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# NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

NUMBER 36.7-63

## The Situation and Prospects in Yemen

Submitted by the  
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the  
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

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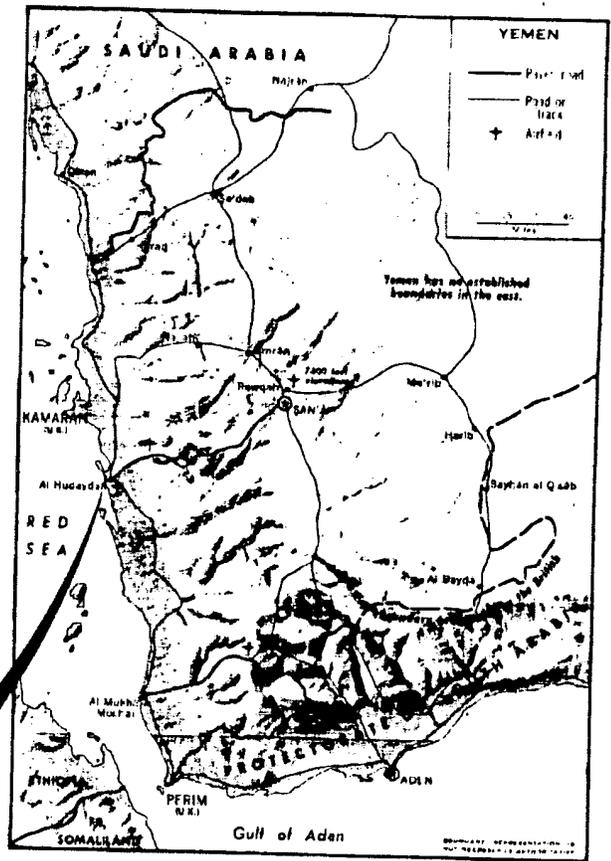
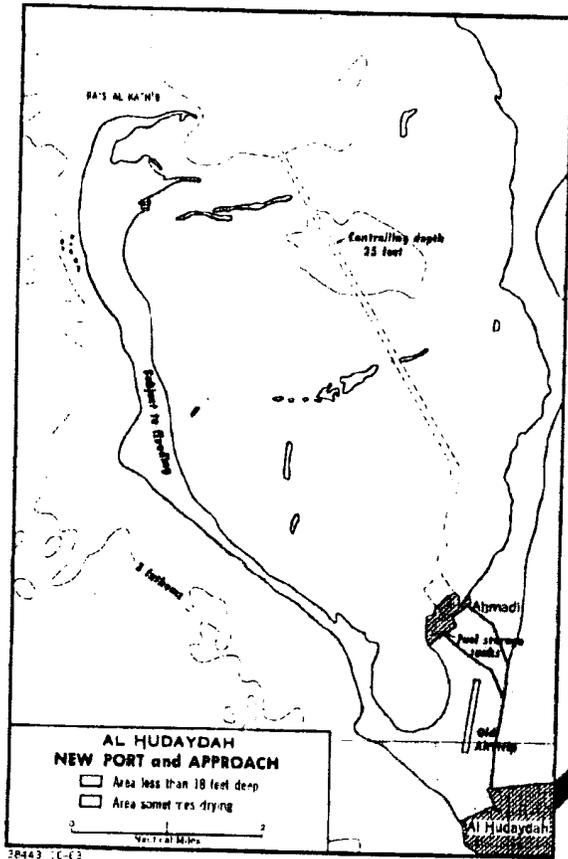
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## THE SITUATION AND PROSPECTS IN YEMEN

### CONCLUSIONS

A. The Sallal republican regime, through the support of some 30,000 UAR troops, controls about two-thirds of Yemen. The royalist northern tribes, which have been supplied from Saudi Arabia, remain in control of the mountains in the north and northeast. A decisive military victory by either side appears unlikely. (*Paras. 1, 4-8*)

B. Many Yemeni leaders feel that major changes in the republican regime are required to end the civil war, establish a central government acceptable to most Yemenis, reduce tribal dissidence to manageable size, and cut down UAR domination. (*Para. 9*)

C. Nasser is under various pressures to reduce his commitments in Yemen. He is tied down in an inconclusive war which is costly in money and casualties and he is facing a growing challenge from the Baath in the Arab world. He would insist that any settlement preserve a Yemen government republican in form, friendly to him, and subject to a considerable measure of Egyptian influence. (*Paras. 10-11, 18*)

