

Interlude. South Yemen:

A “Rough State” in the Region and in the World

During the Cold War, the Horn of Africa was of much geostrategic interest and relevance. This importance was closely connected to free sailing through the Bab al-Mandab and the question of access to Aden port for both superpowers, but also regional actors. Extreme poverty, regular news about terrorist training and erupting violence, as well as the ideological saber-rattling of Arabia’s one and only Marxist state all fostered more attention for South Yemen than its political relevance might have justified. In the 1970s the PDRY forged an alliance across the Red Sea with the other two radical regimes in Africa: Ethiopia and Libya. Clearly, the fledgling South Yemen emerged as a constant factor contributing to the political insecurity in the region and was, due to Soviet military support, a military threat to its neighbors. The following interlude chapter aims to clarify Aden’s position in the region and illuminate the state’s course in Cold War reality to support the reasoning on Moscow’s and East Germany’s interests. The PDRY’s policy and role in the region can be divided into three subject areas: The PDRY and its neighbors, its geostrategic position on the Horn of Africa, and the regime’s extremist tendencies.

1. ADEN: ACTOR AND PAWN IN THE COLD WAR GAME

The regime’s radical path isolated the new state in the region right from the start, and the provisions of the Fourth Congress of the NF did not do much to improve that. At least at the party level, Aden was able to bond with other “progressive” regimes in the region, but even these regimes criticized South Yemen for its closeness to Moscow and East Berlin, condemning Aden and its policies as a betrayal of Islam and Arabism.¹ Naturally, the conservative monarchies of the gulf considered the PRSY/PDRY an imminent threat to their rule and their

1 | Wildau und Serauky zur Reise der VDRJ Delegation in arabische Länder 1972, in: PA AA MfAA C 1555/76, 176.

state's stability. Saudi Arabia, bordering South Yemen in the east, and Egypt, the aspiring regional power, had supported the disempowered sultans and their ally, FLOSY, from early on. After their hopes for a moderate regime had been dashed, Riyadh as well as Cairo tried to find common ground with Aden, in one way or the other. Speculations about newly found oil in the border region between Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, and South Yemen² offered simple reasons for distrust and fueled conspiracy theories. As a consequence, this perceived external threat served to unify the divided ranks of the NF.

1.1 Brotherly Love and Hate: North and South Yemen at War

When the Aden regime eliminated the qualifier “South” in the name of its republic in 1970, this not only referred to Yemeni unity, but undeniably expressed the regime's political claim to all of Yemen.³ The tensions between North and South had continuously been building up for quite some time and the final outbreak of violence was no surprise. The border war between the two Yemens in 1972, however, was merely a short one. The peace agreement reached between al-Aini, foreign minister of the YAR, and Aden's Ali Nasir in Cairo even formulated Yemeni unification as a common goal⁴ – though it turned out to be one of long-term character. It took more than two decades before actual peace between North and South was achieved. In the meantime, the “Cairo Agreements on Unification” of 1972 were followed by new fighting along the border in 1979, while “the PDRY-supported National Democratic Front (NDF) rebellion in the borderlands of the YAR”⁵ kept conflict between North and South quite alive well into the 1980s.

Saudi Arabia's support for the YAR in these conflicts and Moscow's role in these regional disputes illustrate the regional relevance of the conflict. While the Kremlin displayed political restraint when fighting erupted between Saudi Arabia and the PDRY in 1969, it still blamed Saudi Arabia for “fanning all kinds of discord between the [YAR] and the [PDRY]” in 1972.⁶ In doing so, Moscow positioned itself against Riyadh as well as Washington in the region. Due to its realistic perspective on South Yemen's capabilities, Moscow clearly had no interest in a unified Yemen in this period, as long as an expansion of the South Yemeni system to the North was not guaranteed. Rather, the Kremlin had a smaller but stable and loyal Marxist-Leninist regime for South Yemen in mind. This clearly

2 | Information über die politisch-militärische Lage der VDRJ (VDRJ), 1972, in: BStU MfS HV A 388, 278.

3 | Brehony, 2013, 55; Burrowes, 2010, 263; Unger, 1971, 1172.

4 | Burrowes, 2010, 67.

5 | Borders and border disputes, wars and agreements, in: Burrowes, 2010, 59.

