



YEMEN: THE WILTING FLOWER OF THE ARAB SPRING?

Matthew Parish

**Text of a talk to be given at the
22nd International and Humanitarian Security Conference
Geneva, 16-17 February 2017**

Contemporary Yemen is a continuing tragedy that ill befits us all. A beautiful land representing some of the most historical culture on the Arabian peninsula stretching back at least as far as the 12th century BC, this nation is once again plunged into an interminable civil conflict of which some of the most recent predecessors took place in 1972, 1979, 1986, 1994 and 2004. Between 1967 and 1990, the country was divided between South Yemen (under Soviet influence) and North Yemen (under western influence). It is notable that this territorial division reflected ideological, not ethno-religious, principles. The conflicts in Yemen are not dominated by a dynamic typical of ethnic civil wars, although these may be incidents of confrontation. Instead there is a deeper malaise.

Yemen was afflicted by Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula in 2009, and the country was again immersed in chronic political instability following an Arab Spring revolution in 2011. The current Yemeni Civil War, that began in 2015, seems to have split the country once again into a northern region the capital of which is Sana'a; and a southern region whose capital is Aden. Although Sana'a is the *de jure* capital of Yemen, the internationally recognised government sits in Aden, the former

British colonial port on the south coast. This quixotic state of affairs is indicative of the political chaos that burdens contemporary Yemen.

Much has been written about the politics of the current war in Yemen, and I do not intend to repeat it. Instead I would like to look at that conflict through a distinctive lens, so as to start to plot a course towards a possible solution to Yemen's travails that, while potentially regarded by some as unorthodox, might prove of value as a new angle of insight. The genesis of recurrent conflict in Yemen is that country's paucity of natural resources to meet the needs of its population. That was the origin of Yemen's Arab Spring revolution in 2011, and it is the cause of the continuing political instability in the country since then. It has also been a predominant cause of the country's repeated prior civil strife. By looking back through history, we might find both the causes of a repetitive cycle of violence and, one might pray, the seeds of a resolution for the future.

Yemen is mostly a desert. It is one of the hottest countries in the world. Less than 3% of the country's land is considered arable, and that is predominantly located in the northern highlands where temperatures are marginally less inhospitable. The country starves. It was Lenin's depressing if cynical view that famine fomented revolution, and in Yemen he seems to have been proven right. A population of 25 million people has access to a mere 320,000 hectares of land planted with permanent crops. Compare that with Switzerland, for which the equivalent figures are some 8 million people and over 1.5 million hectares. In other words, Switzerland has almost 15 times as much agricultural land per person as Yemen. People in Yemen are starving.

This is not the most depressing statistic. The still graver factor is lack of access to potable water. 13 million Yemenis - over 50% of the population - lack access to adequate daily quantities of drinking water. In Sana'a, only 40% of the population are formally connected to the municipal water system, and even then that may mean water coming out of the taps only two or three times a week. In rural areas, where an estimated 70% of the population lives, equivalent figures are far more dire.

People may spend many hours a day walking to fetch water. It is estimated that malnutrition and diarrhoea kill some 14,000 children a year as a result, with perhaps another 4,000 people a year dying in violent neighbourly disputes about access to water. It is eminently possible that even Sana'a will simply run out of water shortly: conflict or no conflict. The country has very little rainfall, and very little access to the drinking water its population needs to survive.

In other words, it is possible to see the perpetual conflict in Yemen in part as a fight between different regions, and between urban and rural areas, over access to natural resources: principally water but also food. Yemen's interminable cycle of conflict might be resolved only if these key issues are addressed. In my view this a more fundamental diagnosis of Yemen's current problems than the purported ethno-political dynamics that some analysts present. Political differences are not always born of themselves. In some instances they are born of competition from limited resources, in the absence of which people will die.

I want to place the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Yemen in plain context, since much is written about the conflict in Yemen but the global picture is seldom revealed. According to UNHCR, there are some 2.5 million internally displaced people in Yemen: approximately 10% of the population. An additional several hundred thousand Yemenis (exact figures are hard to come by) are estimated to be refugees abroad. Living conditions in Yemen are so dire that its citizens have taken to becoming refugees in other conflict zones, such as Somalia, Syria and Iraq. UNHCR further estimates that almost 19 million people - three quarters of the population - stand in need of continuing humanitarian assistance. Official casualty statistics in the Yemeni Civil War are barely the tip of the iceberg. The country's overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe dwarfs the formal deaths of civil war.

What is to be done? Consider first the most pressing problem serving as a catalyst for civil conflict, namely the lack of water. Desalination - the method of addressing water shortages predominant throughout the Middle East, which involves turning sea water into drinking water - is

expensive and requires sophisticated technology in short supply in conflict-riven Yemen. It is also carbon-negative, consuming substantial quantities of energy although recent advances in desalination technology have reduced this environmental burden. The transfer of water by ships is another option. Freight rates are historically low, and hence drinking water can be transported in sea containers. Yet that is only a temporary solution for a population so vast as Yemen, and it is susceptible to the vagaries of the market for international maritime transport.

As to agriculture, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations has observed that efficient use of Yemen's limited agricultural land is nowhere near being properly achieved. Again, the solutions are technological. Improved irrigation and farming techniques could feed the population of Yemen self-sustainably. Absent cruel competition for the resources necessary to live, Yemenis might find it easier to live in peace.

Whatever the solutions, there is no doubt that the expertise to renew Yemen's infrastructure to resolve its natural resources deprivation challenges exists in abundance. The conflict in Yemen is soluble principally by turning to technology, which may then facilitate subsequent political compromises. The challenge is that the money to achieve these outcomes is not forthcoming. UNHCR's estimated budget requirements for care and protection of people of concern in Yemen during the course of 2017 is approximately US\$100,000,000. Yet only 9% of UNHCR's funding budget for the country in 2016 was in fact met, as the relevant donors did not meet their funding commitments. Yemen is a crisis that can be addressed. Its problems are not insoluble. But resolution of this crisis requires commitment.

We must all press for those commitments to be fulfilled, whether from the public sector, private sources, or a mixture of the two. Until then, people are going to continue to die, and the sources of conflict will not be ameliorated. Even if, under the exceptional work of the current Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General, a temporary political solution to the contemporary civil conflict

might be found, violent confrontation in that country will inevitably emerge once again in the near future should its root causes not be addressed. So I end with an appeal to you all, which is to focus upon Yemen, not let this historical and cultural nation be forgotten, and to do everything you can to encourage the financial contributions necessary to bring the perennial torture of its people to an end. This is one conflict where the principal solutions may be technological and financial rather than political. We would disappoint the moral mandate of the United Nations Organisation, and all of our consciences, if we were not to rise to this most important of humanitarian and developmental tasks.

+++

Matthew Parish is a former UN peacekeeper in the Balkans and formerly served as Legal Counsel at the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Washington, DC. He is the Managing Partner of the Gentium Law Group in Geneva, and formerly served as Chief Political Advisor to Vuk Jeremić in the selection process to become the next UN Secretary General in 2016. Mr Jeremić came second. Matthew is now a key political supporter of the Secretary General-elect, Antonio Guterres. www.gentiumlaw.com www.matthewparish.com