



**Beyond the Headlines
September 18, 2015
Washington, DC**

Ambassador Barbara Bodine

Director of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University
US Ambassador to Yemen (1997-2001)

Yemen: Who Can Put Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again?

Patricia Ellis: Good afternoon and welcome everyone. I'm Patricia Ellis, president of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We promote women's leadership, women's voices on pressing international issues of the day, such as Yemen and our topic today is "Who Can Put Humpty Dumpty Together Again." And since this is quite complicated, we are so lucky to have Ambassador Barbara Bodine with us. She was involved in the Women's Foreign Policy Group very early, way back when. So she is currently director of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown. I'll say a few more things about her in a moment. I first would like to welcome our board members, our board chair Ann Stock, Diana Negrofonte, [and] Gail Kitch. And I also want to extend a warm welcome to the ambassador of Oman, our dear friend Hunaina Al Mughairy. So—and I just—before we begin—want to remind everyone of some of our exciting upcoming events. On Monday we have an extremely timely event with the ambassador of Hungary talking about the migrant crisis and relations with Russia. Then with the lead up to the elections in Argentina we will hear from the Argentine ambassador and looking forward. And then, we don't only have ambassadors, I just want to make it clear, but it just happened that they all came at once—we scheduled this—we have—

Ambassador Barbara Bodine: It's nice that there's actually that many women ambassadors now that you can actually—

Ellis: Yes, well the Argentine and the Hungarian are women. The third ambassador is a man, [*Laughter*] but he's a friend of ours. In our Embassy Series, we tend to have more men, because there happen to be more male ambassadors. It's the Swiss ambassador and he is going to be speaking about their role in Cuba, Iran, North Korea, et cetera—their good offices—and it should be quite interesting and we hope that you can join us for as many of these as possible. So it's now my great pleasure to introduce ambassador Bodine. In addition to heading the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, she is a distinguished professor in the practice of diplomacy. She was a career foreign service officer for thirty three years and she spent most of that time focusing on the Gulf region with kind of dual focus, security counterterrorism and governance and development. And in terms of Yemen, she was ambassador from 1997 to 2001. She also served in Kuwait and in Iraq twice in their embassies. In '91 she received a Secretary of State's Award for Valor for her work in occupied Kuwait. She headed counterterrorism op as acting coordinator for counterterrorism at the State Department and also director of East African Affairs. She also was the dean of professional studies at the Foreign Service Institute. And after leaving the Foreign Service, she was at a number of academic institutions including Harvard, where she founded Governance Initiative in the Middle East, and MIT where she worked on a Persian Gulf initiative. And then she was a lecturer in public and international affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. So we are very lucky to have Barbara as our guide today to help us understand what is going on in Yemen, who the players are, why this is so important for us and for the region. And so please join me in welcoming Ambassador Bodine. [*Applause*].

Ambassador Bodine: Well first of all, thank you very much for the invitation. Nice to be back in touch with this group and for this very nice turnout today. It's kind of—your presence here and your interest in the issue belies kind of what was—what has been one of my opening lines on talks about Yemen recently, which is that it's not just the forgotten war, it's the unknown war. It's—of all the crises that are going on in the Middle East, and there are too many. What's been happening in Yemen for a very long time, but particularly over the last six months since March—rarely makes it into our media. There was something in The New York Times last Sunday, but by and large, this is not a forgotten war, it's an unknown war. And I think there's a number of reasons for that. Part of it is that Yemen tends to be an unknown or forgotten country in the region. It's also, I think, to a certain extent the complexity of Yemen has tendency to have people kind of back away. They don't know where Yemen is, they don't know what Yemen is. They look at all the players and they tend to do one of two things. It either gets put into all sorts of very, very simplistic paradigms. It's a Sunni–Shia fight. It's a Saudi–Iranian proxy war. It's North–South, even though the North and the South are actually East and West of each other. It either is overly—and it's also generally described—is this tribal society, which when I'm teaching Yemen, the first thing I tell my students is that you're not going to talk about it as a tribal society because our idea of tribes and how they operate in Yemen are so fundamentally different.

So, first thing is I talk about clans and families, not tribes. But, so there's either this trying to fit it into some box that we feel that we're comfortable with and we lose all of the nuances of what does make Yemen. Or there is this, “oh my god, it's so complicated, it is so nuanced, there are so many moving parts that unless you're part of the inner circle you can't possibly understand it and so we're not going to try.” I'm going to try to find something between those two in talking today. I want to talk a little about Yemen as of last February. Or Yemen as of this time last year and what the baseline is. It is, as is often described, the poorest country in the Middle East. And there's a Yemeni creation story that I always found very, very illuminating—is that when God created the Arabian peninsula, and as you probably know it's sort of rectangular, that he tipped it in one direction and that's where all the oil went [*Laughter*] and he tipped it in the other direction and that's where all the people ended up [*Laughter*] and, you know, you kind of have to look at it and think “yeah, well maybe there's some truth to that.”

