

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Human Rights in Yemen

featuring

Afrah Nasser, Human Rights Watch Researcher

interviewed by

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Full Transcript

Reema Saleh: Hi, this is Reema, and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts.

Reema Saleh: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies, and policy issues it affects. In this series you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs, and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P in collaboration with The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. In this episode, I speak with Afrah Nasser, a researcher with Human Rights Watch investigating humanitarian law violations and human rights abuses in Yemen. She was an activist and independent journalist in Sana'a, and has been advocating for justice in Yemen for over a decade. So to start, can you walk us through the beginnings of the civil war in Yemen? How have things changed since the 2011 revolution?

Afrah Nasser: 2011 was a very significant point for Yemen's political life, in general. There were a lot of stereotypes about Yemen, that following the Arab Spring, there will not be an uprising or any democratic aspiration in Yemen, given that it's heavily tribal society and there is not room for democracy or a democratic life already. But in 2011, all the youth took the street and protestors were chanting, "irhal, irhal," which means, "leave, leave." Meaning they were demanding the downfall of the president back then Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled Yemen for more than 30 years and was preparing presidency for his son. And then 2011 was the start of all what we see today because there was an international war to topple him with some conditions. So Ali Abdullah Saleh gave up power after the UN and the Gulf Cooperation Council led by Saudi Arabia, stepped in and gave him a power transfer deal, which meant that he was going to give away power and then an exchange of impunity.

Afrah Nasser: So there was guarantee that he was not going to face any transitional justice or at least 400 people from his circle. And that was in my opinion, the seed of the civil war that followed in 2014, because the transition without justice was a recipe for a disaster already. So in 2014, there was alliance between the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and the rebel group, the Houthis, to take revenge against some of the political actors inside Yemen that worked with the international community to topple him. And it was like a marriage of convenience because Ali Abdullah Saleh and Houthis already had several episodes of war, but

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because they had mutual interest at that time. So, that alliance was planning to challenge the presidency of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. So in 2014, the Houthi armed group marched into the capital Sana'a and took control of the major institution and gradually took over of the state.

Afrah Nasser: And then this was marked with a lot of violence inside Yemen, especially the capital, which escalated with the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in 2015. So in March you had the Saudi Ambassador to the US back then Adel al-Jubeir, announcing from the US that Saudi Arabia was leading a coalition of nine to eleven, I'm not sure, Arab states that were going to form a military alliance and fight the Houthi armed group in Sana'a, as he described the Houthi were backed by Iran, and that was a big threat to Saudi Arabia. So since then, seeing the major conflict between the Saudi-led coalition with two key actors in that coalition are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates fighting in Yemen, the Houthi armed group. And then at the same time, civilians were really facing so many abuses in violations by the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi armed group.

Afrah Nasser: And then in 2017 in the Houthis killed Ali Abdullah Saleh, which gave them eventually the upper hand in controlling the capital Sana'a. So today you have the Houthi armed group controlling major parts of the north. While in the south, you have the Southern Transitional Council, which is backed by the UAE, controlling some part of the south. And also there is a presence of the Saudi-led coalition-backed Yemeni forces in the east of Yemen and south. So today we can say that Yemen is divided by different part, by different actors, which is like a multi-layered conflict. So you have one civil conflict, and then on the other level, it's internationalized because the Saudi-led coalition is enabled by the arm deals that it's able to add from major Western states like the US, the UK, France, Canada, et cetera.

Reema Saleh: Could you talk about some of the human rights abuses that have been coming from both parties?

Afrah Nasser: Yeah. So since throughout the course of the conflict, we've seen unlawful attacks by the Saudi led coalition, some of the abuses and violations include bombing schools, hospitals, funerals, weddings, and other civilian sites. The exact number of the casualties in my opinion, is underestimated. So according to the UN the latest statistics from the UN is that nearly a quarter of a million people have been killed. And that's not only by the unlawful attacks, but also including the humanitarian impact of the conflict. And then there is also lack of reliable statistics about the casualties of people killed by hostilities and unlawful attacks by the Houthi armed group. So, that makes it really unfair to describe the impact of the unlawful attacks. But from what we've seen is that the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi armed group forces are committing unlawful attacks or use of violence against civilians or civilian targets.

