



The Cordoba Update

January-March 2020

Editorial

Dear Reader,

The eyes of the world are currently fixed on the dramatic effects of Co-vid-19, with travel bans and widening quarantine measures impacting trade and global economies. These come at the same time as the rapid fall in oil prices following the disagreement between Russia and Saudi Arabia, and the sell-off in stock markets worldwide.

At such times, it is easy to forget the agonising long-term wars that continue to damage lives and livelihoods in a number of countries, leaving an impact of human and communal suffering which will take decades to heal after the fighting stops. Our weapons are too powerful, the damage too remote, and our attention span too short.

We therefore include in this issue articles on Yemen and Libya, in the hope that serious efforts can be made locally, regionally and internationally to find just and peaceful solutions to these two devastating conflicts.

With best wishes from the CPI team.



News of the Institute

Qatar

CPI organised between 8 and 11 February 2020 at Qatar University a training workshop on “conflict transformation and the management of diversity”. More than 30 university professors and 10 peace actors from outside the university took part to this workshop.

Tanzania

CPI delivered two peace promotion training sessions from 5 to 8 February 2020 to participants from Pemba, including 30 NGO members and 6 community leaders. The training covered multi-stakeholder dialogue, and community-based early warning rapid response.

Yemen

CPI participated in the conference “Post-war Yemen... A Forward-looking Vision” organised by the Tawakkol Karman Foundation on 7 March 2020 in Istanbul. The contribution of CPI addressed the topic of transitional justice and reconciliation during periods of transition.



Sana, Yemen - CC Wikimedia Commons

Year Six of the War in Yemen

Abubakar Ben Rajeh

The war in Yemen enters this March its sixth year since the Saudi-led Arab Coalition, with the effective participation of the UAE and logistical support by the U.S., launched the military campaign against the Iranian-backed Houthis. Saudi Arabia justified its military intervention in Yemen by lending support to the legitimate government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansur Hadi, who had been toppled by the Houthi rebellion and forces loyal to late president Ali Abdallah Salah, in September 2014. Hadi himself was elected in February 2012 following the stepping down of Salah under the pressure of the revolution of February 2011, as the then Arab Spring uprisings swept the MENA region.

The war in Yemen has so far consumed many rounds of UN mediation between the Houthis and the legitimate government, in Geneva and Stockholm; as well as secret talks between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, and tentative agreements between the Hadi government and self-proclaimed Southern Transitional Council. Even though several agreements have been signed, they have not

been observed and the war has continued to rage and become ever more complex (1). This situation is compounded with the emergence of new conflict parties and the proliferation of localised and sub-conflicts within the ongoing war, all of which constitute hurdles for prospecting scenarios for ending the conflict (2).

As the news about the war in Yemen is relegated to the sundry news stories of the mainstream media in favour of conflicts deemed more pressing and threatening for Europe, as well as the spectre of pandemics, we ask whether the Saudi-led coalition has accomplished its mission in Yemen in the light of the disastrous humanitarian effects of the war on civilians.

Has the Arab Coalition Accomplished its Objectives in Yemen?

The Saudi-led Arab coalition launched its air strikes, dubbed Operation Decisive Storm, against the Houthis and their Abdallah Salah's loyalists in late March 2015. What was thought would be a swift and decisive campaign turned out to be a

perilous venture, as the Houthi forces continued their southward offensive. Besides, the Saudi coalition did not dare to engage in a full-scale ground offensive for fear of the Houthis' combat experience sharpened over six conflicts that they fought against Abdallah Salah's regime, as well as the challenging terrain of the country. Therefore, it is safe to say that the Saudi-Emirati coalition has reached an impasse in Yemen.

Various geopolitical analyses have been put forward for the inability of the coalition to win the war. These vary, from the poor estimate by Saudi Arabia and its allies of the capacity and combat capabilities of the Houthis, to those who doubt Riyadh's commitment to defeat or even degrade the Houthi group. Some analysts have even suggested that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are using the Houthi card to disguise their expansionist ambitions in Yemen, to gain access to the Arabian Sea and control over the Gulf of Aden (3). On the other hand, the Emirates have striven to weaken Hadi's government on the pretext of its alliance with the Islah Party (Muslim Brotherhood). Furthermore, the Emirates have formed and armed militias outside the national Yemeni army in the south and east of the country, based in Aden and Hadhramaut governorate. Moreover, units of the Emirati army are based in Yemeni ports and islands such as the Al Mokha port and Socotra island.

