



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Situated on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is a country with a diverse landscape of mountains, plains, and deserts. It covers 203,849 square miles (527,970 square kilometers) including 112 islands, an area approximately the size of California and Kentucky combined.

The climate varies with elevation. The coast is hot and humid throughout the year. The central highlands, with villages at 10,000 feet (3,048 meters), experience an average annual high temperature of 70°F (21°C). Monsoon rains may occur from April to August and from November to January. Rainfall is scarce in the coastal desert regions, but runoff from higher elevations and a series of small dams and channels help support some crops. Mountainsides in the arable highlands are terraced to increase cultivation area. Forests once covered the highlands, but overgrazing and logging have almost eliminated them. Excluding its coastal waters, Yemen has no permanent body of water.

History

People have inhabited settled communities in present-day Yemen for thousands of years, and some Arabs consider the region to be the origin of their race. Sana'a is one of the world's oldest cities. The kingdom of Sheba, established around 1000 BC, prospered from the frankincense trade route that crossed the Arabian Peninsula.

As Christianity spread in the fourth century AD, European demand for frankincense declined. The kingdom of Sheba's

wealth diminished, and Sheba was eventually replaced by the Himyarite dynasty.

During the fourth and fifth centuries, Jewish and Christian missionaries converted most inhabitants, but the governor of Yemen accepted Islam as the official religion in 628. Yemenis today consider themselves to be first among Muslims; some families claim direct lineage to the prophet Muhammad.

By 1548, the Ottoman Turks controlled most of the east coast. Yemenis at higher elevations were able to resist the Turks by controlling the narrow mountain passes. In the late 1800s, the British gained control over Yemen's independent southern port of Aden, which they wanted to use as a stopping point between Africa and India. In the early 1900s, the Turks and the British agreed to a border between their two territories, forming North and South Yemen.

Following World War I, North Yemen became an independent country and followed a policy of isolationism. In 1967, after several years of violent struggle, South Yemen gained independence from Britain and became the first Marxist state on the Arabian Peninsula. The nations joined again after years of negotiations, uniting as the Republic of Yemen in 1990.

Yemen held democratic elections in May 1993. Unfortunately, integrating the two governments proved difficult. The army, police, civil service, and monetary systems remained separate. Divided loyalties and other problems eventually led the nation to civil war in May 1994. The elected president, Ali Abdullah Saleh (who was from the north), was opposed by the vice president (from the south). After 65 days, the vice president left Yemen and the war

ended.

However, troubles for the new nation did not end: inflation, conflicts between the more secular south and the conservative north, and border skirmishes with Saudi Arabia combined to destabilize the country. In December 1995, Eritrean troops attacked Yemeni forces in a dispute over possession of the Hanish-Zukur Archipelago. Eritrean troops withdrew in 1996, and the two nations agreed to negotiations. An international arbitration panel granted Yemen sovereignty of the Hanish Islands in October 1998.

Ali Abdullah Saleh was reelected president in the country's first direct presidential elections, in September 1999. The following June he concluded an historic agreement with Saudi Arabia, ending their 66-year border dispute. Since 2001, the government has worked closely with the U.S. military to combat terrorism, a relationship condemned by Islamist-oriented Yemeni tribes.

In 2004, Islamic cleric Hussein al-Houthi launched a rebellion to oppose the government's ties with the United States. Government forces killed al-Houthi in September 2004, but the insurgency continued under the leadership of al-Houthi's brother Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. Clashes between rebels and government troops resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people. A cease-fire agreement was signed in June 2007, but fighting began again in January 2008. A series of terrorist bombings in 2008, including an attack on the U.S. embassy, further destabilized the country.

In 2009, an intermittent rebellion in the northern Saada province flared up, and the Yemeni army launched an offensive against the rebels there. Hundreds of people died and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. The northern rebels also clashed with Saudi security forces along the border. Though the Yemeni government and the rebels signed a ceasefire in 2010, tensions persist between the north and the south, and the country struggles to clamp down on Islamic militants.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Yemen's population of 23.5 million is growing by 2.71 percent annually. About 68 percent of the population lives in rural areas. Sana'a (the capital), Aden, and Ta'izz are the largest cities.

