

## **Civilians Killed in US Operations in Yemen**

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Yemen was an early site of U.S. counterterror operations after the 9/11 attacks, but for many years the war zone was relatively quiet. In November 2001, the U.S. began military cooperation with Yemen, opening a training facility that included CIA and Special Operations forces, and in April 2002, the U.S. designated Yemen a combat zone to support Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. Yemen's political stability was, at the time, fragile, and the government welcomed U.S. military assistance, which it used to fight dissidents as well as Al Qaeda affiliated organizations.

The political context and the U.S. role in Yemen are not dissimilar from the situation in Pakistan. Under the authoritarian government of President Salah from 1990 to 2011, disaffection with the government grew. Yemen's growing political instability attracted militants and terrorists, who fed on local discontent, and used the unrest to hide. The U.S. began direct military operations in Yemen in 2002, in cooperation with the government of Yemen, consisting of drone strikes, other air strikes, and Special Forces operations. The purpose of U.S. operations was to kill Al Qaeda leaders and engage in broader counterterrorism. However, as in Pakistan, the U.S. encouraged and supported the Yemeni military to take the lead in counterterrorism operations. In January 2009, two al Qaeda related organizations merged to form Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and promised to train in Yemen for attacks. Others, also protesting Yemen's close ties to the U.S., and the Yemeni forces attacks on civilians, took up arms against the Yemeni government

The Obama administration reviewed its strategy in Yemen in 2009 and initiated a comprehensive program that included increased economic and military assistance to the Yemeni government and direct U.S. military strikes. In September 2009, President Ali Abdullah Saleh of

Yemen promised the U.S. deputy National Security Adviser, John Brennan, "unfettered access to Yemen's national territory for U.S. counterterrorism operations."<sup>1</sup>

In line with the shift in policy, direct U.S. military operations in Yemen and U.S. support to the Yemeni government through the Department of Defense (section 1206 funding) and Department of State (Foreign Military Financing) for military purposes dramatically increased. Indeed, Yemen became the largest recipient of the Congress' newly authorized counterterrorism 1206 funding between FY2006 and FY 2011, receiving more than \$250 million over that period. Pakistan received 203 million over the same period.<sup>2</sup> The majority of U.S. funding went to purchase and support upgrades of the Yemeni Air Force's helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. Yemen used the U.S. military assistance funding, equipment and training, against AQAP but also against other dissidents and pro-democracy protestors, which concerned some members of the U.S. Congress.<sup>3</sup>

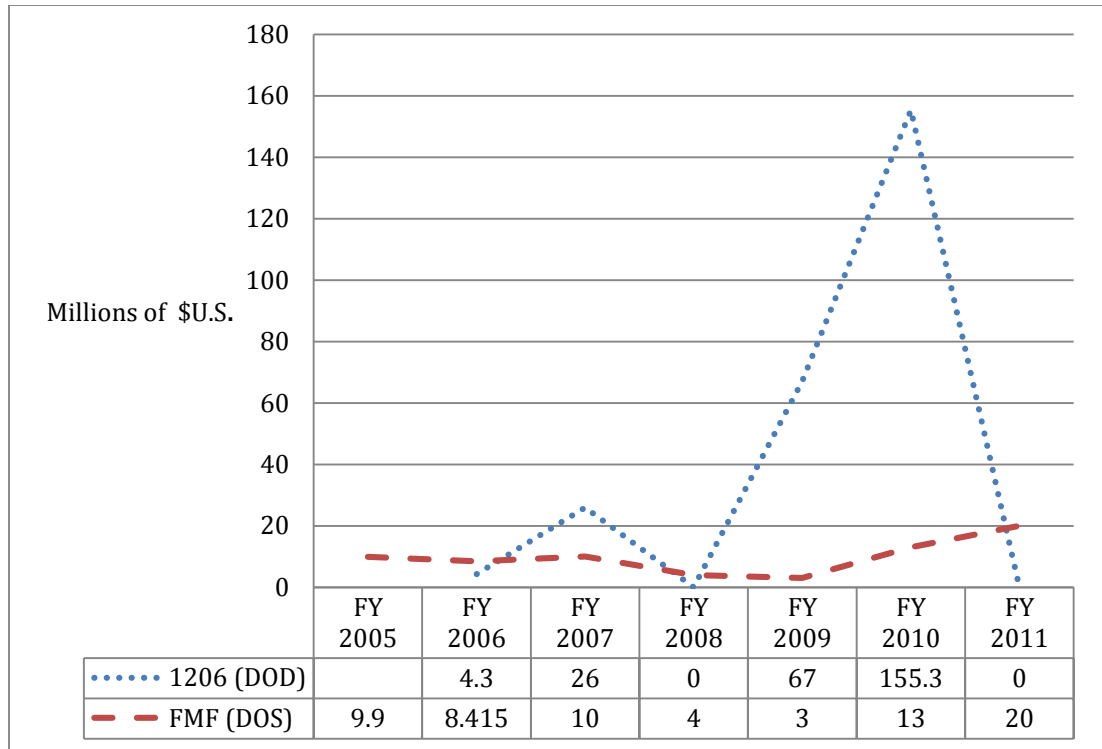
Figure 2.16. Major U.S. Authorizations for Yemen's Military, FY2005-FY 2011.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Diplomatic Cable 15 September 2009, Wikileaks, *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/225085>.

