

The Yemen Crisis: An Interview with Helen Lackner

April 13, 2022



The conflict in Yemen has been going on for a long time with horrendous human consequences. Non specialists find the situation extremely complex, with many internal parties and many outside players, so it makes sense to talk to one of the English-speaking world's leading experts on Yemen, Helen Lackner, a research associate at SOAS at the University of London and author of, among other works, the award-winning *Yemen in Crisis: The Road to War*, which will be coming out in a new updated edition from Saqi in August, and *Yemen: Poverty and Conflict*, to be published by Routledge in July. She has lived in Yemen at various times for more than 15 years. She spoke with Steve Shalom of *New Politics* on April 6 and lightly edited the transcript to bring it up to date.

Steve Shalom (NP): Helen, let's begin with a brief summary of the scale of the crisis that has been going on in Yemen. Perhaps you can give us some idea of what the stakes are.

Helen Lackner (HL): I suppose fundamentally the stakes are the type of country that will exist after the conflict is over, what type of regime it will have, and how its people are going to survive.

NP: Can you give us some idea of what the human costs have been to date?

HL: We're now entering the eighth year of the full-scale fighting that started in 2015. This week we've had the first truce or serious ceasefire in more than six years. And most importantly, there's been a blockade of the most populated parts of the country for the same period. So, while a lot of people have been focused on the military activities, which are indeed important, in terms of the impact on the population and the suffering of the population, the blockade and the prevention of basic goods coming into Yemen has been much more significant. While thousands have been killed in fighting, the majority of the estimated 377,000 deaths since the war started have died from indirect causes, specifically malnutrition-related diseases and the lack of medical treatment.

Although 70% of Yemen's population lives in rural areas, they have been dependent on imports for 90% of the staples in their diet: wheat, rice, and other basic foods. Therefore, the blockade and the collapse of the economy have resulted in a very, very serious economic and humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates that this year more than 20 million people — two thirds of the country's population —

are in need of humanitarian assistance and more than half of the population need food assistance, which is a very serious situation.

The people who are most in need are those who live in the Huthi-controlled areas. The Huthis control about 70% of the country's population, even though, in terms of geographical area, they only control about a third of the territory, and that is the area that is most in need of support and where people are most isolated and most in need of assistance.

NP: For some 30 years before the Arab Spring, Yemen had a single ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Can you tell us a little bit about his regime?

HL: Saleh came to power in what was then the Yemen Arab Republic in 1978. He then became the President of the Republic of Yemen in 1990 when the Yemen Arab Republic merged with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), which had been the only socialist country in the Arab world. If you compare his regime to others in the Arabian Peninsula, you could say it was a democratic, in the sense that it had a multiparty system (after unification, not before) and the parties and elections were not complete and utter farces. There was a real opposition in the Parliament. But at the same time, ultimately, it was a fully autocratic military- led regime where all the major privileges and income etc. went to Saleh and his cronies.

Certainly the democracy in Yemen was less of a farce than in Tunisia, or even in Egypt, prior to the 2011 events, but at the same time, it was ultimately an autocratic regime run by Saleh and his cronies.

NP: What about his external support?

HL: Basically all the foreign states supported Saleh. There were no particular divisions on that front. His relationship with Saudi Arabia was somewhat ambiguous and the Saudis have always had a divide and rule policy in Yemen in the sense that they supported both the regime and various forces either rivaling the regime or opposed to the regime. The Saudis in the past and in the future want Yemen to be both strong and weak enough not to be a destabilizing threat.

With respect to the United States, Saleh promptly supported the U.S. immediately after 9/11. He was the first ruler to turn up in Washington to offer his support to Bush and he made his sure that he would be seen. (He remembered what had happened in 1990 when Yemen had opposed the United States on going to war with Iraq, leading to the cutoff of U.S. aid.)

So basically what you had was an autocratic regime with a veneer — but maybe a little bit more than a veneer — of democracy. And it was supported by all foreign states. The main interest of the U.S. and most other foreign states involved with Yemen was this vision of the country as a hotbed of terrorism, due to the presence of Al Qaeda. And regardless of the reality and the importance of this, this was their rationale for supporting the regime. It's not as if any of those countries have had any qualms about supporting autocratic regimes in the region.

NP: Okay, so then we come to 2011 and the Arab Spring. How did this impact Yemen?