D. Saudi Arabia wants to see the UAR out of Yemen and relies primarily on the US to force Egyptian withdrawals. We believe Faysal is not likely to resume large-scale aid to the royalists in the next two months or so, but that unless there is a substantial reduction of the UAR presence by the end of that period, he may resume it. (*Paras. 12-13, 15*)

E. Under the best of conditions, the situation during the next few months will be fragile and fighting could resume on a wide scale at any time. We believe that if there is no resumption

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of large scale aid to the royalists, with a consequent upsurge in the fighting, and if the various pressures on Nasser to facilitate a settlement increase, he will in time be forced, though reluctantly, to effect a sufficient diminution of the Egyptian presence to permit a political settlement as described in C above. (Para. 19)

F. The USSR has won considerable good will in Yemen by its prompt military and economic support. The Soviets are likely to maintain a significant presence in Yemen for the foreseeable future, although the indigenous Communist movement is small and the population is difficult to manipulate. The USSR will probably get civil air rights and perhaps be able to achieve a small capability to render clandestine support to operations in nearby countries. The Soviets will probably continue to have an edge over the West in Yemen, but we do not believe the Yemenis would grant military base rights to them. (Paras. 27-28)

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## DISCUSSION

### Introduction

1. It is over a year since a group of Yemeni nationalists overturned the government and proclaimed a republic with Abdallah Sallal as its head. They failed, however, in their attempt to kill the recently installed Imam Badr, who fled to the mountains with other princes of the Hamid-al-Din family and there incited many of the northern tribes to wage a guerrilla campaign against the republican regime. The republicans,<sup>1</sup> having assured themselves of Cairo's support before the coup, called on Nasser for aid. He responded promptly in the belief that a relatively small number—perhaps a few thousand—of Egyptian troops could suppress the guerrillas. Not only was this hope disappointed, but Saudi Arabia, apprehensive at the Egyptian presence in Yemen, immediately rallied to Badr's support with arms and money. The conflict continued to grow, and some 30,000 UAR troops<sup>2</sup> are locked in a stalemate with the royalist tribal forces.

2. Despite some trappings of modernity—airplanes, motor vehicles, the telegraph—Yemen is in reality a medieval society in which government is essentially a balance of forces among powerful, armed, semi-autonomous tribes, urban centers, and the central government. Yemeni governments have traditionally relied on exploiting inter-tribal rivalries to prevent any one tribal group developing enough power to threaten the capital. Except to the few Yemenis with modern education, governmental administration in Yemen means rudimentary public order, Islamic law administered by jurists educated in the traditional pattern, and a crude system for collection of revenue. Yemen's approximately five million people have known no other system. Especially in the northern tribal areas, the rugged mountainous terrain and poor communications have made effective direction from the capital virtually impossible, except to the extent that unruly and often rebellious tribal leaders have chosen to cooperate.

3. Tribal and sectarian affiliations absorb the primary loyalties of most of the population. The powerful northern Zaydi<sup>3</sup> tribes, number-

<sup>1</sup> We use the term republican to signify those elements which do not want the restoration of a monarchical regime. We use the term royalist to identify those elements siding with the princes of the former ruling family, although many are against the government or against the UAR presence rather than in favor of restoration of Imam Badr.

<sup>2</sup> While the exact number of UAR troops in Yemen is not known, and changes from time to time on account of rotations, we believe the present figure to be about 30,000 rather than the lower figures used by Nasser.

<sup>3</sup> Zaydis are a branch of the Shi'ite minority of Islam.

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ing about two-fifths of the population, have dominated the country for centuries. For them the Imams have been spiritual as well as temporal leaders, although rebellions against unpopular Imams have been frequent and Badr's two immediate predecessors were especially hated. The southern Shafi'is, who are Sunni Muslims, have long resented Zaydi dominance and sought a larger share of power. Despite this division, the population generally has the feeling of belonging to Yemen as a distinct political entity which has preserved its identity for more than a thousand years. Indeed, times of national crisis, such as the abortive rebellions of 1948 and 1955 against the Imams, have found Shafi'is and Zaydis working together. It is only in recent years, however, that there has emerged a small but growing group of Yemenis—both Zaydis and Shafi'is—who seek to create a modern state. It was these who were back of the 1962 coup.

