

# Yemen: Death in Al Ghayil

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BY IONA CRAIG



Mabkhout Ali al Ameri stands with his 18-month-old son, Mohammed, in the village of al Ghayil in Yemen's al Bayda province. Mabkhout's wife, Fatim Saleh Mohsen, was shot in the back of the head by helicopter gunship fire as she fled with Mohammed in her arms during a U.S. raid. Image courtesy of The Intercept. Yemen, 2017.

**On January 29**, 5-year-old Sinan al Ameri was asleep with his mother, his aunt, and 12 other children in a one-room stone hut typical of poor rural villages in the highlands of Yemen. A little after 1 a.m., the women and children awoke to the sound of a gunfight erupting a few hundred feet away. Roughly 30 members of Navy SEAL Team 6 were storming the eastern hillside of the remote settlement.

According to residents of the village of al Ghayil, in Yemen's al Bayda province, the first to die in the assault was 13-year-old Nasser al Dhahab. The house of his uncle, Sheikh Abdulraouf al Dhahab, and the building behind it, the home of 65-year-old Abdallah al Ameri and his son Mohammed al Ameri, 38, appeared to be the targets of the U.S. forces, who called in air support as they were pinned down in a nearly hourlong firefight.

With the SEALs taking heavy fire on the lower slopes, attack helicopters swept over the hillside hamlet above. In what seemed to be blind panic, the gunships bombarded the entire village, striking more than a dozen buildings, razing stone dwellings where families slept, and wiping out more than 120 goats, sheep, and donkeys.

Three projectiles tore through the straw and timber roof of the home where Sinan slept. Cowering in a corner, Sinan's mother, 30-year-old Fatim Saleh Mohsen, decided to flee the bombardment. Grabbing her 18-month-old son and ushering her terrified children into the narrow outdoor passageway between the tightly packed dwellings, she headed into the open. Over a week later, Sinan's aunt Nadr al Ameri wept as she stood in the same room and recalled watching her sister run out the door into the darkness.

Nesma al Ameri, an elderly village matriarch who lost four family members in the raid, described how the attack helicopters began firing down on anything that moved. As she recounted the horror of what happened, Sinan tapped her on the arm. “No, no. The bullets were coming from behind,” the 5-year-old insisted, interrupting to demonstrate how he was shot at and his mother gunned down as they ran for their lives. “From here to here,” Sinan said, putting two fingers to the back of his head and drawing an invisible line to illustrate the direction of the bullet exiting her forehead. His mother fell to the ground next to him, still clutching his baby brother in her arms. Sinan kept running.

His mother’s body was found in the early light of dawn, the front of her head split open. The baby was wounded but alive. Sinan’s mother was one of at least six women killed in the raid, the first counterterrorism operation of the Trump administration, which also left 10 children under the age of 13 dead. “She was hit by the plane. The American plane,” explained Sinan. “She’s in heaven now,” he added with a shy smile, seemingly unaware of the enormity of what he had witnessed or, as yet, the impact of his loss. “Dog Trump,” declared Nesma, turning to the other women in the room for agreement. “Yes, the dog Trump,” they agreed.

According to White House press secretary Sean Spicer, the al Ghayil raid “was a very, very well thought out and executed effort,” planning for which began under the Obama administration back in November 2016. Although Ned Price, former National Security Council spokesperson, and Colin Kahl, the national security adviser under Vice President Biden, challenged Spicer’s account, what is agreed upon is that Trump gave the final green light over dinner at the White House

([http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/war\\_stories/2017/02/who\\_s\\_to\\_blame\\_for\\_the\\_botched\\_yemen\\_raid\\_that\\_killed\\_a\\_navy\\_](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2017/02/who_s_to_blame_for_the_botched_yemen_raid_that_killed_a_navy_?hpid=hp-top-stories%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpid=hp-top-stories%3Ahomepage%2Fstory) January 25. According to two people with direct knowledge, the White House did not notify the U.S. ambassador to Yemen in advance of the operation.



A girl stands in the burnt-out remains of a house destroyed during the U.S. Navy SEAL raid in the village of al Ghayil on January 29. Image by Iona Craig. Yemen, 2017.

