

Why Yemen Matters

Welcome and Introductory Remarks

(Sabine Schmidtke)

Good afternoon, and a warm welcome

The common Western perception of Yemen is that of a war-torn country, a failed state and, above all, a country facing one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

The underlying factors of the recent conflict itself are either considered to be too complicated to be understood or they tend to be oversimplified, with the ongoing armed conflict being assumed to essentially be a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Beyond the terrible sufferings of the people of Yemen, who are exposed to daily bombings, continuing food scarcity, and declining water resources, the country's rich cultural heritage is severely affected by the war, be it by accident or through targeted destruction.

This destruction also concerns the four UNESCO-recognized World Heritage Sites, which include the historic town of Zabid, the Old City of Sanaa, and the Old Walled City of Shibam, in addition to the other 10 items on the tentative UNESCO list.

While much of the damage to archeological sites and architectural heritage has been well documented, this is not the case for the destruction and loss caused to the many private and public libraries throughout the country, and their respective holdings. There is no way to determine or quantify what has been destroyed or what has been sold off, more often than not through illicit channels.

Hardly any of this ever makes the headlines or is mentioned in the media coverage on Yemen.

Today's event is an attempt to draw attention to Yemen's long history that is expressed by the country's incredibly rich and variegated cultural heritage, from ancient times up until today.

Let me, by way of a short introduction, mention two main factors which have had a major impact on Yemen throughout its history, namely geography and topography.

Looking at a map of the contemporary Middle East, one might get the impression that Yemen is a remote place of marginal significance. From a more global perspective, however, things look entirely different. Besides its relative vicinity to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Yemen has throughout its history been closely connected to the north-eastern parts of Africa—less than 20 miles away across the Bab el-Mandeb strait.

For example, streams of refugees nowadays go in two directions: Yemenis flee to Djibouti to escape the war, while refugees from Africa head towards Yemen with the hope that they will eventually reach Saudi Arabia.

In addition, being located on the south-western corner of the Arabian Peninsula, at the meeting point of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Yemen has always been connected to the larger maritime network of the Indian Ocean. Particularly noteworthy is the 16th, early 17th century, when Yemen held the monopoly for the production and trade of coffee.

Yemen's peculiar topography resulted in a political and religious diversification throughout most of its history. The country is divided into four broad zones:

Upper Yemen (northeastern mountainous area) which since the 9th century constituted the stronghold of Zaydi Shi‘ism, Ṣa‘da being the main center;

Lower Yemen covers much of the remainder of the country, including the Central Plateaux, the Southern Mountains.

The Tihāma plain.

Lower Yemen and the Tihama has been has been predominantly Sunni-Shafi‘i.

And finally the Eastern region with Hadramaut, which includes large stretches of inhabitable desert.

As a result, for most of its history, Southern Arabia was not dominated by a single ruler or dynasty but was typically governed by several local rulers, as the region does not easily lend itself to be conquered or controlled in its entirety. In fact, it was only with the Ayyubid conquest in **1173** that Yemen for the first time constituted a separate, unified political entity, and this was again the case a few centuries later during the Qasimi dynasty’s rule. And lastly, in **1990**, the People's Democratic Republic of *Yemen* (i.e., South Yemen) was united with the *Yemen Arab Republic* (also known as North Yemen), forming the Republic of Yemen.

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During the current academic year, the IAS is hosting an unusually large group of scholars specializing in different aspects of Yemen, and together we hope to provide you during today’s event with a comprehensive picture of some of Yemen’s history and culture, from Antiquity up until today.

Let me briefly introduce our six speakers, in the sequence of their presentations (additional information is included in the program). Each presentation will last about ten minutes, and at the end of the program there will be a q&a session....

Glen Bowersock is an authority on Greek, Roman, and Near Eastern history and culture, and in recent decades, his research has focussed on late antiquity as well as pre-Islamic Arabia.

Christian Robin is a specialist on the history of Arabia since ancient times to the early centuries of Islam.

Dan Varisco is an anthropologist and historian who has worked in and on Yemen since 1978. He is currently serving as President of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies.

Hassan Ansari is a specialist of Islamic intellectual traditions, and he has worked intensively on the history of Zaydism in Yemen and Iran and its manuscript traditions.

Najwa Adra is a cultural anthropologist who lived in a rural tribal community in Yemen's Central Highlands where she conducted field research on the semiotics of dancing and tribal identity.

Nathalie Peutz is a cultural anthropologist who has conducted wide-ranging, ethnographic research in Yemen, Djibouti, and Somaliland.

And now, without further ado, I leave the floor to our first two speakers, Glen and Christian.