



Justice4Yemen Pact
ميثاق العدالة لليمن

INFORMATIONAL BRIEF

Incident Report After 9 years of war, sniper attacks continue to kill and maim civilians in Taiz

MAY 2024

THIS REPORT CONTAINS GRAPHIC IMAGERY

Introduction

When eight-year-old Ruwayda Saleh was shot in the head by a sniper as she fetched water for her family in August 2020, a bystander managed to photograph Ruwayda's brother dragging her to safety, and these harrowing images briefly drew international attention to the plight of civilians in Taiz. Since the spring of 2015 Houthi forces have surrounded Taiz city, most of which is under control of the internationally recognized government. These Houthi forces—and until late 2017 the forces of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Houthis' former ally—have imposed an ongoing siege on the city from the north, east, and west, restricting humanitarian access and civilian movement.¹ As part of this siege Houthi-Saleh forces have indiscriminately lobbed artillery into residential neighborhoods.² They have also positioned snipers on hills, rooftops, and elevated structures surrounding the city, who have repeatedly shot civilians in Taiz proper and its outskirts.³ Human rights organizations, Yemeni media, and UN mechanisms have extensively documented these sniper attacks on the civilian population.⁴

Long after Ruwaydah Saleh's case faded from the spotlight, residents of Taiz have continued to fall victim to sniper attacks. Civilians are shot as they go about their daily lives: fetching water, herding sheep, walking through city streets, or, in

About the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+)

The goal of the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+) program is to increase recognition and protection of human rights in Yemen by empowering Yemeni civil society to champion justice and accountability through human rights documentation, reporting, and advocacy efforts. The YHRFL+ program is working to systematically document, preserve, corroborate, analyze, and report on evidence, obtained from a variety of sources, of human rights violations committed by all parties involved in the Yemeni conflict. Results of this analysis are summarized and presented in a series of investigative reports focusing on specific identified incidents of human rights violations. YHRFL+ also support efforts by Yemeni CSO partners to carry out strategic advocacy, community outreach, and victim and survivor engagement interventions locally and internationally.

About Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition

The Justice4Yemen Pact is a coalition of human rights organizations and civil society actors that are united for the promotion and protection of human rights in Yemen. The coalition's mission is to advocate for the rights of all Yemeni people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. The coalition is committed to addressing the systemic human rights violations that have been plaguing Yemen through years of conflict and violence. The Justice4Yemen Pact works to empower Yemeni people to claim their rights, raise awareness of violations, and advocate for justice and accountability at local, national, and international levels. The Justice4Yemen Pact is guided by the principles of respect for human dignity, equality, justice, and non-discrimination. The coalition believes that by working together, its members can end impunity, provide meaningful support and redress for victims, and contribute to a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future for Yemen.

Acknowledgements

The YHRFL+ program thanks its partner organization the Center for Strategic Studies to Support Women and Children (CSWC) for their work documenting sniper attacks against civilians in Taiz, which is featured in this report.



Ruwayda Saleh being dragged to safety by her brother.
Source: Moammar al-Eryani, X (formerly Twitter)

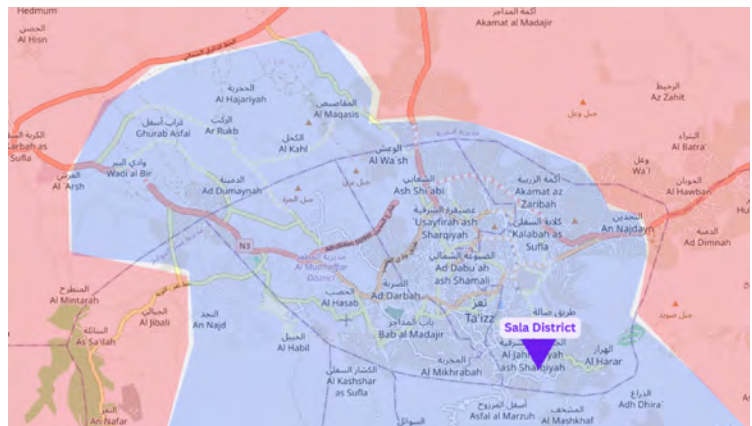
the case of children, while at play.⁵ In many documented incidents, snipers continue to fire on victims and bystanders who rush to help them after the initial attack.⁶

