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Yemen

# From civil war to active support for Gaza in Yemen

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**Since 7 October, Yemen's Houthi rebels have stepped up attacks in the Red Sea against ships believed to be linked to Israel. Thus, on 19 November, they seized a merchant ship belonging to an Israeli businessman, the “Galaxy Leader”, with its 25 crew members.**

The Houthis have repeatedly stated that they will only stop these attacks with the end of Israel's war against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Between 18 November and 13 January, more than 27 commercial vessels sailing in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden were attacked. Faced with this situation, Washington set up a multinational naval force in early December to protect merchant ships in the Red Sea, through which 12% of world trade passes. The main objective is to ensure one of the most essential maritime corridors for international trade. A few days later, the U.S. and the U.K. carried out another round of airstrikes against the Houthis. In addition, Washington has imposed sanctions targeting the Houthis' financing channels, targeting several individuals and entities in Yemen and Turkey. Throughout January and early February, U.S. and British military forces launched new attacks.

Despite the strikes, the Houthis continued their attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden on Israel-linked ships in solidarity with Gaza and said they would not stop until the war ended. The impact on global trade is hugely significant, diverting traffic via southern Africa, increasing delays and costs, creating a significant shortfall for Egypt and the Suez Canal.

The United States and Britain are therefore once again bombing this country of thirty million inhabitants in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, after having militarily supported a coalition including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates against the Houthi rebellion. Over the past ten years, this “civil war” has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and reintroduced episodes of acute famine in some parts of the country. However, the situation and the front line had stabilised with a Houthi victory over half of the country since the beginning of 2023.

## Yemen, a colonial history

The situation in Yemen is quite complicated to follow because it has its roots in the colonial division of that country, religious, ethnic and political heterogeneities, and the interference of neighbours such as Saudi Arabia. Colonial history has been instrumental in determining the political, economic and religious configuration of the region. Yemen is historically a grouping of two Yemens: North and South. In southern Yemen, a British colony since 1864, the port of Aden was considered a vital strategic asset for the British Empire. While the north of present-day Yemen, which was once part of the Ottoman Empire, was ruled by a local royal family after 1918. Reunification took place in 1990, but the country remains deeply divided.

Given the history with the United Kingdom, there is something nostalgic about resuming the bombing of Yemen. Indeed, the people of Yemen have been bombed by the British for almost a century. By the 1920s, military doctrine was evolving, and aviation was beginning to replace the use of troops throughout the British Empire in the Middle East. Thus, villages and tribes that refused to obey their colonial masters were bombed to gain their submission. This method, which was much less expensive than the use of troops, resulted in virtually no military casualties for the British.

Moreover, the British didn't just bomb targets in southern Yemen, they regularly bombed the north, wherever their

interests were at stake. In 1928, for example, the British air force attacked targets on both sides of the border of the two Yemens: it dropped nearly 70 tons of bombs, 1,200 incendiary devices and fired 33,000 machine gun shells, most of which targeted towns and villages, killing dozens of people. In March 1934, for a week, the Queteibis tribe was punished by attacks by the British air force, which this time dropped more than 28 tons of bombs on inhabited villages, with an average of 166 bombs per hour aimed at totally defenceless people. This method of colonial repression continued in the 1950s and 1960s to almost universal indifference.

Yet, in the 1950s, the British were confronted with a powerful trade union movement led by the Aden Trade Union Congress and the Socialist People's Party. Despite general strikes, a forty-eight-day strike in the docks in Aden, a series of demonstrations and protests, the British were determined to hold out. The rebels turned to armed insurrection and guerrilla warfare in the mountains. During the 1960s, a nationalist guerrilla movement developed, which confronted the British with an insurgency in the Radfan Mountains (in the southeast). Once again, the Empire bombed to defeat the newly created National Liberation Front (FLN). In May and June 1964, bombing raids on rebel positions crushed the Radfan insurgency. But the FLN extended its influence: in 1964, a guerrilla war broke out in the port of Aden and the resistance movement spread to much of the rest of South Yemen.

At that time, North Yemen was controlled by a secular nationalist movement that had seized power and created the Yemen Arab Republic. This Arab republic supported the rebels in the south against the colonial entity. The British responded by unleashing a brutal crackdown on the streets of Aden, including the establishment of an interrogation centre charmingly known as the “nail factory”. Torture, beatings and summary executions had become so commonplace that a wave of international outrage erupted. Meanwhile, across the border in the Yemeni Arab Republic, the British, Saudis and Israelis were supporting an Islamist revolt against the secular nationalist government. British mercenaries – the former SAS special forces – help train Islamist groups and sometimes fought alongside them. The Israelis supplied weapons to these rebels and the Saudis paid for everything. This period marks the beginning of a long period of interference by these countries in Yemen's political and military affairs. In the end, the level of resistance made it clear that the British position in South Yemen was no longer tenable, as the cost of remaining in Aden was simply too high. The British were therefore forced to evacuate the city at the end of November 1967. South Yemen later became the People's Republic of Yemen, close to the USSR.

## From Reunification to the 2011 Revolution

The reunification of the two Yemens in 1991, however, did not really bring the country together. And finally, power passed entirely into the hands of North Yemen and its dictator Saleh. Originally from the north, he was known for playing on the many divisions within Yemeni society in order to stay in power. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the realignment vis-à-vis the imperialist powers have had a major impact on Yemeni politics.

