



Season 2 Episode 1 - Made in the USA: Arms Sales and Civilian Harm
Interview Transcript: Ali Jameel, Accountability & Redress Director, Mwatana for Human Rights

Annie: Ali, you are the accountability and redress director at Mwatana for Human Rights, a Yemeni organization that has done critical work advocating for human rights, documenting civilian harm, and supporting victims of the war in Yemen. Listeners might remember that we spoke to your colleague Bonyan about civilian casualty investigations during our first season. Can you explain what you do at Mwatana?

Ali: Mwatana is a Yemeni NGO that defends human rights. The work that we do falls into five main buckets. Bucket number one is the documentation of international humanitarian law and international law of human rights violations, committed by all warring parties in Yemen. We do that through a team of field researchers that are in almost every governorate in Yemen: they document violations on a daily basis. And then bucket number two is legal support. For legal support, we also have lawyers in the field in different Yemeni , and they provide legal support and legal advice to victims of detention-related abuses. The third bucket that we do is advocacy, advocating for human rights issues, inside and outside of Yemen. The fourth bucket is awareness raising: Mwatana tries to do further work on the community level to raise awareness of human rights and human rights violations. And the final bucket is legal action, which mainly my team works on, in which we try to do efforts in terms of accountability and redress on perpetrators involved in the war in Yemen.

Annie: Your organization often describes the war in Yemen as the 'forgotten war' or an ignored war. Can you start by explaining what the war has looked like for civilians in the last few years and what the role of the United States has been?

Ali: We usually say that the war in Yemen is a forgotten war because we think that the war in Yemen should have stopped a long time ago. For people who are working on Yemen, and in Yemen on human rights, it is really frustrating because all of this stuff that is happening could have stopped one year ago, two years ago, three years ago, maybe five years ago, if countries stopped fueling warring parties in Yemen with arms and made use of their pressure on warring parties to stop this war. We believe that there is no potential for military operations in Yemen. And it seems that the war is almost blocked to be solved through military operations. But there is an international interest in the war in Yemen and civilians are paying the price of this interest.

Annie: Ali, do you recall a specific civilian harm incident that was caused using US weapons?

Ali: Yes, there are several incidents, but I would like to speak about an incident that happened in April of 2018 in which an airstrike happened on a wedding party. The wedding party was in a village in Hajjah, to the northwest of Yemen. Normal civilian people in a poor, rural area were having a wedding party and right in the middle of the party, the airstrikes happened. They were really very bloody airstrikes in which 21 civilians were killed, including

11 children, and 97 injured, including 48 children and two women. We heard about this incident during the night of the incident, because the incident happened at 10pm. Next day in the morning, three of the team in Mwatana traveled from Sana'a to the area of the strike to join the field researcher in documentation of this incident, because it is a big incident that requires a bigger team.

We met with victims, survivors, family members, and we looked into the aftermath of the airstrikes. We were able to find pieces of the remnants of the weapon used for these airstrikes, and we were able to share this: to take pictures of these weapon remnants. Then we contracted a weapon expert to do analysis of the weapon used. The result of the analysis by the expert says that this weapon is US made, it is a GPU-12 Paveway II laser guided bomb with MK-82 warheads. It should be a precise bomb. Targeting this wedding with such a bomb, it must have been intentional because it is not a bomb that can be some sort of indiscriminate attack. Because the bomb is laser guided, it should be very precise.

Annie: You talked about speaking with victims and survivors and documenting the aftermath. Can you talk a little bit more about what that aftermath has looked like for those families impacted?

Ali: The wedding was in almost something like a tent next to a house. The area was a poor area, people did not have public services. All they have are small houses. And this airstrike just ruined the house, killed too many people. When you meet with people after the strikes, you see how different people have different sufferings. We met with the mother of the groom and she was really, really sad about what happened to the wedding. We also met another woman who used to put the cow milk inside [of the house]. And she was really feeling sad about her tool, because it is part of her food security and it is not easy for her to get another tool. Maybe to other people like Saudis or Americans, this type of suffering is nothing but to this woman, it was a really, really sad moment.

Annie: And based on what we know about US support during the war, I imagine that this story is sadly not very unique. Is this something that Mwatana has documented frequently: US or weapons from other exporters being used for this kind of harm?

Ali: Yes, this incident is part of a report that we published with the support of PAX. The report highlights 27 incidents in which Mwatana was able to find remnants of the weapon used. Speaking of finding the remnants, it is really not an easy thing to find remnants of the weapon used. We faced many challenges in doing that. All the cases in which Mwatana was able to find the remnants used are not more than 50 cases, while Mwatana has already documented more than a thousand cases of errors of airstrikes committed by the Saudi and UAE-led coalition. The number of cases of which we were able to find the weapon remnants is really a very small fraction of the number of cases that we have documented. And we always say that what we have documented is not everything. Within our capacities, we cannot document everything: we are just a local Yemeni NGO, we cannot document everything. But speaking of the high disproportionality between what we have found the remnants for and what we have not, there might be a very big chance to find weapons that were made in other areas in the world. We usually read and hear and research about countries that support the warring parties in Yemen with weapons. But what we have found until now evidence for is for the US, the UK and Italy. I am sure that if we were able to find more remnants, if we were able to work in perfect conditions, we might see other countries involved in the war in Yemen.