The majority of Yemen's citizens are Arab. There are small groups of African, Indian, or Pakistani descent. A few small Jewish communities are active in the northern highlands. All native Yemenis belong to a tribe. Tribes are based on regions, but it is said that there are as many tribes in Yemen as there are villages.

Language

Arabic is Yemen's official language. Modern standard Arabic is used in writing, business, and formal speaking. Spoken Arabic usually consists of one of many guttural dialects, which vary by region. Arabic has 28 characters and is read from right to left. A growing number of educated people also speak English.

Religion

Islam is Yemen's official religion. The Yemenis are devout Muslims and practice the Five Pillars of Islam: professing belief in and allegiance to *Allah* and the prophet Muhammad, praying five times daily, giving alms, fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan*, and making a *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, at least once during one's lifetime. All who have completed a *hajj* are highly respected. Yemenis revere the *Qur'an* as scripture containing Islam's doctrines, values, and history. The ninth month of the lunar calendar is *Ramadan*, when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset each day to bring themselves closer to *Allah*. Friday is the day of worship. Most men go to a mosque; women pray at home or sometimes in mosques separated from the men. Most Yemenis are Sunni Muslims, though a considerable number of Shi'i Muslims exist as well.

General Attitudes

Yemenis consider *Allah*, family, and tribe to be the most important aspects of their traditional society. The objective in life is to be devoted to *Allah* so that in death one's spirit will be with *Allah*. The Yemenis are extremely proud of their historical dedication to Islam.

People are concerned with the perceptions of others and will not do something that might be regarded as disrespectful to *Allah* or family. Likewise, individuals yield their wishes and rights to the well-being of the tribe or family. Concepts of personal space are not common. Ancestry helps determine who has power, who holds public office, and who is considered especially devout. Personal relations are also important. Yemenis prefer to establish trust and confidence before proceeding with business. Increasing Western influence has benefited Sana'a but has also created strains between more secular areas and conservative villages.

Personal Appearance

In public, women wear a full-length black robe (called an *'abaya* in the south and *bulto* in the north) over their clothing. Girls begin wearing the *'abaya* by age 12 and sometimes even earlier. Under an *'abaya*, a woman might wear a brightly colored dress, a Western dress, or even jeans (for young modern women). Most women wear veils in public. Some northern village women and girls cover the entire face so no unrelated male can see them. Traditional men avoid even looking in the direction of a woman in public. In their homes, some women wear a *deara* (a delicate cloth with holes for the arms and head, and a half-slip underneath). Elderly women wear a shapeless cloak called a *sharshaf* over their clothes.

Men in the south traditionally wear a *futah* (a patterned cotton cloth wrapped around the lower part of the body) with a Western shirt, while men in the north wear a *thobe* (a long, light robe that reaches the ankles) and a Western sport coat. Men from the north wear a *jambia* (curved dagger) on a belt, a practice less common in the south. On Fridays and religious holidays, men wear a *zanna* (long white dress) with a *mashedda* (headscarf). Most men carry a *mashedda* to protect their faces in sandstorms, mask foul odors, or use as a towel.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Respect is the most important element in any greeting. Greetings usually begin with the phrase *Al-salām 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you). *Wa 'alaykum al-salām* (And may peace be upon you) is the proper reply. Other greetings are *Sabah al-khayr* (Good morning) and *Masa' al-khayr* (Good evening). Conversations begin on common social ground and then move on to business if appropriate. Men do not inquire about each other's families.

Men either shake hands or hug and kiss on the cheeks. Women hug and kiss when they meet, but this is done in a house or alley out of sight of men. Men never greet women in public. They do hug and kiss their wives or mothers when returning home, or they might kneel to kiss a parent's knee. Spouses rarely hold hands in public, but it is common for men and women to hold the hand of a same-gender friend or relative when walking or talking.

