

Rise of a Chaos State – What’s going on in Yemen today

Jonathan Puddifoot, a Faringdon resident who has worked for NGOs for more than 25 years, lived in Yemen for a total of 6 years and last visited the country in December 2016. He was thus well placed to speak to Faringdon Peace Group about this beautiful country’s descent into bitter civil war and famine.

With 18 ½ million people suffering from food insecurity and 9 million on the brink of famine, it is the worst human disaster in the world and yet goes widely unreported in the western media. The UK is deeply involved through its lucrative arms sales to Saudi Arabia. These arms are then used against the Yemenis.

Yemen, the home of the Queen of Sheba and coffee, is made up of a mosaic of tribes and major clans which were only brought together into a single nation state in 1991. The front lines in the war are very complicated with many groups fighting against each other, making alliances and changing sides. Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQIAP) is a continuing threat. Inspired by the Arab Spring, the conflict began when peaceful demonstrations for more democracy were brutally put down. The president was forced to resign but the ‘unity’ president who took his place had no credibility among the people and fled to Aden leaving a power vacuum into which moved the Houthi rebels, who had been excluded from the unity government. Alarmed by the rise of a group they believed to be supported by Iran, Saudi Arabia began a military campaign to restore the president and his government. After 2 years of fighting, with huge numbers of civilian deaths and violations of international law on all sides, no side seems close to victory.

Yemen imports 80% of its wheat, the staple food, through the port of Hodeidah which is under Huthi control. Jonathan claims people are not starving but are being starved due to high tariffs on food imports, blockades of the port and destruction of civilian infrastructure. With no functioning government institutions or banks, household incomes have completely collapsed and though food is available, people have no means to pay for it. As well as emergency food and medical relief, aid organisations give support to small enterprises to generate an income, however little.

The future of Yemen looks bleak. Climate change will exacerbate the desperate water crisis. Without a level of institutional capacity food and water cannot be distributed and the country is dependent on foreign aid. Tribal societies traditionally sorted out problems between themselves, but those mechanisms have broken down with changes of allegiances. With no sign of an end to the war, Jonathan believes that a new UN resolution involving all parties is necessary if there is to be any hope of peace. It may be that Yemen splits into 3 or 4 countries or becomes a federation, but if civil society can be rebuilt and people, particularly women, can stand together to reject war and work for peace, there is hope that the Yemenis strength and resilience will win through and they will rebuild their lives.

The conflict has its roots in the failure of the political transition that was supposed to bring stability to Yemen following an uprising that forced its longtime authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to hand over power to Mr Hadi, his deputy, in November 2011.

Mr Hadi struggled to deal with a variety of problems, including attacks by al-Qaeda, a separatist movement in the south, the continuing loyalty of many military officers to Mr Saleh, as well as corruption, unemployment and food insecurity.

The Houthi movement, which champions Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority and fought a series of rebellions against Mr Saleh during the previous decade, took advantage of the new president's weakness by taking control of their northern heartland of Saada province and neighbouring areas.

Disillusioned with the transition, many ordinary Yemenis - including Sunnis - supported the Houthis and in September 2014 they entered the capital, Sanaa, setting up street camps and roadblocks.

In January 2015, the Houthis reinforced their takeover of Sanaa, surrounding the presidential palace and other key points and effectively placing Mr Hadi and his cabinet ministers under house arrest.

The president escaped to the southern port city of Aden the following month.

The Houthis and security forces loyal to Mr Saleh then attempted to take control of the entire country, forcing Mr Hadi to flee abroad in March 2015.

Alarmed by the rise of a group they believed to be backed militarily by regional Shia power Iran, Saudi Arabia and eight other mostly Sunni Arab states began an air campaign aimed at restoring Mr Hadi's government.

The coalition received logistical and intelligence support from the US, UK and France.

After two years of fighting, no side appears close to a decisive military victory.

Pro-government forces - made up of soldiers loyal to President Hadi and predominantly Sunni southern tribesmen and separatists - were successful in stopping the rebels taking Aden, but only after a fierce, four-month battle that left hundreds dead.

Having established a beachhead, coalition ground troops landed in Aden that August and helped drive the Houthis and their allies out of much of the south over the next two months. Mr Hadi and his government returned from exile at the same time and established a temporary home in Aden.

But since then, despite the air campaign and naval blockade continuing unabated, pro-government forces have been unable to dislodge the rebels from their northern strongholds, including Sanaa and its surrounding province.

The Houthis have also been able to maintain a siege of the southern city of Taiz and to continue firing missiles and mortars across the border with Saudi Arabia.

Jihadist militants from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and rival affiliates of so-called Islamic State (IS) have meanwhile taken advantage of the chaos by seizing territory in the south and stepping up their attacks, notably in government-controlled Aden.

Civilians have borne the brunt of the fighting and repeatedly been the victims of what activists have described as serious violations of international law by all parties.

The destruction of civilian infrastructure and restrictions on food and fuel imports have also pushed Yemen to the brink of famine.