

# Republic of Yemen targetted by British for destabilization

by Hussein al-Nadeem

In the third week of December, as U.S. and British forces were bombing Iraq, a London-based terrorist group was planning to launch operations to destabilize the Republic of Yemen. Members of the Ansar Al-Sharia, directed from London by Mustafa Kamel (a.k.a. Abu Hamza Al-Masri, a British citizen and former CIA-Afghansi "mujahid," who trains groups of young people for terrorist activities at his Finsbury Mosque in north London under the guardian eye of British domestic intelligence, MI5), were arrested on Dec. 23, 1998 in Yemen, as they were planning armed terrorist operations. These terrorists were in contact with the Islamic Army of Abeen-Aden (affiliated with the London-based Egyptian Islamic Jihad), which had kidnapped 16 British and Australian tourists a few days earlier.

A rescue operation on Dec. 29 by the Yemeni security forces resulted in the kidnappers killing three British hostages and one Australian; 12 tourists were freed. British press and, later, government officials, accused the Yemeni security forces of "provoking the murders," because they refused to negotiate with the terrorists.

In response, the Yemeni authorities did not mince words. In one day, Yemen kicked out the British Scotland Yard officers who had been invited to observe the investigations (the officers were trying to privately debrief the arrested suspects), withdrew its application to join the British Commonwealth, and announced that a group of British citizens had been arrested while attempting a massive terror-bombing campaign in Aden. On Jan. 25, Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh demanded from British Prime Minister Tony Blair that Abu Hamza Al-Masri be handed over for trial in Yemen on charges of carrying out terrorist acts in Yemen and several other Arab states. This was expressed in an official message Saleh sent to Blair, conveyed by the British Ambassador in Sanaa, Victor Henderson. The London-based daily *Al-Hayat* reported that, according to governmental sources in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa, the message from President Saleh stressed that the Yemeni government has the right to demand that the British government hand over Abu Hamza, and evidence and documents which prove its description of Abu Hamza as a "terrorist" and "extremist."

However, British law does not consider it a crime for individuals and groups based in Britain to plan, incite, or

conduct terrorist operations outside Her Majesty's domains. Britain has previously refused to extradite terrorists seeking asylum in Britain, while the individuals were charged with committing murders and assassinations in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.

Abu Hamza's case is even more complicated, because he is not only an asylum seeker, but has British citizenship. The Yemeni request came in the context of investigations conducted by the Yemeni security authorities into the group whose members were arrested on Dec. 23, including five British citizens (one of them the son of Abu Hamza) and one French citizen, who were in possession of weapons and explosives and were said to be involved in carrying out "terrorist and destructive plans which undermine Yemen's security and stability."

The Yemeni investigations found that Abu Hamza has relations with this group, in addition to his "firm links to the Islamic Army of Aden," led by Abu Hassan al-Muhdar, who is in custody. Al-Muhdar's group carried out the kidnapping of the tourists in December. The Yemeni governmental sources added that the message of the Yemeni President to the British Prime Minister expressed Yemen's great regret over the "terrorist activities carried out by Abu Hamza al-Masri" and others from the British territories, acts which it said undermine Yemen's security and stability, as well as similar terrorist acts in several Arab states.

Eight days earlier, Abu Hamza called for killing Yemeni officials if the Yemeni authorities sentenced the kidnappers to death. Replying to a question from the Qatari al-Jazira satellite station on Jan. 14, he said: "If Zein al-Abidin al-Muhdar were to be executed, there will be revenge acts and massacres."

## The terrorist operations

Usually, when a destabilization operation is carried out against a Third World country, some British-based fanatic group claims responsibility for the operation. The ugly picture of the leader of this or that group is put on the front pages of almost every newspaper in the country, and the British mass media usually label the man "a religious fanatic who fights against Christians and secular governments in the Middle East." Once, in 1996, a Libyan Islamist group,

which no one had ever heard of before, carried out an assassination attempt against Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. In fact, the attempt had been carried out by agents of the British foreign intelligence agency MI6, former MI5 and MI6 agents revealed in 1998.

The kidnapping of the tourists by the Abeen Islamic Army and the actions by the Ansar Al-Sharia group were one operation coordinated from London. Abu Hamza stated in a television debate on Jan. 18 that he had been contacted by the leader of the group that carried out the kidnapping before the rescue operation, "who asked me for advice." Abu Hamza accordingly issued a communiqué and threatened the Yemeni authorities.

