Yemen: a conflict behind closed doors

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In the shadow of Syria, Yemen has been dragged over the last two years into an increasingly radical and deadly war in which the international community and the media have shown very little interest. François Frison-Roche helps us to understand the causes and origins of this conflict in the hope of saving it from the oblivion into which it is sinking.

It has been almost seven years now since Yemen first became caught up in this complex conflict, the brutality of which is only now becoming obvious. Why so complex? Because it is made up of a several wars all happening at the same time.

One conflict, several wars
First there is the war between the “Houthi rebels***”, part of the Ansar Allah* movement, and the Sunni “coalition” led by Saudi Arabia. This is the war we hear a bit about, as it is seen as a new battleground for two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, who are both seeking to preserve or regain hegemonic influence in the Middle East.

But there is also a war going on between the current president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi, who spent a long time in exile in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and is recognised and supported by the international community, and the elites of the former regime of the autocrat, Ali Abdallah Saleh*. These elites are composed mainly of various armed forces which have remained loyal to Saleh, are well-trained, well-equipped, and provide essential military backup to the Houthis. These confrontations have all the characteristics of a civil war2.

And then there is yet another war between north and south Yemen. This war is the result of long-standing and latent antagonism dating back to the war of unification in the mid-1990s and aggravated by a heightening conflict between Shafi Sunnis* and Zaydi Shiites*. The significance of this relatively recent “confessionalising” of the conflict should not be over - or underplayed. In fact, it is a reflection of ancestral tribal struggles that have always been an important part of Yemeni political life, itself inextricably embroiled in interplay between the many networks of political and clientelistic alliances developed over the last thirty years.

And finally there is the war against the terrorist groups of Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQPA)3 and Daesh. This war is the most blursed of all, with examples of manipulation and

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1 To avoid overly long footnotes, the “***”, refers the reader to a series of explanations given at the end of this analysis.
instrumentalization concerning both groups\(^4\). Although these two enemies are clearly identified in the West through the actions they carry out in different countries, their strategy in Yemen is much less clear. Indeed, in Yemen, it is difficult to know exactly who they are fighting with or against\(^5\).

But for the last two years, it is mainly the first of these wars that has been devastating one of the world’s poorest countries. And it is a “silent war”, at least when compared to the amount of media coverage devoted – and rightly so – to Syria.

Yet the horrendous statistics published by major international organisations\(^6\) and aid NGOs\(^7\) don’t seem to be making the slightest impression: in Yemen, people are killing and dying in almost complete indifference\(^8\). Since the start of the conflict, at least 10,000 people have been killed\(^9\) and the thousands left injured have no access to proper care as the hospitals have been destroyed in bombing campaigns and drugs are in short supply. So far, the fighting has led to the displacement of more than 2 million people and this figure is likely to increase. More than 21 million of Yemen’s 25 million inhabitants\(^10\), or 82\% of the population, are in need of aid and 14 million are food insecure, with 7 million suffering from severe hunger. In several regions, famine has set in and without rapid action it looks set to take on catastrophic proportions and start claiming victims among the most vulnerable, especially children. Before the war, Yemen imported around 90\% of its food. Is the air and sea blockade put in place by the Saudi-led military coalition part of a political ploy to starve the Yeminis to death for want of being able to defeat the “Houthi rebels” on the ground?

**Yemen: the challenge of maintaining a humanitarian access**

While most institutions, donors, and diplomatic representations in Yemen have, in the last two years, closed their representative offices or temporarily relocated elsewhere, humanitarian organizations have been struggling every day, without very much support, to remain in the country and deliver increasingly vital aid.


\(^{5}\) Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning and Mohammed Ghebri, “How Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen has made al Qaeda stronger and richer”, Reuters, 8 April 2016, www.reuters.com/investigates/special-dossier/yemen


\(^{8}\) Info 360, *Un rapport de l’ONU confirme que l’Arabie saoudite bombarde l’école, bus et mariages au Yémen [A UN report confirms that Saudi Arabia is bombing schools, buses and weddings in Yemen]*, https://infos360.top/fr/monde/rt/international/14699-rapport-ondu-arabie-saoudite-ymen


\(^{10}\) There are around 20 million inhabitants in the north of the country and 5 million in the south.
Maintaining a humanitarian presence in Yemen has become increasingly complex, as none of the belligerent parties helps to make the successful delivery of aid possible. The increasing fragmentation of the conflict – as described by François Frison-Roche – has given way to a multiplicity of parties and decision-making bodies with which NGOs must negotiate in order to carry out their activities, each party having different, if not contradictory, demands and procedures, and each party regularly putting into question prior decisions. In addition, the country’s civil servants – including health workers – have not been paid for months. The main consequence has naturally been the further decline of Yemeni public services, such as hospital care, due to lack of personnel, which results in a greater need for humanitarian aid. This effect was especially noticeable during the management of the cholera epidemic in October 2016. Out of the forty Cholera Treatment Centers officially operating in the country, a very small number of them actually receives and treats patients, due to a lack of personnel, a shortage of medication, and long customs delays. Nearly 15 million Yemenis no longer have access to the country’s health system, as more than half of the health structures are out of service.