The Houthis – named after their former leader Hussein al-Houthi, who was killed in 2004 – emerged in the early 2000s as a military and political organization representing Yemen's Zaydi minority. Its development has been fostered by the rise of new religious currents within Sunni Islam, and in particular by the emergence of Salafism, a conservative current aggressively promoted by the Saudi authorities. It was initially in order to compete with the popularity of Salafist preachers that members of the Houthi family organized a religious youth movement in the 1990s, marked by the denigration of Zaydist customs and beliefs as “un-Islamic.” But the politics of the Houthi movement are complex: their religious ideas stem from the Zaydi branch of Shiite Islam, which has been present in Yemen since the end of the 9th century. In many ways, the religious practices and beliefs of Yemen's Zaydists are very similar to those of Sunni Muslims, who make up a slight majority of Yemen's population. The two religious groups have coexisted in Yemen for centuries, using the same mosques for prayer.

The youth movement organized summer camps combining religious lectures and sports activities, attracting

thousands of teenagers and young men. The revival of Zaydist religious beliefs took place against a backdrop of growing social contradictions in a region of Yemen that was relatively isolated until the early 1980s. For example, until the construction of the first paved road in 1979, the city of Saada (a historic Houthi site in northern Yemen) was a ten-hour drive from the capital Sana'a.

Initiated by the Houthi family, the movement morphed into a group of armed insurgents, engaged in a confrontation with the state. In the early 2000s, the U.S. government's "war on terror" provided dictators like Saleh with ample opportunity to acquire new weapons and dress up their dirty wars and internal repression as a global crusade against "Islamist terrorists." Meanwhile, many Yemenis were horrified to see US bombs raining down on Afghanistan and Iraq and outraged by US support for Israeli attacks on Palestinians. In 2004, when Hussein al-Houthi began channelling some of this anger into sermons and speeches, Saleh responded by sending troops to Saada, sparking an armed rebellion that continued for the next seven years. The Houthi movement has also relied on economic grievances to build a base, rallying support behind well-founded accusations of corruption against Saleh and his regime. Saleh's alliance with the United States played a crucial role in transforming this apolitical religious revival movement.

In 2011, Saleh's regime faltered. The Houthi insurgency played a role in this, but it was only one element of a much larger picture of growing discontent. Across Yemen, in both the north and south, the majority of the population has faced worsening poverty. Rural communities are being hit by the collapse of agriculture, while urban workers are struggling to make ends meet in the face of rising prices. The 2011 revolution was a struggle for dignity against an autocratic elite: it brought together rural and urban populations in a mass movement for change. But hopes for dignity and justice have not materialized. Yemenis had a new government that, backed by the West and Saudi Arabia, quickly became very unpopular, even though it had gotten rid of Saleh. Following the failure of the 2011 revolution, the country remained divided, and the Houthi rebellion contradicted the plans initiated by the West and Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni civil war had begun.

## The civil war

The Houthi movement's leaders allied themselves with their former enemy, Saleh, who still enjoyed a great deal of support within the army. Despite their radical demands to fight injustice, they were happy to make a deal with the former dictator. Their goal: to launch a military attack on the Saudi-backed government at the end of 2014.

The Saudi-led coalition initially turned to its air power – supplied and supported by the US, Britain and France – to pound civilian infrastructure, massacre mourners at funerals and guests at weddings. The price paid by Yemeni civilians was extremely high: the United Nations estimates that between 2015 and 2021, the war killed 377,000 people, at least 150,000 of whom died as a direct result of the armed conflict. Weapons manufactured and supplied by the United States, the United Kingdom and France are responsible for much of this destruction.

However, this did not dislodge the Houthis from the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, which they had taken control of in 2015. The Houthis' alliance with Saleh was not an accident, but it did highlight the fact that the movement's vision for change was limited to a top-down process of replacing one elite with another.

For their part, the Saudi and Emirati generals then turned to their Sudanese allies to provide the missing troops. In 2016, up to 40,000 Sudanese troops were fighting in Yemen, recruited as mercenaries in areas such as Darfur in western Sudan through a mix of intimidation and economic coercion. Yemen's "official" president spent most of the war in exile in Saudi Arabia, while his Saudi patrons competed with their Emirati allies for influence over the fractured array of pro-government militias that dominated areas outside the Houthis' control. For example, the United Arab Emirates has supported Aidarous al-Zubaidi, a powerful leader of the Southern Movement who has been

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campaigning for the secession of southern Yemen from the north since 2007. Al-Zubaidi took control of Aden in 2017, further deepening divisions within Yemeni society.

The division among their opponents has certainly helped the Houthis survive, but that's not all. Perhaps the biggest mistake made by Saudi and Emirati officials was to believe their propaganda that the Houthis were puppets of Iran. In fact, the movement's leaders have mobilized deep religious and social grievances behind their military campaigns, drawing on a decade of experience challenging the Yemeni state before they seized power in 2015.

That said, the Houthi movement is not really in a position to help the people. The actions against Israel demonstrate Yemeni society's support for the Palestinian people, but it is clear that the Houthi regime is using them to mask the loss of legitimacy and anger of the populations in the areas under its control. Regularly accused of being a puppet of Iran, it nevertheless has its own dynamic: the destabilization of the maritime zone in support of Gaza is on its own initiative and, even if they receive equipment from the Iranian regime, the Houthis have shown that they are capable of deploying their own military means.

Without having any illusions about this regime, which combines anti-American anti-imperialism with a very anti-Semitic hatred of Israel, the fact remains that the action of the UN-sanctioned coalition under the aegis of the United States to bomb this country – again – is inadmissible. The alternatives proposed by the Western powers are unacceptable to Yemenis, who must be able to live in peace without foreign interference, bombing and civil war.

The revolution of 2011 showed another possible path – democratic, inclusive and liberating. It also showed that local powers (Saudi Arabia, Emirates) and Western powers (United States, United Kingdom and France in the lead) have no interest in the emancipation of peoples, even at the cost of one of the most horrible civil wars of this beginning of the century.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).*

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