Episode Transcript:

Episode Title:
Yemen’s Civil War

Guest:
Peter Salisbury
Jon Alterman:
Peter Salisbury is the senior analyst for Yemen at the International Crisis Group. He has been working on Yemen for more than a decade, and in my experience, he is one of the best-informed people I’ve ever spoken to about the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Peter welcome to Babel.

Peter Salisbury:
Thanks very much for having me, Jon.

Jon Alterman:
Who's fighting in Yemen right now?

Peter Salisbury:
The really simple version is that you’ve got the Houthis—who increasingly control the northwest of Yemen—fighting a wide range of mainly local groups with a bunch of different international backers. You can sub-divide those groups into tribal and politically aligned forces—backed by Saudi Arabia and Yemen’s internationally recognized government in Marib and Taiz—and then secessionist and formerly Houthi-allied forces in the south and along the Red Sea coast, who are linked to the United Arab Emirates. The issue with describing these as one block—as one group—is that there has been as much fighting between some of the secessionists in the south and the government and its allies as there has been between these groups and the Houthis. Increasingly, we have a number of armed groups who are pretty powerful, not overtly are not aligned with the government, and not in this war to bring President Hadi back to power. Although from the outside it looks like a relatively simple two-party war—and some people would want to call it a proxy war, although I wouldn’t—the reality is that you have all these different groups with different agendas all lined up against each other. Even without the Houthis, there’s a wide range of groups doing the fighting.

Jon Alterman:
What are they fighting over?

Peter Salisbury:
The Houthis have got a very strong narrative that they like to tell. They say that in 2014, they launched a revolution against a corrupt government that was doing the bidding of the United States and other regional players. The president of Yemen resigned at the beginning of 2015. They replaced him with a revolutionary council and, later, a political council, and since 2015, Saudi Arabia—with the backing of the United States—has been launching an aggression and a siege against their revolutionary forces to undo their revolution.

From the outside, we have a slightly different story. We say there was a coup in 2014. Saudi Arabia intervened on the side of Yemen’s internationally recognized president. The president wants to get back into power. He wants to go back to Sanaa and be the leader of Yemen. That looks increasingly unlikely because he’s not a very popular figure. Most of the forces on the ground in the north of Yemen are just fighting to defend their home turf, and they are hoping against hope that something will happen to get rid of the Houthis. Many of the forces in the south just want to break away from the north of Yemen and go back to pre-1990 dividing lines when there were two separate states—one in the north and one in the south.

Jon Alterman:
How many people are fighting, and where are they fighting? Is this a real war? The Houthis have largely consolidated control over the northwest. Where are people fighting?

Peter Salisbury:
The big fight right now is in Marib. Marib sits to the east of Sanaa and is really the last major urban stronghold for the government and its allies in the north of Yemen. The Houthis are homing in on Marib because taking over would mean that the government doesn’t have a firm foothold anywhere in Yemen. It’s already been pushed out of its temporary capital in Aden by the Southern Transitional Council. Marib also
has oil and gas fields, a refinery, and a power plant. If the Houthis take it over, they will have reconstituted the pre-1990 economic system that Yemen ran on, so they're very focused on getting the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle.

There are also these other sub-conflicts. Recently there was a lot of fighting in a governate called al-Baydah, where local tribal forces, Salafist forces, and even some of these secessionist forces launched a huge push against the Houthis. It was a really strong example of the extent to which the anti-Houthi war effort really isn't very well coordinated. The complaint from these groups, very quickly, was that the government wasn’t giving them support. Saudi Arabia wasn’t giving them support. You end up with this complex and toxic situation. On the Red Sea coast, there is Tariq Saleh—the nephew of the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh—who was on the Houthis side until the end of 2017. He flipped when the Houthis killed his uncle. He won’t swear allegiance to President Hadi and place himself under Hadi’s command and control, but at the same time he is treated as part of the wider anti-Houthi block. There are six or seven major fronts, and Marib is the hottest one right now.

**Jon Alterman:**
Because of the oil and gas there, the stakes in Marib are high. Is that enough to get the interested parties to hold off the Houthis, or do they just not have enough power?

**Peter Salisbury:**
The issue with Marib is that we keep hearing there’s a Yemen national army, led by the government and backed by Saudi Arabia, but when you speak to people in Marib, you learn fairly quickly that the people doing the real fighting to hold off the Houthi advance are local tribal forces who don’t want to lose control of their areas. The main thing that’s really held back the Houthis is Saudi airpower, so the Saudis have been able to hold them off. Still, the trend line is a gradual, slow, inexorable eating away at territory to the south and the west of Marib as the Houthis push on towards Marib city. They try to negotiate that way and create so much pressure on local tribal leaders that they cut deals with them. That has worked in other parts of the country, but it hasn’t worked here.

