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Death From Above: How American Drone Strikes Are Devastating Yemen

On the ground in a country where unmanned missile attacks are a terrifyingly regular occurrence

by VIVIAN SALAMA
APRIL 14, 2014

The people of Yemen can hear destruction before it arrives. In cities, towns and villages across this country, which hangs off the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, the air buzzes with the sound of American drones flying overhead. The sound is a constant and terrible reminder: a robot plane, acting on secret intelligence, may calculate that the man across from you at the coffee shop, or the acquaintance with whom you've shared a passing word on the street, is an Al Qaeda operative. This intelligence may be accurate or it may not, but it doesn't matter. If you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, the chaotic buzzing above sharpens into the death-herald of an incoming missile.

New Report Documents the Human Cost of U.S. Drone Strikes in Yemen

Such quite literal existential uncertainty is coming at a deep psychological cost for the Yemeni people. For Americans, this military campaign is an abstraction. The drone strikes don't require U.S. troops on the ground, and thus are easy to keep out of sight and out of mind. Over half of Yemen's 24.8 million citizens – militants and civilians alike – are impacted every day. A war is happening, and one of the unforeseen casualties is the Yemeni mind.

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma and anxiety are becoming rampant in the different corners of the country where drones are active. "Drones hover over an area for hours, sometimes days and weeks," said Rooj Alwazir, a Yemeni-American anti-drone activist and cofounder of Support Yemen, a media collective raising awareness about issues afflicting the country. Yemenis widely describe suffering from constant sleeplessness, anxiety, short-tempers, an inability to concentrate and, unsurprisingly, paranoia.

Alwazir recalled a Yemeni villager telling her that the drones "are looking inside our homes and even at our women." She says that, "this feeling of infringement of privacy, combined with civilian casualties and constant fear and anxiety has a profound long time psychological effect on those living under drones."

Last year, London-based forensic psychologist Peter Schaapveld presented research he'd conducted on the psychological impact of drone strikes in Yemen to a British parliamentary sub-committee. He reported that 92 percent of the population sample he examined was found to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder – with children being the demographic most significantly affected. Women, he found, claimed to be miscarrying from their fear of drones. "This is a population that by any figure is hugely suffering," Schaapveld said. The fear of drones, he added, "is traumatizing an entire generation."

Throughout Yemen, it seems, the endless blue heaven above has become a bad omen.

In February, at the Khaled Ibn Al Walid School in Khawlan, a district some 45 kilometers from the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, Principal Jameel Al-Qawly anxiously hovers by the door, scolding any young boys dawdling in the sandy courtyard. Moments earlier, he noticed a sticker on the outside window of one of his classrooms: an image of a black flag with the words of the Muslim *shahada*, which translates to "There is no god but God and Mohamed is His messenger." The flag and slogan constitute a symbol often associated with militant Islamist groups, including Al Qaeda. "I have to keep close watch," Al-Qawly admits, "not to allow just anyone from outside talk to the children."

Youth are thought to be easy prey for radical groups seeking recruits. Air strikes by U.S. drones and Yemeni jets have grown in frequency in recent months, destroying families, and as such have stoked resentment. Psychologist Schaapveld compared the likely trans-generational effect to that suffered by Holocaust survivors. "For every one person killed," he argued, "there are going to be hundreds that are affected psychologically."

Moath Ali Al-Qawly sits in a classroom at the Khaled Ibn Al Walid School, hiding his eyes under a blue Mobile Oil baseball cap. The 11-year-old has a haunted face, and doesn't appear to be paying much attention to his teacher's math lesson. After class, I approach him and ask what he was thinking about. "My father," he says shyly, "was killed by an American plane."

Moath's father, Ali Al-Qawly, was a teacher at the school. He'd never missed a single day of work in 13 years on the job. Then one January morning last year, he was late. Ten minutes passed, then 30, and finally an hour, until Principal Al-Qawly announced to his students: "Mr. Ali will not be coming today."

Ali and his cousin Salim Hussein Ahmed Jamil had been driving in a rented pick-up truck late in the evening when two men asked them for a ride. "We are this type of people," explains Ali's brother Mohammed, "who when we see anyone walking in the street, we offer to drive them."

Drones are unmanned aviation vehicles, but not unpiloted, with cameras sending images back to a base, allowing operators to analyze the data and act on what they see. There is not much interpretive room allowed for cultural gestures, for giving lifts to strangers. Ali's relatives believe the two individuals that he and his cousin Salim picked up were suspected militants, which would have instantly made a target out of the Toyota HiLux they were driving — a vehicle that now stands, charred, as an ad hoc memorial in the center of Khawlan.

