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To the Judges:

Throughout 2018, a team of three journalists from The Associated Press trekked across Yemen, investigating the atrocities and catastrophes spawned by the country's grinding war.

The result was a series of groundbreaking stories, photos and videos exposing a host of injustices — including the widespread use of child soldiers, torture by factions on all sides of the war and corruption that's diverted food aid from starving families, pushing the country to the edge of famine.

The team of Egyptian and Yemeni journalists — AP reporter Maggie Michael, AP photographer Nariman El-Mofty and freelance video journalist Maad al-Zikry — braved dangers and faced tough ethical questions as they fought to tell stories that the world heard from no other source.

In a suffering land, AP's reporting made a difference:

- In southern Yemen, authorities released at least 80 prisoners from Emirati-controlled "black site" prisons where the AP, building on its reporting from 2017, exposed the widespread use of sexual torture.
- On the other side of the conflict, leaders of the Houthi rebels launched an investigation in the wake of the AP's reports of torture at prisons run by the rebels across northern Yemen.
- The AP's stories about a famine-afflicted district in Houthi territory forced the United Nations to rush food and medicine to villagers who had been eating boiled leaves to survive.
- In the wake of the AP's far-ranging food corruption probe, the U.N. went public with a vow to cut off help to Houthi-controlled areas unless the rebels stopped diverting aid from the starving.

Ethics and safety

With every day and every story came deep ethical thickets.

There were questions about privacy, which often come with stories about sexual assault and other physical abuse. But those questions, as vitally important and sensitive as they were, were complicated even more by questions about how to avoid putting sources and story subjects — and journalists themselves — at risk of assault, arrest and even death.

Assessing risks for sources, subjects and journalists in Yemen is a thorny task. Reporters in Yemen, the Committee to Protect Journalists says, work amid "a climate of impunity and fear." The same holds true for the people they talk to and tell stories about. It took unrelenting reporting and analysis for the team to fathom the constantly shifting alliances among hundreds of tribes, militias and political groups as well as the roles played by outside powers such as Saudi Arabia, the United States and the United Arab Emirates. Factions that fight each other one day may join on another day to attack a common enemy. Simply moving from one urban neighborhood or village to another can mean a change in who is in charge and who may represent a danger.

In the north, as the AP's reporting revealed, Houthi rebels are quick to snatch up anyone suspected of disloyalty and lock them in torture chambers. The story is similar in the south, which is controlled by a struggling government propped up by a Saudi-led, U.S.-backed military coalition. People who speak critically about the coalition or affiliated militias can be targeted for assassination, arrest or torture.

All of this meant that the AP team had to operate with extreme caution. Michael, El-Mofty and al-Zikry interviewed people in cars, paid for taxis to bring interviewees to safer locations or settled for talking remotely on encrypted communications platforms. On more than one occasion, the team had to quickly leave a village where they were conducting interviews when heard a local militia had learned of their presence.

The team often shot videos and took photos in ways that didn't reveal subjects' identities, filming just a subject's hands or just their eyes from behind a facial covering. We also decided that some AP stringers living in the country wouldn't work on stories that, depending on geography or other factors, could put them most at risk. In at least one case, this resulted in an hours-long

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debate with a stringer, who wanted to take the risk on a particular story. In the end, we decided he could not participate.

Al-Zikry's contacts proved crucial in a land where knowing the right person in the right family or tribe opens doors — and help keep journalists and their sources safe. But for the second time in two years, the AP pulled al-Zikry from the country temporarily, concerned he was at risk because of the AP's aggressive reporting.

Sexual torture

One of the biggest quandaries arose after Michael heard from sources that Emirati operatives in Yemen were using sexual assault as part of their torture techniques. To nail the story, she did more than interview security officers and former inmates of Emirati-controlled prisons. She found a way to secretly interview seven inmates still on the inside and arranged for them to smuggle out letters and a set of stunning drawings of torture scenes. An inmate used a blue ink pen to draw on scraps of Styrofoam plates, showing scenes of snarling attack dogs and sexual assault. The Arabic caption on one said simply: "Naked after beating."

To protect everyone involved, we did not say in our story exactly *how* Michael managed to do interviews with men still being held in detention, and we continue to keep that information confidential.

It was a long process to get to publication. Michael understood the stigma that the men felt talking about being sexual assaulted by their captors — that was the very reason the captors used sexual torture to try to break interrogation subjects. "For them, it was even harder to talk with a woman about this," she recalled. "You have to be really careful what you ask." Michael asked her interviewees open-ended questions and assured them that they were not alone — she was talking to other inmates who had suffered the same kinds of sexual abuse. Slowly, they opened up and decided to tell their stories in detail.

The team members and their editors knew that the drawings and first-hand accounts from men still on the inside would add a deeper level of authenticity and impact to the story, as would naming the sites where the sexual abuse was taking place. But we hesitated to name prisons and locations, for fear of putting the people we'd interviewed in more danger.