According to Ansar Al-Sharia, the targets of the bombing would allegedly have been the British Consulate in Aden and the Anglican Church, in revenge for the Anglo-American bombing of Iraq. This lie was spread immediately in the international press. Yemen was one of the first countries that had denounced the Anglo-American bombing and is regarded as a supporter of Iraq: a black sheep in the eyes of allies of the British and the U.S. State Department in the Gulf.

However, the actual target of these operations has been the government of the Republic of Yemen itself. Abu Hamza made this clear in the television debate, in which he said that the ultimate goal is to overthrow the secular regime in Sanaa, and that there are already supporters in Yemen who are ready to fight for establishing an Islamic state. Al-Muhdar, during his trial, confirmed that the objective of his group is to overthrow every secular government in the region. Abu Hamza and the other members of the "London zoo" of international terrorists are willing tools in a British strategy which has affected even its closest ally, the United States, and its friends in the Middle East.

Yemen has been targetted by British- and, reportedly, Saudi-backed operations to turn the country into a lawless, non-sovereign field of proxy war between London-backed terrorist groups, anti-Saudi Islamists such as Osama Bin Laden, separatists from the former government of southern Yemen lurking in neighboring states on the Persian Gulf, Saudi-backed tribal forces, and all against the government in Sanaa.

Two days before the rescue operation, a Yemeni tribal clan blew up the main oil pipeline in the country. A Yemeni official source said that a group of tribesmen had blown up the oil pipelines in Maareb, 170 kilometers east of Sanaa. The U.S.-based Hunt Oil and Exxon companies monitor the oil fields in this very rich oil province. The Yemeni daily *al-Ayam* said that tribal leaders had warned oil workers in Maareb to evacuate the area, and many of those workers fled in fear for their lives. The paper did not mention the name of the tribe that carried out the attack, but noted that the warning stated that the Maareb oil fields are the private

property of the al-Kharis tribe, one of the main tribes in Maareb.

One month earlier, Yemeni tribal leader Sheikh Muhammad Bin Shaje (from the tribe of Wayla in northern Yemen), whose house was the target of a car bomb, accused Saudi Arabia of trying to kill him. He added that the Saudis had sent "mercenary elements" to carry out this act against him, after the differences had widened between him and Saudi officials on solving the border dispute. He added that he "refuses bargaining on any inch of his country's borders with Saudi Arabia." The more credible background of the incident is that Bin Shaje, while in London for "medical care," told the daily *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* on March 9, 1998 that he was preparing his tribe to host Osama Bin Laden and his fighters. He stated that his 20,000 well-armed men are in the service of Bin Laden, who wants to move from Afghanistan to Yemen, where he could fight against the Saudi Kingdom and the U.S. troops in the Gulf.

Ironically, Bin Laden's family, the richest non-royal family in Saudi Arabia, and also other families such as the Al Olayan and Bin Mahfouz, are originally from Hadhramaut in southern Yemen, the former British protectorate. Two days before the attack on Bin Shaje, Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan Bin Abdul-Aziz, who is in charge of negotiations with Yemen, pressured Yemen not to resort to international arbitration concerning the decades-long dispute on border demarcation between the two countries. A few weeks earlier, an international arbitration court ruled in favor of Yemen in its dispute with Eritrea over the islands of Hanish in the Red Sea, which were occupied by Eritrea, with help from Israel, in 1995.

### **Current history of Yemen's troubles**

In the past few years, the Republic of Yemen has rapidly become another hot spot in the geopolitical destabilization taking place in the southern part of the Red Sea, one of the world's most important trade waterways, due to its location on the eastern end of the Bab El-Mandab, which controls navigation from the Mediterranean through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea. Added to this, is the huge untapped oil and gas reserves, estimated by international oil market experts to be one of the world's largest, of which a great part exists under territories disputed with neighboring Saudi Arabia and Eritrea.

The current history of Yemen has been one of turmoil and a stubborn struggle for independence and sovereignty, in a region long dominated by the policies of the British Empire, and by British-installed kingdoms and sheikhdoms whose political systems do not favor the republican Yemeni tradition that was established following a military coup by army officers lead by Brigadier Salal in September 1962, against Sultan Imam Yahya. The coup was followed by a proxy war between Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt, which

supported the republican revolutionaries, and Saudi Arabia, which supported the royalists and the northern tribes allied with them. Britain had its Aden protectorate at that time, which it later practically handed over to the Marxist National Liberation Front (NLF), upon the signing of the British-Yemeni Treaty in 1967. The left wing of the NLF formed the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (southern Yemen) in 1969.

