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# The Road to Good Intentions: British Nation-building in Aden

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CASE STUDY NO. 12  
COMPLEX OPERATIONS CASE STUDIES SERIES

## **The Road to Good Intentions: British Nation-building in Aden**

Scott Smitson

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## COMPLEX OPERATIONS CASE STUDIES SERIES

Complex operations encompass stability, security, transition and reconstruction, and counterinsurgency operations and operations consisting of irregular warfare (United States Public Law No 417, 2008). Stability operations frameworks engage many disciplines to achieve their goals, including establishment of safe and secure environments, the rule of law, social well-being, stable governance, and sustainable economy. A comprehensive approach to complex operations involves many elements—governmental and nongovernmental, public and private—of the international community or a “whole of community” effort, as well as engagement by many different components of government agencies, or a “whole of government” approach. Taking note of these requirements, a number of studies called for incentives to grow the field of capable scholars and practitioners, and the development of resources for educators, students and practitioners. A 2008 United States Institute of Peace study titled “Sharing the Space” specifically noted the need for case studies and lessons. Gabriel Marcella and Stephen Fought argued for a case-based approach to teaching complex operations in the pages of *Joint Forces Quarterly*, noting “Case studies force students *into* the problem; they put a face on history and bring life to theory.” We developed this series of complex operations teaching case studies to address this need. In this process, we aim to promote research and to strengthen relationships among civilian and military researchers and practitioners.

The [Center for Complex Operations](#) (CCO) emphasizes the importance of a whole of government approach to complex operations and provides a forum for a community of practice and plays a number of roles in the production and distribution of learning about complex operations, including supporting the compilations of lessons and practices.

Dr. Karen Guttieri at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) provided the research direction and overall leadership for this project.

## **The Road to Good Intentions: British Nation-building in Aden**

Scott Smitson

Our period of occupation did the country little permanent good, for all the selfless work of many devoted Englishmen and so many good intentions. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the way we left, whatever was to come after us, the time for us to be there was over. And if we were to go, it was better not to linger on.

Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, last high commissioner of the  
Federation of South Arabia

The weathered, ancient heart of the Middle Eastern city had been a center of trade, bazaars, and merchant activity for centuries. Throughout its history, this urban district had witnessed countless influences from traders from across the Middle East region, bringing with them unique cultural and social contributions to a vibrant, cosmopolitan crossroads of religions, empires, and cultures. But on this day, the neighborhood would be the scene of a violent clash between insurgents, western troops, and local police authorities, who, though trained and nominally allied with the western forces, turned their weapons on their supposed allies. Starting with an ambush of a supply convoy, this battle would evolve into a violent episode of urban conflict, punctuated by sniper fire, grenade barrages, and machine gun exchanges. Unable to differentiate friendly forces from enemies, the foreign troops were surrounded by a lethal enemy that blended in with the civilian population that used schools, homes, and mosques as cover. Many of the western forces were killed by some of the very security forces they had spent years training, mobilizing, and equipping. By the evening of the battle, insurgent forces had taken control of the heart of the city, violently expelling the western presence amid the disorienting alleys and courtyards of the district. But while this story may seem to have come from recent headlines in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is instead a glimpse into an event known as the “Battle of Crater,” fought between British and Aden insurgents in June 1967.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The British colonial experience in Aden came to a swift end in November 1967, shortly after the events of the Aden mutiny, and with the complete dissolution of the federal government Britain had spent decades trying to create in South Arabia. After 130 years of colonial presence, and a concerted

effort at “nation-building” throughout the post-World War II era, the British strategy had failed. This case explores why the strategy failed and what lessons can be learned from the British experience for modern-day nation-building.

### **Historical Background: Why the British Were in Aden**

Situated at the choke point between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, Aden lies at the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> As both a seaport and a city, Aden has a deep natural harbor and sheltered inlets that make it an ideal location for trade as well as for control of key shipping lanes.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the strategic importance of Aden, the British seized control of the battlements and harbor of Aden in a quick and decisive engagement on January 19, 1839, providing the British East India Company a major presence in the Middle East and effectively establishing British control over Aden for decades to come.<sup>3</sup>

Long-standing rivalries with the French and the Russian empires were heightened by these empires’ extensive forays into North Africa and the Middle East later in the nineteenth century, making Aden a strategic outpost for the British Empire.

Moreover, the building of the Suez Canal, which opened to shipping in 1869, only increased the importance of Aden, as control of Aden’s port enabled the British to control all seaborne shipping passing in and out of the Red Sea. The discovery of oil in the Middle East, coupled with the decision of the Royal Navy to switch from coal to oil, made the maintenance of Aden as a colonial outpost and lynchpin of the British Empire all the more important, to include the prosecution of the Allied war effort during World War II.

### **POST-WORLD WAR II AND ADEN**

Despite coming out on the winning side of the war against the Axis powers, the British Empire after the war was anything but dominant. The cost of two global wars in the first part of the twentieth century had effectively bankrupted the empire, leading to what an advisor of the Labour government referred to as a “financial Dunkirk.” In essence, the British had two options: either withdraw from its numerous overseas obligations or face a greatly reduced standard of living at home.

With this stark choice at hand, the Labour government began to craft policies for their overseas possessions. The Colonial Office published a document in 1948 stating that the “central purpose of the British colonial policy is simple. It is to guide the colonial territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth in conditions that ensure to the people conquered both a fair standard of living and freedom from oppression in any quarter.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the leaders of the post-World War II Labour Party (and eventual prime minister), Clement Attlee, noted that when considering postwar colonial policy, “the colonial problem will not be solved by a combination of an eye to business and humanitarian sentiment. Nor on the other hand will it be solved by looking backwards and reimagining that we can recreate the conditions of a past age. Britain must . . . set aside sentimental imperialism and take a realist view of our problems.” More specifically, when considering the colonies “East of Suez,” Attlee maintained that the colonies consisted of “a group of people on the way towards self-government requiring tutelage for many years yet and susceptible to much economic development which should be directed primarily to the welfare of the indigenous populations and to the general service of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, the colonial policies drafted in the post-World War II years sought to create some process of constitutional reform; development of the political, social, and economic sectors; the creation of a strong, self-sustaining government; and the eventual independence of the colony. In the Aden context, policy ideas for decolonization and the creation of political institutions came from career diplomats and colonial officers in the form of something called the “Forward Policy.” This policy was seen by its creators as a “prelude to an attenuated form of self-government . . . [because] the region required a period of formal British tutelage prior to independence. After the demission of authority, Britain’s impact would still be evident in the form of the institutions and ideology which had been implanted.”<sup>6</sup>

