



**Vice on HBO – “After the Fall” (12/18/18)**

- 00:00:25 Danielle Hodes: Good evening. My name is Danielle Hodes, and I'm the manager of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. It's my pleasure to welcome all of you to tonight's program, along with those tuning in to our live web broadcast at [911memorial.org/live](http://911memorial.org/live). And as always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our museum members in the audience.
- 00:00:46 And tonight we're joined by Isobel Yeung, an award-winning correspondent working across "Vice News Tonight" and... the Emmy Award-winning half-hour nightly newscast, and the multi-award winning "VICE" on HBO documentary series. Isobel joined "Vice" in 2014, after working in China for four years, where she reported and developed shows for several Asian and UK TV channels and wrote for notable publications, including "The Guardian," "The Telegraph," "The Independent," and "South China Morning Post."
- 00:01:17 Isobel has covered a wide, wide range of global stories at "Vice," including recent coverage of the aftermath in the fragile Philippine community where ISIS laid siege, the crippling state of Assad-controlled Syria, and the Islamic State's impact on Iraqi youth. She has been nominated for an Emmy Award, and has won a Gracie and Front Page Award for elevating the plight of Afghan women's rights struggles.
- 00:01:41 Before we dive in, please be advised that due to the nature of tonight's program, some potentially disturbing media will be displayed as part of the discussion. We're particularly thrilled to have Isobel with us, as we've

been following her work for several years. And we're also deeply grateful to "Vice" for their continued collaboration on our public programs.

Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Isobel Yeung in conversation with 9/11 Memorial and Museum Director of Public Programs Jessica Chen.

(applause)

00:02:14

Jessica Chen: Isobel, thank you so much for joining us tonight.

Isobel Yeung: Thank you so much for having me.

Jessica Chen: As Dani mentioned, we have been following your work and the work of your colleagues at "Vice" for many years now. And what we appreciate about "Vice's" reporting is that not only does it give us a bit of policy perspective, but we really get to see the humans and the real people being affected by some of these issues. So our conversation tonight is really going to focus on Syria as covered in the episode of "VICE" on HBO, "After the Fall: Syria after ISIS," And also looking at "Women in War," which was a segment that focused on women in Yemen, and how that situation has affected them.

00:02:54

And I'm also hoping in the course of our conversation we can talk a little bit more about your experiencing report... experience reporting from the front line and kind of the impact that's had on you overall as a journalist. So, first, to kind of set up our conversation on Syria. Before we kind of dive into some of the great visuals and, and narrative that "Vice" has set up for us, I, I kind of want to get a sense of, you know, what, where did this story begin for you? And did you have a sense of the people or the communities, the narratives that you might want to capture when you arrived?

00:03:29 Isobel Yeung: Yeah, so this was a story... I don't know who is doing this or not, but this is a story where we go into Raqqa in northern Syria. And at this point, it's several months after the fall of Raqqa from ISIS, ISIS-held territory. And so, we really just wanted to go in there and tell a very human story about what it's like to try and pick up your lives and rebuild what is left of your life when 80% of the city has been completely destroyed and kind of what remnants of your life exist after that.

00:04:03 So, yeah, I mean, we had a... we had a sense of what was going on there. We had a sense of kind of what types of people we wanted to talk to, but a lot of it was on-the-ground reporting, in terms of trying to figure that out when we were there.

Jessica Chen: Sure. Let's go ahead and turn to our first clip to see what Isobel is talking about.

00:04:25 (clip starts)

(explosion in video clip)

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): Last June the battle to retake Raqqa from ISIS began, led by the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, and supported by air strikes from the U.S.-led military coalition.

(explosion in video clip)

00:04:39 (clip ends)

Isobel Yeung: It wasn't a visual trip. It was more of a... (both laughing)

Jessica Chen: It looks like we're having a little delay on the clip over here. Um... Maybe give them 30 seconds? Maybe let's just go into one of the stories and see if our... if we can kind of give you that aerial, visual sense of... of kind of the bigger picture. But, um, you know, 80% of Raqqa is destroyed. Communities are coming in to literally, you know, rebuild their physical homes or try to reoccupy homes that have been destroyed.

00:05:22

But we also see kind of the, the emotional process in which families are trying to connect with those who are missing, those who are presumed to be dead. You know, I'm kind of curious, particularly--and let's see if we can set up another clip-- the... there is a scene in which, you know, you're, you're looking at a man who is actually dealing with the challenges of the physical landscape there. Many of these homes have been left booby-trapped by mines, by ISIS, and so they're looking, you know, for, for how to kind of... how to kind of reoccupy those homes. And, and, you know, I'm kind of curious, and this helps us set up clip, you know, who, who ended up going into these places to, to, to render them hospitable?

00:06:07

Isobel Yeung: Yeah, so, I mean, one of the things that we knew going in there was the fact that there really isn't the international aid and the support... are we going to play it?

Jessica Chen: Uh, no.

Isobel Yeung: Okay. So there wasn't the international support that, that the city needed. I mean, according to the city mayor they needed \$5 billion to attempt to rebuild the city, and they were getting a small fraction of that. And one of the things that's striking about... of a city like Raqqa is the level of human resilience there.

00:06:35

There are so many people who have returned, I think so far, about 150,000 people have returned to the city to just pick up their lives and attempt to rebuild what's left of them, which is pretty remarkable, given that a lot of what's left of the city is just pure rubble and destruction. And

there are still hundreds of dead bodies lying around the city that have yet to be dug up, that have yet to be identified.

