident that the hardliners were gaining strength when the defense minister Qasim and other hardliners joined 'Ali 'Antar on the ruling Politburo. Isma'il's former internal security chief — who was reported to have been

executed or imprisoned in September 1982 — also became a minister at this time. In January 1985, al-Hassani relinquished the prime ministership, though this post did not go to a hardliner but a technocrat — al-'Attas — who was believed to be a supporter of al-Hassani. Still, it was unusual that al-Hassani would want to give up this position considering that he had been able to seize full power from it in 1980.<sup>2</sup>

What role, if any, the Soviets had in these developments is not certain. But they must have been involved in the early 1985 return to Aden of the former leader, Isma'il, from Moscow (where he had been living in exile since 1980). Upon his return, Isma'il was named head of one of the departments in the ruling party's Central Committee Secretariat. In October 1985, the third congress of the Yemeni Socialist Party was held; Isma'il was "elected" to both the Politburo and the Secretariat, as were several other of his hardline allies. With these developments, al-Hassani's position had definitely been weakened.<sup>3</sup>

What happened at the party congress set the stage for the final showdown between the two opposing factions. With al-Hassani as both chief of state and party head, and Isma'il, whom he had ousted from these same positions, occupying a Politburo seat, it came as no surprise that the two men were unwilling to cooperate with one another. The situation could be resolved only in one of two ways: (1) Isma'il would try to oust al-Hassani and seize power for himself; or (2) al-Hassani, anticipating such action on Isma'il's part, would preemptively move to eliminate him and his supporters. When fighting broke out in Aden on January 13, 1986, it was reported that Isma'il had struck first. In retrospect, however, it appears that al-Hassani actually made the first move.

After every coup in South Yemen, the new leadership's account of events has usually been greeted with skepticism. Western journalists visiting Aden shortly after the fighting died down, however, concluded that the new leaders' story was essentially accurate. Al-Hassani had called a Politburo meeting for January 13 to which only his rivals had been invited. As they were waiting for al-Hassani, men with machine guns opened fire on them. Many were killed, including 'Ali 'Antar and Salih Muslih Qasim. Others, who had brought their own weapons to the meeting, escaped and made contact with their supporters. When the rebels finally took Aden, they announced the names of their members who had been killed, making no mention of Isma'il. Several days later they revealed that he had escaped from the meeting room, but had died later.<sup>4</sup>

After arranging for this massacre, al-Hassani did not remain in Aden but went to his home province of Abyan to await developments. This may have been one of several foolish errors for this enabled hardliners to rally their forces and seize many important positions in the capital. Al-Hassani made another error the weekend after the fighting began when he left the country to visit Ethiopia and North Yemen. He may have gone to gain their support, or at least to persuade them not to aid his opponents. But when it was first announced that he had left the country, speculation instantly arose that he had fled; believing this, many who might have supported him switched to the other side out of concern for their own survival. Although al-Hassani did return to Abyan province, it was of no use. Soon afterward his opponents gained control over most of Aden and the rest of the country. It was even reported that al-Hassani was about to march on Aden with his forces, but this never materialized, and Abyan province fell to the new regime as well. Al-Hassani has been reported to be with his remaining followers in various locations: Syria, North Yemen, or the hills in South Yemen near the border with North Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Although it lasted for only a short time, the

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level of fighting, especially in Aden, was said to have been intense; the Western media frequently cited estimates that 10,000 people had been killed.<sup>5</sup>

What was the role of the Soviet Union in this conflict? At first, Moscow seemed confused about what was transpiring. Radio Moscow repeated the initial Radio Aden broadcast made by al-Hassani's supporters that his opponents had attempted a coup but had failed.<sup>6</sup> Soon, realizing that al-Hassani was not in complete control, the Soviets attempted to mediate between the warring factions, but they failed. After this, observers noted that the Soviets undertook a series of measures that increasingly aided the hardliners. The Soviet Union issued a warning to other states not to become involved in the fighting. Since the moderate al-Hassani was more acceptable to the neighboring states than were his hardline opponents, the Soviets were in effect warning other states not to aid al-Hassani. In addition, the Soviet media ceased all mention of al-Hassani — a sure sign that they had lost faith in his ability to stay in power if not an outright signal that they had turned against him. Refugees fleeing South Yemen also claimed that Soviet troops were aiding the opposition forces. Moreover, it was reported that the Soviets were amplifying the opposition's radio signal.<sup>7</sup>

Prime Minister al-'Attas had the good fortune to be on an official visit to New Delhi when the fighting broke out. He had been scheduled to travel from there to Peking, but he went to Moscow instead. When the rebels gained the upper hand, he was named the new chief of state, and he returned to Moscow shortly thereafter. 'Ali Salim al-Bayd, one of the few who survived the January 13 Politburo massacre, became the head of the party. Al-Bayd, however, had been wounded; his newly appointed deputy, Salim Salih Muhammad, appears to be running the party.<sup>8</sup>

