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Our man in Sanaa: Ex-Yemen president was once trainee rabbi

By [Yossi Melman](#)

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In advance of the period of the Jewish holidays, Dorit Mizrahi, a journalist at the ultra-Orthodox weekly Mishpaha, was asked to come up with a creative idea for an article. She decided that the time had come to write about her relative, Zekharia Hadad, the brother of Grandma Levana ("Kamar," in Yemenite), who was kidnapped as a young boy, forced to convert to Islam, and given the name Abdul Rahman Yahya al-Iryani before being appointed the president of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), in 1967.

"As a child, I remember the moment when I found out that my grandmother's brother had become the president of Yemen," says Mizrahi, a resident of Jerusalem. "The first trickle of information actually came from the United States when a letter, with photos enclosed, sent by a relative, posed the question: Doesn't he look like Grandma Levana? When my uncle brought the photos to his mother, my grandmother, she looked at them and said: 'That's him.' She said nothing further."

Mizrahi says that anyone seeing the pictures of her grandmother and her brother could not help but see the resemblance. "The same eyes, the same narrow facial features, the same type of nose, which left no room for doubt. The adults sat around at the time looking at his picture, discussing the details together: the name, the estimated age, in order to confirm what they felt and knew in their hearts. It was clear to everyone that the family member who had remained behind and the president of North Yemen were one and the same person."

Zekharia Hadad was born Advertisement in Ibb, a provincial capital in northern Yemen, apparently in 1910. His parents planned for him to be either a shohet (a ritual slaughterer) or a rabbi, and he began to study the laws of the profession at an

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early age. Those were years of drought; the water that was rationed out caused an outbreak of disease and the Jews were even worse off than their Arab neighbors. The shortages, widespread disease and generally difficult living conditions overcame both parents, who died within a short time of one another, leaving behind three orphans: Levana, who was already married (into the Gamliel family), 8-year-old Zekharia and their little 5-year-old sister.

It was clear that news of the parents' death would quickly reach the provincial authorities, and that they would hasten to carry out the "orphans' decree," which had been introduced by Imam Yahya, the country's ruler. The law determined that, if a Jewish boy or girl was orphaned, their connection to their religion and their family was to be severed and they had to be handed over to a Muslim foster family. The rule was based on the law that the prophet Mohammed is "the father of the orphans," and on the fact that the Jews in Yemen were considered "under protection" and the ruler was obligated to care for them.

During her research, Mizrahi got several of her relatives to talk, and based on what they told her about what they had heard from their parents and their grandparents, she believes that she has succeeded in reconstructing the history of the Hadad family.

Men on horseback

Because she was a married woman, the authorities did not touch Levana and her family, who continued to live in Yemen for about another 15 years. Over the years, Levana was widowed, married for a second time, to a man named Menahem Taasa, and immigrated to Palestine with him. That was in 1934. During a difficult journey, they crossed the desert, on foot and on donkeys, arrived in the port city of Aden, which was under British rule, and sailed from there to Alexandria, Egypt, and from there to Palestine. They settled at first in Jerusalem's Old City, later moving to the Nahlaot neighborhood, where they lived until their deaths.

One family member, Oved Taasa, told Mizrahi that, "as soon as the news of the parents' death was known, before the Jewish community managed to hide them or marry them off, Zekharia and his sister were taken away by official representatives, who appeared on horseback. The family tried to object, offered them jewelry and money, pleaded and wept, but nothing helped. Their [older] sister, Kamar, who remained alone, fell ill from sorrow. From that time it was rare to see her laughing."

Young Zekharia was sent to the Iryani home, a well-connected family whose sons held public office and originated in the city of Irian, a two-day ride on horseback from Ibb. Zekharia's adoptive father was a qadi, a sharia judge, who had great power in the tribal society of Yemen of those days and armed soldiers serving under him. The judge gave his adopted son his name and raised him together with his biological children. During the first years, says Mizrahi, based on testimony of family members, Zekharia-Yahya still managed to keep in touch with his family, although he was threatened that if he ran away, his natural sister and her children would be murdered. "They said that he came on visits to Ibb wearing Arab garb, at risk to his life," she explains.