Since 2015, human rights NGOs have documented tens of cases where airstrikes injured civilians in houses, hospitals, schools, and mosques. These amount to war crimes according to some NGOs. Saudi forces struck, for instance, a wedding celebration which killed 25, including eight children. In another strike the coalition hit a bus leaving at least 26 children dead, using American and European weapons (4). On the other side, Houthis indiscriminately shell Yemeni towns, and their rockets target popular neighbourhoods. This has been especially devastating in Aden and Taiz, the third largest city in Yemen, where tens of civilians including children and women lost their lives (5).

Enforced disappearance

Reports by Yemeni and international human rights organisations, as well as lawyers, have documented hundreds of cases of human rights abuses by all parties involved in the war in Yemen. Houthi group forces, the Yemeni government, forces loyal

to the Emirates, as well as the Saudi-UAE coalition have all failed to observe international humanitarian law when dealing with their political opponents, since 2014. Forced disappearance of persons, arbitrary detention, including of children, running of secret detention prisons, as well as psychological and physical mistreatment and even torture of women have been common human rights abuse practices since the overthrow of Hadi's government in late 2014 (6).

“The Yemeni parties must rally around a comprehensive national project, in order to find consensus on the shape of the Yemeni state and its territorial integrity; and the establishment of a transitional authority based on the principle of partnership,”

Mwatana NGO, a Yemeni human rights organisation, conducted a study on the detention centres in seven Yemeni governorates (Amanat Al-Asemah, Aden, Al-Hudaydah, Ibb, Ma'rib and Taiz, and Hadhramaut). Mwatana surveyed 277 current and former detainees, and 60 police officials in police stations, on the conditions of detention and respect for the law from 2015 to 2018. In addition to breaches of procedural practice regarding arrests and detention, the study revealed the recourse of conflict parties to the use of unlawful detention sites such as private buildings, government buildings and compounds, as well as schools and even sport stadiums, all of which did not meet international and national standards (7). Yemeni activist Huda al-Sarari, has been awarded the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for human rights in February 2020 in recognition of her daring work which exposed a network of secret prisons run by the United Arab Emirates in southern Yemen (8).

Another casualty of the war in Yemen is the cultural heritage of the country. Mwatana for Human Rights documented 15 historical and archaeological sites that were directly targeted by the Saudi-Emirati airstrikes. These sites included the historic town of Baraqish and the northern gateway to the old Ma'rib dam. Attacks on cultural property included the destruction of two religious land

marks in Taiz (Al Sudi Dome - Al Rumaymeh Dome) by an extremist group active in areas under the authority of President Hadi's government. For their part, Houthi tanks and artillery targeted the historical Madrassa and Mosque of Al-Ashrafiya in Taiz (9).

Interference with humanitarian aid

The war has created one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has to deal with. In its 2018 annual report on Yemen the UN estimated that 14 million Yemenis face starvation, as well as epidemics such as cholera, as a result of the violent conflict (10). However, interference by the warring parties with humanitarian aid access, through blockades of important ports, imprisonment of humanitarian relief workers, seizure and confiscation of aid and fuel tanks aimed for power generators of hospitals and water pumps, have all worsened the livelihood of the populations. In "Humanitarian Agencies as Prisoners of War" The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies explains the dilemma faced by the international aid agencies who find themselves forced to submit to the terms of the Houthis who control most of northern Yemen in order for them to deliver aid relief, worth almost US\$4 billion in 2019 alone. This garners the Houthis "critical source of rent and influence for the group's own war effort." The Sana'a Centre argues that the hard truth is that aid is not reaching all those who need it most, and that it only serves to perpetuate a protracted conflict (11), resulting in more waves of IDPs (12).

The Yemeni parties must rally around a comprehensive national project, in order to find consensus on the shape of the Yemeni state and its territorial integrity; and the establishment of a transitional authority based on the principle of partnership, leading to a comprehensive political process that is separate from subnational projects and regional polarisation. Otherwise, Yemen will remain subject to international and regional polarisation, which will prolong the war and exacerbate the suffering of the Yemeni people. It is indispensable that the international community pressures the regional powers to stop the war and destruction in Yemen, to push the Yemeni parties to sit at the table of dialogue and negotiations and bring peace to Yemen.

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Tripoli, Libya - CC Wikimedia Commons

Libya: A political deadlock

Loïc Sauvinet

During the last few months, the situation in Libya has remained complex. After more than two years in his post, Ghassan Salamé the Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, resigned on 2 March 2020. That made him the fifth to leave the position, after Ian Martin, Tarek Mitri, Bernardino Leon and Martin Kobler. This resignation undermines the hopes that most observers had in the Berlin conference and the renewed Geneva peace negotiations. At the time, both of Libya's rival governments announced the suspension of talks.

