

Unprecedented humanitarian crisis amidst imperialist intervention and counter-revolutionary revenge in Yemen

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In 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring, a gigantic popular uprising swept through Yemen. In a country dominated by corruption, plagued by divisions between north and south and the overwhelming role of old military-tribal hierarchies, there was hope. Young people occupied the squares for months in Sana'a, in Taz, in Aden. Among its main spokespersons there was even a woman, Tawakkol Karman, and a demand, a civil state, which broke with the old military-religious and tribal hierarchies. The revolution unified the country, in the hope of putting an end to a corrupt regime, embodied by President Saleh's clan, which sold the country's gas wealth for a pittance to multinationals, such as France's Total, and which used and manipulated the growing danger of al-Qaeda in Yemen to make itself indispensable in the eyes of international donors, especially the US.

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The revolution was strong enough to oust President Saleh from power. But there was no question for US and also French imperialism, or the neighbouring Saudi monarchy, or the old Yemeni military-tribal reactionary forces, of letting the revolution rule. The Bab el Mandeb strait, through which a third of the world's oil passes, could not be under the control of a revolutionary government. Saudi Arabia, where even the country's name is privatized by a single clan, could not accept a revolution that ousted the tyrant. The wealth was to go back to the old clan elites marginalized by the Saleh clan.

This reactionary coalition first blocked the birth of a new democratic constitution, then imposed a government of continuity with the old regime by placing Hadi, the former prime minister of the ousted president, at the head of a transitional government. It united, then tore apart to conquer power, plunging the country into a never-ending military and humanitarian crisis. A crisis multiplied tenfold by the adventurous military intervention Decisive Storm, launched in 2015 by Mohamed bin Salman (MBS), the new strongman of Saudi Arabia, with the support of his ally and mentor Mohamed bin Zayed, of the United Arab Emirates, under the aegis of the American, and more discreetly French, umbrella. The aggression of the wealthy Saudi kingdom against the poorest country in the Arab world was supposed to solve in a few months the problem of the Houthis, supported by Iran, who had taken control of the capital Sanaa, in alliance with the deposed former president Saleh, in a spectacular reversal of alliance. Eight years later, Yemen is more divided than

ever, and the war is still there, culminating in today's stalemate.

“Decisive Storm,” a reactionary adventure

MBS's Yemeni adventure can be explained as much by the desire of the new Saudi strongman to consolidate his young regime within the kingdom as by the muted confrontation that has pitted the Saudis against the Islamic Republic of Iran since the fall of the Shah. A confrontation punctuated by the Iran-Iraq war, where the Saudi kingdom financed the Iraqi aggression, or by the clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi police in Mecca in 1987. These tensions have only been heightened by the rise of Iran's nuclear program. Along with Israel, Saudi Arabia denounced the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal, which left a civilian nuclear component and reintroduced Iranian oil to the market at a time when its price was collapsing. Not to mention the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia, the majority in the Al-Hassa region, Saudi Arabia's main oil region, seen as a perpetual internal threat. For the Sunni kingdom, protector of the holy sites, the Arab Spring was nothing more than an Iranian desire to constitute, against the Sunnis, a Shiite arc from Bahrain to Yemen via Syria and Iraq.

In Yemen in 2014, riding the wave of popular discontent, the Houthis militarily drove Hadi's transitional government out of the capital Sanaa, which on the one hand caused the price of gas to explode for Yemenis, but on the other hand sold it off repeatedly to Total. The Houthis are descended from a particular branch of Shi'ism, the Zaydis, who dominated Yemen for centuries and then were marginalized by the Republic and then reunification. More than a protagonist in a religious conflict – Shiites versus Sunnis – the Houthis represent a minority that loudly criticizes President Saleh's alignment with US imperialism, under the pretext of fighting terrorism after 9/11. A very convenient adversary, an ally of Iran, despised by US imperialism, against whom Saleh sends bombs, but also ultra-Orthodox Sunni Koranic schools, such as Dar al-Hadith, in the heart of Shiite territory, to reactivate a religious conflict that was not very real at the beginning. Ironically, Saleh, like many members of the Yemeni elite, is from the Zaydi minority! What wouldn't he do to keep power for 33 years and to get American subsidies? He would go so far as to ally himself with yesterday's adversaries! And it is an unlikely and unstable alliance between the Houthis and Saleh, just ousted from power, that is expelling the new transitional Hadi government from Sana'a. The Hadi government, which emerged from the fragile compromise between the forces that wanted to bring the revolution into line and divide the country, had to take refuge in Aden, in the south. It owes its salvation only to the military and financial support of the reactionary international coalition of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Opposing coalitions fragment

In Sana'a, the Houthis and ousted former president Saleh, for a brief time allies, were once again tearing each other apart. Saleh was assassinated. The Houthis were the sole masters of the game at the end of 2017. In the south, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, allies and financial and military backers of a heterogeneous anti-Houthi coalition, are seeing their respective protégés confront each other with heavy weapons. This is because Saudi Arabia is supporting Hadi's militias who have taken refuge in Aden at arm's length. They took with them Al-Islah, the military-tribal party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. The same militias that waged the war against the southerners in the 1994 secession attempt, which left thousands dead in the southern ranks and swept away hopes for autonomy. The United Arab Emirates, an ally of Saudi Arabia, is mainly financing the militias of the southern movement, which is certainly opposed to the Houthis, but has created a Southern Transitional Council against the proteges of the Saudis who took refuge in Aden,

to confront militarily the Hadi government and its supporters in Al-Islah.

