

VIGIL FOR PEACE Monday's Noon-1pm Corner MLK Jr & Doty St. Madison City-County Bldg. WK 1600 8.20.2018 **JOIN US!**
We call for an end to the U.S.-Saudi alliance. We call for a release of the "Kill List." We call for an end to the cycle of violence.

Civilian Casualties and Effectiveness of U.S. Drone Strikes in Yemen by Abdulrasheed Al-Faqih, April 3, 2018

*This is the first of two articles on U.S. counterterrorism operations in Yemen. It also the latest in [a new series](#) being produced in partnership Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute that features the voices of experts and advocates from countries affected by U.S. national security policies. **Mr. Al-Faqih** is the Executive Director of Mwatana Organization for Human Rights, independent Yemeni organization aiming to defend and protect human rights in Yemen. The organization works on war crimes, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearance, and freedom of press, in Yemen. (<https://www.justsecurity.org/.../civilian-casualties-effectiveness-u-s-drone-strikes-yeme>.)*

In 2017, the United States military said that it [carried out](#) more than 120 strikes in Yemen, more than three times as many as strikes as [2016](#). For many years, we at the [Mwatana Organization for Human Rights](#) documented the impact of U.S. drone strikes in Yemen through detailed field research. In 2017 we [investigated](#) eight drone strikes and ground operations and found that U.S. operations were responsible for the deaths of at least 32 civilians – including 16 children and six women – and injured ten others, including five children. (*The results of these investigations will be released in a forthcoming report.*)

The 32 civilian deaths and ten injuries are the latest in a long list of victims harmed by U.S. military operations in Yemen who have been waiting for justice for many years. Incidents of civilian harm in Yemen continue to negatively affect the reputation of the United States in the country and push local communities to consider violence and revenge as the only solution to the harm they suffer. With U.S. operations in Yemen [continuing](#) in 2018, it is time for much greater attention to be given to the civilians harmed and the effects of this unwise and destructive policy.

Documenting U.S. strikes

The United States [began](#) targeted killing operations in Yemen in 2002 under the Bush administration, which [increased](#) dramatically within the first few years of the Obama administration. Under President Trump, strikes have again soared. Within Yemen, U.S. operations have raised a great deal of questions, about the [secrecy](#), ethics, objectives, results, effectiveness, effects, and legality of these strikes. Human rights advocates have also [questioned](#) the U.S. government about the fate of the hundreds of civilian victims, about the government's lack of acknowledgment and accountability, and the ways to ensure no new victims are added to the growing list. So far, the U.S. government's response to many of these questions remains inadequate or nonexistent.

During 2013 and 2014, I worked on a team researching civilian victims of U.S. drone strikes. We visited areas and villages in different parts of Yemen that had been affected by U.S. actions. We interviewed witnesses, survivors, doctors, and local social leaders. We inspected the scenes of the attacks, the remains of the munitions, and the effects of such operations on the lives of civilians. We released our findings in a report, *Death by Drone: Civilian Harm Caused by U.S. Targeted Killings in Yemen*, which we co-authored with the Open Society Justice Initiative. It included the results of our field research as well as recommendations to ensure U.S. operations comply with the law and provide accountability for civilians harmed by U.S. strikes. Sadly, many of those whom we spoke to would speak of the harsh reality of their lives.

Our village is poor. We do not have schools, hospitals, roads, or any type of public services. The only thing that we have in the way of progress and development in a modern world are these deadly missiles.

This is what Muhammad Nasser Al Jarrah, a villager from Sailat Al Jarrah [told](#) us during our visit to his remote village on May 31, 2013, after an alleged U.S. strike hit a home full of women and children. Our visit to Sailat Al Jarrah was nearly five years ago, but Muhammad's somber sentiment was shared with us by a number of survivors and witnesses over the years and in different parts of Yemen.

It is now sixteen years after the first U.S. drone strike in Yemen, and we are still working on documenting new attacks and researching their effect on civilians. With Trump's renewed effort to increase lethal operations in Yemen, it seems that the U.S. has still not learned lessons to prevent civilian harm in the country.

Release the kill list: A tool to reduce civilian harm

Strikes that we documented across Yemen, from Sana'a, to Dhamar, to [Rada'a](#) highlight the problematic use of U.S. drone strikes and other counterterrorism operations in what—contrary to the U.S. claim that it is in a global conflict against Al Qaeda and ISIS—is better understood as a local, social, and political conflict. (Please see over.)