*The Intercept’s* reporting from al Ghayil in the aftermath of the raid and the eyewitness accounts provided by residents, as well as information from current and former military officials, challenge many of the Trump administration’s key claims about the “highly successful” operation, from the description of an assault on a fortified compound — there are no compounds or walled-off houses in the village — to the “large amounts of vital intelligence” the president said were collected.

According to a current U.S. special operations adviser and a former senior special operations officer, it was not intelligence the Pentagon was after but a key member of al Qaeda. The raid was launched in an effort to capture or kill Qassim al Rimi, the leader of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, according to the special operations adviser, who asked to remain anonymous because details behind the raid are classified.

Villagers interviewed by *The Intercept* rejected claims that al Rimi was present in al Ghayil, although one resident described seeing an unfamiliar black SUV arriving in the village hours before the raid. Six days after the operation, AQAP media channels released an audio statement from al Rimi, who mocked President Trump and the raid. The White House and the military have denied that the AQAP leader was the target of the mission, insisting the SEALs were sent in to capture electronic devices and material to be used for intelligence gathering. A spokesperson for CENTCOM told *The Intercept* the military has not yet determined whether al Rimi was in al Ghayil when the SEALs arrived.

Although some details about the mission remain unclear, the account that has emerged suggests the Trump White House is breaking with Obama administration policies that were intended to limit civilian casualties. The change — if permanent — would increase the likelihood of civilian deaths in so-called capture or kill missions like the January 29 raid.



A boy stands in the village of al Ghayil in Yemen where U.S. Navy SEALs, attack helicopters, and drones launched an operation on January 29. Image by Iona Craig. Yemen, 2017.

**The January mission** was the fourth time U.S. forces have been involved in ground operations in Yemen. While none of those prior raids could be deemed successful — two were failed attempts to free an American hostage, photojournalist Luke Somers (<https://theintercept.com/2014/12/11/u-s-scuttled-negotiations-free-american-killed-yemen/>) — they did not leave the same trail of destruction as the operation in al Ghayil.

The village is part of a cluster of settlements known as Yakla in the Qayfa tribal region of Yemen's al Bayda province. A basic knowledge of the local political environment, combined with a grasp of the obvious challenges posed by the geographical layout of al Ghayil, would have provided substantial forewarning that this latest raid was a highly precarious undertaking. American military planners should have foreseen that their forces would face not only al Qaeda militants, but also heavy armed resistance from residents of al Ghayil and surrounding villages.

This area of al Bayda has been at war for more than 2 1/2 years, and the Qayfa tribe is renowned for its fighting prowess and a long-standing refusal to yield to the state. After the joint forces of Yemen's northern Houthi rebels and military loyalists of the country's former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, seized control of the capital, Sana, in September 2014, they swiftly moved southeast into al Bayda. Most of the Qayfa tribe, including the men of Yakla, have been fighting the Houthi-Saleh forces ever since. Saudi Arabia joined the fray in March 2015, leading a coalition of nations in a military intervention and aerial bombing campaign, supported by the U.S., to push back the Houthis, who the Saudis view as an Iranian proxy force. In theory, the residents of al Ghayil are on the same side as the United States in a civil war that has left more than 3 million people displaced and brought the country to the edge of famine.

Al Ghayil, just a few miles from Houthi-Saleh-controlled territory, came under Houthi rocket fire more than once in the early weeks of 2017, leaving the area of Yakla on high alert for attacks and residents in constant fear of losing their homes to a Houthi-Saleh incursion. The closest town, Rada — home to the nearest hospital — had been a no-go area for the population of Yakla since it fell under Houthi-Saleh control in October 2014.

When the U.S. Navy SEALs flew into al Ghayil in the early hours of January 29 — a deliberately chosen moonless night — local armed tribesmen assumed the Houthis had arrived to capture their village. After the firefight started, some of the men who ran to defend their families and homes saw colored lasers emanating from the weapons of their opponents, raising suspicions they might be facing Americans.

Shortly after the firefight erupted, Chief Petty Officer William “Ryan” Owens was shot by a bullet that hit just above his armored chest plate and entered his heart, according to the former senior special operations official briefed on the raid. Owens died shortly after he was hit.

