

Yemen's Foreign Relations in the Maritime World of the West Indian Ocean during the 17th Century¹⁾

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The Zaydī Imamate, which was founded at the end of the 9th century by a leader (al-Imām) of the al-Zaydiyya sect of Islam who had migrated to Yemen from the holy city of Medina in the Ḥijāz region of the west-central Arabian Peninsula, established its fiscal base via a very sophisticated taxation system and expanded its sphere of control through continuous military operations, although its territory would always be limited to an inwardly integrated polity of northern Yemen, due to military and political competition with the various kingdoms of southern Yemen. It would not be until the 17th century, on the occasion of the retreat of the Ottomans from southern Arabia that the Zaydī Imamate would be able to expand its sphere of control to the south, allowing a transformation to an outwardly oriented political regime with its capture of the major ports of trade, including Luḥayya, Ḥudayda, al-Mukhā, ‘Adan and al-Shiḥr, thus establishing control over incoming trade vessels and becoming directly involved in the maritime world of the West Indian Ocean, encompassing the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. At that same time, the maritime world of the West Indian Ocean was also home to such prosperous dynasties as the Ya‘rubids of neighboring Oman, the Ṣafawids of Iran and the Mughals of India.

The purpose of this article is to take up the relations enjoyed by Yemen's Zaydī Imamate with the other dynasties and to offer a bird's eye view of the total structure of that maritime world. Yemen's foreign relations during the 17th century have to date received very little attention not only in the historical research on the maritime world of the Indian Ocean as a whole, but also in the work done on the history of southern Arabia.²⁾ It is hoped that the structural overview presented here of the foreign relations between Yemen and its dynastic neighbors will further the historical study of their maritime world and thus offer a new topic of discussion for scholars interested in state of the region during the 17th century. Regarding the source materials to be used in the present study,

the main source will be *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā’ fī al-Qarn al-Hādī ‘Ashar*, recording the daily affairs of the inland urban center of Ṣan‘ā’ during the time in question.³⁾ *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā’* is a historical work written as the sequel to Yemeni chronicler Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn’s *Ghāyat al-Amānī fī Akhbār al-Quṭr al-Yamanī* (The Ultimate Goal of Knowing About the Region of Yemen) and covering the fifty-year period between 1046/1636 and 1099/1688. Despite its geographically limited title, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā’* covers in its pages the political, economic and cultural affairs of southern Arabia centering around Yemen, as well as a wide range of variegated events that occurred both on the Arabian Peninsula as a whole (Mecca, Medina, Oman, etc.) and in neighboring regions (Egypt, Maghrib, Ethiopia, Turkey, Central Asia, Iran, India, etc.). The work is of special interest for the purpose of this article due to the prolific information it provides regarding the Zaydī Imamate’s relations, both friendly and antagonistic, with the three dynasties of the maritime world of the West Indian Ocean during the mid-17th century.

I. Zaydī Relations with Its Ya‘rubid Neighbors

It is a well-known fact that Oman’s expansion of its activities in the maritime world of the West Indian Ocean date back to ancient times. This was also the case during the reign of the Ya‘rubid Dynasty, which flourished during the 17th century, beginning in 1650 when Ṣulṭān b. Sayf I succeeded in wresting Oman’s largest port of Muscat (Musqaṭ) from the Portuguese, who had occupied it since 1507, an event which marked a rapid upsurge in the Dynasty’s maritime activities in the Persian Gulf.⁴⁾ At the same time, in the waters off Yemen, the Dutch stepped into the void created by the Portuguese, who had failed twice to conquer the port of ‘Adan, and were expanding their commercial might with attempts to conquer al-Mukhā⁵⁾; however, the management of the ports of Yemen in the Red and Arabian Seas—Luḥayya, ‘Adan, al-Shiḥr as well as al-Mukhā—remained under the control of the Zaydī Imamate. It was in this manner that the Ya‘rubid Dynasty’s maritime activities were extended from the Persian Gulf into the insular region of the Arabian and Red Seas, or rather the coastal region of Yemen. For example, on the first day of Dhū al-Ḥijja 1079 (2 May 1669), the Omanīs (‘Umāniyūn), who had appeared from time to time along the Yemeni coast and launched attacks on such major ports as ‘Adan and al-Mukhā, anchored seven ships (*birāsh*) under the Ya‘rubid flag in waters off ‘Adan and al-Mukhā, in order to prevent

ships, including cargo vessels, from entering or exiting the ports.⁶⁾ Again in 1085/1674, the Omanīs attacked Socotra Island in the Arabian Sea, killing the islanders.⁷⁾ Concerning this kind of Ya‘rubid maritime influence, an entry in *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā’* for 1085/1674 states,

Due to his (Ṣulṭān b. Sayf I) continued expansion along the Yemeni coast and plundering of Muslim wealth over the past several years, merchants in the regions of al-Ḥasā’, in Iran (‘Ajām), India and other places have suffered huge financial losses; [moreover,] because he has managed to cut off the supply of coffee beans in these regions during this year and the next, no one from Iran or al-Ḥasā’ has bothered to enter our ports [to trade]...He has also blockaded the Baṣra shipping route and trade from Baṣra to India and Yemen.⁸⁾