Afrah Nasser: And then one of the major abuse that I care a lot about and work on a lot, is the detention crisis across the country. So, we've seen since the beginning of the conflict, there is a widespread of arbitrary detention and forcible disappearance of countless number of civilians. And Saudi-led coalition-backed Yemeni forces and the Houthi armed group are all responsible of committing those detention cases. So without exaggeration, from my experience working on this, I feel like every household have been impacted by the detention crisis. I'm bombarded with messages of relatives of missing men who are asking Human Rights Watch to document their cases. It's just the level of detention is just shocking. And the longer the war goes on, the more new groups are impacted by the detention situation. So this year there are reports from the UN coming saying that there are children also that were detained by some of the parties of the conflict. Human Rights Watch, we've worked on the case of the Yemeni model, Intisar al-Hammadi.

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Afrah Nasser: So we've seen also women are being also subjected to detention. So, Intisar al-Hammadi is still imprisoned and facing unfair trial in Sana'a by the court that's controlled by the Houthi authorities. And there are other women also that are detained in her case as well and their families are not able to speak up because of the really deadly consequences of them speaking. So detention is just one area that I feel like is impacting every household. The situation for children also is just one of the most horrific aspect of the conflict. Because maybe not many people know, but most of the Yemeni population are below the age of 15. So it's a really young population and you see the impact of the conflict directly on children. So, today we have more than half the 20 million people who are in need of humanitarian assistance or protection in Yemen, are children.

Afrah Nasser: And most of these children will have those consequences of the humanitarian crisis for all their lives, because it impacts their growth, it impacts their intellectual ability. And just every time there is images of skinny children who are becoming the face of the starvation or famine in Yemen, it just breaks my heart because this is going to have long term devastation to the country. And then also children are impacted by the hostilities and violence in particular. We've seen children being targets of shelling by the Houthi armed group while playing, for example. Those cases are really just like a shocking mirror of the violations of their basic rights. And parties to the conflict also continue to use the schools for the military efforts and purposes. So it's just children don't... there is no safe place for children. Neither when they are playing in the street or...even their schools are being targeted.

Afrah Nasser: And it just breaks my heart. The situation from children is one of the worst, I would say, in the conflict in Yemen. And land mines also are a silent killer that not many people really pay attention to. So what we have seen according to some estimates that the death of land mines is at least 9,000 people who were killed. And in particular, the Houthi armed group have used anti-personnel landmines in conducting indiscriminate attacks. So I can go on, the list is really long, but I think one of the things that really concerned maybe the audience is the humanitarian situation and the starvation and the warning from the UN about famine and the humanitarian crisis. And there are many factors that are playing in this regard. But what we know is that parties to the conflict have had tactics or abusive practice that really exaggerated an already dire humanitarian crisis.

Afrah Nasser: So even us in Human Rights Watch, we have documented severe restrictions by the Houthi authorities, the Yemeni government, and even affiliated forces, and the UAE-backed STC forces. They all have had restriction on the delivery of the desperately needed humanitarian aid. So the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, it's not a natural disaster, or it didn't happen out of nowhere. It's man made and we know that parties to the conflict are responsible of that. Another underreported, I think, aspect of the conflict is the abuses that migrants face. So this year we saw that a migrant detention center was on fire in the north part of Yemen in Sana'a and it was under the control of the Houthi authorities. And from our investigation, we called the Houthi authorities to hold those responsible of the fire to account. And until today, for all those abuses, there were no justice.

Afrah Nasser: And that tells you about the urgent need of justice and redress for the victims in the course of Yemen conflict. So just last month, the UN specialized group investigating violations in Yemen for the fourth year, published a report saying that, "Until there is no political will from the international communities to address the lack of accountability, we will continue to see the situation in Yemen getting worse and worse and more abuses and more violations." Because parties to the conflict feel that they have free access and no consequences whatsoever in committing all these abuses. And unfortunately, that's being enabled by the silence of the international community and lack of political will to address the lack of accountability.

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Reema Saleh: What responsibility does the international community bear for some of these atrocities, especially now that the US has resumed arm sales with the UAE?

