

9/11 MEMORIAL & MUSEUM

Public Program: Why Yemen Matters (12/11/2017) - Transcript

00:00:19 Jessica Chen: All right. Good evening, and welcome. My name is Jessica Chen, and I'm the director of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. As always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our museum members and those tuning into our live web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live.

Tonight, we are joined by Dr. Sheila Carapico for a conversation about the crisis in Yemen. Dr. Carapico is a professor of political science and international studies at the University of Richmond, and widely recognized as a leading expert on Yemen. A contributing editor to "Middle East Report," she was teaching at the American University in Cairo during the Arab Spring, and has published essays about the Egyptian and Yemeni revolutions of 2011.

00:01:03 Dr. Carapico was a Fulbright Scholar who has authored numerous books, articles, and chapters, not only on Yemen, but the Arabian Peninsula and the larger region, as well. She's a sought-after voice on current events, and we are especially grateful to her for making time to share her insights into this particularly turbulent time in Yemen's history.

00:01:22 We are also deeply grateful to The David Berg Foundation for their support of the museum's 2017/2018 public program season. This is our last public program of 2017, but we will be back with you very soon in 2018. So please look out for an email announcement in January with details about upcoming programs.

Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Dr. Carapico in conversation with executive vice president and deputy director of museum programs Clifford Chanin.

(applause)

00:01:56 Clifford Chanin: Sheila, let me add my greeting and thanks for your coming up here to talk to us about a subject matter that is quite complicated and a bit off the beaten track, even for those of us who tend to follow the Middle East. But to get to Yemen, I wanted you to start a little bit back in time. I think it's almost unfair to think that of the country only in terms of what it's going through now.

00:02:23 And you've been studying Yemen for a number of years. Going back, we met in the early to mid-'90s, and that was already a period that you had spent a good deal of time on Yemen. So take us back to the Yemen as you knew it when you were first studying it.

What was it like then? What was the environment like, the lives of people? And, you know, projecting forward a little bit, what the transformation has been, even before the most recent violence?

00:02:53 Dr. Sheila Carapico: That's a great question, thank you. So I went as a junior year abroad to the American University in Cairo before that was fashionable. And while I was in Egypt, I traveled around the region. And Yemen stood out for a number of reasons. One was because it had never been-- North Yemen-- had never been colonized. So it had very minimal Western influence, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they also didn't have this inferiority complex that so many post-colonial countries had.

00:03:29 And then the other thing about Yemen is, it's just beautiful. So it's high mountains, and deep valleys, there's the Red Sea coast, and then in South Yemen, there's also the Arabian Sea, which is the Indian Ocean coast. There's tremendous ecological variation, and historically, Yemen was known as Arabia Felix. So it was "Happy Arabia," where there's great population density. I don't know if your colleague wants to pull up the third-- number four slide.

00:04:04 Clifford Chanin: The fourth slide that, we have some maps we'll show during the course of the...

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Just to indicate that historically, almost everyone in the Arabian Peninsula lived in Yemen, down in the southwest corner. Where, again, there are these high mountains, deep valleys, captures monsoon rains from the Indian Ocean. So it's a kind of verdant place, full of very old cities and villages. Very kind of quaint and colorful and... Exotic.

00:04:36 Clifford Chanin: What was the population makeup in terms of the diversity of peoples, both religiously and ethnically?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: The people in the highlands, in the northern part of the highlands of North Yemen... Of course, these words have become very ubiquitous right now, but they belong to the Zaidi denomination of Shia Islam. People on the Red Sea coast, in what was known, is still known as the midlands, tended to be of the Shafi'i denomination of Sunni Islam.

00:05:12 You know, historically, everyone said that those two-- the Zaidi Shia and the Sunni, Shafi'i Sunni-- were almost indistinguishable. Very similar. Slight differences in how they pray, but, for example, you don't have separate mosques. And then ethnically, also, there are people of the highlands who are lighter-complected, not as light as you and me, but pretty light. And then the Red Sea coast-- it's almost indistinguishable, both in terms of how people look and also in terms of how they dress, and the kinds of homes they live in. If you were dropped down there you would think you were in, maybe, Somalia. Or East Africa. So it has a very, kind of, African feel.

00:05:59 And then, at the time, South Yemen was the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, so I only went there once until quite a while later, but it has an Indian Ocean flair, and a lot of historical connections to India

and indeed, Malaysia and Indonesia. So this is a kind of crossroads of a lot of different cultural influences.

00:06:26 Clifford Chanin: So you mentioned the South Yemen and the North Yemen-- there was a period of split, and then coming back together. But was that a period that reflected, sort of, the politics of the leadership, or divisions among the population? Or were the people, sort of, just subject to whatever the political turnings were among the political class?

00:06:50 Dr. Sheila Carapico Well, the origins of that were that South Yemen was... colonized by Great Britain. So, Aden, the port city, was the only British crown colony in the Arab world, in the Middle East. And then the other parts, the hinterland, which was known as the Protectorates, was South Yemen. And then at a certain point, culminating in 1967, they fought for independence. And like so many other former colonies that got independence quite late, they ended up declaring a people's democratic republic, so it was the only Marxist place in the Arab region.

00:07:32 And then the North had a very different trajectory. They held on to an imam until 1962. And so there was this division, which was basically a product of British colonialism. The people in the border region felt various-- many of them had relatives, walked back and forth, had, you know, common dialects and common diets. And so a lot of them felt as if they were one people, but that was less true the further away you got from the border region.