Residents of Taiz who live near the frontlines because they cannot afford the cost of living elsewhere are at elevated risk of sniper attacks.⁷ Omar, who lost his left hand from a sniper attack, told al-Masdar Online in July 2023 that he lives several meters from the frontlines because of the prohibitive cost of rent inside Taiz city.⁸ “Because I have to pay 30,000 Yemeni riyals [approximately \$18] in rent there, I accepted living in an area most frequently targeted by the sniper terror,” he said, referring to Sala district.⁹

Houthi authorities have declined to talk to human rights organizations seeking comment on the snip-

er attacks in Taiz,¹⁰ nor do they appear to have addressed this issue in public statements. The attacks seem intended to sow terror among the civilian population, and that has been their impact.¹¹ Terrified residents of affected areas have adjusted to the sniper threat with a variety of methods: putting up cement barriers and signs to warn passerby about dangerous streets, hanging cloth coverings to obscure vision, keeping lights off at night, and hurrying through neighborhoods, whether on foot or motorcycle.¹²

Two 2020 reports from YHRFL+ partner organizations SAM for Rights and Liberties, and the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations (YCMHRV), shed light on the scale of the devastation snipers have inflicted on Taiz residents during the war, as the following chart shows:



Map of the frontlines in Taiz as of May 6, 2024 with Sala district highlighted. Red: Houthi control. Blue: Government control.
Source: Liveuamap

Civilians killed by sniper attacks in Taiz, 2015-2020

YCMHRV's report documented child casualties in Taiz from sniper attacks, from March 2015 to August 2020. SAM's report documented civilian casualties in Taiz (men, women and children) from sniper attacks, from March 2015 to December 2020.



YCMHRV attributed all documented cases to Houthi-Saleh forces. SAM attributed 98% of deaths and 96% of injuries nationwide to Houthi-Saleh forces—the report covered other areas in addition to Taiz, and did not disaggregate perpetrator responsibility by location.

Source: "Sniper Horror: A Rights Report Documenting Human Rights Violations Connected to Sniper Attacks in Yemen," SAM for Rights and Liberties, November 2021 ; "The Sniping of Children: The Water Child as an Exemplary Case," Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations, 2020 • Created with Datawrapper

This report presents an emblematic case of the impact of ongoing sniper attacks in Sala district in October 2023. The case was documented by another YHRFL+ partner organization, the Center for Strategic Studies to Support Women and Children (CSWC). The targeting of Abdul Rahman Radfan highlights that even as overall conflict-related violence is low across Yemen since the signing of a nationwide truce in April 2022, Houthi snipers continue to maim and kill civilians in Taiz.

Case Summary

On October 23, 2023, 9-year-old Abdul Rahman and his 13-year-old brother Raed set out to herd sheep by the Nafhan stream in the Sala valley, in Sala district, Taiz, near the front lines separating territory under control of the Houthis, from territory under control of the internationally recognized government. Abdul Rahman's family had previously moved to a neighborhood in Sala district close to the frontlines because they were unable to afford rent elsewhere in Taiz city.

As Abdul Rahman crossed the Nafhan stream, he was shot from the direction of the al-Salal hill, both brothers told CSWC. "I heard my brother scream, and he hid among the trees, and I hurried to him and found that his hand was wounded," Raed said. "I pulled him away but the sniper kept shooting at us," he continued. The two brothers managed to make it home without further injury, and from there "we transported Abdul Rahman to the military hospital, and then he was transferred to the Thawra hospital. There were other victims previously in this area, but I don't know how many," said Raed.

"Abdul Rahman was crying and passing out because of the blood," said a neighbor who saw the two brothers as they headed home. "I hurried over to see what was going on and found Abdul Rahman's hand had been injured by a sniper," said the neighbor, who assisted with the rescue.

After Abdul Rahman arrived at the Thawra hospital he was sent into surgery. "Upon examining the hand by a specialist surgeon, it became clear that the hand was essentially amputated, although the thumb remained connected to the forearm, and there was no sensation or movement in the hand, except for the thumb," reads Abdul Rahman's medical report from the Thawra hospital. "An x-ray revealed widespread loss of bones in the wrist and hand...the

family was informed of the possibility of reattaching the hand, as an alternative to amputation, and that the operation would be complicated and require patience. The family agreed, and the operation began.”

