

Yemen: Time to End its Suffering

Valentine M. Moghadam, Ph.D.

Prepared for WILPF-Boston branch Retreat, 8 Dec. 2017

In February 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states launched a campaign of air strikes against Houthi targets that rapidly besieged the entire country of Yemen. The relentless bombardments since then have turned Yemen into one of the worst humanitarian crises of modern times. Seven million Yemenis are close to famine, nearly two million children are suffering from acute malnutrition, and an outbreak of cholera has infected over 600,000 people. This horrific situation is the result of Saudi/UAE bombing of roads, hospitals, bridges, water and sewage facilities, and the main port of Hodeida combined with a Saudi/UAE naval and air blockade that prevents large-scale humanitarian assistance from reaching the Yemeni war victims. It should be noted that the Saudis use sophisticated weaponry supplied by the US, the UK, and France – which is why those countries have not criticized Saudi Arabia’s war crimes.

The conflict has been described as exemplifying the Sunni-Shia rivalry, and especially the rivalry between Saudi Arabia, which supported previous president Mansour Hadi, and the Houthi rebels, who are said to be supported by Iran. This is true to some extent, as Saudi Arabia is intent on becoming the major power in the region. But according to one expert, the conflict is “a continuation of a long-standing conflict between the Yemeni government and marginalized northern tribes, which escalated thanks to a gradual decline in the legitimacy and competence of the central government in Sanaa” (Orkaby 2017:1-2). For this reason, he writes, “only an internal Yemeni political settlement can end the war” (ibid.: 2). That is, the Saudi bombardment must stop immediately, not only because of the dreadful humanitarian crisis, but also to enable Yemeni political groupings to resolve their differences. Here I will not delve deeper into the complicated tribal rivalries that led to the ousting of the president but will provide an overview of Yemen’s history, the status of women, how Yemen was affected by the Arab Spring, and the disaster that befalls the country today.

Independence – Early 1960s

After years of colonial rule from Great Britain, 1962 marked a turning point. In September 1962, Imam Ahmed bin Yahya Hamididdin died and was succeeded by his son, who was then uprooted by rebels who had formed the Yemen Arab Republic, launching North Yemeni independence from Britain. This sparked what was known as the North Yemen Civil War between the royalists – supported by Saudi Arabia – and the republicans (YAR troops) backed by Egypt. This conflict lasted sporadically until 1967, when Egyptian troops were removed for deployment in the Six-Day War of June 1967. In November of that same year, and following 5 years of violence, the British protectorate was pushed out of South Yemen. The People’s Democratic Republic was born.

The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen – South Yemen

In Nov. 1967 the National Liberation Front (NLF) came to power and declared the Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). It quickly set about launching a modernization project in a country that lacked a unified national economy, political structure, and legal system. The 1970 constitution called its revolution “an alliance between the working class, the peasants, intelligentsia, and petty-bourgeoisie,” adding that “soldiers, women, and students are regarded as part of this alliance by virtue of their membership in the productive forces of the people.” The PDRY came to be known as “the Cuba of the Middle East.”

In contrast to what was occurring in the North, the NLF moved to enhance the legal status and social positions of women. The constitution outlined the government's policies toward women, and a new family law was proposed in 1971 and passed in 1974. The family law became among the most forward-looking and emancipatory in the Middle East. It established the principle of free-choice marriage; raised the minimum legal age of marriage to 16 for girls and 18 for boys (and this in a country where female child marriage was typical); abolished polygamy except in exceptional circumstances such as barrenness or incurable disease; reduced the dower (*mahr*); ended unilateral male divorce; and increased divorced women's rights to custody of their children.

