

# Yemen regains its national unity, looks ahead to a reconstruction program

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The Yemeni civil war ended last month when forces of the central government reasserted control over the entire country and declared an official cease-fire. The most urgent tasks facing the government included humanitarian relief to civilian disaster areas and first steps toward national reconciliation. The gravest threat to civilian lives came from the lack of fresh water.

As Acting Prime Minister Dr. Mohamed Said Al Attar announced to the United Nations, government forces immediately began distributing food and water to citizens in the war-torn city of Aden. Aden's water supply had been cut when secessionist forces, forced out of Abyan, cut off electricity supply lines to that governate, thus cutting power from the water supply stations providing water. The water supply station in Aber Nasser had been destroyed by retreating secessionist forces, and mines were found at the valve of the station, according to the prime minister's office in early July. Teams of technicians were sent into the area to repair pipelines and pumping stations, to ensure continued water supply to Aden. This was done with the cooperation of the Red Cross mission.

During a session of the Ministers Council on July 13-14, measures to ensure security and begin reconstruction were deliberated upon. These included withdrawal of military units from Aden, completion of security apparatus structures there, reopening of normal transport to and from the city, disbanding of militias as well as other armed groups, and restoration of buildings to their lawful owners. The session also established a commission for reconstruction, charged with compiling a statistical overview of the damage and starting a crash program for relief to families of soldiers killed or wounded in the war. A broader program for reconstruction was also discussed, whose realization would require help from other states as well as Arab, Islamic, and international organizations. The most urgent tasks were reestablishing functioning infrastructure (water, energy, food distribution, communications, transport, education, health, and administration).

According to a press release of July 28, Gen. Ali Abdullah Saleh, chairman of the Presidential Council, estimated that the war imposed on Yemen by the secessionists had cost \$3 billion. President Saleh, after expressing his gratitude to the Yemeni people for their having "defended the revolution

and unity," said, "we have also to do the same with our economic and social capabilities to build true and comprehensive development and to reconstruct what was destroyed by the war." He announced that Parliament would be called upon to ratify the "local government and administration bill," which calls for "wider powers" locally, through the "election of governors and directors of districts and the operating of administrative apparatuses in all governates of the Republic." This means that the democratic process introduced in Yemen, a virtual revolutionary development for the Arabian Gulf region, is not being halted by the war, but is being pushed further, in the direction of greater power-sharing. Establishing such governates is also crucial to overcoming the artificial division of the country into "north" and "south." Indeed, during the hostilities, there was no clear-cut north-south divide: Eleven brigades fighting on the side of the legal government, as well as the defense minister, were from the south.

Although reestablishing central control, militarily, was the prerequisite to ending the rebellion, an equally important victory of the Yemen government has been political and moral: A general amnesty has been declared for all those involved in the secessionist rebellion, with the exception of the 16 leading conspirators, and the democratic process is being pushed forward.

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach interviewed His Excellency Mohamed Abdo Othman, ambassador of the Republic of Yemen in Germany, on Aug. 12.

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## Interview: Mohamed Abdo Othman

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**EIR:** Your Excellency, we are very happy that the secessionist attempt has been defeated and that the unity of Yemen has been restored. How did the crisis affect relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, since they reportedly sided with the secessionists?

**Othman:** We distinguish among these countries. For example, Qatar was with the cause of Yemeni unity. Oman was too; they sent the minister of information to Yemen, and a high-ranking delegation of ours went there. They accepted [the secessionist] Al Beidh in Oman, but made clear to him

that he could stay only if he refrained from political activity. The Omanis did this because they want to maintain good relations with the Republic of Yemen. Our government sent a delegation to the U.A.E. [United Arab Emirates] during and after the crisis.

Although the U.A.E. did not have the same position as the two I have mentioned, we have maintained contact. Even with Saudi Arabia, we are doing our best; we extend our hand, it's up to them to respond. We have no ill feeling toward them; particularly with bordering countries, we want good relations. But from their side, there has been no good response till now.

There are elements of the secessionists who are trying to disturb the relations of Yemen with some neighbors. In fact, the secessionists themselves claimed they were supported by some Gulf countries. They got 30 MiG-29s, of which we captured seven.

The question is: Who paid for these planes, and where did the pilots come from? There are still some weapons that they took to Djibouti and Oman. Oman returned them and Djibouti has begun to return them. There were 5,000 Yemeni soldiers in Oman, who have now been welcomed back. They have been given leave to visit their families, then they will come back to work—in the one army, the army of the state.

**EIR:** It was noted that Iraq, Sudan, and Jordan, among others, supported the central government throughout. The consolidation of Yemeni unity has therefore been interpreted as a defeat for the forces of the “new world order” who would like to control oil resources worldwide, even at the cost of national sovereignty. Can you comment on the relationship of forces regionally? Has this been a victory for those who supported Iraq in 1990-91?

**Othman:** It was not only these countries. All Arab nations and most Arab governments were for preserving unity. From Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco—from their parliaments and governments—we saw this. It is only those countries which do not have parliaments, some countries in the Gulf, which were of a different view. In the case of Oman, Jordan, and Iraq, these countries sent delegations to us.

**EIR:** The U.S. administration kept a low profile during the civil war. Many feared that the United States would be pushed into a dangerous adventure. What is your view of the Clinton administration?