00:08:05 Clifford Chanin: What was the economy based on?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Agriculture.

Clifford Chanin: The oil wealth had not come yet?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: No, there was basically no oil wealth, so it was the bread basket of the entire... Again, Arabia Felix. And the reason why you see such density over there in the southwest quadrant is because of the possibilities of agriculture.

00:08:27 And it was, you know, basically, in those days, pretty much rain-fed, or spate, which is surface irrigation, of food crops. And then in the meantime, that changed. So that-- one thing that people may have heard of recently during the war is that almost all food is imported, whereas 40 years ago, they were pretty much self-sufficient in food.

00:08:56 Clifford Chanin: Now, there's been a dramatic growth in population over the period in which you've come to know Yemen well. I'm looking at these numbers: 4.8 million people in 1950, 23.9 million people in 2011, 28 million today, with a projected rise to 46 million by the middle of this century. What impact has that had on the country, this really dramatic, and nowadays, in particular, this youth bulge of, you know, so much of the population being young, what's been the social impact of that kind of transformation in the population?

00:09:36 Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, this is something that happens, that has happened to many countries, and basically, 40, 50 years ago, women were having, you know, nine pregnancies. And five of those children were dying before they reached, say, ten years old. And then fairly modest improvements in healthcare, including, um, attended births, but in particular, vaccines for the very simple, basic diseases, like measles and other such things, reduced child mortality dramatically, in a very short period of time.

00:10:20 Long before women stopped having nine kids. Because when they were having nine kids, it was kind of an insurance policy that some of them would grow up. And so there's this lag, and it is now, I mean, just-- children, everywhere. And of course, social services have not been able to keep up. The education system can't keep up. You know, just social services, in general, are not able to cope, and that, of course, was complicated by the corruption of the government.

00:10:53 Clifford Chanin: That corruption—I mean, we hear about this in many contexts around the world. Was it, you know, particularly devastating to Yemen in your view, or was it-- I hate to put it quite this way-- sort of a garden-variety corruption?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Yeah, I was just about to say the same thing, kind of garden-variety, yeah.

00:11:13 Clifford Chanin: So, the country-- what sort of an infrastructure was there? Because when we come, soon, to the present situation, one hears about the infrastructure having been devastated by the war, but how can you describe what, you know, internal transport was like in Yemen, and schools, and hospitals, and the things that, you know, are the basis of whatever level a society has achieved?

00:11:36 Dr. Sheila Carapico: Yeah, I mean, good point, and when I said earlier that, you know, it hadn't been—North Yemen, at least-- had not been colonized, it seemed very exotic, and you know, that's not necessarily an entirely good thing, because there were... a few basic highways. The first universities were built in the '70s, hospitals were still being built in the '70s and the '80s, so very rudimentary... infrastructure. And then, you know, pretty good strides in the '90s and the 2000s, but again, hampered by corruption and also by poverty.

00:12:20 And then South Yemen was a bit different, because, you know, there had been the British colony, particularly around Aden, but then it was very much neglected. So overall, the infrastructure... remained, you know, what we used to, during the Cold War, call third-world, or even fourth-world-- very rudimentary and not able to keep track, again, with, as you observed, the growth in population.

00:12:48 Nonetheless, I mean, you know, for example, electricity became pretty close to universal access, at least-- I mean, in the cities, pretty much everyone had electricity and running water. In smaller towns and villages,

you would at least have electricity sometimes, and some vehicular access, and some access to hospitals. Education is a little bit easier than some of the-- than those other industries, because you really only need teachers. Whereas, power, water, those are more technologically sophisticated.

00:13:26 Clifford Chanin: The real infrastructure.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: So when they're bombed, for instance, then that's it.

Clifford Chanin: So I want to come back to this point that you made before about the integration of the different religious populations, because the war, as we see it today, has essentially broken largely along these lines that were not clearly defined in these earlier times. So you mentioned the Zaidi Shia-- the Houthis, so-called, a group associated with a leader of that community, and then the Sunnis, who are a rough majority, 55% or something like that.

00:14:03 Was there a point along the way that those groups began to separate, in your mind? Whether some sort of political or sponsorship crisis of outside parties coming into Yemen and trying to stimulate this? We've come to the point where there is now fighting along those lines, but do you see an earlier moment where the integration began to come apart?

00:14:31 Dr. Sheila Carapico: Well, yeah, I mean, there's a pretty specific moment. I mean, in the first place, no one ever used the words "Shia" and "Sunni." At all. Those just were not even in the vocabulary until Saudi Arabia started sending in missionaries, who we would today call Salafi, or perhaps Wahhabi, but they call themselves Sunni. And in particular, they sent... They started founding schools, one in particular, in the heart of... Just across the border from Saudi Arabia, but in the heart of the territory where these Houthis are. So the Houthis are a family, or a group, they're not a sect or a denomination or a school of Islam or anything like that.

00:15:20 But, you know, Saudi Arabia was... And they were doing this in Afghanistan and Indonesia and Nigeria, and lots of places, funding schools. And there was kind of deliberate provocation of the Zaidis, and then that was the basis of a kind of Zaidi revival in reaction.

Clifford Chanin: So a kind of self-protection?

00:15:40 Dr. Sheila Carapico: Self-protection, and so you had a Saudi-funded, what they called Sunni or Salafi school, and then the beginning of the Houthis movement was summer camps that were founded in order to kind of resist what they saw as this outside encroachment, they called themselves the "Believing Youth." And then that sort of led to a kind of revival, again, of sort of Zaidi consciousness. So it's pretty much an imported distinction.

