

Yemen humanitarian crisis: an endangered population at the heart of a multiple stake conflict.

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Abstract

For 5 years, Yemen has been in the grip of a civil war based upon assertions of identity and geopolitical tensions. The historical fragmentation of Yemeni society aggravated these issues and led to the conflict getting bogged down. Yemeni people are the primary victims of this conflict. Because of a shortage of food and medicine, the population is condemned to live in poverty. The situation is even more difficult for the civilians who find themselves targeted by the different sides of the conflict. In spite of the numerous UN warnings, belligerents keep on violating the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law.



The state collapse and the reappearance of identity dynamics caused the escalation of violence, of which the Yemeni populace are the first victims. Noticing civilians' detrimental living conditions, the international community has been calling for the respect of international humanitarian law and the pacification of the conflict without success.

Following the fragile unification of the Yemen Arab Republic in the North and of People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South in 1990, Yemen appears as a new fragmented country. On one hand, uncolonized North Yemen had a specific religious identity which was characterized by Zaidism, a branch of Shiism. On the other hand, South Yemen, previously colonised by the United Kingdom until 1967, was the only socialist Republic of the Arab world. This historical fragmentation of Yemeni society is fundamental to the understanding of nowadays' conflict and the problem of state failure.

On 25th March 2015, Saudi Arabia initiated "Operation Decisive Storm" and intervened militarily to reinstate Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi, qualified as the legitimate President. He came to power in 2012 after the Yemeni Revolution and the overthrowing of President Ali Abdallah Saleh. Hadi was therefore appointed to engage a political transition that did not succeed in this revolutionary political context.

Recently qualified as the "worst humanitarian crisis in the world"¹ by the United Nations, what is the reality of the situation in Yemen? What are the causes and the consequences of this conflict? This article will attempt to answer those questions.

The Yemen conflict, the mingling of multiple factors

After more than 5 years of internationalised conflict, the Yemeni situation is deteriorating. The political crisis evolved and was paired up with an unprecedented humanitarian crisis affecting Yemeni populations. What are the origins of this worsening conflict, caused by multiple factors?

The Yemen conflict started with the collapse of the state and its inability to provide enough resources, as well as with the historical fragmentation of the society. Between 1990 and 2015, the nostalgia of South Yemen's independence strongly resurged. Some Southern Yemenis actually consider that the unification of both territories created a form of colonisation from the North upon the Southern part of the country. This colonisation is characterized by property issues and the privatisation of public goods. This contributed to nourishing a certain bitterness that expresses itself in the conflict. As a matter of fact, the Zaidi minority that took advantage of that privatisation was coming from the North, opposing protesters coming from the South.

In 2011, the Arab Spring revolutions spread to Yemen. This context happened alongside the resurgence of identities. Despite President Saleh's Shiite beliefs, Yemen is constructed according

¹ BRIGAUDEAU, A. (2018). L'article à lire pour comprendre la guerre au Yémen, "pire crise humanitaire au monde". Francetvinfo. [online] 20 Nov. Available at: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/proche-orient/yemen/l-article-a-lire-pour-comprendre-la-guerre-au-yemen-pire-crise-humanitaire-au-monde_3030407.html [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

to a policy of rejection regarding the Zaydi identity. The revival of that identity through Houthis' movement² is the genesis of this revolution. With this revolt, the Houthis' movement became stronger and in 2012, Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi succeeded President Saleh, overthrown after 33 years in office. Nevertheless, evolving in this unstable context, the Houthis' movement became pivotal. In 2014, it executed a form of coup d'état to overthrow President Hadi, who had been qualified as legitimate. The latter is thus forced into exile in Saudi Arabia.

Ever since, Yemen has been in the grip of a civil war opposing the Houthis' rebellious group and President Hadi's government that is legitimised by the international community. The latter is supported by a Saudi Arabia-led coalition to reestablish its authority.

Although the Shiite-Sunni rivalry remains fundamental in understanding the conflict, it detracts attention from more typical geopolitical stakes regarding the control of resources.

The geopolitical and economic dimensions of the conflict, characterized by a hegemonic fight in the Middle East, are able to further explain regional concerns that influence the conflict. Located at the South West of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is a strategic territory in this so-called unstable region. Because the country, alongside Djibouti, encircles the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb that comes to the Red Sea, it is the watchman of more than 20% of the world's oil flows³.