It's the size of Texas, size of France, about 25 million people, so we're talking about a large country with a sizeable population. But it is an extraordinarily poor one and to give you one idea, there are no lakes or rivers or other surface water in the entire country. Just try to imagine that for a minute. I mean, none. Some of you may have seen a book *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, which I highly recommend. But the whole premise of the book is that, you know, it is so absurd to think about salmon fishing in a country with no rivers. It has always—so it is water insecure in the extreme. It is fuel insecure, as I said—the oil did not tip in Yemen's direction. Yemen's oil production on a good day was about the same as Bakersfield, California. It is food insecure. Yemen is one of the ten largest wheat importers or food importers in the world.

And so it is—it lived a very precarious existence in the best of times. It had a very precarious political structure in the best of times. It went through the Arab Spring relatively well compared to a number of other states. There it did not fall immediately—it has managed to avoid the civil war that we all know about in Syria. It avoided the sectarian and ethnic conflicts of Iraq. It has not gone back to a military dictatorship as we see in Egypt. And so, for many people there was a feeling about this time that, with a lot of caveats and asterisks, that Yemen might make it through the Arab Spring, that there was a peaceful transfer of power from the president to the vice president. That's the good news.

The downside is that there wasn't really a change in the political leadership. It went from—it stayed kind of inside the beltway, if you like. But it did make a peaceful transition. They went through a national dialogue conference where for a number of months 565 I believe, Yemenis met in groups on almost every issue that really came down to what is the social contract for the country. And it was remarkably representative given that it was less than 600 people representing a country of 25 million. So, again, the trend lines were they might pull this out.

But they still—the problem that many of us were watching very carefully—is that like the Arab Spring in so many other countries, it was driven as much by economics and jobs and opportunities—was by governance issues and that whatever came out of the national dialogue and whatever came out of this transition, nothing was really being done to either make the government more inclusive or to really create jobs and economic opportunity and a quality of life for the Yemenis and that this was going to be the problem, was not the national dialogue conference, but what happened the day after. And a lot of what we're seeing now is the day after, because it wasn't able to answer those basic economic issues.

To kind of fast forward to where we are now, there has been a Saudi-led coalition, primarily air campaign. Recently it's moved to a ground campaign as well. The stated goal is to return the Hadi government, the vice president and his cabinet to the government, to Yemen and to their positions of power. What we have not been able to see, but we know about—we can't imagine what the result is, but what's been going on is that for close to six months there has been hundreds of air sorties against this country. They have got to be well beyond anything that could be rightfully called a military target. They are up against an insurgency, not another army. They have been taking—they have taken out what was a fairly rudimentary infrastructure. The roads, the bridges, the electricity—all of that were pretty basic in Yemen in the best of times. They've been pretty well destroyed. Utility plants, water plants, just about anything that would count as infrastructure is probably gone at this point.

They also sealed—one of the things that would get international attention from this kind of a situation would generally be refugees as we know from Syria and Iraq. One of the things that's kind of curious to people is that if this has been going on for so long and it's so awful, why isn't anybody seeing any Yemeni refugees any place? I mean maybe it's not so bad. Well, no. What you've got is basically fish in a barrel. The borders have been sealed, the land borders on one side—it's the Empty Quarter which is not conducive to even the most desperate of refugees. The land borders that can be traversed have been sealed. And just, more importantly, the coastline, 2,000 miles of coastline, have been sealed. And even if they were able to leave by sea, they would be going to Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea, which are—you'd have—yeah, not the best places to be going. But what has happened is that this country has been sealed off. Part of this embargo, boycott sealing of the country is that food cannot get in, water cannot get in, and fuel cannot get in. And you've already got an insecure population.

And to try to give you a few statistics, which I'm not going to overload you with, about 25 million people give or take. Nobody is really quite sure. But the UN and the Red Cross and others—I think these are actually Oxfam numbers—but they're all coming from the same sources. About 84% of the population is in need, in desperate need of assistance. It's now considered I think a category three humanitarian crisis. At least 13 million are food insecure or severely food insecure. And as somebody said at another conference, I'm not entirely sure what the difference between being food insecure and severely food insecure is. If you don't have food, you don't have food. But of that, about 1.5 million are children who are now classified as severely malnourished. And, despite the poverty that Yemen has always suffered with, undernourished has been a chronic problem—malnourish [sic] and famine is not something that is actually part of the Yemeni history. You now have at least a million and a half children who are severely malnourished. 21 out of 22 of the provinces governance are under siege. At least 84% of the population does not have access to safe water. And even when water or food is available in some of the cities, it is so expensive at this point that very few people can afford it. It has been—the violence has been indiscriminate on both sides. I mean, yes, my own personal feeling is that the Saudi air campaign with their allies is the predominant source of the death and the destruction. But, the Houthis have also been involved in indiscriminate violence as well. So this is a nasty ugly war. This is not simply taking out military structures, this is not—if there's such a thing as a clean insurgency, this one certainly is not. This is one where the civilians and the children are at dead center for everything. Some of the things that the Saudis have done, for example, they declared an entire governorate a military target. And I'm not an expert on Geneva Conventions, but you're not supposed to do that. That's not considered—if there's such a thing as a just war, that's not.

