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Invitation to the workshop

Yemen under the rule of Imam Yaḥyā, 1904 through 1948
A critical assessment of the sources

Date: 23-24 March 2023**Venue: Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA), Vienna****Abstract**

The workshop *Yemen under the rule of Imam Yaḥyā, 1904 through 1948: A critical assessment of the sources* addresses an important time of transition in modern Yemeni history, in which Imam Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn shook off Ottoman rule and established, since 1918, the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen. In the decades to follow, and inspired by the Ottoman example, Imam Yaḥyā made the first steps towards modern nation state building in northern Yemen by endeavoring (with varying success) to establish a tighter and more centralized rule in comparison with the imams who preceded him.

Yaḥyā's reign was characterized by fundamental ambivalences, which to this day engender very different perceptions and evaluations of his rule. On the one hand, Yaḥyā pursued a policy of autonomy and resistance to the massive encroachment of the empires and colonial regimes of the time, which were looking for spheres of influence, markets, bases, and resources in South Arabia. He established diplomatic relations only with selected friendly states, above all Italy, and in 1959 the Mutawakkilite Kingdom federated (on paper at least) with Syria and Egypt to form the short-lived United Arab States (*al-duwal al-'arabiyya al-muttaḥida*). On the domestic side, Yaḥyā invested in nation building inclusive "modern" institutions (military, administration, government) and infrastructure (roads, railways, post, telegraphs), whose structures were adopted by the post-1962 Yemen Arab

Republic (YAR). Although Yaḥyā remained fundamentally suspicious of innovations and changes, he implemented an ambitious intellectual-educational-scientific programme, including the foundation of a public library and a mosque university in Ṣan‘ā’ (*al-Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya* and *al-Madrasa al-‘Ilmiyya*), as well as the foundation of the National Museum and periodicals like *al-Īmān*.

On the other hand, Yaḥyā’s rule continued to be based on the claim to rule of the *ahl al-bayt* (descendants of the Prophet, called *sādah* in Yemen) inherent in Zaydi Hādawī doctrine, an increasingly coercive and (particularly under his son and successor Aḥmad) tyrannical style of leadership, and the preservation of a rigid social stratification along traditional structures (*sādah*, tribes, non-tribal city dwellers, and underprivileged groups including slaves) – thus preserving a religious orientation, leadership style, and social order that went back to the 9th century CE in Yemen and that did not sit well with the Yemeni people and a dynamic international environment that was in flux and increasingly oriented towards modernization and Arab Nationalism.

Due to these many antinomies, Yaḥyā’s reign is evaluated differently to this day. While some consider him as a state builder and founder of the modern Yemeni state, and recently also as an early pioneer of anticolonialism, others condemn Yaḥyā and his successor Aḥmad – and Yemen’s imams in general – as despotic tyrants and oppressors. Since post-1962 republican Yemen derived its legitimacy primarily in opposition to Imamic Yemen, there is a pronounced reflex among Yemenis to “position” themselves vis-à-vis this time: to either legitimate the Imamic past or validate the anti-Imamic narrative of the post-1962 republic. The Ḥūthī/Anṣār Allāh seizure of power in 2014, seen by many as a retrograde project aimed at returning to the pre-1962 status quo, further reinforced this support/reject attitude among Yemenis vis-à-vis their past.

Given the enormous importance of this period for understanding contemporary Yemen – its intellectual culture, structures, politics, international relations, crises and wars – the lack of research on this crucial time in Yemeni history is astounding. Today we are in a particularly good starting position to reassess this time, since digitization has made a wealth of new materials and historical sources accessible. These include Yemeni sources (e.g. manuscripts, journals, archive holdings, printed books), but also recently discovered legacies of European explorers (along with diplomats, physicians, traders, and writers) including correspondences/epistolary exchanges among themselves and with people in Yemen (including Imam Yaḥyā himself). The travelogues and correspondences recording their observations in Yemen, their encounters with local people, scholars, notables, and the ruling elite constitute unique documents, the evaluation of which enables us to arrive at a refined picture

of that time. Taking into consideration this very large, and diverse, corpus of sources, allows for a dispassionate reassessment and rethinking of this crucial time in Yemeni history.

The workshop invites contributions that address any of the aforementioned aspects that specifically address the issue of sources and their evaluation for the period under consideration.

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