**Othman:** We admire the Americans' attitude. I think this is normal, natural, because the American population has also sacrificed to defend its unity. According to their tradition and the heritage of their revolution, they should think this way. We consider America one of the democratic countries of the world and, accordingly, we expect their support for unity and democracy in Yemen, because we are the only country in the area which is exercising democracy. We held free elections in April 1993, with observers from all over the

world, who confirmed that they were free and fair. This is the first time such elections have been held, not only in Yemen, but in the entire region.

Those who opposed democracy and unity in Yemen were short-sighted and were acting really not in their own interests. Unity is a factor of stability in the region. Democracy is the demand of the people. In the past it may have been easy to rule without democracy and pluralism, but this cannot be accepted by the peoples.

**EIR:** Before the Yemeni crisis, France and Germany displayed great interest in economic cooperation with Yemen. How does that look now?

**Othman:** Our people have special feelings of thanks for the attitude of the European countries during the crisis, especially for Germany and France, because they were very clear in supporting unity. I stress Germany, because during the crisis, former President Richard von Weizsäcker, on the anniversary of Yemen's unity, in May, sent a message to our President, Gen. Ali Abdullah Saleh, expressing sympathy with the Yemeni people and the government. He supported unity and expressed his wish that unity and democracy would be protected.

Our minister of foreign affairs was here in Germany on a private visit, and met with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Helmut Schäfer on a private visit, when the [German] federal minister of foreign affairs was out of Bonn. [Mr. Schäfer] expressed his sympathy and good wishes for the unity of Yemen.

Foreign Minister Dr. Klaus Kinkel also gave a lecture during the crisis, at the German-Arab Society. Our people will never forget this, nor will we forget the kind support of the German people. Dr. Kinkel said during the lecture: “The cooperation between Germany and the Republic of Yemen achieved continuing success through the similarity of the process of the reunification in both countries in 1990, through the democratic free general elections in Yemen in 1993. We are following with concern the internal military conflict which affects the Yemeni people, and Germany hopes and wishes soon an end for this, and realizing the wish of the Yemeni people for the unity and democracy which was supported by the big majority in Yemen.”

**EIR:** The central government, following the defeat of the secessionists, took several measures toward guaranteeing national reconciliation. Press reports talked about a number of Yemen Socialist Party members supporting the central government. How is this proceeding? How do you view the next steps in this democratization process?

**Othman:** The end of the war and the defeat of the secessionists and their conspiracy was a great victory of the people, because it confirms popular support for unity, democracy, and the multi-party system. People who succeed in defeating such a conspiracy—and it was a big conspiracy, supported

by some rich countries—are people who can overcome the problem of destruction and the disaster of the war. It was our wish that such a war would not occur, but it happened.

Following the catastrophe, it is the responsibility of all parties, big and small, to work together. The government should be more representative, to overcome the problems that exist.

According to our Constitution, the President asks someone to form a government, the formation of the government depends on the prime minister-designate, and the Parliament must give its confidence or deny it. In a statement sent to the United Nations, the President confirmed that there will be more democracy, more power sharing, freedom for political parties in accordance with the Constitution and the law governing political parties and organizing.

I read an article yesterday in the *Bonn Generalanzeiger* which reported that women are not free in Yemen. This is not true; women are allowed to vote, to become members of Parliament and so on. If you go to the ministries, the universities, the companies, you will find women exercising their rights and duties without any discrimination.

**EIR:** What is the role of Islam in Yemeni society?

**Othman:** All Yemenis are Muslims, but are very open. We were the first to believe in Islam and to support the Prophet Mohamed; only the Yemeni people supported him and defended Islam from within and from outside. They understood Islam as a religion which respects other religions, very open. In our Constitution, the religion of the state is Islam, and this was also the case in what was called South Yemen before unity.

This is also the case in Egypt. But this does not mean supporting any illegal act against the Constitution, which respects the rights of all people and promotes friendly relations with all friendly countries, and with humanity as a whole. As one of the founders of the Arab League and a member of the United Nations, we respect the charters of these organizations.

Regarding unity, something more should be said. Yemen was one country “before” Islam, even before Christianity. At a time when some people were praying to stones, etc., the Yemenis were more advanced; they embraced Judaism, then Christianity when it came, and then Islam. If you go back in history and philosophy, you see this advance. We see Islam as the last of the three monotheistic religions, which profited from the experiences of other religions, but brought new and additional contributions and support for everything that concerned community. The Yemeni people were very strong supporters of Mohamed, but were not closed-minded. At a time when there was no state, the state of Yemen existed. Maybe you have read about the Queen of Sheba, before Christianity.

You see, Yemen’s borders were not drawn by the British or the French, like some countries in Africa and the Middle

East. Our unity goes far back in history. So when some ignored this fact and said we should not impose “unity by force,” this was wrong, because historically, geographically, and legally (through free elections), unity has been natural and has existed.

**EIR:** If I am not mistaken, Your Excellency, in addition to being a diplomat, you are a poet.

**Othman:** I think that not only those who write poetry, but every human being, man and woman, who has a heart and a mind, has feelings. The difference is that some insist on writing, expressing themselves through poetry, or through painting and music. The source of all art is human feelings and suffering and inspiration.

As a human being, I was interested in reading Arabic poetry. When I was in Cairo, I also read the work of Schiller and Goethe, perhaps more Goethe than Schiller, because he wrote more dealing with the Arabs, his “East-West Diwan,” for example. We also read “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” by Goethe. I wrote some poems and published a small book with a friend, who has since become the director of a university, Abdulaziz Al-Makalla, and another one by myself.

During the old regime in Yemen, many people suffered, many were outside the country or in prison; these are things I wrote about. I wrote about unity, too, when I was in Cairo, so you see the question of national unity is not new.

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