Afrah Nasser: Yeah, there is a huge responsibility when we talk about international mechanisms, when it comes to accountability and international humanitarian law and international human rights, Yemen is a great example of the collective responsibility and collective failure, because there are many international actors that are involved in the conflict in Yemen. So the Saudi-led coalition began the military operation with UN Security Council Resolution in 2015. And it's been having the backing and support of most of the international community. And that means the US, the UK, France, others. And it just tells you how this is not just Saudi Arabia fighting in Yemen, but it also all these super powers as well. And then on the other hand, you have within the UN Security Council, we've seen Russia and Iran fully giving diplomatic support to the Houthis. And there are many news media reports about Iran supporting the Houthis militarily and helping them with training and et cetera.

Afrah Nasser: So the international actors in Yemen have huge responsibility to how the course of the conflict has been going. And when I say it's also like a collective failure, because I feel like when we talk about the international humanitarian law, there are mounting evidence, overwhelming evidence documented by respected international non-governmental, non-profit human rights groups like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, and even Yemeni local rights groups, and even the UN. The UN has established two teams investigating humanitarian IHL abuses and violations in Yemen. And while we have all this overwhelming evidence and documentation and reports, they are all faced by deaf ears from the international community. And it seems there is a collective failure from the international community to pay attention to what is needed and to their legal obligation. And for example, ending their arms deals to parties to the conflict, or even rethinking how they are sending these weapons, what role they are playing in abuses in Yemen. So the international community has a huge responsibility, but also has a huge collective failure.

Reema Saleh: There was an interview that I think you did with Jadaliyya a few months ago, that I came across where you unpack the idea of why Western media often erroneously refers to Yemen as the forgotten war. Can you talk a bit about how Yemen was never remembered by the international community to be forgotten? Could you talk a little more about what this means and what we should take away from it?

Afrah Nasser: Yeah. I would like to answer to that by going back to how the international media and in particular media in the US were feeling about Yemen when Khashoggi was killed. During that time, when Jamal Khashoggi was killed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, there were like this hype, and huge desire and willingness to investigate violations committed by Saudi Arabia at home and outside. And that included putting more scrutiny to what's going on in Yemen. And that was a reality check that Yemen did only matter because it was being seen through the Saudi lens. So Yemen was never a subject matter by itself. There has to be one reason, so we can pay attention to Yemen. There has to be another major event, and then we can look at Yemen. And also when there are other major events happening around the world, secretly, I always pray I hope nothing happened in Yemen during that time, because I know there will not be any media coverage. So for example, with all what was going on in Afghanistan, Yemen just slide to the end of the agenda, or even not even in the agenda of media coverage. I don't mean any disrespect to other tragedies in Afghanistan. And even before that it was in Syria or even to the heinous crime against Jamal Khashoggi, but it's just an interesting way of trying to compare how Yemen don't matter. And how it's really hard to get the media care about what's going on in Yemen. So today you have one challenge that I get, a lot of emails people asking me, "What more can we say about Yemen that hasn't been said before?"

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Afrah Nasser: And I think it doesn't feel right, this question. Because look at your invitation, for example, you just invited me to, "Can you tell us about what's going on in Yemen?" So it's just so simple and easy, and it's heartbreaking how Yemen doesn't matter when it's facing the largest humanitarian crisis. It's just heartbreaking why Yemen doesn't matter when it's the poorest Arab nation where some of the world's richest countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE are infighting. So I think this should be like a very interesting angle to any journalist, any researcher, any scholar, and yet Yemen is just not even in the map. I'm not going to say it's forgotten, it just doesn't count. For me, it's just shocking, really. I mean, one way that we Yemenis think about this is that, because we are poor, because Yemen is poor, that is the main reason nobody cares about it. Even if someone shows solidarity to Yemen, we feel like, "Oh, thank you for being an exception, and seeing a value and showing solidarity to us." But Yemen has a rich history just given an opportunity, it can be as rich as Saudi Arabia, as rich as the United Arab Emirates. So as we speak today, I can see all the bling bling in the UAE Expo 2020 event. And for me, it's disturbing seeing all this extravagance in the UAE while there is misery and pain in their neighboring country in Yemen, while the UAE is backing, some of the most abusive armed forces on the ground, it's just so disturbing. And I just wish there is a chance for Yemen to flourish outside this conflict.

Reema Saleh: The World Food Program has faced some major funding shortfalls this year. With Yemen being its biggest humanitarian operation, what does that mean for the future?