6 | Izvestia, August 1972, in: Halliday, 1990, 185.

did not correspond with South Yemen's interests at the time. Aden aimed for a fast unification under its Marxist leadership. Scharfenberg, the GDR ambassador, considered this a possibility. After the peace negotiations in Cairo and Tripoli between the YAR and the PDRY under Soviet leadership, he reports to Berlin about "national enthusiasm" among the public and party officials and perceptions that "Yemen unity could be swiftly achieved."⁷ In retrospect this was not about to happen too quickly.

The creation of South Yemen's vanguard party in 1978 also led to the official inclusion of the socialists in the YAR. "The YSP is convinced that nothing but a broad-based popular movement backed by all popular forces can achieve unity for the Yemeni homeland."⁸ This meant nothing less than an immediate attack on the northern leadership. Furthermore, the YSP never made it a secret that it intended to expand its version of Marxism-Leninism to the north.⁹ Understandably, this led to increased distrust of the newly installed regime in Sana'a under the leadership of young Ali Abdallah Saleh. Fighting between the two Yemens erupted once more shortly thereafter and it was not until another civil war in the early 1990s that the two Yemens finally unified.

1.2 Regional Ties, New Friendships, and Rivalries of the 1970s

Meanwhile, Moscow was still hoping to improve relations with Saudi Arabia in the mid- 1970s and Aden's saber-rattling became more of a nuisance than a help for Soviet interests in the region. The Kremlin urged Aden to improve the situation and Salmin's pragmatic policies eased the way to the establishment of relations between the PDRY and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ But other events overruled these considerations. Fighting erupted between Somalia and Ethiopia and caused significant turmoil in the region. Aden became renowned as a political meeting point of the regional powers involved and the allies of the Eastern Bloc.¹¹ Cuban leader Fidel Castro pointedly describes the Soviet dilemma to Honecker: "If the Socialist countries help Ethiopia, they will lose Somali Siad Barré's friendship. If they don't, the Ethiopian revolution will founder."¹² In February 1977, after several failed mediation attempts between Somalia and Ethiopia moderated by South

7 | Brief Scharfenberg an Scholz, December 5 1972, in: PA AA MfAA C 1556/6.

8 | Lackner, 1985, 85.

9 | Abd al-Fattah Ismail, in: Grünberg, 2012, 60f.

10 | Yodfat, 1983, 51.

11 | Additions to February 2 1977 Report by Third African Department, Soviet Foreign Ministry, on "Somalia's Territorial Disagreements with Ethiopia and the Position of the USSR," apparently in late May-early June 1977, 63, in: Russian & East German Documents on the Horn of Africa, 1977-78, in: Cold War International History Project Bulletin Issues 9-10.

12 | Castro, Fidel, in: Abebe, 1996, 43.

Yemen, Cuba, and the GDR,¹³ Mengistu Haile Mariam seized power and Moscow took the opportunity to side with Addis Abeba against Riyadh-backed Mogadishu. Werner Lamberz, “SED Politbüro member and Erich Honecker’s troubleshooter for Africa,”¹⁴ and thus a confidant of Soviet diplomats, had been visiting Addis Abeba at the time and readily ensured Mengistu of the support of the Eastern Bloc. Half a year later, the Soviet ambassador to Ethiopia, A.P. Ratanov, reported to Moscow:

“On September 10, together with the heads of the diplomatic missions of Bulgaria, Hungary, the GDR, PDRY, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, [North Korea], Cuba, and Yugoslavia, I was invited to visit Mengistu Haile Mariam.[...] There, I was informed about] the discovery [...] of an imperialist plot against the Ethiopian revolution [by] the USA (the initiator of the plot), Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kenya, and Somalia.”¹⁵

As this report summarizes, alliances in the confrontation were clear and characterized the tendencies of political and military cooperation of the time: In the dispute, the USSR demanded South Yemeni loyalty and support, despite the danger of isolating Aden once more. Against Salmin’s wishes, Ismail opened up Aden’s port for shipping arms and Cuban troops to support Ethiopia. As a consequence of the dispute, Moscow lost Berbera, its naval base in Somalia, and Aden its fragile relationship with Riyadh. Instead, Aden became Moscow’s unofficial substitute for lost Berbera.

Ethiopia’s move to the extreme left and the PDRY’s support during Addis Abeba’s conflict with Somalia made the two radical regimes natural allies in the region, especially as both were very close not only to Moscow, but also to its junior partner the GDR. In 1981, the new friendship culminated in the Tripartite Agreement among Ethiopia, Libya, and the PDRY.¹⁶ The new coalitions forged during the confrontation in the Horn were quite unsettling for the Western powers and the conservative neighboring states.¹⁷ Hitherto, the USSR was considered not

13 | Third African Department, Soviet Foreign Ministry, Information Report on Somali-Ethiopian Territorial Disputes, February 2 1977, 53 and Soviet Foreign Ministry and CPSU CC International Department, Background Report on the Somali-Ethiopian Conflict, 3 April 1978, 92-94, both in: Russian & East German Documents on the Horn of Africa, 1977-78, Cold War International History Project Bulletin Issues 9-10.