#### The Republican Government

4. The Sallal government, backed by Egyptian arms and money, has managed to stay in office and in at least nominal control of about two-thirds of the country. Its administrative capability has been of a low order, even by Yemeni standards. It has, however, maintained rudimentary law and order in those districts which have been largely unaffected by the fighting, principally the area south and west of a line Hudaydah-San'a-Bayda.\* Nearer to the fighting lines, and in the capital, however, the UAR has been virtually in charge. The regime has made little, if any, progress in modernizing the government and putting life into the various "ministries." The republican regime lacks personnel with administrative and technical skills. It has been unable to collect taxes over much of the country and has depended on outside sources, principally the UAR, to pay even basic administrative expenses like salaries.

5. The San'a regime has failed to establish a political and military base of its own, and we see little prospect of this happening under its present ineffectual leadership. Initially, the republicans, by virtue of overthrowing a highly unpopular dynasty, had a fairly broad base of support in most of the country. Over the past year, however, this support has dwindled. There has been a let-down feeling as little has been accomplished despite UAR and Soviet economic and military assistance. Factions have appeared in the republican leadership; the pro-Egyptian element early came to lord it over other republicans; there has been infighting between Zaydis and Shafi'is in the government; and personnel quarrels have further split the regime's shaky solidarity. Some initially pro-government tribes have become neutral, and others have even swung to the royalists, lured by Saudi arms and gold or

\* See map attached.

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repelled by indiscriminate Egyptian bombing attacks. By now, the republic's chief appeal probably lies in the fact that to most Shafi'is and some Zaydis it still looks preferable to the archaic regime of the Imamate.

6. The Imam's armed forces, before the revolution, totalled about 10,000 men. They consisted largely of an ill-organized collection of tribal levies, whose basic loyalties were to their particular tribes. In addition there was the Imam's bodyguard of some 800 men. The bodyguard and elements of the army garrisoned at San'a and other cities formed the armed support of the revolution. After the revolution, the tribal levies, by and large, drifted back to the tribes from which they came and their loyalties are still determined by their tribal leaders. Most of the small number of officers remained with the republic. Some of the members of the former Imam's army are now with the northern royalist tribes, others support the Sallal government and many are neutral. Those who joined the royalists do not constitute a trained, organized group. The indigenous military strength at the disposition of the republican regime, as presently constituted, is not sufficient to cope with the royalists. Some 1500 Yemenis are now being trained in Egypt by the UAR and some training has been given to local military forces in Yemen itself. The importance of the tribes is such that a national army would require the support of a large number of them in order to maintain a tolerable level of security.

#### The Royalist Forces

7. The anti-regime forces, operating in semi-independent commands under various princes of the Hamid-al-Din family, have consistently held the northern mountain area between the coastal plain and the plateau and have operated freely in the northeastern desert areas. They are able to conduct harassing operations outside their strongholds, cutting UAR supply lines from time to time, but are unable to hold any important towns. A substantial proportion, perhaps even a majority, of the Zaydi tribes have been active against the central regime at one time or another, but allegiances are not durable and have shifted from one side to another and to neutrality. The motivations of the tribes are varied; some are attracted simply by money or by the opportunity to fight; others have seen the Egyptian-dominated government as a threat both to their tribal autonomy and to their traditionally dominant position in Yemen; relatively few are convinced monarchists. The tribal forces, which received extensive quantities of money, arms, and ammunition from Saudi Arabia until about four months ago, could hold out in their mountain bastions for a considerable period of time.

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#### The Present Situation

8. The Egyptian forces control the coastal plain and the principal towns and communications routes in the northern half of the country. The southern and the western regions have seen little, if any, fighting. Despite extensive use of air power, including, from time to time, attacks on suspected supply bases in Saudi territory, the UAR forces have not been able to penetrate the mountain areas or break the guerrilla fighting abilities of the northern tribes. The indigenous military forces available to the Sallal government have progressively assumed a passive role, and the fighting has taken on more and more the character of Egyptians versus Yemeni royalists. The level of ground fighting has declined in recent months as local truces have been arranged between Egyptians and royalists. This lull is enabling the Yemenis to gather the fall harvest, and thus to increase the royalists' ability to operate through the winter.