One coauthor of the “Forward Policy,” Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, who would become advisor for the West Aden Protectorate in 1951, commented that the policy’s main task was “to construct ‘states’ out of the loosest and most fluid tribal considerations imaginable.” But despite his enthusiasm and belief that the “Forward Policy” could be successful in achieving the colonial policy outcomes set forth by the British government, Trevaskis knew that “state building” would in no way be easy in the South Arabian context. He asserted that “there was so much that was unusual or anomalous to comprehend—the distinction between states with advisory treaties and those without; between rulers who ruled and those that did not; the differing degrees in which advice and control were employed in different states; the intricate web of feuds and rivalries in which every state, tribe, or clan seemed to be enmeshed; and, brooding over the whole battlefield of conflict and confusion, the dark continuing shadow of the Yemen’s claim to South Arabia.”<sup>7</sup>

But as John T. Ducker, a career civil servant with extensive experience in the Aden Protectorate during the 1960s, explains, the difficulty was that decolonization policies “were all based on the premise that there would have to be a degree of consent [from the indigenous population] and that the state involved would have to be viable, implying both reasonable competent government and economic viability at an attainable level.” Ducker was rather pessimistic about the prospects of a successful decolonization: “[C]onsent implied electoral systems, with an agreed franchise, then almost totally absent, and normally implied the transfer of power from traditional

rulers or authorities to elected ones, which was bound to be disputatious. Competent government implied a level and depth of education, which was not present in most colonies, despite considerable advances. Economic viability gave rise to questions and answers, which differed from territory to territory according to the resources of each. Some economies were primitive, including, it has to be said, much of the Aden Protectorate.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **NASSER, SUEZ, AND THE COLD WAR**

At the time when the British were struggling with how best to plan, control, and execute decolonization in line with their stated aims, the Cold War moved into full swing and Arab nationalism took over much of the Middle East. As the successful leader of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Gamel Abdul Nasser became Egypt’s second president in 1956, heralding a new period of modernization and socialist reform and advancing the idea of pan-Arab nationalism, including a short-lived union with Syria.<sup>9</sup>

Nasser was revered throughout the Middle East, as he was the first native-born Egyptian leader in 150 years, had forced British troops out of their respective Suez Canal bases, obtained arms and aid from the Soviet Union, and actively sought to promote Egyptian leadership in the Arab world and expunge any and all influence of the West, to include the colonial interests of the British, from the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> As a result, in 1957 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and successfully withstood a combined Anglo-French attempt to seize it back militarily. In 1962, in an attempt to expand his influence on the Arabian Peninsula, Nasser intervened in the Yemen civil war, placing tens of thousands of troops in a state that shared a border with the Aden Protectorate.

#### **The Conservative Party and Imperial Concerns**

Meanwhile, the Suez crisis significantly impacted domestic politics in the United Kingdom, bringing about the removal from power of the Labour Party and the selection of new Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, a member of the Conservative Party. Shortly after taking office, Macmillan initiated a thorough review of the British Empire, specifically focused on the ongoing constitutional and political developments in the colonies. This review argued for the need to retain Aden as a strategic asset but recognized the need for continued assistance and political development (see textbox 1).<sup>11</sup>

The Conservatives feared that the rising Arab nationalism increasingly championed by Nasser could provide the Soviet Union an opportunity to gain traction in the region, reinforcing the new government’s conviction of the central importance of retaining British colonial outposts in the Middle East, especially Aden.<sup>12</sup>

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**Textbox 1.** Findings of the Conservative Party's Review of Aden, 1957

(i) Taking strategic, diplomatic, and economic considerations together, Her Majesty's Government has a strong interest in retaining control of the Colony of Aden, which could by progressive stages attain a high degree of internal self-government, but Her Majesty's Government cannot in the foreseeable future consider the grant of self-determination.

(ii) From the point of view of Her Majesty's Government's interests, the Protected States have mainly to be considered in relation to the protection which they afford the Colony; in this sense, the only policies which must be absolutely rejected are any which would be likely to lead to the absorption of these States by the Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

(iii) Her Majesty's Government has, however, because of its treaties, and for general historical reasons, strong obligations towards these Protected States, which equally lead to the impossibility of allowing them to be absorbed by the Yemen or Saudi Arabia, and make it the duty of Her Majesty's Government to continue to develop them economically and socially so that they may eventually be able to maintain their independence vis-à-vis the Yemen and Saudi Arabia without outside support.

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**Source:** as quoted in Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, p. 17.

**The Characteristics of Aden, the West Aden Protectorate (WAP), and the East Aden Protectorate (EAP)**

Although all under the auspices of the British Colonial Office, the region, known as "Southern Arabia" was divided into three separate protectorates, each with different social, economic, and political challenges and responsibilities:

1. Aden itself was a cosmopolitan, commerce-dependent seaport that at one point was the world's third busiest port, serving as a major provider of oil to passing ships that readily took advantage of the nearby Suez Canal. Most of the citizens of Aden Colony were highly educated and served in many professional positions within the colonial bureaucracy. The colony already had some level of political institutions, as it had an elected municipal government and a Legislative Assembly. Aden also was home to many transient Yemenis who were not granted outright political rights in the existing political framework. This sizeable minority within the seaport would serve as a major roadblock in developing a lasting constitution as efforts to create an independent Aden moved forward.



2. The West Aden Protectorate was made up of twenty states with little existing structures of law and order that could provide any framework for a future constitutional order.<sup>13</sup> The WAP states were located between Aden Colony and Yemen, which served as the staging ground for thousands of Egyptian troops fighting in the Yemen civil war. In addition, for many previous decades, an imamate in neighboring Yemen had laid claim to Aden Colony, a claim that continually threatened the entire British nation-building enterprise.
3. The East Aden Protectorate was much more independent and politically and economically self-sufficient than Aden in its governing structures, as a sultan presided over six separate governorships, maintained a peace accord between the urban centers of the EAP and the rural tribes that could at times threaten overland commerce, enforced law and order within the EAP, and utilized existing social structures to provide a tangible governing framework.