00:06:57           The city has yet to really be rebuilt. I mean, rubble has been cleared from most... from a lot of main roads, but there's still, like, a huge, huge level of destruction after four months of obliteration. And so really what was happening is we found that a lot of locals were just trying to clear homes. The man that I think that we're going to play the clip of is a volunteer who, you know, wanted to help people pick up their lives again and felt very passionately about that, that there wasn't the international support or the help that the city needed.

00:07:32           And so he volunteered to just go into these houses that have been booby-trapped by ISIS fighters as they were fleeing and just to clear them. And this guy has very, very little training, in terms of how to actually go about demining something. But they're kind of left with very little choice. And so this is kind of what a lot of people around the city, who are just doing this on an ad-hoc basis.

00:08:00           Jessica Chen: Sure. And just to... in... by way of also allowing a bit more time for our video technicians, you know, something that struck me as I watched this clip, which we will hopefully all see, was just that, you know, here's a man who is taking on what appears to me to be an extremely technical task. You know, how... did you get a sense of how, how people learn those skills?

Isobel Yeung: So I think this particular man had actually at some point worked for a international organization that was there, that was, like, training people, to an extent. And at the time we went there, the U.S. had actually pulled out a... about \$200 million towards that effort of rebuilding and stabilizing the city. And so some people... he'd got some skills, a, a limited amount of international training from that, before the program itself was pulled.

00:08:53            So he kind of picked up bits and pieces from that and applied them himself. But, I mean, this is the kind of task that you, normally you go in there with teams of people, and you have, you know, people backing you up, et cetera, and you have kind of somewhat of an escape plan, and you have equipment. And this guy was in his track suit trousers, and his... sorry, you don't use that phrase in America, he was in his joggers...

(laughter)

And he was in his... he was in his sneakers, and he was just going in there and winging it, basically.

00:09:22            Jessica Chen: Not to give away any more details about the clip...

Isobel Yeung: I just gave it all away, sorry.

Jessica Chen: No, no, and really to understand... It's, it's really quite a remarkable feat that this man undertakes.

00:09:36            (clip starts)

Man: (speaking Arabic): I found one here! Yeah, found a mine here

Man (speaking Arabic): Let him walk behind me. He should put his feet exactly where I put mine.

00:10:02            Man (speaking English): Another one, another one? Okay.

Man (speaking Arabic): First I'm going to remove the fuse, then I'm going to remove the battery so it's completely dismantled.

(dismantles mine)

00:11:00 Man (speaking Arabic): Yes

(applause in video clip)

Man (speaking Arabic): [I cleared] this building and the mine was in the apartment in the back.

00:11:38 Isobel Yeung (in video clip): My palms are sweaty. How are you not scared? How... my heart was going like this the whole time you were up there.

Man (speaking Arabic): I didn't feel anything. My heart is dead [I'm numb] because of everything I've seen. Carrying children's corpses and seeing dead people. Each time I carry a dead child or a severed leg, it kills me inside.

00:12:07 (clip ends)

Jessica Chen: I think, you know, just also something that comes across to me in the clip is that, you know, he's... he's literally using his, an iPhone as a flashlight trying to...

Isobel Yeung: Yeah, that was my iPhone, actually. (laughing): I was like, "Please come back with this."

00:12:23 Jessica Chen: You know, what strikes me is, you know, we're all waiting, watching this with bated breath, wondering what's going to happen. And when he comes out of the house, he's quite, he's quite, you know, he's...

it's almost like the... the atrocities that he's already seen have, have made this seem like almost something natural that he would be doing.

00:12:43

Isobel Yeung: Yeah, he was cool as a cucumber. It's, um... it's really remarkable. I mean, everything's just so relative. And I feel like, given what these people have seen for the last few years living under ISIS rule, given that, I mean, when we were there, every day there were still casualties and fatalities coming in to the hospitals, because of... because children or civilians were stepping on mines. So, I mean, given, given what he's seen, he... there is this, like, as he said, kind of numbness that kind of was just really, yeah, really disturbing, really hard to grasp.

00:13:25

And I should also say that, I mean, a couple of weeks after we filmed with him, we, my producer, Jackie, who is here tonight, and I sadly received photos from our fixer of, of this man who had, sadly, passed away as he was demining another house. And... leaving behind his wife and three children. And it's, yeah, it really actually hit home how incredibly fragile his life and so many other people's lives are there. And the remarkable work that he's doing.

00:14:06

Jessica Chen: And just to give a sense of the scale, I mean, this was just one home, one mine among a city that was completely destroyed. So, with hope, I am turning back to the first clip that will give you a sense of the city at large.

00:14:27

(Clip starts)

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): Last June, the battle to retake Raqqa from ISIS began, led the by the Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF, and supported by air strikes from a U.S.-led military coalition.

(explosions in video clip)

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): For four months, missiles rained on Raqqa, eventually driving out and defeating the caliphate. The SDF took control of the city. But it was a brutal victory that left 80% of the city uninhabitable.

(music playing in video clip)

00:15:02

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): This is the center of the city where you can see just enormous levels of destruction. I mean, almost every single building is crumbled and falling in on itself. At the same time, you can see people starting to move back. I mean, some of these shops have already opened, pretty optimistically, and people are starting to rebuild their lives.

(music playing in video clip)

00:15:33

(clip ends)

Jessica Chen: I mean, with that clip we really get a sense of, kind of the, the scale of destruction, but also the fact that these homes aren't inhabitable. And you did meet many people who had either rented homes across from their original home, because they couldn't move back, and you ask them kind of what, you know, who they blamed.

