

Yemen: In the Shadow of Death

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It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole human race and the world ... If I say no to all these secular forces, I also say yes to all that is good in the world and in humanity. I say yes to all that is beautiful in nature ... I say yes to all the men and women who are my brothers and sisters in the world.— Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, poet, philosopher, teacher, and activist (1915-1968)

How did Nawar al-Awlaki, an 8-year-old child, die at the hands of a Navy Seal during last month's nighttime raid in Yemen? We know from credible reports that she was shot in the neck at close range and received no medical aid throughout the remaining two hours of her life. Some questions come to mind: Was the shooting intentional? Did the soldier deliberately and with "malice aforethought" point his weapon at Nawar and squeeze the trigger, fully aware that he was murdering in cold blood an innocent child? For that matter, might he have been influenced, if only subliminally, by our Commander-in-Chief's prescription for winning the so-called "war on terror"? During his campaign for the presidency, Trump announced that a sure-fire strategy for defeating ISIS had to involve eliminating their families as well as the terrorists themselves. Here are his exact words:

When you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families. They care about their lives. Don't kid yourself. But they say they don't care about their lives. You have to take out their families.

Nawar was part of a family that has the dubious honor of having lost several members to extrajudicial assassinations carried out by CIA drones and their pilots, safely embedded in military bases thousands of miles away. In 2011, Nawar's father, Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen living in Yemen, was successfully "neutralized" despite his having never been charged with or convicted of a crime. (At one time, Awlaki had been viewed as a "moderate Muslim cleric" whom the Pentagon, soon after 9/11, consulted about how to deal with extremism. His subsequent radicalization, however, and his advocacy of a violent response to the violence inflicted by the United States on Muslim countries landed him on Obama's hit list. For Awlaki, born and educated in America, the Constitutional provision for due process of law simply did not apply.)

"Two weeks after the killing of Awlaki," journalist Glen Greenwald writes, "a separate CIA drone strike in Yemen killed his 16-year-old American-born son Abdulrahman, along with the boy's 17-year-old cousin and several other innocent Yemenis." These murders were the handiwork of our beloved, peace-loving former president Barack Obama. And now Donald Trump, having picked up where Obama left off, authorized the commando raid by the Navy's SEAL Team 6 that resulted in the death of one U.S. service member and the deaths

of 30 civilians, including 10 women and children. The justification for the raid was the purported existence of a compound where al Qaeda masterminds had gathered and where computer records and other data might possibly reveal the group's plans for future terrorist attacks, like the one carried out in Paris from January 7-9, 2015 in which three French-born assailants murdered a total of 17 people at the offices of the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine, a kosher grocery store, and in a Paris suburb.

Some critics are calling the January 30 raid in Yemen a botched affair. Insufficient or incorrect intelligence and poor planning, they argue, are responsible for the chaos that erupted when the Navy Seals launched their raid and ended up causing excessive "collateral damage." Sean Spicer, Trump's adversarial press secretary, lashed out at anyone — including Arizona Senator John McCain — who calls the raid a failure. In Spicer's view, such malcontents and naysayers owe an apology to Ryan Owens, the soldier who was killed in the raid: "It's absolutely a success, and I think anyone that would suggest [the raid is] not a success does a disservice to the life of Chief Ryan Owens."

What about the life of Nawar al-Awlaki and the lives of the other women and children whom the soldiers ended up killing? Don't they deserve an apology? Better than an apology, don't their families deserve some form of compensation for the loss of their loved ones? Even more to the point, don't we all deserve an explanation for why the United States is conducting drone strikes and clandestine military operations against the poorest country in the Middle East while supporting the Saudi-led coalition against Houthi rebels and allied military forces?

Again and again, my thoughts return to Nawar, the beautiful child whose all-too-brief life ended when a U.S. commando unit, acting under orders, unleashed their awesome firepower in the course of storming an Al Qaeda outpost in central Yemen. And I can't help but ask myself, in this scenario, who are the terrorists? How much difference is there between masked militants opening fire on innocent civilians in Paris, Istanbul, or any number of other places in the world, and heavily armed soldiers conducting a surprise attack that led to so many unnecessary deaths and will likely inspire more disillusioned young people to join the ranks of extremists.