<sup>2</sup> Nina M. Serafino, "Security Assistance Reform: 'Section 1206' Background and Issues for Congress," 13 January 2012, pp. 25-26 and 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> See Jeremy M. Sharp, "Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, CRS, 22 March 2011, RL34170 p. 38.



Sources: Alfred B. Prados and Jeremy M. Sharp, Yemen: Current Conditions and U.S. Relations, CRS Report for Congress, RS21808, 4 January 2007. Jeremy M. Sharp, "Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, CRS, 22 March 2011; Jeremy M. Sharp, "Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, CRS, 10 April 2012.

As in Pakistan, most civilians and members of insurgent organizations die at government hands, not as a result of direct U.S. strikes. But, in contrast to Pakistan, it appears that the U.S. strikes in Yemen involve a number of different weapons platforms — strikes by drone aircraft, cruise missiles, and piloted aircraft. The first targeted U.S. drone missile strike in Yemen occurred in November 2002 when the U.S. used a Predator drone to kill Al Qaeda leader Qa'id Salim Sinan al-Harithi who was involved in the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in December 2000, and Abu Ahmad al-Hijazi. Four other militants were killed in the strike. There was a several year pause in the drone strikes, but U.S. cooperation with Yemen's government continued.

After more than seven years, the next major U.S. military operations in Yemen were attacks on suspected Al Qaeda training camps in Sana' and Abyan provinces in late 2009. The strike in Abyan was originally reported in the West as conducted by the government of Yemen. It later emerged that the U.S. had launched a cruise missile carrying cluster bombs in the village of al-Majala on 17 December 2009.<sup>4</sup> In a meeting with David Petraeus shortly after the strikes, President Saleh said that Yemen would conceal the U.S. role: "We'll continue saying the bombs are ours, not yours." The deputy prime minister, Rashid al-Alimi said, "U.S. munitions found at the sites could be explained away as equipment purchased from the U.S."<sup>5</sup> The local authorities in Yemen, and a Parliamentary commission investigation, found that of the 58 people killed, 44 were civilians. The Parliamentary commission described the effects of the attack, which is said killed "14 members of the al-Haidra family in one settlement and 27 members of the al-Anbour family in the other. The sole survivor from the al-Haidra family, a 13-year-old girl, was reported to have been sent abroad to receive medical treatment for her injuries."<sup>6</sup> Cluster bombs later killed three and wounded nine others who stepped on bomblets remaining from the attack. Those killed ranged in age from 1 to 67 years old.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. waged a second strike that day, but it is unclear who was killed. An airstrike reportedly made by the Yemeni military with U.S. assistance, against a U.S. citizen working with Al Qaeda in Yemen, Anwar Al Alawki, on 24 December, killed about 30 members of AQAP.<sup>8</sup> On 25 December, a man who had trained in Yemen tried to blow up a U.S. airliner over Detroit, underscoring the threat emanating from Yemen. The December

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, "Images of Missile and Cluster Munitions Point to US Role in Fatal Attack in Yemen," 7 June 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/yemen-images-missile-and-cluster-munitions-point-us-role-fatal-attack-2010-06-04>. Robert Booth and Ian Black, "WikiLeaks Cables: Yemen Offered US 'Open Door' to Attack al-Qaida on its Soil," *the Guardian*, 3 December 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/03/wikileaks-yemen-us-attack-al-qaida>.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Shane, "Yemen Sets Terms of a War on Al Qaeda," *The New York Times*, 10 December 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/04/world/middleeast/04wikileaks-yemen.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Drones Team, "Yemen: Reported U.S. Covert Actions 2011-2011," <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/03/29/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-since-2001/>.