00:15:51

And I think I want to quote one young man, Talib, who is a resident in Raqqa, during the occupation and came back afterwards. And he says, "Bashar al-Assad's regime destroyed us. The Syrian Army destroyed us. The SDF destroyed us. ISIS destroyed us. Al Nusra Front destroyed us. Air strikes destroyed us. Russia destroyed us. Iran destroyed us. The coalition destroyed us. They all came to Syria and destroyed it." Can you talk to me a little bit about that sentiment and, you know, the, the impression that people had of, of what had brought this destruction onto their homes?

00:16:23 Isobel Yeung: Yeah, it was a real mixed bag. I mean, I think that, that quote is pretty accurate. I mean, they really did feel like they were getting it from all angles. I mean, they've lived under brutal Assad regime. Then they lived under this horrific ISIS regime, which... terrible human rights atrocities were committed. And then there were... their city was obliterated by the coalition. And now they're just living in this ghost city.

00:16:52 Um, and so, yeah, I think that it depends who you talk to, actually, because some people on the ground blamed sort of one side more than the other. Some people wished that Assad... we heard it all, we heard that, that some people wished that the Assad government would come back and kind of control the area. There were hopes that people... that some people were... I wouldn't say happy but were glad that the Kurds had some control there.

00:17:18 Some people said that, you know, "Life is better under ISIS. Yes, it sucked, but at least we could afford to eat bread." And so, yeah, it was... but overall, I would say that there was kind of a... there was this overriding feeling of all international forces have only made things worse for these people.

Jessica Chen: And you touched a little bit on this in relation to the demining situation in the house, but, you know, were, were there, was there a presence of aid agencies, even if they weren't kind of participating in rendering safe some of these homes. You know, where were they in this? Because we always hear, you know, the people who are trying to make do with what they have.

00:17:59 Isobel Yeung: Yeah, there was some. I mean, there was sort of limited number of aid agencies. Um... I would say that, like, the overriding effort, though, was coming from the people who were living there. It was... there wasn't like a concerted effort from international organizations. We, obviously, touched base with those. There was a Dutch organization there. There's... there were a couple of American organizations.

- 00:18:24 But, yeah, it was definitely more the civilians than it was anything else. And also, sorry, on your last point, I would also say that there was one kind of overriding theme, also was, there was a lot of anger and frustration at, towards the international community, that Talib there mentioned, but... that everyone kind of touched on in terms of just the level of, yes, destruction that the coalition had caused, this really brutal bombing campaign and the lack of accountability.
- 00:18:59 I mean, after we left, I think it was in June this year, The... Amnesty International came out with a report saying it wasn't the limited number of deaths that the coalition said... that... of civilian deaths that they claimed had died in this... in this attack. It was hundreds and hundreds of them. And I don't think we'll ever know the true number of civilians who have died in Raqqa. Um, and so there was just, like, mounting anger and frustration towards the coalition for failing to take accountability for it and for... yeah, obliterating their city.
- 00:19:35 Jessica Chen: It's, it kind of points to the idea that, you know, ending a war doesn't necessarily mean peace, doesn't mean... you know, kind of, "Here you go. Here's your home." It's really taken an impact on, on these individuals. You, you did, while you were there, speak to some who might be held accountable for what happened. You interviewed half of the four-person ISIS cell nicknamed "The Beatles." And I was wondering if you could kind of talk to us about that process of interviewing them.
- 00:20:06 Isobel Yeung: Yeah, um... it was me and my producer, who were... we'd been... we knew that we could get in front of them and that we had a chance to kind of pitch them on the idea of interviewing them. We knew that they were very difficult to, to secure, and that they were sort of very picky about the interviews that they would give. So we kind of sat down with them.
- 00:20:32 We were taken to this pretty nondescript building very close to the prison in which they were kept. And from what I understand, they weren't told anything about us being there, either. They kind of were led up these stairs, and their blindfolds were taken off them, and they were very dazed and confused as to who we were and what we were doing there.

So we had almost an hour in front of them in which to pitch, "Please give us an interview."

00:20:56 And there were... it was an interesting and kind of surreal experience, because these guys are... very charismatic and very... I mean, they have a lot of kind of childish humor between them that they were throwing back and forth. And they talked about their recollections of living in the U.K., and talked about what was going on in America, made some jokes about Trump.

00:21:19 And they... it was kind of... it was sort of disorientating, and it was a very bizarre experience. And eventually they agreed to be interviewed on camera and, yeah, it was... I kind of had to step out of the room for a moment and remind myself as to who these guys are and the atrocities that they've committed, I mean, over, over two dozen beheadings and killings, allegedly, on their shoulders. So it was, yeah. It was intense.

00:21:48 Jessica Chen: You, you wrote about this experience in an article for "Vice," and you kind of mentioned that, there, you know, what is captured on camera is one thing, and, also, your interaction with them off-camera was another thing. Um, I'm curious, you know, what, what do you think compelled them to give the interview, and kind of what were their motivations behind what they ended up saying?

00:22:07 Isobel Yeung: They essentially wanted to send the message that they were not getting a democratic process in their trial. And the question of what happens to them now is interesting and still hasn't been resolved. There's... there's hundreds of ISIS fighters still kind of languishing in these SDF prisons in northern Syria, foreign fighters. And so we don't know what happens to them. And the U.S. have thrown out the ideas of sending them to Guantanamo, sending them to Iraqi prisons. No one really wants to take them, frankly.

