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Yemen Overview

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Environment

Yemen lies on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Saudi Arabia to the north and Oman to the east. Its western coast lies along the Red Sea, and its long southern coast along the Gulf of Aden. Yemen can be very crudely divided between its mountainous interior, its western coastal plain of Tihama, and the Hadramawt region in the south-east. It is an arid state with significant oil and gas reserves which provide the country with 75 per cent of its income. The World Bank has however projected that these reserves will run out by 2017.

Peoples

Main languages: Arabic and South Arabian (Mehri, Soqotri, Bathari)

Main religions: Shafa'i Sunni (65-70%), Zaydi Shia (30-35%) and Isma'ili Islam (small, unknown)

Main minority groups: Zaydis 6.6-7.7 million (30-35%), Akhdam 440,000-1.1 million (2-5%), Isma'ilis (a few thousand), Jews 500 (.002%)

[Note: Percentages for Zaydis and Shafa'is, the number for Jews, and the estimate of Isma'ilis are taken from US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2007. The percentage range for Akhdam comes from the US State Department's human rights report on Yemen for 2006. The total population of Yemen is 24 million according to the 2010 World Development Indicators from the World Bank.]

Demographic statistics for Yemen are unreliable, but nearly all Yemenis are Muslim. Next to a Shafa'i Sunni majority, there is a substantial minority of Zaydi Shias, mainly from Dhamar northwards.

There are thought to be a few thousand Isma'ilis in Yemen. They are mainly concentrated in Jabal Haraz, near Manakha, west of Sana'a, but a few live on the Saudi border at Najran oasis, with a larger number inside Saudi Arabia. They are Musta'lis, following the line of al-Musta'li in the succession dispute with his brother Nizar in Fatimid Cairo in 1094. Most belong to the Sulaymani sub-branch, following another succession dispute in 1591; a few others adhere to the Bombay-based Daudi sub-branch.

Yemenis are overwhelmingly ethnic Arab and Afro-Arab. The black Akhdam ('servant' in Arabic) ethnic minority does not belong to any of the three main Arab tribes in the country. It is estimated to comprise 2-5 per cent of the population and is thought to have descended either from African slaves or sixth-century Ethiopian invaders. Akhdam live largely isolated and in poverty on the margins of Yemen's cities, and face chronic societal discrimination. Few

Akhdam children attend school.

Only 370 Jews remain in Yemen today and their numbers are in steady decline. Once a sizeable minority of 50,000–60,000 people, the majority of Yemeni Jews were flown to Israel after its establishment in 1948 as part of an international airlift known as ‘Operation Magic Carpet’. The lifting of a subsequent travel ban in 1991 prompted about 1,200 Jews to emigrate, mainly to Israel.

History

Yemen was at first only superficially Islamicized. However, in the late ninth century, most of mountainous, interior Yemen became dominated by Zaydi Shia imams, who achieved a symbiotic relationship with the mountain tribes. From about the twelfth century the coastal areas and south came to be dominated by the Shafa’i school of Sunni Islam, the Sunni school most tolerant towards Shia practice. Britain’s occupation of Aden in 1839 resulted in de facto partition of Yemen. The Aden Protectorate ended with the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist state in southern Yemen in 1966. In the north, rule by the Zaydi imams, which had intermittently been interrupted by Ottoman rule, came to an end in 1962, when a republic was declared.

The Republic of Yemen was formed in May 1990 by the union of the Yemen Arab Republic (northern Yemen) and the Peoples’ Democratic Republic of Yemen (southern Yemen). Following the 1991 Gulf War, hundreds of thousands of Yemeni expatriates returned from the Gulf states, causing severe unemployment and economic turmoil. A brief civil war in 1994 followed attempts at southern secession. Although Yemen is an oil-producing state, it is the poorest in Arabia, in part due to widespread illiteracy and endemic corruption.

In 2000, a terror attack on a US military ship in the Gulf of Aden was blamed on Al Qaeda. Yemen is the ancestral home of Osama bin Laden, the militant group’s leader, and the country has faced sporadic Al Qaeda attacks on oil infrastructure.

Governance

Prior to the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, Yemen had a powerful presidency and a bicameral parliament, although one of its chambers is appointed by the president. Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of the new republic created by the merger of the two Yemens in 1990. He had led the Yemen Arab Republic - the northern part of present-day Yemen - since 1978 when he came to power in a military coup. The unified country’s first presidential elections were held in 1999, and in 2006 President Ali Abdullah Saleh was easily re-elected to another seven-year term. His rule was marked by numerous conflicts with separatists in the South, corruption, poverty and human rights abuses

The 2002 Yemeni constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and that all legislation should be based on Islamic law. The constitution also provides for freedom of religion, but the government prohibits the proselytisation of Muslims, requires permission for the construction of new places of worship, and permits non-Muslims to vote but not hold elected office.

Mass protests broke out in Yemen in late January 2011, as uprisings spread across the Arab world. Protestors took to the street, calling for President Saleh to step down and end his 33-year rule. After months of violent crackdowns, a peace deal was brokered by the six Arab Gulf States that make up the Gulf Co-operation Council. President Saleh agreed to hand over power to a transitional government. The vice-president, Mr Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi agreed to create a new unity government consisting of an equal number of members from the ruling General Congress Party and the opposition before elections that are scheduled to take place on 21 February 2012. President Saleh signed the deal on 23 November 2011 and officially relinquished office a month later.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Since 2004, conflict in the north between the Al-Houthi movement, a Zaidi Shia insurgent group, and the Yemeni government has displaced over 350,000 people, most of them Shia. The Houthis, as the Al-Houthi movement is popularly known in the West, claim years of discrimination by the government against the Shi'a community in the north, while the government believes the group wants to establish an autonomous region there.

The Houthis and the government signed a ceasefire in 2010, in hopes of encouraging internally displaced people (IDPs) to return to their homes. However, with the protests of the Arab Spring, the ceasefire agreement collapsed with the overtaking of the Sa'ada governorate, a province located in the north of Yemen on the border with Saudi Arabia, and the majority of Al-Jawf governorate, west of Sa'ada, by the Houthis. This has resulted in sporadic clashes that have made large-scale returns to these areas difficult. Not all IDPs are from the Shiite community; the conflict in the south has resulted in IDPs mostly from the Sunni majority. Members of the Jewish minority have also been displaced.

Women in Yemen face extreme discrimination, according to a 2010 Freedom House report. The US-based research NGO noted that women in some areas continue to be subject to female genital mutilation (FGM), and that the Penal Code gives lenient sentences to those convicted of 'honour crimes'. Muslim women are not permitted to marry outside Islam. Muslim men are allowed to marry Christians and Jewish women, but not those of any other faith, or women who have renounced Islam.

There were around 171,000 registered refugees in Yemen in late 2009, according to the UNHCR. These included people fleeing deadly conflict in Somalia and Ethiopia. According to online news agency Global Post, around 43,000 African refugees and migrants crossed the sea between the Horn of Africa to Yemen between January and October 2010. When they reach Yemen, many live in Kharaz refugee camp, an unstable collection of buildings housing around 17,000 Somalis. Women from these communities are often the most vulnerable, having suffered sexual violence, and having been forced to pay smugglers to escape persecution. Once they arrive, they are at further risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation

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