Episode 890: Yemen: The War the World Forgot

Guest: Iona Craig

WOODS: I've been meaning to do an episode on this topic for a long time, and I'm glad we're finally having the opportunity to do it. I probably know more about Yemen than the average American, but that is not saying much. The average American knows a bit about what's going on in Syria, but really nothing about this. And I think part of the reason may be, if I can put the most charitable spin on why we're not being told about it, it would seem that compared with the disaster in Syria, the number of deaths directly attributable to bombs, let's say, in Yemen is not all that great. But that of course does not really capture the scope of what's happening in Yemen. So what exactly, just without even getting into who's doing what, what is the scope of the humanitarian crisis that's being faced there right now?

CRAIG: Well, of course, also Syria has had four years on Yemen. Yemen's war has just been going on for two years; now it's going into its third year.

WOODS: Right.

CRAIG: But yeah, the humanitarian crisis is actually the largest one in the world. So Yemen has a population of around 26 to 27 million people, and now 19 million of those are in need of some form of humanitarian aid, and that really goes back to the issue of Yemen being a third world country, a developing country before the war even started and having very limited capacity amongst the civilian population for being able to cope with conflicts in the way that it's now played out.

And Yemen also imports 90% of its food, so of course when you've got a war situation in Yemen right now where the was a blockade imposed on the country at the start of the conflict by the Saudi Arabian-led coalition who intervened in Yemen in March 2015, that immediately restricted imports into a country that was already a developing country, but as I say, imported 90% of its food. So that had an immediate impact.

And then also food was being used and is still being used as a weapon in the conflict by forces on the ground, so the forces that the Saudis have been fighting are the Houthi rebels, who are from northern Yemen, and the former president called Ali Abdullah Saleh and the military units that remain loyal to him, and they've imposed local sieges in parts of the country, which has also restricted access to food and medical aid and supplies. So yes, the humanitarian situation in Yemen is far worse, actually, than Syria, although the numbers who have died from the war are less. Those who are

currently dying and will die probably from starvation in the future will be much higher.

WOODS: When I recently watched an interview that you did on *Democracy Now*, they played a clip from a British — it might have been the defense minister — British official trying to explain and justify Saudi actions in Yemen, and the grounds that he gave were that the Houthis are attacking Saudi Arabia, they have to be able to defend themselves — "they" being the Saudis — and likewise, the Saudis are acting on behalf really of the legitimate government of Yemen and they want to see the legitimate government of Yemen established, reestablished. What are we to make of that line of argument, and what would you say is the real story?

CRAIG: The issue with that is that there is clear evidence from what I've seen and what human rights organizations have gathered from the ground, as well, is the total disregard for civilian life in that process. So I collected evidence just over a space of a few weeks of numerous cases, of more than a dozen cases of airstrikes where there has been indiscriminate targeting of civilians and, as I said, complete disregard for civilian life. And even in the first year of the war, the civilian casualties, 60% of those were being caused by the Saudi-led coalition and their airstrikes. So the bombing campaign is raising serious issues, and the use of weapons therefore being sold to Saudi Arabia, which is being done by the U.S. and the British — and this is why the British government has tried to come out in defense of Saudi Arabia, because it's big business for them. Saudi Arabia is a very important and strategic ally for them.

Also with the political situation in the U.K. at the moment with Brexit, it means that foreign investment is extremely important to the U.K. right now. And of course they do not want to be suspending sales to Saudi Arabia, which activists and human rights organizations have been calling for, because the British are in a much tighter spot than the U.S. on this. They are signatories to the Arms Trade Treaty, which basically means that if there is any risk of those weapons being used in violations of international humanitarian law, then weapons sales should be suspended. So that's currently going through the High Court at the moment in the U.K. But yes, at the moment, certainly from what I've seen and various organizations that have been on the ground, there is clear evidence that those weapons are being used in breaches of international humanitarian law.

WOODS: Okay, so I guess what I'm driving at with the question is: can the Saudis legitimately say, as brutal as it may be, we are simply — this is all self-defense. We're not actually engaged in aggression. Of course every aggressor says that, but I'm curious about how much there is to that claim.

CRAIG: Well, that's become slightly self-fulfilling, because at the beginning of the war, it was very much a domestic political power struggle. So this was a struggle between two presidents, the current president, Hadi, and the former president who was president for 33 years, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Once Hadi was forced into exile and asked the Saudis for help, they then intervened. It wasn't until after they intervened that then the Houthis started firing ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia. It's not the first time the Saudis have engaged in conflict with the Houthis, who are based in the north of Yemen, so on their border, hence the reason why they view them as a threat. But it

wasn't until after the Saudis intervened this time in 2015 with their bombing campaign that the Houthis then retaliated by firing ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia.

But what the Saudis see the Houthis as is a proxy for Iran, and of course this feeds into the regional power struggle then that we're seeing playing out across the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran. And really, the Houthis have long been politically aligned to Iran but really haven't been receiving material support until actually very recently. And there's now increasing evidence over the last six months and nine months of the war that the Iranians have been sending very specific weaponry to Yemen and been providing military assistance. So that's another thing that's become self-fulfilling, really.