Given these significant differences between the three protectorates, it proved extremely difficult to reach a political consensus between British and Protectorate powerbrokers for creating and implementing an enduring constitutional and governing framework.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Trevaskis Plan**

Under the guidance of Kennedy Trevaskis, advisor for the WAP, a plan was initiated that sought to create a federation in combining states from both the East and West Aden Protectorates; this federation would be headed by the governor of Aden and would, in function, be a quasi-independent form of government that would set the conditions for eventual British withdrawal (but would not include Aden Colony). But Trevaskis' plan was widely denounced. The South Arabian League (SAL), a collection of nationalists, elites, and intellectuals that sought a unified South Arabia, rejected the plan because it ran contrary to its own goal of creating a single, unified South Arabian state that would include Aden and both the East and West Aden Protectorates. Nevertheless, the organization still wanted to participate in the dialogue of constitution-building. However, engagement with the SAL from the Colonial Office was decreased following the inability of the British government to reach a consensus on how best to incorporate the varying entities of Aden, the EAP states, and the WAP states. Increasingly marginalized in subsequent negotiations, the SAL turned to Yemen and Egypt for support. Trevaskis bluntly stated that the SAL had "lost faith in our intentions."<sup>15</sup>

In addition, "at almost the same time as Cairo Radio began to speak the tones of revolutionary Arab nationalism, the development of cheap, transportable transistor radios created a mass audience among the poor and the remote. Men who had long lived in isolation now found a common political

language and a breathtaking, liberating community of sentiment with multitudes in their own land and across the Arab world . . . Aden's government had to try to meet this challenge but it was ill equipped to do so."<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, forces within Yemen began to funnel arms and supplies into the West Aden Protectorate to local tribesmen to incite violence and further aggravate security in the WAP.<sup>17</sup>

One observer noted the difficult position the leaders of the Protectorate states found themselves in when assessing the Trevaskis plan, stating that "the initial response from the rulers was favourable." However, the scheme did not get off the ground. The proposed federation implied considerable loss of autonomy by the rulers in favor of the federal institutions, for which some of them were not ready.

In the EAP, there was difficulty in balancing the separate interests of the smaller states with the much larger Quaiti State.

In the WAP, some rulers also feared it might be a subterfuge to detach the Protectorate from Aden, which was not to be included at that stage. Some wondered if Britain would stand by them if they took a step they knew would incur the wrath of Yemen and Cairo Radio. The imam of Yemen attacked the scheme, perhaps because he feared it might extinguish forever his claims to territory in the WAP. Egypt opposed the scheme because of the British sponsorship.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the British government continued to debate the "Aden question" endlessly, throughout the 1950s and '60s, with the Conservative Party reinforcing the needs of retaining Aden for strategic flexibility "East of Suez," while the Labour Party continually argued for the immediate relinquishment of Aden to the indigenous population. The theme of Labour's feelings of limited military presence is epitomized by the following quote from a leading member of Labour during the period:

"The first of these limitations is that we should not seek to maintain military facilities in an independent country against its will. The second is that we should not accept commitments to give military support to a country unless that country provides us with the facilities we require to make our support effective in time. The third is that we should not attempt to maintain a capability for carrying out major military operations entirely alone and without allies. I do not believe that, even if it were economically or militarily possible for us to avoid accepting these limitations, it would be politically wise for us to seek to do so. In particular, to seek to maintain military facilities in an independent country against its will can mean tying down so many troops in protecting one's base that one has none left to use from it. The base then becomes a heavy commitment in itself and loses all its military value."<sup>19</sup>

While Labour's views were tied to economic concerns, the Conservatives continued to espouse the importance of Aden in a geostrategic context:

“We have in Aden today—for we have it still—the third most important port in the world. . . . There is a major airfield, an important refinery, . . . excellent training grounds and, above all, a major stockpile which enables us to pack a heavy punch, if we should need to, anywhere in the western part of the Indian Ocean.

The value of the base has been proved more than once. We based our operations in Muscat on it. We organised the safety of Kuwait from it. We prevented the expansion of the three East African mutinies from it. The Secretary of State for Defence said yesterday that we did not need that base to carry out our commitments outside South Arabia. I wonder whether he is right. I do not know how without Aden he will be able to go to the help of our numerous Commonwealth partners in East and Central Africa. I am not quite clear how in a real emergency he will be able to help the Persian Gulf.”<sup>20</sup>

Seeing the vigorous rejection of the Trevaskis plan by foreign elements within and outside of the Protectorate, coupled with the deadlocked views of the way forward with decolonization of Aden in the British parliament, the British government had to review its policies on the direction of political development in Aden. Reappraising British policies in Southern Arabia, the prime minister’s cabinet Colonial Policy Committee recommended the following in March 1956:

- The colony of Aden could progressively attain a high degree of internal self-government though not, in the foreseeable future, self-determination on account of Aden’s strategic military importance;
- Any policy that might lead to the absorption of the protected states by Yemen or Saudi Arabia must be absolutely rejected;
- Her Majesty’s Government had a strong obligation to continue to develop the protected states;
- The future independence of those states would very likely need some form of closer association;
- The governor should continue discussions with the rulers about such forms of closer association, which should also address the questions of management of any future oil revenues.<sup>21</sup>

While this colonial governing policy document demonstrated the British government’s logic for *decreasing* the pace of the decolonization process (though decolonization was still a stated objective), the British military drafted new, strategic planning documents in 1958 that *increased* the importance of Aden to the overall strategic framework of the empire. The 1958 Defense White Paper moved the general headquarters of the British Middle East Command from Suez and Cyprus to Aden; Aden was now the command location for all the British air and land forces in the “Arabian Penin-

sula, the Persian Gulf, and British Somaliland”; the Defence White Paper also implemented the concept of “commando carrier” groups that would provide strategic flexibility throughout the Indian Ocean, with one “commando carrier group” based in Singapore, the other in Aden.