00:16:14 Still, very few people—except for Salafis-- very few people would call themselves Sunni or Shia, although there has been what a number of commentators would call a sort of "sectarianization." So something that didn't exist before.

If you think for a moment about Northern Ireland, you know, Christians—or Catholics and Protestants-- but that's not something that's everywhere all the time. That's something that existed in a certain historical circumstance, and then, you know, also kind of faded away. So that kind of narrative or discourse of a sectarian conflict is one that really comes from outside, rather than from inside.

00:17:02 Clifford Chanin: Let's talk about the relationship, in more traditional times, between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. You can see that very long border. If I'm remembering correctly, it's 1,300 miles or something like that. And so, a lot of shared characteristics. I'm sure that border is not especially well-enforced along its length.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Right.

00:17:24 Clifford Chanin: So there's movement back and forth, I'm quite sure. How did, in traditional terms, Saudi Arabia see Yemen, and how did Yemen see Saudi Arabia?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: So if we could also just pull up slide number two, which is actually not that good of a visual, on the per capita income. And the previous slide, also, there were these big blobs of cities along the Gulf Coast, which is the...

00:17:52 Clifford Chanin: Along the Red Sea?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: No, not on the Red Sea, on the Gulf. So on the right-hand side, or the eastern side of this slide. You know, historically, until, say, the middle of the 20th century, Yemen was, you know, again, Arabia Felix, the wealthy part. But then, the oil was really discovered in the east on the Gulf Coast.

00:18:17 And so you had the rapid growth of Qatar, in particular, but also Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia-- more in some parts than others-- that became very, kind of filthy-rich countries very quickly. Dependent very heavily on immigrant labor, and at one point, they were predominantly Yemenis. So it was frequently said in the '70s that one son from every Yemeni family went to the Gulf to work and sent home remittances.

00:18:54 And then when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Yemen failed to support the monarchies, and a million people were thrown out. And so that was really the beginning of this vast disparity in wealth, and this doesn't show very well, but if you can see the bar chart here, Yemen hardly shows up-- it's on the far right.

Clifford Chanin: So it's a tiny little blip, as you can see.

00:19:24 Dr. Sheila Carapico: Tiny little blip. This is before the war. Per capita income in Yemen, \$1,500 a year. The other countries, it's ten to 20 times as much. And that's a huge difference-- it's a difference in lifestyle, it's a difference in political attitudes, it's just a... It's, like, light-years away.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah.

00:19:52 Dr. Sheila Carapico: So Saudi Arabia, I mean, tends to see Yemen the way that, I don't know, people in Washington, DC, tend to see West Virginia. You know, it's full of hillbillies and nincompoops and people without teeth. Yemenis, of course, they're just like in West Virginia, and they're kind of proud of who they are.

00:20:13 Clifford Chanin: So we were speaking before the program about this, sort of this sense of being part of Arabia, and that the national boundaries that have come...

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Pretty recent.

Clifford Chanin: ...into such prominence in the, in some cases, in the second half of the 20th century...

Dr. Sheila Carapico: In most cases.

00:20:30 Clifford Chanin: That there was a broader sense of what it was to be from this part of the world, and Yemen had its place in that vision of what it was. What was that sense of Arabia?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Well, I mean, I think one of the... You know, the birthplace of the Arabian... the Arabic language-- so, lughah al-arabiyah

jazirah al-arabiyah, the language of the Arabian Peninsula-- they consider that to be the language.

Clifford Chanin: The original Arabic.

00:21:01 Dr. Sheila Carapico: And then that goes along with the birthplace of Islam, and a kind of sense, you know, and this is true of so many people in so many parts of the world, you know, their sense is that this is the center of the world. It's-- the Queen of Sheba was from Yemen. You know, all these antiquities, you know, like, living cities and towns that are thousands and thousands and thousands of years old, that you know, a kind of sense, "We're the center of the world."

00:21:33 And again, without, I think... In Egypt or much of North Africa, where they also, of course, in Egypt, have that huge sense of history, but they also have the sense of having been repeatedly conquered by Europeans. Which the Arabian Peninsula did not have, with the exception of the port of Aden. So, you know, quite a lot of... A sense that we speak the language, we have the religion, and we were strong and...

00:22:07 Clifford Chanin: Proud of our roots and our history?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Proud of our heritage, yeah.

Clifford Chanin: So let's move forward now, because I do want to come to the current situation, which has pretty much uprooted almost everything you've described. And it begins in Yemen, events that would ultimately burst out into war, but those events begin as part of the Arab Spring.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Right.

00:22:33 Clifford Chanin: And so Yemen has a long-time dictator, who has recently been killed, but we'll come to that later, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has somehow managed, through shifting alliances and so on and so forth, to hold power and exercise it strongly, corruptly, brutally at times. And the first movements against him are inspired by what's happening elsewhere in the Arab world. Can you pick up the impact of those broader events and what they brought to Yemen at that point in 2011?

00:23:06 Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, it's interesting that... So that, the so-called Arab Spring, the uprisings, were in, predominantly in five countries. Bahrain is a little bit of an exception. They were all republics that had previously overthrown dynasties, kings. And where incumbent presidents were preparing their sons to take power, or, in the case of Syria, where the son had already taken over from his father.

00:23:37 Clifford Chanin: So let's just enumerate, I mean, Egypt would be one.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Egypt, Tunisia.