Gestures

The left hand is considered unclean, so it is not used for greeting, eating, or gesturing. Yemenis do not beckon with just one finger. Rather, they wave the four fingers of the right hand toward the body, with the palm facing down. It is impolite to wear shoes in the home or point the sole of the foot at someone. Women usually do not speak or show emotion in public. They do not sit by men who are not family members.

Visiting

Most Yemeni men visit friends and relatives every afternoon to talk, gossip, and chew *qat* (an addictive stimulant leaf that grows on a bush). The “chew” is usually held in a room with cushions and pillows on the floor. Visitors purchase their own *qat* at the *suq* (open-air market). When swallowed, juice from the leaves has a caffeine-like effect on the body but does not significantly alter behavior. Cola, juice, or water is also served. Guests also smoke a *mada'a* (water pipe filled with tobacco) and cigarettes. The visit ends by 6:30 p.m. Often business or political decisions are made and disputes are resolved during the chew. If women chew *qat*, they do so in a separate room or household. More Westernized or educated people may avoid *qat* because of its negative impact on society: *qat* inhibits a healthy appetite, the poor often substitute it for food, and *qat* fields are displacing cash and food crops.

Male guests do not see the females in the host family. If they need something, the host calls for the women to bring the desired item, which is placed where a male family member can retrieve it. Women do not necessarily visit the same homes as their husbands. In rural areas or the north, women only visit close neighbors; they do not walk on roads or go into town. Young children generally stay with their mothers when they visit, or they stay home with an older sister or grandparent.

Eating

Yemeni women prepare the main meal of the day and serve it at about 2 p.m. Each person washes his or her hands and face before eating. Everyone sits on the floor around a mat containing dishes of food. Rural families use bread as their only utensil. Urban or wealthy families use spoons and sometimes other utensils. Diners scoop food out of the serving dishes with the right hand. They may tear bread with the left hand. The family usually eats together unless a male guest is present. In that case, the women eat separately. Guests are offered second helpings and are expected to accept. There is generally little conversation during the meal. When all have finished eating, people sit, talk, and drink tea. The women are expected to clean up after the meal.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Family ties are strong, and many generations live under one roof. Elderly family members are treated with great respect. Men have the ultimate decision-making power and are usually the family's sole providers. Girls are part of their father's family until they marry, at which time they become part of their husband's family. If a conflict arises in the marriage, the wife returns to her father's house until a solution is found. After a divorce, children may stay with their mother until age seven, when they usually must return to their father. Women can own property, drive, divorce, and work, but their roles in society are clearly defined. They make decisions only about the household and young children, although educated urban women have more flexibility than others.

Housing

Housing styles vary from region to region, but most homes feature a sitting room, in which the male host and his guests sit on cushions as they chew *qat*. Rural Yemenis generally live in stone or mud-brick houses with two or three storeys. Multi-storey apartment buildings are common in cities, though some families build small freestanding houses on urban outskirts, where land is cheaper. Examples of ancient building methods—such as stones fitted together without mortar—are still evident in many parts of the country, though cinder blocks are rapidly replacing traditional techniques. Running water is available in many parts of the country, but most villages remain without it. Women in remote areas typically draw water from the nearest well twice a day, sometimes walking up to two hours each way. They may carry the water in pots on their heads or load them onto donkeys.

Dating and Marriage

Dating is not practiced in Yemen, and marriages are almost always arranged. In Sana'a and other large cities, men and women may meet at the university or work and decide to marry with their families' approval. However, for the most part, such interactions are uncommon.

Weeklong weddings include separate celebrations for men and women. Women wear jewelry and elaborate gowns and decorate their skin with flower patterns painted with black

dye and henna (a red dye). Men dress traditionally. Men and women both chew *qat* and dance throughout the celebration. On the final night of the ceremony, the bride and groom spend their first night together at the groom's home.

The most valuable thing a Yemeni woman can bring to marriage is her chastity. Men pay the woman's family a bride-price, a practice both men and women increasingly criticize because saving for it can delay a marriage. Prices for village women are higher than for urban women because villagers are valued for their ability to work in the fields, maintain a household, tend animals, and raise children. Men may have as many as four wives, but few do because, according to Islamic teachings, each must be cared for equally.