### **Sir William Luce’s Warnings**

That same year, Sir William Luce, the governor of Aden, began signaling that all was not well in Southern Arabia, and in fact the policy direction in Aden and the Protectorates should be reversed, not necessarily accelerated. First, in April 1958, Luce warned that “we now have on our doorstep two powerful influences—both hostile; and we must assume that both Russia and Egypt will support and exploit the long-standing ambition of the Imam to secure Yemeni domination of both the Aden Protectorate and Colony.”<sup>22</sup>

Given these challenges, Luce saw three options:

1. Remain indefinitely.
2. Withdraw early.
3. Disengage gradually.

Luce recommended the third option, but he felt that it would take nearly a decade to withdraw from the Arabian Peninsula in a manner that supported Aden Colony and the Protectorates so that they could remain a viable political entity after the British colonial and military presence had ended.<sup>23</sup> He suggested that the British should withdraw completely from the Middle East, more closely align themselves with representatives of the Arab nationalist movement, and thereby set the conditions for favorable relations with Arab countries in the future.

Luce argued that the only suitable “end game” in the disengagement from the Arabian Peninsula was the establishment and implementation of some sort of comprehensive governing structure that included both Protectorates, as well as the Aden Colony. Doing so would require a significant investment in British fiscal, military, and diplomatic capital as well as a recognition that any continued British military presence in Aden Colony had to come solely at the discretion of Aden political elites.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Conservative Reaction to Luce**

The withdrawal recommendation sent shock waves through the Conservative Party. The Colonial Policy Committee decided Aden was too important in the existing British strategy to give up; Aden was essential to the British military’s role in maintaining a presence in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean to counter the threat of Soviet influence.

To reinforce this policy in the Middle East, a communiqué was sent from the secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to the various heads of missions of British embassies throughout the region (see textbox 2), outlining the strategic objectives of the British government, which at the time was still controlled by the Conservative Party:<sup>25</sup>

- Stability in the Persian Gulf to facilitate the production, refining, and flow of oil into international markets;
- Support for the large, British commercial interests in the oil industry;
- Continued access through the Suez Canal and through over-flying rights to facilitate trade and the deployment of the armed forces in the Indian Ocean region, including South East Asia;
- In concert with the USA, minimization of Soviet influence exercised mainly through relations with Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

It was apparent that British strategy heavily relied upon the continued use and presence of overseas basing of their military forces in the Middle East. While diplomats in Aden continued to work toward an eventual hand-over of control from the Colonial Office to the Aden citizenry, the British military significantly increased its footprint in the colony, so much so that troops were shifted from traditional basing areas such as West Germany to Aden to be utilized in operations in East Africa and Kuwait.

For the Tories, no merger of Aden Colony in the Protectorates was politically feasible for the foreseeable future; any proposed “Aden Federation” had to come from the Protectorate states themselves. The colonial secretary at the time, Alan Lennox-Boyd, argued that the British government had to “secure Aden Colony as a military base for as long as possible . . . and . . . could not allow the merger of the Colony [Aden] and the Protectorate/Federation at that time. . . . Time would be needed to accomplish a merger given the different stages of development of the parties . . . although Aden politicians and Protectorate rulers wanted to merge Aden into the Federation, they did so for very different reasons and they totally underestimated the difficulties which would arise.”

Comparing sentiment in the government with sentiment in the field, it became quickly apparent that “there was a basic incompatibility between Her Majesty’s Government’s desire for the military facilities in South Arabia and the policy of creating a viable state to hand over at independence.”<sup>27</sup>

### **THE FEDERATION OF SOUTH ARABIA**

The British government’s decision to continue its drive toward a federation of states in the Aden Protectorate, absent Aden Colony itself, was boosted

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**Textbox 2.** Policy Guidance from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs for Middle East Policy

First, we believe that each country in the Middle East should be left to choose its own road to salvation, free from outside interference. Our object is to work with whatever governments are in power, or come to power, on the basis of such common interests as exist between us, and to help them within the limits of our means.

Second, we should accordingly abstain from any interference in the internal affairs of Arab states and from Arab quarrels, except to the extent to which our special responsibilities may make it, exceptionally, necessary.

Third, we must make it clear that where we have special responsibilities and so long as we have them we intend to carry them out. Our action should be prompt and effective, and the minimum necessary to achieve our purpose.

Fourth, we must accept Arab nationalism and 'Nasserism,' which is one manifestation of it, as a fact of life. We must take account of it and adopt as sympathetic an attitude as is compatible with British interests.

Fifth, we must avoid any general anti-nationalist, anti-Nasser, or anti-revolutionary posture, both because it would provide Arab nationalists, even though they may be working against us, with a convenient target against which to rally other Arabs against the West and to inflict greater harm on our interests.

Sixth, we must continue to keep in close touch with the United States Government and ensure that our policies are coordinated and each properly understood by each other.

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**Source:** Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule*, pp. 340–341.

when on February 11, 1959, six West Aden Protectorate states joined the Federation of Arab Emirates of the South (Federation of South Arabia) and adopted a constitution giving each state legislative and executive representation. Additionally, the Federation of South Arabia and Britain signed a "Treaty of Friendship and Protection," which laid out plans for British financial and military assistance in an effort to help the Federation achieve full independence; coupled with this development agreement was a promise by the British to protect the Federation from both foreign and domestic threats.<sup>28</sup>

### **Structural Issues of the Federation Constitution**

Nevertheless, Trevaskis criticized that "the Federation existed only in agreement on a constitution. There was no federal government and no federal

civil service. The Federation had no officers and owned neither a table nor chair. . . . What they [the Federalists] had in mind was something in the nature of the Arab League and based on the principle of the absolute equality of all states in everything; . . . what emerged out of months of argument was a cross between our two concepts: an unattractive hybrid, but something which was a good deal better than nothing and which, one hoped, would be later improved.”<sup>29</sup>

Trevaskis stated that “the Constitution provided for a Legislature, called the Federal Council, in which each state would be represented . . . and a Cabinet of ministers or Supreme Council on which each state would be represented by one minister. . . . There was to be no President or Prime Minister. . . . Reliance on the collective leadership of ministers, representing separate states, the appointment of ministers on the basis of states and representation in the Federal Council on the principle of equality were regrettable but unavoidable weaknesses, which I hoped would fall away with time.”<sup>30</sup>

The Federation construct had other weaknesses as well: First, it entrenched the power of existing political elites (i.e., sheiks, tribal leaders, and sultans) without specifying how to reconcile power allocations between the elected and the traditional leadership.<sup>31</sup> Second, it relegated the authority and responsibilities of British political officers from “state building” to “state repairing” by placing the focus on overcoming the weaknesses in existing government forms in the Protectorate states rather than guiding the creation of a completely new political institution.

