

# 2020: The Yemenite Impasse

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Yemen entered its sixth year of conflict in March 2020.<sup>1</sup> Yemeni confrontations and foreign armed interventions on its soil have caused “the worst humanitarian crisis in the world,”<sup>2</sup> according to the UN. Independent witness accounts reaching us show all the horror of what is happening in this devastated region<sup>3</sup> where violence has become generalized,<sup>4</sup> liberties trampled by the different warring parties<sup>5</sup> and health conditions catastrophic, not to mention the Covid-19 pandemic, which could severely affect a population that has already been stripped of everything.<sup>6</sup>

The failure of the military coalition led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) on the ground is flagrant.<sup>7</sup> Since the emergence of the “Yemen question” in 2011, the

acknowledged influence of Saudi positions on decisions by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) raises several matters of principle regarding its legitimacy and can only damage its international image. Just how far will interventionist policies by regional powers directly involved in Yemen go?

## The Coalition's Military Failure

When the KSA and its main ally in the Sunni coalition, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), started their Yemen “reconquest crusade” against the Shiite “Houthi rebel” movement in March 2015, they believed the matter would be settled within a matter of weeks simply because of their superior military materials, the quality of the “strategy” taught to their high officers and the support provided to them by UNSC's. After all, didn't these two countries “settled its accounts” in the 2011 with Bahraini Shiite uprising, and that in only a few days?<sup>8</sup>

Due to the mountainous terrain in northern Yemen, hardly conducive to the deployment of ground troops,

<sup>1</sup> François FRISON-ROCHE, “Yémen: les coulisses d'un conflit,” *Politique Internationale*, No. 166, Winter 2019-2020, p.279-299.

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/fr/focus/yemen>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://insidemyemen.msf.fr/en/podcast#prologue>, also available in French and Arabic.

<sup>4</sup> Read the pages on this topic in the latest report by the UN panel of experts on Yemen, from 27 January 2020, <https://undocs.org/en/s/2020/326>, particularly pages 10 and following, 36 and following.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning the situation of human rights in Yemen since 2014, see the UN's report from 2018: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/39/43>. On Houthi abuses, see The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor report: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Hanish\\_prisonenreport.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Hanish_prisonenreport.pdf). Regarding prisons in South Yemen, see: [www.amnesty.fr/peine-de-mort-et-torture/actualites/les-prisons-secretes-du-yemen](http://www.amnesty.fr/peine-de-mort-et-torture/actualites/les-prisons-secretes-du-yemen).

<sup>6</sup> See: [www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200323\\_acaps\\_risk\\_report\\_covid19\\_impact\\_on\\_yemen.pdf](http://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200323_acaps_risk_report_covid19_impact_on_yemen.pdf); [www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200504\\_acaps\\_covid-19\\_n\\_yemen\\_misconceptions\\_rumours\\_and\\_politics.pdf](http://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200504_acaps_covid-19_n_yemen_misconceptions_rumours_and_politics.pdf); [www.unicef.fr/article/covid-19-au-yemen-une-pandemie-impact-potentiellement-catastrophique](http://www.unicef.fr/article/covid-19-au-yemen-une-pandemie-impact-potentiellement-catastrophique) and Michael YOUNG, “Yemen's Catalogue of Woes”, *Diwan: Middle East Insights from Carnegie*, 27 April 2020 <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/81624>.

<sup>7</sup> François FRISON-ROCHE, “Yémen: Imbroglie politico-juridique, désastre humanitaire, impasse militaire,” *Politique étrangère*, No. 4/2017, p. 91-101; and François FRISON-ROCHE, “Guerre au Yémen: an V,” *Politique étrangère*, No. 2/2019, p. 93-104.

<sup>8</sup> [www.lexpress.fr/actualites/2/monde/des-troupes-saoudiennes-a-bahrein-les-chiites-parlent-de-guerre\\_971943.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/2/monde/des-troupes-saoudiennes-a-bahrein-les-chiites-parlent-de-guerre_971943.html).

the KSA adopted the technique of carpet bombing “everything that moves”, including marketplaces,<sup>9</sup> hospitals,<sup>10</sup> schools,<sup>11</sup> weddings<sup>12</sup> or funerals,<sup>13</sup> not to mention archaeological sites and museums.<sup>14</sup> After all, it was war and resistance had to be broken, quickly and, if possible, definitively,<sup>15</sup> not only of those “Houthi rebels,” dangerous because they were of Shiite denomination and therefore pro-Iranian, but also of the local civilian populations supporting them. This military “strategy” neglected the capacity for action and resistance of an adversary who was in reality not limited to “rebels,” but included the best trained and best armed part of the Yemeni army, which remained faithful to former President Ali Abdallah Saleh. The latter opportunistically allied himself to the Houthis in 2014 to attempt to regain a place on the Yemeni political chessboard.

Since 2015, apart from decimating civilian populations and destroying the country’s infrastructures through its savage bombardments, the KSA has failed miserably in its objectives to eradicate Iranian influence in Yemen, prevent Houthi retaliation on its own territory and restore President Hadi to power.