However, this Gulf region remains polarised between Saudi Arabia and Iran's influences. This war for influence between the two great powers of the Arabian Peninsula can explain the escalation of the conflict. Indeed, since Zaidism is a branch of Shiism, Saudi people imagine Houthis to be great allies of Iran in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen is motivated by two ambitions. The first one, which is codified by a United Nation resolution, consists in reestablishing President Hadi while the second revolves around the war for influence against Iran in the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, there are many struggles between regional powers regarding symbolic aspects of power, such as leadership or material possessions. In that matter, Iran's control over strategic points and resources, especially fossilised, would definitely undermine Saudi Arabia's influence over the region. Since Iran already has control over the Hormuz Strait, Saudi Arabia fears that a Yemeni government in favor of Iran would take control over the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. Western countries that get their oil from the region are supporting Saudi Arabia to counter Iran's influence over the main shipping roads of the peninsula. This conflict of influence, therefore, leads to several demonstrations of force displayed from the different parties of the conflict, without a thought towards civilian populations.

² The Houthis' movement emerged in the 1990s and revolves around a project of replenishment of their Zaydi identity which was predominant in the country for 1000 years, until 1962. Marginalised in the Northern part of the country, in Saada province, the movement constructed itself against the Republic and the state. In Yemen, there is a certain category, which includes Houthists, who pretend to be descendents from prophet Mahomet. In the context of the rise of the Republic that started in 1962, they felt marginalised. Therefore they still want to regain their position of political preeminence, and plan to do so through the succession of generations. This generated a rivalry between, on one hand, the tribal majority of the country : tribes are not claiming to be descendents of the prophet, and on the other hand, this category of Zaidi.

³ BONNEFOY, L. (2019). *Yémen, de l'Arabie heureuse à la guerre* [Conférence.] Le conflit yéménite, une nouvelle guerre ?, European School of Political and Social Sciences (Lille, France).

The population as the first victims of this conflict

In Yemen, 24 millions of people, i.e 80% of the population⁴, need humanitarian aid. The Yemen conflict generates migration flows from bombed cities, obligating the population to take refuge in the desert where living conditions are more than precarious. There are now more than 4 million displaced persons⁵.

The price of commodities rose by 150%⁶. Some Middle-Eastern countries are supplying Yemen with food and hygiene resources. Nevertheless, because of the coalition and especially because of Saudi Arabia's pressure, donating countries are forced to stop commercial exchanges or to raise their export prices towards Yemen.

Drinkable water is rare and inaccessible for 16 million Yemenis⁷ thus, causing the outbreak of infectious diseases such as cholera. Hence, the human toll is constantly rising. No medical structure is able to handle the abundance of injured and sickly persons. Furthermore, only a few hospitals are still functional since others were either destroyed or controlled by militias.

Children are also extremely affected by this conflict. Their health and growth are compromised by the constant lack of hygiene and the precarious living conditions. Children being displaced are also lacking access to education. This is all the more the case considering that most schools were intentionally destroyed by militias and the Houthis army.

This war does not exclusively affect Yemeni populations. Indeed, Yemen is a strategic crossing point for African migrants. Their life and travel conditions, already particularly inhumane, are amplified by the conflict: detention in centers with poor health and food conditions, constant risk to be hit by a stray bullet... Fear replaces the hope of fleeing their country. Only a few migrants manage to cross the Saudi border. Those who make it are not necessarily finding the peace they hoped for. In April 2020, Houthis notably evicted towards the Saudi border thousands of Ethiopian migrants that they considered infected with the coronavirus. Upon arrival in Saudi Arabia, the army arbitrarily shot tens of them before authorising survivors to enter the territory. The latter are now held in insalubrious camps where they are subjected to much violence.

⁴ OXFAM. (2019). 4 années de conflit au Yémen : la crise est délibérément empirée. *oxfamfrance.org* [online] 4 Nov. 2019. Available at: <https://www.oxfamfrance.org/humanitaire-et-urgences/4-annees-de-conflit-au-yemen-la-crise-est-deliberement-empiree/> [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

⁵ BRUT. (2019). *Yémen : les images rares d'une guerre qui embarrasse le gouvernement français - Brut*. *youtube.com*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZNIBrg4HuU> [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

⁶ OXFAM. (2019). 4 années de conflit au Yémen : la crise est délibérément empirée. *oxfamfrance.org* [online] 4 Nov. 2019. Available at: <https://www.oxfamfrance.org/humanitaire-et-urgences/4-annees-de-conflit-au-yemen-la-crise-est-deliberement-empiree/> [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

⁷ *Ibid.*

The Yemen conflict is in this manner the starting point of the “worst humanitarian crisis in the world”⁸. It represents a fundamental issue for the international community. Indeed, the acts of the authorities alongside the living conditions of the populations outrages international organisations.

