
IV. Obama Supports Saudi War Crimes

YEMEN

Saudi-Arabia Is Killing People and Wiping Out their Cultural Memory

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Aug. 10—The UN definition of genocide is “Acts of war with intent to destroy—in whole or in part—a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.” Yesterday, the Saudi coalition restarted a war against Yemen which meets that definition: An attack against the Zaidis, an ethnic and a religious group that has been in Yemen since the Eighth Century, and against the millennial cultural heritage of Yemen.

The brutality of the war launched in March 2015 by a Saudi-led coalition of ten states against Yemen has already led—in record time—to 7-10 thousand dead and more than 2 million displaced. It is an illegal war, not approved by the UN, and has not respected any of the laws of war: 23 hospitals have been bombed, 30 schools have been destroyed, and children are targeted. A UN report, quickly withdrawn after massive pressure from Saudi Arabia, accused the coalition of having caused the death of 60% of the 6,400 civilian victims since March 2015, of which nearly a third are children: 785 children were killed and 1,168 were wounded in 2015 alone, i.e. almost six per day! And beyond killing people, the Saudis are also targeting the population’s history, by systematically destroying the rich

cultural and historical legacy of Yemen.

If the brutality of the Saudis is not a surprise, the full military support given by the United States, the United Kingdom and France to this war, and the complicity of the most important mass media which do not report the facts, is shocking. Beyond bringing dishonor to the populations of those countries, this support is also a war crime, a crime against humanity.

This article, based on the warnings set forth by specialists in Yemen at a colloquium organized at France’s National Assembly at the end of June, should provoke an outcry against those policies of the “West.”



Sana'a, the capital of Yemen.

Destroy a People by Erasing Its Knowledge of Its Own History

On June 29, Hervé Féron, a socialist deputy of the Department of *Meurthe et Moselle* in France, launched a strong attack on the shameful war led by Saudi Arabia, supported by France, the U.K. and the United States, against one of the poorest countries in the world: Yemen. According to international organizations, this brutal war has already created one of the worst, if not the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with more than 70% of its 24 million population now threatened with death by famine.

In order to remove the Houthis—a Zaydi Shi'a grouping that took control of Yemen in 2014—from power, a coalition of ten countries supported by the United States, the U.K. and France, is waging a war of disproportionate violence against the Houthis which has resulted in more than 7-10 thousand dead since March 2015, many of whom were children and civilians, in addition to 10-30 thousand wounded and more than 2 million displaced. Saudi Arabia accuses the Houthis of being close to Teheran.

But it is not only the Houthis that are being targeted; it is also Yemen's extremely rich and millennium-long heritage, its historical memory. Air strikes, bombs, street combat, and the massive looting unleashed by this state of affairs, have already provoked immense destruction, notably in three sites classified by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites: the old city of Sana'a, and the ancient cities of Zabid in western Yemen and of Shibam in the valley of Hadramawt in the central desert of Yemen.

Making matters worse, the Coalition is targeting sites which are of no military interest, such as the ancient Marib Dam, the very ancient city of Baraqish, and the regional museum of Dhamar, confirming the thesis that there is a desire to destroy the culture of an entire people. One single bombing sufficed to destroy the totality of the 12,500 pieces at the Dhamar Museum, stated Mrs. Iris Gerlach of the German Archeological Institute. Among them were objects of the Himyarite civilization (275 to 571 AD); hundreds of inscriptions in Sabatean—the language of the Kingdom of Saba (800 BC), and a collection from the Islamic period. These developments lead one to believe that the Saudis, who are Sunnis, are ready to do everything to exterminate the Houthis, followers of the

Zaydis, a branch of Shi'ism. The declared objective of the Saudi war is to exterminate the Houthis and bring back to power Yemen President Mansour Hadi who had resigned.

To warn against the threat the war poses to Yemen's heritage, which is unknown to most people, M. Féron, in collaboration with Mrs. Anne Regourd, a researcher at France's National Center of Scientific Research—*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS)—and at the University of Copenhagen, [decided to bring together at the Bourbon Palace](#)—which belongs to the National Assembly—the best world specialists in the historical heritage of Yemen in the areas of architecture, archeology, archives, manuscripts and music, which are often unknown to the general public.

There is no excuse for the behavior of the coalition. Italian archeologist Sabina Antonini de Maigret and French archeologist Jérémie Schiettecatte, joined Iris Gerlach in drawing up a list of 50 Yemeni archeological and historical monuments for UNESCO, that should be protected as a priority, and that list was delivered to the Coalition in June 2015.

Space does not permit us to review all the very valuable material presented at this colloquium. We will concentrate primarily on the destruction of the architectural and archeological heritage, in the hope that the public at large will be particularly sensitive to those beautiful images.