And rather than attempts at deescalating the conflict, it's actually escalating and becoming much more multilayered and drawing in many more powers from the region, and of course it makes it incredibly difficult then to reach a political resolution when you have many more parties involved and fragmentation on the ground.

WOODS: There's been a lot of question as to why the U.S. would be involved in this, aiding and abetting this, and the answers I've gotten have been, Well, they value the Saudi friendship and they don't want to lose that and there are military bases at stake and this and that. But presumably, the friendship with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia is not going to come to an end if the U.S. is not playing a role in Yemen, so is that really the full story?

CRAIG: Well, I think initially at the beginning obviously the Saudis, as everybody tends to when they go into wars, thought this would last a couple of months and they'd be done and dusted. And at the beginning, I think you have to go back to that time in 2015 and just before then in 2014 when the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Washington wasn't that great because of the deal that had been done with Iran that the Obama administration did. So really by initially supporting Saudi Arabia in this conflict, I think it was an attempt by the Obama administration to appease the Saudis slightly, to offer them some form of reassurance after the deal with Iran had been done, and to try and better those relations. Now, of course, the conflict has gone on and on and we're now going into the third year.

And increasingly, what the other U.S. benefit of this has really been has been a financial one. This is billions of dollars worth of weapons sales and equipment that has gone to Saudi Arabia. I mean, the Obama administration since 2009 offered Saudi Arabia $115 billion worth of weapons, equipment, and training, and so it's a financial interest as well as that sort of strategic alliance between Washington and Saudi Arabia, which at the beginning of this was not in a good place.

And of course now we're in a different situation with the Trump administration, and really now the Saudis are holding out for more American support, and they're hoping that the Trump administration will actually get more involved militarily in the conflict to support them and still trying to get the appearances of a win at least for Saudi Arabia, because really they want to get out of this war, but they can't do so unless they can be seen to have won.

WOODS: Is the problem of mass malnourishment in Yemen a combination of typical wartime factors with the blockade?

CRAIG: It's a combination of a lot of things. I first started reporting on the humanitarian situation and malnutrition in particular in children in Yemen back in 2012. Yemen always had serious levels of malnutrition amongst children, even back in 2012. It was second only to Afghanistan in that status. So there was yes, a massive contribution made by the blockade, which was then somewhat eased, and the UN then took over the role of checking boats and vessels trying to go into the west coast that was under the control of the Houthis and the former president, Saleh, who the Saudis are fighting.

But I think if you look at the figures now, and I've been to Yemen very recently, and having crossed from both sides of the front line, people are starving on both sides now. And in fact, some of the worst hit areas actually in President Hadi, i.e., the Saudi-led coalition territory and not just in the Houthi-controlled areas, which have been affected by this blockade. So the two worst hit areas in Yemen are in the west coast in Hudaydah and then in another governorate, another province called Taiz, which is actually under coalition control. And those are the two worst hit areas, which tells you it doesn't matter if you're a civilian which side of the frontlines you're on; you're as likely to be starving whichever side you may be on geographically in this war.

WOODS: I'm sorry I've got a question that reveals my utter ignorance of the situation, but if the humanitarian crisis you're describing is as staggering as it is, it makes me wonder why or how this can still be going on. You said that the Saudis no doubt thought that this would go on for a couple of months. How has this not been resolved? How is this not just a Saudi victory?

CRAIG: Because the thing was the Houthis are very hardened fighters. They fought six wars against the government before in the past — in fact, against Ali Abdullah Saleh, who's supporting them now — and they know the territory particularly well. But then in addition to that, they then had support from basically most of the Yemeni military, so when the Saudis started bombing Yemen, they were taking on the longstanding army of Ali Abdullah Saleh, and they didn't obviously anticipate what they were going to face in pushback — and also perhaps the consolidation of support initially at the beginning of the war for the Houthis very much against Saudi Arabia in that way.

So both sides now are refusing to even engage with the UN special envoy, who has been tasked with trying to find a political resolution to the conflict. They're not even talking to him. And so Yemen is actually further away from even reaching a state of ceasefire, never mind the end of this conflict, than it probably has been since the beginning of the war. Neither side wants to back down. Neither side is under any pressure really to back down right now. There have been no major movements on the ground in terms of gaining territory really since August 2015. The Saudi-led coalition has taken some more territory in the last month of so on the west Red Sea coast, but really other than that, you're talking about gaining ground of a few hundred meters and then losing a few hundred meters across most of the fronts in the country over the last two years.

WOODS: I want to ask you something on a personal level. I'm curious to know what it's like to be reporting on a situation that, unless you are a professional foreign policy analyst, almost no one seems to take much interest in it. There's very little attention paid. Is this frustrating?

CRAIG: Yeah, it's incredibly frustrating, but I've been covering Yemen since 2010. I was living in Yemen for the best — well, five years, nearly, from 2010 till the beginning of 2015, and even during the Arab Spring in 2011 when all the regional revolutions were happening, even then, Yemen was lower down the list of priorities for all news editors around the world. So it's always been a battle and there's nothing new in that.