The non-payment of salaries has also further delayed the issuance of administrative authorizations (visas, travel permits, programme agreements, etc.). At the same time, NGOs are facing mounting pressure from the authorities to address this problem and pay the salaries of civil servants providing these services, be they administrative staff in charge of granting authorizations, or health personnel, for example.

Given that the humanitarian situation has become so dire, that the economy of the country is on the verge of collapse, and that the belligerent parties refuse to recognize the impartiality of operational NGOs in the conflict, State control of humanitarian aid is now being played out at all levels. Authorities regularly interfere by wanting to participate in the drawing up of needs assessments – unless they perform these assessments themselves – and they intervene when lists of beneficiaries of humanitarian programs are being compiled, so that they can include their own people. Objections raised by NGOs frequently lead to reprisals, ranging from threats to arrests, violences, bottlenecks in the delivery of authorizations and visas, searches in NGO offices, etc.

Faced with this situation, humanitarian organizations have jointly developed common operational standards to maintain a concrete coordinated approach in line with humanitarian principles, which should allow them to approach these matters with the authorities. The time allocated by humanitarian organizations to open the dialogue with local and national authorities, to inform them of operating procedures, and to clarify the roles of each constituent has become a priority for all those involved.

The obstructions to providing assistance caused by hostilities are unrelenting. Bombings were extremely heavy after peace talks broke off between August 6th and December 2016. The targeting of civilian infrastructures (schools, hospitals, harbors, bridges, markets, etc.), of roads and checkpoints (with greater intensity during this period), resulted in having activities and travel come to a halt due to the absence of a safe and viable process of deconfliction [Fact to reduce the risk of conflict between different protagonists in an area by coordinating their movements, Editor’s note]. Since early January 2017, these dangers have resurfaced with greater intensity after the launch of a new military offensive along the coast by the Saudi-led armed coalition. The conflict thus shows no signs of abating, and the humanitarian space needed for NGOs to operate is not getting any better. Despite this, NGOs are assuring their presence, and are managing to provide humanitarian assistance that is now more vital than ever. In the case of Action Against Hunger, more than 250,000 Yemenis benefited from health and nutritional support programs, and from food and water safety measures and sanitation in 2015. These
programs were further developed in 2016, notably following the cholera epidemic. But NGOs themselves need support to maintain their presence and pursue these actions, financially speaking, naturally, but also to preserve their direct dialogue with the authorities. Given the magnitude of the crisis, all those involved – institutions, benefactors, and diplomatic representations – need to speak out to help the humanitarian community gather the support it needs for it to gain greater access to all victims of the conflict.

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Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

**Two aggravating factors**

This brief study focuses on two points in particular, both likely to worsen and lengthen the conflict. The first is internal and concerns the Yemeni president’s decision to transfer the country’s central bank. The second is external and concerns “commercial competition” between major powers over weapons sales, competition which is certainly helping to temper diplomatic pressure by western countries on Saudi Arabia.

To begin with the internal issue, despite strong qualms on the part of the International Monetary Fund, albeit cloaked in respectfully diplomatic language, President Hadi’s decision on 19 September to transfer the headquarters of the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) from the capital, Sana’a, to the “temporary capital”, Aden, has dealt a heavy blow to the country’s humanitarian situation. Until the move, the CBY had been one of the rare institutions still functioning thanks to a tacit agreement between the two Yemeni parties to the conflict. Despite the fact that the regular resources that used to constitute the country’s budget (royalties from the export of gas and oil, international aid) had completely dried up, the CBY was using its reserves to continue paying the salaries of all the country’s public servants and soldiers (i.e. about a third of the population), regardless of their political or religious allegiances in the conflict.

This transfer, supposedly for technical reasons, is having serious consequences because, in Aden, the CBY no longer has enough funds or sufficiently qualified personnel, that all stayed behind in Sana’a. This fact is more serious than it might appear on the surface. For example, the new CBY headquarters in Aden is unable to provide the letters of credit or commercial guarantees needed by local businesses to buy supplies on the international market. The buying cycle, which takes about two or three months, is running out of steam, which will inexorably lead to more shortages and worsen the famine taking hold of the country. Consequently, the global food crisis, which was already affecting the population at the end of 2016, seems likely to reach a peak during the first quarter of 2017.