The last contact with him, about which there was even written documentation, was during World War II. Nissim Gamliel (Levana's son) enlisted in the British

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army in Palestine in 1942 and was taken captive by the Germans. From his captivity, and out of despair, he wrote several letters to his uncle Zekharia-Yahya in Yemen, whose address he remembered. His uncle, already a Muslim and an important public figure, replied in two letters and even sent food packages to his nephew. Gamliel saved the letters in his personal diary, which he wrote in secret in Rashi script, in Hebrew, in the prison camp. In 1945, at the end of the war, he was released from captivity and returned to Palestine, but over the years some of the pages of his yellowing diary were damaged and together with it the letters disappeared as well.

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In 1948 Qadi al-Iryani participated in an unsuccessful coup against the imam. In its wake the rebel leaders were executed, including the qadi and his sons. Although he was not among the conspirators, Zekharia-Abdul Rahman Yahya decided to flee, out of fear that he would share the fate of the other members of the Iryani family. He found refuge in the Jewish neighborhood of Ibb, the city of his birth, but after a while he was caught and imprisoned for seven years. It was in the notorious Haja Prison that his political awareness became stronger and he became a sworn opponent of the imam and the royal family.

In September 1962 Imam Ahmed died, and was replaced by his son Mohammed al-Badr. The commander of the Yemenite army, Abdullah Sallal, and officers in the army, who drew inspiration from the ideas of the Egyptian Free Officers, exploited the situation. They deposed the new imam and declared the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in north Yemen. This led to a civil war, between the royalists, who supported the imam, and the new government - a war that had roots in history as well as in the country's tribal rivalries.

Elected president

Additional countries were swept up in the maelstrom of the war: Egypt under president Gamal Abdel Nasser supported the republicans and sent a military force that at one stage numbered about 30,000 soldiers. Neighboring Saudi Arabia, backed by Great Britain, supported the royalists. The battles, during which the Egyptians used chemical weapons (mustard gas), continued until 1967.

The republican camp was divided between supporters of president Sallal, who adopted liberal views, and that of Abdul Rahman Yahya al-Iryani, who was opposed to the connection with Egypt and to the presence of the Egyptian army, and believed in reconciliation with the royalists. The new rebels deposed Sallal and in November 1967, Iryani was elected the second president of the Yemen Arab Republic.

During his term, the civil war came to an end. The Egyptian army left Yemen and the new president tried to mend the rifts and heal the scars of war. His term lasted for six and a half years, during which he participated in Arab summit conferences (in photographs, he is seen beside his colleagues among the Arab leaders). In June 1974, another military coup took place in Yemen. Iryani was deposed and found refuge in Syria, where he died in 1998 at the age of 88. His body was flown to Yemen, where he was buried.

Dorit Mizrahi, whose impressions were published in Mishpaha about a week ago, remembers the moment when one of her relatives brought home an issue of the weekly tabloid Haolam Hazeh in 1967. In an article by Nurit Gertz, entitled "Zekharia the Jew, President of Yemen," several of her relatives were interviewed, she recalls: "The publication naturally aroused excitement, but the family wanted to maintain a low profile. The fear was that the discovery of his Jewish origins was liable to endanger his life."

Mizrahi tried not only to discover the family connection, but also to fill in one

more gap in information: Was there, during the 12 years when he was one of the leaders of the republican camp, any clandestine contact between Iryani and Israel? Israel was involved in the Yemeni civil war, its interest being to keep a large percentage of the army of Egypt, Israel's worst enemy, tied up in the country, and to divert it from a potential conflict with Israel. For that reason Israel agreed to accede to Britain's request to supply weapons to the royalists.

The request was conveyed in 1964 by a representative of MI6, British intelligence, to Mossad headquarters, which was then in the Hadar Dafna building in Tel Aviv. Meir Amit, the intelligence agency's then-chief, says he decided almost without hesitation to agree to the request. "It was a clear Israeli interest," and part of the concept that was described as "the peripheral alliance." Beginning in the 1950s, the Mossad nurtured alliances with non-Arab countries in the Middle East (Iran, Turkey), with countries bordering on Arab countries that were located in regions of strategic importance vital to Israel (Ethiopia), and with ethnic minorities in the Arab countries (Christians in Lebanon, Kurds in Iraq, Christians in southern Sudan).

