

COUNTING THE COST: ASSESSING THE HUMAN IMPACT OF DRONES IN YEMEN



A PRESENTATION BY CAMILLA MOLYNEUX

First response by Baraa Shiban and Dr Larry Lewis

12 December 2018, Palace of Westminster

Key findings: The human impact of drones on people in Marib Governorate, Yemen, emphasises the importance of expanding the understanding of civilian harm beyond that of casualties. Through in-depth interviews more than two dozen people the presentation detailed the widespread, constant/continued and severe impact drones have on people's lives. Crucially, the research showed that drones harm not just those targeted by missiles, but people living under their frequent presence. The presentation focused on three areas, namely the impact of drones on mental health, education and family finances. The findings underline the importance of including a multitude of information sources when evaluating military operations and policy and should be taken into account at and learned from not just by the US, but also UK Government and Military.

Research background: Camilla Molyneux travelled to Marib, Yemen in July 2018 to investigate the human impact of drones. There she conducted in-depth interviews with several dozen people: the majority of the interviewees were women, because according to local culture and Muslim tradition only women can talk to strangers about the experiences of all the family's members. The people interviewed lived at different locations outside the city, in villages, small makeshift refugee camps or in a isolated house in the desert. Molyneux travelled to the homes some of the interviewees, talked to local community activists and herself heard drones flying when visiting a remote house in the desert. In addition, Molyneux also interviewed local government official, and spoke to high level national politicians and Saudi Special Forces officials.

Biography: Camilla Molyneux is the APPG Drones Researcher. She has previously worked at Reprieve, researching drones and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa, as the Human Rights Officer at the Norwegian Embassy to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Bahrain and Oman, and has conducted extensive research into 'War in Terror' policies.

First responses by:

- Baraa Shiban, Reprieve caseworker, Yemeni activist and Representative for the Youth Delegation to the National Dialogue in Yemen.
 - Dr Larry Lewis, author of the Obama Administration's Civilian Casualty Policy
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Can people hear the drones? Whether people can hear or see drones from the ground has been the topic of some controversy: Whereas people associated with the US or UK military suggest they do not, NGOs and journalists with contacts on the ground have reported otherwise. The data collected by Molyneux shows that people do hear and see drones, with the acknowledgement that *some* of the aircraft likely are manned. However, from the perspective of harm to people on the ground, *where* aircrafts are piloted from makes minimal difference. Interviews with dozens of unconnected people all provided intimate details of drone activity, from visuals to sound: during one interview, a young child interrupted his mother to describe what a drone looks like. The interviewees all shared stories detailing how drones impact their daily lives. For instance, one woman said: *'When they [the children] hear the drones, they run home from school calling for their mothers, then everyone gets into their cars and evacuate the village...'* This village evacuates two to four times a month. A man living elsewhere told me: *'The drones fly lower during the night, they are so loud it can be difficult to hear the TV.'* The sound directly impacts children and adults' ability to sleep and causes widespread fear. Accounts also showed a direct causality between the presence of drones and people applying self-restrictions on their movements:

'One day I was about to go outside, my husband stopped me. He could hear the drone. I stayed inside all day.' Similarly, mothers restrict children's play to inside, and when the perceived danger of strikes on their way to, or at school are high, children stay at home.

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- A mother, Marib



The impact of drones on mental health. The renowned psychiatrist Bruce Perry has researched children and trauma extensively. His findings show that trauma at a young age can have a chronic and detrimental effects on the development of the brain. In fact, his research shows: “the more our stress-response system is activated in uncontrollable ways, the less able we are to handle even small amounts of stress”.¹ As such, the brain of a child living in an unsafe environment may focus on survival mechanisms only. Parents told Molyneux that their children suffered from trauma, sleep deprivation and fear. One mother described her young son’s repeated suicide attempts. Molyneux encouraged the audience to think about what effect living under drones and in constant fear that you, your friends or family might be killing may have on children? What about the loss of a parent, sibling or friend? Perry’s research shows that feelings, such as fear, are contagious. As such it seems likely that the fear experienced by adults may project onto children. Adults suffer from many of the same mental health issues as children, including depression, fear and the loss of a loved one, including concerns over the impact this may have (emotionally and financially) on the family. In addition, the knowledge that the ‘drone war’ is an open-ended war, likely feeds into the frustration of not being able to provide their children with a safe future. Finally, several women reported airstrikes causing them to have miscarriages, which comes with their own mental health implications.