HL: You know the Arab Spring in Yemen was a movement that had already started before the beginning of 2011. The previous decade had witnessed an increasing level of frustration and anger by the population in general, due to the deterioration in their living standards and the increasingly limited possibilities within the democratic system that existed. People were giving up on the possibility of changing the regime through elections because they could see that the electoral process was very much manipulated.

It's a mistake to say that the Yemenis followed Egypt and Tunisia in 2011. Yemenis were already having street demonstrations when these other movements emerged. Of course, Tunisia and later on Egypt really encouraged people very, very strongly. I was in Sanaa when Mubarak fell. People had been demonstrating for weeks and they had set up their tents in various parts of the city. But when Mubarak fell, there was this sudden explosion of car horns and people shouting throughout the city in enthusiasm. So they were already there, but what happened elsewhere encouraged the movement to develop.

And at the same time, Saleh was a very crafty politician. In all the other countries, the main demonstrations were in Tahrir Square, which in English means Liberation Square. Sanaa has a Tahrir Square just like everywhere else, but three weeks earlier, as soon as things started, Saleh had installed his own people into Tahrir Square. So you had a whole load of tents occupied by military and other people supporting Saleh in Tahrir Square, which forced the Yemeni movement to move a mile up the road to settle outside the university. They called their area "change square" — basically it was an area that wasn't a square and didn't have a name. So it's not as if they left Liberation Square; it's just that Saleh had the skill to occupy the square with his people first.

NP: That's fascinating.

HL: The movement was a widespread popular movement. Now people always call it a youth movement. But 65-70% of Yemenis are under 25, while people who are over 50 or 60 like us form less than 5% of the total population. So almost anything that happens in a country like Yemen will be a youth movement. The other more interesting thing is that for such a gender-segregated society as Yemen, you had a very strong presence of women. There were nowhere near as many women as men in the movement, but they came out a lot, and that was an important factor. The third factor that people neglect is that the movement brought together people from all parts of the country and from all social groups. All the tribespeople were there. They make up between 60 and 70% of the population. They played a very major role, but so did other social groups, both lower status and some upper status. And by the end, you had all the opposition parties joining in. The demonstrations were taking place not just in the cities, but in all the towns and capitals of the governorates, and that includes some places that barely deserve the name of town — just somewhere between a village and a town. It was a widespread national movement. And given the ease with which people moved from rural to urban areas, almost as many rural as urban people were involved.

This extremely widespread movement basically had one common call, which was for the fall of the regime. This is a sort of negative call, but on the positive side, it was calling for a new Yemen — more democracy — but what it didn't do was seriously challenge the neoliberal economic approach. I think that was one of its failures. In any case, the movement in the end was sidelined by internal fighting between two of its major factions.

To explain this, I need to go back a bit. On the 18th of March 2011, there was what became known as the Friday of Dignity. Saleh's forces killed about 50 demonstrators. This created a clear split within the Saleh regime between his supporters and his rivals, including major military figures. Afterwards, the kind of revolutionary people I was just talking about were rapidly marginalized by the increasing power of this military faction plus some of the formal opposition, particularly the tribal Islamist party known as Islah. By the summer of 2011 you actually had a number of military clashes between these two factions, Saleh supporters and elite rivals.

And even earlier, from April onwards, you had a situation where the foreign element — a group of 11 ambassadors that had been constituted as the Friends of Yemen by the British earlier in 2010 — took the lead to try and come to a transitional agreement. This eventually became known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement and was signed and approved in November 2011.

That created the transitional regime, which was supposed to bring about the new Yemen, but it was dominated by these two major elite factions. The so-called new forces of youth, women, and civil society, as well as the more progressive elements from the opposition parties, were very much marginalized in that period. So that's how you ended up from 2012 to 2014 with a regime from which Saleh was excluded as president, but he remained the head of his political organization and was in a position to seriously undermine the transitional program.

And at the same time, the other part of that government of national unity was also a problem because it was dominated by basically the same rival elite forces as opposed to the more progressive revolutionary forces.

NP: And Saleh's vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, becomes the head of this transitional government that you refer to?