On one side, you have an issue with people getting demoralized because they realized that the big push against the Houthis just isn’t coming. The reality is that you’ve got these local tribal forces who complain that they’re not being given the money, the weapons, or even the ammunition needed to make this an equal fight, and Saudi airpower is the only thing that has made a difference and prevented a complete Houthi push to the outskirts of the city.

You get these crazy dust storms in Marib, and the Houthis waited for some of these dust storms, so that the air cover would be less effective and they could push towards Marib. A year ago, people in Yemen were saying, “well the Houthis are losing so many guys in this offensive that clearly they will not be able to sustain it.” A year and a half in, they can sustain it. They might not make the breakthrough tomorrow, but the trend and trajectory points towards them arriving on the outskirts of Marib at some point—absent some sort of game-changing factor or political settlement.

**Jon Alterman:**
What’s happening in the rest of the country, and how do we know what’s happening in the rest of the country with it being so difficult to visit and move around?

**Peter Salisbury:**
The simple answer is WhatsApp—WhatsApp and Signal. I speak to people in pretty much every part of the country regularly, and that’s part of my job with the International Crisis Group. We like to think of ourselves as being primarily focused on field-based research, so we’ve tried to get into the country as much as humanly possible. For me, that has been really a
couple of times a year until the Covid-19 pandemic began. Every time I travel in, it doesn't matter who I've been speaking to, or how much detail I've tried out of people in phone calls, emails, or WhatsApp messages; you're always going to find so many more layers to the onion when you get there. You're going to hear so many different stories.

Our information is the best it can be at times, but nothing beats doing proper field research. Of course, that lends itself to a lot of misinformation and storytelling, and it allows the different parties to this conflict to say a lot of things about what's happening on the ground. There's a really limited number of people who have been working on Yemen as researchers for a long time and can get in and out of all these different parts of the country and bring back detailed, fairly accurate reporting, but there are some excellent journalists and researchers working on the ground. I have to tip my hat to the Sanaa Center and Deep Root—which is a consulting firm that does really great regular reports and have been pushing locally-led research.

**Jon Alterman:**
The U.S. embassy in Yemen is now based in Saudi Arabia. What's at stake for the United States in Yemen?

**Peter Salisbury:**
In terms of its national security priorities, counterterrorism is still high on the list. There is also regional stability, the stability of Saudi Arabia, and the free flow of international trade. Somewhere on that list is a keenly felt moral obligation toward what is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

**Jon Alterman:**
What tools has the U.S. been using for the last several decades.

**Peter Salisbury:**
That's kind of chopped and changed. Yemen was a policy backwater for a long time. That changed after 9/11 because you had various jihadists groups. They tried to attack U.S. soldiers in hotels in Aden in the 1990s and launched the attack on the USS Cole, which was claimed by al Qaeda not too long before 9/11. Because of this, you saw a lot of focus on counterterrorism work (CT) there, and the development of local counterterrorism forces and intelligence forces. The drone program was pretty heavily implemented in Yemen into the mid-2010s. What we've seen over the course of the conflict is a “one foot in, one foot out” approach to Yemen. At the beginning of the war, U.S. officials wanted to reassure Saudi Arabia because the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was happening at the same time as the war began and Saudi Arabia intervened in 2015.

The United States quickly soured of the way the war was being fought and the lack of strategic thinking that was going into either trying to win or end the conflict through a negotiated settlement. There's been a lot of drift, particularly since 2018, when the United Arab Emirates oversaw this push towards Hodeidah and people started talking about humanitarian implications of that push. There was a lot of reporting coming out of big U.S. media outlets about the human cost of the war.

Most recently, in February we saw the Biden administration coming out with what was described as a policy pivot. In many ways, it was actually just enshrining policies that had quietly been put in place. here was no more offensive support for the Saudis in Yemen and they stepped up support for diplomacy, but that won’t change the realities on the ground.

**Jon Alterman:**
You've written about the need for comprehensive negotiation between representatives of diverse interests in Yemen to resolve the conflict. You’ve said that it’s going to be messy and that you have to bring people to the table. Starting in 2011, Yemen set about establishing the National Dialogue.
Conference—565 delegates meant to encompass everybody. It had large quotas for women and young people. There was a lot of UN support—a lot of international support. I remember that the National Democratic Institute was very involved. This was a push to resolve the issues that were bubbling in the wake of the Arab Spring. Yemen soon dissolved into war. If we’re going to have a big negotiating process to resolve all of the complex issues in Yemen, how do we set it up differently to get a different outcome than the last time Yemen had a big process?

