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Yemen's Hidden War: How the Saudi-Led Coalition Is Killing Civilians

Iona Craig

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IN THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT of *qadar*, your divine destiny is inescapable. If you try to cheat death it will find you. For two women on a dusty road in mid-June on the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, their repeated attempts to dodge fate ended in tragic failure.

Leaving the war zone of Yemen's southern port city of Aden on June 10, the women headed north in a Toyota Cressida driven by a male relative. The pair were escaping the violence that had already turned entire streets in Aden to rubble, left hundreds dead and thousands of civilians under siege, struggling to find food, water and medical care.

Driving ahead of them was a family of four in a Hilux pick-up truck, slowing at the numerous checkpoints along the road and weaving around potholes in the asphalt. Between 4:30 and 5 p.m., seemingly from nowhere, the first missile struck. The Hilux flipped into a cartwheeling fireball, killing the two children and their parents inside.

Before the women in the Toyota had a chance to compose themselves an ominous whistle preceded a second missile, which smashed into the ground beside them and sent their car careering off the road into the dusty scrubland. Twice in the space of just a few minutes the women had stared death in the face.

Dressed in black *abiyas* — the uniform dress code of women in Yemen — they clambered out of their sand-bound car. Seeing the two stranded women, Mohammed Ahmed Salem pulled over in his bus. Salem was taking his 25-year-old daughter to the province of Lahj and had filled his bus with passengers to help pay for the fuel. The passengers made room for the two women, who left their male relative to wait for a family member to help recover the crashed Toyota. But as they thanked God for their narrow escape, the third and final missile came out of the sky. The bus and some 10 passengers were obliterated.

The names of the dead did not even make news in the local press in Aden. This form of death is now commonplace amid a war so hidden that foreign journalists are forced to smuggle themselves by boat into the country to report on an ongoing conflict that the U.N. says has killed more than 4,500 people and left another 23,500 wounded.

On one side of the conflict is the U.S.-backed coalition of nations led by Saudi Arabia supporting Yemen's president-in-exile, Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi. Their adversaries are the predominantly Shiite Houthi fighters who hail from the northern province of Saada that abuts the Saudi border, along with soldiers from renegade military units loyal to the country's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh.



A March 30 airstrike on a public bus in the Khormakser district of Aden, Yemen, left four dead, including one child.

In March, the Saudis — aided by U.S. and British weapons and intelligence — began a bombing campaign in an attempt to push back the Houthis, who they see as a proxy for Iran. Since then, from the northern province of Saada to the capital Sanaa, from the central cities of Taiz and Ibb to the narrow streets at the heart of Aden, scores of airstrikes have hit densely populated areas, factories, schools, civilian infrastructure and even a camp for displaced people.

From visiting some 20 sites of airstrikes and interviews with more than a dozen witnesses, survivors and relatives of those killed in eight of these strikes in southern Yemen, this reporter discovered evidence of a pattern of Saudi-coalition airstrikes that show indiscriminate bombing of civilians and rescuers, adding further weight to claims made by human rights organizations

that some Saudi-led strikes may amount to war crimes and raising vital questions over the U.S. and Britain's role in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen.

(The number of civilian casualties has not been officially collated or recorded by NGOs or aid agencies. Only a handful of humanitarian and independent human rights organizations have had a presence on the ground in Aden, while nationwide just a small fraction of the strikes have even been independently documented. The death tolls for the eight strikes, which include five on public buses, were given by witnesses, or those who collected the dead after the strikes, and are necessarily imperfect; the total ranges from 142 up to 175.)

“The Obama administration needs urgently to explain what the U.S.’s exact role in Saudi Arabia’s indiscriminate bombing campaign is,” said Cori Crider, strategic director at the international legal group Reprieve. “It very much looks like there is a case to answer here — not just for the Saudis, but for any Western agencies who are standing behind them. International law shuns the intentional targeting of civilians in war — and in the United States it is a serious federal crime.”

