

To the Judges:

The United Arab Emirates has been engaged in systematic human rights abuses in southern Yemen, and when The Associated Press set out to find evidence of the prisons and the role of the United States, it was clear that speaking to former prisoners and their families put sources at risk of being re-arrested.

Starting in 2016, [hundreds of men have vanished](#) in a network of secret prisons where torture is extreme, including the “grill,” where a victim is tied to a spit like a roast and spun in a circle of fire. While UAE officers tortured, US officials interrogated suspects to extract information allegedly about al-Qaida in Yemen. The secret prisons are inside military bases, ports, an airport, private villas and even a nightclub. Some detainees have been flown to an Emirati base across the Red Sea in Eritrea.

Families of detainees spoke on social media about the forced disappearances of their children, and activists posted pictures of small demonstrations — but there was no confirmation of what was really happening.

In fact, as a condition of their release, former prisoners had to sign a statement pledging to never speak about what they had experienced or witnessed. In one incident, a former prisoner posted on his Facebook page about what he endured inside one of the secret prisons; the next day he vanished again.

AP’s Maggie Michael from Cairo into Aden to get the story, where she met up with Maad al-Zikery, an AP freelance photographer and video journalist.

Activists warned them that former detainees were under surveillance, their phones tapped, and their Facebook pages and movement were monitored. The former prisoners who suffered torture and guards who witnessed what happened inside these secret prisons were two major components necessary to gather evidence and key testimony from eye witnesses.

Michael and al-Zikery spoke with 10 former prisoners, and were able to get several to speak with AP. The journalists discussed the risk of talking to AP with each source, and despite the need to gather evidence consistently leaned on risk management instead.

In a small Yemeni town, the AP team met with a vendor who was a former prisoner and one of the main witnesses. Care was taken to not specify his job, to change the sound of his voice on video and then to show him how he would appear so he would understand exactly what he was agreeing to. We asked him to remove his shirt so that even the details of his clothing would not give him away.

A second former prisoner was eager to be identified, and the AP interviewed from inside a car over two days. He was very brave, but his own mother was anguished and in tears over his risks, so we decided not to identify him despite his willingness. Maad filmed him, showing only his hands, and we asked him to draw pictures of the inside of the prison where he was detained, which allowed us to use them for a graphic showing sketches of the prison’s layout and torture room.

A third ex-prisoner insisted on speaking in front of the camera with his face uncovered, because his father had been taken to the Eritrean port of Assab, where the UAE set up a military base. After discussing different options and scenarios, the former prisoner insisted he wanted to hide nothing. He appeared with his name on camera and disclosed his identity. He has escaped re-arrest.

One of the hardest challenges was interviewing a person who was detained for a few weeks as a punishment for helping prisoners. The person feared retribution and was terrified. The AP used his account — he was the source who witnessed Americans preparing to interrogate prisoners — but the AP did not disclose his identity or key details that would have strengthened the story but would have put the man at risk.

These kinds of stories in countries where people face serious dangers for speaking to the press are complicated by the need to show readers and viewers actual evidence. Anonymous sourcing is not ideal, especially in the current climate where people are increasingly suspicious of unnamed sources. In this case, we managed to work around risks to sources by putting them on camera but hiding their identities, for the most part. We were able to show that they were real people, with real stories — and by asking for their prison sketches, which we verified, were an innovative solution that helped balance the anonymity.

What we did not anticipate was the danger posed to al-Zikery, who is Yemeni. In our discussions about security before we took on the project, he had thought he would be fine given that he lives in the north, and the story was based in Yemen's south. After the story made headlines around Yemen however, he was targeted on Twitter by a government official and we quickly moved him out of Yemen until the dust settled. He returned a month later.

The choices that our journalists face on the ground are difficult, but we were proud of the innovative thinking on the part of Michael and al-Zikery, as they figured out ways to keep sources safe and innovate methods to still come up with compelling storytelling. In the end, our evidence was strong, and the U.S. government did not deny that it was interrogating prisoners detained by its ally, the UAE.

For cautious and intrepid reporting that secured sources' safety while still exposing an important violation of international law, we are proud to nominate Maggie Michael and Maad al-Zikery for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,



Trish Wilson
International Investigations Editor
The Associated Press
Editor of the Yemen torture coverage

Inside Yemen's secret prisons: 'We could hear the screams'

<https://www.apnews.com/b2a5ecfd1adb442a86df5bdo5bc6599e/Inside-Yemen's-secret-prisons:-'We-could-hear-the-screams>

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