

The War and Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen: A Forgotten Conflict?

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The war in Yemen has long been described as hidden or forgotten. It has been going on, however, for over three years and it immediately generated a large-scale humanitarian crisis, described by international humanitarian agencies as the worst in the contemporary world. The cholera epidemic that gripped a million Yemenites in 2017 is one of the indications, but the figures circulating on the humanitarian situation are sometimes difficult to grasp and are actually generally unknown. Thus, the UN usually refers to 10,000 deaths caused by the war, but this estimate, generally repeated by the media and in reports, is very certainly under the mark, since the figure dates back to the summer of 2016. All of them have thus ceased to keep the macabre count.

A Long-Hidden War

In fact, the conflict, which began in March 2015, long remained under the media radars. This could at first be ascribed to the difficulties foreign journalists had in gaining access to the terrain. International media sending reporters were very rare during the first two years of the war. Those who did go met with the express desire by all parties involved to control the images and stories.

In any case, it would seem that the disdain towards Yemen can also be ascribed to other factors, namely, the complexity of a war that is beyond any Manichaean reading.² The intervention of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates was done, within a legal framework endorsed by the UN Security Council's Resolution 2216, in order to restore the President qualified as legitimate – Abderabuh Mansur Hadi – to power. Although most of the destruction and the civilian victims can be ascribed to the coalition bombarding the country and severely limiting its imports, the Houthi rebellion that took over the capital also violates quite a few international conventions. Moreover, its anti-American and anti-Semitic slogan as well as its de facto alliance with Iran do not make it a group easy to identify with. Sudden changes in alliance – such as the one that led to the assassination of former President Ali Abdallah Saleh by the Houthis last December – the growing weight of local identities, primarily in the south of the country,³ as well as the sometimes-shady games of the coalition armies also blur the readability of the conflict. This limits the medias' and policymakers' capacity to speak of a war that moreover (and very wrongly!) appears to be far removed from European or North American concerns.

The scant interest in the Yemen situation, however, can also most certainly be ascribed to the complexity of Western governments. In fact, the latter do not encourage putting the matter on the media or diplomatic agenda at all, and have repeatedly blocked initiatives by certain actors of the international community. In 2016, for instance, responding favourably

¹ Author of *Le Yémen : de l'Arabie heureuse à la guerre*, Fayard, 2017

² "Rencontre avec François Burgat : Trois ans de guerre au Yémen." *Les Cahiers de l'Islam*, April 2018, www.lescahiersdelislam.fr/Rencontre-avec-Francois-Burgat-Trois-ans-de-guerre-au-Yemen_a1720.html

³ SALISBURY, Peter. "Yemen's Southern Powder Keg." Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 27 March 2018, www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemens-southern-powder-keg

to pressure exerted by Saudi Arabia, Western diplomats prevented the creation of an independent commission to investigate potential war crimes. The military engagement of the coalition armies is, moreover, directly supported by the United States, the United Kingdom and France (though each to different degrees) through technical support to the belligerents, as well as through arms contracts of the past that are continually renewed.⁴ Since the onset of the war, France has doubled the amount of its sales to Saudi Arabia. The United States, during Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh in May 2017, signed arms contracts with the Kingdom amounting to US\$110 billion. In the face of such budgets, the economic trade-off done by Western governments may be perceived as rational, but it also proves to be constraining on the diplomatic level.

Progressively Entering the Agenda

In any case, the entrenchment of the war has gradually led to a certain awareness. Describing the conflict in Yemen as hidden is certainly now slightly exaggerated. In 2017, coverage of the crisis in Western media improved considerably, even if still unsatisfactory. A growing number of foreign reporters have been able, though under difficult, if not outrageous conditions, to cover the conflict from Aden, or more rarely by travelling to Sanaa, an area held by the rebels.

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Public and political debate has taken up the Yemeni issue, though very timidly as yet. Discussions have taken place in British Parliament and the American Congress (where a vote with a very close outcome

concerning military support to the coalition was called by Democrat Bernie Sanders in March 2018). The questions addressed to the French government at the National Assembly, in particular by majority MP Sébastien Nadot, as well as the sit-ins organized during Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to European capitals also indicated how Western countries have become aware of the impasse of the military strategy chosen by the Arab coalition. In the face of this process whereby the Yemen issue is gradually being put on the agenda, an independent UN inquiry commission was finally accepted in October 2017. The Tunisian human rights activist, Kamel Jendoubi, is heading it.