Although the new leaders are closely associated with Isma'il and the hardliners who earlier had made strenuous efforts to export revolution, both they and the Soviets went to great lengths to reassure Oman, North Yemen, and Saudi Arabia that they intended to continue al-Hassani's policy of maintaining friendly relations with those countries.<sup>9</sup> The Soviets, then, did not abandon al-Hassani because they disapproved of his policy of befriending the neighboring countries. Indeed, this is a policy they wanted South Yemen to continue since if the new leadership in Aden tried to promote revolution in Oman and North Yemen, they would probably not succeed at this time but would only undermine Moscow's recent success in improving relations with some of the conservative Gulf states.

### Conclusion

Had the Soviets really sought the ouster of al-Hassani? Jeane Kirkpatrick concluded in *The Washington Post* that they had and, moreover, that they had orchestrated the change in regime in order to install someone of less independent mind.<sup>10</sup> As has already been seen, however, al-Hassani's policy of seeking good relations with his neighbors was yielding benefits for Moscow; the Soviets had no interest in risking their gains by seeing those restored to power in Aden who wanted to export revolution at a time when exporting revolution was not likely to be successful. The Soviets could have desired the ouster of al-Hassani because they feared that his policy of allowing Western businesses into the country would subvert socialist rule there. The Soviets, after all, did permit Isma'il to return to Aden from Moscow and may well have been instrumental in effecting his return to the Politburo.

But had the Soviets really sought the ouster of al-Hassani, they probably could have brought about a quick, quiet change of regime at any time, either before or after Isma'il returned. Instead, it appears that the Soviets were basically satisfied with al-Hassani, but that they were worried about some of his internal policies. Therefore, they sent Isma'il home to join the Politburo not in order to overthrow al-Hassani, but merely to warn him that he *could* be overthrown if he went too far in allowing Western corporations into South Yemen. From the Soviet point of view, this must have seemed an eminently sensible maneuver: there existed two factions (at least) among the South Yemeni leadership, both of which were pro-Soviet. By pitting them against one another, the Soviets could best ensure that the policies they backed were carried out by Aden. This was much more effective than relying on one leader who, although pro-Soviet, could pursue his own policy preferences more easily (which is what Isma'il had been doing before al-Hassani overthrew him in 1980). And ultimately, a strong Marxist ruler could conceivable break with Moscow completely, while a divided leadership would be unlikely to do this. Even if some wanted to expel the Soviets, the rivalry among the leadership would virtually prevent them from uniting on such a move, and the Soviets could support the rival leaders in ousting the potential apostates.

If this indeed was the Soviet reasoning behind returning Isma'il to Aden, then they badly miscalculated not only the sheer viciousness of the rivalry among the South Yemeni leadership but also their own ability to keep the situation under control. Once the fighting broke out, Moscow became alarmed that each faction was turning to its own tribe for support, and that the tribes were becoming heavily involved in the conflict.<sup>11</sup> What must have worried Moscow was that if conflict among the Marxist forces persisted, non-Marxist forces, such as the tribes supported by some of the neighboring countries, could overthrow the Marxist regime altogether and expel the Soviets completely. Thus,

the Soviets may have decided to support al-Hassani's opponents because they seemed more likely to win and because it was more important to Moscow to see one side come to power quickly and restore the Marxist order. The unacceptable alternative was to remain loyal to al-Hassani, thereby risking prolonged fighting that could have led to the destruction of Marxist rule in the country.

South Yemen is now relatively calm, and the new pro-Soviet leadership seems to be firmly in power. The fighting in Aden interrupted the USSR's progress in improving ties with the oil-rich monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council. But because South Yemen is now quiet, and because both Moscow and Aden have made great efforts to reassure Saudi Arabia, Oman, and North Yemen that South Yemen will not be a threat to them again, the setback in the Soviet diplomatic campaign to win friends in the region may prove only temporary.

Some may conclude that though the upheaval in South Yemen is tragic for the people of that country if the casualties suffered were indeed as high as was reported, the Soviet position in the country or in the region will suffer little negative impact. But the Soviets themselves may not be so sanguine. Until this year, South Yemen was something of a showcase-example among the new Marxist-Leninist Third World states. Virtually all the others (Afghanistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, and Nicaragua) are struggling against armed internal opposition that the local Marxist government has been unable to defeat — even with the help of large numbers of troops from Cuba (in Angola), Vietnam (in Cambodia), or the Soviet Union itself (in Afghanistan). In South Yemen, though, this was not the case. No significant domestic opposition existed, and the Marxist regime seemed firmly in power.

