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Of Jungles, Deserts, and Bandits: State-Sanctioned Danger in the Border Regimes of 1940s ‘Aden and 2020s America

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(Received 05 November 2024; revised 31 December 2024; accepted 05 January 2025)

Abstract

This article draws a comparison between US border policies in the 2020s and the policies implemented by the British colonial regime in 1940s ‘Aden to dissuade Jewish immigration. It makes an original argument, based on documents from the British colonial archives and Jewish philanthropic sources, that the plunder of Jewish migrants was a consequence of British policy, and not, as scholars have sometimes assumed, a vaguely-defined “anarchy” in the Aden Protectorate sultanates (today, southern, and eastern Yemen). The history of British immigration policy – and the unofficial incorporation of both environmental and human forces into the project of dissuading Jewish migration – bears a striking resemblance to American policies in recent years. The perils of the Darién Gap and other deadly routes and the concentration of migrants in dangerous conditions on the US–Mexico border *de facto* incorporate the jungle, the desert, and criminal syndicates into the border regime’s efforts to disincentivize migration. A look at the archival record of a parallel story in 1940s Yemen/‘Aden allows us to glimpse the construction of policies that utilize unofficial actors and factors (from bandits to the hot desert sun) in a border regime’s campaign of terror against (potential) migrants. The article demonstrates the value of historical comparative cases for understanding the policies of governments today. Scholars of current events lack access to the intelligence reports, correspondence, and other once-classified documents available to historians, which allow for a fuller understanding of the ways in which similar policies have been developed and implemented.

Keywords: border; migration; yemen

Over the course of the 2024 election, we saw the candidates compete with one another to demonstrate a “hard line” on immigration. The exclusion of immigrants and asylum-seekers appears to be a shared priority, but Trump administration policies like the ironically named Migrant Protection Protocols (“Remain in Mexico”) and Title 42, which remained in force late into the Biden administration, have caused truly astounding humanitarian crises.¹ Policies that force migrants into informal, un-serviced “refugee camps” on the US–Mexico border, subjecting people fleeing tyranny or poverty in their home countries to the dangers of trafficking, assault, robbery, and other forms of violence, are intended to dissuade more migrants from coming. Every kidnapping at the border supports the US objective of proving

¹ See, e.g., Gostin and Friedman 2023, Mercado et. al. 2021, and Silverstein et. al. 2021.

to migrants that seeking asylum is more dangerous than staying home. Even as American and Mexican law enforcement agencies combat organized crime, US border policies *de facto* incorporate criminal syndicates into the state apparatus – gangs become unofficial border guard units, of a sort, doing a grisly service for the US border regime and collecting their wages from the plunder of the weak in a model reminiscent of medieval European warfare.²

Geoffrey Alan Boyce and Samuel Norton Chambers write about what they call “the corral apparatus”: the erection of infrastructure and checkpoints designed to “funnel” migrants toward deadly routes. The apparatus has, indeed, led to a spike in migrant mortality.³ Officials have at times declared that the aim of the infrastructure that makes the crossing of the US–Mexico border so dangerous is to deter migrants from making the journey in the future.⁴ The sources that Boyce and Chambers cite thus demonstrate that thousands of border crossing deaths are not only a consequence of US border policy, but also an intentional part of US border strategy.

In 2019, Amnesty International published an article about the arrest of American volunteers bringing water to save migrants from dehydration in the deserts. Border officials had also been destroying potentially life-saving water jugs.⁵ By the time they reach the Mexico–US border, migrants have often already traversed several lethal paths, like the now-famous Darién Gap, a stretch of rainforest and other dangerous terrain in which lurk bandits, human traffickers, and wild animals.⁶ American pressure on Mexico has made direct flights more difficult. The trees, mountains, parasites, criminals, and creatures that prowl the Gap now, therefore, *de facto* work for the US border regime as well, taking their place alongside the Sonoran Desert.⁷

As someone deeply concerned with the humanitarian implications of US border policy, I was struck to find parallels in my own research, which focuses on another part of the world, and another period, entirely. I study the migration of Yemeni Jews to ‘Aden (a port city that is today in the south of Yemen) and thence to Israel, mostly in the 1940s. In my work, I have found that the British authorities who ruled the ‘Aden Colony wanted to dissuade Yemeni Jews from coming to ‘Aden, both because they opposed Jewish immigration to Israel and because they were concerned with the ethnic/racial makeup of the Colony.⁸

Like American policymakers in the 2020s, British colonial officials in the 1940s sought to make migration difficult and dangerous in the hopes of disincentivizing migrant arrivals. British Governor Reginald Stuart Champion, for example, once ordered the refugee camp in

² For details on migrations to the US (particularly from the Northern Triangle of Central America), some US border policies, and the dangers migrants encounter, see Obinna 2019.