This entry, which was recorded two years after the death of al-Imām al-Mutawakkil ‘ala Allāh Ismā‘īl b. al-Qāsim (r. 1054/1644–1087/1676; hereafter al-Mutawakkil), is historiographical evidence that such aggressive maritime activities of the Ya‘rubid Dynasty had begun during the reign of al-Mutawakkil, and included attacks by the Omanis on trade vessels bound for Yemen, resulting in their disappearance from Yemeni ports, as well as the coastal regions of India, Iran and the western coast of the Persian Gulf, and great losses to their merchants.

Of the trade vessels which were victim to Omani attacks, those of the Bāniyāns were especially targeted. An incident dated the last day of Dhū al-Ḥijja 1084 (early March 1674) is recorded in *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā’* as follows.

Towards the end of this month, the following report was delivered to the merchants of Ṣan‘ā’ from such ports as ‘Adan and al-Mukhā. To wit, twelve large vessels belonging to the ruler of Oman arrived at the two ports [‘Adan and al-Mukhā], then retreated into the Bāb al-Mandhab Strait with the apparent intention of attacking and plundering some petty merchants sailing between the seas...The Omanis followed the merchants, but the fact that their real target was Bāniyān infidels became clear from the Omanī actions.⁹⁾

Generally speaking, the name Bāniyān referred to people belonging to the Hindu merchant caste from the Gujarat region of India.¹⁰⁾ During the 17th century, many Bāniyāns were commercially active in Yemen both

as visitors and residents, and we can assume that the number of Bāniyān ships trading there was quite substantial.¹¹⁾ Their being “targeted as infidels” by the Omanis refers to their status as non-Muslims and suggests one of the objectives of Omani maritime activities to interfere with non-Muslim traders.¹²⁾ In any case, there is no doubt that the maritime activities of the Ya‘rubid Dynasty exerted significant influence on Yemen.

As recorded in *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*, for the al-Mutawakkil regime, its fiscal health and prosperity were supported by the three columns of land taxes (*kharāj*), poll taxes (*jizya*) and whatever income could be generated by its ports of trade,¹³⁾ including both commodities and materiel brought by merchants to Yemen and customs levies on those items. For this reason, the stoppage in shipping due to Ya‘rubid blockades and the consequent losses in trade revenue was a crucial problem for the continued prosperity of the al-Mutawakkil regime. In order to solve this problem, the Zaydī Imamate 1) had the authorities of its major ports intensify their control by inspecting all incoming and outgoing vessels for country of origin, cargo content, crew members and passengers and 2) had cruisers equipped with cannon patrol the coast in search of suspicious vessels and capture law-breakers.¹⁴⁾ Also in time of emergency, troops would be deployed to the major ports, their garrisons would be strengthened, and weaponry such as cannon would be increased. At the same time, military fortifications would be repaired or newly built against Omani attacks from the sea.¹⁵⁾ Finally, in fiscal matters, the property of Yemen’s non-Muslim (Dhimmī) communities of Jews, Christians, etc., was taxed anew in order to cover these military outlays.¹⁶⁾

However, such measures were not always successful, as we learn from *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā’*.

The following report arrived at the end of al-Muḥarram. To wit, in the waters off al-Mukhā, a single ship (*jalaba*) appeared just as letters from the authorities at ‘Adan and al-Mukhā were received [by al-Mutawakkil]. They reported that several Omani ships (*jilāb*) were attempting to blockade a fleet of traders (*mawsim*) in the Bāb al-Mandhab Strait and then were joined by more Omanis until their number stood at over twenty vessels. In response, al-Imām al-Maḥdī remarked, “troops stationed in al-Tihāma and the ports of trade are sufficient to defend the ports, especially in al-Mukhā due to its military fortifications. However, our military forces have no capabilities at sea.”¹⁷⁾

The entry describes Yemen's maritime situation and coastal defense capabilities during the early years of the reign of al-Imām al-Mahdī li-Dīn Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan (r. 1087/1676–1092/1681). In sum, while deployment of land troops was sufficient to defend the ports, there were insufficient naval forces to combat Omani ships at sea, leading one to conclude that Yemen was somewhat militarily inferior to its Omani neighbors. According to *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*, al-Mutawakkil is quoted as saying that Yemen's fiscal health was in dire straits and that existing tax revenue (*wājibāt*) was insufficient to cover the military budget.¹⁸⁾ While the new taxes levied on the Dhimmī communities were intended to secure more revenue, this item suggests continuing difficulty in financing the strengthening of defenses against the Omani fleet. In sum, around the year 1080/1669, the Omanis present in the waters off Yemen, that is to say the maritime activities of the Ya'rubid Dynasty, began to grow more aggressive, launching attacks on Yemeni ports, coastal region and trading vessels bound for them. The trading vessels of the Bāniyāns, settled in or visiting Yemen, were especially targeted by the Omanīs, resulting in substantial losses being suffered by the Zaydī Imamate. It was this escalation of maritime activity on the part of the Ya'rubid Dynasty that proved the Zaydī Imamate incapable of defending itself fully against attack from and on the sea.