14 | Ostermann, 1996, 48.

15 | Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia A.P. Ratanov, Memorandum of Meeting with Mengistu, 10 September 1977, 78f, in: Russian & East German Documents on the Horn of Africa, 1977-78, Cold War International History Project Bulletin Issues 9-10; On the GDR’s involvement in the peace talks see: Dagne, 2006, 18.

16 | Burrowes, 2010, 121.

17 | Moskauer Strafexpedition am Horn von Afrika, in: Der Spiegel, No. 7, 1978.

only a major player in the region, but also able to control access to the Red Sea and thus the Suez Canal. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates jointly offered assistance and support to the “people of South Yemen” in return for “good behavior,” that is, restraint with regard to PFLOAG and general political moderation.¹⁸ This policy also aimed to curb Soviet influence in the PDRY: In a meeting with the West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Fahd declared Saudi Arabia’s intention to offer an “alternative” to the people of South Yemen. The destabilized situation in South Yemen

“may serve to improve the Soviet position in the country. South Yemen disposes of weapons like tanks and planes it does not need for its defense, that’s the danger. The country’s army doesn’t have the opportunity or ability to use these weapons. Thus one has to ask what they are there for. This military power indeed can only be used against countries like Somalia, Sudan or the Gulf states.”¹⁹

Aden repeatedly labelled Riyadh’s policy as hostile and in June 1972 Salmin explicitly announced that the PDRY would work toward the “extinction of the regime [in Riyadh] and the establishment of a republic.”²⁰ This attitude toward Saudi Arabia was not about to change before Ali Nasir established himself as unchallenged leader in 1980. The PDRY’s military forces, however, clearly were no match for Riyadh, and comments by contemporary analysts and today’s historians alike consider Soviet military support for the PDRY rather “unimpressive.”²¹ However, the PDRY’s dedication to its military forces was not to be denied: A standing army of about 27,500 regulars was entertained by one of the poorest countries in the world with a population of about three million people. Due to Soviet and Cuban training and Soviet arms deliveries, the PDRY’s army noticeably exceeded the equipment, training, and discipline of its immediate neighbours, the YAR and Oman.²² In addition to that, the new leader Ismail gradually drifted away from Salmin’s moderate pragmatism and back to the PDRY’s policy of “revolution export” to the north and east.²³ Saud’s open worry about the extent of military equipment in the PDRY and possible “unrest” in its near vicinity, as well as Washington’s decision to substantially engage in the Yemen Arab Republic during the second Yemeni War in 1979,²⁴ clearly show that the PDRY was perceived as a serious threat in the

18 | Chubin, 1980, in: The International Institute for Strategic Studies (Ed.), 303.

19 | Dialogue of Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Fahd with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt on April 27 1981, in: AzAP-BRD 1981, FN 18, 652.

20 | Der Generalsekretär Robaya Ali, June 22 1971, in: PA AA MfAA C 1555/76, 169.

21 | Chubin, 1980, in: The International Institute for Strategic Studies (Ed.), 303.

22 | Burrowes, 2010, 39; Halliday, 1990, 202f.

23 | Katz, 1986, 8.

24 | In February 1979, the USA finally gave in to persistent Saudi requests and agreed to \$1.4 billion aid including military equipment. Chubin, 1980, FN 93, in: The International

region. Thus, even though the total amount of Soviet military support in South Yemen had been decisively smaller than in Iraq or Syria, its political impact has to be considered significantly higher. This was due to geostrategic reasons, but also to the fact that South Yemen was perceived as an unpredictable actor in the region, thus capable of producing much instability. Aden's close ties to Moscow and the YSP's open striving for a leadership role among the communist parties in the Arab world, as well as the PDRY's habit to harbor terrorists, certainly did not improve South Yemen's reputation either.²⁵

2. BETWEEN CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND SECURITY POLICY: EAST BERLIN, ADEN AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

The results of the archival work undertaken within the research for this study undeniably point at a certain exchange between East Germany and South Yemen on international terrorism and possible cooperation in the field. Thus, the topic cannot be left out when analyzing the GDR's foreign policy in the PDRY. However, due to a research gap compounded by a lack of sources for verification, current publications hover between spy novels and conspiracy theories. As a consequence, this chapter is not grouped under one of the analytical phases and rather presented as an excursus.

