

Brief history

Aden had been a busy port for over a 1000yrs.

Marco polo commented on how wealthy the sultan of Aden was with a pop 80000 and 360 Mosques.

But it declined after 1500 when Vasco De Gama opened a sea route around South Africa. Merchants preferred this route to save on paying tax to the Sultan. Also in 1538 Aden was captured by the Ottoman Turks who preferred the port of Mocha to Aden which then declined and by the 19th Century had a pop of less than a 1000.

In 1829 a steam ship sailed from Suez to Bombay refuelling at Aden this became a regular service.

The French and their ally Egypt were getting more active in the area which caused concern in London and Bombay. The Indian navy with 700 British and Indian troops took Aden by force in 1829.

In 1869 Aden prospered and with the opening of Suez canal.

When the British arrived in Aden it was a barren land with outlook only to the sea. Its main asset was its large natural Harbour. There were no roads inland only camel tracks.

As Aden's prosperity grew so did raids by locals who found rich pickings. Eventually Britain bought the good will of the people with treaties (over 90 between 1859 -1954) signed with the local sheiks, sultans, and emirs. The Agreements were that they did not sign any other agreements with outside powers such as Yemen or the Ottoman empire. In return they got aid and protection.

Britain was never quite sure of their policy towards Aden in fact in 1920 PM Lloyd George told parliament he and his staff did not know which Gov dept looked after Aden. In a way this was understandable as Aden was actually administered from Bombay.

In 1935 the Gov of India Act transferred Aden to the Colonial Office.

1939-45 saw Britain's control of Egypt meant there was little use made of Aden. After the war Aden expanded into the second busiest port in the world (New York first of course). This was mainly due to BP opening a refinery in Aden in 1954 after being thrown out of Iran. Some traders set up a polite national organisation, the Aden Association, and asked for a measure of self government.

May 1956 Lord Lloyd, Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, addressed the Aden Legislative and told them of the importance of Aden to the Government and so a degree of internal self-government was the only offer.

After Suez, NASSER soon became the inspiration for Arabs everywhere, his face on every wall, his voice on every transistor radio. Some Arabs, Sheiks, Sultans and Emirs, who lived in the protectorates near the Yemeni border, were anxious not to come under Yemeni control.

Britain was evicted from Jordan and Iraq and even Cyprus was now under threat. Britain needed a base and Aden could supply this. Britain proposed to the South Arabian Sultans that they form a federation in a treaty relationship with them. But in 1958 there was a coup in Iraq that galvanised the Sultans of the West Arabian Protectorate (WAP) for a federation. In February 1959 the Federation came into existence.

The Federation states were given aid to help develop schools, clinics and roads. Roads were the most difficult thing to build. As soon as a road was opened, tribesmen would shoot at the lorries travelling on them.

The East Arabian Protectorate States did not join the Federation. They hoped to strike oil and so kept out of the Federation but for the states in the Federation it did not stop the Nasserite support. It should be mentioned that all males carried a gun and would shoot each other as a national sport.

The creation of the Federation boosted British confidence in Aden's stability and Aden became the Headquarters of the Middle Eastern Command. Aden was getting more prosperous with the influx of people such as the BP Refinery workers and 8,000 military plus their families. The population by 1955 had increased to 138,000 of which Yemenis were the largest group.

It took until 1962 before Aden joined the Federation. The day after they joined the Federation the Imam of Yemen was overthrown by a Republican Coup backed by Egypt. After the Coup in Yemen Britain should have recognised the new Regime but Britain did not do so. The Republicans did not have full control of Yemen. Saudi backed Royalists were a threat and also Britain wanted to resume relations with Saudi Arabia. America recognised the new Regime in Yemen but against Foreign Office advice Britain stuck with the Royalists. Egypt reinforced the Yemeni Government with 20,000 troops. British diplomats warned that continuous support for the Royalists would encourage the Egyptians to stay in Yemen for longer.

The majority of the population of Aden supported NASSER. The Sultans in the Federation were ill-suited to govern so the Federation was not going to help the Royalists.

In 1963 Kennedy Trevakis became the High Commissioner for Aden. Britain continued to support the Sultans and the Federation and refused to recognise the new Yemeni Regime against all Foreign Office advice. Trevakis went to the U.N. to argue

Britain's continued colonisation of Aden, but Egypt and the A.T.U.C. also attended to show what colonisation really meant.