Further confusion set in when the attack helicopters joined the assault. Knowing the Houthi-Saleh forces do not have an air force, residents could only assume it was the Saudi-led coalition attacking them from the air. They were not entirely wrong. Troops from the United Arab Emirates — leading players in the coalition’s two-year fight against the Houthis — also took part in the raid and might have been involved in flying the helicopters that fired on civilians. Dozens of UAE Apache gunships are currently stationed in Emirati-run military bases across Yemen.

The UAE government did not respond to multiple requests for comment on its role in the raid or answer queries regarding any casualties among its personnel.

According to the former senior U.S. special operations official and a current military consultant, both of whom were briefed on the raid, the SEALs discovered by the time they arrived in the village that their operation had been compromised. It is still unclear how those on the ground were tipped off, but a current consultant to the Joint Special Operations Command, which oversees SEAL Team 6, said the command is investigating whether UAE forces involved in the raid revealed the details of the mission before the SEALs arrived in al Ghayil. (However, local residents, who are used to hearing the buzz of drones in the remote area, said they noticed the unusual presence of helicopters around 9 p.m. the night before the raid, which raised concern.)

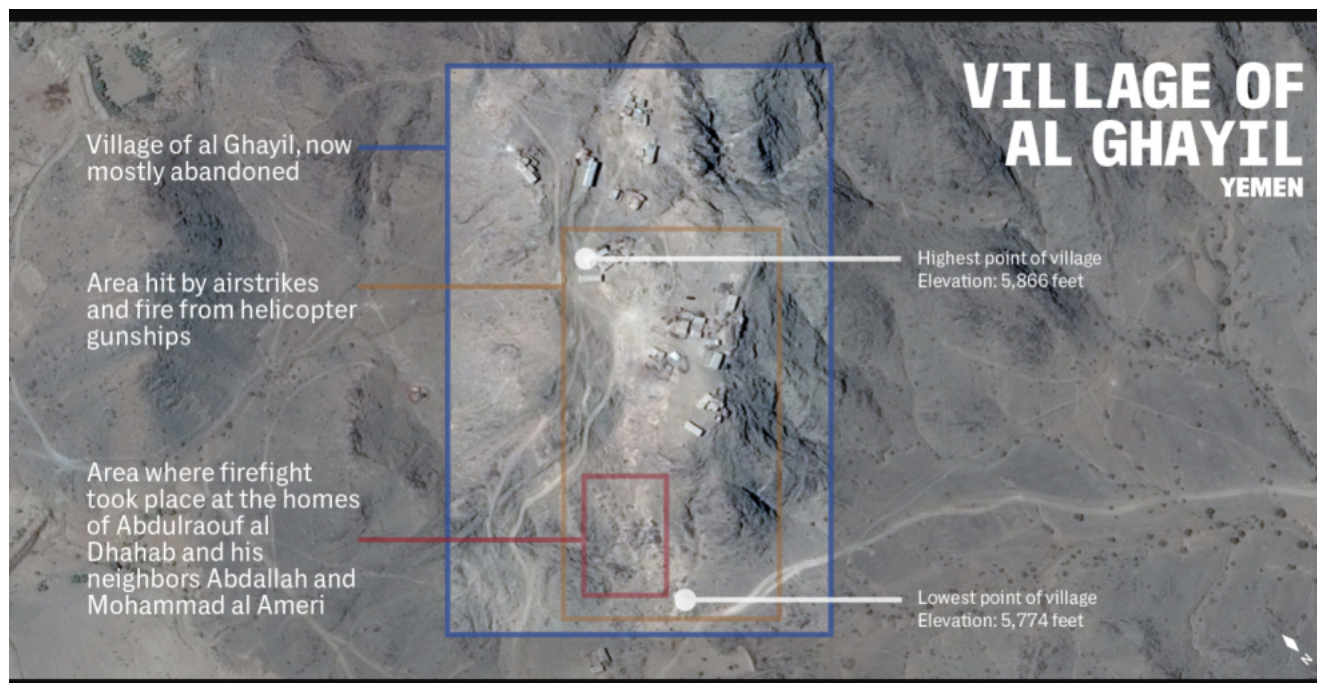
Some men in the surrounding villages grabbed their weapons and ran to help defend their neighbors when they heard the sound of a battle unfolding, according to residents. Mohammed Ali al Taysi, from the nearby village of Husun at Tuyus, dashed to his battered SUV, tearing down a dry riverbed in the dark to reach al Ghayil from the north. But just short of the village, a helicopter flew low overhead, pounding warning shots into the ground on either side of his vehicle. Al Taysi jumped out, firing his rifle toward the Apache before retreating into the night. Other armed men closer to the village descended from the mountainside on foot to support the tribesmen of al Ghayil, who already held the advantage of the high ground on the western side of the village. The SEALs had come in from the low ground to the north, approaching the homes of Abdulraouf al Dhahab and Mohammed al Ameri from the eastern slopes below.