In the light of these latest developments, we have to ask ourselves how this country collapsed, how a seemingly strong state could fail and allow the dynamics of violence to set in, and finally what could be done to manage a peaceful way out of the crisis?

To find some answers or at least some keys to interpreting the situation, it is important to have a multidisciplinary approach, using the tools of historical science, sociology and political science. It

seems relevant to look at Libya's past, in order to know if it is possible to find some links and possible origins to the woes affecting the country nowadays. And even if these relations cannot be attested, an understanding of the past is primordial to grasp the present, because it gives us the opportunity to capture current events and relevant phenomena. Thus, the historical angle brings contextualization that allows us to refine the results obtained through political science. Regarding the latter, it allows for an understanding of contemporary events, Libyan structures and the origins of violence. This approach also allows us to tackle numerous dimensions of the problem, without just focusing on one actor or a particular phenomenon.

Such a dramatic collapse leads one to consider the assumption that Libya was already a weak state, though perhaps not yet a failed one, before Qadhafi's coup in 1969. This is because, under the Ottomans and the Italian occupation, the region was administered from the outside and had no proper state, and after that the monarchy was not able or did not have the will to establish a legitimate state with institutions and a balance of contending forces. Therefore, Qadhafi seized an

already weak state but did nothing to strengthen it. On the contrary, he weakened potential opposition and reinforced centralization, while cornering the country's hydrocarbon wealth. In 2011, the revolution took place in the context of a weak state, or even a failed state, the frontier between these two concepts being thin. This limit was rapidly crossed, notably by means of a strong mobilization boosted by economic struggle in the daily life of many citizens, by an ideological climate where religion and revolutionary spirit go together but also by discontent touching every part of society and linked to the state's incapacity to respond to the population's hopes. In Qadhafi's Libya there was a great dissonance between the state's position and the daily life of citizens. Also, the violent climate installed by Qadhafi's regime played an important part in its normalization and contributed to the rapid shift from peaceful to violent opposition, leading to the regime's demise. And once the dissension increased and became organized, international actors stepped in to support the opposition, creating a snowball effect by accentuating the regime's weakness. Therefore, the fall could not have taken place without this external involvement, but this involvement would not have taken place without the local uprising.

But what about Libya post-collapse?

In our view, the Libyan situation does not allow one to see a way out of the crisis for many reasons. After Qadhafi's fall, the fight for control of the country took place in a context with no State and thus no monopoly on violence. And since then, no solution has been found, whether it be the 2012 or 2014 elections, the UN resolutions or local actors' attempts to unite the country, or even undemocratic and violent ones like Haftar's attempts to take control by force. And because of this situation where no compromise can be found and no major player can impose himself, the country is divided into two parts with a government for each. These failures have some identifiable causes. In Libya there is an absence of political and democratic culture caused by lack of experience. Also, the first government tried to create legitimacy through the ballot before solving important problems like security and the implementation of solid institutions allowing for the launch of a reconciliation process. Therefore, the elected governments

could not gain the legitimacy to allow them to engage reforms and to stabilize the whole country. In addition, the security aspect is fundamental because its disorganization, caused by the multiplication of militias and the state's incapacity to take control, did not offer an environment favourable to the transition and even pushed towards the country's fragmentation. So, if the situation in Libya complicates the possibility of finding a way out, and the last years of conflict, violence and the growing involvement and multiplication of foreign actors seems to confirm that, how can we produce peace?

What are the potential solutions in peacemaking? It is crucial to launch a reconciliation process and to establish justice, without excluding the people who worked within the Qadhafi regime as was done in the past. It is essential to reintegrate into a peaceful economic system the fighters and everybody else who benefits or depends on the war economy by finding them a long-term place in society. It is indeed necessary to reconcile and demilitarize the country in order to reduce the number of armed groups and to establish a feeling of safety amongst the citizens. A state must be created with a democratic and accountable judiciary, administrative, security and political system. These steps are fundamental for the legitimacy of the future state.

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Beside these points, the Libyan situation is very complex and the numerous alliances are always changing in line with interests as diverse as they are overlapping. But we have to keep in mind that the end of the crisis is mostly analysed through an occidental vision and the nation state model. For Christopher Clapham (1), the idea that every portion of the world has to be a part of a state was born with the nation state model, and the situation is observed in this light. But it is not an easy task to maintain a functioning state, and maybe the model is not always achievable. We should perhaps consider some alternative systems, work on questions of governance and move towards a negotiated solution between the main stakeholders.

Reference

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Dr. Abbas Aroua (second from right) at the Post-War Yemen conference.

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