

## Kawkaban

Several years ago, while attending the opening of the Abdullah Al Othman Center in Sana'a, the Yemeni Minister of Religious Endowments invited the Kuwaiti Minister of Justice and me to join him for lunch. He told us that we would have our lunch together in Kawkaban. Perhaps without considering protocol, I asked spontaneously, "Does the region have something to do with the Kawkaban Trio?" Laughing, the Yemeni minister replied, "Yes, that's their country." Our minister asked who they were and I told him, "It's a band from the seventies which sings in the Aden style. Only someone who loves Adeni art knows who they are. Someone like me." Our minister laughed.

Anyway, the trip was about an hour's journey from Sana'a. Kawkaban is located on top of a high rock and protected by a cliff on three sides. Separated from the earth by a deep chasm on the fourth side, the entrance to the impregnable castle is met by a wooden bridge. Chilly and wet even through the summer, the castle is self-sufficient against any blockade, making it difficult to reach by invaders. An archaeologically significant area, it is said that Kawkaban's city was built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, standing witness to the history of Sheba, the emigration of the Arab people, and the Muslim conquests. However, as the hometown of *khat*, Kawkaban is also a witness to the misery of Happy Yemen, where from the highest peak one can see the once bountiful coffee plantations replaced by fields of khat.

After our lunch, during which we were treated to the most generous Yemeni hospitality, we moved to the top floor where the council sat. After tea, a large plate of khat was brought out and placed in the center of the council and their minister started chopping and serving it to his guests. As I am an enemy of cigarettes, hookah, and every similar evil—but without any official authority with which I could