Women were given the right to vote in 1970 when universal suffrage was implemented and by 1977 women candidates were competing for electoral office, as well as working in factories, handicraft cooperatives, and local defense militias. Much assistance for the PDRY came from the socialist bloc, and especially the Soviet Union. The General Union of Yemeni Women, formed in 1968, mobilized women throughout the PDRY and was especially active in monitoring and promoting the family law. A women's conference held 10 years after the family law sought to assess the progress it had made for women legally and socially. It was acknowledged that many women had indeed benefited from the government's policies and especially the family law, but that cultural values and norms remained conservative and more time would be needed for all women to be integrated into economic and political life (see Moghadam 2003: 95-98; Molyneux 1985).

Unfortunately, the PDRY's time and its socialist modernizing project were limited.

North Yemen vs. South Yemen

North and South Yemen remained hostile due to political and ideological differences. Fighting erupted between the North and South in October 1972, with North Yemen supported by Saudi Arabia and the South by the USSR, but the two countries reached a unification agreement later that month. The late 1980s brought interest in unification with an eye to oil exploration near the border of the two countries and enhancing both economies. The global context is relevant: the unification plan was occurring during the Gorbachev years, which saw the USSR seeking changes to its domestic and foreign policies, including a gradual withdrawal of its support for the modernizing, left-wing government in Afghanistan. May 1988 saw steps made to reduce tensions between North and South Yemen in the interest of unification.

Unification (1990) and Civil War

The unified Republic of Yemen was declared on May 22, 1990, with Ali Abdullah Saleh becoming the Head of State, but it wasn't long before tensions swelled again. After a new oil field was opened up in the South, many southerners perceived unification to have been a Northern conspiracy to acquire the South's land and resources. In addition, Yemen's decision not to support Coalition forces in the U.S.-led Gulf War resulted in an estimated 800,000 Yemeni nationals and overseas workers sent home by Saudi Arabia and placed into refugee camps by the Yemeni government, where they added to the problems of high unemployment and poverty. The unification process, thus, was a very difficult one.

The combination of the externally-generally problems, along with problems associated with transition and integration of government, bureaucracy, and militaries, resulted in tensions that would jeopardize the country in the years following. In August 1993, the vice president of the new unified state, Ali Salim Al-Beidh, left the North for Aden to protest what he deemed to be unfair treatment of the South. He suggested that he and the president resign.

An outbreak of fighting between the north and south armies occurred on May 4, 1994. Most of the actual fighting in the 1994 civil war took place in the southern part of Yemen. There were air and missile attacks carried out against some major cities in the north such as Sana and Tai'z. This civil war ultimately ended in July, when Aden was captured by the North and resistance ceased. The two-month civil war in 1994 decimated the southern Yemeni Socialist Party and consolidated the power of Ali Abdullah Saleh, head of the General People's Congress Party, who then formed a coalition government with the Islamist Islah party.

Again, the global context is relevant. By the 1990s, Islamist parties and movements had expanded throughout the Middle East. In addition, Al-Qaeda – led by the Saudi Osama bin Laden – had gained momentum in the years following the first Gulf War and the entry of American troops in Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries.

Meanwhile, all of the South's previous legal frameworks, including the family law, were annulled. During the 1990s, when I was attending UN meetings before and after the 1995 Beijing conference and would encounter the Yemeni women's delegation, I could tell who was from the North and who from the South by their dress. Gradually, most women in the South came to don some form of *hijab*.

Yemen is comprised equally of Shia and Sunni Muslims, and is the poorest and least developed country in the Middle East, with a tribal system that has been reinforced due to the state's failures in development and security. After the September 11 attacks in the US, President Saleh announced that Yemen would join the U.S. in its war on terror. Supporters of Al-Qaeda remained, however, and in 2009 formed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). As that group expanded in numbers and operations, the Yemeni government increased military spending, reaching 7% of GDP, one of the highest proportions in the world, and extraordinarily high for a poor country. In 2009 the Obama administration announced a counter-terrorism partnership with Saleh and began to launch drone strikes targeting multiple al-Qaeda locations. These strikes resulted in the killing of many Yemeni civilians. Dissatisfaction

with the Saleh regime grew, especially but not exclusively on the part of Yemen's Zaidi Shia, whose leader al-Houthi had led a rebellion in 2004 that had been crushed by government forces.