Afrah Nasser: I think the humanitarian crisis is bigger than just the lack or decline in funding. As long as there is war profiteering and war economy that was created as a product of the conflict, we will continue to have this humanitarian crisis and no amount of humanitarian aid can fix the situation. So today, for example, you have major restrictions from parties to the conflict, the mobility of humanitarian operation personnel and goods within and outside Yemen is extremely difficult, and they are faced by several restrictions from authorities on the ground, and even the Saudi-led coalition as it controls the air base of Yemen. So without lifting those restrictions, no amount of humanitarian aid can fix the situation or make the humanitarian crisis go away. And then you have the war economy. And one, just one tiny aspect of it is the taxation system on the ground.

Afrah Nasser: So there are some tracks that go from east Yemen to south or north. They are being taxed by every point, by every authority that is controlling the different parts. So logistics are becoming more and more expensive. And sometimes they outweigh the humanitarian aid itself. So without dealing and addressing all these obstacles, I think we will continue to have humanitarian crisis. This is why we need accountability measures so we can address or mitigate the humanitarian crisis. It's just a dilemma. You have to rethink your humanitarian strategies in Yemen, given the violations and abuses and restrictions and obstruction of humanitarian aid.

Reema Saleh: So what will eventually need to be done to ensure accountability for these human rights violations when the war is ended?

Afrah Nasser: That will be a huge work for all human rights groups. If the war ends today, that means we have a lot of things to do. But meanwhile, we think that it's so important for Western states, states that are mentioned in the documentation of the UN groups and human rights groups. So we have today, the US, UK, France, Canada, they all have to suspend their arms deals that are going to the conflict in Yemen, going into the parties in the conflict, that are basically enabling the continuation of the conflict. Now, I remember how during Donald Trump, there was this narrative that we can't suspend our arms deal to Saudi Arabia because it's creating a lot of jobs and that will impact our own national economic make interests. So why I'm focusing

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about the arms deal is because I think this is the least thing that the international community can show that they have accountability, or they want to take the parties to the conflict accountable to what's going on or violations and abuses in Yemen.

Afrah Nasser: And if the state's only way of making money is out of the blood of innocent civilians in Yemen, I think they have a huge problem already. Arms deals are very specific demand that all human rights groups have been asking since the beginning of the conflict. And God bless his soul, when Jamal Khashoggi was killed, there were countries actually that started to suspend their arms deals. So you had Germany, for example, some countries in Scandinavia. So we've seen that this was doable before, so why we don't do it now? I think arms deals is one specific area that the international community can address the lack of accountability.

Reema Saleh: How do you remember Yemen before the civil war?

Afrah Nasser: I remember my college. I remember my school. I remember the nice sessions with families, the jokes. I remember generosity. It's just like everywhere you go. People are just so generous. Even relatives are generous to each other. Neighbors are generous to each other and the more I'm working on Yemen, the more I understand that generosity is fundamental part of Yemeni culture because of war, famine, and misery and pain. So Yemenis do understand what's like to be hungry, what does it feel to be hungry? So they're always generous with food. You might go to the most poor family and yet they will get out everything that they have and show hospitality and try to serve you the best what they have. So this I always remember. And I think the work cannot take that away also.

Reema Saleh: Can I ask what initially brought you to blogging and journalism and writing in general?

Afrah Nasser: Yeah. I started writing in my journals when I was teenager and then that escalated to writing in local newspapers during my first years of college. And then when I finished college and I joined Yemen Observer, a newspaper in Sana'a, I started to blog also and put some writing in my blog. I've always been passionate about writing, but I think me focusing on writing about Yemen comes from the fact that I had Ethiopian origin. So half of my family are Ethiopians and the other Yemenis. In Ethiopia, I was typical like of all mixed races. In Ethiopia, I was looked as like, "Oh, she's Yemeni." And then in Yemen, I was like, "Oh, she's Ethiopian." But all I know is Yemen. My native language is Arabic. And I grew up in Sana'a and I've always felt I was from Sana'a. So I wanted to demonstrate or prove to the society that I was more Yemeni than any other Yemeni. So, this is why I started writing about Yemen.

Afrah Nasser: Maybe it was in English in the beginning because I felt that was the safe space, because I can speak Amharic as well. And then Arabic was also my native language, but I was being told that, "Oh, you're not Yemeni." So that felt I wasn't Arab also. And then English was somewhere that I chose it wasn't imposed on me or something. Yeah, that's how it all started.