From time to time, some of the people we met would also suggest ways that the U.S. could better protect civilians in Yemen. One of the demands that survivors of drone strikes would ask for is a list of wanted individuals. A list that is clear and available to the public so that they can avoid targeted individuals, protect their children, and not allow U.S. targets to have a presence in their areas. Some of the local residents we would interview would claim that a number of the attacks targeted children or ordinary civilians that were not doing anything that might cause suspicion or indicate that they were dangerous or involved in terrorist acts. To them, having a list of wanted individuals would perhaps prevent further civilian harm.

Nasser Mabkhout is one of two survivors of an alleged U.S. drone strike on December 2, 2012. He was driving a group of civilians from a market back to the village of Al Sabool, when the car was hit by a U.S. drone. At the time, the attack was one of the deadliest strikes ever, killing 12 civilians, including three children and a pregnant woman. Two civilians were also injured.

During an interview at his home in Al Sabool, Nasser told us: “I was not worried at all when I saw the plane flying above us. I was sure that they had specific targets, and that these targets were members of terror groups, while we are just vendors and workers. I had heard a lot that these planes were very smart, and that they knew their targets and were very accurate in their strikes. While we were watching the plane, we were laughing and making jokes until we were stopped by one of its missiles, which hit my car and devastated the people in it.”

Local security officials, social leaders, and witnesses of U.S. drone strikes in Yemen told us that the strikes targeted individuals in areas and conditions where it was possible for them to be arrested, investigated, and tried in a court of law. As recently as late last year, the Governor of Mareb [told](#) researchers that the United States carried out a drone strike in November 2017 against a target that his security forces could access. The Governor lamented the failure of the U.S. government to provide information to local forces that might have led to the capture of terrorism suspects.

This leads to a number of questions. How dangerous are the suspects that are targeted in these operations? How feasible is it to arrest, investigate, and try them in court? What do American agencies use to determine who is a suspect when they make the kill list? These and many other questions remain unanswered.

Cycle of violence

Our research team also traveled to a village in the area of Qaifah, Yemen on May 26, 2013. This area is one that has been targeted the most by drone strikes. While we were there, we heard a number of men who were relatives of the civilian victims of a drone strike loudly discussing whether they should kidnap us to pressure the U.S. government to look into the cases of Yemeni drone strike victims. The group that had this idea was trying to convince the rest of the men that we were working for an American organization, the [Open Society Foundations](#), and that this organization could pressure the U.S. government to look into cases of Yemeni drone strike victims. We were lucky that one of the village men, who was also our guide in the area, told the others that he could not allow them to kidnap us because we were his guests and under his protection. Ultimately, we were able to leave the area without any problems.

The incident, however, shows how the families of the victims, many of whom are poor farmers who have waited so long for an acknowledgment for the harm they suffered, and for justice through legal means, begin to consider violent “solutions” to their problems. The U.S. government should realize that Yemenis on the ground feel that U.S. practices that ignore civilian harm are not only dehumanizing but are also counter-productive to the United States’ long-term counterterrorism objectives.

Acknowledgment of accidental civilian deaths can be a vital step toward preventing further acts of violence. I’ve seen some cases where the relatives of civilian drone strike victims are first convinced that the attack was a mistake, that the United States and its Yemeni government ally will officially apologize for the attack, and provide the victims with justice and a remedy. When this apology and remedy does not come, the relatives work to draw attention to their case to highlight that their relatives are civilian victims. And when there is no reaction or response from the U.S. government after those attempts, the families are left only with thoughts of revenge. In these moments, Al Qaeda and similar jihadist groups stand ready to capitalize and exploit these feelings of discontent and injustice.

The potential for violent groups to take advantage of civilian discontent has only grown in recent years. Since the start of the current conflict involving the sectarian Houthi group on one side, and the Saudi-led coalition supported by its international partners on the other, Yemen has been torn apart and its institutions almost completely destroyed. This environment has made it easier for jihadist groups to prosper. The war has allowed Al Qaeda to come out of isolation and expand, so it is now more present in areas that, as the crisis in Yemen drags on, will become more friendly to such groups—not least if the United States continues raining down drone strikes and launching lethal raids on the people of Yemen.

We are fortunate that, in the different areas in which we have worked, it was clear to us that many people, for now, reject Al Qaeda and jihadist groups, even as they are outraged that drone strikes killed their civilian relatives. This has limited Al Qaeda’s influence in Yemen. But every time the U.S. fails to acknowledge a drone strike that harms civilians, the risk that people will turn to Al Qaeda only grows.