Nawar, sadly, is not alone. She is one of countless children killed or wounded in the course of America's relentless "war on terror" in which, apparently, we are entitled to bomb, shell, sanction, or otherwise immiserate any country or people that somehow threatens our national security — and to do so with absolute impunity. In the case of Yemen, the U.S. is complicit in the ongoing destruction of the country. The biggest culprit, of course, is Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the United Arab Emirates. In 2015, the Saudis intervened in Yemen's civil war to put down the Houthis, a minority sect within Shi'a Islam, believing that Houthi forces were supported by Saudi Arabia's arch-rival — Iran. Since the Saudis began their assault, the U.S. has provided intelligence, logistical support, and weapons, in addition to mid-air re-fueling of Saudi bombers. Since 2009, when Obama began his first term, the U.S. has sold more than \$115 billion in weapons, including cluster munitions, banned in 2008 under the terms of the Convention on Cluster Munitions, a treaty signed by 116 nations. The United States and more than 80 other countries have *not* agreed to ban the manufacture or deployment of cluster munitions, though in May 2016 the Obama Administration chose to stop selling cluster bombs to Saudi Arabia in response to the growing number of civilian casualties attributed to the use of this indiscriminate weapon.

However one parses the various players in Yemen's two-year-old conflict and their reasons

for continuing the bloodshed, one thing is certain: the people of Yemen are undergoing one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. According to the latest report from UNICEF on conditions in Yemen, the war that began in 2015 (and has been fueled by U.S support for Saudi Arabia's bombing campaign) about 70 percent of the population, or 18.8 million people, are in need of humanitarian assistance. More than 10,000 people have died and 3 million have been displaced as direct results of the conflict. Over one thousand of those deaths have been children like Nawar al-Awlaki. The war has only worsened the already debilitating effects of Yemen's longstanding poverty, including the near collapse of the country's healthcare system and a 200 percent increase since 2014 in children suffering from [severe acute malnutrition](#). At least 2.2 million children are in need of urgent care in a country where Saudi coalition aircraft have bombed over fifty-eight hospitals and where access to medical facilities is extremely limited.

In the absence of a functioning healthcare system, safe water and sanitation, and with high rates of malnutrition, many of the children are dying from easily preventable diseases. Heartbreaking photographs of severely malnourished children in Yemen remind me of those I visited in public hospitals in Iraq where years of U.S.- and UK-enforced sanctions led to severe shortages of life-saving drugs and nutrient-poor diets for mothers and their children. Like the children in Yemen, the Iraqi children were wasting away and given palliative care at best. They would die, and their deaths would go unnoticed and unmarked in the countries that bore the lion's share of responsibility for what Hans Von Sponeck and Denis Halliday, former UN officials, have rightly called genocide.

In a family photo taken before her death, Nawar al-Awlaki is wearing a bright red bow in her hair and holding her smiling face in her hands. The photo will no doubt become a lasting emblem, an iconic moment in this little girl's life. Other imperishable images come to mind, like the one of Alan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed up on the shore of a Turkish beach. Alan, his older brother Galip, and their mother Rehan all perished at sea while the family was hoping to find refuge in Canada. Just as wrenching is the image of 5-year-old Samar Hassan, an Iraqi child whose parents were killed by U.S. soldiers in the northern Iraqi town of Tal Afar in 2005. In the photo, Samar is screaming in terror and spattered with the blood of her parents.

Several years ago, I encountered another Iraqi family who suffered the same fate at the hands of U.S. soldiers. While driving from Mosul to Baghdad to spend the holidays with relatives, they came too close to a U.S. military vehicle. The soldiers, following protocol, opened fire. The driver died instantly. The car went up in flames. The father managed to crawl out of the burning vehicle and pull his two young sons to safety. Then he went back to rescue his wife, but it was too late. The soldiers restrained him, knowing he too would die in the flames if they let him go.

When we met in Boston, he was with the younger of his two boys. The child had been severely burned and would need multiple surgeries and skin grafts over the next several years. But the trauma he had suffered, watching his mother burn to death inside the car they had been riding in, will be with him for the rest of his life.

But of course none of this really matters, certainly not to the *apparatchiks* who devise America's foreign policy, nor to the generals who implement policy decisions. Civilians killed in a botched raid in Yemen? Entire families blown to pieces by a Hellfire missile? To quote Harold Pinter, British playwright and 2005 Nobel Prize winner in literature:

It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn't happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest. The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them.

We can do more than talk about them. We can open our hearts to the suffering of people in places like Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Libya where the U.S. government and its military, under the pretext of advancing "freedom and democracy," have committed or abetted crimes against humanity. But even that is not enough. We have a responsibility to speak out against these crimes and the ones who perpetrate them, and to work toward creating an effective, politically motivated, nonviolent resistance to the ongoing and seemingly non-ending imperial wars. Above all, we can respond to the violence of war with a deepening sense of shared humanity and an activism motivated, ultimately, by love.

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