Reema Saleh: Half my family is from Ethiopia as well.

Afrah Nasser: Oh, interesting.

Reema Saleh: Yeah. The other half is from Eritrea.

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Afrah Nasser: Yeah. I mean, what's going on in Ethiopia and Eritrea tells you how some of these countries, their history is just full of war and conflicts. And it just makes you really wonder when will this end. But the fact that you're saying Ethiopia and Eritrea, all these neighbors they continue to migrate between each other. My grandfathers during the civil war in Yemen in the 60s, he immigrated to Ethiopia. And then when the conflict happen in Ethiopia during the 70s and 80s, my family, my parents came back to Yemen. That's going through one circle, I think.

Reema Saleh: Yeah. There's definitely a lot of moving back and forth. I have family that's moved between home and Dubai and Saudi, it's definitely... I feel like we're all tied together somehow.

Afrah Nasser: Exactly.

Reema Saleh: Can I ask you what your relationship with your homeland is like now that you're a journalist and the diaspora?

Afrah Nasser: Well, today I am a researcher. I'm not involved in journalism anymore, but I feel like I'm growing into like a global citizen. So, for example, something that I started to care a lot about is climate change or climate injustice, climate crisis, which is impacting everywhere. And COVID really also taught you how this world is a small place. So one virus went everywhere and impacted everywhere. And if one place is not safe, the other will not be safe. So that identity, I think, is becoming more and more clear to me, being global citizen. And I don't think of myself as someone in exile or even me working on Yemen, basically what I'm doing is connecting the dots between the other parts of the world and Yemen. So it doesn't mean I'm just Yemeni from Yemen and working on Yemen. No, I'm actually interested in what's going on everywhere. So the election in Germany, for example, and who will come next after Angela Merkel will definitely impact the arm sales industry, and how that will fuel the conflict in Yemen. And that just example. So I'm interested in everything that is global. And as a global citizen, I think we're far connected than we ever think.

Reema Saleh: So blogging can be a medium between journalism and activism in a way. So how do you think your independence allowed you to cover issues that went under reported?

Afrah Nasser: Yeah. No, it's helped me a lot. I remember one friend in Sweden in 2011 when I first came to Sweden and I mentioned that I had a blog and then we were discussing things about Yemen. And I told him like, "maybe you can read a World Bank report instead of my blog." And then he turned to me and he told me like, "your blog is more credible to me than most of these institutions' reports." And today I understand why he was saying that. I had so much freedom outside big institutions' policies and the dos and don'ts and that freedom... I was just writing things that I thought mattered the most to me as someone Yemeni and to my friends, to my relatives. So I wanted to show Yemen from our perspective.

Afrah Nasser: And I think that when you really believe in your value, that's like the most revolutionized thing you can do. Because I didn't believe much of the international media coverage on Yemen and how sometimes - I'm not saying all the time - but they describe Yemen with just one focus. Which is like, for example, terrorism, and I thought Yemen was bigger than that.

Afrah Nasser: So I wanted to talk about all of that. So for example, terrorism. For me, poverty was the biggest terrorism for civilians in Yemen. Not al-Qaeda, or Daesh, and things like that, or the corruption from Ali Abdullah Saleh regime. How that really fueled terrorism that the international media is talking about. So,

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things like that, for me, just being genuine and truthful were very, very important. And I think that why my writing resonated to a lot of people.

Reema Saleh: Definitely. I think there's something really human in a lot of the stories you were writing at the time.

Afrah Nasser: It's not about being human. It's just I felt like we are not any less than any other nation. Yemen is important like Saudi is important, like the UAE. So I was just writing like that.

Reema Saleh: Yeah. So this is my last question. What inspires you to keep working and what brings you hope in these times?

Afrah Nasser: You see there is this saying, I forgot the name of the philosopher, but he says, "Optimist by the will, and pessimist by the intellect." And it feels like you have to have some sort of hope so you can continue doing what you're doing. Otherwise, there will be no point in the work that you do. And I think tyrannies really want us to have despair and just give up. I think that is what gives me motive to continue is just, I don't want to give tyrannies what they want and I think we need to take what's rightfully ours.

Reema Saleh: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Afrah Nasser. This episode was produced and edited by Aishwarya Kumar and Reema Saleh. Special thanks to UC3P and The Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on The Pearson Institute's research and events, visit thepearsoninstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.