

Middle East

FRANÇOIS BURGAT

The Sanaa Chronicle

Days before the American campaign against Afghanistan began, an editorialist of the government journal *Al Thawra* chose, to give an indication of the general mindset of people in Yemeni streets, to publish the words of a corn vendor and some of his clients located on the Sanaa Aden route in the heart of the old country. 'How dare America claim that it is combating terrorism, while it itself terrorizes the entire world?' asked the vendor. 'How dare they accuse us of not being able to protect the "Cole" [destroyer] whereas they themselves were not able to protect their Pentagon?' 'Not a bad analysis', noted the editorialist, 'maybe we should have him appointed to Foreign Affairs in Sanaa.' 'You're not spot on yet', said his travel companion with a note of irony, 'it is in Washington, at the State Department, that he should be appointed!'

The editorialist, ex-president of the University of Sanaa, Abdelaziz Maqaleh, is a man of letters renowned throughout the entire Arab world. He is not particularly 'Islamist'. As an old Baathist, he would have even been inclined to distance himself from that generation.

But it is in an almost unanimous fashion that the Yemenite vox (populi) manifests a double reticence. The news that, for once, the pilots were Arab and the victims American seemed to certain people to exorcise an old evil spell. Few, however, spontaneously identify with the presumed actors in the suicide attacks against the World Trade Center or the Pentagon. Nonetheless, and all political affiliations taken together, no one accepts the categories of the American discourse of war 'against terror'. Depending on whether one launches the bombs or receives them, depending on whether those bombs come from armament factories of the 'big ones' of the world or the backyards of those who combat them, the juridical qualification of terrorism is, as we know, the object of long-standing controversies. 'Give us your aeroplanes and we will give you our cradles' was a phrase already pronounced by Algerian independence fighters to the French colonial forces. In Sanaa, as in the rest of the Arab world, armed resistances to the world order that originated at the end of the 1980s from the breakdown of the USSR are less automatically criminalized. The rhetoric of he who apparently succeeded in administering such a terrible blow to the arrogant United States indeed arouses a certain degree of curiosity. On every street corner, one is offered recordings of his inter-

views, recent or not so recent. Listening attentively to them can be very instructive for several reasons. Behind the religious rhetoric of legitimation and that nasty habit of, a little like George Bush it is true, dividing the world into two irreconcilable camps, we especially discover very profane and very banal anti-imperialist claims. Usama bin Laden is the son of a Saudi entrepreneur of Yemen origin, who can boast of having restored the three most sacred mosques of Islam: those of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. It is the occupation of the homeland of the former two and the feudalization of a great number of regimes of the Peninsula and of the Arab world that feed the most evident of Bin Laden's frustrations. 'Even a chicken, if an armed man takes some of his territory, will fight the man! And that is just a chicken! [...] We do not demand anything more than the right given to every living creature, not to mention humans, not to mention Muslims: the right to defend oneself.'¹ The occupation of the Al-Aqsa mosque, symbol of the age-old Palestinian conflict, although chronologically first, comes in second place, he willingly admits. But Palestine has always been present in his preoccupations, contrary to what those who blocked this invasive filiation seemed to think. The murderous embargo on Iraq is the third great source of exasperation, with the long procession of 'double standard policies' of the West in this region of the world. 'Why are massive arms of destruction reserved for only one of the two camps?' 'Why was Iraq not condemned when it employed its chemical weapons against Khomeyni's Iran?'

We can also come to understand by listening to Al-Jazeera the disquieting distance that is forming between information on Western and Arab-speaking shores. Al-Jazeera is not, as certain people have tried to make us believe, the 'propagandist' channel of the Islamist guerrilla. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera does not forbid allowing its listeners to know – if for nothing else, if they so wish, to better condemn – its motivation and objectives. And this is where the big difference lies. The more or less scholarly calculations by which a former student of the Department of Economy of the University of King Abdelaziz of Jeddah exposes the extent of financial loss of oil countries since the Saudi princes, along with the US administration, have the common cause of bring-

ing down the price of the barrel, do not manage to reach television audiences of the West, despite their fondness of 'information'. It seems preferable to insist on the simplifying and warlike dichotomies (believers vs. non-believers) of the protégé of the (former allies of the USA) archaic Taliban. It is not certain that 'information' will benefit, in terms of quality, from all this. From the all too often unanimous incantations of CNN illustrating the strikes 'against terror' to the contrasted debates of Al-Jazeera, in which the voice of America is never excluded nor even mistreated, it would seem that the old torch of mediatic objectivity is changing camps – an unpleasant defeat for Washington and its allies.