Clifford Chanin: Tunisia.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. You know, so all of them with grievances about that, about corruption, about guys who had stayed in power for approximately 30 years, so the majority of this youthful population had never seen anything else. And so there was the uprising in Yemen, which was, in some respects, much more predictable.

00:24:07 I was living in Egypt at the time. But in some respects, the uprising in Yemen was more predictable, because Yemen is a bit freer place, anyway. So you could feel it coming. They could feel it coming in Egypt, too. People take to the streets in, you know, huge numbers, and whereas in Tunisia-- and then I'll speak to Egypt, because I was there-- you know, 18 days and Hosni Mubarak resigned.

00:24:37 Yemen, it went on and on and on, and people just stayed in the streets and armed tribesmen threw down their weapons to protest peacefully. And women were front and center. People may recall that there was a Yemeni woman, Tawakkol Karman, who was the person who got the acknowledgment of the Nobel Peace Prize as the leader of the Arab uprisings.

00:25:04 Clifford Chanin: Yes.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: And then, I mean, this isn't quite the question you asked, but it is my take. So the kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula, I mean, they were worried about the uprising in Tunisia. They were worried about Egypt, they were worried about Libya, they were worried about Syria... They were panicked about Yemen.

Clifford Chanin: Because it's so close.

00:25:30 Dr. Sheila Carapico: It's right there, it's so close, and it's half the indigenous population of the whole region.

Clifford Chanin: I see.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: And so they really intervened in order to try to manage the transition.

Clifford Chanin: I should say, for all the other countries in that Gulf region, they are all monarchies, they are all kingdoms, royal families.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: They're all monarchies, Yemen is the only republic, it's the only place that ever has elections. I mean, they're not the most perfect elections in the world, but there's a bigger divide between

elections and non-elections than there is between perfect elections and imperfect elections.

00:26:06

Clifford Chanin: Right. So this was a contagion that they were worried would spread.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: It was a contagion that they were very worried about. I don't want to get too down in the weeds, but basically, they tried to create a transition which only amounted to Ali Abdullah Saleh resigning.

Clifford Chanin: The longtime corrupt president.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: The longtime corrupt... And handing over power to his own hand-picked vice president. This is like a makeover. It's not like some sort of, you know, regime change. And the vice president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, currently referred to as the "internationally recognized president of Yemen," because he has no recognition domestically, and he lives in Saudi Arabia... So he's internationally but not domestically recognized.

00:26:54

Clifford Chanin: It's a start, you know.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: It's a start. And you know, there was, you know, kind of this contrived, one-man election for two years, which expired two years ago. But the idea was that the Gulf Cooperation Council, which is the alliance of these monarchies of the peninsula, would manage Yemen's transition.

Clifford Chanin: And there was a, sort of a stagnant period of a couple of years, there, where they're trying to put the pieces in place and bring the various factions and groups together to negotiate some kind of a compact or agreement, but that fails.

00:27:30 Dr. Sheila Carapico: Yes, essentially. I mean, there was a National Dialogue Committee. I must say, initially, I was pretty optimistic, but it just dragged on and on and on. And the other flaw in that was that they had given-- and this was primarily the Gulf monarchies-- had given Saleh, although he was persuaded to hand over power, he had immunity from prosecution and he remained as head of the party with the majority in Parliament.

00:28:01 So he retained a huge amount of... popular influence, of influence within the country. And his kids-- his son, in particular-- maintained his command of the Republican Guard, which the most sophisticated of the military forces.

Clifford Chanin: When does the fighting begin?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: So meanwhile, so those Houthi guys, who had responded in-- a couple of questions ago-- to the Saudi, Wahhabi, Salafi incursion with the Zaidi revival, they had fought six separate wars against Ali Abdullah Saleh, while Saleh was president. This is where it gets really confusing and hard to follow, okay? So...

00:28:43 Clifford Chanin: Let me just make one point, and correct me if I'm wrong, but six wars, yes, but wars that come to either a brokered agreement, or it sort of stops for a while at different points along the way.

00:28:55 Dr. Sheila Carapico: Right, except that what's noteworthy, of course, is that you have the central government, with the help of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, unable to break the backs of these ragtag guys in flip-flops from, you know, the far northern mountains. So, you know, it's in such an asymmetric situation, the failure to defeat those guys is a kind of defeat for the central government, so this was a problem, and there are a lot of personality things here that I just can't go into, because I'd lose everybody.

(laughter)

00:29:30 But... So the Houthis are gaining steam, Saleh has resigned, the public protests have stopped. There's a stalemate in terms of politics. And then two things happened, both frankly, urged by foreign donors. One was some sort of federal scheme where they just drew a map, kind of arbitrarily, the way you've heard of so much colonial history.

00:29:58 Clifford Chanin: You would think that this idea of drawing maps would sort of have stopped by now.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: And yet, it became fashionable. Like, there were all these experts coming in saying, "Here, here's how you could draw this map." And you know, trying to decide how do you translate federalism into Arabic. Is it "federali"? In other words, the English word, or do you take an Arabic word and make it sound like maybe it means that, except it doesn't really?

00:30:23 Anyway, there's that, and then they also, at the advice of the International Monetary Fund-- how good of an idea was this one?-- decided to raise fuel prices. Precipitously, for the sake of "budget balancing." Houthis, they march out of their mountain-home-place, and they come to Sana'a, and nobody stops them. And then Saleh, their sworn enemy for all these years, throws his forces, the forces still under his command, still on his payroll, on their behalf.