<sup>7</sup> The Long War Journal counts 41 dead, perhaps not including the later victims of Cluster munitions.

<sup>8</sup> Sudarson Raghavan and Michael D. Shear, "U.S.-Aided Attack in Yemen Thought to Have Killed Aulaqi, 2 Al Qaeda Leaders," *The Washington Post*, 25 December 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/24/AR2009122400536.html>.

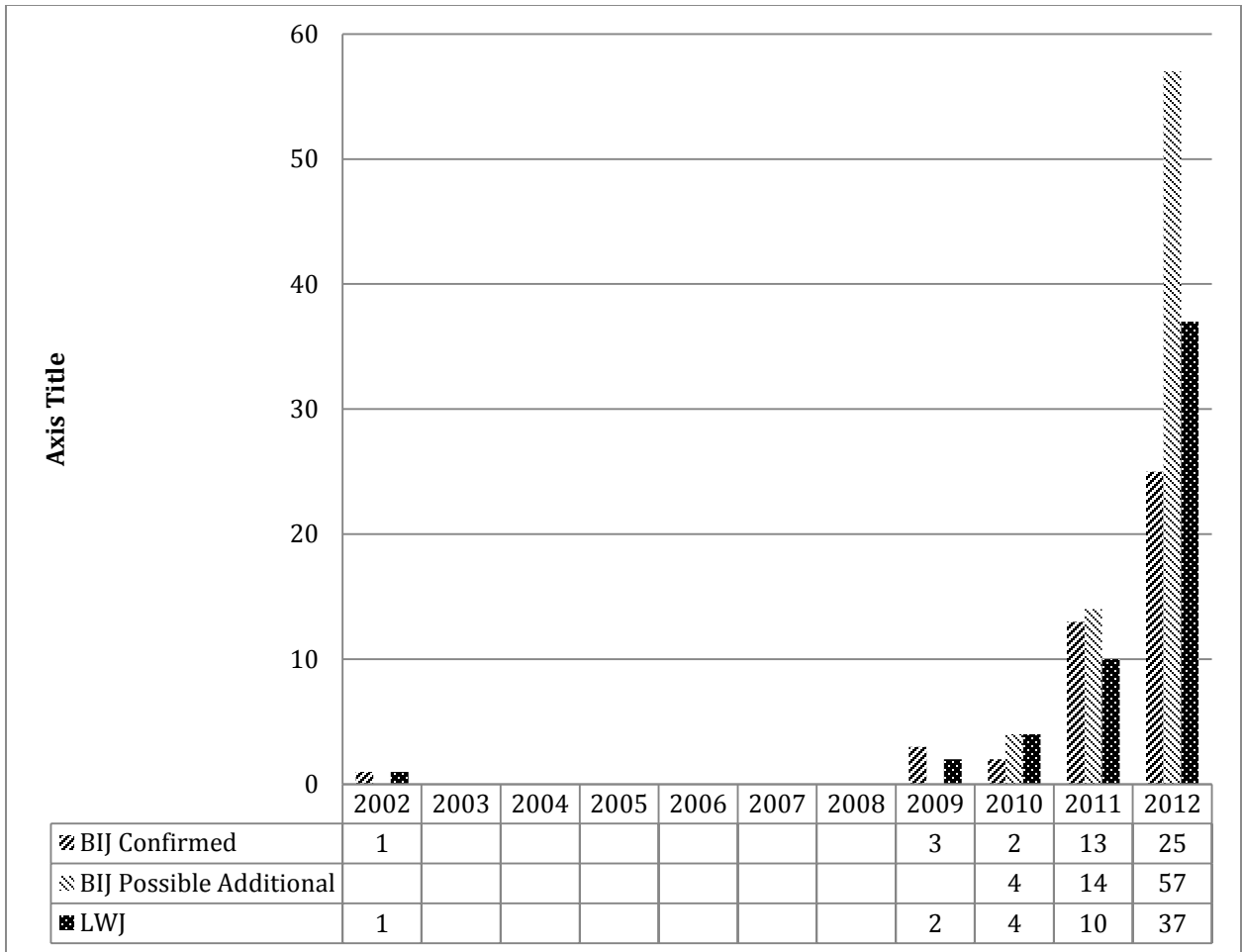
2009 strikes were the beginning of increased drone and cruise missile air strikes in Yemen. A strike on 14 March 2010 killed an Al Qaeda leader, but the next U.S. strike, on 25 May 2010 killed a top civilian official, the deputy governor of Marib Province, and some of his bodyguards.<sup>9</sup>

But there is some uncertainty about both the number of U.S. strikes and the platforms being used. For example, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism publishes short narratives of each confirmed strike, and other possible strikes, as well as its sources, and they count more strikes in Yemen than the Long War Journal. Figure 2.17, below, illustrates the difference in the two counts of strikes. As in Pakistan, few outside reporters have had access to Yemen, and the government was, for many years not honest about the source of the attacks, over when they were made, and how many and the identities of those who are killed or injured.