We are very thankful to M. Paul Bonnenfant for having loaned us the photographs he took in the period 1975-2004.

Architectural Heritage

CNRS researcher Paul Bonnenfant opened the first part of the colloquium by taking participants “on a tour



Map of Yemen, showing the location of the three cities that UNESCO has designated as World Heritage sites: Zabid, Sana'a, and Shibam.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 1 City of Saada. Grand Mosque and Mausoleums of al-Hadi Yahya ibn al-Husayn, the first Zaydite Imam from Yemen, who died in 910.

showing the effects of the war and the destruction of Yemen’s architectural heritage” from the North to the South of the country. M. Bonnenfant polemically denounced the seven richest countries in the world for waging war against one of the poorest (Yemen ranks 194 out of 229 in *The World Factbook* in the list based on income). He also attacked the huge French sales of weapons to Saudi Arabia, “one of the most violent world dictatorships,” and “denounced France for awarding its Legion of Honor medal to Prince Mohammad bin Nayef of Saudi Arabia.” All that, he said, “is not very moral.”

He began his presentation by describing the northern city of Saada, the Houthi bastion for which the Saudi’s reserved a particularly murderous treatment. The 1,200



Fig. 2 Two views of Al-Hadi Mosque, partially destroyed by bombardments.

year old Al-Hadi mosque (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) was partially destroyed by air raids, along with millennium-old houses of rammed earth and hundred-year-old minarets.

He then moved on to discuss Zafar, the former capital of the tribal Himyarite confederation (110 BC to 525 AD), the second largest archeological site of the country after Marib, which was also targeted by air raids.

He then discussed the magnificent city of Sana’a (Fig. 3), the capital of Yemen, which is one of the three UNESCO World Heritage sites in Yemen, where 5,000 of the 9,000 beautiful several-story houses of the Al-Qasimi district (Fig. 4), dating from Yemen’s apogee (the Seventh and Eighth Centuries) suffered significant damage from air raids (Fig. 5).

He then discussed Radaa, with its Sixteenth Century madrasa—an Islamic school, and its aligned domes (Fig. 6), Jibla and the famous mosque and palace of the



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 3 The citadel of Sana’a, capital of Yemen. This very ancient site is still occupied by the army, and is at risk of getting hit by bombing and sinister collateral damage.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 4 Houses overlooking urban gardens in Sana’a. Several of those houses whose façades lead to the urban garden of al-Qasimi were destroyed by bombing runs.



Fig. 5 Two views the al-Qasimi district after air raids. View on right shows bomb damage.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 6 The citadel and madrasa al-Amiriyya of Radaa. This college-mosque of the Tāhirid dynasty (15th-16th Centuries) is very original in its architectural conception.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 7 The citadel of Ta'iz which dominated the city, shown before the bombings. The several millennia-old archaeological site (the left half of the photo) was devastated by the bombings.

Zaydi queen, Arwa al-Sulayhi, and Ta'iz, a city built on a 1,400 meter mountain (Fig. 7). At the center of the war during the last 15 months, Ta'iz has been devastated. Its medieval fortress al-Qahira (Cairo in English) was bombed and the museum destroyed (Fig. 8). The population of the city faces shortages of all basic necessities: hospitals, water, and food.

Other magnificent monuments are also threatened by the war in Ta'iz (Fig. 9, Fig. 10).

He then discussed Zabid, the second UNESCO World Heritage site. It was the capital of Yemen between the Thirteenth and the Fifteenth Centuries, and was of great importance throughout the ages because of its Islamic University and the



Wikipedia

photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 8 The medieval fortress of Al-Qahira in Ta'iz being bombed.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 9 In Ta'iz, the madrasa al-Ashrafiyya, of the Rasūlid era. The Rasūlid dynasty (13th -15th Centuries) was one of the most brilliant in Yemen, especially from the standpoint of architecture.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 10 A Ta'iz, the grand mosque al-Muzaffariyya, of the Rasūlid era.

beauty of its civilian and military architecture, and planning (Fig. 11, Fig. 12, Fig. 13).

Finally, he described the old fortified city of Shibam, the third UNESCO World Heritage site, with its seven story brick buildings built upon the rocky spur of the Hadramawt valley. The impressive structures built in the form of towers contribute to the city's nickname: "the Manhattan of the Desert" (Fig. 14).

Fertile Arabia

Iris Gerlach is in charge of the Sana'a branch of the German Institute of Archeology. She opened the second part of the colloquium with a speech entitled "The Forgotten Arabia Felix,"



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 11 The Mausoleum of Aysa al-Hitar, in the coastal plain of the Red Sea, near Zabid.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 12 The cemetery and the 'Aynāt mausoleum in Hadramawt.



photo: © Paul Bonnenfant

Fig. 13 The very famous mausoleum of prophet Hūd in Hadramawt.