00:31:07 Clifford Chanin: So he turns against his own former vice president, now...

Dr. Sheila Carapico: And joins them. When it happened, I started hearing rumors of this and I was, like, "No. That can't be." Because it just didn't make sense, but sure enough, that's what he did. And then their combined forces had some success. So, Hadi, the replacement, vice president who'd become president, he runs away, first to Aden, in the South, and then to Riyadh, which is the capital of Saudi Arabia, and when

he gets to Riyadh, he says, "Help! I want you to restore me to power." And the new king, and his son, installed with no experience whatsoever as the defense minister, are, like, "Sure, we can bomb Yemen into submission in no time." That was March 2015.

00:32:07

Clifford Chanin: 2015. So we're two and a half years into this. Now, it is kind of a perfect storm in the sense that the new Saudi government, or the king, and the deputy crown prince, I believe, at that point, but the young man who was trying to establish his authority and credentials, it seemed they were almost looking for an occasion to show just how effective and strong they could be. And Yemen seems to have presented itself, at least in their imagining, as the opportunity to do this. But it didn't quite turn out that way. So at what point... The Saudis don't really send a lot of ground troops in, they're bombing from the air.

00:32:51

Dr. Sheila Carapico: No ground troops.

Clifford Chanin: There are some ground troops from the Emirates.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: The Emirates, mostly Sudanese or other conscripts from other countries. We're told not to call them "mercenaries."

Clifford Chanin: They're-- but they go in, thinking this is going to be a cakewalk.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Be a cakewalk.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, and what was their strategy? What were they there to do? The Saudis?

00:33:16

Dr. Sheila Carapico: They were there, in my view, to assert Saudi hegemony over outcomes in Yemen. If we say this guy Hadi is going to be

president, then he's going to be president. Even though he lives in Saudi Arabia and has no following or anything like that, but... And, you know, there's been a history of this. Again, not to get too weedy, because...

00:33:39

But... I mean, there have been previous histories of Saudi interventions in Yemen, and so it's not just that this happened in 2015. There's been quite a history of it.

Clifford Chanin: Now, the Saudis, not sending a land army in there, decide that they can win this war from the air.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Right.

00:34:01

Clifford Chanin: Which, two and a half years later, has not proven to be the case. Though they have wrecked extraordinary damage on the infrastructure, just the country that, as we were speaking about it earlier. Has that been the consistent Saudi strategy here, simply to bomb their way to victory if they could get there?

00:34:20

Dr. Sheila Carapico You know... some of us have been debating whether this approach warrants the use of the word "strategy," because you've got to wonder. You know, how they thought that that was going to work. But, you know, I mean, what they have done, they've crippled the ports, they started out by... I mean, one of the first raids was Sana'a Airport, and then Hodeidah port, which would be over here on the Red Sea, on that side.

00:35:01

And since then, I mean, it's been power plants, and also hospitals-- Médecins Sans Frontières has... and others have documented that. There was another bombing of a hospital in a God-forsaken-- two air raids on a hospital in a God-forsaken, poverty-stricken... town with no Houthi sympathizers in them whatsoever, today.

00:35:30 And, you know, some of that, I think they did kind of quick studies of the rules of war, and if you call it essential infrastructure-- so during World War II, the United States would bomb German factories on the grounds that they were being used to build munitions, and that that was considered to be legal under international law-- Saudi Arabia has interpreted that to mean that it's also legal to bomb, say, potato chip factories. You know, things that have no military use. But, you know, the United States and other NATO powers, particularly the weapons exporters, have basically supported the Saudi war effort.

00:36:18 Clifford Chanin: Right. The Houthis have turned and gotten support, I'm not sure it's at the same level, though. This is where Iran comes into the picture, as well. So if the Hadi forces have a sponsor on their side, or multiple sponsors, linking them to the Saudis, the Houthis need an outside supporter, too, presumably, and this is where Iran figures into the picture.

00:36:46 Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, the Houthis have this very strange... Um... They use an Iranian slogan, which is "Death to America and death to Israel." You got to wonder, what the heck are they talking about? Because Israel, I mean, really doesn't matter to Yemen. It's way far away. And the Iranians, they-- particularly Press TV, which is the Iranian propaganda outlet-- I mean, they cheer the Houthis. You know, they really—so there's moral support there.

00:37:24 There has still yet to be any hard evidence of Iranian support. There was during the brief period... When the Houthis took over Sana'a, Iran started having frequent flights, I believe, daily flights into Sana'a. But that only lasted for, like, a month before Saudi Arabia destroyed the airport.

00:37:49 Clifford Chanin: There was the incident of the shooting of a missile by the Houthis.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Which, which...

Clifford Chanin: Which is said to be an Iranian missile.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Which-- you know what? There's no photograph. It is... It is said, more precisely, to have Iranian parts.

Clifford Chanin: Right.

00:38:08 Dr. Sheila Carapico: But more American parts. But there has yet to be a photograph of Iranian weapons. Because the Saleh administration was awash in weapons. They had ample weapons. I mean, they don't have an air force, or anything like that. Air and naval power are completely on the Saudi-led coalition. But the evidence for, I mean, it's talked about a lot...

00:38:37 But, and I'm actually not relying on my own judgment on this, but rather on a group of people with serious military expertise who just keep looking everywhere, constantly, for a photograph of an Iranian weapon.

