

Helen Lackner. *Yemen in Crisis: Devastating Conflict, Fragile Hope*. London: Saqi Books. 978-0863561931.

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Yemen is a nation that is often forgotten. It is one of the modern world's most devastating and prolonged humanitarian crises, with 80 per cent of people in the nation relying on humanitarian aid, prior to the pandemic.¹ Despite this, little attention has been paid to this nation which has been mired in conflict marked by Saudi-US-Israeli bombings and attempts at separatism by the South backed by foreign powers such as the UAE. Few in the anglophone world know Yemen better than Helen Lackner, making her work foundational for understanding the nation and its crisis.

Lackner has been studying Yemen for over five decades and lived in the various state formations over the years: People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the Republic of Yemen (ROY). As Lackner takes us through the history, she outlines the major events, states and non-state actors involved in the road to the conflict that is ongoing to this day. A wealth of sources is drawn upon, both primary and secondary. Her time in the nation livens the book with personal accounts.

The book looks at the historic roots of secessionism. Lackner goes into the history of Yemen, looking at both the YAR and PDRY. Her work focuses more on the latter, as the scholarship covering Yemen has often been more focused on the YAR than the PDRY, this is a welcome addition into the field of writing on Yemen. Her notes on the development of the two nations are particularly insightful. Her argument on the disparity between the North and the South pre-unification is useful for understanding the recent advancements attempted by the separatist UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) in January 2026. She argues that Southern feelings of discrimination in the initial years of unification were not without foundation. The conditions in the South did deteriorate after unification, but it is merely that the Southerners were "simply being reduced to the same status as the majority of the population of Yemen." (p. 213). Thus, using this framework it becomes easier to trace the roots of STC. The latter is not the only group that pushes for southern secession – and not all southerners are secessionists – but southern secessionism as Lackner rightly argues has only managed to maintain its international presence through the body of the STC because of the UAE's "political, diplomatic, financial and military support." (pp. 31-32).

One of the most contentious points of the book is the discussion around the Houthis or Ansar Allah movement. Lackner argues that the movement's appeal was not purely its religious character but due to the economic conditions. She clarifies initially that despite being a Zaydi movement, they are not exclusively Zaydi. In charting their rise to popularity, she focuses less on the religious aspects, rather concentrating more on the material conditions of life – often absent from Western commentary. At the height of discontent in Yemen, with rising fuel prices due to pressure from international financial institutions, people flooded Sana'a to demonstrate, not only against the price rises, but also "in support of the Huthis who also claimed to oppose corruption and promote good governance." (p. 194). She

goes on to quote the UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar, who said “Ansar Allah is acting as though it were a replacement of the state.” (p. 195). This is a prescient point which a lot of popular commentary has ignored. Ansar Allah now rules over 70 to 80 per cent of the population; while internationally it is the Saudi backed government that is still recognised as the representative of the Yemeni people.

Western commentary has also flattened the roots of the Ansar Allah movement and turned it into a mere proxy of the Iranian state, rather than a movement with its own logic and agency. Lackner intervenes and argues against this tendency. While not completely dismissing Iranian support, she places it in context. She lays out evidence of the regime under Ali Abdullah Saleh exaggerating claims that Ansar Allah was an Iranian proxy to increase military aid from the Saudis and the Americans, even shutting down an Iranian hospital in Sana'a claiming it was used to help the movement. She writes of the initial scepticism of the US of towards claims, and how this scepticism dropped when it suited the Saudis to justify their intervention in Yemen. Lackner remains sceptical of the extent of Iranian control and aid over Ansar Allah as she points out that the US claims that Iranian weapons and personnel were found in Yemen have not been backed up by any evidence.

This work is particularly important as it historicises Yemen. While Lackner has written a history of South Yemen in the 1980s, this work traces the contemporary issues to the past. This proves valuable for understanding the present. While Lackner wrote before the genocide in Gaza intensified and Ansar Allah shut off the Red Sea in solidarity with the Palestinian people, her work is critical to understand this moment. It is not that Ansar Allah was acting as a proxy of Iran which was the dominant view in Western commentary.

Nowhere is this clearer than when reading Yemeni history through the lens of Palestinian solidarity. The Yemeni people have long stood in solidarity with the people of Palestine. In 1971, the PDRY allowed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to attack Iranian oil tankers making their way to Israel. The PFLP commandos made their escape to the YAR. While the YAR initially arrested these commandos not knowing what they were doing, they eventually released them into the PDRY. This was on the cusp of the first Yemenite War in 1972.² At a time of tension between the two states, one thing that had them on the same side was their solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Yemen in Crisis is an indispensable work for anyone seeking to understand a conflict that the world has too often looked away from. Lackner's decades of engagement with Yemen gives her an authority that few scholars can match. She historicises the present by tracing the roots of secession in the South, analysing the material basis of Ansar Allah's rise and challenging the limits of the Iranian proxy thesis, offering a corrective to flattened narratives that have dominated Western commentary. Despite being written before the intensification of Israel's genocide of Gaza and Ansar Allah's closure of the Red Sea, Lackner's historical framework has become ever more important. From students to specialists, this book is essential reading.

¹ Zainab Syyeda Rahmat et. al, “Food Insecurity during COVID-19 in Yemen.” *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 106, no. 6 (2022): 1589, <https://doi.org/10.4269/ajtmh.22-0059>.

² John Albert Noel Brehony, ‘Coral Sea Incident,’ in *FCO 8/1703: Attacks from South Yemen Territories on Shipping in Red Sea*, 4.