II. Zaydī Relations with the Ṣafawid Dynasty

At the same time of Yemen's hostile relations with neighboring Oman over the Zūfār region, the Zaydī Imamate was in the process of establishing diplomatic relations with the mighty West Indian Ocean polity of the Ṣafawid Dynasty in Iran; and the above-mentioned belligerent actions of the newly rising Ya'rubids in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea might have been one incentive for the Zaydī Imamate's actions. This section describes in what manner the Zaydis came into diplomatic contact with the Ṣafawid Dynasty and the significance of those relations for Yemen. The first contact between the two courts is recorded while the Ottoman Dynasty was still occupying Yemen, during the early part of the reign of al-Imām al-Mu'ayyad billāh Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim (r. 1009/1602–1054/1644). The sources say that al-Qāsim sent a letter to Shāh 'Abbās I announcing his enthronement as monarch of the Zaydī Imamate¹⁹⁾; however, after the letter was sent, there is no historiographical evidence of any further exchange of either correspondence or diplomatic envoys between the two polities, leaving us in the dark about any relations that may have

existed at that time.

The next contact is recorded in another work by al-Jarmūzī entitled *Tuhfat al-Asmā' wa al-Abṣār bi-mā fi al-Sīrat al-Mutawakkiliya min Gharā'ib al-Akhhār* (Gift of Observations Regarding Extraordinary Information from the Biography of al-Mutawakkil), which contains a copy of a letter addressed by al-Mutawakkil to Shāh 'Abbās II (r. 1052/1642–1077/1666) and dated Shawwāl 1061 (mid-September 1651).²⁰ Despite the missive's great length, it contains no clue of exactly what kind of relations, if any, the two courts were enjoying at that time; however, it does mention that the envoy who delivered a previous letter to Iran did report on his return the Ṣafawid reconquest of the region of Qandahār (Bilād Qandahār).²¹ And so we know that already prior to this missive of 1061/1651, the two courts were at least exchanging information. Incidentally, Qandahār at that time was an important inland transportation hub for both Iran and India²² and as such became a point of continual clashes between the Ṣafawid and Mughal Dynasties over its occupation, the most recent of which was the entrepôt's reoccupation by the forces of Shāh 'Abbās II in 1058/1648.²³ Therefore, it is possible to date the mutual dispatch of diplomatic envoys and exchange of state documents between Yemen and Iran around the year of the latter's retaking of Qandahār. Nevertheless, there being no record of any reply by the Ṣafawids to al-Mutawakkil's letter of 1061/1651, the first historiographical evidence of actual diplomatic exchange appears about ten years later in 1073/1663 in the writing of Yemeni historian Abū Ṭālib (d. 1170/1757), who states,

This year the al-Imām sent to Sultan of Iran (*Sulṭān al-'Ajām*) Shāh 'Abbās b. Ṣafi Shāh a letter concerning the agreement (*mu'āhada*) and expressing feelings of friendship. The Shāh replied by calling for complete friendship and deep and everlasting relations the magnitude of which defy description.²⁴

Here we have al-Mutawakkil proposing some kind of “agreement” to Shāh 'Abbās II for his consent. Although there are Yemen-related sources inferring several “agreements” between the two courts after al-Mutawakkil's missive to Shāh 'Abbās II in 1061/1651, none of them is able to clarify the content and arrangements involving the “agreement” proposed by al-Mutawakkil in 1073/1663. However, the following is an example of al-Mutawakkil's correspondence related to what is thought to be an “agreement” dated three years later during Sha'bān 1076/February 1666.

During Sha‘bān of this year Aḥmad b al-Ḥasan from al-Khārid visited the palace of [al-Mutawakkil] and al-Imām [al-Mutawakkil] summoned him to his presence. There he [Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan] undertook what al-Imām wanted him to carry out. He [al-Ḥasan] was carrying a reply from Shāh ‘Abbās b. Ḥusayn b. Shāh ‘Abbās al-Imāmī to the letter written to him by al-Mutawakkil from Ḍawrān in 1073, in which reply he [Shāh ‘Abbās II] stated, “We have decided to cooperate [*ta‘āwun*] with you in resisting the Khārijī (Khawārij) Sect of Oman, since these Omanis occupy territory between yours and ours. You are clearheaded and may conceive a plan against what these Omanis are scheming. Consequently, we will lend you support [*i‘āna*] to the best of our ability, which will hopefully result in our governance of the regions of Oman.”²⁵⁾

Assuming that this is a reply to the above-mentioned 1073 al-Mutawakkil missive to Shāh ‘Abbās II mentioned by Abū Ṭālib, cooperation (*ta‘āwun*) between the Zaydīs and the Ṣafawids against Oman’s Ya‘rubid Dynasty was already agreed upon in 1073 at the behest of al-Mutawakkil. In other words, it was this “cooperation” that was the subject of the “agreement” mentioned in al-Mutawakkil’s correspondence of 1076/1666.