00:38:54 Clifford Chanin: In the broader logic of what's going on in that part of the world, though, the extension of the Saudi-Iranian conflict along sectarian lines... I mean, it makes sense that it would reach into this place, as well. I mean, it's happening in all kinds of ways, and I'm not claiming that's proof of the origins of the missile, but it does seem that this conflict is being regionalized here, too, as it was in Iraq, as it was in Syria, and so on.

00:39:24 Dr. Sheila Carapico: So could we see slide number five? So this is Saudi Arabia claiming that what they're doing is attacking Iran. This is a Yemeni cartoonist. He's very generous in allowing me to use his cartoons. Without the Iran excuse, what would Saudi Arabia claim is a good reason to be bombing a poverty-stricken country who hasn't done anything to them?

Clifford Chanin: Right.

00:40:01 Dr. Sheila Carapico: And the answer is, "Oh, we're fighting against Iranian influence." But in the absence-- I mean, now, in Syria, I grant you, it makes sense that Iran and Saudi Arabia are backing opposite sides. But I think as an excuse for destruction on this scale, in the absence of either a provocation from the Yemenis, okay, or serious evidence of Iranian involvement, then it becomes, to my mind, not a persuasive argument.

00:40:37 Clifford Chanin: Let's talk about the humanitarian catastrophe that is a result, because... I have some numbers here, and if we can go back to the map, because I think it's interesting to sort of see this in the context of the map.

But, let's see. The U.N. says two-thirds of Yemen's 28 million population faces, face shortages of food and clean water. A staggering seven million are now on the brink of famine, a cholera epidemic is raging, the war has killed an estimated 10,000 people, but far more are at risk or have died from the conditions they are living in, not from the violence of war.

00:41:21 So this reaches... There are parts of the country that are apparently less affected, but this reaches pretty much across Yemen, regardless of which side is being affected, because the blockade keeps food from everybody. So what do you know of the impact of this on Yemen itself?

00:41:41 Dr. Sheila Carapico: Well, I mean, as you suggest, it is... Actually, if you could go back to one of the... Slide number four, just because it shows the population density a little bit. So the worst impact, not surprisingly, is where most of the people live. And that's on the Red Sea side. And then where, along the coast of the Gulf of Aden, the way it's marked there, that's considered to be under coalition-backed forces. And in particular, it's patrolled by at least some foot soldiers from the United Arab Emirates, or, again, hired by the United Arab Emirates.

00:42:25 In response to that missile that was lobbed into Saudi Arabia fairly recently, they closed even the ports on the Gulf of Aden side, the Arabian Sea side, that are said to be under control of their allies. Which makes no sense. Except as a deliberate policy of starvation. And that's been the

conclusion that's increasingly coming from organizations like Oxfam, Human Rights Watch...

Clifford Chanin: Right.

00:43:04

Dr. Sheila Carapico: The UNHCR, Commission on Refugees. I mean, the humanitarian organizations are telling that story.

Clifford Chanin: They are, and this is the largest humanitarian catastrophe underway in the world right now.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Right.

Clifford Chanin: Now, what has this done for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is also a factor on the ground there, not as large as some of those other forces, but well-established in parts of the less densely populated areas of Yemen. What has this conflict meant for them?

00:43:38

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Well, you know, the irony is, of course, the Houthis do fight against Al Qaeda, so the United States is supporting the side of the conflict that is at war with Al Qaeda, and, at the same time, is at war with Al Qaeda.

But Al Qaeda gained considerable territory, they've been beaten back a bit now, but on the Gulf of Aden down the southernmost... the southern coast, which is the Arabian Sea and then it feeds out-- you can't quite see it on this map...

00:44:13

Clifford Chanin: But towards the Omani border...

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Towards the Omani border and then out to the Indian Ocean. But several of those areas, there are a few, that one spot

there, it's a port called Al Mukalla, for two years, it was under Al Qaeda control. As Saleh... and other, you know, government...

00:44:37 Originally, government forces kind of withdrew. And so Al Qaeda overran certain portions of what are considered to be sympathetic to the coalition, and now, one of the things that I can't even... ..make a coherent statement about, which was the reason for that pause, because there are certainly rumors that the United Arab Emirates is in cahoots with Al Qaeda.

00:45:05 I don't-- but I don't want to say that, because I don't actually-- all I know is that there are rumors. And I'm not actually trying to spread those rumors, but I am acknowledging that those rumors exist because the Emirates are presumably the dominant force in these areas, and yet it's clear that Al Qaeda are running amok.

00:45:30 Clifford Chanin: Now, is this area where Al Qaeda has some nominal control, is this an area that could become another one of those ungoverned spaces where other forces or others come, you know, to join Al Qaeda in its effort? I mean, we saw the evaporation, essentially, of the Islamic State in Iraq and most of it in Syria, so that, now, is not an option. And obviously, there's a distinction between ISIS and A.Q.A.P., but the idea that there's room to maneuver is something that, conceivably, anyway, is quite attractive to people looking for that room.

00:46:06 Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, and ISIS, which, of course, the English-language acronym, means the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, so you wouldn't necessarily think they'd show up in Yemen. Because it's not Iraq or Syria, but they've been sighted, and the area there, and again, that's why this population map is useful, because some of this is wide-open near-desert. And that's ideal for, you know, armed groups that want to stay clandestine.

00:46:41 Clifford Chanin: So the most recent turn involves the death through sectarian fighting with his once-allies, then former allies, of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president who was back but who had decided he was

going to offer himself back to the Saudis, turn on the Houthis. In intramural conflict, he is killed, and there was some thought that, you know, as familiar a rogue as he was, he might be the guy who could somehow calm things down there. With his death, what do you see as the prospect going forward for some kind of solution to this?