These civilian deaths occurred in strikes that account for just a handful of the thousands of bombing raids carried out by the Saudi-led coalition since its aerial campaign began. Of particular concern are the U.S.-style “double tap” strikes — where follow-up strikes hit those coming to rescue victims of an initial missile attack — which became a notorious trademark of covert CIA drone strikes in Pakistan. On July 6, for instance, at least 35 rescuers and bystanders were killed trying to help scores of traders hit in a strike five minutes earlier on a farmers market in Fayoush, in Yemen’s Lahj province.

Abdul Hamid Mohammed Saleh, 30, was standing on the opposite side of the road when the first missile hit the gathering of more than 100 men who had been arriving since before 6 a.m. to trade goats and sheep at the daily market. The initial blast, he told me, killed around a dozen men and injured scores more. Body parts flew through the air, and an arm landed next to Saleh. He said he began to flee, but hearing the screams of the injured he turned back and crossed the road to try and help. The second strike landed less than 30 yards from him, sending shrapnel flying into his back.



Mohammed Awath Thabet looks over the crater left by the first bomb of a “double tap” strike that killed at least 50 civilians on July 6 in Fayoush, Yemen.

Mohammed Awath Thabet, a 52-year-old teacher who helped collect the bodies of the dead after the twin strike, said at least 50 people, all civilians ranging from teenagers to men in their 60s, were killed in total. “After 50 it was hard to tell,” Thabet said. “The rest were all body parts. People cut to pieces. What parts belonged to who? We couldn’t tell. Some were animal parts. Some were human,” he added, pointing to a brown stain on a nearby cinderblock wall left by a man’s head that had been stuck to it by the force of the blast. He and other witnesses said that there were no conceivable military targets or Houthi fighters in the area.

On June 12, six days after an airstrike split a large public transport bus in two on the edge of Aden’s Dar Saad district, Lami Yousef Ali, 23, found the decomposing body of his 28-year-old brother, Abdu, still entangled in the wreckage. Lami and Abdu had been chatting via WhatsApp moments before the bus was bombed, and their father, Yusef Ali, also died in the strike, which killed at least 16 civilians. According to witnesses, this bombing also hit two cars carrying Houthi fighters. (This is the only case of the eight strikes investigated in which Houthi fighters appear to have been the target rather than civilians.) Although no remnants of the cars are visible at the strike site, the twisted metal of the bisected bus still lies in the sand, rusting in the scorching heat of Aden’s summer sun. In the background the familiar sound of distant bombings resonates from the shifting front lines as the battle moves on.

On April 25 a fighter jet bombed a public bus towing another bus carrying Somali refugees from the isolated Kharaz refugee camp, 93 miles northwest of Aden. Forced to take a winding back route to Aden because of fighting on the main road, the shambling convoy was hit around 11 a.m by at least two strikes in the remote desert scrublands of Lahj.

Mustafa al-Abd Awad said he lost his brother, Mohammed, a father of seven. When Awad went to the site to recover his brother’s body, he counted more than 30 others in the ashes of the two burnt-out buses. Other relatives who went to collect their dead said the total killed was as high as

52. “They take everything from us,” shouted Awad, gesturing toward a cloudless sky. “Why? Tell me why.”

Mohammed Hussein Othman, 23, was also killed that day, leaving behind his 4-year-old son, Rashid, who had already lost his mother at birth. “My Dad went to heaven to be with my Mum,” said the little boy, sitting in the lap of his grandmother, Itisam, while the older woman smiled at selfies taken by her son shortly before his death.

These erroneous Saudi-led strikes have not just hit remote desert roads. In the Crater district of Aden, nestled in the heart of a dormant volcano, at least 18 civilians were killed on April 28, including a family of seven. The crumbling buildings and carcasses of cars left behind suggest that multiple strikes hit the narrow residential street. The facade of one house torn open by bombs exposes furniture and family possessions like a child’s doll house; just a few yards away a school, mosque and maternity clinic all lie in ruins.

Along with the Saudi coalition’s bombing campaign, American warships have also helped to enforce a naval blockade that the Saudis say is necessary to prevent weapon shipments to the Houthis, whom they claim are supported by Iran. According to the U.N., this collective punishment has left the country “on the brink of famine,” with desperate shortages of food, medical supplies and fuel — vital not only for transportation but for pumping increasingly scarce water from the depths of the country’s depleted water tables. Four out of five Yemenis are now in need of humanitarian assistance.