13 Saudi Arabia is thought to have sent funds to the CBY in Aden in January to pay salaries, but only those of public servants and soldiers loyal to president Hadi.

As a result of this move to Aden, the only ones left to supply the starving population are traffickers, often controlled by the Houthi clans or by the former president. Herein lies the paradox of this decision: it strengthens the predators, and harms the immense majority of the country’s population, especially in the north, forced to endure a political situation with objectives they don’t necessarily share.

As for the external issue, there is little point in lending too much impact to the recent claims by the United States to have cancelled an arms deal with Saudi Arabia. This is a prime example of what might be called a cosmetic measure, designed to attract a lot of media attention and pacify public opinion in the West where people were shocked by the bombing in October 2016 of a funeral ceremony in Sana’a (140 people killed) after a series of other “collateral damages” by the Saudi air force, including the bombing of hospitals, markets and historic monuments. This time, American authorities, “deeply distressed” by this particularly barbaric act, declared that “US security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank cheque”.

Trade in the front line?

A few figures suffice to reveal the extent of the commercial interests linked to this forgotten war in Yemen. According to a serious Swedish NGO, SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), Saudi Arabia was the third largest arms importer in the world between 2011 and 2015. In 2015, its military expenditure is thought to have been in excess of 87 billion dollars. Again according to SIPRI, between 2009 and 2016, Saudi Arabia bought 43% of its arms from the US (a market of 115 billion dollars according to the Congressional Research Service), its other major supplier being Great Britain. Some Yemenis are concerned about US and UK neutrality with regard to the conflict as, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE),

the Foreign Affairs ministers of these four countries form the “quartet\textsuperscript{25}” charged with helping to formulate and support a political solution in Yemen.

According to figures provided by the official DSCA (Defense Security Cooperation Agency) website, since the start of the air campaign against Yemen by the Saudi-led military coalition – 2 years ago at the end of March 2017 – the US authorities have approved the sale of more than 20 billion dollars’ worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia\textsuperscript{26}. The cancellation of this munitions deal for an estimated 500 million dollars\textsuperscript{27} – which has not even been confirmed\textsuperscript{28} – puts both the effects of this measure and the distress of the American authorities into a certain amount of perspective.

Of course, optimists will see this cancellation not just as a sign of “exasperation\textsuperscript{29}”, but as a clear warning issued by the United States to their long-standing partner in the region, Saudi Arabia. Pessimists, on the other hand, might well see it as smokescreen for hiding its strong support to a country which has been its ally since the end of the Second World War and is considered to play a crucial role in regional stability.

Great Britain is also very mindful of its commercial interests in the region, as its weapon sales to Saudi Arabia are a godsend for its weapons industry\textsuperscript{30}. Despite Saudi Arabia recently acknowledging its use of British-made cluster bombs\textsuperscript{31}, the UK has no intention of changing its policy towards the Gulf countries in general, even if it forces the Prime Minister, Theresa May, to publicly rebuff her Foreign Affairs minister\textsuperscript{32}.

Meanwhile, and despite criticism mainly from English-speaking NGOs\textsuperscript{33}, France is trying to step into this US/UK-dominated market. According to SIPRI, it is only supplying 5% of Saudi Arabia’s weapons imports at the moment, as confirmed by the organisation Control Arms which compiles lists of weapons sold by France and other countries\textsuperscript{34}. However, according to reports in the Saudi press, a visit by the French prime minister to Riyadh has led to the promise of numerous contracts thought to amount to several billion dollars\textsuperscript{35}.

Today, Yemen is no longer really a state. The “central government”, whose functioning had long been little more than façade, is now in a state of total collapse. Among the very numerous

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\textsuperscript{26} www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales; www.dsca.mil/tag/kingdom-saudi-arabia

\textsuperscript{27} “Saudi official denies reports US has decided to restrict military support”, The Guardian, 18 December 2016, www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/18/saudi-arabia-yemen-us-military-support-john-kerry


explanations put forward for the causes and enduring nature of this conflict, those discussed in this brief study are rarely alluded to, probably because they are not considered paramount. But we believe it is important and necessary to bring them to public attention.