Trevakis was disappointed with the U.N. trip and needed to forestall a popular uprising by persuading the Government that it must grant the Federation independence as fast as possible.

December 1963, Trevakis prepared to leave for London. At the airport a grenade was thrown which killed the Assistant Commissioner, a woman bystander and wounded 50 others. Nevertheless the Minister decided to let Trevakis proceed with his efforts to bring Aden and the Federation jointly to independence under the rule of the Sultans and Adeni businessmen. A target date for independence was set for 1968.

October 1964 – A new Labour Government was in power, the new Colonial Secretary, Anthony Greenwood, had some knowledge of Aden. He knew Abdullah Al Asnag, the Leader of the ATUC and from him he got a different view of Aden than that put forward by Trevakis.

Greenwood summoned Trevakis to London and sacked him. But Greenwood was not a strong Minister and was overruled. This was partly due to President Lyndon Johnson, who had an unpopular war in Vietnam going, and was anxious for Britain's help. The Prime Minister could not send troops to Vietnam but he could help by keeping bases available for the American's use. Johnson in return offered to help stop the devaluation of the pound. This led to the Labour Government reviewing its policy on the Aden base and also reviewing the policy on the Federation, which in effect, meant that Independence was put on a back burner.

Since the grenade attack at the airport Aden had been peaceful even though Cairo and San'a Radio promised bloodshed. The ATUC, the most sophisticated trade union in the Arab world, was constantly holding strikes for political ends, but the Government felt they could deal with this, especially as the refinery and the base were functioning OK. The Labour Government therefore pursued a scheme to create a unitary state of South Arabia with power being given to the elected majority in Aden, not the Sultans.

It should be noted that the Sultans, Sheiks and Amirs were not the rich powerful type, as in Saudi Arabia. Some were more like Village Elders and not all of them were even literate.

Greenwood flew to Aden to arrange this. He talked to the Sultans into giving up a substantial portion of their powers and the Aden ATUC and Al Asnag into agreeing to the retention of the British base. After some months a new Chief Minister was appointed in Aden, Abdul Makawee, a member of Al Asnag's party. If Al Asnag could deliver Nasser's support for the scheme and the Sultan's were prepared to place their trust in a Makawee Aden Government, a solution might have been at hand. But problems arose from a new source, The National Liberation Front (NLF)

founded in Yemen in late June 1963-4. The NLF was formed because Britain did not recognise the Republican Government in Yemen and still supported the Royalists. The NLF proved unexpectedly effective in Radfan (an area to be pointed out on the map) tying down Federal and British troops including 2,000 troops specially flown in from the UK for nine months.

The NLF was set up by Qahtan Asshabi. He was an advisor to the Yemeni Republican Government. When he set up the NLF radical Aden newspapers reported the fact, but the news made no impact on the British administration because organisations dedicated to the overthrow of imperialism were ten a penny in the Arab world. It held its first congress at TAIZ in Yemen in June 1965. Its key paragraph in its declaration would be to organise a popular revolutionary army.

The NLF became a problem for the British. They were an unknown force which meant little intelligence had been collected about what they intended or even who they were. They were organised into cells of three to five members. These cells were given tasks to do but a cell structure like this proved difficult for intelligence gathering.

December 1964, grenade attacks against British servicemen caused Greenwood to announce that Britain would hold a constitutional conference in London to work out the details of a proposed unitary state. This conference would mean Federal Sultans and Adeni businessmen would need to attend. The NLF threatened to kill anyone who attended. Potential participants threw up obstacles and the conference was cancelled.

After the speaker of the Legislative Assembly and the Superintendent of Police were murdered, Greenwood suspended the Constitution and imposed direct rule by the High Commissioner.

The NLF aim moved from just expelling the British to the removal of the traditional merchant and ruling classes. The NLF conference in June 1965 was the first chance for British officials to identify the NLF and therefore to ban it.

The leader of Aden's TUC Al Asnag decided that he did not want the NLF to govern Aden so he set up his own military unit in Cairo with Nasser's blessing. Nasser was finding the NLF difficult to control. Al Asnag's new group called FLOSY (Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen) was under Nasser's control.

Nasser signed an Agreement with Saudi Arabia that meant Egypt would pull out of Yemen and Saudi Arabia would stop funding the Royalists. The Winners of this were the NLF as the Royalists were no longer a threat they could concentrate on the liberation of Aden.

