

**Sarah Smaïl on AbdelKarim Qassem**

***Evacuation***

**Saudi Arabia, filmed in 2009 and produced in 2011**

## **Geopolitical context : around the 2009 Saudi-Yemen border war**

The 2009 border conflict between Saudi Arabia and Yemen had long time roots and reflected larger geopolitical tensions.

### ***a) In Yemen: the Houthi revolt and internal tensions***

In 2004, the Houthis, a Shia minority belonging to the Zaydi branch, started a revolt against the central government of Sunni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The revolt turned into a guerilla that spread throughout Northern Yemen and reached the capital, Sanaa.

That uprising was not the only one in the country, and stemmed from long term tensions between various factions competing for power or contesting the power in place. The unification of North Yemen and South Yemen in 1990 was followed by secessionist movements that resulted in the 1994 civil war and that have lasted since.

The Houthis revolted against the corruption and what they perceived to be the excessively pro-American stance of President Saleh's government. The opposition between Shia and Sunni has been described as one fundamental reason for that opposition. However, it has been argued that the differences between Sunni and Houthi

practice of religion had not been, in themselves, a major element of discord until then<sup>1</sup>. Rather, the question was of ruler legitimacy. The Houthis sought to restore the rule of the Imam, overthrown in the 1962 revolution, and considered President Saleh as unfit to rule due to his working class origin. The Houthis believe that only a descendent of the Prophet, which they claim to be, can be a legitimate ruler.

The Houthi revolt caused turmoil in the country, giving opportunity for Al Qaeda fighters to act. President Saleh had assured the West, and the United States in particular, of his will to help fight terrorism and had participated in their anti Al Qaeda efforts - but he also angered them by protecting men designated as terrorists by the United States and the United Nations, such as Jamal Al Badawi, convicted of helping with the planning of the 2000 USS Cole bombing<sup>2</sup>. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has however been active in Yemen and has been spilling over the ill-defined border with Saudi Arabia.

### ***b) The spillover of Yemeni tensions into Saudi Arabia and the Saudi reaction***

The Yemeni-Saudi border was partly defined in 1934 through a treaty which validity was only planned to last for 20 years. Further legislation was difficult to ratify as the border zone between Saudi Arabia and Yemen was still claimed by both country. The 2000 Jeddah treaty was supposed to settle the dispute, but large zones of the border remained unclearly defined. In 2003, for security purposes and to prevent the entry of illegal immigrants, Saudi Arabia started the building of a barrier along the border. The building was slowed down by Yemeni indignation, but is still going on to this day<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> «Yemeni refugees caught up in Middle East's forgotten war», The Guardian, 23 November 2009

<sup>2</sup> «For Yemen's leader, a balancing act gets harder», New York Times, 21 June 2008

<sup>3</sup> «Saudi Arabia builds giant Yemen border fence», BBC News, 9 April 2013

Saudi Arabia, a United States ally, saw the turmoil in Yemen and the threat of Al Qaeda terrorism spilling over its borders as menaces to its stability<sup>4</sup>. The Saudi crackdown on Al Qaeda had either put its members in jail, killed them or kicked them out of the country.

In August 2009, the Yemeni central government launched a military offensive, operation *Scorched Earth*, against the Houthi rebels in the North. In November, the Houthis attacked a Saudi border patrol on the Saudi side of the border, killing at least one Saudi soldier. The Saudi responded by sending troops and bombing Houthi locations on the Saudi sides, while the Houthis kept fighting<sup>5</sup>. Claims that locations on the Yemeni side had also been hit by the Saudi military were denied by the Saudi authorities<sup>6</sup>.

The Saudi response was the first war waged by the Saudi army alone. The last military involvement dated back to the 1991 US-led intervention to prevent Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. It found large relays in the media and came as a shock for the Saudi population.

The reciprocal attacks led to tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs), who were forced to flee the fighting scenes and tried to reach the overcrowded UNHCR camps. The number of IDPs between 2004 and 2009 has been estimated to 175 000 people by UNHCR<sup>7</sup>. Many Yemeni refugees who had found shelter near the border in Saudi Arabia went back to Yemen after Saudi Authorities had issued announcements that

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<sup>4</sup> «Behind deadly Yemen air raid, threat of Al Qaeda looms large», The Global Post, 17 September 2009

<sup>5</sup> «Saudi forces bomb Yemeni rebels on Southern border», The Wall Street Journal, 6 November 2009

<sup>6</sup> «Saudi jets bomb Yemeni Houthis», Al-Jazeera, 5 November 2009

<sup>7</sup> «Hundreds displaced by fighting on Yemen-Saudi border», IRIN News, 11 November 2009

the bombings were making their stay unsafe. Towns on the Saudi side of the border were also evacuated and their population placed in refugee camps.

### ***b) Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran***

In the larger picture, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran appears. Despite denials from both sides, many sources have claimed that the Houthis had been receiving financial and material support from Shia Iran<sup>8</sup>, the long time rival of Sunni Saudi Arabia, which gave another reason for Saudi reaction to the turmoil caused by the Houthi revolt.

Since 2009, President Saleh has been toppled in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The current President of Yemen, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, is also a Sunni. The turmoil in the country has not decreased, and the wills for secession have been vocal. The Southern part of Yemen demands independence, while the Shia/Sunni rivalry continues.

The civil war in Syria has escalated tragically. Syria has a Sunni majority and is run by the Bashar regime, which is part of an Alawite minority that was officially attached to Shia Islam in the XXth century. Iranian support of the Alawites and Saudi support to the Sunni have been crossed over by the interference of Al-Qaeda and terrorist factions.