The inmates, however, said they wanted us to be as specific as possible, as long as we didn't use their names or give too much individual identifying information. Their situations were already so dire that they wanted an opportunity to make a public plea for help, to break through the secrecy and shame and force authorities inside and outside Yemen to face up to what was happening inside these black sites. More than one said to her: "Keep our names secret to protect our lives and make anything else public."

After much deliberation, Maggie and the editors on the project determined that being clear and explicit was the only way to expose the horrors and force authorities to respond. We decided to identify the prisons involved and describe in detail an incident of mass sexual abuse at a specific prison on a specific day.

The day after our story ran, authorities released several men from the prison where the mass incident had occurred. In the coming weeks, dozens more were released from that prison and another prison we identified. Michael's sources indicated to her that the releases were a result of the publication of the drawings and the AP's story. In a rare public rebuke of an ally in the war effort, the interior minister for Yemen's coalition-backed government demanded Emirati officials shut down or hand over prisons that the AP identified as being under the control of the UAE.

Houthi torture

Michael also dug into torture committed by the Houthi rebels who control northern Yemen. For that story, she interviewed 23 people who said they had been tortured or witnessed torture within Houthi detention centers; former prisoners described being scorched with acid and hung from chains by their wrists or genitals for weeks at a time.

Because the ex-inmates she interviewed had left Houthi territory after their releases, they weren't at risk of re-arrest or other reprisals. Most were willing to be named in the story, because they wanted the world to know what was going on inside the Houthis' detention centers. However, Michael made sure to ask each one: Who else would be put in danger if we identified you in the story? Do you have family members or others still in Houthi territory who might be targeted if we use your names? If the answer was "yes," we decided on our own not to use the ex-inmate's name.

We also struggled with questions of who to identify after a source leaked us an internal video that reformers within the Houthi hierarchy had made to expose torture within Houthi jails. The video had been suppressed by hard liners and we worried that using it and naming some of the officials involved would put the reformers at risk, especially if it was picked up and used by television outlets from Saudi Arabia or other enemies of the Houthis. The only image of an individual we used from the video was of an official who would be immune from reprisals because of his seniority and because he was the brother of the Houthis' top leader.

Child soldiers

For another story, Michael interviewed 18 children, as young as 10 years old, who had been enticed or forced to serve in rebel militia units; a Houthi official acknowledged the rebels had recruited 18,000 child soldiers since the war's start, far more than previously reported.

Michael was careful to get permission from not only parents or guardians but also from tribal chiefs or staffers at the rehabilitation center where some of the children were getting counseling. It was important everyone knew what was going on, and that there would be no blowback against the children or their parents.

Because of the children's ages and other factors, we generally used only their first names. For example, in the case of a 14-year-old ex-soldier, we decided not to use his full name, his nickname or other identifying information because we were including his account of joining in the torture and killing of a prisoner. We did not believe that this war crime, which he participated in as a child while under the control of adult commanders, should follow him for the rest of his life.

In interviews, we were again careful to ask open-ended questions, in order not to re-traumatize children. Michael also decided to steer clear of asking children about sexual abuse at the hands of their commanders, even though staffers at the rehab center pointed out specific children who'd been sexually abused and said the practice was common.

Aid workers

The team also dealt with questions of anonymity in its interviews with humanitarian workers who wanted to expose the theft of food aid. We operated with the knowledge that, if they were named, the workers — and perhaps their relief agencies — would likely get kicked out of the country. We were careful not to identify on-the-ground staffers or, in many cases, name the agency they were working for or even say whether it was a local or international group. We knew we needed to be as detailed as possible in order to fully expose — for the first time — the pervasiveness of corruption in the distribution of food aid in Yemen. But we also wanted to make sure we didn't cause aid workers or agencies to be forced from the country, which would further deprive the needy of food and medicine.

Conclusion

These examples are just a few of the many ethical questions we grappled with throughout our Yemen investigations. There are others, of course, we can't detail in order to keep people still on the ground in Yemen safe.

As one of the editors who shepherded these stories to publication, I'm honored to nominate Maggie Michael, Nariman El-Mofty and Maad al-Zikry for the 2019 Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,



Michael W. Hudson
Global Investigations Editor

Yemeni prisoners say Emirati officers sexually torture them

<https://www.apnews.com/37485a888de646918dfd4e7b8de3df73>

Ex-inmates: Torture rife in prisons run by Yemen rebels

<https://www.apnews.com/e32442a4c8c24acd9d362c433d5cd10e>

Child soldiers tell of fear, carnage on Yemen's front lines

<https://apnews.com/082c0b7b6253468e97da5ee0c3f43066>

AP Investigation: Food aid stolen as Yemen starves

<https://apnews.com/bcf4e7595b554029bcd372cb129c49ab>

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