The cost of Abdul Rahman’s surgery and hospital stay totaled 5 million Yemeni riyals, roughly \$3000 per the local exchange rate. This was a prohibitively expensive sum for Abdul Rahman’s working-class family—the average per capita annual income in Yemen was \$666 in 2018, the latest year for which World Bank data is available.¹³ Abdul Rahman’s family was able to gather money for the treatment from local civil society activists and philanthropists, and Abdul Rahman has regained movement in his hand following treatment, his father told CSWC.



Abdul Rahman Radfan’s hand after surgery. Source: CSWC

A researcher from CSWC visited Sala district on October 10, 2023, and observed the scene of the sniping attack. The researcher was unable to photograph the location because of how dangerous it is, however, they noted that the location where Abdul Rahman was shot was directly in front of the al-Salal hill. Over the course of the war, Houthi snipers have repeatedly shot civilians in Sala district from the al-Salal hill, as well as other elevated locations in the district, and Abdul Rahman and Raed reported after the attack that the fire came from that direction.¹⁴ Many of the victims in Sala have been children: the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations documented 69 children shot by snipers in Sala district between 2015 and 2020.¹⁵ Most recently, 7-year-old Asrar al-Rimi was shot in the foot by a sniper in the Zahra neighborhood of Sala district in early April 2024.¹⁶

Legal Analysis

International humanitarian law forbids the targeting of civilians not directly participating in hostilities.¹⁷ Under the Statute of the International Criminal Court, it is considered a war crime to intentionally direct attacks against the civilian population or individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities.¹⁸

In this case, a sniper shot Abdul Rahman, a 9-year-old boy, as he was tending to a flock of sheep with his 13-year-old brother, and then kept shooting at the two boys as they attempted to flee. The shooting of Abdul Rahman indicates the deliberate targeting of a civilian with no role in hostilities. The shooting fits a pattern of sniper attacks against civilians going about their daily lives in Sala district specifically, and Taiz city generally, which have been extensively documented by media, human rights organizations, and United Nations mechanisms during the Yemen war.

As for international human rights law, both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulate that everyone has the inherent right to life.¹⁹ The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that every child has the inherent right to life, and that “States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.”²⁰ As the de facto governing authorities in control of northern Yemen, the Houthis claim to abide by Yemen’s international commitments to protect civilians in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law.²¹