³ Boyce and Chambers 2021, 2.

⁴ Boyce and Chambers 2021, 3–4, 9.

⁵ Warren 2019.

⁶ For scholarship on the Darién Gap and its dangers, see Soliman et. al. 2023, Taylor 2022, and Yates 2023.

⁷ Roy and Baumgartner 2024.

⁸ See, for example, the minutes of a meeting between ‘Aden Governor Reginald Stuart Champion and representatives of the Foreign Office on 11 February 1949, during which Champion insisted on maintaining the Colony’s opposition to Jewish migration despite the end of the British Mandate over Palestine and London’s decision to abandon its Mandatory-era policy of formally preventing the migration of military-age Jewish men from British Colonies to Israel. Record of a Meeting with the Governor of Aden at the Foreign Office on Friday 11th February, 1949, 14 February 1949, British National Archives. FO371/74951, p. 5.

‘Aden destroyed because, according to one report by an aid official,⁹ if it “was allowed to remain, this would attract more Jews from the Yemen whom he was determined to keep out of Aden at all costs.”¹⁰ British officials also, on more than one occasion, suddenly closed the Yemen-‘Aden border, stranding Jewish refugees in Ḍāl’a and barring the ‘Adeni Jewish community from delivering food to them.¹¹ The deserts of the sultanates served, for the British, the same function that the Darién Gap and the Sonoran Desert serve for American border officialdom. British officials prevented ‘Adeni Jews from bringing sustenance to their coreligionists in much the same way that American officials have tried to prevent volunteers from saving the lives of dehydrated migrants.¹²

More often, however, English officials were less directly involved in the project to dissuade Jewish immigration. It is a commonplace of Yemeni Jewish refugee stories that, on the trek from the far reaches of Yemen to ‘Aden, local people plundered the refugees, stripping them of their possessions so that they arrived in the Colony impoverished and, often, in danger of starvation after having crossed the desert with insufficient supplies. Moshe Gavra, in his work on that migration, writes that most such robberies happened not in Yemen proper (today, northwest Yemen), but rather in the sultanates that comprised the “Aden Protectorates” (southern and eastern Yemen today).¹³

The Protectorates were ruled from British Colonial ‘Aden through a web of sultans. Scholars have sometimes described those sultanates as “anarchic,” but, in fact, they were typically spaces of complex – and very hierarchal – domination. The British colonial officials projected power in the protectorates not only through the sultans themselves but also through vast networks of colonial militias, aerial bombardments, and other means. After 1934, British officials focused on “setting the Protectorate house in order,” particularly by establishing firm control over the routes spanning Yemen and the Protectorates and leading to ‘Aden.¹⁴ They spared no measure toward that end, training border patrols and fighting

⁹ The author of the letter, Harry Viteles, was stationed in Tel Aviv, but he maintained close contact with the staff under his direction in ‘Aden. His account of Champion’s reasoning for the dismantlement of the refugee camp was based on a conversation that he personally had with Champion during his visit to ‘Aden in March of 1949.

¹⁰ Harry Viteles, Letter to A. G. Brotman, 9 August 1949, London Metropolitan Archives, Board of Deputies of British Jews Collection. ACC/3121/C11/13/5

¹¹ Jewish Emergency Committee [likely Selīm Banīn], Cable to World Jewish Congress London, 15 June 1949, Joint Distribution Committee Archive. G45–54/4/29/2/AD.7, Item ID: 740297. See also Meir-Glitzstein 2014.

¹² The Jewish Emergency Committee was the leading body of ‘Adeni Jewry during this period and advocated consistently in support of Yemeni Jewish migration. The committee’s views on this issue marked a departure from the stance of the previous ‘Adeni Jewish community president, Selīm Menahem Messa, who collaborated with the British authorities against the migration of “indigent” Yemeni Jews in the 1930s. For details of Messa’s collaboration with the British, see M. C. Lake, Letter to The Director, Department of Immigration, Jerusalem, Palestine, 18 July 1934, British National Archives. CO725/33/17 and Bernard Reilly, Letter to Secretary of State for the Colonies, London, 13 February 1935, British National Archives. CO725/33/17. For an example of the difference in approach between Selīm Menahem Messa and his nephew, M. Benṭob Messa, who formally presided over ‘Adeni Jewry in the 1940s, see Ahroni 1994, 101 for a description of M. Benṭob Messa’s work to hold the British regime accountable for anti-Jewish policies in 1932 and see Selīm Menahem Messa’s disapproval of that work in “Note of an Interview with Mr. Selim M. Menahem Messa of Aden,” 27 September 1932, London Metropolitan Archives, Board of Deputies of British Jews Collection. ACC/3121/E3/211/1. For the ‘Adeni Jewish community’s collective resistance to the British regime’s targeting of Yemeni Jewish refugees in the 1940s, see Benjamin Berman-Gladstone’s forthcoming article in the first volume of *‘Aleī Tamar: Journal of the Culture, Heritage, and Spirit of the Jews of Yemen*, in press. For more on the history of ‘Adeni Jewry, see Ahroni 1994.