It has been escalating, not decreasing. Even though to most people the number of military targets has got to be pretty well exhausted at this point. According to one report, the Saudis have on their target list 500 homes. Again, you're not supposed to hit homes. And even, you know, if you hit a home with a large bomb, you tend to hit the ones next to it and the ones next to it as well. So this has gotten to the point where the humanitarian agencies who do have some people on the ground and are able to track this—and there is Twitter and Facebook and everything—have, as I said, declared this a severe humanitarian crisis. The question that I think for a lot of Americans, and those who watch this, is first what is driving this exactly? What is the US role—what should be the US role? And how do you get out of this? Humpty Dumpty is pretty well shattered at this point. So there is now the question of what can you do? The stated policy of the Saudis and their coalition partners is—

Ellis: Can you tell us who's in the coalition?

Ambassador Bodine: The coalition is—sorry about that—the coalition is all of the GCC [The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf] states, except Oman. The Egyptians, the Moroccans, the Jordanians, basically most of the Sunni Arab states. The stated goal is, as I said, to return president Hadi and his cabinet, the internationally recognized government, back to power. What is really driving this and I think the Saudis have been very explicit is that they see this as a war against Iran. They have been very explicit that this is a proxy war. The Houthis, who are on the other side, are Zaidis, which is a form of Shia. I'm not gonna get you guys into all of those fine points. They were receiving some support from Iran prior, but not a great deal.

But what has happened as a result of these activities, this campaign, is that it has sectarianized Yemen in a way that it wasn't before. It was about 50/50, Zaidis and Shafi'i—which is sort of Sunni–Shia—sort of—but people didn't really identify that way. They identified as Yemeni. And this part of the Humpty Dumpty problem is that Yemen before, despite its size, despite its very rural scattered structure, had a very strong sense of being Yemeni. You knew your clan, you knew your area, you knew all of that. Family relationships were unbelievably large and complex. But there was this fundamental sense of being Yemeni. That has been pretty well destroyed. And how you put that part of Humpty Dumpty back together again, I don't know.

It has drawn Iran in, in a way that it wasn't before and so in that sense it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's also done something else that really should concern us, is that prior to this campaign, we were cooperating—or the Yemenis were cooperating with us against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP]. The Houthis are actually committed in opposition to AQAP. But AQAP was somewhat contained. With all of this that's been going on for the last six months, what you've got is kind of a circular firing squad going on, except nobody is really shooting at Al Qaeda. It's opened up a vacuum for them to be able to move into it. And there are reports that Al Qaeda has come into Aden. ISIS, which was not a part of the Yemeni political topography is now there.

How is this going to finally resolve and when is this going to finally resolve? I wish I had the answer to this. There have been a lot of efforts and I will say that Oman has been very much at the center of trying to find a way to get to a political solution. The UN has a special envoy. There is this recognition that the only solution to this will ultimately be political. The problem is that the various sides in this circular firing squad have not really been willing to negotiate yet. The position of the Saudis, the coalition, the Hadi government and actually, to a very large extent, the UN and the US, is that the Houthis—the opposition has to completely surrender and completely pull back. In other words, the demand is they have to completely capitulate before negotiations can begin. And I do teach a class on negotiation and usually you don't start with the other guy completely capitulating unless you have totally defeated him militarily and it looks as if this is what the Saudis are trying to get to. But the destruction in the meantime has just been beyond description.

Are there some ways out? Possibly. Another one of the elements in this highly convoluted system—situation—is that the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who actually spent ten years when he was the president fighting the Houthis, is now aligned with the Houthis against his former vice president and his former allies the Saudis. If I get you to a point where you're utterly confused, then you have begun to reach wisdom when it comes to Yemen. [Laughter].

And so there's an element in here that is vindictive. That we're far beyond geopolitical. We're far beyond just pushing back Iranians. We're far beyond just the issue of, you know, returning a legitimate government. You've got Saleh on one side who is determined to punish those who he feels betrayed him. And that includes us. The Saudis are on a vindictive campaign to basically bring Yemen totally to heel, which in some ways they've been trying to do for decades and now it's just like "okay we've stopped being nice, we're just going to basically destroy you in order to be able to control you."

There's also an element of the Saudi campaign that I think has really surprised and saddened people is that, in addition to being beyond the military targets and getting into civilian targets and infrastructure targets, they're also going after antiquities and various ancient sites. And it's—if we can believe the reports—and I have to put that as a very strong caveat because nobody really knows what's going on—it's on the verge of also becoming almost a cultural genocide. And I know there's a great deal of concern that when and if the siege of Sanaa begins, that the old city—which is, you know survived for 800 years—may not survive.

