



# In Yemen, Saudi-Arabia is killing people and the memory of people; The West must stop supporting this genocide!

by Christine Bierre

Editor of *Nouvelle Solidarité* (France), for the Schiller Institute

“Acts of war with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious groups”, is the UN definition of genocide. On the 9th of August, the Saudi coalition restarted a war against Yemen which qualifies with that definition. An attack against an ethny and a religious group implanted in Yemen since the VIIIth century, the Zaidites, and against the millenary heritage of Yemen.

The war launched on March 2015 against Yemen by a Saudi Coalition of ten states, is one whose brutality has already lead in a record time to 7 to 10 000 dead and more than 2 million displaced. It is an illegal war, not approved at by the UN, and one which 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 A UN report, quickly withdrawn after massive pressure from Saudi Arabia, accused the coalition of having caused the death of 60% of the 6400 civilian victims since March 2015, of which nearly a third are children : 785 children were killed, 1168 were wounded in 2015 alone, ie. close to 6 per day ! And beyond killing people, the Saudis are also targeting the memory of people by destroying systematically 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 does not report the facts, is shocking. Beyond bringing dishonor to the populations of those countries, it is also a crime of war, a crime against humanity.

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

## **The most efficient means to destroy a people is to erase the comprehension of its own history**

On June 29, Hervé Féron, a socialist deputy of the Meurthe et Moselle department of France, launched a strong attack on the shameful war led by Saudi Arabia, with the support of France, the UK 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 to death by famine.

In order to remove from power the Houthis that took control of Yemen in 2014, which the Saudis accuse of being close to Teheran, a coalition of ten countries supported by the United States, the UK and France, is waging a war of disproportionate violence against this country resulting already in more than 7 to 10 000 dead, since March 2015, among which many children and civilians, 10 000 to 30 000 wounded and more than 2 million displaced.

But it is not only the Houthis that are being targeted; it is also Yemen’s extremely rich and millenary heritage, its historical memory. Air strikes, bombs, street combat, and the massive looting this state of affairs has unleashed, has already provoked immense destruction, notably in three sites classed world heritage of humanity by UNESCO: the old city of Sanaa, and the ancient cities of Zabid in the West and of Shibam in the valley of Hadramawt (East).

Worse even, 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 will to destroy the culture of an entire people. One single bombing sufficed to destroy the totality of 12 500 pieces at the Dhamar Museum, stated Mrs. Iris Gerlach of the German Archeological Institute. Among them, objects of the Himyarite civilization (275 to 571); hundreds of inscriptions in sabatean – the language of the Kingdom of Saba (800 BC), and a collection of the Islamic period. Everything leads to believe that the Saudis, who are Sunnis, are ready to do everything to exterminate the Houthis, adepts of Zaydism, a Shia branch. The declared objective of the Saudi war is “to exterminate the Houthis and bring back President Mansour Hadi who resigned, to power”.

It was to warn against the threat the war poses to that heritage, often totally ignored of the large public, that M. Féron, in collaboration with Mrs. Anne Regourd, researcher at France’s Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), and at the University of Copenhagen, decided to bring together at the Bourbon Palace, a dependency of the National Assembly, the best world specialists in the historical heritage of Yemen, in the areas of architecture, archeology, archives, manuscripts and music. ([link to conference invitation](#))

The Coalition has no excuse for its behavior. Sabina Antonini and Jérémie Schiettecatte, an Italian and a French archaeologist, joined Iris Gerlach in drawing up for UNESCO a list of 50 Yemenite archaeological and historical monuments to be protected as a priority, and that list was delivered to the Coalition on June 2015.

We cannot review here, for reasons of space, all the very valuable material presented at this colloquium, so we will concentrate primarily on the destruction of the architectural and archaeological 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 lent to us the photographs he took himself in the period between 1975 and 2004.

### **Architectural héritage**

Paul Bonnenfant, researcher at the CNRS opened the first part of the colloquium taking participants « on the route of the war and destruction of the architectural heritage » of Yemen, from the North to the South of the country (Fig 1 Yemen's architectural heritage). M. Bonnenfant did not try to avoid the necessary polemics. He denounced the fact that the seven richest countries in the world are waging war against one of the poorest (Yemen ranks 157 in the list of countries according to income); attacked the massive sales of weapons by France to Saudi Arabia “one of the most violent world dictatorships”, and “deplored the awarding by France of a Legion of honor medal to Prince bin Salman of Saudi Arabia”. All that, he said, “is not very moral”.

He started his presentation with the northern city of Saada, bastion des Houthis to whom the Saudi's reserved a particularly murderous treatment. The 1200 year old Al Hadi mosque (Fig 2PB et Fig 3) was partially destroyed by air raids, along with millenary houses of rammed earth and hundred year old minarets. He moved then on to Zafar, the former capital of the tribal Himyarite confederation (110 to 525 ac) where the second largest archeological site of the country, following Marib, was also targeted by air raids.