00:22:45 Um, and so they're aware of that, and they're aware of their position, and they're aware of... I mean, they... they could either get sent to the U.K., where I think that they felt like they would get a more fair trial. They could get sent to the U.S., where there's the chance of them getting the death penalty, which their mother has advocated strongly against recently. Or they could be tried in Syria. Or they could just stay there for a long... an indefinite period of time. So they essentially wanted to talk about, ironically, the injustices of democracy, which they... (laughs)

Jessica Chen: It's, it's a bit much.

Isobel Yeung: Yeah.

00:23:26 Jessica Chen: I... I don't even know what to say. Um, but, you know, I, I want to kind of cue up to our next clip in that, you know, when you were in Raqqa you met a woman named Mone, who, whose son, Muhammad, was taken by ISIS. And she's on this quest to look for her son. So actually, in your, you know, in your conversation with them, I believe you present a photo of Mone's son, Muhammad, to them and ask, you know, "Do you recognize... do you recognize this man?" What did you get from their... kind of, did you feel like they had any sense of what they had done?

00:24:06 Isobel Yeung: Um, they're different, I mean, they're pretty defensive, and they were... they talked about their time in ISIS like it was a time at a water park. They sort of, you know, talked about the good times they had, the friends they made. They sort of brushed over some of the unpleasantness by saying, you know, "Of course, there are things we regret. You know, we all regret things." Um, but, yeah, I don't... they were not letting on as to any of the scale of atrocities that they committed. They kind of took everything very lightheartedly.

00:24:42 I feel like they, they also know that the evidence that you need to really effectively prosecute those level of crimes has most likely also largely disappeared in their bombing campaign. And so they not only would not talk about those crimes, obviously, with me. But they were very aware of their position.

00:25:07 Jessica Chen: Um, I, I want to go to this next clip, because in a way, I find it, you know, in this context, where, you know, they're very aware of the processes that surround their fate. You know, there are also individuals, like this Syrian mother, who is trying to appeal to anyone, whether it's a community person or whether it's a local official, to try and get answers about her son. And so I-I think we see a little bit more of kind of this situation which people are looking towards governance to provide answers, and they're not getting them. If we could just turn to that clip now.

00:25:46 (clip starts)

Mone: (speaking Arabic): Help me to know if my son is alive or dead.

Official: (speaking Arabic): How can I help you with something unknown? If he was a prisoner.

Mone (speaking Arabic): My son was accused of collaboration with the Americans.

Official (speaking Arabic): [If] he was guilty of collaboration with the Americans they might have executed your son. You should also think of that. If he was guilty of collaboration, they must have executed him. Hopefully, they haven't executed him. If we had him here, we would've released him.

00:26:10 Hundreds of missing people are being asked about. Even we, the military men, have missing people. All Raqqa people have relatives executed by ISIS. You should follow up with the Civilian Council. I told you, the U.S.-led coalition does the investigation first, then we handle it, but they investigate first.

00: 26:40

Hopefully he is alive, but nothing is in our hands. Now...

Mone (speaking Arabic): My son hasn't done anything.

Official (speaking Arabic): Ma'am...

Mone (speaking Arabic): He was just accused.

Official (speaking Arabic): We talk to you based on your words that your son is accused. ISIS do not fear Allah. You know they don't

Mone (speaking Arabic): We raised him to serve the country. We raised them and got them in universities. I've been serving this country for 37 years so that our sons live in peace and security. We don't know where our sons are now.

00:27:12

Official (speaking Arabic) I know ma'am. I know. How long had he spent in their prison?

Mone (speaking Arabic): It's been a year since he was taken by ISIS.

Official (speaking Arabic): During Raqqa blockade.

Mone (speaking Arabic): During the blockade

Official (speaking Arabic): During the blockade, ISIS went savage. ISIS became more savage than ever. Any prisoner with any charges was executed immediately.

00:27:32 Isobel Yeung (in video clip): So you are saying that Mone's son is most likely dead?

Official (speaking Arabic): I don't want to hurt her feelings with my words. But it's one hundred percent, because I was fighting during Raqqa liberation and I know what ISIS does. A group of families tried to withdraw but ISIS surrounded them. They were retreating and people hid from ISIS in the buildings. They [ISIS] threw children, men, and women off the buildings. They just wanted to slaughter. It's what they do best. They kill immediately. No other assumption.

00:28:19 I hope you find your son. As long as your heart tells you that he is alive, he will be alive, God willing.

00:28:27 (clip ends)

Jessica Chen: What was going on in your mind as you sat by this conversation?

Isobel Yeung: Um... it's actually really eerie watching it in here. It... yeah, I mean, it's just heartbreaking. This woman has been looking for her son at this point for the last year. I think it was a year and five days at the point that we met her. And she will continue looking for her son until the day she dies. Um, it's really... it's just really, really... you see people in these situations on the real, kind of, you see so much... you learn so much about humanity, because you see people in the real extremes of life. And I can't imagine anything more heartbreaking than a woman, a mother looking for her son and likely knowing how he's died but still just never giving up hope.

00:29:26 Jessica Chen: We're... you know, you, you went to Raqqa in the summer. We're now several months away. You know, I'm just curious, what has happened in Raqqa since you shot there, you know, in terms of the level

of civilian casualties? You know, what do you know of the situation that has unraveled since you were there?