The Yemeni Ministry of Interior cleared Ali and Salim of any wrongdoing or connection to the passengers who rode with them on that day, and ruled the incident, simply, as the work of "fate." Detonated missile fragments, allegedly from the incident, were photographed and sent to an arms expert at Human Rights Watch. They were found to be the remnants of a hellfire missile. The Yemeni military has no planes equipped for hellfires. Neighboring Saudi Arabia does, but experts suggest that Saudi's hellfire-equipped flyers do not go that far beyond the border region. The U.S., on the other hand, has been implicated in hellfire-equipped drone strikes all across Yemen.

In a sense, whether or not an American drone killed Ali is as important as whether or not people believe that's what happened. At the Khaled Ibn Al Walid School, more than a year after the missile strike, Ali's name is still listed on the master schedule in the main office, as if he might soon return from vacation. But the students are under no illusions. They are no strangers to such tragedies, having grown up hearing about, as one little girl described it to me, "the American planes that shoot."

"Some of the children have been affected," says Principal Al Qawly about his students' mental state vis-a-vis drone strikes. "They get nervous from any small sound. Many of them are angry, or they don't talk as much. Some of them can't sleep."

Missile strikes, allegedly by U.S. drones — which American officials argue is a safer, more efficient and precise form of aerial warfare than using piloted fighter jets or sending ground troops — have now been reported in twelve of Yemen's 21 governorates, with as many as 504 people killed in confirmed strikes since 2002, according to data compiled by the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism. Another 44 people have been killed in possible U.S. strikes. The strikes reached their peak in August 2013, right around the time 19 U.S. embassies in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, were shut down, during which time some 12 strikes in different locations were reported within a two-week period, killing at least 34 people, according to Baraa Shiban, project coordinator of Reprieve, a U.K.-based legal rights organization that has also worked with detainees at Guantanamo Bay.

Questions Still Surround America's Drone Program

The overall fatality count, though, is clouded by America's growing use of so-called "signature strikes" — guilt-by-association attacks against suspected but unidentified targets. Having

committed no prior crime, these victims' names are not part of any list and in some cases, not even known. Many Yemenis say that the increased prevalence of signature strikes makes it impossible for them to predetermine possible targets, heightening anxieties among those who feel that they will inevitably end up in the crosshairs.

Beginning in 2009, the Obama administration made drone strikes its go-to method for killing members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), causing a spike in reports of drones in Yemen. The strategy, the government insists, is reasonable: AQAP has been linked to recent Yemen-originated plots including a 2009 airliner underwear-bombing scheme, and to the parcel bombs intercepted in Dubai en route to synagogues in Chicago in 2010. There have also been some successes, as drone strikes took out high-profile targets like Saeed al-Shihri, a Saudi citizen who co-founded AQAP, as well as senior operatives Samir Khan and Anwar al-Aulaqi.

In October 2011, Aulaqi's son, 16-year-old Abdulrahman, an American citizen, was killed in a strike in the southern governorate of Shabwah, triggering a fiery debate on Capitol Hill over the legal and ethical limits of drone technology. Abdulrahman "should have a far more responsible father," argued former Obama campaign advisor Robert Gibbs in 2012, as some accused the administration of playing God. "Obama and his aides have become the judge and the executioner," Anwar's brother, Ammar Al-Aulaqi, a Canada-educated engineer and prominent political activist said while sitting in his Sana'a office, "And that, I'm sure, is against the American values, against the American constitution and against the American law."

In December 2013, Abdullah Mabkhut al-Amri's wedding to Warda al-Sorimi made headlines around the world after it ended in tragedy – his relatives blown to pieces by four hellfire missiles during the wedding procession.

Late this winter, I spoke with the sixty-something Abdullah at a hotel in Rada'a. He appeared haggard and frail as he reflected on the day he took his second wife. (Polygamy is a cultural norm in Yemen.) His lanky body draped in a white, ankle-length *thobe*, with a ritual dagger, called a *jambiya*, slung across his waist, he walked me through the worst day of his life.

Lunch had been prepared by the bride's family. All the villagers were invited. The attendees indulged on lamb, a rice and meat offering called *kabsa* and other traditional dishes. They chewed *qat*, the leafy mild narcotic savored daily by many Yemenis. The celebrants shared folklore and recited poetry. The group collectively performed *al-Asr* prayer before commencing their short journey through the arid land that cuts across a rugged mountain valley in the Bayda province, escorting Warda to Abdullah's ancestral hometown of al-Abusereema.