HL: Yes, but Saleh was still very much present as the head of his General People's Congress, which participated, for example, in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was one of the elements of the transition. And though he personally wasn't part of the government, his people held half of the positions. So you had a situation where you had a transitional regime, which by definition was unlikely to produce a seriously improved outcome. And I think that's largely because the GCC agreement, was actually originally an internal agreement within the rival Yemeni elite factions that the GCC decided to adopt at a time when they thought it would give them good status; it didn't really end up that way.

But basically, the design and the idea were to make some concessions to the revolutionary movement without fundamentally changing the regime, preventing the emergence of a truly different democratic regime that would have sought or fought for more equity and equality. What some of us might call something remotely resembling socialism — or even resembling social democracy was not what they wanted. So basically the GCC deal forced the situation into a combination of Saleh's people and his rival elites, as opposed to bringing in new people with new ideas.

NP: Are you saying that this was not an external imposition, but really external forces rubber stamping something that came out of Yemeni power dynamics?

HL: I wouldn't quite say rubber stamp because they made some transformations to the original April agreement within Yemen, and they added something called the implementation mechanism that hadn't originally been there, but basically what you're saying is correct.

NP: Okay, so we have this transitional regime, and we have Saleh still around and then what happens to that arrangement?

HL: It collapses. The transition was supposed to last two years, from 2012 to 2014. By the time it officially ended you'd had this government which had basically done nothing except be even more corrupt than previous governments. You had had in 2012 a promise of \$8.4 billion in economic support most of which never materialized. So during that period the living conditions of the population continued to deteriorate.

And you had a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that was supposed to prepare the fundamentals of a new constitution, or at least the new ruling regime, which it also failed to do. What it did do was agree that Yemen should be a federal state. Now there was lots of debate within the NDC about what kind of federal state it should be, how many regions there should be in it, etc.

It also was supposed to deal with two problems that we haven't talked about yet, which complicate the situation a bit. The first one was the Huthis in the far north, who had been fighting the Saleh regime since 2004. And the second one was the southern separatists, in the former PDRY, who also had various demands and were also pretty split amongst themselves.

So by 2014 what you had was a situation where the NDC had ended, and the transition was supposed to end. And during that period a number of things had happened. One of them was the Huthis had considerably increased their area of control, while participating in the NDC. They had also from 2013 onwards been increasingly cooperating with Saleh because they had certain interests in common. Second, you had the southern separatists, who were completely divided as usual, some of whom participated in the NDC, and others didn't but that problem continued. So you had a situation in 2014 when the Huthis eventually in alliance with Saleh gradually moved South and took Sanaa, the capital, and took over the government.

Without going into too much detail, the Huthis in alliance with Saleh by 2015 controlled Sanaa and a lot of the country. The Hadi regime after having been put under house arrest escaped to Aden, which they named as the new interim capital. The Huthi-Saleh forces chased them down there, Hadi escapes to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and got the Saudis to launch their offensive on the 26 of March 2015. The Saudis launched their offensive within 24 hours of being asked to do so, which obviously means that they had been preparing for this and that there had been discussions between Hadi and the Saudis prior to that about their support for the effort to restore him to power. And so you have the beginning of the internationalized war.

NP: Are there any foreign backers of the Huthi-Saleh side of this?

HL: At the time when this started, the Huthis - who are often described as Iranian proxies — had very limited relations with Iran and the involvement of Iran was minimal. But the involvement of Iran over the period increased significantly, both militarily and financially, though by comparison with the support of the other side it's trivial.

Apart from that, the only embassy that stayed open in Sanaa after 2015 was the Russian embassy, which remained open as long as Saleh was alive. After the Huthis killed Saleh in December 2017, the situation changed, and the Russians left.

So at the moment, or at least until the current Ukrainian war, the Russians have been receiving missions from every Yemeni faction that wants to go to Moscow. They had visions of seeing themselves as mediators when the situation permitted. I think this is probably no longer the case at the moment.

So basically in terms of foreign support you have a situation where the Iranian involvement on the Huthi side has increased significantly in the last seven years but it's still very insignificant by comparison with what's happening on the other side.

NP: When does the United Nations get involved in trying to settle this?

HL: The UN's been involved from 2011 onwards. The first UN special envoy was appointed in 2011 and he thought he would achieve a peaceful solution and avoid war. Many people think that his actions and his behavior worsened the situation rather than improved it.