The battle for Aden had begun. The Conservative Government had in effect challenged both FLOSY and the NLF to do their worst. It was the misfortune of the Labour Government to inherit it.

February 1966

Saw the Government review defence commitments overseas and concluded it could not afford the defence of Aden even to please President Johnson and that Britain would leave Aden in 1968.

Britain made it clear it had no interest in Aden except to handover to a stable successor. Neither of the two candidates that Britain wished to be the successors – The Sultans or Al Asnag – were able to negotiate with Britain due to the NLF running riot in the villages of the Sultans and the centre of Aden. The announcement shocked the Conservative Party, particularly Duncan Sands, who had promised the Sultans security.

From that moment on Britain tried to encourage prominent Adenese to join the Federal Government which still seemed the only formal body to which it was possible to transfer power. Nobody with popular backing would agree. The Federal Government tried to persuade Britain to enter into a defence treaty after independence. The Labour Government was determined on total military withdrawal. Al Asnag also had a problem with negotiating with the British because he had no control over the NLF. So neither of these successors were viable.

Al Asnag needed to show that he was as anti-British as the NLF. President Nasser did everything he could to help. He provided training, camps, arms and equipment for FLOSY and when the NLF refused to subordinate themselves to a movement led by FLOSY, Nasser compelled Qahtan Asshabi to stay in Cairo. Asshabi had founded the NLF.

Following the March 1966 announcement of withdrawal from Aden Nasser reversed his decision to quit the Yemen and thus he reneged on his agreement with King Feisal because Nasser now saw the possibility of taking over Aden.

It soon became clear to Nasser that his plans were different to the plans of the NLF. Nasser's plan was to unite North Yemen, South Arabia and Aden as one state but the new leaders of the NLF wanted separate South Arabia and Aden states. These new NLF leaders wanted this new state completely independent from Britain, from Yemen and from Egypt. In 1966 Britain acquired a new Foreign Secretary, George Brown. He had clear ideas on policy and he was determined to re-open relations with Egypt, and more particularly with President Nasser. The Foreign Secretary saw that an understanding with Nasser looked like being the only way to secure a peaceful transition of power. Brown needed somebody who Nasser would respect and trust and luckily for Britain there was one person who fitted the bill. The recently retired

Moscow Ambassador, Sir Humphry Trevelyan. Trevelyan had been Ambassador to Egypt at the time of Suez and had got on well with Nasser.

A Foreign Office official, Sir Sam Falle, was sent to open talks with the NLF. He met two representatives and put the case to them that Britain wished to negotiate with all parties. He said Britain could remove the ban on the NLF and then could negotiate in a more relaxed atmosphere. Britain would have one minor condition – Would you please stop killing us. The two representatives both laughed and said ‘sorry we cannot do that. You see FLOSY constantly accuses us of being running dogs of the Imperialists so we must be seen to be driving you out of Aden. When we have driven you out of Aden, we can then negotiate.’

Trevelyan unable to talk to FLOSY or the NLF tried to talk to the only other alternative, the Federal Government. But this proved useless. The Federal Government, army and police, were out of control and which came to be known as the army mutinies.

This came to a head on the 20th June 1967. A group of Federal Army Cadets burnt down an Army camp and a group of armed Police, who were told that the British were about to attack them to restore order, shot at two passing land rovers carrying British soldiers and killed nine men. Other armed Police fired on passing British vehicles until the total of British soldiers killed in this way reached 22.

The worst of these incidents occurred in Crater, the most densely occupied area of Crater where most of the middle-class Arabs and Indians lived. On the 20th June 1967 Crater had become a No-Go Area for British troops.

Worse, the mutiny created fear between the British and their only allies.

British soldiers were angry and could have made matters worse by quickly taking the law into their own hands. Lt.col. Mitchell of the Argyll and Southerland Islanders agreed with his men that they should take action and became known as ‘Mad Mitch’ because of the way he complained about prowling journalists and squeamish politicians who prevented him from ‘sorting out the Arabs.’ He put the word about in Crater ‘that they were wild Bedouin tribesmen from the Scottish Islands who could get very rough if provoked.’

The general officer commanding British troops in Aden Maj. Gen. Phillip Tower said later of Mitchell:

“it would have been very easy to sort out the Arabs if we had so desired but that was not what we were trying to do. Our objective was to get out with minimal casualties and with as much equipment as possible and leave a Government behind. Col. Mitchell, for reasons of his own wished to cut and dash with the Argylls in Crater.