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This process is essentially taking place along two lines: the humanitarian situation, on the one hand, and the matter of arms contracts on the other. Since the outbreak of the war, NGOs and UN humanitarian actors have been alerting about civilians' extreme dependence on international aid, describing a pre-famine situation potentially affecting many millions of Yemenites. The catastrophist discourse that in 2015, for instance, described Yemen as in a situation worse than Syria, very fortunately did not come to pass. The relative resilience of economic structures (primarily through contraband) as well as the continued functioning – during over a year and a half of war – of a central bank that could pay the salaries of all civil servants, served for a time as a security net. But these funds have been exhausted or have even disappeared.⁵

Over the course of 2017, the description of the cholera epidemic as the largest and most brutal ever recorded got the media mobilized and raised public awareness. Regardless of the fact that cer-

⁴ MUSA, Shavana. "The Saudi-Led Coalition in Yemen, Arms Exports and Human Rights: Prevention Is Better Than Cure." *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, Volume 22, Issue 3.1, p. 433-462, December 2017, <https://academic.oup.com/jcsl/article-abstract/22/3/433/4719304>

⁵ Ammar AL-AULAQI, et al. "Rethinking Yemen's Economy - Addressing Yemen's Most Critical Challenges," Policy Brief. DeepRoot, 5 June 2017, www.deeproot.consulting/single-post/2017/06/05/Rethinking-Yemens-Economy---Addressing-Yemens-Most-Critical-Challenges

tain international NGOs then denounced both the instrumentalization of this epidemic and the exaggeration of the official figures provided by the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), this war doubtless needed a symbol to catalyse its placement on the international diplomatic agenda. The countries of the Arab coalition, sensitive to the deterioration of their image in the West, have attempted to make up for this indictment by promising massive funds for NGOs and UN agencies intervening in Yemen. Making the distribution of these funds operational remains subject to scrutiny, since humanitarian actors' access to these funds are being restricted by the coalition.

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The matter of Western complicity through arms contracts constitutes the second line of pursuit by the media and of criticism of the coalition's intervention in Yemen. The engagement of associations and elected officials in the United States and Great Britain in this matter has preceded the mobilization in France and other European countries (Belgium, Germany and Italy, for instance). The February 2016 passing of a European Parliament resolution calling for an embargo on arms sales to Saudi Arabia has had no substantial effect and has not really generated any significant debate.

In 2017, in any case, initiatives have been undertaken by various countries. Finland and Norway – who, by the way, are not among the main suppliers to the Gulf monarchies engaged in Yemen – have officially set up embargos. The government agreement ratified in early 2018 between Angela Merkel and her Social-Democrat partners in Germany contains an

explicit resolution ending weapons sales to Saudi Arabia due to its intervention in Yemen and the civilian victims. Petitions in France, insistent questions posed by journalists, to which political leaders, including the Defence Minister Florence Parly, have supplied often awkward answers, as well as a poll taken by an NGO showing that 75% of French citizens reject arms contracts being signed with coalition countries⁶ indicate to what extent the Yemen issue is no longer really being ignored.

An International Issue

This public awareness is a necessary stage. It is understood that the international pressure exerted on the warring parties provides strong leverage, whether over Saudi Arabia or even Iran, whose involvement is increasingly substantiated after having been uncertain for a long time.⁷ But the placement of the Yemen conflict on the international agenda is important as well because this war has implications that go beyond its territory. The fate of Yemen concerns the Middle East and most certainly the world. The country's location at the crossroads of trade routes make it a significant issue, where its destabilization could prove very costly.

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The structure of the conflict, marked by confession-alization dynamics similar to those observed in Syria and Iraq, also fosters jihadist groups. The latter have developed a territorial base in the country. Recall that it was the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda that

⁶ ACAT France, "Yémen. La France complice ?" Press Release, March 2018, www.acatfrance.fr/app/items/print/communique-de-presse/3-francais-sur-4-pour-la-suspension-des-ventes-darmes-aux-pays-impliques-dans-la-guerre-au-yemen

⁷ KENDALL, Elisabeth. "Issue Brief. Iran's Fingerprints in Yemen: Real or Imagined?" Atlantic Council, October 2017, www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/Irans_Fingerprints_in_Yemen_web_1019.pdf

claimed authorship for the January 2015 attack against Charlie Hebdo in Paris. These armed groups directly benefit from the situation of chaos and the collapse of state structures encouraged by the conflict. In addition, designating the Houthis as Shiite heretics associated with Iran legitimizes the confessionally-based propaganda of jihadi actors.

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Thus, for instance, the Organization of the Islamic State, in competition with al-Qaeda, has emerged in this context of war and has been carrying out activities in the southern provinces. It particularly targets government leaders but has also deployed openly anti-Shiite violence, attacking mosques, for example. Although the jihadis have continued to be the targets of US drones since the beginning of the conflict and some of their leaders have been eliminated, at the same time, these movements have become established among the population in a con-

text imbued with violence. Many Salafist combatants, though not necessarily directly affiliated with any transnational jihadi organization, have also been co-opted by the coalition into the war effort against the Houthis, blurring certain categories but contributing to generating a problem that could well resurface and project its violence beyond Yemen.

UN figures indicate 3 million displaced people, of which some 500,000 are abroad, mainly in Arab capitals. The more the conflict becomes entrenched, the greater the risk that the number of refugees will rise, the latter progressively entering migratory networks that go from the Arabian Peninsula to Eastern Africa and then turn north to cross the Mediterranean. These flows towards Europe, which remain marginal for now, are not the only ones to generate political controversy in the more or less long term. The flows towards Gulf States in particular could lead to significant migratory pressure, especially since the border with Saudi Arabia remains permeable. Demographic data (an annual population growth of 3%) and the exhaustion of water resources in many Yemen regions will foster translational migration in any case. The war, however, accentuates and accelerates these dynamics, which will come at a cost for the region and the world. It also takes precious time away from attempting to find solutions to these structural challenges.