9. By midsummer of 1963 many Yemeni leaders had come to feel that major governmental changes were required to bring an end to the civil war. A conference of some 3,000 notables met at Umran, about thirty miles north of San'a, in September 1963. The conference was organized by supporters of the republican government and neutral elements, but leaders of tribes in royalist controlled territory were guaranteed safe conduct to attend and some of them did. The Umran conference presented Sallal and the Egyptians with a series of demands, designed to bring broader support to the republic, to give the tribes a greater voice, and to refurbish the national army, utilizing the customary practice of balancing tribal forces within it. Implicit in the Umran demands was a general belief that the UAR role must be reduced and that the Yemenis themselves should put their own government together. The anti-Egyptian tenor of these demands was promptly recognized by Cairo.

#### Attitudes of Outside Powers

10. When Nasser agreed in April 1963 to "disengage," he probably believed that the end of the rebellion was in sight and that, with a cessation of Saudi aid to the royalists, he could make a substantial withdrawal of troops without endangering the Sallal government. He apparently recognizes now that he is not likely to be able to win a decisive military victory. The Yemen war has already cost the UAR some \$50 to \$75 million in military expenditures above normal peacetime garrison costs, plus about \$10 million in financial assistance extended to the republican government. This is a heavy burden, a fair proportion of it is in scarce foreign exchange, and it has increased the UAR's already serious financial problems. The Yemen war, with its heavy toll of casualties, is becoming increasingly unpopular in Egypt

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and, apparently, with its military commanders. In addition, Nasser has other problems which compete for his military and political resources. He is involved in the Algerian-Moroccan dispute and has already sent a military mission as well as arms to Ben Bella. Finally, the emergence of Baathist governments in Syria and Iraq and their growing close association pose a strong challenge to Nasser. In a word, he is overcommitted, and in Yemen he faces mounting costs and little likelihood of the smashing victory he once hoped for.

11. Nasser recognizes the difficult situation he is in but does not see a solution. He has rejected Sallal's plea for a union between Egypt and Yemen. So far his thinking apparently has not gone beyond a broadening of the present government, which hopefully would give it greater strength by attracting the support of more Yemenis and permit substantial UAR troop withdrawals while permitting Egypt to retain predominant influence. Although he has agreed to several of the Umran conference demands, he does not appear yet to have recognized that a drastic reduction of the Egyptian influence and presence, together with a virtually new government, would be necessary conditions for a political settlement broadly acceptable within the country.

12. Faysal believes that Nasser intends to use whatever means are at his disposal to overthrow the Saudi regime and install one acceptable to the UAR. Hence, Faysal has the primary aim of eliminating the threat which he sees to Saudi Arabia from a major Egyptian position in Yemen. There is no particular feeling of solidarity between the House of Saud and the Hamid-al-Din princes, and we believe that Faysal probably would withhold support from the latter in favor of a settlement which would get Nasser's forces—or at least the great bulk of them—out of Yemen.

13. There are strong pressures on Faysal to facilitate a settlement which would bring relative quiet to Yemen. Saudi support of the royalist tribes has provoked discontent within the country and Faysal may fear growing Baathist activity in Saudi Arabia. Faysal is aware that the presence of the US air detachment in his country was made contingent on his respecting the disengagement agreements. He feels that the US is pressuring him to adhere to his commitment on disengagement while Nasser is violating his part of the agreement. Faysal probably believes that the US would not withdraw those forces in the absence of some compliance by the UAR with its disengagement commitments. At the same time, he almost certainly recognizes that there is some risk that if he resumed large-scale aid to the royalists he might be left without any defense against Egyptian air action and might lose this very important symbol of US commitment to his regime.

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14. The British are chiefly concerned with minimizing pressures from Yemen on Aden and the Protectorate. The Aden base looms very large in British strategic thinking, especially since the British expect to lose their bases in Kenya. They recognize that any Yemeni government will maintain its claims in Aden, but feel that these claims will be more strongly pressed if Egyptian influence is great in Yemen. In a larger sense, the British are concerned that the consolidation of an Egyptian position in Yemen would threaten their interests elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. Hence, the British, like the Saudis, seek to reduce the present dominant Egyptian position in Yemen.

#### The Political Outlook

15. The UN observation mission (UNYOM) has been extended to 4 January 1964. Faysal takes the position that he agreed to the Yemen disengagement in reliance on US commitments to procure the withdrawal of UAR forces, a commitment he feels the US has not kept. However, he did not wish to have blame focused on Saudi Arabia for refusing to continue to seek a peaceful settlement through the use of the UN. At the last minute, Faysal agreed to support a two months extension of UNYOM, although with great reluctance. We believe that such an agreement means that Faysal will not resume large scale aid to the royalists in the next two months or so. However, he will remain insistent that the UAR proceed promptly with substantial and continuing withdrawals and will expect the US to play a major role in forcing the UAR to do so. Unless there are such withdrawals by the end of this period, Faysal may renew his aid to the royalists.