Annie: We have been talking now, of course, about US weapons or weapons from other countries being used directly in a strike. But of course, US support for warring parties has been broader than that. Can you talk a little bit about what that other support has looked like and how Mwatana has approached that?

Ali: Unfortunately, what we have worked on regarding military support is only about the weapon remnants that we find, because this is what falls under our methodology. That is like something that we can research and mainly our work is in the field. But still supporting the countries involved in Yemen is really critical in keeping the war moving forward or stopping the war. I was in a panel last year with a researcher from Spain who was speaking about how important technical support is for the coalition to continue their airstrikes. He stated that all the new high technology fighter jets cannot operate for more than five days without technical support. So there are many countries in the world that can stop the war in Yemen, just by stopping this technical support, by stopping the transfer of weapons to Yemen.

Annie: That is obviously a very real practical impact in allowing the war to continue. What do you see as the political signal that that support also sends?

Ali: It is a very clear signal that despite what you have done in Yemen, you still can go further. There are other signals that that happens. Now, the warring parties at the moment have a signal to continue the war because there are still countries that support them with weapons. There are countries that support them with military technical support. Also, last year, we lost the only independent UN mechanism investigating human rights violations in Yemen, the GEE [Group of Eminent Experts]. So, the GEE started its mandate to investigate the human rights violations in Yemen in 2017. Unfortunately, in 2021, member states of the Human Rights Council did not renew the mandate of the GEE, the group of eminent experts, and we lost the independent UN mechanism researching, documenting and reporting on Yemen. This also is another signal for warring parties to continue and it was really clear that after the termination of the mandate, which happened in October 2021, there was a very high escalation in the number of airstrikes, starting in November 2021, that led to many bloody airstrikes from November until beginning of 2022. One of these cases was a case in which the Saudi-led coalition launched an airstrike on a detention facility in the north of Yemen in Saada. The result was over 250 human casualties, deaths and injuries.

Annie: Why do you think that this kind of support, from the US for example, has continued despite clear evidence of harm like so much of what is found in your reporting?

Ali: I think because there are governments that have chosen economic interests over human rights. There are countries that think more about national income than about human rights and the lives of others somewhere else in the world.

Annie: I want to go back a little bit to the story that you told about the strike on the wedding party. I am wondering if you can just talk a little bit more about the detail of what it was like to find those weapon remnants and how you went about that specific documentation process and what it was about what you found that helped you know what it was or help the weapon expert know what it was?

Ali: Our team is trained in how to deal with weapon remnants, because these remnants can be sharp, can be hazardous, can sometimes explode again. But they know how to deal with these weapon remnants. And then they know how to take pictures of these weapon remnants. For example, one of the tips that they use is to put a pen next to the weapon remnant: this will help an expert to know the dimensions of the space, because weapons all over the world have the same size, which is 12 to 14 centimeters. And this helps the weapon expert to know the dimensions of this piece. Like they know of which pieces to take pictures, which angle they should take. Making sure that there is enough contrast between the background and the color of the weapon remnant, and also to make sure that the device that they are taking the picture with is taking the metadata for this picture. So, the cell phone or the camera that they are taking the picture with is capturing the date, time and location inside the metadata. This would help us for accountability work. If we go for any legal action, then

there it is easy to prove the crime, that 'there is this weapon piece that we found in this location and on this date' and then you can go to Google Earth and check before and after and see the destruction clearly on the satellite imagery.

Annie: Did the survivors of the strike know that it was a US bomb?

Ali: The survivors? We have been in contact with the survivors for several times. Unfortunately, the survivors had money paid from the coalition as condolence payments. It was a very small amount of money. And unfortunately, the Houthi armed group that controls the area knew about this payment, and then they took them so we were not able later on to speak with the families again. I know that some of them know that the weapon that was used was American. To them, whether it was made in America or in the UK or in France or any other place in the world, this does not change the reality that they lost their loved ones, that they lost their house. They really need reparations to take place and also accountability for perpetrators and people who were involved and implicit in this war.

Annie: That actually brings me to my next question, which is about your asks for the warring parties. Because you are focusing on arms transfers today, I am also curious about your asks, especially for the US government, and other governments that are providing this kind of support to the warring parties.

Ali: For US governments and other governments as well, our ask is to stop military support and weapon transfers to warring parties in Yemen, to all warring parties in Yemen. Our asks even go beyond that: we are expecting from them to be more active in establishing a criminally-focused mechanism to investigate war crimes in Yemen and also to push for peace in Yemen. Countries like the US, UK, France, they have very strong relationships with countries that are involved in the war in Yemen and they can have leverage to push for peace in Yemen. I do not think that this is something impossible for them; I think it is something very easy to reach. But then I think they should use this leverage and they should push for peace in Yemen, and also to make sure that accountability and redress for victims takes place in the future.