From the early 17th century on, the Ṣafawid Dynasty expressed strong interest in the Persian Gulf region, as exemplified by Shāh ‘Abbās I first incorporating Bahrain (al-Baḥrayn) in 1601, followed by the conquest of Hormuz Island in 1622 with the help of the British, after which port facilities were moved to Gamrun to construct Bandar ‘Abbās.²⁶⁾ Likewise, concerning the aforementioned Zaydī conflict with the Ya‘rubids over the region of Zūfār, al-Mutawakkil’s proposal of 1073 fits in against the backdrop of such international conditions in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, establishing a system of cooperation in response to the Ya‘rubid Dynasty’s movements in the region, including what seems to have been a suggestion on the part of Shāh ‘Abbās II to take military action. How Yemen should respond to Shāh ‘Abbās II’s proposal for the military invasion of Oman was deliberated in 1076/1666. One opinion expressed was that if the Shah’s forces (*junūd al-Shāh*) were deployed to Oman and managed to take control of that territory, the Ṣafawids would probably claim, “Oman is now ours. We have entered on the strength of our victory.” Then they would probably proclaim their insignia and religious sect (*madhāhib*) there and seek all points of contact. Based on this opinion, the Ṣafawid proposal was rejected, while at the same time point-

ing out that any attempt by Yemen to independently launch an attack on Oman would for the time being be impossible due to fiscal difficulties and the possibility that such action would incite insurrection among powerful leaders in the provinces. Consequently, al-Mutawakkil replied to Shāh ‘Abbās II, “We are fully aware of their (Omani) aims and if we rise up against them we will certainly need your assistance. However, we also want to make clear to you that we must refuse your proposal. May God keep that region and its people on the right path.”²⁷⁾ In sum, the process of these Zaydī deliberations informs us of fears concerning 1) the possibility that Yemen’s approval of a military expedition into Oman by the Ṣafawid Dynasty would result in that Dynasty’s laying claim to the territory and using it as a staging ground for a possible invasion of Yemen and 2) troop deployment both overburdening the treasury and inciting unrest in the provinces being the reasons for rejecting Shāh ‘Abbās II’s proposal for a joint invasion of Oman. In the background to such arguments probably lay the relative reduction of an impending Omani military threat in 1076/1666, compared to the military stand-off that took place between Oman and Yemen over the Zūfār region beginning in 1070/1660. However, it should also be kept in mind that since any emergency situation with Oman would at that time require assistance from the Ṣafawid Dynasty, Yemen did not go as far as to end all cooperation with the Ṣafawids.

Then in the following year, when news of Shāh ‘Abbās II’s death reached Yemen,²⁸⁾ Zaydī-Ṣafawid cooperation centering around how to deal with Oman did in fact come to an end. Whether or not the Shāh’s death, and the internal conflict within the army, demoralization of the bureaucracy and increasing expenses incurred by the court which followed, all important factors in the decline of the Ṣafawid Dynasty,²⁹⁾ were also to blame for the cessation of Zaydī-Ṣafawid cooperation, from that time on no attempt was made on the part of Yemen to reestablish official relations, leading to the end of contact between the two polities.

In sum, relations between the Zaydī Imamate and the Ṣafawid Dynasty were established by al-Mutawakkil’s successful efforts to befriend Shāh ‘Abbās II, based on mutual interests linking the former’s fears of military expansion by the Ya‘rubid Dynasty in neighboring Oman and the latter’s deep concern regarding maritime affairs in the Persian Gulf, thus leading to joint cooperation regarding Oman. Despite the fact that Shāh ‘Abbās II’s death ended such cooperation, ties of friendship with the Ṣafawids became, for a short time at least, a very important aspect of Yemen’s foreign relations under the Zaydī Imamate.

