

# Relationships between Yemen and Italy

**M. Castaldi**

Nowadays, Yemen is one of the Arab world's poorest countries, which has been devastated by an ongoing civil war, began in 2015, between two factions: the internationally recognized Yemeni government, led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, and the Houthi armed movement, along with their supporters and allies. This war is having great consequences on the population, bringing to the rise of a real humanitarian crisis. In fact, more than 9,245 people have been killed and 52,000 injured since March 2015. Moreover, civilians have repeatedly been the victims of "unrelenting violations of international humanitarian law" and the 75 per cent of the population requires humanitarian assistance. Many of them are considered at risk of starvation, they lack basic healthcare and they have been forced to leave their own homes.

## **Historical relations between Yemen and Italy**

### **The maritime republics and the Middle East**

Nowadays, many Italian people consider themselves as completely unconnected to what is happening in the Middle East and, in this case, in Yemen. In fact, they considered this situation as something of too far and out of their own interests. However, studying the history, we can see how this is not completely true and how, among the centuries, Italy has built strong commercial relations with these countries, which enabled it to increase its economic power and cultural development. In particular, between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the three Italian main maritime republics, Genoa, Pisa and Venice, held the monopoly of European trade with the Middle East. The silk and spice trade, involving spices, incense, herbs, coral, drugs and opium (usually used in medicine), made these Mediterranean cities incredibly rich. Commercial relations with the Middle East were, for this reason, extremely useful for the Italian maritime republics because the great part of these products came from Asia and Africa. In this way the Middle East ports, including many Yemeni ports on the Red sea, like the port of Aden and the port of Mocha, represented a real point of contact between different continents and a great opportunity to

develop the economic power of each country interested in the trade, but also to know new cultures and social habits.

### **1926: the Italo-Yemeni Treaty**

New relations between Italy and Yemen took place during a very dark period for the Italian society, the Fascism. In fact, during this period, the great part of the European countries aimed to increase their power by “conquering” new colonies, to exploit their resources and their cheap workforce. Italy already had some colonies in the African continent, like Eritrea and Somaliland, but they were both of low profitability. In the same time, the United Kingdom aimed to control the Red Sea, which was strategically really important for the trade and as a route for its navy to pass through, in order to reach India among other places. For this reason it had taken control of the South of Yemen (the British colony of Aden and the Aden Protectorate), which was at considerable risk of anti-colonialist rebellions. In fact, the Kingdom of Yemen strongly wanted to annex Aden to create a Greater Yemen and reach the independence. Exploiting this situation, in 1926, the Kingdom of Italy signed a friendship treaty with the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen. With this treaty, Italy, ruled by the National Fascist Party with Benito Mussolini as head of the government, recognized Imam Yahya Muhammad Hamid ed-Din as King of Yemen and acknowledged his claims to Aden. In this way, by increasing ties with Yemen, Mussolini thought that this factor would fuel trade with the colonies and bring this region into the Italian sphere of influence. The treaty was renewed on October 15, 1937, after Italy had annexed Abyssinia and Yemen remained in friendly relations with the Italian country until the end of WWII when Italy lost all its colonies in the African continent.

## **Relations between Italy and Yemen during the Yemeni civil war**

### **The Italian export of weapons in Yemen**

Italy seems to have some responsibilities in what is happening in Yemen since 2015. We can explain this sentence by quoting a part of an article wrote on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, which says: “At 03:00am on 8 October 2016 an airstrike allegedly by the Saudi-led military coalition struck the village of Deir Al-Hajari in Northwest Yemen. The airstrike killed a family of six, including the pregnant mother and four children. At the site of the airstrike bomb remnants were found, and a suspension lug manufactured by RWM Italia S.p.A., a subsidiary

of the German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall AG. ECCHR and its partners from Italy and Yemen call for an investigation into the criminal liability of the Italian authorities and RWM's directors for arms exports.”

In fact, according to the Yemeni authorities and the *Rete Italiana per Il Disarmo* in cooperation with *Osservatorio Permanente sulle Armi Leggere e le Politiche di Sicurezza e Difesa*, Italy is exporting deadly weapon on the Yemeni territory, to sell it to Saudi Arabia or another member state of the Saudi-led military coalition. Although many different warnings regarding the fact that all these weapons are causing significant loss of civilian lives and breaches of international humanitarian law, the export of bombs and other weapons has not stopped and are still taking place. The responsibility of this criminal act has been given to the RWM Italia S.p.A., that produces these weapons, and to senior officials of Italy's National Authority for the Export of Armament (UAMA), who have authorized these exports of armaments manufactured in Italy. In fact, this fact, which is having a strong impact on the Italian credibility around the world, could be the result of a criminal agreement between RWM managers and UAMA officials, in order to make profit.