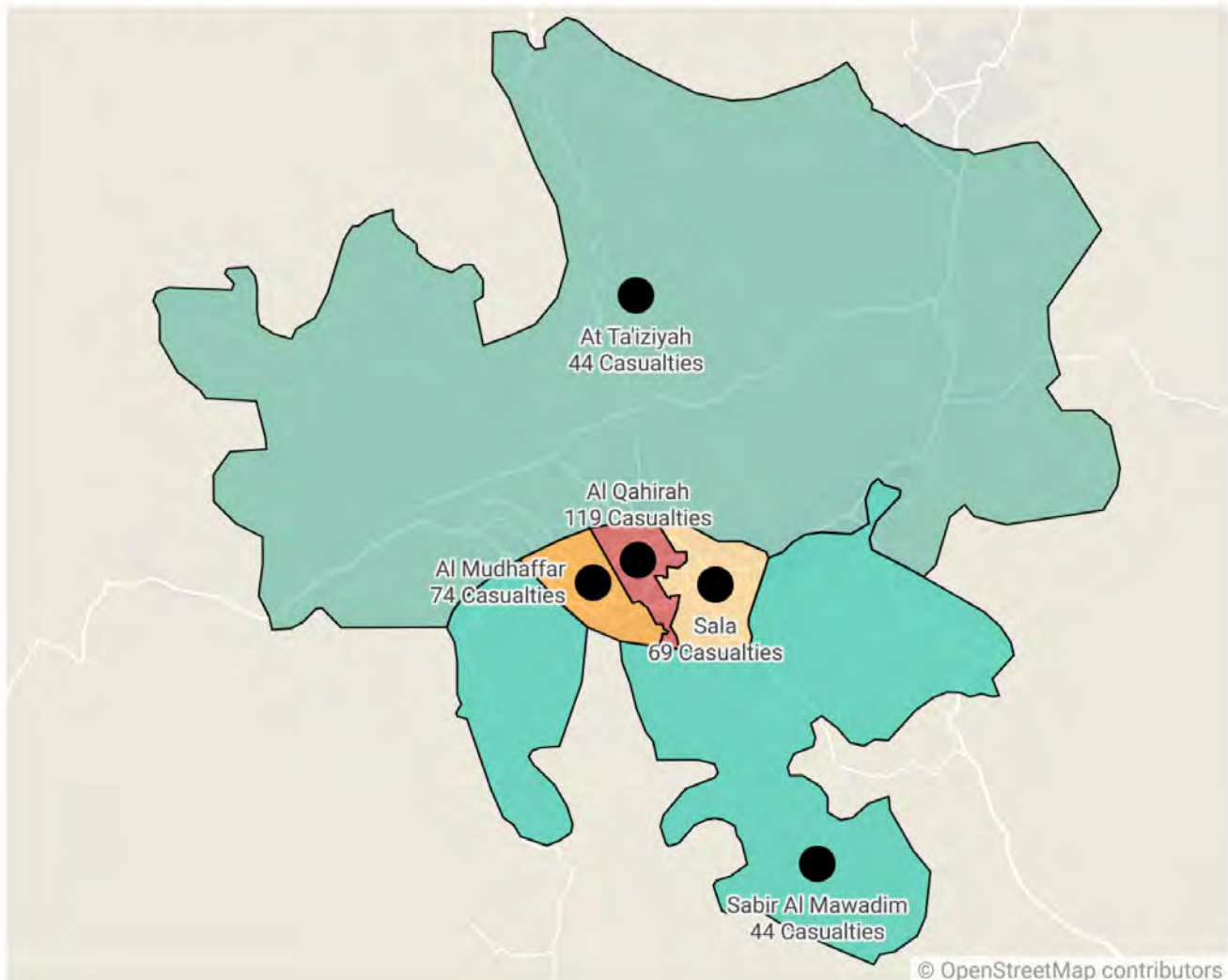
Syyad sniper rifle manufactured in Iran and used by Houthi forces. Source: UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, report S/2021/79

Recommendations

- **To Yemeni NGOs in Taiz documenting violations of international humanitarian and human rights law:** Compile and publicize recent cases of civilians shot by snipers in Taiz as they go about their daily lives, to build public pressure on the Houthis to cease these attacks. Report violations to UN mechanisms to establish a pattern of sniper attacks against civilians in Taiz and draw international attention to them.
- Coordinate charitable campaigns to pay for medical treatment for civilian victims of sniper attacks. Abdul Rahman Radfan's case illustrates that the cost of surgery can be prohibitively expensive for poor families who are at highest risk of sniper attacks in Taiz, but philanthropists and civil society organizations can successfully step in to cover the cost of treatment.
- **To international humanitarian NGOs working in Taiz, such as Médecins Sans Frontières and the Qatari Red Crescent:** To the extent possible, ramp up free or low-cost medical treatment for civilian victims of sniper attacks.
- **To the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and organizations working in the humanitarian cluster system:** Ensure the referral mechanism with existing humanitarian networks—such as the Yemen Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), cluster coordination mechanisms, and local coordination structures—covers victims of sniper attacks. Collaborate with humanitarian actors operating in Taiz to ensure seamless referrals and victims' access to a needed services.
- **To the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations to Human Rights:** Consider highlighting the pattern of sniper attacks targeting civilians in Taiz, as well as representative incidents, in the commission's upcoming 12th periodic report.
- **To Ansar Allah – The Houthis:** Cease targeting civilians, including children, with snipers in Taiz city. The targeting of civilians violates the principle of distinction, the cornerstone of international humanitarian law.

Appendix: Map of Child Casualties in Taiz from Sniper Attacks, 2015-2020

This map displays the 5 districts in Taiz city that witnessed the highest number of documented child casualties from Houthi sniper attacks from March 2015 to August 2020, according to data gathered by the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations



Source: "The Sniping of Children," Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations, 2020. Created with Datawrapper

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Endnotes

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- 7 "Houthi Sniping...Deliberate Killing of Residents 'With no Way Out' in Taiz," The New Arab, June 7, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/53zyzkup>
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