Since 2015 there have been three UN Special Envoys, who basically tried to end the war and restore peace. The second one, who was there from 2018 until late 2021, really got nowhere fast. His predecessor, who served from 2015 to 2018 was a Mauritanian (who's now Foreign Minister in

Mauritania), at least arranged a three-month negotiation attempt in Kuwait in 2016, though that failed for a number of reasons. From that time onwards — until the truce that's happening now — there was absolutely no progress made of any kind. There was the Stockholm conference of 2018 but really that achieved extremely little.

The new UN special envoy, who is a European, as opposed to being a Brit (the Brits are considered by the Huthis to be basically underlings of the Americans), has started being seen much more positively by most Yemeni parties, and he has, at this point in time, achieved more than anyone else in the sense that he's achieved this two-month truce which started on April 2. And he's very actively trying to get all the parties to talk and discuss things in a way which hopefully will be more successful than previous attempts.

NP: The U.S. and British governments are backing and arming Saudi Arabia, but what they say is that they are supporting the internationally recognized Hadi government (the IRG), and that's the government that ought to be recognized.

HL: The internationally recognized government's only asset is that it is internationally recognized. Its presence on the ground is almost zero. Hadi and most of his government have been sitting in Riyadh since 2015. Occasionally the southern separatists, who now control Aden, allow some of Hadi's ministers to turn up in and spend some time in Aden, but they're really there at the mercy of this southern transitional council group.

And yes, being internationally recognized is its asset, but it's internationally recognized basically because of UN Security Council resolution 2216 of 2015, which says that Hadi is the legitimate president. Lawyers and legal experts could spend a lot of time analyzing this because he was elected in 2012 for two years. So that ended in February 2014. His term was then extended by the then UN Special Envoy - but I never found any evidence explaining how long the extension was for or on what authority he did this. His own wish? And indeed that particular UN Special Envoy resigned, the day after UNSC Resolution 2216 was passed. So the legitimacy of the Hadi government is something that could keep legal experts busy for a long time.

It's not as if this government controls much of what's happening in the country. If you look at the country at the moment, you have the Huthis controlling about two thirds of the population and about one third of the territory and you have the rest of the place that's divided between five, six, or seven different groups. The group that comes under the name of internationally recognized government (IRG) officially includes the Southern Transitional Council (STC), but the disagreements and the occasional physical fighting between the STC and other parts of the internationally recognized government is almost as intense as that between them and the Huthis. Then you have groups like Saleh's nephew and his forces who are fighting on the side of the coalition and certainly working with the UAE, but they do not recognize the IRG. So on the one side, you have the Huthis, and on the other side, you have a multiplicity of groups who are currently sitting in Riyadh and possibly trying to agree with each other about something. Maybe, we don't know.

The Riyadh meeting, effectively only of the anti-Huthi forces as the Huthis refused to attend a meeting in the capital of the main "aggressor" resulted in a fundamental change in the anti-Huthi forces. Under extreme pressure from the Saudis, an 8-person [zero women] Presidential Command Council (PCC) was formed, replacing both Hadi and his Vice-President, both of whom were considered by most as obstacles to any progress, either military or diplomatic. Composed of the main leaders of the fighting factions, its willingness to seek a peaceful solution is doubtful. As it is composed of men who fundamentally disagree with each other and are effectively enemies, even their ability to meet and function as a unit is unlikely. Reminiscent of earlier presidential councils forced upon Yemen by circumstances or outsiders, it is highly unlikely to be a harbinger of good

news for the long-suffering Yemeni population,

NP: Did you think Security Council Resolution 2216 was ill-conceived?

HL: Oh absolutely! It was more than ill conceived. Many people call it a war resolution, rather than a peace resolution. It did two fundamental things that have prevented UN personnel from doing anything serious.

First, it recognized Hadi as the President, whose legitimacy is highly debatable. And second, it demanded that the Huthis withdraw to where they were in 2011. Given the size and the expansion of their gains in that period, the likelihood of them agreeing to basically surrender everything they've done in 10 years or so, is zero.

The resolution was, according to all assertions, written on more or less under the instructions of the Saudis at that time. But the resolution is still in force. There have been other resolutions that could be used, but it seems that the current UN Special Envoy is managing to do extremely well without changing it so maybe it's possible to do something simply by ignoring it.