¹³ Gavra 2015, 548.

¹⁴ Resident [Bernard Reilly], Letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 November 1934, British National Archives. CO935/10 [accessed online].

guerilla conflicts with communities accused of banditry. Shortly before the large-scale Jewish emigration, for example, British planes shattered Qūṭaibī villages in response to “looted caravans.”¹⁵ On that occasion, the British officials even contemplated targeting civilians in their fields, although they ultimately decided against it.¹⁶ The Protectorate roads, then, were not anarchic at all – banditry along those routes was a top concern of British officials, and they reacted harshly against it.

Those same British officials made an exception when it came to Jews. We can best understand the attacks of Jews along the routes between Yemen and ‘Aden, then, as part of the British policy of trying to make Jewish migration difficult and dangerous. In an intelligence report about the month of September 1949, British Chief Secretary Richard Percy Errington, who was most directly responsible for managing British domination of the sultanates, wrote the following:

In the Western Aden Protectorate, where for valid reasons, including the safety of the Jews themselves, the Aden Government has declined to intervene in the conditions under which they are permitted to pass, a tax at a fixed tariff per head is collected at every tribal frontier while brutal tribesmen pick over their poor belongings, discussing perhaps whether a pregnant woman should be charged double or whether the party should be delayed until she has given birth.¹⁷

Aside from reiterating an experience already prominent in Yemeni Jewish public memory, this entry tells us at least three important things: first, that the British officials ruling the roads were aware of the issue; second, that the British colonial regime had made an explicit decision to allow the problem to fester; and third, that Errington regarded the plunder of Yemeni Jews not as robbery, but as a “tax.” The conditions may have been “brutal,” but, from a British perspective, they were a legitimate function of the sultanates’ British-backed road control, not illegitimate (and hence punishable) criminal activity.

Errington’s report is not the only document that suggests that the plunder of Jewish migrants had the sanction of the British colonial officials and the sultans through whom they administered the territory. In a July 1949 letter, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) employee Joseph Simon expressed suspicion that a British Agent was trying to mislead him about migration through the Fadlī Sultanate, where the ruler, ‘Abdullah bin ‘Uthman, was holding up Jewish migrants.¹⁸ Simon had heard contradictory things from the British officials – on the one hand, that it was impossible to persuade the sultan to change his mind, and, at the same time, that the British officials did have the power to order a policy change.¹⁹ Because we are in possession of historical documents to which Simon did not have access, we can say definitively that the British officials did, indeed, have that power. In 1941, ‘Abdullah bin ‘Uthman had actually been the one to deliver the

¹⁵ H. T. Lydford, Report of Operations Against the Quteibi Tribe: November 27th, 28th, 29th, and December 4th, 1947, 14 January 1948, British Library. India Office Records R/20/C/2543, pp. 3–4.

¹⁶ Edit to Draft of Aden Command Operation Order No. 7/47, November 1947, British Library. India Office Records R/20/C/2543, p. 4.

¹⁷ R. P. Errington, Yemen Intelligence Summary No. 7 for September, 1949, 28 October 1949, British National Archives. FO371/1013, p. 2.

¹⁸ Simon was stationed in ‘Aden and wrote about a conversation between himself and a British agent there.

¹⁹ J. Simon, Letter to Harry Viteles, 26 July 1949, London Metropolitan Archives, Board of Deputies of British Jews Collection. ACC/2793/09/01

surrender of his predecessor, Šāleḥ bin ‘Abdullah, to British forces. The last Faḍlī Sultan had been deposed after several incidents, but the final straws were levying road tolls in excess of those permitted by the British regime and, in one instance, momentarily detaining a group of Government Guards (Arab militiamen under British direction) in order to extract taxes from them.²⁰ ‘Abdullah bin ‘Uthman was thus more aware than anyone that the British were willing to depose their erstwhile allies, and that roadside security and taxation were the major issues that could trigger a harsh British response. Nevertheless, he was not afraid of punishment for holding up Jewish refugees; he was clearly under the impression that his actions were aligned with British policy.