Return to the Arab political norm?

Political Yemen had, for a time, a precious particularity: the Islamists, well implanted in a society in which the religious norm remained very rooted, were less repressed and ostracized than they were integrated into the system, in any case in the now hegemonic North.² Due to their participation in the revolutionary struggle against the absolutism of the Zaydite *imamat* (during the 'Constitutional Revolution' of 1948 and the civil war from 1962 to 1970) the Islamist current gained historically important credit in the eyes of President Ali Abdallah Saleh's regime. Until 1994, the latter regularly instrumentalized some of its members, in not always noble combats it is true, to eliminate the 'communists' of the South. This proximity of the political power with the universal (Islamist) enemy at the moment (is the parliament of Sanaa not led by an Islamist sheikh elected with the votes of the party in power!) disturbs a number of Yemen's Western partners. Visiting Sanaa, journalists from the world over, with a touching unanimity, have chosen without exception to interpret this complex political Yemen through the sole prism of those 'Afghans' that the regime is accused of having tolerated for too long on its soil and those Islamists 'that it does not combat vigorously enough'. The old habit of tribes of settling their business, by abducting tourists, with a central state that is rather 'incomplete' facilitates even further all the amalgams. Tribes and beards...!: Bin Laden cannot be too far away.³

The present Yemeni formula does not, however, have only bad sides. The relative calm of the country with respect to the American campaign on Kabul and – comparatively speaking – the relative liberalism that prevails is notably due to the fact that the real political forces are integrated into the system. Despite all of its limitations, the Yemeni regime is not merely content with manipulating the puppets of pluralism that, from Egypt to Algeria, passing through Tunisia, form the substratum of the current Arab 'democracy'. In the wake of the 11 September events, President Ali Abdallah Saleh managed to conclude a pact of moderation with those who may have been tempted to act against the United States and its allies. An anti-American demonstration did take place, but this was in Amrane, some 50 kilometres north of Sanaa, far from the television cameras. This fragile equilibrium 'that burns the hand of the state leader' as he was keen to say to several foreign visitors, risks being re-questioned under international pressure. The United States in fact demands each day more 'guarantees' in the battle against 'terrorism', the frontiers of which we know increasingly little since it includes

henceforth formations of Palestinian or Lebanese resistance. The chief of state could thus at any given moment seize the opportunity of the American injunctions to give in to repressive complaisance. Yemen will perhaps come even closer to the institutional 'Arab' 'norm'. The more or less truncated elections (the president-candidate of the presidential elections of 1999 did not tolerate any adversary other than another member of his own party⁴) already form part of the system. The only thing left is the repression by the regime of half or even more of the political landscape. The country will perhaps then attain the felicity of Western recognition and be qualified (according to the formula that the French chief of state employed in 1996 with respect to the Tunisia of General Bin Ali) as an 'exemplary experiment of modernization'.

A daily scene: boys bathing in a *birkeh*.



PHOTO: FRANÇOIS BURGAT, 1999

Notes

1. Jamel Abdellatif Isma'îl, *Bin Laden, al jazira wa ana*, Dar al Huria lil Sahafa wal Tab'a wal Tarjama (2001).
2. Hegemonic since the end of the civil war of 1994 concludes to the detriment of the ex-socialist South. Cf. Franck Mermier, Udo Steinbach and Rémy Leveau, *Le Yémen contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 1999).
3. 'Financements, amitiés et complicités: les traces laissées par les terroristes sont nombreuses' as *Le Monde* gave in its subheading, creating a tone which is not bothered with historicizing an episode which we often forget was above all part of the Cold War between the USSR and the USA. 'Le Yémen, Ben Laden et les Afghans', *Le Monde* (12 Octobre 2001).
4. François Burgat, 'Les élections présidentielles de septembre 1999 au Yémen: du "pluralisme armé" au retour "à la norme arabe"', *Maghreb-Machreq Monde Arabe*, April-June (2000): 168.

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