This improbable cohabitation has indeed awakened the old north-south divides. The north emerged from the Ottoman occupation and the struggle against the monarchy, with the Yemeni Arab Republic. The south emerged from the occupation by British imperialism of the port of Aden and its hinterland, to secure its empire and the route to India. It also stems from the abortive experience of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which followed the forced withdrawal of the British. This very advanced experiment, with free education and healthcare, formal equality between men and women and anti-imperialist positions, was the target of many attacks that limited its development, fostered internal fractures and pushed it into the arms of the USSR. It ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and ended in 1990 with a reunification entirely dominated by the elites of the northern Yemeni Arab Republic.

But the fractured anti-Houthi front in the south can also be seen against a backdrop of growing economic competition between Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. MBS wants a Saudi kingdom that is no longer just a petro-monarchy. He wants to initiate a grandiose and probably very unrealistic transition, to develop services, tourism, foreign private investment, with his Vision 2030 project. He is pressuring multinationals to repatriate their headquarters to Riyadh, which inevitably puts it in competition with Dubai, the Emirates' largest city. In 2021, Riyadh issued an ultimatum to large foreign groups. No more public contracts after 2024 if you don't locate your regional headquarters in the kingdom, which hosts only 5% of international headquarters compared to 76% for the Emirates. It must be said that the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a court journalist who had become a critic of the Saudi government, the kidnapping of hundreds of princes locked up for many months in the Hilton Riyadh and robbed of their money, the forced resignation of Saad Hariri, Lebanese prime minister, a Sunni and ally of the West, after his kidnapping by MBS in Riyadh, have chilled more than one foreign investor and angered the United States.

The picture of Yemen's fracturing would be incomplete if we did not add al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, and the Yemeni branch of Islamic State, which are taking advantage of the clashes to gain territory, notably the port of Mukalla and the Hadramaut Valley. Not to mention the U.S. drones that regularly strike markets and tribal leaders. An infinite politico-military fragmentation, the main victim of which is the Yemeni people.

Both sides bogged down

After eight years of war, Saudi Arabia has failed to defeat the Iranian-backed Houthis, who control the northern two-thirds of the territory. Its alliance is fractured, Yemen balkanized. The Yemeni government-in-exile that it makes and unmakes, has power only over the rooms of the luxury hotels it occupies in Riyadh. A stalemate that is costing the kingdom dearly. Worse, Saudi Arabia and its oil terminals have been repeatedly targeted by Iranian-designed Houthi drones, temporarily reducing its capacity to export oil, an essential asset that accounts for 90% of the state's revenues. Mohammed bin Salman will remember that the United States did not move a finger when Iranian drones hit his country.

The war is unwinnable for Saudi Arabia, which wants to refocus on its economic agenda, whose bright horizon is still receding with the covid crisis, and whose actuality is less and less dictated by its exclusive relationship with the United States, which did not support it, and which must resume talks with Iran to get out of this quagmire. Similarly, the Houthis, firmly established in the north, cannot hope to conquer all of Yemen's territory. Their deadly failure, with the deaths of tens of thousands of fighters, including many child soldiers, in an attempt to take control of the oil-rich

region of Marib, sounded the death knell for their hopes.

Yemen is hungry, Yemen is thirsty!

The war is estimated to have claimed more than 100,000 civilian lives. Nearly four million people have fled the fighting and bombing. But hunger, malnutrition and thirst kill even more surely than the bombing of schools, hospitals, markets and weddings by the Saudi coalition. The UN speaks of 200,000 indirect civilian casualties. Twenty-four million people, 80 per cent of the population, need emergency assistance. This is a figure never reached by any country in the world. More than half of the population does not have enough to eat. 7.4 million people are malnourished, including 2 million children, according to Oxfam. The health system is bled dry, the few functioning health facilities, especially those of NGOs, are bombed by Saudi planes. Prices are skyrocketing while incomes are collapsing. To financially stifle the Houthis, who levy customs duties and hold humanitarian organisations to ransom, Saudi Arabia is blocking the delivery of humanitarian aid, which is already vastly undersized in relation to the immense needs. The humanitarian crisis is worsening with the Saudi blockade of the port of Hodeidah and the airport of Sana'a. The country is ranked 191st in the UN Development Index. This is the price paid for the intervention of imperialism and the revenge of the old military-tribal hierarchies against the revolution.