NP: What are the terms of the current ceasefire and what do you see as its prospects?

HL: The talk until it happened was that it would be a ceasefire for the duration of Ramadan. Now it's been announced to be for two months, so it's already twice as long as the original talk. The Huthis had said all along that they would agree to a ceasefire if Sanaa airport were reopened and if the blockade, and particularly the fuel blockade on Hudaydah port were ended. These are the two things that they have obtained. To my knowledge, as of 13 April, no flights have yet arrived in Sanaa, but there have already been three fuel ships arriving in Hudaydah in the last few days. So they've gotten what they really wanted, I think, from the ceasefire. That's not the long-term solution, but it's major progress.

So that's one element. The other element is that the statement promoting the ceasefire does bring up the issue of Ta'izz. Now Ta'izz is the city where basically there's been ongoing stalemate and fighting throughout the period. The Stockholm Agreement had a provision about Ta'izz that was completely ignored, from the time it was signed in December 2018, until now. One of the elements of the current truce is the reopening of roads in and around Ta'izz, which is something that's very important for the people of that city.

Another element which has been emerging in recent weeks has been an indication of progress on the liberation of prisoners. Now the Stockholm Agreement had agreed on the exchange of 16,000 prisoners and absolutely nothing happened, until late 2020 when 1,080 were liberated, but none of the big names. Now according to a lot of things that have been published in the last week, there's been a new agreement, which will allow the liberation of about 800 more prisoners, including some of the big names that have been talked about throughout the period. I'm assuming that negotiations are continuing on this and will hopefully reach a positive outcome.

This particular truce is the first time since 2016 that anybody has achieved a kind of a ceasefire, so this is significant in itself. It's happening in the context of the establishment of the Presidential Command Council at a time when the new UN Special Envoy is currently holding consultations with all the different political groups in order to prepare for some more formal negotiations. Whether the PCC will help or hinder his efforts is unclear at this point.

People have been saying from the beginning that there's no military solution to this war, there's only a political solution. I regard this as a nonsensical statement. If you look at any war, you always end

up with a political solution. When does it happen? It happens either when one side has won and the other one has lost, or when both sides have reached such a stalemate for so long that they've given up on trying to win. And I think in this particular case, we are reaching a situation, I think, where the stalemate element is probably the stronger element, because the Huthis for the last two years have been trying a major offensive to take the last stronghold in the northern part of the country of the IRG, a place called Marib. And they have failed.

They have failed because, ultimately, the anti-Huthi forces have actually united and really fought back to prevent them from taking this place. The fact that this has been going on for two years, that a lot of people have gotten killed in the process, has contributed to the Huthis being more willing to negotiate. And they've been given what they want, what their primary demands were: namely, to have the Sanaa airport re-opened and the Hudaydah blockade ended, at least temporarily.

So I think there is more hope at this point of coming to some kind of ending of the *fighting* in Yemen, within maybe a year or so, because there is still going to be an enormous amount of discussion to happen.

But what has to be remembered, is that any discussions that the Special Envoy manages to arrange will be discussions between a group of leading elites who have in the last seven years shown zero consideration for the welfare of the population and have continued fighting primarily because they were increasing their own incomes with the war economy.

It's not as if it's going to bring about automatically a peaceful Yemen that would be democratic and address the urgent needs of the population.

I think it's also important to remember that we are in the Arabian Peninsula. The rest of the Peninsula states are all autocratic monarchies with — okay, a little bit of democracy going on in Kuwait and maybe in Qatar, slightly less autocratic states than Saudi Arabia or UAE. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the ones that dominate and they're not going to support a social democratic regime that focuses on people's requirements.

So in the medium to long run, I think there's a hope for an ending to the fighting; whether that will bring about significant real improvements to the living conditions of the population is a very different question.

NP: Finally, are there particular things that progressive groups in the United States and Britain should be pressing their governments to do to improve the situation in Yemen?

HL: I think there's things they could try and do, but I don't think they are very likely to succeed. I think the two things that they should do are, number one, work towards the ending of the arms sales and, number two, demand that their governments help and support efforts to address the needs of the Yemeni population in terms of development and humanitarian program within the perspective of poverty reduction and reducing inequalities. I think that's pretty unlikely, but that's what they should do.

NP: Thank you, Helen, for this informative and insightful conversation.