In 2015 in the south of the country, the UAE took charge of intervening militarily on the ground to prevent the Houthis and the part of the Yemeni army remaining faithful to former President Saleh from taking Aden. Over the months, they did not hesitate to pursue their regional ambition of becoming the guarantors of security in this geostrategic area of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait by controlling the Yemen coast. They paid, trained and armed the mi-

litas to ensure the subordination of local tribes, some of which were openly separatist, and through an organization called the Southern Transitional Council (STC), contested the legitimacy of President Hadi and his government, who had the support of the KSA.

**Due to the mountainous terrain in northern Yemen, hardly conducive to the deployment of ground troops, the KSA adopted the technique of carpet bombing “everything that moves”**

After numerous local, military-political developments that undermined the Saudi-Emirate alliance, a “power-sharing” agreement, at least for the South, was signed in Riyadh in November 2019, under the aegis of Saudi Arabia.<sup>16</sup> It has been a failure to the present, since the parties have proven irreconcilable.

### The UN Influenced?

Since 2015, numerous flaws in the handling of the Yemeni issue by the UN<sup>17</sup> and its special envoy<sup>18</sup> have been noted. In late 2019, some five years after the start of the conflicts as they are es-

<sup>9</sup> [www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/yemen-au-moins-29-morts-dans-un-raid-sur-un-marche-ryad-accuse\\_1956986.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/yemen-au-moins-29-morts-dans-un-raid-sur-un-marche-ryad-accuse_1956986.html).

<sup>10</sup> [www.msf.fr/actualites/yemen-3-ans-apres-le-bombardement-de-l-hopital-msf-d-haydan](http://www.msf.fr/actualites/yemen-3-ans-apres-le-bombardement-de-l-hopital-msf-d-haydan).

<sup>11</sup> [www.unicef.fr/article/yemen-14-enfants-tues-alors-qu-ils-etaient-l-ecole](http://www.unicef.fr/article/yemen-14-enfants-tues-alors-qu-ils-etaient-l-ecole).

<sup>12</sup> [www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/09/29/01003-20150929ARTFIG00344-au-yemen-131-morts-dans-le-bombardement-d-une-fete-de-mariage.php](http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/09/29/01003-20150929ARTFIG00344-au-yemen-131-morts-dans-le-bombardement-d-une-fete-de-mariage.php).

<sup>13</sup> [www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2016/10/10/l-arabie-saoudite-a-nouveau-pointee-du-doigt-apres-un-bombardement-aerien-sur-sanaa\\_5010798\\_3218.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2016/10/10/l-arabie-saoudite-a-nouveau-pointee-du-doigt-apres-un-bombardement-aerien-sur-sanaa_5010798_3218.html).

<sup>14</sup> [www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/07/29/le-patrimoine-du-yemen-bombarde\\_4702972\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/07/29/le-patrimoine-du-yemen-bombarde_4702972_3232.html) and <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/segesta3756/blog/081015/les-raids-saoudiens-pulverisent-le-patrimoine-du-yemen-par-chiara-cruciati-il-manifesto>.

<sup>15</sup> Over the course of the 2000s, the KSA’s bombings supported the six wars against the Houthis waged by the Yemeni president of the time, Ali Abdallah Saleh.

<sup>16</sup> [www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/11/05/yemen-gouvernement-et-separatistes-signent-un-accord-de-partage-du-pouvoir-dans-le-sud\\_6018142\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/11/05/yemen-gouvernement-et-separatistes-signent-un-accord-de-partage-du-pouvoir-dans-le-sud_6018142_3210.html).

<sup>17</sup> François FRISON-ROCHE, “Transition et négociations au Yémen. Le rôle de l’ONU,” *Note de l’IFRI*, October 2015 [www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/yemen-transition-negociations.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/yemen-transition-negociations.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> The envoy was Jamal Benomar, a Moroccan who had obtained British nationality. An atypical figure, he was a member of the UN missions to Afghanistan and then Iraq. With the failure of his action in Yemen, he was obliged to step down in April 2015. He is now a representative of Qatar on the Lagardère Group’s Supervisory Board.

established today and over the course of UNSC resolutions,<sup>19</sup> a report revealed what could be considered an alignment by the latter, in particular in three of its five permanent members (P5), with Saudi positions.<sup>20</sup>

It is true that the envoy of the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) at the time followed a more confrontational approach with the former President, Ali Abdallah Saleh, rather than seeking “inclusive dialogue” among all Yemeni parties as was announced in UN speeches. With the full immunity he was granted during negotiations on the transition agreements in Riyadh in 2011 and the acceptance of his return to Sanaa, Ali Abdullah Saleh must certainly have thought he had obtained the guarantees and authority to intervene in internal Yemeni political orientation. Directly or via the intermediation of his acolytes, he therefore undermined President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi’s<sup>21</sup> proposals, which had been suggested by the UNSG’s representative to Sanaa, whom we know took his instructions from the Department of Political Affairs at the UN headquarters in New York.<sup>22</sup>

Without a doubt, numerous political ambiguities persisted in these 2011 Riyadh agreements organized by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which was acting under the leadership of the KSA.