What happened in January 1986 shattered this assumption. The Soviets, certain that their control of South Yemen was firm, were surprised to find that it was obviously not firm enough to prevent intense conflict

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from erupting. Further, the fact that the rival Marxist factions turned to their respective tribes for support was not an encouraging sign: the Soviets can hardly depend on tribal forces for the best defense of the Marxist order. Finally, there is the strong possibility that fighting will erupt again; wherever the head of the party and the chief of state have been two different leaders, they have inevitably clashed. This is the situation that exists now in South Yemen. It is not at all clear whether party ideologues such as Salim Salih Muhammad will long tolerate the technocrat al-'Attas as chief of state; al-'Attas, after all, was associated with al-Hassani before the fighting erupted.

The Soviets, then, may face similar crises in South Yemen if the South Yemeni leaders, following their usual pattern, once more become locked in struggle. If fighting becomes chronic, the Soviets may find they need to exert greater efforts and incur greater costs to maintain their position in the country. Yet, if a strong leader arises who can unite all these disparate elements under his own rule, the Soviets will become fearful of being expelled by him. There are, after all, only some 1,000 Soviet military advisers in South Yemen<sup>12</sup> — far fewer than the 20,000 that Sadat expelled from Egypt. In light of these considerations, the Soviets cannot be confident of easily retaining their influence in the South Yemen of the future. ■

## NOTES

1. For a fuller account of South Yemen's internal and external politics, see Mark N. Katz, *Russia and Arabia: Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Arabian Peninsula* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), ch. 2.

2. See Norman Cigar, "South Yemen and the USSR: Prospects for the Relationship," *The Middle East Journal* 39:4 (Autumn 1985), pp. 775-795.

3. On the elections to the YSP Central Committee Politburo and Secretariat, see Aden Domestic Service in Arabic, October 16, 1985, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Middle East and Africa Daily Report* [hereinafter referred to as *FBIS ME*], October 17, 1985, p. C1; and *FBIS ME*, October 21, 1985, p. C6.

4. John Kifner, "Battle for Southern Yemen: How the Fury Began," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1986, p. A4; John Kifner, "Massacre Over Tea: Southern Yemen Conflict," *The New York Times*, February 9, 1986, pp. A1, A16; "South Yemen Reports Ex-Chief Died in Battle," *The New York Times*, February 11, 1986, p. A5.

5. John Kifner, "Rebel Fighters Declare Victory in South Yemen," *The New York Times*, January 20, 1986, pp. A1, A4; and "Southern Yemen Battles Subside," *The New York Times*, January 27, 1986, p. A3.

6. Moscow TASS in English, January 13, 1986, in *FBIS: Soviet Union Daily Report*, January 14, 1986, p. H1.

7. "U.S. Urges Soviet to Stay Out of South Yemen War," *The New York Times*, January 24, 1986, p. A3.

8. Al-Bayd had been elected to the YSP Central Committee Secretariat in October 1985. Celestine Bohlen, "S. Yemeni Official in Moscow Proclaimed Leader by Rebels," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 1986, pp. A1, A17; and Aden Domestic Service in Arabic, February 6, 1986, in *FBIS ME*, February 7, 1986, p. C3.

9. John Kifner, "Southern Yemen Offers a 'Good Neighbor Policy,'" *The New York Times*, February 1, 1986, p. 3. (In recent conversations, however, American and North Yemeni officials indicated that the National Democratic Front has renewed its activity in southern North Yemen; moreover, the new South Yemeni leadership has supported it in retaliation for North Yemen's allowing Al-Hassani and his followers to remain there. But the level of NDF activity does not appear to be as intense as it was in 1979-82.)

10. Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Hazardous Duty in South Yemen," *The Washington Post*, February 4, 1986, p. A16. (Ms. Kirkpatrick's views are cited here because they reflected the thinking of many high-level policy-makers as to what was transpiring in South Yemen.) See also, Mark N. Katz, "South Yemen: The Kirkpatrick Version," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 1986, p. A19.

11. On the role of the tribes in the fighting, see John Kifner, "Soviet Said to Try to Calm South Yemen," *The New York Times*, January 17, 1986, p. A3; and Kifner, "Battle for Southern Yemen: How the Fury Began," *loc. cit.* The role of the tribes, however, must not be overemphasized, as is the case in an article by John Cooley, "S. Yemen Conflict Boils Down to Tribal War," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 11, 1986.

12. As of July 1985, there were also only 500 Cuban and 75 East German military advisers in South Yemen. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1985-1986* (London: IISS, 1985), pp. 30, 33, 147.