One observer noted that “administration had given away to politics and in this field the colonial officials were limited by their inability to make any mass ideological appeal which could compete with that of their nationalist opponents. Federal rule consisted of an amalgam of autocratic commands through British-created administrative structures, and political manipulation of traditionally-determined social mechanisms.”<sup>32</sup>

Another observer concluded that “the Federation never assumed an effective political identity. It remained what it had been at the start, an aggregation of interested individuals and groups, united not so much by a positive feeling as by fear of common enemies.”<sup>33</sup>

## ADEN INTO THE FEDERATION

As negotiations commenced, it became clear that these disjointed British policies created new challenges. Aden Colony was, in every aspect, vastly different than the Protectorate states in the West Aden and East Aden Protectorates. First, British colonial elements had to find a way to convince Aden’s indigenous political elite to join the Federation of South Arabia. Second, it had to be determined what level of representation Aden Colony, as the most significant member of the Federation, given its population size, economic might, and advanced levels of governing institutions, would have in both the executive and legislative councils of the Federation.<sup>34</sup>

### **Structural Compromises for Aden's Inclusion**

To address the first issue, the number of representatives to Aden Colony's Legislative Council was increased and their term extended from four to five years. In addition, a position of "chief minister" was created, and the established Executive Council was renamed the "Council of Ministers."<sup>35</sup>

The second issue, determining who would be eligible to vote in Aden Colony elections, proved to be a major hurdle. Although British records estimated that Aden Colony's population was quickly approaching the 250,000 mark, the right of suffrage was only extended to those who were born in Aden, British subjects, or protected subjects who had lived in the colony for at least seven of the previous ten years. In the end, only 21,500 people out of 180,000 were eligible to vote, and only 6,000 of those eligible cast a vote at all. One group left out of the political process was large numbers of migrant workers of Yemeni descent who had lived in Aden Colony for years, and in some instances decades, for fear that these immigrant groups could become influenced by the anti-British forces in Yemen and retard British efforts in the colony.<sup>36</sup>

Complicating issues further was the fact that the bulk of the labor that worked in the key industries of Aden Colony were Yemenis who were highly organized and heavily opposed to the inclusion of Aden Colony into the Federation of South Arabia. Leading the dissent of the workers were the trade unions, specifically the Aden Trade Union Congress, and its political wing, the People's Socialist Party.

The period between 1959 and 1963 saw a marked increase in political demonstrations, mass protests, and highly effective and debilitating strikes organized by the Aden Trade Union Congress. One such strike in 1963 nearly collapsed operations on the British military base in Aden, as striking workers shut down the supply distribution operations.<sup>37</sup>

Opposition to the inclusion of Aden Colony into the Federation of South Arabia continued to come from the British Labour Party, which increasingly voiced its dissent and disapproval with the myriad of initiatives undertaken by the Conservatives due to the persistent Labour claims that the British government needed to remove itself militarily and colonially "East of Suez." One Labour spokesman stated that "the major problem for the next Labour Government is going to be to decide whether there are any real interests overseas which it is going to be both politically and militarily possible to protect by force. That is going to entail a total revision of our defense policy."<sup>38</sup>

It was no surprise that after recapturing control of parliament in 1964, Labour should suspend or reverse many of the Conservative Party policies in Aden. When violence from the Yemen civil war began to spread over the borders into some states in the West Aden Protectorate (now, the Federation of South Arabia) in February 1963, the British military resorted to air raids and artillery shelling to honor their security guarantees with the Federation states that bordered Yemen. Meanwhile, the United Nations (UN)



was called in to review the incidents and eventually became critical of the security and governance initiatives being undertaken by the British government. The UN Security Council went so far as to vote for UN Resolution 1949 that declared that “the maintenance of the military base in Aden is prejudicial to the security of the region and that its early removal is therefore desirable . . . calls upon the administering power [implied to mean the British government] to repeal all laws which restrict public freedoms; to release all political prisoners and detainees and those that have been sentenced following actions of political significance; to allow the return of those people who have been exiled or forbidden to reside in the Territory because of political activities; to cease forthwith with all repressive actions against the people of the territory, in particular military expeditions and the bombing of villages.”<sup>39</sup>

What had been to that point contentious, though nonviolent, disagreements about the future of the southwest Arabian Peninsula would soon transform into an increasingly violent and bloody crisis.

#### FROM POLITICAL TO ARMED CONFLICT

For some elements of the Aden political community, dialogue was no longer the currency to achieve independence. In the summer of 1963, radical activists, no longer patient with the negotiation methods used by organizations such as the South Arabian League, started the National Liberation Front (NLF), openly calling for armed struggle against the Federation of South Arabia. In its initial charter, the NLF stated its basic rationale as making “the South Yemeni population rise against British imperialism and the ‘forged federal unity’ [the British-constructed Federation of South Arabia] which only signified separation and reaction.” Founders of the NLF sought to create “a nationalist movement of liberation . . . progressive, organized for a struggle with a revolutionary ideology . . . which would be based on Arab nationalist noble targets.” Outside of its ideological directive, the NLF sought to unite existing nationalist and insurgent groups in their efforts for liberation and develop a clearly defined “programme for the struggle of independence.” The NLF sought to lead, violently if necessary, the contemporary movements against the British and the Federation and lay sole claim to the future political direction of South Arabia.<sup>40</sup>

The NLF demonstrated its lethal capability in a grenade attack on Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, high commissioner in Aden, in December 1963. This attack, which Trevaskis survived, signaled the beginning of a bloody terrorist campaign in the urban centers of Aden Colony and throughout the Protectorate states. By December 1963, the NLF had already been heavily involved in funneling arms and creating unrest in the rural, hinterland areas of the West Aden Protectorate. This unrest eventually required a massive effort of British forces to successfully prosecute a campaign in the Radfan mountains.<sup>41</sup>