The United States' position has been one of public support, repeatedly. And in fact when King Salman was here, you know, president Obama said you know we'll replenish all of your stocks. There are reports that we are quietly on the side supporting the peace talks and pushing humanitarian—and kind of suggesting that the Saudis should let humanitarian assistance in, but our public position has been one of support, whatever our private position has been.

Putting Yemen back together again is going to take a concerted international effort that I personally doubt will happen. We have our concerns with Tunisia, we have our concerns with Syria. We have our concerns with Iraq. We have so many—we, the international community—have so many other concerns that Yemen will fall fairly low down on the priority list. Even when we have offered—we have just announced \$170 million in humanitarian assistance. Sounds like a nice number. At least according to the calculator on my iPhone, that comes out to \$7 a Yemeni. I'm sorry, I'm not impressed. The kind of multi-billion dollar long-term investment to bring the infrastructure back and the kind of healing that's going to be needed to bring the social fabric back together again, is something that I do hope is forthcoming. The Saudis and the Emiratis who have been two of the leaders in this campaign have pledged to rebuild Yemen. I don't know. But it's going to take, even if they do come forward with billions in aid, it's going to take an international effort. And what I'm concerned about is infrastructure can be rebuilt. Social fabric cannot be. And I don't know what is going to happen to Yemen going forward.

Why should this concern us? Well first of all, this is a humanitarian disaster. And we should be concerned about it on a human level. First and foremost. In terms of geopolitical, if Yemen is a failed state, this—we know that large failed states have a tendency to be breeding grounds for problems that erupt much further. And there can be a terrorist problem, or there can even be a health problem. One sidebar to some of this is that there is now, not only reports of, but reports of death from dengue fever, which in the 30 years that I worked on Yemen, I never heard of dengue fever in Yemen. Malaria, yes; dengue fever, no. So, yes I can give you a geopolitical reason to be concerned. I can give you a counterterrorism reason to be concerned. But the real reason—the real issue for us is the humanitarian one. And the one that I think we also need to think about is our support for this kind of action against what was a sovereign state. And I think that that is something that we are going to be—we are going to have to answer for in the region, not just to the Yemenis, but to others for a very long time—our full throttled support. I'm going to stop there.

Ellis: Great.

Ambassador Bodine: And open this up to questions, comments.

Ellis: Thank you, well that was fantastic. Sorry that the news was so bad, but—

Ambassador Bodine: I wish that I could come up with a happy punchline—

Ellis: Really in terms of trying to understand the complexity of what's going on. So I'd like to start off by asking you who's actually benefiting from this chaos. Really, because you said there are so many different players an—

Ambassador Bodine: Okay, who's benefiting from this, I think, really the answer is no one is benefiting. I don't think in the long term that even if the Saudis and their coalition partners are militarily successful that this will be a long-term benefit to them. I don't think for, you know—the whole concept of international responsibility towards others that has certainly taken a big hit. In terms of America's standing in the Middle East, this is going to hurt us. We talk about it as the Saudi-led coalition. In much of the Arab media it's referred to as the Saudi-American coalition. And so, you know, this is going to come back and haunt us. The only people, so far, that seem to be benefiting from what is going on is Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS, who have much more room to roam. They are not being targeted the way they were. It is radicalizing Yemenis at a level in a way and to the extent that is unprecedented.

Ellis: Okay, so why did the prime minister and members of his cabinet come back at this point? Were they hoping that talks might reopen or, you know, what is the timing of this?

Ambassador Bodine: Right. Well they came back recently—the prime minister—he's actually the vice president. The vice president has come back.

Ellis: From Saudi. He was in Saudi Arabia.

Ambassador Bodine: There's an interesting element to that, I'll see if I can do it succinctly, but he and members of the cabinet came back as a way of demonstrating that Aden was now back in government hands. And it does seem to be under Saudi-Emirati control. And the best that we can figure out what the Saudi strategic plan is, is to get the government back to Aden and installed in Aden in a demonstration that, you know, they're back—a military push northward through Taiz toward Sana'a. There are elements working across from the Hadhramaut toward Sana'a and there's elements coming down. And basically what you've got is an increasing military surrounding of Sana'a and a great uptick in the air campaign against Sana'a in order to defeat it and reinstall or install the government. What's a little bit interesting in terms of the politics of this, is when the Houthis came in to Sana'a about a year ago and there was a national partnership plan was negotiated between the Hadi government and the Houthis that one of the things that the Houthis demanded was a technocratic cabinet. And I will say that the cabinet before was probably one of the worst, you know, by in almost any standard. And the person who was finally agreed upon as the new prime minister was this gentleman named Bahah who was a very well respected technocrat who is not from the North, he's not from the South, he's from the Hadhramaut, which kind of makes him a little bit neutral. And even when the government was under house arrest, which is why Hadi ultimately fled to Aden, Bahah was able to negotiate his way with the Houthis to leave. So he seems to be a little bit more acceptable to the Houthis than certainly Hadi is. He's not a Northerner or a Southerner, he's a Hadhrami. So when he was installed as the vice president, there was a part of me that said "Okay, I'm beginning to see a little bit of the makings of the political settlement, which is that Hadi does not come back, Saleh does not come back. So in other words each side throws their respective leader under their chosen bus." And Bahah, who is the vice president, can then under the terms of the Yemeni constitution, become the president. That's the best spin on the politics that I can come up with. But it's a part of the military campaign to reassert that the legitimate government is back.