"I felt very comfortable with the bride," Abdullah says of his new wife, whose name means "Rose" in Arabic. His son from his first wife, Saleh, "was there and he always stands by me and supports me."

As the sun began to set on that fateful winter day, the line of SUVs and pick-ups, decorated with simple ribbons and bows for the occasion, set off for its 22-mile trip. But as the procession came to a standstill to wait on some lagging vehicles, some of the tribesmen claim the faint humming sound they typically heard from planes overhead fell silent. The emptiness was soon filled with

the unthinkable. "Missiles showered on our heads," Abdullah says, moving his hands frenetically. "I started to scream and shout for my cousins. Anyone who was still alive jumped out of their cars."

Four hellfires, striking seconds apart, pierced the sky, tearing through the fourth vehicle in the procession. When it was over, 12 men were dead, Saleh among them. At least 15 others were wounded according to survivors and activists, including Warda, whose eye was grazed by shrapnel and whose wedding dress was torn to shreds.

The blast was so intense that it reverberated all the way to al-Abusereema, where the groom's brother Aziz waited for the guests. "I called some people to ask what was that explosion and somebody told me it was the drone," Aziz recalls. "It was the most awful feeling."

"As we were driving to the site," he continues, "I felt myself going deeper and deeper into darkness. That is the feeling of a person who sees his brothers, cousins, relatives and friends dead by one strike, without reason."

"We are just poor Bedouins," says Abdullah, now pounding his hands against his chest. "We know nothing about Al Qaeda. But the people are so scared now. Whenever they hear a car or truck, they think of the drones and the strike. They feel awful whenever they see a plane."

Citing unnamed U.S. and Yemeni officials, the Associated Press reported that the target of the wedding strike was a mid-level Al Qaeda operative named Shawqi Ali Ahmad al-Badani, who has alleged links to the terrorist threat that shut down those 19 U.S. embassies last August. Several media reports claim that al-Badani, repeatedly named on Yemen's Most Wanted List, was wounded and escaped the December attack. The tribesmen present that day say they know nothing about him.

The Obama administration has not denied the wedding attack occurred, but has not commented beyond stating that an investigation into the incident is underway. "Short term, these strikes might have a tactical or strategic impact of containing the activities of insurgents," explains journalist and military expert Chris Woods, author of the forthcoming *Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone Wars*. "But that is at an overall cost to America's global reputation." That said, the U.S. has tacitly admitted some culpability for accidental civilian deaths. Caitlin Hayden, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, says that, "in situations where we have concluded that civilians have been killed, the U.S. has made condolence payments where appropriate and possible."

None of the families to whom I spoke report receiving any payment from the American government, but some families, including those impacted by the wedding strike, have been promised compensation, in the form of 101 rifles and \$101,000, from the Yemeni government. Two days after the events in Rada'a sent shockwaves across Yemen, Saeed Mohammed Al Youseffi of Ma'rib Province was set to marry Fatimah, a hazel-eyed woman from a neighboring village. The young couple had planned an elaborate celebration, to be followed by a month-long honeymoon. But many of their wedding guests were still stunned by the horrifying news from Rada'a. "The atmosphere was very tense," says Saeed, speaking from behind the wheel of his

Land Cruiser as he drove through the Ma'rib desert to his home. "People were really terrified," he explains. "People are afraid now to attend any large gathering – weddings, funerals. Everyone is just trying to survive."

Oil-rich Ma'rib is one of the most heavily targeted regions in Yemen, as its vast, hard-to-search desert makes it attractive to militants. In January 2013, tribesmen blocked the main roads linking the area to the capital in protest of the government's failure to arrest the militants known to be roaming freely in the province. A number of tribes had attempted to alert Yemeni authorities to Al Qaeda infiltration in their area. But the authorities did nothing. The tribes took up arms in an effort to drive the terrorists out. Their efforts succeeded, at least temporarily. "We used to hear at 2 a.m. Bang! Bang! Bang! Shooting between Al Qaeda and the tribes," said Saeed's father, Abu Saeed. "The tribe is larger and has more loyalties than Al Qaeda." But, he says wearily, "Al Qaeda is more organized."