Besides the NLF, which was very much a “homegrown” organization, the Federation and the British government also had to contend with the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen. The Front was heavily influenced and controlled by Egypt, and despite its aversion to the British and the Federation of South Arabia, viewed itself as a rival to the NLF, so much so that the two groups were eventually at war not only with the British and the Federation but also with each other.<sup>42</sup>

What had started out as isolated instances of violence quickly became a civil war, as the number of armed incidents in Aden Colony alone saw dramatic increases in security incidents and casualties. For example, in 1964, there were thirty-six recorded incidents of violence in Aden Colony, with the deaths of two British military forces and twenty-five wounded. By the peak of the “Aden Emergency,” as the insurgency period was called, there were at least 2,980 recorded incidents of violence in Aden Colony in 1967, as well as 44 British military forces killed and 325 wounded; local civilian deaths and Federation troop casualties figures mirrored this upward progression in deaths from 1964 to 1967.<sup>43</sup>

As the violence in Aden increased, dissent of a less violent but still significantly important degree was taking shape in the heart of the British political system: the victory of the Labour Party in the British general election of October 1964.

#### THE LABOUR PARTY’S APPROACH

Firmly in control of Whitehall and parliament, the new prime minister, Harold Wilson, selected individuals for his cabinet who would faithfully execute the policies of the Labour Government: Denis Healy to head the Ministry of Defense, and Anthony Greenwood as the colonial secretary. The Labour Party Manifesto stated that the new government would seek to reinvigorate the powers of the United Nations and conduct a thorough reappraisal of the defense establishment, especially within the context of budgeting and funding. More specifically, the manifesto argued that “the first responsibility of the British Government is still to the Commonwealth . . . in foreign affairs the most important effort would be to revive the morale and increase the powers of the United Nations . . . in defense, a Labour Government would see to it that the nation gets value for money on its overseas expenditures and as a first step would submit the whole area of weapons supply to a searching re-examination in order to ensure that the limited sums available are spent on those weapons best designed to carry out our policies and fulfill our obligations.”<sup>44</sup>

Denis Healy, minister of Defense, recalled that at the beginning of the Labour government in 1964, when appraising the British role “East of Suez,” there was no general role for Aden, but rather “it was related to responsibilities in particular territories which we tried to get rid of as soon as we

decently could” and was “intent on getting out of Aden ‘from the word go’.”<sup>45</sup>

Almost immediately, Greenwood began to break any ties the British government had with “feudal rulers,” the sheiks, tribal leaders, and chiefs who had been integral to the formation of the Federation of South Arabia, and instead engaged with elements in Aden who had been hostile to British efforts in Aden Colony, namely Abd Allah al-Asnag, leader of the Aden Trade Union Congress. Next, Greenwood immediately replaced the governor of Aden, Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, with Sir Richard Turnbull, an appointee with experience in creating independent political institutions in British colonial East Africa. Greenwood, in what appeared to be a nod to the recommendations of Luce a decade earlier, sought to break ongoing constitutional impasses by championing a “unitary state” solution and advocated the immediate withdrawal of British forces from Aden.

As violence in Aden increased, the chief minister of Aden, Abd al-Qawi Makkawi, supported the NLF and refused to denounce terrorism. Sir Richard Turnbull was forced to invoke his emergency powers as governor and suspended all constitutional processes in September 1965. Aden was now under the direct rule of the British Colonial Office, seemingly as far removed from a sovereign, democratic-based governing structure as it had been a decade earlier.<sup>46</sup>

### **Aden Policy and the Defense White Paper of 1966**

Following close on the heels of the decision to invoke direct rule over Aden Colony was the publication of the Labour Government’s Defense White Paper of 1966, whose goal was “to reduce the proportion of government expenditure allocated for defense in favor of domestic expenditure. This fundamental decision forced the British government to consider reductions in commitments around the world. This determination was accompanied by an ideological, almost visceral feeling among some Labour backbenchers and politicians that the day of colonies and military bases was over.”<sup>47</sup>

The Defense White Paper specified that:

To relax the strain imposed on the British economy . . . and to shape a new defense posture . . .

- There would be a 6 percent reduction in Defence, nearly 100 million pounds . . .
- Defence must be the servant of foreign policy, not its master . . .
- Although we have important economic interests in the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere, military force is not the most suitable means of protecting them . . .

- Even small British Forces can prevent large scale catastrophes [but] outside Europe we can act
  - (1) only with Allies
  - (2) only with facilities
  - (3) no maintenance of bases in independence countries against their desires . . . South Arabia is due to become independent by 1968, and we do not think it appropriate that we should maintain defense facilities there after that happens. We therefore intend to withdraw our forces from the Aden base at that time, and we have so informed the Federal Government.<sup>48</sup> We shall be able to fulfill our remaining obligations . . . by making a small increase in our forces stationed in the Persian Gulf.<sup>49</sup>

Not surprisingly, publication of the white paper produced widespread dissent within the British parliamentary system, as well as from high-ranking civil servants who had spent years working in Aden Colony and the Protectorate during the Conservative government years. Despite vigorous debate in parliament, the Conservatives could not stop the vote for withdrawal from Aden from passing in the House of Commons in March 1966.

The announcement of a concrete withdrawal date reenergized the efforts of regional actors, especially Nasser, who soon contended that “there was an announcement that Britain has decided to grant independence in 1968. Well then, we shall stay there [in Yemen] until 1968.”

The leadership in the Federation was now faced with the stark reality that there would be no protection from Britain, diplomatically or militarily, against the rising forces of nationalism and insurgency within Aden Colony and the Protectorate. Those linked with the Federation now had the choice of siding with the anti-Federation forces increasingly gaining control of the territory, or maintaining allegiance to a governing structure that had little caché amongst the population and had no means, militarily, diplomatically, or otherwise, to stem the tide of civil war and insurgency consuming the Southwest Arabian Peninsula.<sup>50</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. See Map appendix for further clarification of Aden’s geographic position in the Indian Ocean, Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula.

2. Harvey Sicherman, *Aden and British Strategy: 1839–1968* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1972), p. 3.

3. R. J. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule: 1839–1967* (London, UK: C. Hurst & Co, Ltd., 1975), p. 1.

4. Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 130, 162.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

6. Spencer Mawby, *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorates 1955–67: Last*

*Outpost of a Middle East Empire* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge Press, 2005), pp. 6–7.

7. Kennedy Trevaskis, *Shades of Amber: A South Arabian Episode* (London, UK: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1968), pp. 32–33.

8. Peter Hinchcliffe, John T. Ducker, and Maria Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia: The British Retreat from Aden* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2006), p. 8.

9. Early in the twentieth century, Arab nationalism began to develop as a political force within the Middle East; according to the Arab nationalist view, the borders of twentieth century states in the Middle East, drawn up by the western powers after the Treaty of Versailles, divided a monolithic Arab identity and culture that spanned the whole of the region. Implicit in the idea of Arab nationalism was an antiimperialist position toward the western powers, as well as a deep disregard for any existing political institutions within Middle Eastern states that could be viewed as complicit reactionaries (kings, shahs, landowners, etc.) to the colonial powers; in essence, Arab nationalism quickly became fused with the idea of revolutionary socialism. See Tore T. Petersen, *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East: 1961–1969* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p. 7.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

11. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, p. 17.

12. See Map 1, British “East of Suez” Strategic Zone of Responsibility.

13. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, pp. 8–13.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, pp. 14–15.

16. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule*, p. 333.

17. Karl Pieragostini, *Britain, Aden, and South Arabia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 25.

18. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, pp. 14–15.

19. Hansard, March 7, 1966, pp. 1781–1782.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 1961–1962.

21. As quoted in Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, pp. 15–16.

22. Pieragostini, *Britain, Aden, and South Arabia*, pp. 26–27.

23. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, pp. 18–20.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

25. Memorandum dated April 17, 1963, from the secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to all heads of British missions in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, setting out Her Majesty’s Government’s approach to foreign policy in the region.

26. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, p. 61.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

28. Pieragostini, *Britain, Aden, and South Arabia*, pp. 26–27.

29. Trevaskis, *Shades of Amber*, pp. 143–144.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, p. 25.

32. The observer quoted above also noted that “[t]hey had to make do with older methods of political management, concentrating on the particular rather than the general, winning over traditionally distinct individuals and groups by bribes and administrative favors. . . . Broadcasting, education, and general social integration cut into and rendered otiose the chiefs’ traditional functions of interpreting a wider world to their parochial followers.”

33. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule*, pp. 340–341.

34. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, p. 25.

35. Pieragostini, *Britain, Aden, and South Arabia*, pp. 38–39.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

37. Pieragostini, *Britain, Aden, and South Arabia*, pp. 31, 42–45.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

39. UN Resolution No. 1949, “The Question of Aden,” 1277th Plenary Meeting, December 11, 1963.

40. Kostiner, *The Struggle for South Yemen*, pp. 53–55.
41. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule*, pp. 345–346.
42. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, pp. 44–45.
43. Julian Paget, *Last Post Aden* (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1969), as referenced in Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, p. 36.
44. Pieragostini, *Britain, Aden, and South Arabia*, p. 91.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
46. Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, pp. 355–357.
47. Hinchcliffe, Ducker, and Holt, *Without Glory in Arabia*, p. 204.
48. The Defense White Paper is referring to the Federation of South Arabia when it mentions “the Federal Government.”
49. Defense White Paper of 1966 excerpt, as referenced in Sichernan, *Aden and British Strategy: 1839–1968*, pp. 34–36.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–38.

## TIMELINE

January 19, 1839

British seize Aden port

1945

End of World War II

1948

British government outlines decolonialization policies

1952

Formation of South Arabian League political organization in Aden

1954

Gamel Abdul Nasser seizes power in Egypt; British leave Suez military base

1956

Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal  
Formation of the Aden Trade Union Congress

1957

Suez crisis, failed Anglo-French attempt to take back the Suez Canal from Egypt  
Harold Macmillan (Conservative Party) appointed as British prime minister

1958

Publication of British Defense White Paper outlining reasons for strategic importance of Aden

January 1958

Egypt, Syria, and Yemen form the United Arab Republic

March 1958

Sir William Luce authors letters to British government stressing importance of British withdrawal from Aden

1959

Creation of the Federation of South Arabia  
British government (Conservative Party) decides to ignore policy recommendations of Sir William Luce

1962

Nasser intervenes in Yemeni civil war  
Formation of the People's Socialist Party in Aden

1963

British begin protecting Federation states from incursions from Yemen  
Major strikes by Yemeni laborers and unions in Aden negatively impact British military operations and supply

October 1963

Formation of the National Liberation Front  
Aden Election Commission formed; creates restrictive suffrage requirements for 1963 election

December 1963

Grenade attack on Aden High Commissioner Sir Kennedy Trevaskis

January 1964

Beginning of the Radfan Mountain campaign

June 1964

Constitutional conference held in London concerning Aden and the Federation of South Arabia

October 1964

British Labour Party takes control of parliament; Harold Wilson selected as prime minister

December 1964

Aden Council of Ministers issues declaration of support to form unitary state of South Arabia, to include Aden and both East and West Aden Protectorate  
Armed attacks begin on British military in Aden

September 1965

Beginning of Aden Emergency; British direct rule of Aden reinstated

March 1966

Publication of 1966 Defense White Paper; outlines British intent to leave Aden by 1968

May 1967

Beginning of evacuation of service families from Aden to the United Kingdom

June 1967

Israel defeats neighboring Arab States in Six-Day War; closure of the Suez Canal

July 1967

Battle of Crater and the "Aden Mutiny"

*November 27, 1967*

British withdrawal from Aden

**APPENDIX: MAPS**

1. British “East of Suez” Strategic Zone of Responsibility (post-WWII)
2. Middle East and North Africa (circa 1963)
3. Yemen, Aden Port, and the East and West Aden Protectorates (circa 1963)