III. Zaydī Relations with the Mughals

This section will review what Yemen's historiography reveals about the relations of the Zaydī Imamate to one more polity in the world of the West Indian Ocean equally as powerful as the Ṣafawid Dynasty; namely, the Mughals of India. Similar to its relations of amity with the Ṣafawids, Yemen's relations with the Mughals during the period in question may have also been motivated by Zaydī concerns about their neighbors in Oman. What follows is an analysis of how relations were formed with the Mughals, in what way they developed and whatever significance they may have had. The first evidence of contact between the Zaydīs and the Mughals after the ousting of the Ottoman forces from Yemeni soil was during the reign of al-Mutawakkil, as recorded in such sources as *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil* and *Tuhfat al-Asmā'*, to the effect that a certain minister of Mughal emperor Shāh Jahān (r. 1037/1628–1068/1657) visited al-Mutawakkil bearing gifts and a communique during his pilgrimage to Mecca, which led to a series of exchanges of diplomatic letters between the two polities.³⁰ Although the actual content of these missives is not known, according to *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*, during the following year of 1066 (1665–66), a Mughal envoy sent to the Ottoman Empire stopped in Yemen on his return to India with the purpose of reporting the object and the accomplishment of his dispatch,³¹ indicating that amicable relationship between the two polities may have begun to develop around this time. Then Aurangzīb, Jahān's successor who ruled for almost half a century and extended the territory of the Mughals to the most expansive boundaries in its history,³² had a certain vassal stop over in Yemen on his return from Mecca, who after acquainting himself with al-Mutawakkil, returned to India in 1068/1658.³³ Upon the delegate's return, al-Mutawakkil entrusted to him gifts and a long letter to be presented to Aurangzīb, a copy of which is contained in the sources.³⁴ Although the letter does not indicate the actual conditions under which Yemeni-Indian relations were formed, the fact that cooperation and normalized relations did exist between the two polities is mentioned at the end of the text, and the date of the letter, Shawwāl 1068/July 1658, indicates that it was sent to Aurangzīb before he crowned himself in Delhi.³⁵ From the fact that official diplomatic relations with the Mughals had been established through a series of communiqes exchanged with Shāh Jahān, we may assume that al-Mutawakkil was probably under the impression that Aurangzīb was not the emperor, but rather a member of Shāh Jahān's imperial family.

Two years after sending this letter, in 1070/1659, a Mughal envoy returned with a letter from Aurangzīb, a copy of which is recorded in *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil* and confirms that Aurangzīb indeed received al-Mutawakkil's letter of two years previous and that this was his reply to it.³⁶⁾ The letter's date of Rabī' al-Thānī 1070 (mid-December 1659) indicates that it was written immediately after Aurangzīb's coronation on 5 June of that year after a civil war fought among the four sons of Shāh Jahān, out of which Aurangzīb rose victorious.³⁷⁾ While this reply also fails to describe in concrete terms the relationship between the Zaydīs and the Mughals, it does inform the Imamate that Shāh Jahān had fallen seriously ill in 1067, resulting in a weakening in Mughal governance, and then goes on to describe the circumstances surrounding Aurangzīb's enthronement, in an apparent attempt to legitimize him in Yemeni eyes as the Mughals' sixth emperor. Accompanying the letter were gifts of precious and exotic Indian products, including twenty head of horses (*barādhīn*), all indicating a formal reply from now Mughal Emperor Aurangzīb acknowledging al-Mutawakkil's request for the establishment of normal diplomatic relations between the two polities.³⁸⁾ According to *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*, two years after receiving his reply from Aurangzīb, in 1072/1662, al-Mutawakkil sent eight horses (*khayl*) with an envoy to Aurangzīb via Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan, his cousin residing in 'Adan.³⁹⁾ Exactly why the envoy was dispatched at that time is not made clear; however, in addition to al-Mutawakkil's letter of 1068/1658 referring to normalized relations existing with the Mughals, even before Aurangzīb's enthronement, the present envoy was now dispatched to Aurangzīb, the "Sultan of India" (*Sulṭān al-Hind*) and "King of India" (*Malik al-Hind*), and after spending several years at the Mughal Court returned to Yemen with gifts of gratitude.⁴⁰⁾ Moreover, judging from the description of this Zaydī envoy in the history of Aurangzīb's reign, *Ma'āsiri-Ālamgīrī*,⁴¹⁾ its purpose was to thank the Mughals for its dispatch of the envoy two years previous and formally congratulate Aurangzīb on his coronation.

Given Yemen's success in establishing friendly diplomatic relations with the Mughals, first during reign of Shāh Jahān and continuing into the reign of his successor, Aurangzīb, the Yemen's historiography frequently mentions how important al-Mutawakkil regarded those relations and the pains he took to maintain them. For example, on the occasion of the arrival of a high-ranking Mughal official at the court of Shāh Jahān in Yemen on his way to Mecca in 1065/1654–1655 via the land route along the Red Sea coast, al-Mutawakkil ordered his local administrators in that region to

receive the envoy hospitably as a guest (*diyāfa*) and send him safely on his way.⁴²⁾ Since mention of such special treatment on the part of the Zaydīs very seldom appears in the Yemeni sources, one can only conclude that the gesture was reserved exclusively for Mughal personages. Contrast this behavior with the attempt by “Sultan of the Uzbeks” (*Sulṭān Uzbek*) from Central Asia’s Kāshgar to land at the port of al-Mukhā with an entourage of 500 followers and armed guards with the intent of reaching Mecca. On that occasion, not only did the Sulṭān’s men clash with the port’s garrison and suffer many casualties, but al-Mutawakkil made no arrangements to welcome him.⁴³⁾

A more concrete example of the special treatment given by Yemen to the Mughal Court is given in *Yawmiyāt San‘ā* dated 1071/1661, when a Mughal envoy on his way to the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina died in the Yemeni region of Yarīm. Concerning how the tribute goods carried by the deceased envoy were handled is described as follows.⁴⁴⁾