There were six other Battalions in Aden all of whom were doing an equally good job. So I stopped Col. Mitchell and made him do what everybody else was doing: that is Keep the place as quiet as possible.”

The British were fighting only FLOSY and NLF. To start fighting the Federal army as well would have made the pull-out near impossible. Crater needed to be reoccupied due in part to its near location to KHORMAKSAR airport. (show map).

Instead of British soldiers going on the rampage in revenge, Col. Mitchell led a light operation into Crater to bring it under control. The mutiny had delivered a fatal blow to the Federation. Always politically weak it was now no longer in charge of its own forces. Some measures were taken to restore discipline in the Federal army but Britain felt now it could not rely on this force.

The NLF had been gaining ground over FLOSY but had been unable to obtain dominance because of Egypt's substantial backing which kept FLOSY going. Then in June 1967 in a war with Israel, Egypt was humiliatingly defeated and Nasser had promptly to summon home his troops from Yemen. The urgent crisis in Egypt left him no freedom to pursue ambitions in South Arabia. The money and logistic support on which FLOSY had relied was promptly withdrawn.

The two co-incidental events, the Mutiny and the Arab-Israel war had raised the NLF from favourite into the unchallenged winner of succession in Aden.

The British speeded up their evacuation plans and by the end of June withdrew all their forces into Aden. Asshabi's men one by one took charge of the Sultan's States. Most of the Sultans went into exile in Saudi Arabia. Trevelyan announced that the Federal Government was no longer functioning and invited the Nationalist forces to represent the people (FLOSSY and the NLF). Asshabi would have been pleased to talk if the NLF was recognised as the sole voice of the people. This was rejected so the meeting was cancelled and the NLF and FLOSSI carried on killing each other. Trevelyan could not contact Asshabi – only pass messages through intermediates. He urged a meeting in Geneva to arrange the handover. The NLF delayed attending until the 22nd of November 1967, eight days before the final British withdrawal.

The Egyptians withdrawal from Yemen and the British withdrawal from Aden occurred at the same time. So FLOSSY still had a good supply of Egyptian weapons and ammunition. The NLF had secured the Shiefdoms but FLOSSY held much of Aden. The battle raged between FLOSSY and the NLF whilst the South Arabian Army was ordered to stay neutral but sided often with the NLF which eventually triumphed.

The meeting in Geneva with the British Government team, led by Lord Shackelton, that Assabi eventually agreed to attend, was not an easy affair. Assabi had discovered that the state he was about to take over was impoverished. One of the main sources

of jobs and money, the British base, had just been closed down. The port, recently so busy, had almost been put out of business by the closing of the Suez canal. (because of the Arab-Israel war). The Sultans had none of the stores of gold some NLF members expected. Britain offered £12 Million, a lot less than Assabi wanted. He had to make do.

The last days in Aden was unlike any other. The British assembled a great fleet to take troops and civilians away and to make sure nothing went wrong at the last minute. The last British civilians to depart assembled at KHORMAKSAR airport surrounded by troops. **Dai Morgan, the Marine's Colonel recalled:**

“at 1.45 pm helicopters from HMS Albion lifted the final 330 men from 10 positions from around the airport perimeter. As soon as the men were lifted off I got into my own helicopter and went round the final positions to make sure nobody had been left behind. As we flew back across Aden Bay to go back to HMS Albion, I had a feeling of sadness that I was the last man leaving Aden after a 128 years of British presence.”

THE MAIN PLAYERS

Gamal Abdel Nasser - President of Egypt

Sultans of the West Arabian Protectorate – WAP (The Federation)

Sultans of the East Arabian Protectorate – EAP

A.T.U.C. - Arabian Trades Union Congress

Abdullah Al Asnag – Leader of the A.T.U.C.

F.L.O.S.Y. - Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (guerilla movement led by Al Asnag)

Kennedy Trevakis – High Commissioner for Aden (1963-)

Anthony Greenwood – Colonial Secretary (Labour) from 1964

Abdulqawi Makkawi – Member of the People's Socialist Party became
Chief Minister of Aden from 1965
Sacked September 1965

N.L.F. - National Liberation Front

Qatan Asshabi - Founder the National Liberation Front

Major General Phillip Tower – Commander of British Troops in Aden