Unified Yemen remained the poorest country in the Middle East, with widespread illiteracy and malnutrition, and a high rate of adolescent girl marriages, high fertility, and high infant and child mortality. By the time the Arab Spring broke out, almost half of the population lived below the poverty line and one-third experienced chronic hunger. Yemen also has one of the most heavily armed populations in the world (Phillips 2017). This is one feature it has in common with the USA.

The Arab Spring and the Yemeni Uprising

In 2011, the outbreak of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt inspired protests in Yemen. The Yemeni protests were against the government's failings around key issues in economic conditions, corruption, and the Yemeni Constitution, and the protesters called on President Saleh to resign and step down from power.

The Gulf Co-Operation Council (GCC) tried to mediate the conflict between Saleh and the people by drafting a proposal for the transfer of powers, but Saleh refused to cooperate at the time. At that point, there was an uprising, followed by an assassination attempt at the presidential palace 10 days after the start of the uprising. Saleh and seven other government officials were wounded, and Saleh was brought to Saudi Arabia for surgery. On November 23, 2011 Saleh signed the GCC document that transferred power to Vice President Hadi.

In 2011, activist journalist and Islah party member Tawwakol Karman was bestowed a Nobel Peace Prize for human rights activism (shared with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee from Liberia). According to Wikipedia, Karman gained prominence in her country after 2005 in her roles as a Yemeni journalist and an advocate for a mobile phone news service denied a license in 2007, after which she led protests for press freedom. She organized weekly protests after May 2007 expanding the issues for reform and then redirected the Yemeni protests to support the Arab uprising in Tunisia. A Saudi cable leaked by WikiLeaks revealed that while publicly denouncing Saudi Arabia she was secretly arranging meetings with the Saudis to request their support. Karman lavished praise on the Saudis for pushing through a transition agreement that many reformers saw as a deep betrayal of their "revolution". One source reports that she even accused Hadi of supporting the Houthis and Al Qaeda.

Emergence of Houthi Rebels

Amidst the tensions associated with unification and civil war in the 1990s, a religious-political group called the Houthis emerged in northern Yemen, with tensions between the group and the Yemeni government growing throughout the years to come. As I mentioned, In June 2004, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi – the Zaidi religious, political, and military leader – launched a rebellion against the Yemeni government, specifically president Saleh. He was killed and the rebellion crushed, but the Houthis returned after the Arab Spring protests.

In September 2014, Houthi rebels entered the capital city of Sanaa, gaining full control by January 2015. After Houthi forces took the presidential palace along with other key areas, both President Hadi and his

prime minister resigned, leading the dissolution of Parliament and the takeover of Houthi militants as the governing body. Contrary to the claims of the Saudis and the Obama and Trump administrations, Iran actually advised the Houthis not to seize Sanaa (Wilkerson and Porter 2017). In a challenge to mainstream opinion pieces, Asher Orkaby (2017) has written that not only do the Houthis act independently of Iran, but they have no interest in confronting either the U.S. or Israel. Their main enemies are AQAP, ISIS, the corrupt former government, and now Saudi Arabia.

Conclusions: End the Intervention of Outside Forces

Saudi Arabia launched a military intervention into the new Yemeni civil war ostensibly to restore the government of President Hadi. This intervention involved bombing Houthi rebels along with a naval blockade and the deployment of forces on the ground. Other countries have also involved themselves in the air campaign including nine other (mostly Sunni Arab) states. The US, UK, and France were also involved in the campaign through mostly intelligence and logistics like aerial refueling. Subsequently, Iran supplied the Houthis with some arms, but the Houthis acquired most of their weapons when they attacked Yemeni army units still loyal to Saleh (Wilkerson and Porter, 2017).