According to those present, the firefight quickly escalated around the al Dhahab house, halting the SEALs’ advance. As the U.S. forces fought from the lower ground and more men descended the mountainside to join the shootout, airstrikes obliterated Mohammed al Ameri’s house on the hill above, killing three of his children, ages 7, 5, and 4, and seemingly destroying any possibility of retrieving laptops, hard drives, or other intelligence material from inside without digging through piles of rubble in the dark.

With one Navy SEAL dead and two others seriously wounded, the special operations forces began to withdraw. But before they departed, according to local witnesses, the MV-22 Osprey used to extract the retreating soldiers crash-landed, forcing another aircraft to land to pull out the operators. Airstrikes then deliberately destroyed the abandoned Osprey.

The gunfight had lasted the better part of an hour. It would be another hour or more before the skies fell silent and the sound of helicopters, aircraft, and drones faded. It was in the dawn light that the mass of bodies was revealed, the missing accounted for, and dead children identified. Smoke swirled into the air from the roofs still burning and the carcass of the smoldering Osprey in the distance.





Map of the village of al Ghayil in the al Bayda province. Map courtesy of *The Intercept*.

**This was not** the first time residents of the remote Yakla area had lost family members to a U.S. attack. In December 2013, a drone strike on a wedding convoy (<http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/america-tonight/america-tonight-blog/2014/1/17/what-really-happenedwhenausdronehitayemeniweddingconvoy.html>) killed 12 civilians. The groom, Abdallah al Ameri, survived that attack. But on January 29, the 65-year-old was killed standing unarmed beside his house as it was bombed. A picture posted online shortly after the raid showed his body lying in the rocky sand with his hand clasped around a blood-soaked head torch.

The aftermath of the raid's destruction left villagers struggling to understand what the Americans were trying to accomplish. Abdulraouf, whose house appeared to be one of the targets, was no stranger to American attempts to kill him. He was the apparent target of at least three separate airstrikes between 2011 and 2013 in al Bayda province, including one in September 2012 that killed 12 civilians (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/26/anatomy-air-attack-gone-wrong>) — a pregnant woman and three children were among the dead.

Following the deaths, Abdulraouf called on the families of victims to hire international lawyers to take their cases to court in the United States. Two of Abdulraouf's brothers were also killed by American drone strikes as the U.S. was drawn into a long-running bloody feud that had split the family of some 18 brothers between those aligned with al Qaeda and those who stood with the state.

Although Abdulalah al Dhahab, a brother who survived the January raid but lost his 12-year-old son, denied Abdulraouf was an al Qaeda member, the bonds between the family and Yemen's al Qaeda insurgency also extend to marital ties. Al Qaeda propagandist and American citizen Anwar al Awlaki married Abdularouf's sister. Awlaki's 8-year-old daughter, Nawar, was in the al Dhahab house the night of the raid. She bled to death after being shot in the neck — the second of Awlaki's children to be killed by the United States since his own death by an American drone strike in September 2011. His eldest son, 16-year-old Denver-born Abdulrahman, was killed by a U.S. drone two weeks after his father.

Following the onset of civil war in March 2015, Abdulraouf played a key role in leading the self-described "resistance" of local armed militias loyal to the Saudi-led coalition, fighting on the pro-government side of Yemen's internationally recognized president-in-exile, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. As a senior Qayfa tribal figure, Abdulraouf was a well-respected resistance leader. The day before the January raid, he was handing out salaries for pro-government fighters after collecting the money from the nearest Saudi coalition base in the neighboring province of Marib.