A deadly war neglecting international law

Despite public opinion’s indifference, the war in Yemen appalls international organisations. In this respect, the United Nations and multiple NGOs note the violation of some fundamental principles of international humanitarian law by the different parties involved in the conflict.

The principle of distinction is the most discussed rule regarding the conflict. It is for instance codified in Article 48 of the Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions⁹. This law obliges soldiers to distinguish between civilians and combatants, but also between civilian and military objects. This principle was created to avoid hurting populations and to diminish civilian’s suffering. Nonetheless, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen demonstrates the parties’ unwillingness to abide by this distinction.

Numerous attacks initiated by the Saudi government go against this customary principle of international law. The Abs hospital attack that happened on 15th August 2016 in the North West of the country is an example of such violation. More recently, it also happened in Taizz City against Al-Thawra General Hospital on 13th March 2020. Those deadly air raids appear to be violating the Geneva Convention relative to the protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and its Article 18 regarding the protection of hospitals¹⁰. Compliance with this article is even more important considering that less than half of Yemeni medical infrastructures are operative¹¹. The lack of infrastructure is a real problem in a country where cholera and malaria continue to rage. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic increased the medical needs of the territory.

Children are also victims of this conflict and of such violations. Besides their indirect suffering, they are often right in the middle of the bombing. On 9th August 2018, a school bus was struck in Sa’dah, in the North West of the country. According to Saudi authorities, this accident took place during a “legitimate

⁸ BRIGAUDEAU, A. (2018). L'article à lire pour comprendre la guerre au Yémen, "pire crise humanitaire au monde". *francetvinfo.fr*. [online] 20 Nov. Available at: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/proche-orient/yemen/l-article-a-lire-pour-comprendre-la-guerre-au-yemen-pire-crise-humanitaire-au-monde_3030407.html [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

⁹ “In order to ensure respect for and protection of the civilian population and civilian objects, the Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives.”

¹⁰ “Civilian hospitals organized to give care to the wounded and sick, the infirm and maternity cases, may, in non circumstances be the object of attack, but shall at all times be respected and protected by the Parties to the conflict. [...]”

¹¹ UNOCHA. (2020). Yemen: UN Humanitarian Coordinator condemns hospital attack. *unocha.org*. [online] 18 Mar. 2020. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/story/yemen-un-humanitarian-coordinator-condemns-hospital-attack> [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

military operation”¹² around the area. Such attacks notably contravene Articles 51¹³ and 52¹⁴ of the Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Conventions, thus exemplifying violations of international humanitarian law.

Additionally, Houthis’ use of anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines outrages the international community. It violates Yemeni national law alongside the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty. The use of such weapons also undermines the principle of distinction since victims are unpredictable. As a matter of fact, no less than 140 civilians have died because of landmines since 2018¹⁵. Indeed, as they are randomly put in place, mines can harm anyone.

Thereupon, the international community called for the appeasement of the conflict on multiple occasions. Numerous resolutions were adopted by the United Nations Security Council to prevent the aggravation of the humanitarian crisis. Those reaffirmed the need to abide by international humanitarian law. The Security Council notably adopted Resolution 2216¹⁶ to implement an embargo on arms that could potentially be used in the conflict. Yet, compliance with it is not guaranteed. Indeed, many states such as France or the United States of America are main weapon suppliers to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. NGOs are thus accusing those countries of violating the embargo. In this way, despite several attempts by the international community to pacify the region, the Yemen conflict remains a bloody war, with no end in sight, that continues to make civilians suffer.

¹² EUROPE1 AND AFP. (2018). Yémen : au moins 29 enfants tués dans une attaque contre un bus. *europa1.fr*. [online]. 09 Aug. 2018. Available at: <https://www.europa1.fr/international/yemen-au-moins-29-enfants-tues-dans-une-attaque-contre-un-bus-3729743> [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

¹³ “*Protection of the civilian population : 1. The civilian population and individual civilians shall enjoy general protection against dangers arising from military operations. [...]*”

¹⁴ “*General protection of civilian objects : 1. Civilian objects shall not be the object of attack or of reprisals [...]*”

¹⁵ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. (2019). Yémen : Les mines posées par les Houthis tuent des civils et entravent l’aide humanitaire. *hrw.org* [online] 22 Apr. 2019. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2019/04/22/yemen-les-mines-posees-par-les-houthis-tuent-des-civils-et-entravent-laide> [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

¹⁶ “*14. Decides that all Member States shall immediately take the necessary measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer [...], of arms and related materiel of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment, [...].*”

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