We remember French participation in the dirty war in Yemen. Despite the French government's denials, the leak of a memo from the Directorate of Military Intelligence confirmed the accusations made by French NGOs. In the midst of the Khashoggi affair, it revealed that 48 Caesar cannons manufactured by Nexter, 100% owned by the French state, with a range of 42 km, were deployed by Saudi Arabia on its border with Yemen. The delivery was completed in 2018, well after the conflict began. A new export contract was even signed in December 2018, in the greatest secrecy, for Titus armored vehicles and 105LG towed guns. After the United States, France is the main supplier of the dirty war that is martyring and starving Yemen.

Yemen is hungry, but Yemen is also thirsty! In one of the driest inhabited regions in the world, global warming is further reducing the level of precipitation, transforming it into rare torrential rainfall episodes that tear up arable land, all the more easily since terraced crops are no longer maintained because of the war. But the collapse of the water system did not date from the war. It has been exacerbated by the joint effects of the aid policies of neoliberal international institutions and the former Yemeni central government. Both have favoured, by means of subsidies and by turning a blind eye, the anarchic multiplication of water pumping from deep boreholes, which only the large landowners can afford. This is to produce quaat, the euphoric water-hungry plant, which yields a lot of money but pumps 40% of Yemen's agricultural water and to produce export crops, such as bananas or mangoes, for multinationals. These boreholes deplete aquifers, divert water from subsistence village crops, and multiply conflicts over water. The surface wells of small farmers are drying up. This further increases their dependence on tribal chiefs and their tankers that bring deteriorating drinking water to the countryside and the city. In 2017, Yemen recorded the world's worst known cholera outbreak, with more than one million cases, while its health system collapsed. This water management model is unsustainable in the short term. It pumps more than water resources can replenish, while renewable water is only 72 m³ per inhabitant per year, already far from the 500 m³ defined as a scarcity threshold.

Saudis seek withdrawal

On this field of ruins, the revolution put down, with no hope of victory for any of the many

reactionary camps, direct negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia have begun to bear fruit, under the watchful eye of UN special envoy Hans Grundberg. Prisoners are being exchanged, the October 2022 ceasefire agreement has halted Saudi aerial bombardments and Houthi drone attacks, access to humanitarian aid improves, discussions have begun on the payment of Houthi officials on Yemeni oil revenues, managed by Saudi Arabia, a key demand of the Houthis. All this constitutes a fragile hope for peace, but in a country devastated and fragmented by the old hierarchies and imperialist aggression, which seems to have killed the democratic and unitary hope of an entire generation of youth. This is a fragile hope for peace, which is nevertheless essential for the reorganisation of Yemeni civil and democratic society, which is the only real bearer of hope.

Because a “victory” for the Houthis, through the withdrawal of the Saudi enemy, and the end of its financial and military support to the various anti-Houthi fronts, is not synonymous with the victory of democracy or women’s rights. Far from it! The numerous imprisonments, assassinations, disappearances, Kalashnikov volleys in the legs that the Houthi government has inflicted on its opposition, the multiple corruption cases or the campaigns for decent Islamic dress attest to this.

But the Saudi horizon of withdrawal from Yemen cannot be understood solely through the failure of its military adventure. It must be seen in relation to the evolution of the international situation, and to the more autonomous role that MBS wants to play in it. Two international events illustrate this new situation. A month before the US mid-term elections, Saudi Arabia chose to cut OPEC production by two million barrels a day to increase its oil revenues. This dealt a severe blow to Biden by sending oil prices higher just before a difficult election for the Democrats. And it gave a breath of fresh air to Putin, who saw oil revenues soar despite sanctions against his invasion of Ukraine. While Biden went so far as to shamefully shake MBS’s hand in Jeddah, after calling for his isolation following Khashoggi’s murder, and did everything he could to block Bernie Sanders’ Senate resolution on war powers to limit U.S. support for the war in Yemen, while U.S. courts granted immunity to the prince, Biden has not been able to count on the support of Saudi Arabia in his standoff with Russia over oil.

In April 2023, during a spectacular meeting in China, under the aegis of Xi Jinping, Saudi Arabia and Iran re-established diplomatic relations, which had been severed since 2016. Another sensational announcement was the creation of a Chinese-made drone assembly plant in Saudi Arabia. Or participation in the BRICS alongside China and Russia. At the same time, Mohammed bin Salman put on the table the proposal to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel, in exchange for a binding commitment by the United States to defend Saudi Arabia in the event of aggression. MBS’s desire is clearly to disengage from the Yemeni quagmire, to move forward in peace negotiations with the Houthis, against the backdrop of the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, to make the most of the oil rent, even if it means putting the American godfather in difficulty, to refocus on his 2030 horizon, by taking advantage of a multipolar world and the tensions between China and the United States to better negotiate a more autonomous place. Again, even if it means offending the United States.

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