**Map 1.** British “East of Suez” Strategic Zone of Responsibility (post-WWII)

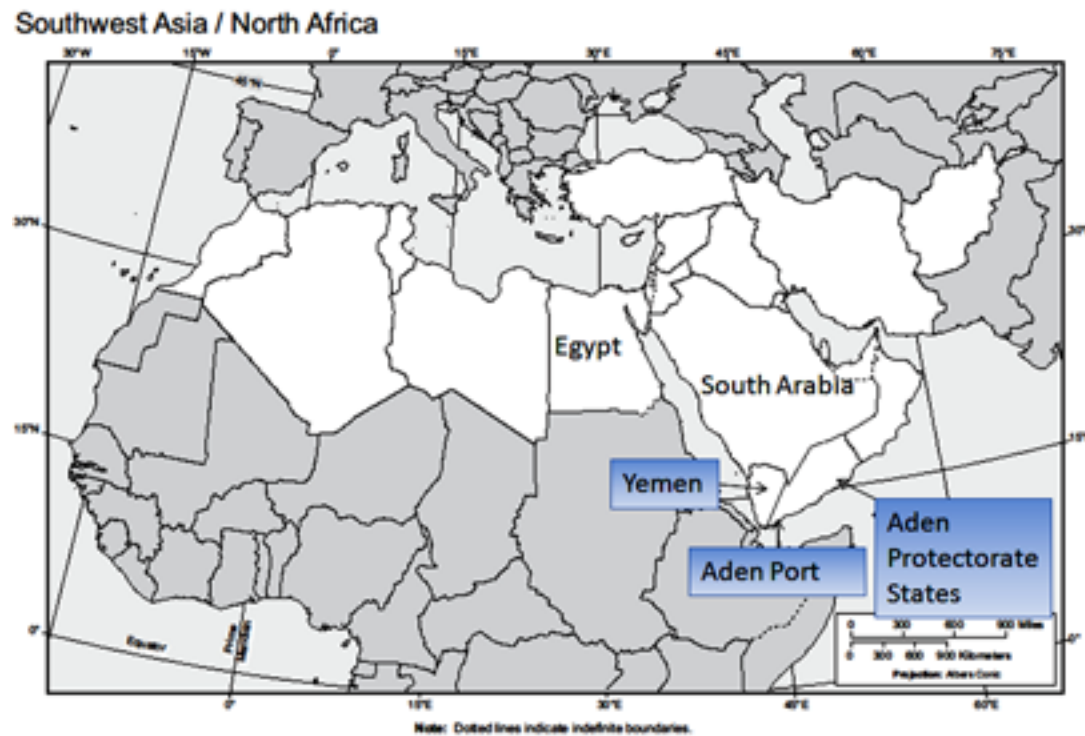
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**Source:** Base map obtained from U.S. Geological Survey. [http://neic.usgs.gov/neis/bulletin/neic\\_pcc3\\_1.html](http://neic.usgs.gov/neis/bulletin/neic_pcc3_1.html). Labels for Suez Canal, Aden, and Singapore work by author.

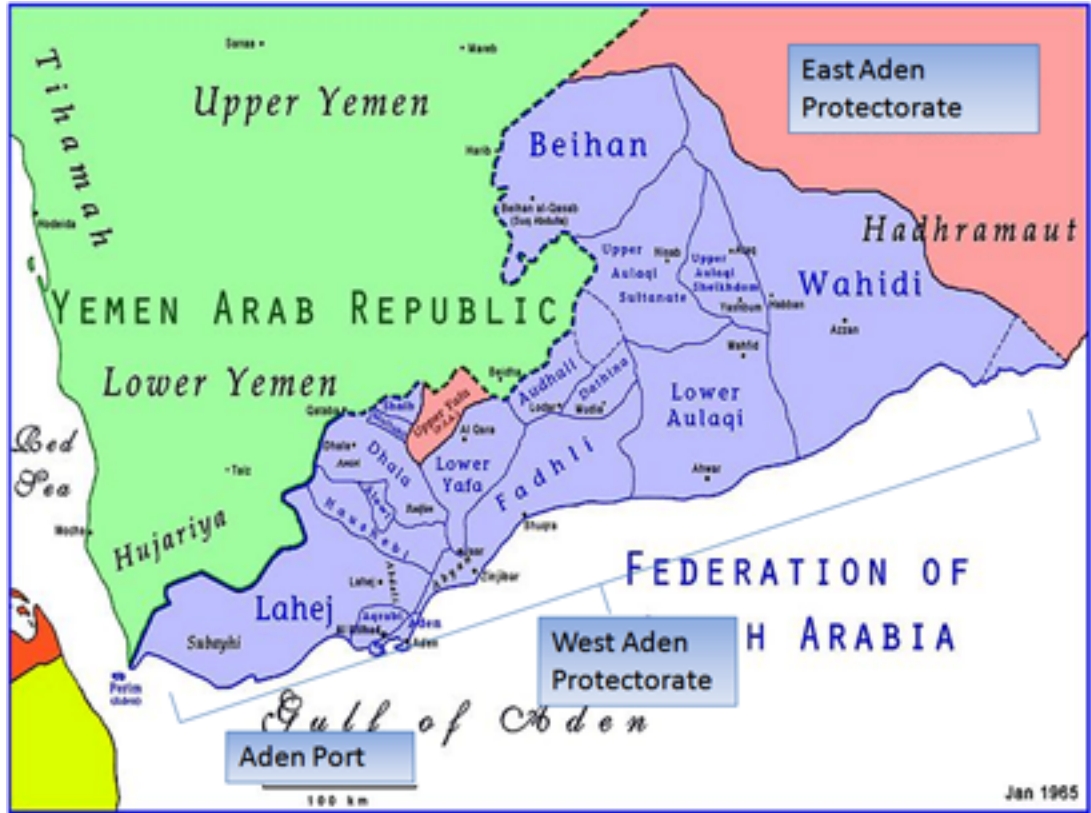
Map 2. Middle East and North Africa (circa 1963)



Courtesy: Arizona Geographic Alliance  
Department of Geography, Arizona State University  
Sally Dowdland

**Source:** Base map obtained from Arizona Geographic Alliance. <http://alliance.la.asu.edu/maps/mideast.pdf>. Labels of maps and demarcation of Yemen/Aden, Egypt, and South Arabia work by author.

**Map 3.** Yemen, Aden Port, and the East and West Aden Protectorates (circa 1963)



**Source:** Base map obtained from U.S. Army (Open Domain). Labels of Aden Port, West Aden Protectorate, and East Aden Protectorate work by author.

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