Next came the magnificent Saana (Fig4PB), the capital of Yemen which is one of the three sites classed world heritage by UNESCO. 5000 of the 9000 beautiful several story houses of the Al Qasimi quarters (fig 5PB), dating from Yemen's apogee (VII and VIII centuries) suffered important damages from air raids. (fig6qassimidestruction)

Radaa, with its XVIth century Madrassa – a Mosque school – and its aligned domes (Fig7PB); Jibla and the famous mosque and palace of the Zaydite queen, Arwa al-Sulayhi; Taiz, a city build on a mount at 1400 m (fig 8PB). At the center of the war during the last 15 months, Taiz has been devastated. Its medieval fortress al-Qahira (Cairo in English) was bombed and the museum destroyed (Fig9wiki). Within the city the population lacks everything: hospitals, water and food.

Other magnificent monuments are threatened by the war in Taiz (Figs 10pB, 11PB, 12PB).

Then comes Zabid, second site classed by UNESCO as world heritage of humanity. Former capital of Yemen between the XIII and the XV century, Zabid was of great importance throughout the centuries because of its Islamic University and the beauty of its civilian and military architecture and planning. (Fig 13PB mausoleum nearby Zabid)

Finally, the old fortified city of Shibam, third site in UNESCO's world heritage of humanity, with its seven story brick buildings, built upon the rocky Eperon of the Hadramawt valley. The impressive structures build in the form of towers contribute to her nick name: “the Manhattan of the Desert”. (Fog 14wiki copyright Goldzahn)

### **Fertile Arabia**

Iris Gerlach, in charge of the Sanaa branch of the German Institute of Archeology opened the second part of the colloquium. In a speech entitled “The forgotten Arabia Felix” she developed at length on the archeological heritage of the Kingdom of Saba (end of the second millennium BC to 116 AC) today 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 Yemen up the coast of the red sea into Saudi Arabia, and to Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Far from being an isolated country, Yemen was fully integrated into the flourishing Silk Road linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and China.

“With the help of highly developed irrigation systems, said Iris Gerlach, Marib was able to transform the desert into fertile and luxurious land, and contributed to maintain the largest artificial oasis in the ancient world throughout more than 1000 years. A major cross road of Arab commercial routes, Saba organized and controlled, in particular, the long distance trade of perfumes, incense and myrrh. Those products, sought intensely by the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian world, 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”.

“The ancient Marib, capital of that Kingdom was an « urban center 94 hectares wide 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 ‘chef d'oeuvre’ of engineering. The irrigation of the fields was possible because of the monsoons that arrived twice a year in the Yemen mountains. The precipitations were collected in the “wadis”, which inundated powerfully the neighboring arid desert. The gigantic amounts of water that flowed in a totally uncontrolled fashion from the moun-

tainous region to the desert were stopped at Marib by a dam built of two massive rock walls [4 m high in the beginning and up to 14m. in later years, and 600 m length]. That barrier restrained the water flow and redirected it to rotary valves: the Northern rotary valve and the Southern one”.

### **The Yemen manuscripts**

The third part of the colloquium dealt with the state of the archives, manuscripts and even the musical heritage of Yemen. Mrs. Anne Regourd, chief editor of the magazine “Chronicles of Yemen’s manuscripts CYM)” dealt with the wealth of that country’s manuscripts and the need to protect them from the war.

In an article co-authored with David Hollenberg and published in the CMY (Jan 2016), the two specialists examined the specific content of that corpus of manuscripts, contributing thus to better understanding of the underlying reasons for the ongoing war between the sunni Saudi Arabia, and the Houthis who are zaydite shias.

Compared to other Muslim countries, the Yemen manuscripts are particularly rich in the areas of jurisprudence, dialectical theology, grammar, history, belles lettres, sciences, Coran exegeses and piety. They are testimony of a classical Islam which between the 11th and 20th centuries, produced a more “rationalist” dialectical theology, founded not on textual rigorist doctrines but on a necessary contribution from the intellect (Reason), philosophy and logics. The importance of those manuscripts transcends Yemen as such, state these scholars, extending to a cultural area which is a crescent including Iran, Iraq, Bilad al Sam, and Zaydit Yemen.

In order to protect those manuscripts, held by many individual citizens, a big effort is already under way via a network of NGO’s and nonprofit local organizations who 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 however striking, and these authors call for international assistance for those local institutions.

### **Call for mobilisation**

Despite numerous denunciations, the destruction of the Yemen heritage has yet to provoke the general outcry that similar attacks provoked in Syria, Iraq or Niger. On September 7th, deputy Hervé Féron had already posed a written question to then Minister of culture, denouncing the “incredible inaction” of the international community. He had asked the Minister to make a public statement aimed at stopping “Saudi Arabia from razing the several millennium 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 to the ongoing genocide in Yemen.

All the above mentioned photos (figures 1 – 14) can be seen in the original French text, here: <http://www.solidariteetprogres.org/Yemen-la-france-doit-mettre-fin-genocide.html>