As well as inflicting great suffering on the population, the war raging in the south of the Arabian Peninsula will no doubt deal a fatal blow to the very idea of a Yemeni nation. This conflict, entirely a Yemeni affair at the outset, looks set to transform this country into a fragmented community of entities, varyingly and diversely influenced, and led by whoever manages – one way or another – to come out on top, by force of arms or with the support of self-serving allies. Is this really what the international community wants when what is still sometimes called “Arabia Felix” adjoins another fragile area, the Horn of Africa? If Yemen is allowed to sink into chaos, there is every reason to fear that the situation in Somalia and Eritrea will become even more volatile. A concentration of various armed forces (France, United States, Japan and Germany in Djibouti) or the establishment of bases (China in Djibouti, UAE in Somalia and Eritrea) in the area could lead to escalations and loss of control, with an inevitable “boomerang effect” for a number of countries in the region, especially Egypt, as well as for the international community in general.

The Houthi rebels and the Ansar Allah movement

The “confessionalising” of the political debate in Yemen, which began in a specific international context at the beginning of the 2000s, is largely due to former president Saleh seeking to divide the various opposition groups rising up against him. By opposing the Zaydi Shiites and the Shafi Sunnis, he attempted to instrumentalise the two main local branches of Islam and strengthen his power. In the early 1990s, with Iraq at war and a difficult unification process underway in Yemen, he encouraged Hussein Badr Eddine al-Houthi, member of parliament for the Hizb al Haqq party from 1993 to 1997 – and a Zaydi –, to form the “Believing youth forum”. This association, very much influenced by the “anti-imperialist” ideas prevailing in the Middle East at the time (in Lebanon, Hezbollah was harassing Israel which responded with “Operation Grapes of Wrath”), adopted the slogan, “God is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A curse upon the Jews! Victory for Islam!” When, after 9/11, President Saleh was forced to align himself with the United States, al-Houthi became virulent in his criticism. Saleh therefore decided to crack down on the Houthi clan and, with the help of the Saudi air force, launched several wars against this group in the Saada region on the grounds that it was a danger to the Republic and, with the help of Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, was seeking to re-establish the Shi’ite Imamate abolished by the republican revolution in 1962. The six successive wars against the Houthis resulted in the deaths of around 10,000 people. Hussein al-Houthi himself was killed in September 2004 and the movement took his name. His brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, born in 1979, took over as leader of what then developed into an armed group of highly motivated and experienced fighters.

The “political branch” of the Houthis is called Ansar Allah (Partisans of God). It is led by Saleh Ali al-Sammad who, when the capital fell in September 2014, was appointed as an adviser by President Hadi in a move to pacify the situation. He is now head of the “Supreme Political Council”, which is made up of 10 members, 5 of whom are members of former president Saleh’s party, the GPC.

The Houthis consider themselves to be marginalised and victims of the Salafists. During the National Dialogue Conference (2012-2014), two of their members were assassinated. They have not accepted President Hadi’s decision to transform the country into a federal six-region state, especially as the territorial limits established for their own region deny them access to the Red
The Saudi-led Sunni coalition
The Sunni coalition operating in Yemen was first formed in March 2015 by Saudi Arabia which leads it. It is made up of nine other countries: Bahrain, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar and Sudan. The Sultanate of Oman is notably absent. This small country in the south of the Arabia Peninsula, where the majority of the population is Ibadi (the 3rd branch of Islam), borders both Yemen (to the West) and Saudi Arabia and is endeavouring to play a mediation role. The coalition's official objective is to reinstate Abd Rabbuh Mansour al-Hadi, who was ousted from power by the Houthi rebels and military forces loyal to the former president Saleh.

Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi
After serving as vice-president to President Ali Abdullah Saleh for 17 years (1994-2011), General (now Field Marshal) Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi (71 years old) is now president of Yemen. He was elected as the “consensus candidate” (he was in fact the only candidate) in February 2012 by direct universal suffrage for a two-year transitional period which was extended by a year in January 2014 at the end of the National Dialogue Conference in a procedure that could hardly be called democratic. He is, however, recognised as Yemen’s legitimate president by the international community.

Originally from the south of the country (Abyan governorate), he trained as a soldier (6 years in Egypt followed by 4 years in the USSR). In 1986, he fled the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) where bloody confrontations were raging between rival socialist factions and sought refuge in North Yemen. In 2015, after the capital Sana’a fell to the Houthi rebels, he resigned and was placed under house arrest. He managed to escape to Aden where he rescinded his resignation. As Houthi forces advanced southwards, he fled to Riyadh where he officially requested Saudi Arabia’s military assistance to return him to power. The next day, Saudi Arabia began a bombing campaign in Yemen. In April 2016, he appointed General Ali Mohsen as Vice-President, a man close to the Islamic Al-Islah movement and with a reputation as an economic predator when he was an ally of President Saleh.