Although U.S. drone strikes killed a succession of leading AQAP figures in the first six months of 2015, drone, air, and sea-to-land bombings over the preceding 15 years were plagued by poor intelligence and numerous civilian casualties. Survivors of the al Ghayil operation were left to speculate what intelligence led American special operations forces to storm their village “as if they were coming to kill Osama bin Laden,” as one resident noted, puzzling over whether the U.S. thought it was going after the leader of the Islamic State rather than an apparent low-level al Qaeda militant of the same name, Abubakr al Baghdadi, who was killed in the raid. “Or the Americans were tricked into killing Abdulraouf, the leading fighter in Qayfa, to help the Houthis and Saleh,” hypothesized one anti-Houthi tribal fighter.

On at least one occasion in Yemen, the U.S. was deliberately fed false intelligence by the regime of then-President Saleh. In May 2010, it resulted in the erroneous killing of the deputy governor of Marib in a drone strike. As one anonymous American official was later quoted as saying, “We think we got played.”

(<https://www.wsj.com/articles/sb10001424052970203899504577126883574284126>)

Though the planning for the Yakla operation began many months ago, Abdulraouf’s house in al Ghayil was built recently. The modern cinder-block walls and PVC windows stood out among the simple stone huts dominating the rest of the village. The tribal leader had been living in a tent on the rocky hillside after being run out of the al Dhahab family homestead in the village of al Manasa by Houthi-Saleh forces in the fall of 2014.

One resident, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals, stated that Mohammed al Ameri’s home was used as a guest house by passing al Qaeda militants — aggressive men whom the rest of the villagers avoided. To get to Mohammed’s house, the SEALs had to pass the al Dhahab home, where Abdulraouf, his brother Sultan, and their guests were holding a late-night gathering with another tribal leader, octogenarian Saif Mohammed al Jawfi, who also died in the raid. The witness claimed the meeting in al Dhahab’s house was held to resolve an issue regarding one of Saif’s relatives who had been arrested by militants connected to the guest house, as well as to arrange the distribution of the U.S.-backed Saudi coalition cash payments to anti-Houthi resistance fighters.

Those in the village speculated about the exact target of the January 29 raid. Was the house of Abdulraouf and the tent beside it the objective? Did the U.S. military believe that Qassim al Rimi, the AQAP leader, was inside the house? Or was it the next building on the hillside above, the home of Mohammed al Ameri, the Navy SEALs were aiming for? Others ventured that a woman, Arwa al Baghdadi, might have been the focus.

Arwa al Baghdadi, according to her own social media postings ([https://twitter.com/arwa\\_baghdadi](https://twitter.com/arwa_baghdadi)), was imprisoned in 2010 and tortured by authorities in Saudi Arabia after her brother was shot dead by security forces. She was later used as an apparent bargaining chip in the 2015 release of a Saudi diplomat (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/11031>) who had been kidnapped by AQAP in Aden three years earlier (Saudi officials say there was no connection). Arwa al Baghdadi, who fled to Yemen after her release from prison, was killed in the raid along with her son Osama, and another brother, Abubakr al Baghdadi. Her pregnant sister-in-law was shot in the stomach. The unborn infant, grazed by the bullet fired into his mother’s stomach, died following an emergency caesarean section at the 26 September hospital, a five-hour drive away in the neighboring province of Marib.

Many of al Ghayil’s residents denied any presence of al Qaeda militants in the village that night. Al Rimi’s statement after the raid offered condolences to the families of those killed, and along with AQAP propaganda channels, listed 14 men among the dead, although al Rimi stopped short of calling them AQAP members. (Eight of those names were not included in the toll of the dead that villagers provided to *The Intercept*, as they were not known to local residents. Family members disputed claims the remaining six men were members of AQAP.)

In the current context of Yemen’s civil war, AQAP has sought to frame the conflict as a sectarian struggle against Shiite Houthis. In that narrative, AQAP regularly describes all opponents of the Houthis as Sunni “brothers” or “one of us” — part of a long-term strategy to create a more seamless blend with the local population and tribes.



Children stand in the rubble of houses destroyed during a raid by U.S. Navy SEALs in the village of al Ghayil. Image by Iona Craig. Yemen, 2017.