00:29:46 Isobel Yeung: I mean, I think, as far as I understand it, the cleanup effort is continuing. There is still... given the scale of destruction there, the, um, level of rebuilding and even stabilization is not happening at the pace in which locals would want. And so, the insecurity is increasing, is increasing. And the levels of frustration and anger on the ground, from what I understand, is also increasing.

00:30:17 Jessica Chen: What do you think needs to happen in order for things to continue to head in the right direction, perhaps with a little bit more, a little bit more speed?

Isobel Yeung: I mean, there needs to be a real international effort to stabilize, which is what the U.S. and other western countries committed themselves to with the destruction of Raqqa. And, I mean, the argument on the ground is, you know, "It was the coalition that destroyed the city. It should be the coalition to rebuild the city." Um, and there's, obviously, different arguments as to, like, what level of rebuilding we should commit ourselves to. It's also a very, very fragile situation, because Raqqa itself is kind of surrounded by different, very complex, different parties.

00:31:07 And so we don't know what's going to happen there. And, I mean, even within the last couple of days, the... Erdogan has sent troops to the border of northern Syria, and there's a real concern that the Turkish might lead an offensive on, on that area, not Raqqa itself, but on areas nearby. So it's a very, very fragile situation and one that the U.S. also has high stakes in, given that the, really, the only ally on the ground is the... is the SDF, and is the Kurds there, which is currently the party that is... the rebel party that is controlling Raqqa and parts of northern Syria. And so if they lose that, then it's a... it's a very, very... fragile situation for the U.S.

00:31:58 Jessica Chen: Sure. We're now going to kind of transition to Yemen, but, hopefully, with a sense of really looking at... I want to kind of highlight the fact that Mone's search for her son, even though it's incredibly

heartbreaking, and, you know, later in the episode you see that this woman goes into these prisons, literally looking at the walls for any sign, any, any note that might have indicated what might have happened to her son.

00:32:22 I want to kind of look at the fact that in a way, her, her pursuit for answers is also, you know, a testament to her resilience in the face of everything that's going on, that she still is, is really searching. And so, it's, it kind of points to this larger question of women in, in conflict, in situations of vulnerability demonstrating resilience. And I think that's a story you capture in Yemen. So I'm just curious, you know, going into Yemen, was that a story you already had in mind? Did you have a sense of the kind of women that you wanted to talk to?

00:32:56 Isobel Yeung: Um, it was a story that came about because I was interested in the conflict there. It's now in its fourth year. It's been the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. But we actually hear quite little about women who are suffering the most in, in this conflict. And so, yeah, I wanted to go in there and tell their stories. And also, increasingly, what I found out is that women are, yes, some of the most vulnerable people there.

00:33:23 I mean, two thirds of women are now married before the age of 18. Sexual violence has increased. Domestic violence has increased on all levels. They are the most... they... women are most likely to be displaced and abused. At the same time, they are incredibly resilient, and what I wanted to get across from this story was that it's often the women who are taking up roles that they wouldn't normally take up.

00:33:48 I mean, this is one of the most conservative countries in the world for women. And I think it's been consistently ranked the worst place in the world to be a woman. And yet, they are taking on these breadwinning roles. They are really stepping up, really pushing for some form of social justice and change, and, and actually on the front lines of some of these, some of these efforts to, to create peace in the country. I'm kind of... sorry.

Jessica Chen: Yeah, no.

00:34:16

Isobel Yeung: So I mean, the purpose of that, in a roundabout way, is that I just wanted to show the strength of women and, um, how they were really just holding up society, rather than just showing them as kind of the vulnerable faces that we, we often see.

Jessica Chen: You met some of the women who form an elite female unit in the Aden security forces. And I'm curious if you can describe, it's also kind of comedic, kind of their interaction with the men in the security forces while they're, while they're in training, and the new recruits are kind of learning how to use their weapons. There's a lot of mansplaining that happens, which conveys across cultures. So I'm just curious if you could talk a little bit about that experience, and maybe things that surprised you, things that, you know, that captured your, your attention in, in their, you know, pursuit of doing that work.

00:35:02

Isobel Yeung: Yeah it was, it was refreshing, because you see... yeah, you kind of... it's difficult, actually, to interact with women sometimes, because especially in Yemen, which is so conservative, and you can't really... it's sort of taboo to film women, for them to appear on camera, and... with a male cameraman. So it's also taboo for them to be in the presence of men in certain cases. And so it's actually very, very difficult to even talk to people. And so even just moving around, you don't really see a lot of women. And they're, obviously, completely covered up as well.

00:35:34

So it was actually so refreshing to see, I think in the scene you're describing, which is... some of them taking up roles in the security forces and, yeah, holding these guns, and... taking roles that they would never normally even consider. And, you know, they, the women themselves have been targeted exactly for that, and several of them have had attempts on their lives, because it's seen as... as horrific that they would even attempt to take on jobs, let alone these sort of very male orientated roles.

00:36:12            So yeah, it was kind of... it was cool to see them being so feisty and yelling back at the men who were telling them how to hold a gun. They're like, "No, I know how to hold a gun. I'll point this gun at your head."  
(chuckling): It was kind of, in a weird way, slightly refreshing.

Jessica Chen: You also had a conversation with men who, you know, you weren't able to... none of the senior officials in the government would agree to be interviewed, but you did have a conversation with some men who were working for the government, and you guys had a khat-chewing session. And, you know, I think it was an interesting conversation, because you were essentially asking them about the state, the conditions for women, particularly at this time in Yemen, but, also, just kind of overall the roles between men and women and what role they had in society.