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Fig. 14 The old fortified city of Shibam, the third UNESCO-designated World Heritage site, is nick-named "Manhattan of the desert" because of its seven-story brick buildings.



Fig. 15 The vestiges of the big dam at Marib.



Fig. 16 Detail of a floodgate of the dam, damaged by air raids.

in which she discussed at length the archeological heritage of the Kingdom of Saba (dating from the end of the second millennium BC to 116 AD), reporting that today it is threatened by the war.

She denounced the air raids against the most remarkable piece of technology of that era, the great hydraulic dam of Marib (Fig.15; Fig. 16), which was key to the economic boom of the great kingdom of Saba, which extended from present-day Yemen up the coast of the Red Sea into Saudi Arabia, and across the Red Sea to Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Far from being an isolated country, Yemen was fully integrated into the flourishing Silk Road which at that time linked the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and China. Gerlach continued:

With the help of highly developed irrigation systems, Marib was able to transform the desert into fertile and luxurious land, and contributed for more than 1,000 years to maintaining the largest artificial oasis in the ancient world. A major crossroads of Arab commercial routes, Saba organized and controlled, in particular, the long-distance trade of perfumes, incense and myrrh. Those products, eagerly sought by the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian regions, produced enormous profits to the Arab Kingdoms of the old South, among which Saba was one of the most influential and powerful. That revenue was then invested, among other things, in the elaboration of construction programs of urban centers, sanctuaries, palaces and also water management installations.

Ancient Marib, capital of that Kingdom, was

an urban center of 94 hectares (232 acres), surrounded by walls that protected magnificent temples, palaces, residential quarters, parking zones for caravans, and grandiose gardens. The gardens and the fields were irrigated by a vast system of canals fed by the great dam of Marib. That structure is a true masterpiece of engineering. The irrigation of the fields was possible because of the monsoons that arrived twice a year in the Yemen mountains. The precipitation was collected in the “wadis” [valleys, gullies, or streambeds that remain dry except during the rainy season—ed.] which fed the neighboring arid desert with great amounts of water. The large amount of water that would normally have flowed in a totally uncontrolled fashion from the mountainous region to the desert, was stopped at Marib by a dam built of two massive rock walls [4 meters high in the beginning, increased to 14 meters in later years, and 600 m length—Christine Bierre]. That barrier restrained the water flow and redirected it to rotary valves: the Northern and Southern rotary valves.

The Yemen Manuscripts

The third part of the colloquium dealt with the state of the archives, manuscripts, and the musical heritage of Yemen. Mrs. Anne Regourd, editor-in-chief of the journal *Chronicles of Yemen's Manuscripts* (CYM) described the wealth of Yemen's manuscripts and the need to protect them from the war.

In an article co-authored with David Hollenberg and published in the *CYM* (January 2016), the two special-

ists examined the specific content of that body of manuscripts, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the underlying reasons for the ongoing war between Sunni Saudi Arabia, and the Shi'a Houthis.

Compared to other Muslim countries, the Yemen manuscripts are particularly rich in the areas of jurisprudence, dialectical theology, grammar, history, *belles lettres* [literary works], science, Koran exegeses, and piety. They bear testimony to a classical Islam which between the Eleventh and Twentieth Centuries, produced a more "rationalist" dialectical theology, founded not on strict textual doctrines but on a necessary contribution from the intellect (Reason), philosophy, and logic. The importance of those manuscripts transcends Yemen as such, according to these scholars, extending to a cultural area which is a crescent including Iran, Iraq, Bilad al-Sham [Syria—ed.], and Zaydi Yemen.

In order to protect these manuscripts, held by many individual citizens, a big effort is already under way via a network of NGOs and nonprofit local organizations which are particularly motivated to do so. The different scholars addressing this colloquium underlined the extent to which the population of this poor country is aware of the importance of its cultural heritage, and

goes to great lengths to protect it. The lack of funds is a serious problem, however, and these authors called for international assistance for those local institutions.

Call for Mobilization

Despite numerous denunciations, the destruction of Yemen's heritage has yet to provoke the general outcry that similar attacks provoked in Syria, Iraq or Niger. On Sept. 7, 2015 deputy Hervé Féron had already posed a written question to the then Minister of Culture, denouncing the "incredible inaction" of the international community. He asked the Minister to make a public statement aimed at stopping "Saudi Arabia from razing the several millennia-long memory of that part of the world" because, he said, citing George Orwell: "the most efficient means to destroy a people is to negate and to erase the comprehension of its own history"!

The French government has remained to this day deaf to those calls. We call on our fellow citizens to bring this problem up in the strongest manner with their elected officials at all levels, and to stop the participation of their respective countries in the ongoing genocide in Yemen.

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