U.S. military support has enabled the Saudi coalition's destruction of Yemen's civil infrastructure and its cultural heritage sites, exacerbated an already devastating humanitarian crisis, and empowered terrorist organizations. In January 2017, the Trump Administration authorized the U.S. military to launch air strikes, which resulted in the killing of dozens of civilians. The military campaign has been widely criticized by international bodies and human rights organizations. According to the United Nations, by February 2017, the civilian death toll had reached 10,000, with 40,000 others wounded. The U.N. further reports that the U.S.-backed Saudi-led coalition is responsible for roughly two-thirds of civilian casualties in the war.

According to the International Rescue Committee, "Yemen is facing the largest humanitarian crisis in the world as 17 million people—60 percent of the population—are critically food insecure and require urgent humanitarian assistance." Children are among the worst sufferers with 2.2 million suffering from acute malnutrition, and more than 460,000 severely and acutely malnourished.

Yemen's problems originate in a regime that after 1990 failed to provide its citizens with security, economic development, and social services; squandered its oil wealth on military purchases; allowed U.S. drone strikes; and reinforced a complex tribal system enabling shifting alliances. These problems have been exacerbated by external intervention and especially by the Saudi military assaults and blockades. This needs to stop, as Yemenis must be able to reconcile their differences without external military interference. If the Saudis withdrew, the Houthis could be persuaded to put down their arms and attend peace talks.

Although it is difficult to appeal to the U.S. government to save Yemen from its humanitarian crisis, given America's abysmal record in the region, it is incumbent upon peace-loving and anti-war citizens to demand that the government immediately end its air strikes on Yemen, halt its arms sales to the despotic Saudi regime, and provide Yemen with urgently needed humanitarian aid. Our organization should continue to work with Mass Peace Action, Code Pink, other progressive advocacy groups, and

progressive legislators to stop all U.S. weapons delivery to Saudi Arabia and to insist that Saudi Arabia stop its bombardment campaign, leave Yemen alone, and make restitution for all the death and destruction it has incurred in Yemen.

References

Al-Sakkaf, Nadia. 2012. "Yemen's Women and the Quest for Change" (October). Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09434.pdf>

Benjamin, Medea. 2016. *The Kingdom of the Unjust: Behind the U.S.-Saudi Connection*. London: O/R Books.

Moghadam, Valentine M. 2003. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Molyneux, Maxine. 1985. "Legal Reform and Socialist Revolution in Democratic Yemen: Women and the Family." *International Journal of Sociology of Law* 13: 147-172.

Orkaby, Asher. 2017. "Yemen's Humanitarian Nightmare: The Real Roots of the Conflict." *Foreign Affairs* (forthcoming, Nov./Dec.).

Phillips, Sarah G. 2017. "Yemen." Ch. 20 in Ellen Lust, ed., *The Middle East* (14th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Wilkerson, Lawrence and Gareth Porter. 2017. "Congress, end America's role in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen." *The Hill* (Oct. 12).

See also:

British Broadcasting Corp [BBC]. 2017. "Yemen Profile - Timeline." *BBC News* (06 July). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704951>

Central Intelligence Agency. 2017. "The World Factbook: YEMEN" (accessed 19 Oct.). www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html

Pike, John. "Military." *Yemeni Civil War (1990-1994)*. N.p., n.d. Web. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/yemen1.htm>

Wikipedia:

- "Modern History of Yemen" (accessed 1 Oct. 2017). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_history_of_Yemen

- "Saudi Arabian-led Intervention in Yemen" (accessed 21 Oct. 2017).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saudi_Arabian-led_intervention_in_Yemen
- "Yemeni Revolution" (19 Oct. 2017).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemeni_Revolution#cite_note-cia-47;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tawakkol_Karman

Washington Report on Middle East Affairs. 2009. "North and South Yemen: Lead-up to the Break-up" (08 Dec.). <https://www.wrmea.org/1994-july-august/north-and-south-yemen-lead-up-to-the-break-up.html>

Wintour, Patrick, and Julian Borger. 2017. "Independent Investigation Will Look into Human Rights Abuses in Yemen." *The Guardian* (29 Sept.). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/29/yemen-un-investigation-human-rights-abuses>