00:36:56            And I wonder if you could share little bit more about kind of, I guess, you know, the, the disparity, in terms of, you know, sense of, of what the problem really was between these women who are, who are taking on these roles and these men who, who are kind of hanging out and chatting with you.

00:37:14            Isobel Yeung: Yeah, I mean, it's... the khat-chewing thing is real in Yemen, and so, actually, like, a lot of the time that we were hanging we really wanted to get any kind of government interviews, and no one was really... well, the first thing is that a lot of the government members aren't even in the country. They've left to go to Saudi or the U.A.E. And so anyone who is there is kind of lower-tier. And it transpired that, I was like, "There must be someone doing something for the country." You know, like... then we realized that these are the guys that are supposed to be running the country. And all they were doing was chewing khat.

00:37:48            And when I asked them about, yeah, women's rights, and whether that was a concern for them, and the fact that abuse has increased, and that so many of them were displaced, et cetera, et cetera, they were like, "What about men's rights? Why are you asking about women?" I mean, "First we need to address men's rights, and then we can move to

women." So, yeah, it was, it was shocking to them that that was even brought up as a topic.

00:38:13 Jessica Chen: Yeah, and I mean, I think this, this... I also... you know, while, while talking about women who have stepped into nontraditional roles and really have kind of helped to hold up society, especially, you know, kind of in contrast to these men, who are, who are sitting around and talking to you, I wanted to highlight too, that, you know, the, the women who are really vulnerable and at risk at this time also include children.

00:38:37 And so you spoke to a family, and this is where we, we can, I guess, talk a little bit about the humanitarian crisis in, in Yemen. But a child who is married off by her, her father, essentially commoditized for, for the financial stability of her family. And I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the experience of interviewing that family. Because there's also a very interesting gender dynamic there, between the father of that family and the mother of that family.

00:39:03 Isobel Yeung: Yeah. I mean, essentially, this was a family who were very, very poor and had been displaced from their hometown, which was up in the north of Yemen and had fled to southern Yemen. And one of the members got sick, and the father pulled the girl out of school and... and married her off to a man that he'd met, I think, once.

00:39:29 Um, and this girl was 12 at the time, I think. And... yeah, it was just kind of escalated to be a very, very bad situation where this poor girl was kind of tied to a man who she never met and had absolutely no interest in knowing. But this was very, kind of... sadly, this is, the number of child marriages has increased since the war started in 2015. And finances have been so hard to come by. And so marrying your daughter off feels... for a dowry is kind of an obvious answer, unfortunately.

00:40:10 Jessica Chen: And it's worth highlighting that the... I believe the mother in the family was the one who was able to work. And I think when you asked the father, you asked her I think, you know, what, you know, "If

you're the one making the money, do you get a say in the decision-making?" And she says, "He, the man, sets the strategy, and I execute."

And so I think there's a unique moment in, in, you know, thinking about the decision that they made, in terms of the marriage of the daughter. But I think when you ask the mother, she, she says if it were up to her, she wouldn't have done it. And I'm just curious, kind of, the... I'm, I'm more so kind of trying to think about the dynamic in the family that you witnessed, because the daughter also has very much... very much resents her father.

00:40:53 Isobel Yeung: Yeah, how can you not when your father sells you off for \$200 to a man three times your age? And yeah, it is funny, I mean, the woman was the one who, even if these, like, very desperate situations, was going out and collecting cans and taking them, like, hauling these huge cans around to try and fill them for money so that she could try and get her daughter back into school, actually, which is what she was trying to do, and to also try and buy her daughter back and out of this marriage that she'd been trapped in.

00:41:25 But, yeah, it's, it's just, I mean, it's cultural as well in the, in some ways in that... yeah, it's just kind of accepted that it's, he's the man of the household, and even though he doesn't work or didn't... wasn't particularly contributing to the family, that he was... whatever he said goes.

Jessica Chen: Well, I want to cut to this clip of some women who, who are embodying a different kind of voice, and we'll talk a little bit about that clip.

00:41:58 (clip starts)

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): Some Yemeni women are taking things into their own hands. In Aden we came across a street protest demanding the end to legal detentions by Yemeni security forces. The protesters call themselves, "The Mothers of Abductees" and were calling for justice.

Woman (speaking Arabic): We are a country and we need justice, law and rights. Yes, we are for human rights in a civil state. One of justice, order and law.

00:42:21

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): It's really quite extraordinary to see women out here in public shouting themselves hoarse right outside the security building, which is incredibly risky here, and ensuring that their voices are heard and that men are the ones listening to them in a place where often their voices go completely unheard.

Woman (speaking Arabic): We don't know if we'll be able to go back home today. We don't know what will happen to us because of this protest. We might be attacked, violated, wronged, arrested. Anything might happen to us. We need freedom, justice and equality for all our people.

00:42:51

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): Somebody has gotten a security man coming over right now to tell these women that they shouldn't be here. And these women are being incredibly feisty, telling them that they have every right to be here and that this is their protest and their fight.

Woman (speaking Arabic): We came here to put an end to this.

Isobel Yeung (in video clip): You are making quite an impact.

Woman (speaking Arabic): Of course! We're making an impact on the street because we're southern female leaders.

00:43:12 Isobel Yeung (in video clip): That impact has been lasting. A few weeks ago, 46 detainees were released from a Yemeni prison, following the mothers' protests. Despite being the most vulnerable and overlooked half of society, women here are proving themselves capable of pushing for real change. It's only with their involvement that Yemen will ever have hope of one day finding peace. How much do you think the future of this country depends on the action of Yemeni women right now?