“My son has tried to commit suicide multiple times. He walks to a nearby busy road and lies down in the middle. He says he wants to join his father [who was killed by a drone strike] in heaven”
- Mother, Marib

The impact of drones on education. Drones had three primary effects on children’s ability to go to school. First, the death of a family member caused some children to drop out of school in order to contribute to providing for the family. The number of children working has likely increased due to the additional financial burden put on people already living in economic difficulty by the civil war. When young children and teens enter the workforce, they miss out on crucial education, which, in Marib is already a problem as the competition for work is tough. Second, some children are prevented from going to school because the travel is too dangerous. Finally, the ability of children to learn in the classroom can be significantly reduced when drones fly above schools, in addition to the trauma and stress children bring with them to school from unsafe homes, as described in the section above. Finally, an important part of a child’s education and socialisation is play, however, this is made hard in places without places to play safely.

¹Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz (2017) *The boy who was raised as a dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist’s Notebook: What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us about Loss, Love and Healing*. 3rd edition. Basic Books.



The impact of drones on family

finances. Drones have three primary and direct impacts on family finances. First, when a breadwinner is killed it falls upon his family, especially wife, but also children, to compensate for the lost income. In a society where women primarily conduct unpaid work, where paid work has only recently been opened to women and competition is high, many resort to begging. This often leaves children home alone for long hours or out working instead of attending school. Second, airstrikes damage property, such as homes as homes and vehicles. Families can rarely afford to rebuild or replace damaged property and may as a result lose out on important income. Moreover, families are forced to continue to live in damaged houses or in makeshift homes serving as a constant reminder of the airstrike. Finally, livestock are often killed in airstrikes both in Yemen and Somalia. Without money to replace livestock, responsible for the primary income of many families in rural Marib, people struggle to make ends meet, go hungry and end up in

debt. In addition, the presence of drones has restricted the livelihoods of people more broadly. Airstrikes killing or injuring farmers and shepherds have scared people out agriculture or seek the best pasture for their animals.

Takeaways from *the human impact of drones*: lessons and actions

The people on the ground in Marib provide important insight into the effectiveness and on-the-ground impact of 'war on terror' policies.

There is a consensus among people in Marib, from rural communities, to tribes and the government, that Al Qaeda must be stopped. Whilst tribes already operate a strict exclusion-and-reporting programme (of all members who have joined terrorist networks), the local government has told US and UK officials that it wants to replace drones with local efforts to capture, prosecute and try suspects, specifically requesting assistance to develop and improve the

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local judiciary. Furthermore, local communities have expressed strong wishes to assist in the capture effort, requesting pictures of wanted suspects.

As the impacts of drones on the ground become clear, it is essential that the UK ensures that military assistance provided to allies is legal and subject to appropriate oversight and accountability. The APPG on Drones report titled: *'The UK's Use of Drones: Working with Partners'* outlined the possible risks to British military personnel and ministers, including criminal liability for murder, if providing assistance to the unlawful acts of allies. By supplementing local information from non-military sources with conventional military intelligence, the military will be better equipped to evaluate its policies and activities and ensure adherence to British laws and values.

The UK should leverage its position as a global leader and standard-setter to push for a international framework that restricts drone use, technology development and proliferation to prevent the slippage of principles set out in international war - such as restricting the use of force outside declared battlefields - and limit civilian casualties and harm. Moreover, this policy could prevent adversaries from developing technology - such as lethal autonomous weapons - that the UK cannot afford or has made commitments not pursue.