16. We believe efforts by Yemeni leaders to reach a political solution in Yemen will continue but that any settlement probably will take some time to work out and would have to have the concurrence, however reluctant, of the UAR. In order to get broad Yemeni support, a settlement would have to reduce the power of Sallal and to eliminate a number of his associates who are believed to be Egyptian tools. The settlement would have to provide for a reduction of the UAR presence to a point where the Yemenis no longer felt the country was being run by the Egyptians. A balance would have to be struck between the Zaydi tribal leaders who wish to preserve their traditional dominant position and the Shafi'is who feel that the revolution so far has failed to satisfy their hopes for greater influence. The manner in which a settlement is approached, and indeed the result, would appear peculiar in Western eyes. The result probably would be an arrangement which gave the relatively peaceful southern half of Yemen a semblance of modern administration and left the northern tribes their traditional semi-autonomous status.

17. The Hamid-al-Din princes and their hard core of loyal followers would be a knotty problem. There would be virtually no future for most

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of them in the "new Yemen" and they know it. Hasan, Badr's uncle, would probably return to exile if this were a necessary condition for a settlement; Badr, despite his efforts to promote some reforms during his few days in power, is anathema to the republicans. In any case, he would probably quit if the tide turned decisively against him. Of the remainder, a few could live with the republic, but others would prefer to continue to wage guerrilla warfare in the Yemen mountains.

18. Despite the pressures on Nasser to find a way out of the Yemen impasse, there are, we believe, several conditions of movement towards a settlement on which he would be adamant. The first is that his withdrawal would have to be gradual. Nasser believes probably correctly, that an early complete withdrawal of UAR forces would enable the royalist tribes to overthrow the regime. Furthermore, a sudden UAR departure would be construed as an acknowledgement of a political defeat and, in the absence of political arrangements among Yemeni forces, would probably cause chaos in the country. Secondly the settlement should not appear as a victory for the royalists, i.e., the government should remain both republican in form and friendly to the UAR. This would not preclude having an Imam as a purely religious leader for the Zaydi tribes.\* Thirdly, Nasser would require the retention of a considerable measure of Egyptian influence in Yemen, through the presence of technical and administrative personnel and probably military training detachments.

19. Under the best of conditions the situation during the next few months will be fragile and fighting could resume on a wide scale at any time, particularly after the harvest or if Faysal resumes aid to the royalists. Faysal almost certainly has already begun to stockpile arms in the border area. Persistent and heavy pressure will have to be applied on Nasser to continue the reduction of UAR troops in Yemen, and to relinquish more authority to the Yemenis, in order to maintain progress toward a settlement. Pressure will also have to be applied on Faysal who will be inclined to view any likely UAR troop reductions as inadequate. We believe that if there is no resumption of large scale aid to the royalists, with a consequent upsurge in the fighting, and if the various pressures on Nasser to facilitate a settlement increase, he will in time be forced, though reluctantly, to effect a sufficient diminution of the Egyptian presence to permit a political settlement.

20. Should the Saudis resume active support of the royalists, Nasser would be strongly tempted to strike at Saudi Arabia either by renewed air attacks on supply bases or perhaps by intensifying subversive activities against Crown Prince Faysal. We have little information as to the

\* There are several families of Sayyids—descendants of the Prophet—from whom an Imam could be selected, most notably the Wazirs, unsuccessful rebels of 1948.

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assets Cairo has within Saudi Arabia but doubt that they are capable at present of upsetting the regime. The chances of Nasser's striking militarily at Saudi Arabia will depend to a large extent on US policies and presence in the area. If Cairo believes that such action would result in a US-UAR military confrontation, UAR forces are unlikely to strike much beyond the Saudi-Yemen border. This situation would seriously strain US-UAR relations but would probably reinforce Nasser's feeling that he must find a way out of the Yemen imbroglio.

21. In any event a political settlement and calming down of the civil war will still leave Yemen with difficult problems. Turbulence in the tribal areas is likely to be endemic for many years. So are border troubles with Aden. The country is capable of feeding itself on the old subsistence economy basis, but ambitions and appetites for bigger things have been aroused. Available resources are meager. At the moment, Yemen cannot even find enough money to pay its civil employees and its army. If any progress is to be made toward economic betterment, Yemen will require loans and other aid. It will be willing and eager to take aid from any source, as long as no obvious strings are attached.