Life Cycle

Most women deliver their babies in the home with the assistance of a local midwife or female family members. Hospital births occur in cities, but even there, women often opt for home deliveries because of a fear of hospitals. Male babies are usually circumcised during their first few days of life. The event is often accompanied by a large celebration for which a sheep is slaughtered and the meat distributed to everyone in the neighborhood. To protect an infant from the "evil eye," the baby wears amulets and people refrain from calling the child by his or her name. Forty days after a delivery, the mother is honored by female friends and family members with a party. The woman's convalescence is then considered complete and she resumes her regular duties in the household.

When a person dies, the body is ritually washed as verses from the *Qur'an* are recited. The body is then wrapped in a muslin cloth and transported on a pallet from the house or mosque to the cemetery. Mourners carry the pallet on their shoulders as they walk in procession. The body is buried as soon as possible after death. For the next one to three weeks, the family receives guests at the home. Some families slaughter a sheep and serve this and other foods to the visitors.

Diet

A main meal begins with a cup of soup made from meat broth, followed by the main course of either fish, chicken, goat, or beef served with vegetables, salad, and rice or pasta. The south has been heavily influenced by Indian and African cuisine. Coastal areas have an abundance of fish and seafood. *Salta* (a spicy stew made with fenugreek) is a popular dish. Yemenis also enjoy *fūl* (a spicy bean dish) and scrambled eggs with tomatoes, onions, and green chilis. Bread is served with every meal, often with a spicy relish in which bread is dipped. *Bint al-sahn*, a festive bread, is cooked in layers and served hot with clarified butter and warm honey. Fruits and vegetables are plentiful, the most common being grapes, oranges, melons, mangoes, bananas, tomatoes, potatoes, green beans, and cucumbers. Typical desserts are cream caramel or fruit. Evening street vendors sell egg pancakes, fried bread, boiled eggs, boiled potatoes, and meat sandwiches.

Recreation

The primary recreation in Yemen is chewing *qat* while visiting friends. Soccer, the most popular sport, is played mainly by school-aged boys. Women do not participate in sports, but they enjoy dancing. Music is an important part of festive occasions and *qat* chews.

The Arts

Yemen's arts reflect its history as a crossroads between Asia, India, Africa, and the Middle East. Architecture ranges in expression from stone fortress villages in the mountains to distinctive mud-brick skyscrapers in some urban centers. Windows are highly decorative and the making of stained glass is a popular art form. Other crafts include painting, sculpture, and metalwork.

Yemenis have a rich tradition of oral literature. Proverbs, stories, and especially poetry are commonly recited and highly valued. Most villages can trace their history and tradition through poetry or song. Singing is closely tied to poetry and usually is accompanied by the *'oud* (a wooden lute, similar to a mandolin). Yemeni music has developed with such close ties to poetry that the two have similar rhythms. Dancing is an important part of weddings and other social occasions. Modern cultural institutions such as theaters, museums, and galleries are rare.

Holidays

The lunar calendar determines religious holidays, and the solar (Gregorian) calendar determines national holidays. These include May Day (1 May), Day of National Unity (22 May), Revolution Day (26 Sept.), National Day (14 Oct.), and Independence Day (30 Nov.). Primary religious holidays are *Eid al-Fitr*, a three-day feast at the end of *Ramadan*, and *Eid al-Adha* (also called *Eid Arafat*), a feast honoring Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. This holiday also celebrates the completion of the annual pilgrimage season.

During *Ramadan*, Yemenis fast all day. At dusk, they break the fast by eating dates. Men go to mosque for prayer and then return home for the evening meal and joyful festivities. Although the mood is celebratory, the focus is on religion and one's closeness to *Allah*. People shop and spend time with family and friends. Later they retire to their homes to chew *qat* and rest until the predawn meal and prayer.