I think the really frustrating part about it now is that all sides in the conflict have been actively trying to prevent journalists from getting into the country at some stage, if not all the time, and it's incredibly difficult to, once you do get in, certainly in the north where the Houthis are, to operate independently. And getting just access to the story in the first place is incredibly hard. So most big news organizations don't need too much discouragement to go off and find another story, because there are plenty out there, when you have those kinds of barriers. So yes, for me, it's always been a constant battle, and I think now I'm probably in a better position to be able to get in the country the most, just because I'm willing to put up a fight a bit more than many would, I suppose.

WOODS: Right, good, good. Good for you. Now, of course everybody wants to compare the situation to Syria. I'm sure you get that question a lot. "How would you compare the situation to what's going on in Syria?" Let me twist that question a little bit. Of course we know about the U.S. strike on Syria in response to the gassing that we read about. And nobody denies that that's a terrible atrocity, and yet during wartime there are so many terrible atrocities, I don't know what calculus to use to compare them. If my child were literally starving to death before my eyes, I don't know how I could say, Well, at least he's not being gassed. I just don't think I could think that way. I think this is equally an atrocity. And yet, in the U.S. there's just no outrage about this. There's no — I mean, I'm sure there's coverage here and there, but it's like everybody's on some secret team I don't know about. Everyone decides today we're going to be outraged about Syria, but the day we're going to be outraged about Yemen we haven't managed to pencil in to our calendars. Isn't that odd?

CRAIG: Yeah, it's clear double standards, and of course the reason is the U.S. and the U.K. are all on the side of the Saudi Arabian-led coalition, who are the ones who are responsible for the majority, but not all, of those violations of international humanitarian law, of those mass civilian casualties.

WOODS: But why should the American media be on the side of the Saudis? I mean, for crying out loud, they can't even be independent enough to be critical of Saudi Arabia, for heaven's sake? The American media?

CRAIG: Right, absolutely. No, I agree with you. I mean, this is a fight that I find myself in on a regular basis. Again, Yemen has never been on a priority list for anybody covering the region, and whenever they talk about Yemen, it's always looking at it through the prism of al-Qaeda, and it's rarely giving two hoots about the civilian population.

And I do actually recall near the beginning of the war, one of the U.S. networks who was in Sana'a — I was actually in another part of the country at the time — who went into to do some TV reporting on the beginning of the war in Yemen, and the first piece they did was standing in a house that had been bombed and killed civilians by the Saudi-led coalition. While standing literally in front of the rubble of the house, their report was then about how al-Qaeda was a great threat to America. And for me, that's just appalling — appalling journalism and makes me embarrassed to call myself a journalist in the first place — but absolutely said it all about what the priority is for the U.S. and even the U.S. media in this, is, Oh look, the greatest threat from Yemen is it's all about al-Qaeda; never mind the fact that you've got millions of Yemenis starving as a result of this war and you've got many tens of thousands dying. Let's all go to Yemen, and if we report on this we're still going to be talking about al-Qaeda — which is so low on the list of priorities for Yemenis, really, right now, that it's kind of ridiculous.

So yeah, I find myself very embarrassed to call myself a journalist a lot of the time, and that was one of those many scenarios, that was an example of it, I think.

WOODS: Wow, all right. Well, suppose you could speak for those who have no voice and you're leaving aside your journalistic impartiality and you're just speaking to Westerners and you have 60 seconds to talk to them. What would you say?

CRAIG: I think I would say, Go to, whether it be your lawmakers in the U.S. or the U.K., and implore them to stop selling weapons to Saudi Arabia and supporting the Saudi-led coalition, because once the Saudis are forced to deescalate the conflict in Yemen, then it actually creates a better scenario where they can find a political situation between the Yemeni parties in this conflict, between the two presidents who started this war in the first place. But in order to be able to get to that point, you need to be able to remove the Saudi-led coalition. And the American government is not only helping weapons, it is providing daily logistical support to the bombing campaign that's being led by the Saudi Arabians at the moment, and that means refueling of all of their aircraft that are running bombing raids into Yemen. And without that support, they wouldn't be able to drop bombs tomorrow if they stopped that today. And I think that is really crucial right now, because that also then will alleviate the humanitarian crisis, and it will hopefully lead to a closer resolution to the conflict in Yemen right now. And that's what people can do directly back home, I think.

WOODS: How can people follow your work?

CRAIG: Well, I'm in the usual places. I have my own website, which is IonaCraig.com, and I'm on social media, I'm on Twitter, and I'm on Facebook. Most of my reporting is up on my website, and the links I always put up there once my work is out. And at the moment, I'm just working on a piece for *Harper's*, actually, from my last trip to Yemen, having already done some work for *The Intercept* and for *IRIN* and some others — and for the BBC as well. So yeah, I freelance; I've got a lot of fingers in a lot of pies.

WOODS: Wow, okay, so I'm going to link to your website on the show notes page. This being Episode 890, it'll be TomWoods.com/890. Well, thank you so much for your time

and what you're doing and this nice briefing for us. It was very needed and I appreciate it. Thank you.

CRAIG: Thanks, Tom. Great to talk to you.