When the “Houthi rebels” and the pro-Saleh military units took over the capital in autumn 2014 and then decided to march on Aden to de facto conquer the entire country, the UNSC gave unreserved support to the KSA, who feared Yemen falling under Iran’s control, along with the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, through which 35% of the world’s maritime commerce passes, and thus a large part of Saudi hydrocarbons. With threats looming over free passage through the Strait of Hormuz in the east of the Arabian Peninsula, this Iranian presence in Yemen would clearly

compound the capacity for blackmail of the KSA’s main enemy in the region. This was unacceptable and non-negotiable, and the KSA of King Salman and his son Mohammed (colloquially known as MBS) would use all their influence at the UN to lock the Resolution 2216 of April 2015, as well as the following ones, to their advantage.

Must we go as far as to evoke the idea that, for five years, the KSA and the UAE have been bribing their three main arms suppliers, namely the US, Great Britain and France, permanent members of the UNSC, so as to continue to be supported on the international level and have free rein in Yemen, as suggested by certain observers?<sup>23</sup> This hypothesis could possibly be accredited, in view of the cumulative amounts of these infamous arms contracts.<sup>24</sup> As cryptically indicated in the UN report: “Several [UNSC] members’ close political, financial and trade relationships with Saudi Arabia, as well as with other GCC countries, have made the Council sensitive to Saudi influence and often restrained members’ ability to discuss the situation more critically [...]”<sup>25</sup>

## The UN Security Council gave unreserved support to the KSA, who feared Yemen falling under Iran’s control, along with the Bab-el-Mandeb strait

Even Russia, Iran’s ally in the case of Syria, is balancing the interests of this other major hydrocarbon producer which is the KSA, with whom it seeks to improve relations. Was it really random that Rus-

<sup>19</sup> All of these texts are accessible at: [www.securitycouncilreport.org/un\\_documents\\_type/sanctions-committee-documents/?ctype=Yemen&cbtype=yemen](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/sanctions-committee-documents/?ctype=Yemen&cbtype=yemen).

<sup>20</sup> “The Rule of Law: Retreat from Accountability,” Research Report, December 2019, (page 21-26): [www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/research\\_report\\_3\\_rule\\_of\\_law\\_2019.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/research_report_3_rule_of_law_2019.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Who had been his Vice-president for 17 years, and was elected as the sole candidate “by consensus” for a two-year term in early 2012.

<sup>22</sup> This would result in Resolution 2140 of 26 February 2014, which instated a series of sanctions primarily directed against former President Saleh, described as spoiling the transition process: [www.undocs.org/en/S/RES/2140%20\(2014\)](http://www.undocs.org/en/S/RES/2140%20(2014)).

<sup>23</sup> Waleed ALHARIRI & Nickolas ASK, “Five Years of the UN Security Council Toeing the Saudi Line,” <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9603>.

<sup>24</sup> [www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/usa-and-france-dramatically-increase-major-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-largest-arms-importer-says](http://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/usa-and-france-dramatically-increase-major-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-largest-arms-importer-says).

<sup>25</sup> “The Rule of Law: Retreat from Accountability,” *op cit.*, p. 26.

sia abstained when Resolution 2216 was adopted? With regard to China, it would definitely want to avoid falling out with the KSA, which is a highly influential partner in Muslim countries, particularly Asian ones, and can thus play an important role in the framework of its political-economic project of the “Silk Route” going through Bab-el-Mandeb.

### A new Resolution would save the current UN special envoy from having to flounder between humanitarian emergency and the constraints of former political directives

To better understand the support and the vote process within UN Resolutions, it must be kept in mind that the KSA has enjoyed the support of various countries that are non-permanent members of the UNSC, as for instance Jordan (between 2014 and 2015), Egypt (2016-17) and Kuwait (2018-19), all members of the GCC and the Arab military coal-

tion intervening in Yemen. The UN report, however, indicates that certain countries, namely European ones (among others), have not endorsed this complacent, pro-Saudi position, even if it is held by the majority.

In the face of the current Yemen impasse, despite the numerous obstacles to overcome, isn't it high time that the UNSC members rapidly create the conditions for a reconfigured approach to the conflicts on the whole through a new resolution that would set a definite course to end the crisis?

Wouldn't it be worse to wait, or even do nothing?

A new resolution would save the current UN special envoy from having to flounder between humanitarian emergency and the constraints of former political directives, that have become contradictory, obsolete and questionable, and which cannot but contain the situations on the ground. It would also allow regional powers, who are seeking a graceful exit from the quagmire into which they've sunk, to find international motivation to formulate political ways out. It would also establish certain limits to the demands of the different Yemeni parties, in both the North and the South, who are currently either clinging to their positions on the ground, or to past guarantees, which are both unjustified and illusory.