SOCIETY

Government

Yemen's constitution provides for a multiparty democracy with an elected president (currently Ali Abdallah Saleh) as head of state. The president is elected to a seven-year term and appoints a prime minister (currently Ali Muhammad Mujawwar) as head of government. Legislative authority belongs to the 301-seat House of Representatives, whose members are elected to six-year terms, and the 111-seat *Shura* Council, whose members are appointed by the president. The constitution stipulates that *shari'ah* (Islamic law) be the source of all legislation. Local *shaykhs* (tribal leaders) have authority to resolve disputes between villagers and keep peace. Rule of law is significantly undermined by tribal

loyalties, a heavily armed populace (about 50 million weapons are owned by Yemeni citizens), and distrust of the government.

Economy

Yemen is one of the poorest Arab states. Its struggling economy reflects the challenges of unification, poor agricultural practices, corruption, and past market policies. Government reforms have reduced inflation and initiated some progress. However, roughly half of the population does not have access to adequate health care and education. Women generally have a lower earning power than men and fewer opportunities for education. While Yemen's banks were relatively insulated from the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent global economic slowdown reduced demand for the country's exports and discouraged already-low foreign investment. The kidnappings of tourists have significantly reduced tourism.

Oil and natural gas are the country's most valuable natural resources. Traditional industries include textiles, leather, jewelry, and glass. This industrial base has expanded to include soft drinks, cigarettes, aluminum, and food products. Yemen's mines and quarries produce salt, limestone, and marble. Agriculture and livestock farming have always been important to Yemen, which could meet its own food needs and export surplus crops if *qat* cultivation was not replacing cash and food crops. Orchards produce oranges, apples, peaches, papaya, and other fruits. Cotton and coffee are also grown. The currency is the Yemeni *rial* (YER).

Transportation and Communications

Yemen's transportation system is relatively extensive; the most remote mountain villages are accessible by some form of transportation. Two-lane paved roads run between major cities. Smaller communities are connected by dirt roads or dry riverbeds. Private cars are rare outside of major cities. Most urban people travel by bus or in converted six-passenger minivans. Shared taxis are fast and convenient but crowded, with 10 people in a station wagon or as many as 20 in a larger vehicle. Buses are slower but more comfortable. Outside of large cities, women rarely travel, and then only if accompanied by a male relative. Yemen has an airline but no railways. Major seaports are located in Aden, al-Hudaydah, al-Mukalla, and Mocha.

Landline telephone systems have become much more reliable in recent years, and cellular phone use is now widespread. Internet cafés are available in major cities. Yemen's television stations are government-owned. Newscasts are in Arabic (with two English news bulletins per day). Local radio stations broadcast in Arabic. The press writes openly about social life and politics. Sana'a has several Arabic daily newspapers and two English weekly papers.

Education

In the past, only the *Qur'an* was taught at religious centers. After World War II, a modern school system was introduced; a primary level lasts six years, an intermediate level lasts three years, and a secondary level lasts three years. A university system established in 1970 now is joined by

several small colleges and polytechnic institutes. In an effort to achieve self-reliance, Yemen is replacing foreign educators with native teachers. Students who do not finish school usually become laborers, farmers, factory workers, or shopkeepers.

Health

Yemen's healthcare system suffers from a lack of supplies and facilities. The primary cause of death among children is diarrhea, followed by upper-respiratory infection and malaria. Typhoid and a resurgence of polio also claim lives. Yemenis suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer. HIV/AIDS is also present. The Ministry of Health is trying to combat these diseases through improved health education. Lack of funding, poor hygiene, unsanitary water, and the reluctance of men to send their wives and daughters to male doctors are all problems Yemen must overcome to improve its citizens' health. Funding from international sources is helping, but improvements will take time.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Yemen, 2319 Wyoming Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 965-4760; web site www.yemenembassy.org.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	23,495,361 (rank=48)
Area, sq. mi.	203,849 (rank=50)
Area, sq. km.	527,970

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	133 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	138 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$2,500
Adult literacy rate	71% (male); 30% (female)
Infant mortality rate	57 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	61 (male); 66 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).