The two explosive-laden parcels, intercepted before they could reach their intended U.S. destinations, were just the latest terrorist threat to come out of Yemen. The beleaguered Arab country grabbed headlines after Christmas Day 2009, when a Nigerian man linked to terror groups on Yemeni soil almost blew up Northwest Flight 253 on a Detroit tarmac. Since then, Yemen has fallen into Washington's crosshairs as a new front in the war against Al Qaeda. Depending on what reports you read, the country is either Afghanistan on the sea or the next Somalia, or both. Hovering on the brink of failure, the Yemeni state is considered to be corrupt and weak, powerless in the face of insurgents, fractious tribes and radical clerics as well as a breeding ground for pirates and jihadis alike. The poorest country in the Middle East, it's a world away from the region's richest — Saudi Arabia — luxuriating in its petro-wealth just north of the Yemeni border.

But Yemen — which means South Arabia in Arabic — was for centuries the center of civilization and wealth on the Arabian peninsula. The Romans referred to the area as Arabia Felix, or "Happy Arabia." Its once fertile plains were irrigated with the aid of the great Ma'rib Dam built around 700 B.C. by the kings of Saba — biblical Sheba. Bustling market towns along the coast thrummed with activity. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a chronicle written by an anonymous 1st century AD Roman mariner, speaks of the land as "Frankincense country," whose cities brimmed with all sorts of goods and provided the major link between the Mediterranean world and the fabled Indian ports of Muziris on the Kerala coast and Barygaza in Gujarat.

*(See the search for the historical queen of Sheba.)*

A pivotal crossroads for trade and travel, Yemen in antiquity became home to a mix of people and faiths. On his way to India, the apostle Thomas is said to have stopped at the Yemeni island of Socotra — some 200 miles south of the country's mainland, near present day Somalia — and established one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. (The U.S. has voiced plans to set up an air base on the island to better coordinate counter-terrorism operations.) Dhu Nuwas, the last monarch of the powerful Himyarite
dynasty, was a convert to Judaism who warred with another Yemeni kingdom ruled by Ethiopian Christians around 523 AD. Knowing defeat was upon him, or so the legend goes, Dhu Nuwas rode his horse into the Red Sea and drowned. Yemen’s unique Jewish community remained a prominent part of its society up until 1950, when most of the Jewish population — nearly 50,000 people — was evacuated over a period of six months to Israel in a series of airlifts dubbed Operation Magic Carpet.

(See pictures of the alien beauty of Socotra.)

Islam came to Yemen soon after its rise in the 6th century AD as much of the Middle East fell under the sway of a succession of powerful caliphs. Imams from the Shi’ite Zaidi sect installed theocratic rule in the northern part of Yemen by the 9th century, a political order whose influence has lasted effectively into the past century, notwithstanding a few interruptions by marauding Turkic warlords. The Zaidi teaching that one has the right to overthrow unjust rulers animates contemporary insurrections.

In the meantime, Yemeni cities flourished — today's capital Sana’a and the principal port, Aden, grew into important medieval centers for textiles and spices. Yemeni merchants formed diasporas from Spain to India’s Malabar coast and China's Pearl River delta. In Yemen's eastern Hadhramaut region, caravan towns developed into fortified settlements now thought to be the oldest "skyscraper" cities in the world, where, to stave off Bedouin attacks, residents lived in multi-story mud-brick towers. The most famous example of this architecture is at Shibam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where much remains as it was 600 years ago.

By the 19th century, Yemen's modern political contours were taking shape with the region a chess piece in the hands of foreign powers. The Ottoman Empire extended its control over Arabia south from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, seizing Sana’a and nearby towns. In 1832, soldiers of the British East India Company captured Aden, which they saw as a strategic waypoint between Europe and their colonial possessions in India. In 1904, the Ottomans and the British agreed on a boundary separating their spheres of control, carving Yemen into an Ottoman North and a British South. When the Ottoman Empire crumbled at the end of the First World War, its slice of Yemeni territory became an independent kingdom led by a Zaidi imam. Arab nationalists toppled the ruling monarchy in 1962 with Egyptian help to found a republic but a civil war with Saudi-financed royalists raged for almost a decade thereafter.

The British protectorate endured until 1967 when it was pressured out following five years of violent insurgency. After a faction of radical Marxists took over in 1970, South Yemen became the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and was propped up by a host of communist backers, the Soviet Union chief among them. The two Yemens eventually formed a united republic in 1990, but their politics had been marked for decades by infighting, assassination attempts and the specter of military coup. Not long after unification, disputes over power sharing led to leaders from the South declaring a separate state, but a swift and ruthless campaign in May 1994 quashed this rebellion.
Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled North Yemen from 1978 before heading the united republic, has over the years spent most of his political capital consolidating his position rather than knitting together a stable, democratic state. Poverty, corruption and the hopelessly weak rule of law form the backdrop to al-Qaeda's entry into the country, signaled most strongly in the 2000 bombing of the U.S.S. Cole off Aden's harbor. Much of the country is still divided along local tribes, which further complicates dealing with the rebellions of separatists such as the Shi'ite Houthi, who are allegedly backed by Iran. Within this chaos, the U.S. has reportedly embarked on a CIA-led covert war, using drones and elite units of special forces to target al-Qaeda operatives. But If Washington believes it can wholly guide Yemen away from dysfunction, it has its hands full — as in Afghanistan, foreign intervention here has little record of success and, invariably, has caused more harm than good.

Find this article at:
http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2028740,00.html