This fact has huge consequences not just from an international point of view, but also from an internal point of view. In fact, it violate the article 1 of the law 185/90, which bans the export of weapons in countries in a state of war. Moreover, all these weapons are used by Saudi-led coalition to hit illegal targets, like schools or residential areas, causing deaths among the civilian population. This factor brings to a loss of credibility for the Italian government, which is not able to control, in a proper way, the export of weapons in these war-torn countries, becoming an accomplice to the Saudi coalition in all their immoral and illegal acts.

On the other hand, by financing the war in Yemen through the export of deadly weapons could have bad consequences on another great problem, which is afflicting Italy during the last few decades: the immigration. In fact, according to recent results, in May 2016, some illegal Yemeni refugees have reached the Italian coasts of Lampedusa. For this reason, we can see how the export of armaments is causing an import in term of refugees, generating a sort of “vicious circle”. This fact is producing a strong dissatisfaction among the Italian population, while the new government seems not to be willing to accept new refugees on our coasts. In fact, they believe that the Italian government should recognize itself as responsible of the augmentation of the rate of immigration and should continue to provide its help to the refugees.

To face this situation, the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has said that his government wants to end arms sales to Saudi Arabia and so now, it is only a question of formalising this position. However, it is not only a problem which regards Italy, but also several other nations which are still exporting weapons to the Middle Eastern kingdom, including France and the UK.

### **Italy and the protection of minorities in Yemen**

Another important aspect of the Yemeni civil war, which is strongly interesting Italy, is the respect and the protection of religious minorities. In fact, according to recent reports, strongly denounced by the non-governmental organization Amnesty International, in September 2018, about 24 Yemeni citizens (including an underage girl) have been arrested by the Huthi militias because of their religious belief, the baha'i faith. Now, all these people risk the death sentence and this is something that the Italian government cannot accept. In fact, the Huthi militias are using fake accusations and corrupted processes just to persecute and eliminate the Yemeni baha'i because of their faith. In most cases, the accused persons are considered guilty of very serious crimes, like the espionage for a foreign country, which could be punished with the death sentence. In this way, the Huthi authorities make use of the judicial system to eliminate minorities and to limit their freedom of belief.

This event is having a very strong relevance in the Italian baha'i community, which has asked the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs to intervene and remind the Yemeni authorities to respect the elementary human rights. The Italian minister Moavero Milanesi has rapidly answered to the request made by the baha'i community by expressing a great preoccupation for the situation regarding the death sentence of the 24 baha'i people, under process in the Special Penal Tribunal in Sanaa. In fact, the protection of the freedom of belief and of the fundamental rights of minorities are some of the priorities of the Italian foreign policy. Moreover, Italy is every day busy in the fight against capital executions and every form of discrimination and intolerance. For this reason, the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs has asked to the European Union and to the UN Human Rights Council to join its initiatives to avoid the death sentence of the Tribunal of Sanaa for the 24 baha'i worshippers. However, the situation seems, nowadays, not to be changed and the 24 people, as many other members of several minorities in Yemen, are still at risk of death.

### **The risk for the Catholic community in Yemen and the Pope Francis's appeal**

Keep going on the subject of the risk for the minorities in Yemen, another appeal comes from the Vatican. In fact, in many different speeches, Pope Francis has showed great disappointment and delusion for all the victims and the innocent blood this civil war has caused since 2015. Above all, he has expressed a strong preoccupation for the Catholic minority in Yemen, which counts about 4 churches and more than 4,000 worshippers. This worry is the result of a series of bad consequences the Yemeni civil war has had in the last few years on the Catholic community. In fact, since 2015, some different attacks have involved Catholic worshippers, like: the looting and the destruction by fire of the Church of the “Holy Family” in Aden between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> of September; the attack to the monastery of the “Missionaries of Charity” in Aden on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2016, which has caused the death of 16 people, including 4 nuns and a kidnapped priest.

The appeal pronounced by Pope Francis could have a strong impact on the friendly relationship between Italy and Yemen. In fact, as we know, the Vatican has a strong influence on the Italian policy and, above all, on its foreign affairs regarding Catholic minorities around the world. For this reason, the strong disappointment expressed by the Pope could bring Italy to make pressure for a UN intervention in Yemen in defence of religious and social minorities.

## Conclusion

It is clear that Italy and Yemen are geopolitically, economically and historically connected more than we can think. For this reason, we should not consider ourselves as completely outside what is happening nowadays in this country, but we should commit ourselves wholeheartedly to try to solve, with every means, this situation, that is causing death and destruction among the population and which represents a serious scourge for all the world society.

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