The al-Imām [al-Mutawakkil] dispatched al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Ahwārī and others to where he [the dead envoy] lay to investigate the matter... Later he [al-Ahwārī] took the [tribute goods] to [al-Mutawakkil in] San‘ā where the al-Imām secured them until an envoy from the ruling Sultan of India [*rasūl ṣāhib al-Hind al-sulṭān*] arrived and requested al-Imām that they be sent to the Holy Cities. And so the al-Imām did what was requested; and at the end of this year when the envoy was leaving [to return to India], he was entrusted with a written account (*mā rasama*) [of the whole incident].⁴⁵⁾

Here we have an example of the already well-studied⁴⁶⁾ practice of the Mughal emperors presenting large donations to such holy places as Mecca and Medina and a case of when a donation heading for the holy cities was unable to reach its destination.

We now know the response in Yemen on such an occasion; and *Yawmiyāt San‘ā* reports a similar incident occurring in 1083/1672, when a series of accidents caused gifts carried by a Mughal envoy to the Amīr of Mecca, Sa‘d b. Zayd, to be held up in Yemen. Upon hearing of the incident, al-Mutawakkil replied, “We must send it [*ṣadaqa* (alms)] to where it belongs”⁴⁷⁾ and delivered the goods to Mecca for the Mughals. Such efforts to safeguard wayward goods from the Mughal Court found in his realm, investigate and report on their condition and ensure that they safely reached their destination are ample proof of the crucial importance

given by the Zaydīs to the friendly relations they had established with the Mughals and the great pains they went to maintain them.

As to the Mughal Empire's response to such favored treatment, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan 'ā'* mentions several ships arriving at the port of al-Mukhā in 1087/1676 loaded with gifts for al-Mutawakkil and *ṣadaqa* for the *sharīfs* of Yemen.⁴⁸⁾ Also that same, immediately after the death of al-Mutawakkil, Aurangzīb, as the Sultan of India (*Sultān al-Hind*), again sent "*ṣadaqa* of India" (*al-ṣadaqa al-Hindiya*) to the *sharīfs* (*al-sharā'if wa al-ashrāf*) of Yemen, which was distributed among them by Muḥammad b. al-Mutawakkil Ismā'īl, the son of al-Mutawakkil,⁴⁹⁾ both incidents indicating a feeling of gratitude on the part of the Mughals for Zaydī favoritism.

As to the reason why the Zaydīs gave such high priority to maintaining friendly relations with the Mughals, we should point to the international conditions affecting Yemen at the time in question, as shown by the following entry in *Yawmiyāt Ṣan 'ā'* for the year 1085/1674.

When the eastern winds in (the month of) Rajab calmed seas for the Omanis, leading to suspicions arising [in Yemen] about their intentions toward the coasts of al-Mukhā and 'Adan, news was received [by al-Mutawakkil] of the rulers of Oman setting sail from Muscat. Such tidings caused the al-Imām and Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn much concern about [an attack by] the Omanis...They [the people of al-Mukhā and 'Adan] have for the past two years continued to fear two directions in particular. That is to say, Syria under the rule of Sulṭān Muḥammad b. 'Uthmān,⁵⁰⁾ who intended to head for Yemen, as already mentioned, and Oman under the rule of Ya'rūbid Dynasty' Sulṭān b. Sayf I, due to what occurred last year and what his minions were up to at that time.⁵¹⁾

The entry appears as the result of concern about domestic unrest based on rumors that al-Mutawakkil had fallen ill, and the following the description of the continuing chaos from which his realm was suffering. What should be noted here is the absence of any mention of the movements of the countries of Western Europe, at a time when the Dutch had appeared in the Red Sea, having already made their way through the Bāb al-Mandhab Strait during the Ottoman Empire's occupation of Yemen and still frequenting Yemeni ports under Zaydī rule in search for such trade goods as coffee. It was this situation that led to clashes between Dutch visitors to al-Mukhā and Indian Muslim merchants residing there during

1070–1071/1659–1660, which prompted the latter to demand that restrictions be placed on the trading activities of the Dutch and resulted in the Zaydī port authorities banning the sale of Dutch goods and prohibiting any Dutch affiliation with local Muslim merchants. In addition, the port's garrison was reinforced and surveillance of Dutch vessels intensified.⁵²⁾ This failure to mention the countries of Western Europe as another direction for vigilance can only be explained by the fact that despite the trouble caused by individual Dutch traders, the Zaydī Imamate felt no existential threat from the Western European powers as possible aggressors.