Another disturbing example can be found in a report by Jewish Agency delegate Ya‘aqov Veinshtein, who reported on one incident of what Errington had called a “tax”:

The Arabs on the border of Yemen and the Protectorate had captured four Jewish girls from a group of 12 Jews who were coming over here. The Arabs asked L10 for the liberation of each of the girls. The delegate said that the Sultan wanted to buy one of the girls, only 14 years of age, as a wife. Negotiations continued for six days and then the [‘Adeni Jewish] community members of their own funds paid the Arabs and the girls were brought to the Chairman of the community. This was a scene I will never forget, as I saw Jewish people being rescued and the Jewish community taking care of them. Mr. Banin [‘Adeni Jewish leader Selim Banīn] the chairman of the community, has been working day and night for the last several years to help these people.²¹

Veinshtein referred generally to “the Arabs on the border,” but his comments reveal that the people in question were not operating independently. They were working in conjunction with “the Sultan,” whose power was derived from British protection.

It was the British colonial officials, then, who not only propped up those sultanates, but also made a special exception to their policy of harsh reprisals for roadside interference in the case of Jewish migrants. British officials in ‘Aden used similar tactics to accomplish other unsavory policy objectives. In 1940, for example, ‘Aden Political Secretary Morice Challoner Lake wrote in support of expanding the British colonial policy of kidnapping civilian “hostages” (including children) in order to terrify their families into submission. “The legal aspect,” he wrote, “might be got over by having a concentration camp just this side of Dar al Amir, the Protectorate side of the boundary.”²² In subsequent years, the colonial officials adhered to Lake’s advice, keeping children and other civilian hostages locked in the dungeons of the sultans rather than under direct British supervision in the Colony. The comparison is instructive because it shows that the British officials made a habit of deploying the sultans to carry out tactics that directly targeted civilians.

What does this history tell us about American border policy today? Several scholars have studied the development of US border policy, including its expansion in recent years. To name just one example, Terence Michael Garrett writes about the globalization of the

²⁰ Governor, Aden, Cypher Telegram to C. in C. East Indies, 28 March 1941, British National Archives. CO725/81/6 and E. C. Figgis, Report on a Visit to the Fadhli Sultan Concerning General Administration, 30 December 1940, British Library. India Office Records R/20/C/1143, p. 3.

²¹ Ya‘aqov Veinshtein, “Report on Visit to Aden May 12th to May 17th, 1949,” Joint Distribution Committee Archive. G45–54/4/29/3/AD.16, Item ID: 740626, p. 1.

²² M. C. Lake, Minute, 12 March 1940, British Library. India Office Records R/20/C/1231.

American border “securocracy” before, during, and in the wake of COVID-19.²³ Historical parallels like the case of British colonial policies against Yemeni Jewish migrants, though, can offer us different kinds of insight.

Scholars today can observe the humanitarian crises generated by US policy, seek current-day comparisons like European anti-immigration infrastructure that forces migrants to navigate dangerous sea routes, and conduct interviews with migrants, officials, and other actors. Usually, though, we do not have access to the secret intelligence reports and correspondence between officials over the course of which those policies are actually generated. Historical examples and the archival record give us a behind-the-scenes look at the same systems and practices that are still with us today. Future historians will have access to an archive of the confidential exchanges and meetings in which the US–Mexico border strategy of the last several years was developed. For now, though, our knowledge of what goes on behind closed doors in Washington, DC is limited. Even if White House officials in the coming years, for example, write down plans to circumvent “the legal aspect” of certain policies (as Lake did in 1940), we may not see those documents for a long time.

A historical analogy like the one presented in this article, however, can help us gain big-picture insight into how border policies of deterrence really work. By studying times in the past when governments have adopted similar policies, we can start to understand the hidden machinations of the American government today. Such analogies give us a chance to see the deadly, overarching strategy of which the corral apparatus, border globalization, and the threats to migrant life posed by the criminals who operate in unofficial and unacknowledged symbiosis with border officials are components. With the ‘Aden example in hand, we can see more clearly that the thousands of migrants who today die crossing dangerous jungles, waterways, and deserts or suffer from the ruthlessness of criminal syndicates are not victims of tragic happenstance. They are, rather, the object of a longtime state practice of subtly and unofficially incorporating lethal environmental and human forces into an extended border regime.

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Conflicts of Interest. The author declares none.

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²³ Garrett 2023. See also Miller 2019.

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Cite this article: Berman-Gladstone, Benjamin. 2025. "Of Jungles, Deserts, and Bandits: State-Sanctioned Danger in the Border Regimes of 1940s 'Aden and 2020s America." *Public Humanities*, 1, e64, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.4>