00:47:27 Dr. Sheila Carapico: I don't know. I mean, the past week, I was saying, even before we started, if I had written a speech, I would've had to throw it away and start from scratch, in the past, you know, whatever it's been, ten days or something like that. So he made a speech in which he said that he had decided that the Houthis, who he had been fighting alongside with, alongside of for two and a half years, were indeed Iranian-backed, and that he was going to turn a new page with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

00:47:58 And then something happened, and I must say, it's still not 100% clear, but it does seem that he was assassinated by his erstwhile allies, the Houthis. You know, who don't have that much popular support. He actually has been gaining popular support, and this didn't completely come out of the blue. So, for example, in the capital, Sana'a, since about August or September, Saleh's group and the Houthis have been staging rival rallies.

00:48:37 So, getting, you know, in some cases, tens or even maybe hundreds of thousands of men into the streets. It's very different, I might add, from 2011, when there's these mass popular demonstrations, but they're full of children and women. These were full of armed men. Very different kind of thing. So they were kind of facing off with one another.

00:49:00 But now you have the Houthis minus Saleh, who was the one with the weapons, and they may have seized some of them, but they're not going to—so they're presumably weakened, but also emboldened, I think. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seems to be bombing even more intently.

Clifford Chanin: Yep.

00:49:28 Dr. Sheila Carapico: And... I don't see... I don't really see a way out. I mean, Oman, you know, has made some efforts to mediate. The Netherlands. But the U.N. Security Council is derelict in their responsibility. The United States continues to support the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And I think that the Saudi... Particularly the crown prince, they just want, they want an unconditional victory.

00:50:11 Clifford Chanin: But shouldn't it have occurred to them by now that that's... They've failed, over two and a half years, to do that, and their strategy's not changing. Are they looking for a way out, by contrast?

(Dr. Carapico clears throat)

Clifford Chanin: The reporting was that Saleh, in making this turn, was somehow offering the Saudis the possibility of a way out-- declare victory and leave-- and that door now gets shut. I mean, are they committed to going deeper into the swamp, or is there some sense that they'd like to find some way out of this?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, I wish that I thought that. I'm not sure I do. But I wish I did.

00:50:56 Clifford Chanin: Yeah, yeah. You know, last question, then we'll see what our audience has to say. But you know, the situation we've described, the devastation of Yemen, is paralleled in Iraq and in Syria and in other parts of the Middle East, which have suffered through these internecine conflicts which also bring outsiders and their weapons to bear. Maybe you want to just answer for Yemen, or maybe you have a sense of the broader problem, but you know, at some point, it stops, and then what is left? And what are the efforts that would be needed to reconstitute anything resembling a functioning society after all this is done?

00:51:41 Dr. Sheila Carapico: I mean, I think that Iraq is a better parallel than Syria, because Syria really is internecine conflict, whereas Iraq began with foreign intervention.

Clifford Chanin: Right.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: And what we've seen is that long since the intervention has ended, there has been, again, this sectarianization of, you know, domestic factions fighting against one another over the spoils of a ruined state.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah.

00:52:19 Dr. Sheila Carapico: And I wish I thought-- and we haven't even actually talked about it, and I'm not sure I want to get into it-- but, you know, what used to be South Yemen, I mean, they want out. They want independence. So there's also that conflict. But unfortunately, I think that Iraq is kind of the... I don't want to use the word "model," because that's the last thing you would say, but, you know, a kind of harbinger. It's very difficult to see a way out of this at this point. You know, put the women in charge, see how that goes.

(laughter)

00:53:00 Clifford Chanin: Fair point. Fair point.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: I wanted to cheer people up a little bit. That would work.

Clifford Chanin: Let's see if we have any questions from the floor. I could do more, right? William. Just wait for a mic. And please stand up.

00:53:29 Man: Thank you very much for your presentation. It was extremely informative and rather distressing. Are there any-- not your presentation, but the facts.

(laughter)

Man: Are there any stabilizing forces that could come into play to do some good?

00:53:48 Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, there are... There are some indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms. So, surprisingly, given the bad image that a lot of outsiders have, tribes have, they have quite strong mechanisms for negotiating, separating warring sides. They have, for example, historic concepts of something that's called "hijira," and it means a place where fighters will not go or will not bring their weapons. It's like sanctuary, it's exactly sanctuary.

00:54:28 And there have been, on a larger scale, historic efforts to engage in something like a national dialogue of political forces where you get different people together and, you know, try to hammer things out. But unfortunately, those things don't work if the dominant force in the conflict is outside.

00:54:54 You know? I mean... So, one question, to go back, is you know, what-- and you were suggesting that the Saudis want a way out-- but it's difficult to see what their incentive would be to negotiate or to compromise or to bargain. Because they have the upper hand.

Clifford Chanin: Do they?

Dr. Sheila Carapico: They've got the air power and the naval power.

00:55:17 Clifford Chanin: But it's a strange dynamic, because they have this vast array of weaponry that they've bought and they haven't been able to win. Now, there's a strategic problem there, which is, you need boots on the ground to-- but, you know, that creates its own dead end. So the Saudis, in trying to flex their muscles, are reinforcing weakness as much as they are power.

Dr. Sheila Carapico: Vietnam.

Clifford Chanin: All very encouraging parallels.