For the people here who have no ties to Al Qaeda or any militant groups, the constant stress of the drone threat has warped long-standing cultural norms. Mothers are increasingly keeping their children home from school or forbidding them from going to mosque for fear that they might be handed a DVD or SIM card containing propaganda or information linking to Al Qaeda. Just the mere possession of Al Qaeda propaganda or an accidental run-in with a suspected militant is enough, locals believe, to be deemed a legitimate target for the drones. "We don't know who is with Al Qaeda," says Oum Saeed, a middle-aged mother of ten, "but the drones know."

While the research being done by Schaapveld is one of very few studies exploring the impact of drones on individuals in Yemen, the correlation between his findings and the results of research conducted in conventional war zones is striking. A 2004 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, "Mental health, Social Functioning, and Disability in Postwar Afghanistan," found that symptoms of depression were prevalent in 67.7 percent of Afghan respondents, symptoms of anxiety in 72.2 percent, and PTSD in 42 percent. (By comparison, approximately 18.1 percent of Americans 18 and older suffer from anxiety disorder, while about 3.5 percent of Americans in this age group have some level of PTSD, according to the National Institute of Mental Health).

That's the quantitative. The qualitative is perhaps more revealing. On the outskirts of Ma'rib, near a burst of green palm trees where furry camels, indifferent to their surroundings, take refuge from the sun, AK-47 wielding tribesmen gather inside a tent to talk about drones, and what, if anything, can be done. "We had hopes that the new government would help," says a farmer named Abdel Kareem Ali, sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor of the tent. "But until now, nothing has changed." The men assembled discussed case after case of drone attacks they'd heard about at the local coffee shop, or in passing conversations with fellow townsmen, in which an Al Qaeda operative is targeted and several civilians are allegedly killed in one fell swoop, rendering the entire community helpless. "Our women are really badly affected," said Salim Al-Ahmad, whose bright smile was in contrast to the situation being described. The government "says it is investigating," he offered. "But they've got their hands in the refrigerator" – a popular Arabic expression suggesting that their minds are some place else.

President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Yemen's leader since the 2011 forced-resignation of longtime President Ali Abdallah Saleh, has left much to be desired for a populace that felt change was at hand when protests swept through the Arab world three years ago. But Hadi has, in many ways, picked up where his predecessor left off, openly supporting the use of American drones on Yemeni soil while failing to make progress in curbing the militant threat at home.

In January, Yemen held the closing ceremony of its National Dialogue Conference, in which 565 delegates from across the country worked on the framework for its first constitution since ousting Saleh. Among the recommendations agreed upon at the conference, delegates, through full consensus, urged criminalizing the use of drones and extra judicial killings, including drone strikes. But many are skeptical that the government will act on these recommendations. Last August, amid the threat that shut down the U.S. embassies, Yemen's President Hadi asked the United States to supply his military with drones, saying it would help it fight Al Qaeda threat.

Yemeni Whose Village Was Bombed Testifies at Senate Drone Hearing

Farea Al-Muslimi, a prominent local activist who testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee last year about a strike in his home village of Wessab, says that anger over drones has become a convenient outlet for feelings of resentment about other issues. "People don't have jobs," he tells me. "People cannot get access to health care." Yet, he says, "people are angry with the drones. People want revenge for their relatives." The United States was a steadfast ally of ousted President Saleh, and continues to support the current regime, allocating more than \$337 million in assistance to Yemen in 2012, the majority of which was geared toward counterterrorism operations and humanitarian assistance. The Yemeni government, Al-Muslimi lamented, "will never solve these problems. Yemen is most stable in times of instability."

Left at the mercy of a government that has all but forgotten them, activists are teaming up with the families of drone victims across Yemen, those who are looking to help the communities impacted by this phenomenon. The National Organization for Drone Victims (NODV), established by Mohammed Al-Qawly, whose brother Ali Al-Qawly was killed in Khawlan, was launched in March, with the mission of conducting independent investigations into drone strikes in partnership with Reprieve, and highlighting the impact this controversial program is having on civilians.

For some, however, the damage offers no recourse. There's Oum Salim in Khawlan, who sobs uncontrollably when she hears her son Salim's name — Salim, who was riding in the doomed Toyota with his cousin Ali Al-Qawly. His mother pulls a framed photograph off the wall and cradles it in her arms. "Allah, have mercy on him!" says prays. "Allah, look after him! Allah, be kind to him!"

And, in Ma'rib there's a little boy named Ali, who asked, looking to the uncertain sky above, "Will I be next?"