Recent deals between the United States and Iran around the question of the Iranian nuclear program have raised serious tensions in Saudi Arabia, who fears losing a crucial ally to a sworn enemy. The negotiations that led to Syria agreeing to abandon its chemical weapons also angered Saudi Arabia, which argued that the Bashar regime should be

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<sup>8</sup> «With arms for Yemen rebels, Iran seeks wider Mideast role», New York Times, 15 March 2012

treated as a rogue regime and not negotiated with. As a display of disapproval of Western involvement with Shia regimes, Saudi Arabia became the first country ever to reject a UN Security Council seat in November 2013, a seat it had work hard to obtain<sup>9</sup>.

As Shia-Sunni tensions increase, Saudi Arabia worries that backing the Houthis as a Shia minority revolting against a Sunni central government might encourage that kind of revolt within its borders.

The Saudis experienced the shock of war, which they had been conceiving of only as a distant reality for two decades. Suddenly, the rather unfamiliar notion of refugee camp got familiar. The war affected the people physically involved in it in a violent way. It affected the rest of the public, who watched it unfold in the media, by affecting their imagination.

How can large scale geopolitical stakes and power plays be understood at the scale of a person? How can war be pictured for us to comprehend it at a deeper level that allowed by the stream of images seen in the media?

## **On AbdelKarim Qassem life and artwork**

AbdelKarim Qassem is a Saudi artist from Abha, in the South-West of Saudi Arabia, a land taken from the Yemeni kingdom by King Saud in the early XXth century and defined in the 1934 of Taif as part of Saudi Arabia.

AbdelKarim Qassem also works in the Saudi military.

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<sup>9</sup> «Saudi Arabia Rejects U.N Security Council Seat in Protest Move», New York Times, 18 October 2013

Few of his artistic productions are available online, but from what is, one can gather an intense connexion to his natural, urban and human surroundings. His Facebook and Twitter activities reflect a strong interest in art and a defense of freedom and respect of others. The artist takes snapshots of usual every day settings, such as stores, and writes short poetic comments around them and their connection to a larger scheme.

Another artwork of his, *Tiling the Sea*, is a 5 minute video suggesting tiling the sea as a somewhat ironic solution to the problem of an overcrowded land filled with exhausting human disputes, hoping without much conviction that those disputes would not be reproduced in the water. The sea as the last-chance shelter can be seen as a critique of global warming, of human smallness and as the expression of a hope for a change through a new apprehension of the very nature we have been taking for granted and altering for so long.

Qassem explains that art, or any cultural work, should not be elitist as it is made for the community as a whole and does not target one particular elite. He sees the artist as a historian and a guarantor of human integrity. The artist, he says, is always free in his work, but freedom of speech can vary from one environment to another.

## ***Evacuation***

The video *Evacuation* was filmed in 2009 in a town which name remains unknown, located at the Saudi-Yemeni border. As part of the Saudi military, the artist was in charge of making sure the town had been evacuated, while Saudi Arabia and Yemen were exchanging fire at the border, over which the Yemeni Houthi revolt was spilling. The evacuated population was sent to refugee camps, making the qualification of «refugee» go from practically non-existent to very real in Saudi Arabia. The evacuation had been planned by the military, as a means of protecting the population of the town, but for the population it happened as a shock.

The war greatly changed the lives of the families of combatants, and affected all of society, as for two decades Saudis had been living away from wars. Although it was difficult, waging it was a necessity, Qassem says, as border lands are always troubled lands.

Surrounded by gunfire, the air filled with the sound of military planes, Qassem filmed the empty town while his life was in immediate danger.

Asked what he was trying to capture at that moment in that place, the artist explains that what he was shooting was a historical moment that was grounded in the humanity of a place lost to its humans. Of all the artistical paths he walks, the most important to him is the one that separates those who live the war from those who watch it as a TV show. All wars, he says, are very different depending on whether you participate in it as a combatant or as a spectator. Media coverage turn wars into regular shows for the public by showing streams of images that are stripped of their humanity. Filming the evacuated town was an

expression of the artist's conviction that the artist is the historian and the guarantor of human integrity, away from political media, marketing and their complications. Art reaches the humanity in us, better than a documentary would. Stressing the fact that artists are always free to work in any way, Qassem explains that in our highly connected time art relies more on reflexion than strictly on visuals, which is why the artist's work has become real work when it concerns his or her surroundings.

Filming the streets and walls and shops of the town was for Qassem a way of capturing what was left of all the people who had had to flee the war. The writing on the wall tragically asked: «is there repentance before death?». That question was directed to us, the artist says. The incongruousness of his being in that location at that moment, after everybody had left, the intensity of his present as a post-disaffection witness affected him deeply. «*By filming the shops, I was witnessing what the life of those people had been in that place before the war*», he says. «*I could hear the sounds of the vegetable seller and even the discussions in the jewelry shop, which name was written with white spray on the outside door. I was imagining how they celebrated the Aid here, because this time, they had not been able to celebrate, as the war broke out preceding the Aid by just a few days*».

The bullets above him «*like meteors in the sky*» separated him from his usual, urban life and pushed him into the war. «*At that moment, he says, I wished a bullet would hit me in any part of my body except my head, so I could remain aware of what was going on*».

All the while, a quote rang in his head: «it is beautiful to die for one's country, but the most beautiful thing is to live for it».



Qassem insists on the preeminence of art on bullets in working at reaching peace. It is creativity, not bullets, that will allow discussion around wars, and that might lead to that day when a child can ask his mother, «Mom, what's war?».

His work has received praises as a Saudi experiment in participating in war a, but treating it artistically only.