#### Soviet Prospects

22. Moscow's assistance to Yemen in the early months after the revolution largely took the form of supplying equipment and technicians to the UAR to enable Cairo to aid the republic more effectively. However, the USSR soon began sending technicians directly to Yemen to salvage and maintain what they could of the \$30 million worth of military equipment sent to the Imam under a 1957 agreement. The greater part of this had been neglected for several years. A new agreement, apparently providing for an additional \$20 million in military equipment was negotiated in March 1963. In addition, the USSR agreed to construct a large airfield north of San'a, the major part of which has recently been completed, probably using the remaining \$5 million of a \$25 million economic credit negotiated in 1957.\* By such assistance and by the speed with which they responded to Yemeni requests in time of need, the Soviets have won considerable good will and have been able to establish an extensive presence in Yemen.

23. Whether there is a settlement or not, the Soviets, unless they make some serious mistakes in handling their affairs, are likely to have a significant presence in Yemen for the foreseeable future. The Soviets will encourage Yemeni claims to Aden and the Protectorate. In Yemeni eyes, the US aid program is outclassed by the USSR's, and the US is

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\* \$15 million of the \$25 million credit was used to build a port at Hudaydah and \$5 million was to be spent on agricultural projects. In addition to Soviet aid, Communist China provided a \$17 million credit to build an asphalt surfaced highway from Hudaydah to San'a.

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believed by the Yemenis to be closely associated with the unpopular British. Hence, the Soviets will probably have a continuing edge over the West.

24. Specifically, it is likely that the Soviets will get civil air rights in Yemen on the completion of San'a airfield. These would be a useful step forward in the Soviet push to establish civil air links with East and Central Africa. The Soviets already run the control towers at Hudaydah and Ta'izz airfields. They may also be able to acquire a privileged position at the new airfield including perhaps control of a building or two and relative immunity from Yemeni customs control. This could give them some capability to lend air support to clandestine operations in nearby areas.

25. The Soviets have control of the operating facilities of Hudaydah port, which is useful to them.\* The port can provide bunkering facilities for Soviet merchant and naval vessels. However, the small capacity of the storage tanks—56,000 barrels of all types of fuel including diesel, marine bunkers, aviation gas—and the 25 foot depth of the channel and turning basin limit its use in this regard. As a potential naval base, Hudaydah has several further drawbacks. It is only 200 miles from the British airbase at Aden. It lacks any repair facilities and its 200-250 foot wide, five mile long channel is highly vulnerable to closure.

26. The Soviets have about 1,000 people in Yemen at the present time. More than half of these are employed in construction work at the new San'a airfield. Logically, the greater part of them should depart on the approaching completion of the airfield. However, the Soviets have agreed to train Yemenis in the operation of the construction equipment they have used and this could provide an opportunity for many of them to stay on. Other Soviet personnel are at Hudaydah port and Hudaydah and Ta'izz airfields, and there are about twenty instructors at the military school in Ta'izz.

27. While Soviet prestige will probably remain high for a long time to come, converting prestige into influence for specific ends is another matter. There is a small native communist movement in the principal towns, numbering less than forty identified adherents at present, a few of whom hold government jobs. There are few institutions which can be utilized to manipulate the population. The principal Soviet hope probably is to develop over a period of time, through scholarships, economic and technical aid, military training and the like, a cadre of supporters for future use. The Soviets hope to capitalize on the return of some 450 young Yemenis from extended educational tours in the Soviet Union, particularly as Yemenis generally do not have extensive contacts with the West to offset the Soviet impact.

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\* See map attached.

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28. For some time, the UAR, even in the event of a much diminished position following on a political settlement, is likely to dispose of far more direct power in Yemen than is Moscow and will guard its position against Soviet encroachments. Further, the diffusion of power within Yemen is likely to persist for a good many years, a situation which, combined with the xenophobic tendencies of the country, will inevitably tend to frustrate anyone trying to dominate the whole, be he Westerner, Egyptian, or Russian. Finally, it is very unlikely that even the unsophisticated Yemeni republic—which shares the Arab world's emotional reaction to foreign dominance—would grant military base rights to a non-Arab power or accept direction, even from the helpful USSR.

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