Britain was fighting against both nationalist elements in southern Yemen and the young (northern) Republic of Yemen. Starting in 1958, it was recruiting southern Yemeni tribal leaders to form a "tribal federation" under British control in the south, in order to prevent the emergence of another independent republican state, or a union with northern Yemen with support of Abdul Nasser. In northern Yemen, during the war of 1962, Britain was helping the Saudis to arm the royalist tribes. Then-Crown Prince Faisal Bin Abdul-Aziz and Prince Sulatan were in charge of the war efforts against Yemen. The two were financing young arms-dealer Adnan Khashoggi's purchase and transport of British rifles and other arms, with the covert help of the British government.

A significant change took place when President John F. Kennedy's administration recognized the new government in north Yemen, despite huge pressure from Britain, France, and, according to some sources, from John Foster Dulles. Prince Faisal was in Washington to meet with Kennedy in September 1962, but he could not change Kennedy's mind. The U.S. administration recognized the Republic of Yemen in December 1962, despite the fact that civil war had just begun. The war ended in favor of the republicans, when Abdul Nasser and King Faisal were reconciled in 1967, motivated by the Israeli war against the Arab states.

The next civil war began in 1994, when the union of South Yemen and North Yemen, which was reached in 1988-89 with Iraqi support, collapsed, as a result of separatist intrigues by officials from the former southern Yemen government.

Most recently, the "Somaliaization" of Yemen, a term used frequently by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, started, following the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Yemen opposed the military buildup, and favored a political solution. Yemen became isolated from two of its supportive big brothers, as Iraq was destroyed and blockaded, and Egypt fell in behind the Bush-Thatcher war mobilization. Ending up as the "ugly duckling" of the Gulf, Yemen, the Arab world's poorest state, was left at the mercy of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the international oil cartels. Most of the land area of Yemen is divided by oil and gas concessions for mainly American, British, and French companies.

In June 1998, armed clashes, the biggest since the civil war of May-July 1994, took place between the dominant tribes in the north and government regular army forces.

These were triggered by price hikes on fuel and other basic food items, according to an IMF-World Bank-advised package. The most serious combat took place in the governorates of Maareb and Al-Jouf, claiming the lives of dozens of tribesmen and army soldiers, and wounding more than 200. These tribes are well-armed and -organized, a situation the government was forced to accept during the civil war against the secessionist south in 1994, as the tribal chiefs supported the government. These tribes also gained a major political position after the war, as the Yemen Party for Reform (Al-Islah) became the second-biggest party in the country, at the expense of the ousted Socialist Party, and formed a grand alliance with the ruling party (Congress) after the 1997 elections. Al-Islah, headed by Sheikh Abdallah Al-Ahmar, the chief of the Hashid tribes of northern Yemen, is currently the biggest Islamic opposition force in the country.

Saudi Arabia has been engaged in endless negotiations with Yemen on the demarcation of the border between the two countries, which has been left open since the Tayif agreement in May 1934, which followed the failed invasion by King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.

Recently, this developed into a dispute which escalated into armed skirmishes. On July 20, 1998, President Saleh, in a press conference in Sanaa, declared that Saudi armed forces had occupied the Yemeni island of Al-Duwayma, and warned Saudi Arabia against supporting Yemeni insurgents. Saleh demanded the extradition of a number of those who were involved in the clashes in June, who, according to Saleh, are being treated and protected by Saudi authorities. Yemeni sources reported that the Saudi forces had previously occupied other islands since May. These moves coincided with the riots in Yemen. The crisis was solved through the intervention of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, who formally took charge of the Yemeni negotiations from Prince Sultan. But the problem is still unresolved, and could be used again for further provocations between the two countries.

As the countdown for renewed war against Iraq continues, with the objective of carving up the country, the Middle East, and especially Jordan and the Gulf, will head into a prolonged state of instability and, potentially, anarchy. Yemen, isolated and impoverished, could be exposed to larger-scale destabilization efforts against its security and national unity.

The fact that the Yemeni government has countered British-backed terrorism in such a manner, is indicative of the Yemeni leadership's realization of the dangerous situation facing not only Yemen, but the whole region. Yemen, in its efforts to bring about a unified stance in the Arab League in support of Iraq, and in its fight against terrorism, is acting not only in its own interest, but in the interest of the whole region. Yemen's current lack of economic and financial resources does not seem to deprive it of courage and pride.

The U.S. President has yet to demonstrate the degree of courage and statesmanship which was previously demonstrated by President Kennedy in the case of Yemen.