(laughter)

00:55:49 Clifford Chanin: You wanted one? Yeah, wait for Harmony, please. I mean Harmony the person, rather than harmony, the unified concept of everyone getting along in the world.

Man: Thanks, and it has been very interesting. You know, I attend these talks regularly and I can't count the number of speakers who have claimed that the Iranians are influencing what's going on in Yemen. You're the first to step up and say maybe that's not true. Can, maybe, you comment on how all the others are coming to that conclusion that may not be founded?

00:56:29 Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, that's a great question, actually. because it is widely reported that way. That's certainly the Saudi line because again, otherwise, their excuse for this intervention is pretty thin. And... You know, and I don't even blame this entirely on Trump, because I think it was true of Obama, as well-- accepting the Saudi narrative also provides a rationale for continuing to sell weapons, and there's a kind of willingness to believe, which goes back to 1979, you know, sort of stories that demonize Iran.

00:57:15 And so it's become the prevalent narrative. I was just reading something today, which is not quite ready for publication, but sort of trying to trace where that storyline came from. Originally from Saleh, when he was president and trying to say, "Well, these Houthis are backed by Iran, therefore I need weapons." And then also the American press, because... And also the American press picking that up, although the American researchers, the American and European researchers who started noticing the Houthis-- you know, around 2000... I want to say '03, '04, and then for the next, whatever, decade and a half-- nobody who did field research discovered any evidence of Iranian anything. They never encountered any Iranians in the area, never encountered any Persian-language books.

00:58:11 And again, these other guys that I'm in touch with who investigate the weaponries-- and some of these are people who, like, they can look at a film of the missile and tell you what kind it is. You know, so, that's way beyond my military expertise. But you know, sometimes these storylines take on a life of their own and are part of the arsenal of what is used. And so, I know one of your speakers, who is a colleague of mine, but spent a lot of time in Saudi Arabia hearing their version of it.

00:58:48 And so it's not surprising that he would see it in that way. You know, so I wouldn't say, "Well, you should believe me and not these other speakers," because that's, like, disingenuous or something. But maybe to be alert to the possibility that it's not so self-evident.

Clifford Chanin: One more. If you would come here. Yeah, please. Would you stand up, please?

Woman: Oh.

Clifford Chanin: Sorry, no, it's okay.

- 00:59:26 Woman: What is the purpose of Saudi Arabia going into Yemen? What is their goal? Their ultimate goal, and why are they continuing to just bomb? I mean, what are they looking for, what is...?
- 00:59:44 Dr. Sheila Carapico: I mean, you know, let me draw attention just briefly to, also, this Saudi rift with Qatar, which is completely different than the bombing of Yemen. But, Qatar, they're trying very hard to punish Qatar, which is the only part of the peninsula that's even richer than Saudi Arabia and a couple of the others, but... And basically, they're angry with Qatar for not allowing Saudi Arabia to be the... ..government that speaks for the whole peninsula.
- 01:00:25 They have a very strong sense that, "We're the ones who ought to be in charge." And I think that applies more to Yemen, because it's so poverty-stricken, than to Qatar. But you see it also in its relationships with... with Qatar, as well, and with Bahrain. And so, I mean, I think that, and in particular, under this crown prince, you know, with the hubris and so forth, there's a strong desire to say, "You know, we are... We are Arabia. And if the Yemenis don't acquiesce to Saudi preferences for their leadership, or threaten, you know, popular demonstrations, then we're going to... put them in their place. Make sure that they don't have the capacity to disrupt the kingdom." That's my view.
- 01:01:26 Clifford Chanin: Okay, so one more in the back, I'll... Just wait for the mic, please. And since you're a Mets fan, I'm glad I chose you.
- (laughter)
- Man: Hi, and thank you for your time. I'm just curious, what's the Dutch perspective? Why are they looking to get involved in any form? What do they have to gain?
- 01:01:47 Dr. Sheila Carapico: You know, thank you for that one. So there was a United Nations resolution quite early on, 2216, which called on-- which

imposed sanctions on the Houthis and Saleh, and called for... The sanctions meant that they are not to be able to receive weapons.

01:02:15 And unfortunately, it being a U.N. Security Council resolution, it would have been-- in the view of people who are fans of international law-- they would have called on all parties to stop fighting. Some kind of general ceasefire. But it didn't do that. All it did was, it called on the Houthis and Saleh to put down their weapons, and did not mention that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and the other members of the coalition are also belligerents.

01:02:48 The Netherlands-- I can't actually remember the exact date, but they attempted to bring a resolution before the Security Council calling for an overall ceasefire. And the United States, France, and Great Britain didn't want that. I think, you know, the Netherlands were doing what small powers sometimes can and often should do, which is to try to take a position grounded in international law and a quest for peace, but in this case, they didn't get very far.

01:03:35 Clifford Chanin: Well, this is one that...

Dr. Sheila Carapico (laughing): Sorry.

Clifford Chanin: No, I... You know, we look at these issues in the Middle East and elsewhere, and they are difficult and they are complicated. The small virtue they have is that they give us ongoing programming, so...

(laughter)

01:03:52 Clifford Chanin: So that's my segue into thanking everybody for coming to this season's programs. And of course, we'll resume, most likely in February, as Jess said, you'll get an email, and please sign up for our

notices as the programs resume, and we will be continuing these fascinating discussions.

But until then, I'd like you to join me in thanking Sheila Carapico for coming here and telling us about Yemen.

(applause)