Ellis: Okay, two more things, quickly, get your questions ready. One is, on the humanitarian side—in this announcement from two days ago from USAID that the US is increasing its contribution of aid to \$89 million—they also said that Saudi Arabia, when they were here, had committed to opening access to ports in the Red Sea. I'm wondering, you know, how much difference it would make because a lot of, you know the food can't get in obviously and I'm wondering along that line, could there be airdrops, for example? I mean, honestly, it has been used in some places. And then, lastly, how has the Iran deal impacted what's going on there?

Ambassador Bodine: Yeah, that's an interesting part of the puzzle. The Saudi campaign did start about 24 hours after the announcement of the Iran Deal. And about 24 hours after the president had called the various GCC leaders, specifically the Saudis, to assure them and confirm to them that we would be on their side and all of their security concerns—that, you know, don't worry we're with you. And just about 24 hours later the Saudis go in to Yemen and—there's lots of rumors in this town, you all know that, so I'm putting this in the rumor category—but the story has it that the Saudis basically came to us with about three or four hours' notice with a take it or leave it, we're going in. And we had just made this grand promise to support them in all their security needs and they make this case that this is a big security need and all of a sudden we're sort of stuck with, you know, we're going to do it. That's the story and the—I suppose probably, more importantly, to whether or not it's true or not, it's what people believe. The belief is that we are backing the Saudis in large part because this is important to them. It's critically important to the Saudis. And we desperately need the Saudis to at least acquiesce on the Iran deal. There is a level of cynicism in that, which I find appalling but I'm not willing to completely discount it either. I think there was a calculation—I don't know, I've never had these conversations with my colleagues, that there was not an understanding of how long this would go on, how broad that destruction would be, or that the Saudis would do things like block the ports or block humanitarian assistance coming in. So, I'm not saying that we signed up for what is happening, but I think there was probably a, at best, naive understanding of what the Saudis wanted to do and how long it would take to do it. It's important to remember that after just the first month, it's almost like the Saudis took our 2003 playbook and, you know, they did a “are you with us or against us?” They did a shock and awe and then after a month they declared a victory and did a mission accomplish and then continued with the war. So for those of us who were around to know the three, there was a lot of bad memories. I don't think the Saudis understood how long this was going to take and I'm quite sure they didn't have an end game. They thought that a bit of shock and awe and that it would collapse and that the Houthis would go away. The Saudis have repeatedly pledged, you know, billions in reconstruction. The Saudis have pledged all of these things. We haven't seen it yet, and we haven't seen the ports open. In terms of air dropping, the problem with that—

Ellis: I haven't read it any place, it just came to my mind, since it's so desperate

Ambassador Bodine: No, it's so desperate. The problem is that Egypt, the figure is there's 75,000 settlements in Egypt. And that's 80 million people, or 85 million people. In Yemen, it's estimated to be 100,000 settlements and Yemen is this remarkably beautifully mountainous country. And so you've got like a little village down here at the bottom, and you've got another little village about halfway up the mountain and you've got another little village at the top of the mountain. And the game we used to play when we did fly over, was can we even find the goat path between these, much less a road. Usually there is a road. But to airdrop would be virtually impossible. What the Red Cross has said, this was when there was the negotiation on the first cease fire, because you have to get fuel in so people can pump water and then you also have to get water and food in, but that there is a very good distribution system in Yemen. There is a gazillion little hilux trucks. The Yemenis are able to distribute things around the country probably more effectively than aid agencies going in and trying to figure out where these 100,000 little settlements are. So it probably would be better done by road, but it takes more than a five day ceasefire to get the stuff to the port, on the trucks, and into this large and rugged country.

Ellis: Right. Well let's open it up for questions. So, Alright, we'll take a few together.

Question: I'm Mary Portz, Department of State.

Ambassador Bodine: Oh, so tell me, everything that I've said is wrong.

Question: No, no, no. I would like you to go back to Iran, though, and so we know—we heard the impact of the deal, but there were also, as you know, lots of stories floating around about how much of an influence is in the situation in Yemen.