The 1970s also have to be considered the high times of South Yemen's support for what the PDRY called "national liberation movements". While some of the supported groups and individuals pursued the goal of liberation, many of them not only agreed with Aden that they had "a right to struggle by "all means," they also acted on this principle. South Yemen "became a center for revolutionaries, opposition forces and rebels,"²⁶ some of them straightforward terrorist groups. In Aden and its hinterland, movements such as the PFLOAG in Oman,²⁷ the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), Naif Hawatmah's Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP), and George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), set up their offices, training centers, and meeting points. During the 1970s, the PDRY became notorious as a training ground and safe haven for terrorists.

Institute for Strategic Studies (Ed.), 322; Halliday mentions about "\$400 million worth of US arms to the YAR" as well as the development of naval forces in the gulf to deter South Yemeni forces, in: Halliday, 1990, 192; Also see: Burrowes, 2010, 39.

25 | Informationsmappe für den Besuch des Generalsekretärs des Zentralkomitees der JSP [...] Ali Nasser Mohammed, November 1984, in: BStU MfS HA II Nr. 28712, 153.

26 | Yodfat, 1983, 49.

27 | Arab National Movement; Border and Border Disputes, wars, and Agreements, in: Burrowes, 2010, 33 and 59.

Even though the South Yemeni leaders always denied these activities, clues and events are just too pressing to deny the PDRY's engagement with and support for international terrorist groups and individuals. The MfS reports: "In context of [...] reconnaissance of terrorist groups and forces, it was concluded repeatedly that the PDRY serves as a country of transit and residence [...]"²⁸ International terrorist Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, also known as "Carlos the Jackal," boasted two South Yemeni passports, one of them a diplomatic document. His girlfriend "Lilly" also used a PDRY passport.²⁹ He and his groups received extensive consular support by South Yemeni embassies worldwide and were able to use the PDRY as a training and home base.³⁰

Some MfS documents suggest that Carlos aimed to extend his status there, by acquiring a "Party over Governmental decision" on the cooperation with his group.³¹ Speculations about institutionalized cooperation between Carlos' group and the PDYR may find at least some support in the MfS files as well: "The unofficial source informed [us] that President Ali Nasser is not responsible for the Ministry of State Security anymore. Thus, the contacts for the Carlos group have changed as well."³² Another document of the South Yemeni KfS may be considered more resilient. There, the KfS is asking for the MfS' advice with regard to the handling of Carlos and his supporters:

"1. May the group around Carlos be trained in the PDRY? (The import of weapons to the PDRY will be possible) 2. May the PDRY be used as a base for the group? 3. Is there agreement [of the MfS] with regard to a possible issuance of passports for the members of the group by the PDRY?"³³

28 | The report names a South Yemeni liaison officer of the KfS as source. Konzeption für ein Gespräch mit dem Vorsitzenden des MfS der VDR Jemen zur Fragen des Terrorismus, November 12 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004, 51.

29 | Bericht "Carlos", January 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.11, 239; 252; Gesprächskonzeption über die am 16.8. – 17.8.1979 durchzuführende Beratung mit Vertretern der ČSSR-Sicherheitsorgane in der ČSSR-Hauptstadt – Prag, August 14 1979, BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004, 11

30 | Bericht "Carlos", January 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.11, 239; Report on Carlos' future moves, dated probably before 1981, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.17191, 53.

31 | Report on Carlos' future moves, dated probably before 1981, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.17191, 53.

32 | Information über die Zusammenarbeit der "Carlos"-Gruppierung mit der VDRJ, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.17191, remnant, sine anno, sine pagina.

33 | Vermerk Telegramm aus Aden vom 20.8.1979 an Neiber, Roscher, HV A/III, August 20 1979, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004, 7f.