Concerning what the above quotation did mention—that is, perceived foreign threats to Yemen—were the Ottoman Empire ruling the huge territory comprising Egypt, Turkey, Syria and Iraq, in addition to the neighboring kingdom of Oman under the Ya'rubid Dynasty. The former, which had pulled its forces out of Yemen, would always be considered threatening to move south again, but since the Zaydīs were avoiding antagonizing it militarily or politically,⁵³⁾ a relative peace had been maintained without any major military conflict. On the other hand, the latter, as we have already seen, had launched an attack on the border region of Zūfār and was committing frequent acts of piracy in the waters off Yemeni ports and coastal regions, causing the Zaydīs to be in continuous preparation for war. Considering such an alarming international situation in which Yemen found itself engulfed, the diplomatic measures taken by al-Mutawakkil in fostering relations of amity with the Mughals stemmed no doubt from the idea that an all-out military clash with the Ya'rubid Dynasty was inevitable and that if hostilities did in fact break out, he expected both Mughal military and political support. The basis for such a conclusion comes from *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*, which records a letter being written from either India or Iran addressed to the Ya'rubid Dynasty, who was at that time preparing for a military operation in the Ḥaḍramawt region, warning that if in fact troops were deployed, they would be attacked.⁵⁴⁾ This fact indicates that neighboring regions, like India and Iran, were by no means unaware of the Ya'rubid Dynasty's militarily expansion efforts and that al-Mutawakkil reckoned that if the Ya'rubids did indeed take action, the Mughal Empire and the Ṣafawid Dynasty would side with Yemen.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide a bird's eye view of the foreign relations conducted by the al-Mutawakkil regime of the Zaydī Imamate

in the maritime world of the West Indian Ocean during the 17th century from mainly military and political perspectives. By virtue of the fact that al-Mutawakkil was successful in occupying the region of Zūfār, the main source of military and political differences with the Ya‘rubid Dynasty of neighboring Oman, he was able to maintain security in the administration of the Ḥaḍramawt region, but at the same time was unable to do the same regarding the Ya‘rubids’ maritime activities, which included Omani attacks on ports of trade and trading vessels. On the other hand, in the midst of such tensions between the Zaydīs and the Ya‘rubids, al-Mutawakkil built friendly relations with Shāh ‘Abbās II of the Ṣafawid Dynasty through the exchange of diplomatic communiqués, setting up a system of cooperation in dealing with their mutual enemy, the same Ya‘rubid Dynasty. Later on, however, on the occasion of a request by the Ṣafawid Dynasty for Zaydī military assistance in a joint invasion of Oman, al-Mutawakkil demurred due to fear of 1) Ṣafawid military expansion into the southern coastal region of the Arabian Peninsula, and 2) domestic political and fiscal problems, although the system of cooperation between the two polities continued up to the death of Shāh ‘Abbās II.

While building cooperation and friendship with Iran, al-Mutawakkil also began normalizing relations with India’s Mughals during the reign of Shāh Jahān and that of his deposer and successor, Aurangzīb, and was successful in establishing working relations with the Mughals through such means as the exchange of communiqués and diplomatic envoys. In order to strengthen relations with the Mughals, al-Mutawakkil granted Mughal visitors to Yemen privileged status and special protection, measures that were motivated by the belief that the Mughals would consequently side with the Zaydīs in the case of aggression on the part of the Ya‘rubid Dynasty against Yemen.

In sum, Yemen’s foreign policy towards the maritime world of the West Indian Ocean during the 17th century was dominated by concerns over how to contain the aggressive activities of the Ya‘rubid Dynasty both politically and militarily, by building and developing relations of amity and cooperation with the powerful empires of Iran and India, which had similar concerns and ambitions towards the region.

Notes

- 1) This article is an English translation of a paper published in Japanese in 2006 [Kuriyama 2006]. While some deletions have been made in the original, the remaining content has been neither augmented nor revised in any

- way.
- 2) Within the research done to date on southern Arabia, there is the work by R. B. Serjeant [1983a] regarding al-Mutawakkil's expedition into the Ḥaḍramawt region in the context of the political history of the retreat of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Zaydī Imamate. On the maritime activities of the Ya'rubid Dynasty of Oman, see Serjeant 1983b.
 - 3) Although the original full title of this source is *Bahjat al-Zaman fi Ḥawādith al-Yaman*, the collator changed the title on the occasion of its publication (Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:16–22). However, this change reflects the fact that the work circulated under that title prior to publication and that the collator was merely following that custom.
 - 4) Concerning the Ya'rubid Dynasty and its maritime activities, see, for example, Risso 1986 and Wilkinson 1987.
 - 5) The Netherlands and Great Britain attacked al-Mukhā in 1070/1659 or possibly the year later (al-Jarmūzī, *Sirat al-Mutawakkil*: ff. 110a–112a). See Serjeant 1974:117–120. Concerning al-Jarmūzī's biography of al-Mutawakkil, this article is based solely on the version of *Sirat al-Mutawakkil* held by Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, since it was impossible to refer to the manuscript obtained by Serjeant in Mukallā. See Serjeant 1974:112–113.
 - 6) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:178.
 - 7) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:234.
 - 8) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:340.
 - 9) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:232–233.
 - 10) Yule & Burnell 1995:63–64.
 - 11) Concerning the activities of the Bāniyāns in Yemen, see Serjeant 1983c:432–435, and details about their activities throughout the maritime world of the West Indian Ocean may be found in Gupta 2001.
 - 12) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:352, 357. Cf. Gupta 2001:82.
 - 13) al-Jarmūzī, *Sirat al-Mutawakkil*:f.161b. Cf. Serjeant 1983c:433.
 - 14) al-Jarmūzī, *Sirat al-Mutawakkil*:f.132a; Donzel 1986:91.
 - 15) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:196, 206, 246, 355.
 - 16) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:196, 206, 246, 355.
 - 17) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:344.
 - 18) al-Jarmūzī, *Sirat al-Mutawakkil*:f.185a.
 - 19) al-Jarmūzī, *al-Jawhara al-Munira*:138–141. This source is a non-collated manuscript, but page numbers have been added, which are cited here.
 - 20) al-Jarmūzī, *Tuhfat al-Asmā'*, I:165–169.
 - 21) al-Jarmūzī, *Tuhfat al-Asmā'*, I:167.
 - 22) Dale 1994:45–55.
 - 23) Riazul Islam 1970:110–116; Roemer 1986:299–300.
 - 24) Abū Ṭālib, *Ta'rikh al-Yaman*:89. Cf. Muḥsin, *al-Shudhūr*:f.23a; Ibn al-Wazīr, *Ṭabaq*:190.
 - 25) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:135.
 - 26) *E.I.* 2nd, I:1013.
 - 27) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan'ā'*:135–136.
 - 28) Muḥsin, *al-Shudhūr*:f.25b; Ibn al-Wazīr, *Ṭabaq*:219.

