

**Living in Terror Under a Drone-Filled Sky in Yemen**  
**By Vivian Salama, the Atlantic**  
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A small house, once made of large cement blocks, is reduced to rubble in a sea of untouched homes and shops in Jaar, a town in South Yemen's Abyaan governorate. There are no signs of life where that house once stood -- no photos, furniture, and certainly no people left behind. In May 2011, the house was struck by a drone -- American, the locals say. Some believe the sole occupant, a man named Anwar Al-Arshani, may have been linked to Al Qaeda, although he kept to himself, so no one knows for sure. As Al-Arshani's house smoldered from the powerful blow, townspeople frantically rushed to inspect the damage and look for survivors. And then, just as the crowd swelled, a second missile fired. Locals say 24 people were killed that day, all of them allegedly innocent civilians.



A boy stands next to his grandmother, Noor Awad al-Houla, 60, at their house in the southern Yemeni town of Jaar on February 1, 2013. The woman suffered a stroke that left her paralyzed after an air strike hit a neighboring house last year that was targeting al Qaeda-linked militants. (Khaled Abdullah Ali Al Mahdi/Reuters)

Eighteen-year-old Muneer Al-Asy was among them. His mother Loul says she knows nothing about America -- not of its democracy or politics or people or values. All she knows is that it killed her son. She cannot read and does not own a television. Like many in her village, she says Al-Qaeda is "very bad," but the thought of her youngest son being killed by an American missile haunts her dreams at night. She screams in fury at the people who took her son: "criminals!" She rocks anxiously back and forth on her sole piece of furniture -- a long cushion in her single-room home -- recalling the day her son was "martyred" by a U.S. drone. "I am like a blind person now," says Loul. "Muneer was my eyes."

Thousands of miles from Washington, where the debate rages on over the moral and legal implications of using unmanned aerial vehicles for lethal targeting, the names and faces of many of the victims paints a somber picture. Some are fathers who can no longer buy food and medicine for their children. Some are kids whose only crime in life was skipping out on studies to play soccer with friends. Some are expectant mothers who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. As the U.S. focuses attention on the successful targeting of names on the notorious "kill list," the number of innocent civilians killed by U.S. drones on the rise -- threatening to destroy families, spark resentment, and fuel Al-Qaeda recruitment.

While strikes in Pakistan have been recorded since at least June 2004, drones have become more common in Yemen in recent years, used to weed out and eliminate members of Al Qaeda's notorious Arabian Peninsula network (AQAP). AQAP has been linked to recent schemes including the foiled 2012 underwear bomb plot, as well as for parcel bombs intercepted before reaching synagogues in Chicago in 2010. The drone program has seen some successes, including strikes on high-profile targets like Saeed al-Shihri, a Saudi citizen who co-founded AQAP, and senior operatives Samir Khan and Anwar al-Awlaki. The latter was a preacher who often delivered his provocative sermons in English and, like Khan, was at one time an American citizen.

However, with the growing use of so-called "signature strikes" -- attacks against suspected but unidentified targets -- there have been increasingly troubling signs that many victims are deemed guilty by association. Having committed no crime, their names not part of any list and in some cases, not even known.

The targeting of Awlaki's son, 16-year-old Abdulrahman, a minor and an American citizen at the time of the October strike that killed him, has triggered a fiery debate on Capitol Hill over the limits of this technology if American citizens can be killed overseas so unapologetically. Abdulrahman hadn't seen his father in two years when he was killed. He had no known links to Al-Qaeda and is said to have lived the life of an ordinary teenage boy similar to any in America.

AQAP "is a huge problem," Farea Al-Muslimi, a Yemeni activist and analyst who recently testified at the first U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee about the drone wars, addressing an attack on his own village, said in an interview. "What you're doing is making any counter efforts to AQAP more problematic. It has set the rules of the game. They have no problem with getting shot. Even if they die, there is a new generation rising up inside the organization."

U.S drone attacks in Yemen skyrocketed to 53 last year, almost triple the number of attacks in 2011, according to Washington-based think tank the New America Foundation. The civilian casualty rate from those strikes is estimated between 4 percent and 8.5 percent. The George W. Bush administration, by contrast, only launched one drone attack in Yemen in its eight years. In Pakistan, the Obama administration has deployed at least 316 drone strikes since assuming office, versus the 52 strikes conducted by the Bush administration. One of few international organizations attempting to compile statistics on drone-linked deaths, the London-based Bureau for Investigative Journalism (TBIJ), estimates the number of civilians killed in confirmed drone strikes in Yemen is as high as 45 people. However, that does not include the unconfirmed, covert strikes, which TBIJ estimates could account for as many as 136 additional civilian deaths to date. Civilian deaths in Pakistan since 2004 have totaled anywhere from 411 to 884 - with children accounting for as many as 197 of those deaths, TBIJ said.