Ellis: Let's just take a few questions together, yes, could you identify yourself please.

Question: Hi, I'm Valerie Begley, I'm with the International Civil Society Action Network. I also have a question about Iran, so I'll ask a different question, which is if we went back to, say February 2015, prior to the Saudi airstrikes, would this have resolved itself [*Inaudible*] cooperation support for the Houthis meant this was going to be a civil war anyway.

Ambassador Bodine: Yes, that's a great question.

Ellis: Okay, so why don't you take those.

Ambassador Bodine: Okay, on Iran's influence, I think it's overstated. I think it has grown as a result of the campaign. To kind of put a little bit of history—well I'm not going to get into the Iranians are Twelvers and the Yemenis are Fivers, if you know what I said that's great and if you don't, don't worry about it. There are two different, very different schools of Shi'ism and the Iranians kind of made noises in support of the Houthi rebellion, which started ten years ago. Sistani, in 2005 or 2006, said something about, you know, our Shia brothers. But that was about it. There was some verbal, but Iran's interest is Iraq and Syria. You know, that's where their real interest is. And Yemen was a sideshow to the Iranians. They don't traditionally have a presence or an influence there at all. As this has built up, yes, they are supporting the Houthis. How much, in terms of military equipment, I honestly don't know. They say they're sending in humanitarian. That's probably true. There are reports that they're providing military. Probably true. How much of either of those, I have no idea. But, some of this is, you know—at this point the Houthis would take support from anybody. And the Iranians as I said, the Saudis are the ones that said this, to push Iran out, so Iran is stuck in this position of "we've gotta help." The Houthi insurgency is not an Iranian creation. This was not Iran going in and creating a Hezbollah. This was something that was indigenous, domestic, and has grown. Whether or not, you know—not whether or not—the degree to which Iran is supporting and/or exploiting or anything else is a result of, not the cause of.

In terms of—that's a very interesting question, I got it just the other day as well. What would have happened if the Saudis hadn't done this? Because the Houthis had gotten all the way to Aden. They had pushed Hadi into exile. It's important, you know, to recognize that the Houthis are not progressive liberals. I don't want to overstate that. Somebody asked one thing, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys in this fight? And somebody else on another panel said, they're all just guys [*Laughter*] in the sense that you can't do good guy, bad guy. It's a whole bunch of Yemeni guys. They're not progressives, they're not great liberals. They're not Iranian sock puppets either. They did not have a great degree of support in Yemen. You know, even about the time of the national dialogue conference, and the Houthis—by the way—the Houthis did participate peacefully in the Change Square demonstrations in 2011, surprised everybody, probably them too. But they were a part of the peaceful demonstrations. They were involved in the political process of the national dialogue conference. So there was this sense that they are willing to be part of this political structure. And then, you had September when they rolled in to Sana'a with virtually no opposition. A number of us got—even at the high point of the Houthis being part of the political process—they had less than 50% support even in the North. Most Northerners didn't like them—weren't comfortable with them. And the further south they went, the stronger the resistance was. And by the time they got to Aden, they were into enemy territory. You also had at this point, Saleh was now aligned with

the Houthis, which was just one of the weirdest coalitions that anyone's ever see, even by Yemeni standards. And so you not only had the concerns about these Houthis coming out of the North, but you know, are we going to have Saleh coming back? Well, if we don't get Saleh back, then we're going "what's Hadi?" I think there would have been—I think there was already, actually—but there certainly would have been anyway, a civil war. There was, you know, the Houthis had certainly moved into territory where they were not welcome.

The Houthis don't have an ideology, but they also have absolutely no governing expertise whatsoever. They couldn't govern what they were taking. Most of what they took were taken by small elements of something called the Houthi, which by the way, there is no such thing really as a Houthi. It's not an ethnic group, it's not a religious group, it's not a linguistic group. The academic term is a non-kinship identity. I love the academic world. It's a bunch of guys. *[Laughter]*. And so at a certain point—and I think, you know, even in February and March, you know the Houthis were at this in the South. There was going to be a real push back. And so there would have been a civil war. And there probably would have been a lot of death and destruction. It would not, however, have been on this scale. This is a qualitatively different level of violence and level of destruction. They would not have been able to seal the ports, so humanitarian assistance would have come in. So it's not that we went from a good situation to a bad situation. We went from a bad situation to a horrible situation.

Ellis: Okay, so, other questions? Diana.

Diana Negroponete: Thank you very much, Ambassador Bodine, for your presentation. You certainly present a complex situation. I'm Diana Negroponete. I'm a board member here and I'm at the Woodrow Wilson Institute. I'm trying to understand the nature of the conflict among Yemenis themselves. You've talked about the civil war. Is this ideological? Is it clan versus clan? Is it class? What is the explanation of why Yemenis fight Yemenis?