Ali Abdallah Saleh
General (then Field Marshal) Ali Abdallah Saleh (74 years old), was first of all president of the Yemen Arab Republic (1978-90) after the assassination of his predecessor, President al-Ghashmi, before being elected president of the Republic of Yemen after unification with the PDRY (1990-2012). Destabilised in 2011 by the wave of protests in the Arab countries, he is wounded in an attack and goes for care to Saudi Arabia, then to the United States. Confronted with a growing popular uprising and the defection of his local allies, he transferred his office and powers to his vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, after signing an agreement brokered in Riyadh by the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) with the support of the UN and the principal western countries. This agreement guaranteed him full immunity and he returned to Sana’a where he remains president of his party, the General People’s Congress (GPC) – the country’s only structured political movement. He still plays a veiled political role thanks to a huge network of cronies developed over his 33 years as a head of state and to his large fortune. More of an autocrat than a dictator, he had governed the country with the help of members of his family (his half-brother was air force commander, his son was commander of the Republican Guards and his nephew was head of the intelligence services) and with the active support of other economic predators of the time, such as general Ali Mohsen, commander of the 1st
Armoured Division, and Sheik Al-Ahmar, leader of the Al-Islah movement.

**Sunnis from the Shafi’i school in Yemen**

Shafi’i is one of the four main schools of Sunni Islam. In Yemen, as in many other countries, including Egypt, South India, Malaysia and the Philippines, the majority of the population is Shafi Muslim. In terms of numbers of followers, this school is by far the biggest in the Muslim world.

It was founded by Imam al-Shafi (767-820), who lived in Yemen, after studying in Medina with Imam al-Malik (708/716-796), whose family was originally from Yemen. Accused of being too close to Shi’ism, he appealed to Caliph Harun al-Rachid (whose mother was Yemini) who exonerated him of all wrongdoing. He then lived in what is now Iraq. He studied there with Mohamed ibn al-Hassan, a disciple of Abu Hanifa (699-767), the founder of the Hanafi school. His first collection of jurisprudence, written in 810, was a sort of summary of numerous interpretations of the Maliki and Hanafi schools. He then went to Egypt where he studied with the disciples of Imam al-Layth ibn Sad and dictated another collection of jurisprudence, al-Madhhab al-Jadid, in which, after considering different methods of analysing the hadiths and opinions, he amended several of his earlier interpretations. Al-Shafi’s contribution is considered important as it rejected a certain juristic conformism (taqlîd). Today, Yemen is split between two fundamental currents of Islam, Sunniism and Shi’ism, and some observers say that the Shafis are, to a certain extent, the Shiites of Sunniism in the same way as the Zaydis are, to a certain extent, the Sunnis of Shiism — although this is a somewhat caricatured “formula”. It is also true that not so long ago, the Zaydis and the Shafis used to pray together at the same mosques in Sana’a.

**Zaydism**

Zaydism is a branch of Shi’ism. It is followed mainly in Yemen where specialists believe it represents between 30 and 40% of the country’s global population, concentrated in the mountainous North of the country around the city of Saada. But these figures should not necessarily be taken at face value. In the absence of a reliable headcount, they are subject to all kinds of manipulating and instrumentalization by the different “camps”. There is also a Zaydi minority in Saudi Arabia.

Zaydism comes from the teachings of Zayd ben Ali al-Hussein (?-740), a descendant of the prophet Mohammed (570-632) through his daughter Fatima (606-632). So he is thought to be the great-grandson of Ali (600-661) and the grandson of Hussein (626-680). In 898, the founder of Zaydism in Yemen, Al-Hadi Yahya ben al-Hussein (?-911) converted the local tribes and established a politico-religious regime, the Zaydi Imamate, which lasted until nationalist officers established the republic in 1962. The main difference between Zaydism and Persian duodecimal Shi’ism (Iran) and Ismaelism (another branch of Shi’ism followed, for example, by the Alawites in Syria or the Druze in Lebanon), is that Zaydis reject the choice of the fifth imam as caliph and successor to the Prophet.

Apart from these dogmatic quarrels, Zaydism sees itself as Arab Shi’ism and distances itself from the Persian Shi’ism of modern-day Iran with which it retains only tenuous links. This is why we believe attempts to link it to the Shi’ism of the current Iranian regime are mistaken, and mainly the result of the paranoia of the Saudi authorities and the politico-strategic calculations of the ayatollahs in Tehran who are “confessionalising” the current conflict which is, first and foremost, a Yemini affair.
Translated from the French by Mandy Duret

Biography • François Frison-Roche

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