First responses by Baraa Shiban and Dr Larry Lewis

Baraa Shiban, who has investigated many strikes on the ground in Yemen, said that the first thing victims ask him is always: 'Why don't they talk to us?' People who have been subject to airstrikes want to assist in the capture of terrorists and moreover, want a chance to prove their innocence *before* they are killed by airstrikes. Shiban continued by clarifying an often generalised myth about drones: they do not radicalise large populations in Yemen. People acknowledge that they may live in ungoverned places that lack government institutions to stop terrorists. Nevertheless, it is common to link the presence of drones and the harm caused by them to the West. Shiban concluded by emphasising that drones cannot replace local police and security efforts. Pointing to Marib as a prime example, he highlighted how terrorist attacks in the city only stopped once local police and security forces gained control and implemented measures that stabilised and secured the city, years after drone strikes first commenced.

Dr Larry Lewis, who has analysed great numbers of quantitative data on US and coalition airstrikes in Afghanistan, said Molyneux's was an important qualitative analysis and that the emphasis on civilian harm was timely and necessary. He stressed the disparity between the intelligence and understanding of the ground truth between the military and people living under drones. Following on from this, Lewis argued that the lack of information from non-military sources in the intelligence process was part of the problem. As such, analysis like that presented by Molyneux, focusing on the individuals subject to policy and departing from a place of empathy was strongly missing. Furthermore Lewis raised several

questions that he urged the audience, but also more so governments and militaries to make clear: What is the legal framework drones operate within, and what is the long-term strategy? The latter in particular, Lewis said, was often lost. Finally, Lewis urged the audience to think about who should be part in conversations about these questions in the US, and asked what the UK could learn from US operations in Yemen to avoid making similar mistakes?

Further comments and questions

Gill Furniss MP for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough emphasised her dedication to the people of Yemen and activity on issues the civil war, in part due to her many Yemeni constituents. Furniss found the presentation enlightening and particularly insightful for those seeking further understanding of the many harms experienced by people in Yemen. Furniss concluded by expressing her willingness to participate in parliamentary business, from PQs to EDMs and Westminster Hall Debates on the topic of Yemen.

Professor Paul Schulte of Birmingham University asked the panel what the alternative to drones might be and whether the human impact of drones was different from the impacts of alternatives.

Molyneux explained that the alternative to drones is often no operation at all. Regularly flying in operational areas outside declared battlefields, the missions are deemed too risky, either politically, or the risk to a pilot's life is too high. We need to move away from a commonly held assumption that if not a drone, a manned aircraft. As such, the alternative to drones might often be no military operation at all, which in the case of the people in Marib, would improve their lives significantly.

Shiban urged the audience to think outside of the box: Drones cannot replace police and security forces on the ground. Instead Shiban suggested, investment into local security and police infrastructure, as seen in Marib, is an apt alternative that prevents further terrorist attacks. Shiban recognised that this might be a costly alternative. However, Molyneux and Larry both noted that with the hourly fly-rate of Reapers at more than X, local investments may from an economic point of view, may be preferential.

A member of the audience asked about the panels thoughts on reports of the Trump Administration's dramatic increase in drone strikes.

Molyneux said the people in Marib had noticed both and increase in strikes, presence of drones, and that the aircrafts had been flying at a lower altitude since Trump took office.

Dr Lewis added that whilst the Trump Administration drastically had increased the number of strikes in 2017, the numbers seen in 2017 had thankfully not continued into 2018.

Adam Holloway MP and Chair of the Group remarked on how Parliament rarely takes to seek out 'ground truth' as Molyneux has done at great cost and personal risk: a highly admirable trait. Ground truth should be an integral part of informing policy, and provides a broader base of information, including on their less visible consequences.

Baroness Stern, Co-Chair of the Group said the presentation was impressive and impactful and highlighted that, in the end, these are the people who are affected the most. Baroness Stern reflected on how this is often forgotten in conversations where we discuss the technology, legality or policy of drones and from a British or Western perspective. Finally, Baroness Stern suggested that the group should return to this topic every two-to-three months.