The Sound of Yemen

Article & photo: Torstein S. Worren

LOOKING down at western Germany through the aircraft window, I was acutely aware of the gulf separating two worlds. Down there was stability, orderliness, silence. Only two days earlier I had been sitting on a roof lit up by a single bulb, receiving power from a diesel generator running for a few hours every evening.

I had been in the countryside of Yemen's Ibb governorate, peeking around a wall and taking in the display in front of me. On top of the mountain across the narrow valley, flashes from gunfire were clearly visible in the dark and the sound of guns – ranging from 100-year-old rifles to mounted heavy machine guns – were echoing back and forth between the steep mountains like thunder.

"Not long ago several bullets hit our house", Radman said from next to me in the dark. He was hunched down behind a rock on the parapet, as if to make himself into a smaller target should the same happen again. He was in his early twenties and made a living from a patch of land between the village and the mountainside where he grew mangoes and qat, a mildly stimulating leaf widely chewed in Yemen. "They were shooting from the summit up there trying to hit the level below on this side of the mountain. A lot of the time with automatic fire the bullets go high and hit our side of the valley."

From the way he spoke about it, it was obviously not a unique occurrence in these parts and I was later told that his village had taken part in similar clashes only five years earlier. "It's been going on for two years now," he continued. "There was a one-year cease-fire after the sheikhs got together to solve the problems, but the other side broke it as they are troublemakers and crazy."

The 'other side' he was referring to was the Bani Rashid, the tribe that occupies the eastern side of the mountaintop. In contrast to the huge tribal confederations of Upper Yemen, the tribe in Lower Yemen mostly constitutes the extended family. This prevents smaller conflicts from turning into greater tribal wars as they have done further north until recently. However, it does not mean that there is not a wealth of smaller scale conflicts raging at any given time.

Like so many other conflicts, the one heating up above us had been caused by rights to land and resources. "It started with an argument over the use of a spring that the two villages share for drinking water and irrigation," said Radman and pointed to somewhere between the two warring villages. Water is becoming scarce in many parts of Yemen causing tensions in local communities. "One man from our side was killed in the argument and that started the cycle of violence."
Radman and the people in his village are of the A'mas al-Okdi family, the same family as the western village fighting across the valley. Like the other villages in the area related to one of the sides, they do not get involved directly, but they regularly collect money to support their relatives' war effort.

Weapons have always been part of Yemeni culture and the government estimates that there are currently about 60 million weapons in a country of 22 million inhabitants, earning it the number two spot globally in the 2007 Small Arms Survey. Most Yemenis learn how to handle automatic weapons from an early age, and this is especially the case in the countryside where the state has no presence and the traditional tribal laws are still the only laws.

Between 2004 and 2006 there were about 20,000 *reported* deaths and injuries resulting from firearms according to the Yemeni Ministry of Interior. The real numbers are probably higher. Meanwhile, the country has witnessed increasing conflict challenging its cohesion and stability. Islamic terrorism has begun to target Yemeni interests at home, and in the north of the country a war between rebels and the government has been raging since 2004. Even in the south, political discontent is fuelling armed clashes with security forces. As a result, the authorities have begun cracking down on the arms trade, and most of the weapon markets around the country have supposedly been closed down. In reality, they have just gone underground.

"We used to be able to buy the weapons from markets," said Radman as fighters from his family were trying to regain a strategic position above us. "But the new laws have made that more difficult. Now the arms traders come to us in cars instead. However, it has become a lot more expensive. A Kalashnikov assault rifle used to cost us about 200 US dollars. We now have to pay 1000. Even the price of bullets has gone through the roof. Before, we paid 20 riyals (10 US cents) per bullet. They now cost 80 or 90."

From the top of the mountain and with a view to the battlefield from the night before, he pointed out the two warring villages. "Over there on the eastern side a woman from the troublemakers of Bani Rashid was killed by a stray bullet not long ago, and before that a little girl was seriously wounded in the same way. That's why they fight so fiercely despite our side's numerical and arms superiority." He numbered the other casualties to about twenty, not including countless donkeys and farm animals.
"Why doesn't the army or police intervene to stop it," I asked naively.
"The army?" exclaimed Radman. "The army doesn't come here. They know that if they show up here we will shoot at them. We take care of our own business!"

Like most Yemeni villages, his village is built for defence, situated on a cliff 60 metres above the valley floor. I believed him when he said the army would never try anything so foolish as to attempt to enter the local villages. "So, who's winning the war?" I asked, trying to change the subject. "Who's controlling the water over there?"
"Oh, no one is using the spring now. It's in the line of fire from both sides."
"Couldn't your side have used the money spent buying bullets to lay a pipe from a spring further away?" I wondered.
Radman looked at me sceptically, obviously not used to getting advice from a dim outsider. "I suppose," he said, "but the whole thing is a matter of principle."

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