To add to the worsening humanitarian crisis, on August 18 Saudi-led fighter jets bombed the port in the northern city of Hodeidah, a main supply route for aid agencies, while on the outskirts of Aden white sugar spills into shredded sacks of flour. Hundreds of pounds of vital food supplies lie ruined in bombed-out warehouses.

While protesters have taken to the streets of the capital, Sanaa, in the thousands to demonstrate against the bombings, in Aden green Saudi flags flutter in the sea breeze at checkpoints, and street vendors sell posters of Saudi Arabia’s King Salman in acknowledgement of the Kingdom’s support in the battle to remove the Houthi Saleh forces from their city. Unlike northern Yemen, where sympathy for the Houthis is strongest, many southerners are reluctant to blame their Saudi neighbors for the civilian casualties.

Some observers, such as Human Rights Watch, say evidence shows many of the Saudi-led strikes appear to be “serious laws-of-war violations,” while others stress that the many civilian deaths are a result of error. In Aden, where scores of civilians have also been killed in a ground war that raged for over four months, Southern Resistance fighters place blame for the deaths on the poor coordination between the anti-Houthi militias and their coalition partners in Riyadh. “It was not organized,” said tax director and Southern Resistance supporter Mohammed Othman of the Saudis’ first attempt at managing a modern war. “Those calling in the strikes were old commanders who don’t know the recent layout of the city.” (A day after our meeting, Othman was shot dead by a Houthi sniper.)

Brig. Gen. Ahmed Assiri, spokesperson for the Saudi-led coalition forces, denied air strikes had targeted civilians and rescuers, or civilian infrastructure. When asked to comment, he said that “It is not a good story to talk about,” and also that he welcomed any United Nations investigation into the strikes.



Shukri Ali Saeed lies in the hospital two months after an airstrike hit the truck he was driving in Lahj, Yemen, on June 18, killing two passengers. Saeed suffered severe burns and both his legs were broken.

But some on the ground in the south still find it difficult to absolve the Saudi-led coalition. Shukri Ali Saeed said he was driving his flatbed truck from Lahj into Aden on June 18, the first day of the holy month of Ramadan, when it was hit by an airstrike. Two men sitting alongside him were killed. With both his legs broken and suffering from third degree burns, Saeed dragged himself out of the upturned truck. He lay on the side of the road for more than two hours before someone came to help him. Two months later Saeed is still in the hospital. At night the sound of the incoming missile haunts him when he tries to sleep. “I can’t blame the Houthis,” said Saeed from his hospital bed. “It’s clear who is responsible.”

Last week, 23 human rights organizations called on the United Nations Human Rights Council to create an international commission of inquiry to investigate alleged violations of international laws by all sides in the ongoing conflict. This includes the U.S. and Britain. Some 45 U.S. advisers are currently assisting the Saudi coalition from joint operations centers in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, while the American government has also supplied intelligence, in-flight refueling of fighter jets, and weapons, including, according to rights organizations, banned U.S. cluster munitions.

America’s continued support of Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen comes as Saudi-U.S. relations have been strained by President Obama’s pursuit of a nuclear deal with the Kingdom’s regional nemesis, Iran. Adam Baron, a visiting fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations, suggests that the U.S. has been more eager to conciliate Saudi Arabia than usual, “because they want them and the other Gulf States to at least not actively oppose the Iran deal.”

A U.S. Department of Defense spokesperson responded: “We take all accounts of civilian deaths due to the ongoing hostilities in Yemen seriously. We continue to provide logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition in response to ongoing aggressive Houthi military

actions. We have asked the Saudi government to investigate all credible reports of civilian casualties and to undertake urgent steps in response if these reports are verified.”

Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed bombing campaign continues into its sixth month and Yemen’s largely hidden war endures; its civilians struggle to survive, with little influence over their fate. “We don’t know when or where death will come, where the next bullet or bomb will drop,” said Itisam, staring at a picture of her dead son’s gray, dismembered body wedged under the undercarriage of a bus. “Only God knows.”