Woman (speaking Arabic): It depends a lot on women. We are human beings. We want to have our rights to improve our lives and to build a future for our children.

00:43:53 (clip ends)

Jessica Chen: Can you tell us a little bit more about how this, this protest came about and kind of what, you know, the, the ramifications on the women who participated, but also kind of whether this is an ongoing practice for them in their society. And do you see that role increasing?

00:44:10 Isobel Yeung: Yeah, so, actually, this is a movement, the Mother of Abductees, or, um, which exists both in the north and in the south. And it originated from literally the mothers of people who had been detained as largely political prisoners, and, and others. And, yeah, they're fighting to have them released.

And, yeah, a lot of them spoke of ramifications, because, I mean, given... you know, there is sort of this expectation that you sort of stay silent and... just fit into the gender norms within society there. And so raising your voice and doing it in such a bold manner, and criticizing the, in this case, in the south, it's the Emiratis who are controlling the prisons that they want these political prisoners to be released from, is a very, a very brash move.

00:45:02                   And it goes against all kind of gender expectations within the country. And so, yeah, we were hanging out with these ladies as they were preparing to really push to get somebody released. And they were very, very persistent. I mean, I have to say, they were there every single day outside these prisons. There's allegedly horrific human rights abuses going on inside these prisons, which is, you know, why it's so crucial for them to get these people out.

00:45:29                   A lot of them, also, were not even related to the prisoners who had been abducted. So they were... yeah, they just saw it as their duty. You know, they were like, "We're not on the front lines fighting, but we can try and push for, for equality. We can try and push for human rights. And we can try and better our countries in whatever ways we can."

Jessica Chen: Do you think the women in Yemen have a sense of community with each other? Or is that, you know, traditionally have? Or has that been a recent development, in terms of needing to lean on each other for support in, in this situation?

00:46:02                   Isobel Yeung: I mean, I, I got the sense that there is a... yeah, there's a real sense of community, and that... I would say that given what's happened to their country in the last few years, you can't really, you can't really ignore that. And so I can only imagine, and I hadn't been before this year, but I can only imagine that those bonds increased, and, and that, that sense of community got stronger and that women are increasingly kind of grouping together and finding, finding their strength and trying to figure out how they can uphold society.

00:46:38                   Jessica Chen: And, lastly, just thinking about the, the increased attention on this conflict, and the fact that now there is strong international... a strong international desire for a cease-fire. And we saw this internationally backed cease-fire go into play on Tuesday in Hudaydah, and I'm curious, you know, with, with things like that kind of proceeding, are you optimistic about the future of Yemen? Are there things that you feel like policy makers need to keep in mind as, as that moves forward?

00:47:09 Isobel Yeung: Yeah, I mean, I think, like, for the first time, there is some real level of optimism and hope. And for such a long time there's just been pure bleakness when it comes to the topic of Yemen. But given what's happened in the international community, given the case of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi being killed by the Saudis, and given that this country is on the brink of a mass famine, I mean, I think that the last figures are 16 million people could potentially face famine if something is not done, then there has been a real, a real effort to attempt to do something about the situation in Yemen.

00:47:50 So, yeah, there is this very fragile cease-fire at the moment. I think it's pretty crucial that that holds and that is actually really implemented on the ground and that the U.N. stays strong to their word there. And that... it's, it just seems incredibly fragile, because there are so many different groups who also need to stay committed to that cease-fire in order for it to stick. And I think that it kind of could go either way, because if it sticks, then that's, you know, incredible, some form of glimmer of hope for the country, which it so desperately needs.

00:48:23 Um, on the other hand, if it doesn't, I mean, the cease-fire is in Hodaydah, which is the main port city where 70% of the goods come into the country. And if it collapses, it sounds like the fighting could be even worse than it was before. And, I mean, these cease-fires have collapsed before when they've attempted to negotiate them. When the... I think the last one was in 2016. That collapsed; there has been several of these, and none of them have, sadly, worked out.

00:48:53 So, like, any Yemen experts you speak to will be very, very cautious about predicting that this is going to be a lasting effort, and we're only kind of one day into this so far.

Jessica Chen: Yeah.

Isobel Yeung: So... and if doesn't, I mean, yeah, the level of famine that would break out from that, the level of all-out destruction across the country would be pretty horrific.

00:49:18 Jessica Chen: We're going to go to audience questions in just one minute, but I wanted to ask you, you know, you've been reporting in this region for some time now, and I think in a previous interview that you had said you were fascinated by what happens to humanity in the most extreme circumstances. How has this reporting impacted you, impacted your, your role as a journalist?

00:49:41 Isobel Yeung: Um... I mean, I think that, on a personal level, I mean, I think that I... it's interesting, because I think on the one hand you kind of become somewhat hardened to seeing this sort of destruction and this sort of suffering. And on the other hand, you realize as time goes on, that it really does affect you. And I think I've actually only started to realize that recently. But, yeah, it's impossible for people's stories not to stick with you. It does really, I think, I think that... it really, at least for a moment, really kind of... recalibrates things and makes you think about what's important.

00:50:21 I mean, for, for example, when we were in Raqqa, we were hanging out with Mone, the lady who was looking for her son and had been looking for her son for the last year. And we visited her son's home, which has been completely destroyed by mortars. And we were just sort of standing there, walked over a bunch of dead bodies to get there, and were standing there on top of this pile of rubble.