Ambassador Bodine: You guys are asking really good questions. And I think the short answer is—I don't know if there is a short answer, I'll try to do a short answer—it is not ideological. As I said, the Houthis do not have an ideology. Hadi does not have an ideology. We're not talking about socialist or Ba'athis or even Salafis or anything else. It's not really a class issue. There is a, to a certain extent the political class in Sana'a is largely out of this fight. And even calling it regional, I think, is a little misleading. Yes, the Houthis come from the North. Yes, they've been having most of their pushback in the South. This is simply a good old fashion power game. It's who gets to be in charge of Yemen. And it's not that anyone has such a fundamental governing philosophy, really, that it's going to make that kind of a difference. This would not be a Cold War kind of fight. You can't say that you've got liberals and conservatives on another, or anything like that doesn't quite fit. It has become a little more sectarian. There is a little bit of regionalism, but it really doesn't come down to clan or class. And even getting into the regional element can get kind of distorting. So this is really who gets to run Yemen. And what you had was a reasonably legitimate government under Hadi—verly, maybe not, reasonably, yes—forced out, by an insurgency, which at least in the North had some support. They are trying to get themselves reestablished with Saudi help. And there are people who don't want Hadi and the old governing structure back. And then, within the Houthis, who in many ways are insurgents trying to change the basic governing structure—their major ally is Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was the previous regime. So, no, it doesn't really fit into nice neat—and this is why good guys, bad guys, is so very difficult to put in this one. And the way that Yemenis traditionally would solve disputes—and it is a wonderfully, in the best of circumstances, it is a chaotic, noisy, fractious country—But when something really needed to be worked out, Yemenis can sit and talk forever. And ultimately something will come out that works in a Yemeni context. And it's generally not very pretty and it's generally a bit wobbly, but it works. What the Saudi air campaign did, was preempt that process. And what they're—even the Omanis cannot create, that environment where they can all sit down and try and work this out. But there isn't a nice ideological good guy, bad guy to this thing.

I would like to hear if Hunaina wants to either to add, subtract, comment, because I keep talking about her country.

Ambassador Hunaina Sultan Ahmed Al Mughairy of Oman: No, no. It is a very sad situation. And of course, as everybody knows here, Omanis are involved where I have Doctors Without Borders knocking on my door every—well about every other day. But you know, trying to see if they can find a little gap where they can go through, but we cannot allow them to go through because we do not control—the borders are being controlled by the coalition. How involved are the Americans in the coalition? Maybe Barbara, you can respond. I am not sure, that's number one. Number two, the really sad part, because if we have a look at the percentage—okay, and Ambassador Bodine did say that this is the forgotten war—if we look at the percentage of the number of death and the malnutritions and the children, compared to the other, I mean it is all my region. I come from the region, you know I can't say that Yemen is—we share border with the Yemenis, but if you look at the percentage that between the devastation in Yemen and the other part, the other region, this is even—

Ambassador Bodine: Much worse

Ambassador Mughairy: Much, much worse. Now, public opinion is very important. But why is it a forgotten war? Is it because you're involved? I don't know. This is a question that, you know, nobody talks about. You don't—very seldom you switch on the television or you open the newspaper and you see Yemen. I kept looking for Yemen every time I opened the newspaper.

Ambassador Bodine: Me too.

Negroponte: And Al Jazeera doesn't cover it?

Ambassador Mughairy: No. Because we have Al Jazeera America. If I look at the Al Jazeera, which I can't get anymore. So this is for the American public. Al Jazeera is in America now, it's not—yeah. But it's really, really very sad what is going on. Children—and I mean this news I get only when I go back to Oman. When I'm here, I don't see this.

Ellis: That's why we wanted to do something, honestly, to shine a light.

Ambassador Mughairy: This is very sad. And this is a country that doesn't even have water. They're running out of water, there is no food. And, I mean, it's not a country where they grow vegetables and fruit, et cetera. Everything is imported and if the borders are closed, where would you get your produce?

Ambassador Bodine: At this point the humanitarian crisis has got to be just so much worse than even the statistics. And the statistics are 85%—

Ellis: What is the UN doing?

Ambassador Bodine: The UN has been working on this as well, but the thing is, the Saudis have it sealed off. And nobody can get past the Saudi land and sea borders. The degree to which the US is involved—we support the UN Security Council resolution. We have supplied the weaponry. When King Salman was here, the president publicly stated that we would replenish the Saudi stocks. And we have said that we are providing logistical support, intelligence and targeting. If we're really helping on the targeting, then we have something to answer for. But we have publicly identified with this, with this campaign. Why doesn't it resonate in the United States? I think there's a couple of reasons. One is, most people don't know what a Yemen is. When I first went there as ambassador, a friend of mine thought it was some place up by Lapland. *[Laughter]*. Well not all of my friends are in the Foreign Service. It's good to have friends who are outside this—

Ellis: For a reality check

Ambassador Bodine: Yeah for this kind of reality check. The other reason I think it's been ignored is that even though many of us really worked at the beginning, you know, any time I went on any program that would have me, is this is not a Sunni–Shia fight. You know, trying to get it out of the narrow boxes that we tend to think of in the Middle East. And I turn on—I'm a big fan of the news hours. They do the best, you know of almost anybody, and they always talk about the Shia insurgency, the Iranian supported insurgency. And so the narrative has taken hold that this is Iranian, it's Hezbollah, it's, you know—I mean you say Iranian-led, Shia-supported, and Americans default to all sorts of things that they don't want to think about anymore. And since they have no idea what a Yemen is anyway—and there aren't refugees coming out, there aren't the kind of photographs—

Ellis: So it's the visuals.