Peter Salisbury:
We’ve got to look at what happened around the National Dialogue—the contexts that it happened in—and where we are today because they’re two very different things. Sometimes, people talk about the national dialogue as if it was the only component of Yemen’s political transition. In 2011, there was an uprising in Yemen against what people saw as a corrupt, kleptocratic, and anti-democratic regime. Midway through that uprising, different bits of the regime who had a tense relationship for years broke from each other and started fighting in the streets. This is when regional players and the United States got really worried about Yemen because they saw the regime dissolving. For them, that meant there was a vacuum and space for al Qaeda and other terrorist to enter.

What we ended up with at the end of 2011 was an elite bargain, first and foremost, between Saleh’s General People’s Congress (GPC) and an umbrella opposition group led by a group called Islah—which is Yemen’s main Sunni Islamist party. It’s really a network built around Islah and a network built around the GPC who had been fighting each other in 2011, so they entered into a unity government. Salah’s former vice president—the current president, Abdrubbah Mansur Hadi—is named as interim president, and they oversee this period when they’re meant to be doing some economic, military, and security reform. They still have the reins of power. At same time, the National Dialogue happens, but it had no input into the way that the country is being run.

There were multiple sub conflicts that were escalating, and in Sanaa, there was a real disconnect between these three things: the situation on the ground and the reality lived by Yemenis, the National Dialogue and its utopian view of the future, and the actual governance of the country which was still led by parties that were conducting lower intensity conflict with one another. This created a vacuum into which other groups, like the Houthis, southern secessionists, and al Qaeda could penetrate.

The people at the conference, in most cases, didn’t have very much power. Since 2014 and 2015—the beginning of the civil war—Sanaa’s grip over the rest of the country and its status as the center of power is gone. The Houthis control the northwest of Yemen—its most populous areas—but Marib is, by and large, controlled by Maribis. Over the course of the conflict, we’ve seen the establishment of many new armed groups, new security networks, and new governance networks.

People at the local level now control their own areas and are trying—to varying degrees of success—to run their own areas. They’re not going to give that up at the end of this, so this is no longer a power struggle with an elite in Sanaa who hold the balance of power. It’s a power struggle between these formerly peripheral areas among themselves and with the new dominant force of the Houthis in the northwest. If we move towards some form of inclusive dialogue going forward, we’re no longer in a position where, for example, the Houthis and Hadi can form a unity government in Sanaa and just try to impose their writ and play the same game. The actors at the local level can come up to the national level and say, “Hey, you actually have to listen to me, and you don't get to just take back over.”
**Jon Alterman:**
So, in some ways it almost feels like a return to the 1980s in Yemen. I traveled to Yemen in the early 1990s. Since that time, Ali Abdullah Saleh consolidated control over a lot of the country as president. When I was there, they were building a lot of roads, and the roads allowed the government to have access to places where they didn't previously have access. That allowed central government control to spread. What it sounds like you're suggesting is that there's a need to do the opposite of consolidation and have significantly more peripheral control.

**Peter Salisbury:**
I think that's something that goes back to the National Dialogue. One of the things that was agreed on was that Yemen should be highly decentralized in the way that it was governed to prevent a regime from assimilating all the power and resources at the center. There was broad agreement that the country should become a federal state. We still have the National Dialogue Conference outcomes document that clearly says that Yemen is going to be a highly decentralized country. In fact, Yemen has laws on the books that say the same, so what we're talking about right now is that the reality on the ground matches the vision that people had before—with the exception of the Houthi-controlled areas, which are unquestionably a highly securitized police state and where probably 70 percent of the population lives.

Realistically, federalism and decentralization tend to work best when you have strong local and national institutions, and in Yemen what we've got is weak, uncoordinated, diffuse, and mismatched institutions both locally and nationally. That means that as they approach Yemen, the international community needs to think critically about their approach. They way that they bring funds into Yemen—around reconstruction and governance—will shape the incentives for people to do things on way or another. If they decide they want to put all their effort into capacity building for national institutions in Sanaa, then we're going down that same slippery slope. But if they want to put their time and effort into making sure that we have strong local institutions all over Yemen and that those then coordinate, link up, and become part of a national system with a much stronger balance between the local and national level, that's the best way forward.

**Jon Alterman:**
It's a large challenge, but it sounds like one we're going to be engaged in for a long time. Peter, thank you very much for joining us.

**Peter Salisbury:**
Thank you for having me, Jon.