00:50:45 And I was like, I mean, "Even if you find your son, he's going to come back to absolutely nothing. There's nothing left here." And she was like, "It doesn't, it doesn't matter." Like, "All I need is my son, because all we have left in the world is these human connections. That's all that matters." Which, like, really, really puts things into perspective. Um, and I think that, yeah, that's kind of grounding in a lot of ways. And I feel very privileged to get to experience that.

00:51:12 Jessica Chen: Now to go to the audience for some questions. If you have one, if you could please raise your hand, and we will bring a mic to you. Over on the left here.

Man: Hey, Isobel, big fan. I've noticed in a lot of your interviews, you seem to strike this balance between being disagreeable and agreeable by...

Isobel Yeung (laughing): That's just my general demeanor.

00:51:37 Man: It's, I don't know how you do it, but you sort of confront and challenge the other person, while making the environment conducive to sort of an ongoing, productive conversation. I wonder, like, how you maintain that composure especially when you're interviewing people like ISIS fighters or hypocritical sheikhs sending, you know, radicalizing other people's sons to go fight in war. And just sort of how do you strike that balance before an interview?

00:52:01 Isobel Yeung: Well, thank you. Um, I think that it just comes from a place of really... really wanting to understand and really wanting to listen and really... I don't think there's any point going in there guns blazing and super aggressive with, with a line of questioning. I mean, you, obviously... it is about striking that balance. You need to hold people accountable for their actions, and you need to question when they... for example, these ISIS fighters kind of want to brush over facts and brush over events that really took place, and to talk about their level of responsibility within that.

00:52:43 But it also, I mean, the reason I enjoy doing this reporting is because I really hope to further our understanding of humanity. And I really want to... I mean... every... there's no such thing as a black-and-white story. There are always two sides to it. And I really, I want to understand why these guys went to Syria. I want to understand what they were doing there. I want to understand how they feel about it now. I want to understand if they have any regrets. Um, and all humans, I think, deserve

a chance to have those conversations. And my role is just to have that conversation.

Jessica Chen: Right here. Just wait for the mic.

00:53:30 Woman: Hi, thank you for taking my question. So I actually work in news as well. I'm a podcast coordinator. I'm not on air at all. But I was wondering, how do you pick a story and run with it full throttle? Like, how do you... there are so many important stories in the world, how do you pick the stories that you do?

Isobel Yeung: Um... it's a constant toss and pull. I mean, I, I constantly struggle with what stories I should be doing. And I guess it's increasingly... I'm sure you have this as well... it's so difficult, given that in our current climate, you kind of... it makes me anxious. I feel like I should be covering everything. And then I'm like, "I'm not covering anything." And then, "What am I doing?"

00:54:10 I feel like it just has to come from a place of what you are interested in and what, kind of, what feels the most important. And, and also, I mean, these stories are a good example of, I felt like they were not being covered effectively. And I just didn't understand what was going on there. And so it also comes from a place of, like, really just trying to get to the bottom of what was happening.

Jessica Chen: Time for one more question. Or two more questions. Right there. And we'll come to you next.

00:54:44 Woman: Hi, as an audience in the U.S., why, what do you think we should know in order to fully decipher the situations in the Middle East?

Isobel Yeung: Wow. (laughing)

Jessica Chen: Next program topic.

Isobel Yeung: Just went straight in there. Um... I mean, more than anything, that it's just incredibly complex. I think that the U.S.'s relationship with the Middle East has, I mean, it's been... it's so hard to summarize. It's been a really lengthy one. And I think that we're going to continue having a very complex relationship with the Middle East, and I think that it, it's good for us to kind of be aware of the different players there, and, also, that we have currently a very, very fragile situation.

00:55:35

Because there are so many, there are so many... the Middle East is kind of where the global stage meets, and there are so many kind of fractitious relationships and I'm not describing one thing at all well. So I really don't know the answer to that one, sorry. Um... (laughs)

Jessica Chen: The, the motivations are fairly complex. And I would also use this as a selfish moment to encourage to you come to programs here at the 9/11 Museum where we, where we really dive into all of those, all of those subjects one at a time, really. And we're still going today. Yeah. One more question right up here, this gentleman.

Isobel Yeung: Sorry.

00:56:14

Man: So you describe these places as those where women are really repressed. And yet, you as a woman, seem to get access. Tell us how you do that. What's, what's the, you know, your advantage to get you into these places where, you know, women aren't usually accepted?

00:56:34

Isobel Yeung: Well, I mean, I think reporting in the Middle East as a western woman, you kind of walk into this no-man's-land-type territory, where you're... you're not really considered a man, but you're also not really considered a woman. And that kind of gives you the opportunity to... you are underestimated in a lot of situations. And that gives me the opportunity to sit in front of certain people, and they don't expect you to

ask the hard questions, which is a bonus, because they wouldn't necessarily let a man in that situation.

00:57:05

It also affords me the opportunity to, like, kind of float between worlds and to really spend time with the women and with children, and I feel like that's kind of a very privileged situation to be able to see both sides.

Jessica Chen: Well, I want to thank Isobel for her really difficult but really important reporting that she's done. I want to encourage everyone, if you don't already have an HBO subscription, "After the Fall: Syria after ISIS," and all of Isobel's work is available to watch on HBO Go and HBO Now.

00:57:41

We are also... this is our final public program here at the museum for this season. We will pick up back next year. And, also, later in the year. But I promise the programs will be really exciting, so look out for an announcement from us in late January. So with that being said, I want to really thank "Vice" for their collaboration with us on the programming front. And if you could join me in thanking Isobel for her time today. Thank you.

(applause)