Ambassador Bodine: There aren't the visuals. You're a journalist, you know you have to have those visuals. There aren't visuals, there aren't anything. It's statistics. It's 85% of the Yemenis. Well, if you don't know what a Yemeni is, it's like saying 85% of the gerbils. It means that much. And that's why it's not a forgotten war, it's an unknown war.

Ellis: So just one quick follow up and then we'll go to the next few questions. What, if anything, might be an incentive for the Saudis to pull back, because recently a lot of—45 Emirati soldiers were killed in one attack. A lot of Saudis have been killed, and I'm just wondering if there might be any kind of outcry, you know, from these countries about their people getting killed or that would just not resonate?

Ambassador Bodine: Well, I met with a group of young Emirati diplomats a couple of months ago when this was going on, but fairly new, and I was surprised at how vehement they were about the Houthis being an Iranian threat. And so, I think what we've got—and this is where we're having—where policy is a problem—is, I think, for the Saudis, and to a certain extent their coalition partners, this really is an existential war. It's not just getting Hadi back. It's fundamentally changing Yemen, and so to a certain extent, I don't think they're going to stop until they think it's finished.

Ellis: So it's a big part of the power play against—

Ambassador Bodine: It's a very much part of the power play and while it's very easy for me to tell you that Iran's influence and presence really was minimal before all of this—I can do all of this, you know, logic—it doesn't matter because the perception is that this is, in a sense, the existential fight between the Sunni—between the Saudis and the Iranians is taking place in Yemen. And that's how the Saudis and others see it. And what they've managed to do, as I've said, is that our narrative has picked up their language.

Ellis: Okay so we have time for a few more questions, yes? Here.

Question: Audrey Scott from the Washington, DC Rotary Club. What a phenomenal position you amplified with being a woman in a man's world. When you were Her Excellency in Yemen, did you work with women? Was there one in the crowd that was outspoken?

Ambassador Bodine: Well, okay. Yeah somebody once said when I was first heading off to Yemen, you know, are they going to talk to you because you're a woman? And my answer was—well first of all, I've been working with the Yemenis at that point for probably 20 years and I have always been a woman [Laughter] which is actually a statement you need to make now. But they knew what I was when they granted agrément, so I wasn't a surprise getting off the airplane. And I should add that my deputy chief

of mission, my political officer, my economic officer, my vice consul, my assistant systems manager and the deputy commander of my marine security guard were all women, so—

Question: Really?

Ambassador Bodine: Yes, so if they weren't going to talk to me, they were going to have a problem. It wasn't a problem. It was absolutely not a problem. In terms of Yemeni women speaking out, I have never met a shy Yemeni woman. I think that those are contradictory terms. They are very strong. They are very outspoken. They were very much a part of the Change Square. They were very, very well represented in the national dialogue, they've been parts of the cabinet. And this is women of our generation and the younger women. Yes, because of the poverty and all those things that go with it we are talking about a smaller elite group of women. but even if you go out to the villages, there's a wonderful story when they had one of their first elections in the early 90's where a friend of mine was an observer and this woman comes in, and she's clearly from out—most of Yemen is the periphery—but she came in, she was illiterate. She wasn't even illiterate, she was actually alliterate and when she—came time for her to vote, she marked her ballot, and this friend of mine says, well basically, "do you know what you're doing," was kind of what his question was—"do you have any idea what this ballot is and this parliament and all this other stuff." And she turned to him and said, "I may be illiterate, but I'm not stupid." Okay. They're very strong and they're very much a part of what is going on. But right now, what we've got is a whole bunch of guys, you know, playing power games with guns. And it would be very nice to say, you know, if you can bring women into the political process, you bring in the people who can actually get you to a solution and make sure that it actually holds. There may very well be women involved in that, but not necessarily as women representing women, but because of their own political power positions. But Yemeni women are not shy at all.

Ellis: Okay, well, on that positive note, thank you Barbara, so much. This has been excellent. I know we all learned so much and hopefully more people will learn about Yemen because it clearly is very important and it's at the intersection of so many issues in the region and we really need to pay more attention. So, thank you and please come back again.

Ambassador Bodine: I shall. Thank you very much. [*Applause*].