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Letter From Yemen

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The remarkable London-based legal charity, Reprieve (i) which defends lives "from death row to Guantanamo Bay", providing legal support for prisoners unable to pay for themselves, have released a letter to President Obama, and Yemen's President Hadi from Faisal bin Ali Jaber, a Yemeni engineer who lost his nephew and brother-in-law in a US drone strike on Hadhramout Governorate, in August 2012.

The letter was released to coincide with the meeting between President Obama and President Hadi at the white House at which Obama spoke of the visit reinforcing: "the strong partnership and cooperation that's developed between the United States and the government of Yemen" and thanking President Hadi and his government for the strong cooperation that they've offered when it comes to counterterrorism." (ii) Translation, give license for the US to execute, without Judge or jury, people like Mr Jaber's relatives, on Obama's signature.

The day the letter was released, there was another strike on Hadhramout, with its wadis, crops of wheat, millet, coffee, date palm and coconut groves and herds of sheep and goats.

Further, as Rep. Ron Paul has just written: "Most Americans are probably unaware that over the past two weeks the US has launched at least eight drone attacks in Yemen, in which dozens have been killed. It is the largest US escalation of attacks on Yemen in more than a decade." (iii)

Mr Jaber does not see the US extrajudicial assassinations as "counterterrorism" and appeals to President Obama to take heed of the anti-drone anger in Yemen. He writes:

"Our family are not your enemy. In fact, the people you killed had strongly and publicly opposed al-Qa'ida (his brother-in-law) Salem was an Imam. The Friday before his death, he gave a guest sermon in the Khashamir mosque denouncing al-Qa'ida's hateful ideology. It was not the first of these sermons, but regrettably, it was his last."

"Our town was no battlefield. We had no warning – our local police were never asked to make any arrest. My young cousin Waleed was a policeman, before the strike cut short his life."

Here is the letter in full. That "international community" should hang its collective head in shame:

> Dear President Obama and President Hadi:
>
> > My name is Faisal bin Ali Jaber. I am a Yemeni engineer from Hadramout, employed by Yemen's equivalent of the Environmental Protection Agency. I am writing today because I read in the news that you will be meeting in the White House on

Thursday, August 1, to discuss the "counter-terrorism partnership" between the US and Yemen.

My family has personally experienced this partnership. A year ago this August, a drone strike in my ancestral village killed my brother-in-law, Salem bin Ali Jaber, and my twenty-one-year-old nephew, Waleed.

President Obama, you said in a recent speech that the United States is "at war with an organisation that right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first." This war against al-Qa'ida, you added, "is a just war – a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense."

President Hadi, on a trip to the United States last September, you claimed that "every operation [in Yemen], before taking place, (has) permission from the President." You also asserted that "the drone technologically is more advanced than the human brain".

Why, then, last August, did you both send drones to attack my innocent brother-in-law and nephew? Our family are not your enemy. In fact, the people you killed had strongly and publicly opposed al-Qa'ida. Salem was an Imam. The Friday before his death, he gave a guest sermon in the Khashamir mosque denouncing al-Qa'ida's hateful ideology. It was not the first of these sermons, but regrettably, it was his last.

In months of grieving, my family have received no acknowledgement or apology from the U.S. or Yemen. We've struggled to square our tragedy with the words in your speeches.

How was this "self-defense"? My family worried that militants would target Salem for his sermons. We never anticipated his death would come from above, at the hands of the United States. In his death you lost a potential ally – in fact, because word of the killing spread immediately through the region, I fear you have lost thousands.

How was this "in last resort"? Our town was no battlefield. We had no warning – our local police were never asked to make any arrest. My young cousin Waleed was a policeman, before the strike cut short his life.

How was this "proportionate"? The strike devastated our community. The day before the strike, Khashamir buzzed with celebrations for my eldest son's wedding. Our wedding videos show Salem and young Waleed in a crowd of dancing revellers, joining the celebration. Traditionally, this revelry would have gone on for days – but for the attack. Afterwards, it was days before I could persuade my eldest daughter to leave the house, such was her terror of fire from the skies.

The strike left a stark lesson in its wake – not just in my village, but across Hadramout and wider Yemen. The lesson, I am afraid, is that neither the current U.S. or Yemeni administrations bother to distinguish friend from foe. In speech after speech after the attack, community leaders stood and said: if Salem was not safe, none of us are.

Your silence in the face of these injustices only makes matters worse. If the strike was a mistake, the family- like all wrongly bereaved families of this secret air war – deserve a formal apology.

To this day I wish no vengeance against the United States or Yemeni governments. But not everyone in Yemen feels the same. Every dead innocent swells the ranks of those you are fighting.

All Yemen has begun to take notice of drones – and they object. Only this month, Yemen's National Dialogue Conference, a quasi-Constitutional Convention which I understand the U.S. underwrites, almost unanimously voted to prohibit the unregulated use of drones in our country.

With respect, you cannot continue to behave as if innocent deaths like those in my family are irrelevant. If the Yemeni and American Presidents refuse to engage with overwhelming popular sentiment in Yemen, you will defeat your own counter-terrorism aims.

Thank you for your consideration. I would appreciate the courtesy of a reply.

Yours Sincerely,

Faisal bin Ali Jaber

Sana'a, Yemen

i. http://www.reprieve.org.uk

ii. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/01/remarks-president-obama-and-president-hadi-yemen-after-bilateral-meeting

iii. http://www.globalresearch.ca/why-are-we-at-war-in-yemen/5345692

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