This document, which is dated before the two South Yemeni passports were issued for Carlos,³⁴ suggests that the East German MfS usually knew about South Yemen's contacts in this regard and maybe even had a say in the PDRY's decisions. However, political cooperation with international terrorist groups had not been too profitable for the PDRY, neither politically nor economically. In the end, and despite several years of close cooperation between the PDYR and Carlos the Jackal, "relations [somewhat] cooled down" in 1981. In accordance with the quoted "top secret" MfS report, Carlos had begun moving arms and equipment from Aden to Syria due to the remote position of the country.³⁵ In addition to the GDR's knowledge of South Yemen's contacts with terrorist groups, East Berlin undeniably followed its own interests in this regard. According to Kowalczyk, the GDR's MfS "not only entertained contacts to the PLO, but also to Arab terrorist groups. Hundreds of these fighters [...] had been trained by officers of the MfS."³⁶ Carlos and his closest partners were able to move freely between several states of the Eastern Bloc and certain "safe harbor states" like the PDRY:

"[Carlos] left Bagdad in January 1979 because of fear of reprisal and has been residing mostly in the Socialist countries GDR, Hungary, Bulgaria and the ČSSR. Exemptions are short visits to the PDRY, Libya, Lebanon and Syria."³⁷

The "Carlos" Group or "Organization of International Revolutionaries,"³⁸ as the group members called themselves, officially supported national liberation movements against "Imperialism, Fascism, Zionism, Racism, and Colonialism."³⁹ Major allies in this fight were the socialist countries, as an MfS report of 1980 suggests: "Out of strategic considerations friendly relations are to be established and maintained [with the Carlos Group]."⁴⁰ Despite the GDR's refusal to offer full support to the Group as a "safe harbor state," the report mentions that "visa for entry and transit to the GDR" had been issued and that the leading figures of the group received accommodation.⁴¹ Carlos and his supporters repeatedly visited East Berlin between 1979 and 1982 as a "guest of the embassy of South Yemen."⁴² There they received substantive support by Arab and East German citizens in the GDR,

34 | Bericht über die Tätigkeit terroristischer Organisationen, unter besonderer Beachtung der "Organisation Internationale Revolutionäre," die vom bekannten Terroristen "CARLOS" geleitet wird, Februar 10 1981, BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004, 42.

35 | *Ibid.*, 39.

36 | Kowalczyk, 2011, 262.

37 | Bericht "Carlos", January 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.11, 231f.

38 | *Ibid.*, 234.

39 | Bericht "Carlos", January 10 1980,

40 | *Ibid.*, 235.

41 | *Ibid.*, 237.

42 | Wolf, 1997, 383.

including long-term accommodation.⁴³ Also according to the report, the “Carlos Group” had declared that it was willing to “execute operations on behalf or in the interest of Socialist states against imperialist targets and individuals.”⁴⁴ During a certain period, the GDR verifiably provided home and shelter for the Carlos Group in Central Europe. There they were able to meet with other international terrorists as well as representatives of secret services, such as during Carlos’ visit to the GDR in July 1979.⁴⁵

However, the affiliation of the GDR with terrorist individuals like “Carlos” backfired soon enough, as can be seen in a document summarizing the “dangers and security threats resulting from the [activities] of the ‘Carlos Group’ for the Socialist countries.”⁴⁶ Despite the group’s assurance not to interfere with internal and external Socialist politics, neither the MfS nor other secret services of the Eastern Bloc trusted these promises.⁴⁷ And while the political acceptance of the Carlos Group in the GDR was upheld during the 1980s,⁴⁸ the MfS watched the group’s movements closely. By helping him to reestablish his relations with Iraq and arranging a meeting with a member of the Iraqi Secret Service,⁴⁹ the MfS clearly hoped to finally getting rid of Carlos.

East German support for Carlos had been especially delicate with regard to relations to Western Germany. The 1970s in West Germany sometimes are referred to as the “German Fall,” “Deutscher Herbst”.⁵⁰ This was the heyday of a West German terrorist group, the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), and its affiliates who entertained contacts with other terrorist groups worldwide, especially in the Arab world, and profited from their experience and training, among them the PLO, the “Abu Nidal Group,” and the “Carlos Group”.⁵¹ In the end, cooperation with Carlos all in all must have become considerably less advantageous for the GDR.

43 | Bericht "Carlos", January 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.11, 268.

44 | Ibid., 238.

45 | Ibid., 244; Bericht "Carlos", Februar 10 1981, BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004, 32.

46 | Bericht "Carlos", January 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.11, 231; 271ff.

47 | Ibid., 232; 246; Bericht "Carlos", March 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004; Bericht "Carlos", Februar 10 1981, BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004, 28-40.

48 | Bericht "Carlos", January 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.11, 274.

49 | Ibid., in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.11, 247; Bericht "Carlos", March 10 1980, in: BStU MfS HA XXII Nr.20004, 1-6.

50 | On the controversies about this term see: Jesse, in: Jesse, 2007, 15.

51 | Wunschik, 2007, 25f.