- 29) *E.I.* 2nd, VIII:770–771.
- 30) al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:f.104a; al-Jarmūzī, *Tuhfat al-Asmāʿ*, II:929.
- 31) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:90. Cf. Ibn al-Wazīr, *Ṭabaq*:144.
- 32) Sarkar 1912–.
- 33) al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:f.91a; al-Jarmūzī, *Tuhfat al-Asmāʿ*, II:888.
- 34) al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:ff.91a–93b; al-Jarmūzī, *Tuhfat al-Asmāʿ*, II:888–897.
- 35) Aurangzib was provisionally enthroned on 21 July 1658 and then formally crowned on 5 June of the following year. See Sarkar, II:277–278.
- 36) al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:f.97a.
- 37) Sarkar, II:165–389.
- 38) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:111.
- 39) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:119. Cf. Muḥsin, *al-Shudhūr*:f.22b; Ibn al-Wazīr, *Ṭabaq*:183–184; Abū Ṭālib, *Taʾriḫ al-Yaman*:87.
- 40) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:119.
- 41) Muḥammad, *Maʾāsiri ʿĀlamgīri*:32.
- 42) al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:f.104b; al-Jarmūzī, *Tuhfat al-Asmāʿ*, II:929.
- 43) Ibn al-Wazīr, *Ṭabaq*:250; Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:183.
- 44) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:111–112. The envoy, whose name is recorded in *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā* as *Sayyid* Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm, arrived in Yemen in 1070/1660, while *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil* differs slightly, calling him *Sayyid* Muḥammad Ibrāhīm. Nevertheless, both sources concur that his death in Yemen occurred in 1071/1661 (Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:107; al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:f.91b). The Indian sources state that the person who was dispatched by the Mughal Empire at that time was one *Sayyid* Mīr Ibrāhīm, who was the head of a pilgrimage to Mecca which departed India during November of 1659 and who died in Arabia (Muḥammad, *Maʾāsiri ʿĀlamgīri*:17; Sarkar, III:67).
- 45) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:111.
- 46) Pearson 1996:105–121.
- 47) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:212.
- 48) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:270; Ibn al-Wazīr, *Ṭabaq*:321. Nevertheless, al-Qurʾān does not regard *sharīfs* as appropriate recipients of *sadaqa*, a subject that Sejeant [1983a:81], who quoted the passage, has chosen not to go into. This writer intends to take up how this term should be interpreted in future research.
- 49) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:303. Cf. Muḥsin, *al-Shudhūr*:f.38a.
- 50) This sultan is identified by *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā* as Sulṭān Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad Khān ʿUthmān (Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:143), most probably indicating Muḥammad IV b. Ibrāhīm (r. 1058/1648–1099/1687). See Bosworth 1996:239.
- 51) Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣanʿā*:243. Cf. Serjeant 1983a:81.
- 52) al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:f.111a.
- 53) For example, al-Mutawakkil made plans to invade neighboring Ethiopia; however, due to political considerations that such action may perturb the Ottoman garrison stationed in Sawākin, the plan was abandoned (Yaḥyā b.

al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā*:66). Also, despite that fact that a route of advance was opened from northern Yemen through the central Arabian Peninsula to the western coast of the Persian Gulf for the purpose of invading Oman, the invasion was halted after Ottoman troops were observed redeploying to Baṣra (Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, *Yawmiyāt Ṣan‘ā*:136).

54) al-Jarmūzī, *Sīrat al-Mutawakkil*:f.83b.

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