**The only evidence** released so far to back up Sean Spicer’s claim that “the goal of the raid was intelligence gathering, and that’s what we received” was a video posted by U.S. Central Command on February 3. CENTCOM presented the clip as confirmation of the “valuable” material collected during the raid and labeled the video as an “AQAP course to attack the West.” But it was quickly taken down after it was discovered ([https://www.buzzfeed.com/nancyyoussef/a-video-the-military-said-showed-a-recent-raid-was-successful?utm\\_term=.pwroqgmzq#.uxr5ook7br](https://www.buzzfeed.com/nancyyoussef/a-video-the-military-said-showed-a-recent-raid-was-successful?utm_term=.pwroqgmzq#.uxr5ook7br)) that the footage was 10 years old — pre-dating the existence of AQAP in Yemen — and was readily available online. The U.S. government has yet to produce any further proof of intelligence collected from the raid.

There are other suspect details in the U.S. version of events. In the days after the raid, the Pentagon claimed (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/30/world/middleeast/yemen-raid-women-qaeda.html>) that the women killed were armed and fought the incoming U.S. special operations forces from “pre-established positions.” Yet all of the witnesses to the attack interviewed by *The Intercept* in al Ghayil strongly challenged this accusation, citing a culture that views the prospect of women fighting, as Nesma al Ameri put it, as “eib” — shameful and dishonorable — and pointing out the practical implausibility of women clutching babies while also firing rifles. A CENTCOM spokesperson refused to provide any details about female fighters to support its assertion.

However, the names of the dead that villagers gave to *The Intercept* did not include one woman listed by AQAP media channels. Propagandists and supporters of the militants claimed one unnamed woman “fought them with her own gun,” with an additional claim that Arwa, the former Saudi prisoner, had thrown a grenade killing a U.S. soldier — assertions strongly denied by Abdulelah al Dhahab, who survived the lengthy gunfight around his brother’s home. Sheikh Aziz al Ameri, the head of the al Ameri clan, lost 20 members of his extended family, six of them children, the youngest only 3 months old. “Everyone who tried to run, they killed them,” he said, standing on the hilltop outside his home 11 days later.

In response to *The Intercept*’s findings, Hina Shamsi, director of the American Civil Liberties Union National Security Project, called for a full investigation into the raid, including the legal basis for the operation, the adequacy of intelligence beforehand, what precautions were taken, and why any precautions failed.

“Each new revelation about this tragic operation is grievous and shocking,” Shamsi said. “Even in recognized armed conflict, there are rules to safeguard against the killings of civilians, and even under the Obama administration’s imperfect lethal force policy, which to the best of our knowledge remains in effect, there are constraints that should have prevented or at least minimized civilian deaths.”

Last week, the White House announced the Pentagon would be carrying out three reviews of the raid, looking into the death of Owens, the loss of the Osprey, and the civilian casualties.

During his first address to Congress on February 28, President Trump noted that Owens died “a warrior and a hero,” leading to a standing ovation for the Navy SEAL’s widow, Carryn Owens. Trump has made no mention of the relatives of the women and children who died that night.

By the time the whirring sound of drones returned to Yakla two days after the operation, the village of al Ghayil was largely deserted. With little reason to stay after their livestock had been eradicated, families fled in fear of further attack and imminent enemy takeover following the death of Abdulraouf al Dhahab, Qayfa’s most eminent adversary of the Houthi-Saleh forces. The majority of the men, women, and children who survived are now indefinitely displaced.

A month later, amid an unprecedented uptick in U.S. military activity in Yemen last week, the helicopters and drones returned to Yakla. Apaches descended on al Ghayil before dawn on March 2, carrying out “indiscriminate shelling,” according to Sheikh Aziz al Ameri, one of the few residents who remained in the village. Later that day, the Pentagon took responsibility for more than 20 airstrikes carried out in the early hours of the morning across three Yemeni provinces, including al Bayda.

Early on March 3, attack helicopters and drones returned yet again. An airstrike, apparently targeting Abdulelah, the surviving brother of Abdulraouf al Dhahab, landed just outside the door of his house, killing three of his extended family members from their home village of al Manasa. Late that night, Abdulelah was yet again the apparent target of a drone strike that killed four men traveling with him in a car in Marib province. It is unclear if Abdulelah survived. At least six houses in al Ghayil were damaged the same night by yet more helicopter gunship fire. With the village coming under attack for the third consecutive night on March 5, Sheikh Aziz and his family finally fled; they are now living under trees several miles away. Less than 24 hours later, another drone strike killed two more children, brothers ages 10 and 12.