Prime minister Levi Eshkol approved the campaign to assist the royalists in Yemen. The task of coordinating the connection with them was given to David Karon, the head of the Middle East department in the Tevel (Cosmos) section of the Mossad. Amit says the Mossad had several agents in Yemen, whose goal was to gather information about the Egyptian army there, although to the best of his memory the Mossad did not have a permanent representative in the royalist headquarters in the country. As opposed to him, another Mossad man, who spoke on condition of anonymity, claimed that the Mossad liaison men "hopped over" for this mission in Yemen and stayed there for short periods of time.

The truth, although over 40 years have passed since then, will probably not be known until the Mossad opens its archive and reveals the documents, though it is doubtful whether that will ever happen.

Israeli aide

The main responsibility for contact with the royalists was that of MI6. They decided to use the services of a private company belonging to Col. David Stirling, the legendary founder of the Special Air Service (SAS), the elite unit of the British army that was established during World War II and became a role model for commando units the world over, including Israel's elite Sayeret Matkal unit.

Stirling recruited several dozen former members of the SAS for the operation, who were sent to Yemen as advisers to Imam al-Badr and his forces. One of them was a British pilot named Tony Boyle, who came to Israel, held talks with Mossad representative Karon and his people, and afterwards met with Israel Air Force commander Ezer Weizman and his officers. They included a man named Aryeh Oz. During these meetings it was decided that the air force would fly over Yemen and drop weapons, ammunition and medical equipment to the royalists.

For the purpose of the operation, which received the code names "Rotev" ("gravy") and "Dorban" ("porcupine"), the largest transport plane in the air force was recruited, the Stratofreighter. One of its pilots was Oz, who said in an interview published a few months ago in the air force magazine that, "Ezer told me to come to his home, and when I arrived he came straight to the point: 'I want you to organize a parachute drop in Yemen.'" A handful of people in on the secret in the air force prepared the plan, which included information about the weather, flight routes and the topography of Yemen.

The first flight took off in March 1964 from Tel Nof, with outdated weapons

from World War II in the belly of the plane. After a flight of about seven hours, when they arrived above the prearranged area, which was mountainous and dangerous for the heavy plane, the British advisers and royalist soldiers lit torches to mark the area of the parachute drop. During the sixth flight, Tony Boyle had a new idea. "He suggested," said Oz, "that since we were already there, maybe we would also bomb the airport in Sanaa."

Ezer Weizman was enthusiastic. The air force made plans, but chief of staff Yitzhak Rabin and prime minister Eshkol did not approve the request. The operation went on over a period of slightly more than two years, during which the transport plane flew 14 times in nighttime sorties from Tel Nof to Yemen.

As far as is known, the Mossad made do with aid to the royalists and did not try to contact the Jewish president. Mizrahi says that over the years the family tried from time to time to speak about Grandma's brother, and to take an interest in him, but they didn't try to contact him either. "Because it was almost impossible, and perhaps especially because this entire business was hard for Grandma. She was an amazing woman. Devout and traditional, but closed, restrained and sad. Emotions were a private matter that was not shared. Even if deep inside she felt better knowing her brother was alive, it was difficult for her to acknowledge what he went through. She spoke about it very little and the family didn't want to burden her. This open wound was sealed with a heavy silence."

"I once asked my uncle Zekharia, who is now 82 years old and is writing his memoirs," says Mizrahi, "why Iryani didn't try, when he was 16 years old, say, to escape and to contact the family. My uncle Zekharia explained to me that there was very close supervision of Jewish orphans. I imagine a boy with curly earlocks wrapped in a prayer shawl, according to the Yemenite custom, almost a little man already, sitting and studying the laws of shehita and finding it difficult not to wonder who he really was: Zekharia Hadad or Iryani."

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