Figure 2.17. Comparison of Counts of U.S. Strikes in Yemen, 2002 – 28 October 2012.

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<sup>9</sup> Scott Shane, Mark Mazzetti, and Rober F. Worth, "Secret Assault on Terrorism Widens on Two Continents," *The New York Times*, 14 August 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/world/15shadowwar.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/world/15shadowwar.html?_r=1).



Sources: BIJ: Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Drones Team, "Yemen Strikes Visualized," <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/07/02/yemen-strikes-visualised/>; LWJ, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Yemen/code/Yemen-strike.php>. BIJ and LWJ accessed 29 October 2012.

There is thus, unsurprisingly, uncertainty about the death toll of U.S. military strikes in Yemen. For example, the *Long War Journal* reports no civilian deaths in Yemen due to U.S. military strikes in 2011. By contrast, other sources report civilian deaths due to U.S. strikes. For example, *Wired*, noted contradictory reports of an incident on a U.S. strike on 14 July 2011 on a police station in Yemen that had been taken over by militants. While the *Long War Journal* did not report any civilian deaths for the entire year, the *New York Times* reported eight militant

deaths in the strike, and *CNN* reported witness statements that "at least" 30 civilians were killed along with about 20 militants.<sup>10</sup>

The most famous drone strike in Yemen occurred on 30 September 2011 when the U.S. killed a U.S. citizen Anwar al-Alawki and three others. The Obama administration ordered that al-Alawki, a member of AQAP who endorsed and advocated violence against the U.S., including civilians, be put on a terrorist "capture or kill" list in 2010 and several attempts had been made to kill him. Killed with al Alawaki that day was another U.S. citizen, Samir Kahn, the editor of a pro-Al Qaeda magazine, *Inspire*. Two weeks later, Al Alawki's 16 year old son, and 17 year old nephew were killed in U.S. drone strikes. By almost any definition, the editor and the two boys were civilians.

In late November 2011, after 11 months of intensive protests by pro-democracy activists, the government agreed to elections, which occurred in February 2012. The new government, led by President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi acknowledged the U.S. strikes publicly for the first time in October 2012. Hadi told reporters that he personally approved "every operation" by the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command and the CIA in Yemen and had visited the U.S. command facility near the Sanaa.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, U.S. strikes in Yemen in 2012 increased dramatically over previous years. Overall, in the period from 2008- late October 2012, *Long War Journal*, documented 82 civilians killed out of a total of 372 killed in strikes from 2002. *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, counted a minimum of 60 civilian deaths to U.S. strikes from 2002 to 23 October 2012, with a minimum number of total deaths of 362 during this period. Thus, BIJ minimum number of deaths (362) due to U.S. strikes during this period was similar the LWJ (372) total for the same period.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Spencer Ackerman, "Massive Drone Strike Hits Qaeda Cop Station in Yemen," *Wired*, 15 July 2011, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/07/massive-drone-strike-hits-qaeda-cop-station-in-yemen/#more-51982>. Hakim Almasmari, "Massive Demonstrations Turn Deadly in Yemen," *CNN*, 17 July 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/07/15/yemen.drone.strike/>.

<sup>11</sup> Hadi quoted in Greg Miller, "In Interview, Yemeni President Acknowledges Approving U.S. Drone Strikes," *The Washington Post*, 29 September 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/yemeni-president-acknowledges-approving-us-drone-strikes/2012/09/29/09bec2ae-0a56-11e2-aff-d6c7f20a83bf\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/yemeni-president-acknowledges-approving-us-drone-strikes/2012/09/29/09bec2ae-0a56-11e2-aff-d6c7f20a83bf_story.html).

<sup>12</sup> Drones Team, "Yemen: Reported U.S. Covert Action 2012," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/05/08/yemen-reported-us-covert-action-2012/>. Accessed 17 May 2012.

It is in their maximum number killed that the two sites differed dramatically. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism maximum number killed from 2002 to 23 October 2012 is 1,055, with a maximum of 163 of those being civilians.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Drones Team, "Yemen Strikes Visualized," <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/07/02/yemen-strikes-visualised/>.