Pentagon spokesperson Capt. Jeff Davis said in a statement (<https://www.defense.gov/news/news-releases/news-release-view/article/1100244/statement-by-pentagon-spokesman-capt-jeff-davis-on-us-strikes-against-aqap-in-y>) that the strikes targeting AQAP were conducted in partnership with the government of Yemen and were coordinated with President Hadi. Anti-Houthi resistance fighters on the front lines of the civil war, not far from Yakla, were also killed, according to residents of al Bayda. The following day, Davis told reporters that additional strikes were carried out early on Friday, bringing the total to more than 30 strikes in less than 36 hours — exceeding the 32 confirmed U.S. drone strikes in Yemen during all of last year (<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-2016>).

Although Davis stated that “U.S. forces will continue to target AQAP militants and facilities in order to disrupt the terrorist organization’s plots, and ultimately to protect American lives,” NBC News reported (<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/u-s-launches-air-strikes-yemen-n728186>) the strikes were also part of “new directives” to aggressively pursue the Dhahab and Qayfa clans, citing a senior military intelligence source.

While the Yakla raid supposedly took place under presidential policy guidelines ([https://www.justice.gov/oip/foia-library/procedures\\_for\\_approving\\_direct\\_action\\_against\\_terrorist\\_targets/download](https://www.justice.gov/oip/foia-library/procedures_for_approving_direct_action_against_terrorist_targets/download)) set up under the Obama administration — standards repeatedly used to defend the U.S. drone program — further developments last week indicate the Trump administration is no longer abiding by the condition of “near certainty” that civilians will not be killed or injured in operations.

A defense official speaking to the *Washington Post* ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/accelerating-yemen-campaign-us-conducts-flurry-of-strikes-targeting-al-qaeda/2017/03/02/8a9af8cc-ff91-11e6-99b4-9e613afef09f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f68738c2f15f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/accelerating-yemen-campaign-us-conducts-flurry-of-strikes-targeting-al-qaeda/2017/03/02/8a9af8cc-ff91-11e6-99b4-9e613afef09f_story.html?utm_term=.f68738c2f15f)) stated that the military has been granted temporary authority to regard selected areas of Yemen as “areas of active hostility.” That change, while shortening the approval process for military action, effectively puts the U.S. on a war footing in any area of Yemen designated, but unlikely to be disclosed, by the military, noted Cori Crider, a lawyer at the international human rights organization Reprieve who has represented Yemeni drone strike victims. This authority has a lower bar: Civilian deaths have to be “proportionate” rather than avoided with a “near certainty,” as set out by the previous administration for the use of lethal force “outside areas of active hostilities.”



“This means that all of those much-vaunted ‘standards’ the Obama administration said they were using to minimize civilian casualties in drone strikes in Yemen have been chucked right out the window,” said Crider.

In a press briefing on March 3, Davis told reporters that the legal authority for carrying out the January raid and recent strikes “was delegated by the president through the secretary of defense” to U.S. Central Command. But when contacted by The Intercept, the Pentagon could not clarify whether al Ghayil was still considered to be outside areas of active hostilities during the botched raid.

In al Bayda, the continuing aerial bombardments are perceived by some as helping Saleh and the Houthis — who last month Spicer conflated with Iran (<https://vimeo.com/202247118>) and accused of attacking an American Navy vessel off Yemen’s western Red Sea coast. The Houthis had, in fact, hit a Saudi frigate.

Meanwhile, the villagers of al Ghayil are not calling for the usual tribal standard of compensation for the families of victims. Few wanted to be named saying so, but all expressed the same sentiment less than two weeks after the raid: This time, they want revenge, not a payout.

While President Trump continues to hail the mission as a success, quoting Defense Secretary James Mattis in Congress last week that intelligence gathered “will lead to many more victories in the future against our enemy,” in Yakla, the clearest outcome appears to be lengthening the list of America’s adversaries beyond al Qaeda.

Mohammed al Taysi, the tribesman who tried to join the fight in al Ghayil, put it succinctly as we parted company at dusk along the track out of Yakla. “If they come back,” he said, referring to the SEALs, “tell them to bring their caskets. From now we are ready for any fight with the Americans and the dog Trump.”

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