More significantly, thousands of Yemeni residents are showing signs of a vast range of psychological disorders linked to the fear of living under spy planes and drones, including trauma, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly since many report hearing a constant buzzing sound from the drones flying overhead. Some women claim to have miscarried from the sound of nearby strikes, and activists say this is a growing phenomenon. None of the families interviewed has received any type of compensation for damage or death. "Whether true or false, if Yemenis believe drones are causing miscarriages, that's as detrimental to the U.S. winning hearts and minds as if it were reality," said Letta Tayler, a Yemen expert with New York-based Human Rights Watch. "There is an enormous amount of anger over the targeted killing program. If the U.S. makes mistakes, it needs to apologize, compensate, and hold thorough investigations to help prevent further deaths of civilians."

In January, the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights launched an inquiry into the impact drones are having on civilians in countries like Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, and Afghanistan and is aiming to assess whether the program is in-keeping with international law. Many activists in Yemen point to the tight-lipped policies of the American drone program, which make it extremely difficult to prove civilian casualties. "There is no accountability," said Atiaf Alwazir, a Yemeni-American researcher and blogger who has worked to document the cases of civilian victims. "There is no information regarding the kill list. An entire population could be deemed militant because they live in a certain area."

Calls and emails to the White House and Central Intelligence Agency were not returned. The Department of Defense pointed to past comments made by now-CIA director John Brennan last year about the program, in which he notes: "The United States has never been so open regarding its counterterrorism policies and their legal justifications...one can argue that never before has there been a weapon that allows us to distinguish more effectively between Al-Qaeda terrorists and innocent civilians."

Many in Yemen dismiss this. "The U.S. drone has entered the realm of the boogeyman here in Yemen," said Haykal Bafana, a Yemeni-Singaporean international lawyer whose hometown Wadi

Hadhramaut has been heavily targeted. "What's the point of winning the war against Al Qaeda if America has to throw away all of its principles and moral values?"

Residents in the oasis governorate of Ma'rib say they are on the front line of this battle. Locals say Al-Qaeda is increasingly moving into their area, and bringing trouble ranging from air strikes to recruitment. At least one civilian has been killed so far this year by a U.S. drone, relatives and local activists say. Fatimah, 9, says she feels frightened from the "planes that shoot" and her heart beats fast every day when she escorts her younger siblings to school. "I'm afraid they will shoot me," she says.

In January, tribesmen blocked the main roads linking to the capital in protest of government neglect. A number of tribes had attempted to alert Yemeni authorities to the increasing presence of Al-Qaeda in their area. But the authorities did nothing. The tribes were forced to rely on themselves, taking up arms against militants in an effort to drive them out. "The reality is my tribe can protect me from Al-Qaeda, but they cannot protect me from drones," said Entisar Al-Qadhi, 30, a native of Ma'rib.

"The Yemeni government had a chance to capture them, arrest them and put them on trial, but they are ignoring this fact and instead, hitting them with drone strikes and causing fear and panic among the local residents and families of that area," said Baraa Shiban, Yemen project coordinator at Reprieve, a legal rights organization that has also worked with detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Yemen's president of 33 years, Ali Abdullah Saleh, an American ally, was forced out of office in February 2012 after a year of popular protests. Many in Yemen have cast doubt over their government's sincerity in the fight against terrorism since the military's offensive against the group has traditionally come in waves. It has also been a steadfast supporter of the drone program, opening its skies and granting liberties to the U.S. government, which last year committed an additional \$52 million in aid for areas hit hard by the country's war against Al-Qaida, bringing total annual U.S. assistance to Yemen to \$170 million.

In a September interview with the Washington Post, Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi said: "Every operation, before taking place, they take permission from the president."

The arguments in support of this evolving form of warfare are both spirited and defensive. Many point to national security, citing the need to take action in the face of credible evidence of deadly plots against the U.S. and its citizens. Advocates of the drone program say that using unmanned planes allows for more time, less pressure and better judgment by its operator than a fighter pilot would have at the controls of an F-18, for instance -- and, as a result, make less mistakes. Many different parties, including lawyers, also supervise drone operators, as opposed to fighter pilots who, in most cases, call the shots on their own. "You do not know collateral damage until you send humans dropping bombs from 35,000 feet who are afraid for their lives," said Mary Cummings, associate professor of Aeronautics and Astronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a former fighter pilot for the U.S. Navy. "There is no question in my mind that this is a better way, and with any luck we will get better and better about it and maybe one day we can do it without casualties."

But that is a hard case to make to the people living in fear that they will be the next casualty. Magda Awad Mohammed, 25, was widowed from that double strike in Jaar and is now faced with a daily, gut wrenching fear that she cannot feed her three young children. Her husband Adel Ahmed Mohammed was a day laborer who often took jobs selling bananas in town. She was happy when he didn't come home that day because she assumed it meant he found work. As fate would have it, he was in a souk near to Anwar Al-Arshani's home when it was hit by a drone. "My son is sick and I don't have money to buy him medicine," Magda says. "I can't do anything for them. I am helpless now."