



Season 2 Episode 1 - Made in the USA: Arms Sales and Civilian Harm

Episode Transcript

Marc: This podcast contains content that may be alarming to some listeners. Listener discretion is advised.

Ali: So now we have like warring parties in the moment, they have a signal to continue the war, because there are still countries that support them with weapons that are countries that support them with military technical support.

Teaser Clip: Every day 100 civilians are killed in conflict and countless more are harmed, yet their perspectives are often missing from the stories we tell about war. This is the Civilian Protection Podcast. A monthly podcast produced by CIVIC and PAX.

Annie: Hey everyone – welcome back to season 2 of the Civilian Protection Podcast! I’m Annie Shiel, Senior Advisor for the United States at Center for Civilians in Conflict, or CIVIC.

Marc: And I’m Marc Garlasco, Military Advisor from PAX. Our organizations work in conflicts around the world to protect civilians caught in war. Our first season of the Civilian Protection Podcast explored the journey of civilians seeking acknowledgement and compensation for harm, the long-term effects of a single bombing on civilian communities, the legacy of the war in Afghanistan, and more. And this season we’ll continue to center the experiences of civilians as we explore topics from arms sales, to climate change and environmental degradation, to community-led protection initiatives.

Annie: Today’s episode starts in some ways on April 22, 2018, when planes belonging to the Saudi- and UAE-led Coalition dropped a bomb on a wedding celebration in Al-Raqa village, in Yemen. The attack killed 21 civilians, including eleven children, and injured 97 people.

Marc: The bomb was a GBU-12 Paveway II, made and sold in the United States.

Annie: Today we explore the system that made this, and so many incidents like it, possible – that saw a bomb made in the USA destroy the lives of dozens of people celebrating a wedding in Yemen. I started by speaking with Ali Jameel, Director of Accountability and Redress 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. And

listeners might remember that we spoke to Ali's colleague, Bonyan, about civilian casualty investigations in season 1. Mwatana has been documenting civilian harm in the war in Yemen since the Saudi-led Coalition intervention in Yemen began, back in 2015.

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: Yes. So it's, 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. So for people who are working on Yemen, and in Yemen on human rights, it's really, really frustrating. Because all of this stuff is happening. It 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, there is no, there is no potential on military operations in Yemen. And it seems that it's almost blocked to be solved through military operations. But there is an international interest in the war in Yemen. And this interest is... the 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.

Al Jazeera Clip: The wedding hall which was to have been a scene of joyous celebration was turned into a death trap. Local officials said the first missile detonated in the men's section of the wedding party, moments later a second one hit the side on which the females were gathered. *[Sounds of a young boy crying out in Arabic.]* A young boy screaming and crying next to what appears to be the lifeless body of his father. Dozens of people were treated in the nearby hospital...

Ali: The wedding party was in a village in Hajjah, to the northwest of Yemen. Normal civilian people in a poor, rural area were, were having a wedding party, and right in the middle of the party, the airstrikes happened. It was really a very bloody airstrike, in which 21 civilians were killed, including 11 children and 97 injured, including 48 children and two women.

Annie: Ali and his team went to the site to investigate the airstrike, and found that the strike had been carried out using US weapons.

Ali: We heard about this incident the night of the incident, because the incident happened at 10pm. The next day in the morning, three of the team in Mwatana traveled from Sanaa to the area of the strike to join the field researcher in documentation of this incident. So we met with

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 this airstrikes, and we were able to, to share this, to take pictures of this weapon remanent and then contracted a weapon expert to do analysis of the weapon used. The result of analysis that the expert made says that this weapon is US made, its GBU 12 paveaway II laser guided bomb with MK 82 warheads. It should be a precise bomb. And like targeting this with, with such a bomb, it should be intentional because it's it's not a bomb that that can be some sort of indiscriminate attack, because the bump is laser guided should be very precise.

Annie: And, you know, 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: It's like the wedding was in almost, something like a tent next to a house. The area was a poor area, people didn't have public services. All they have are the small houses. And this airstrike just ruined the house, killed too many people. Like when you meet with people after, after the strikes, you see how different people have different sufferings. Like 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 lost her tool, that she used to put the cow milk inside. And she was really, really feeling sad about her tool, because it's almost part of her food security. And it's not easy for her to get another tool. Maybe to other people, this type of suffering, to Saudis or to Americans, 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, you know, US or weapons from other exporters being using this kind of harm?

Ali: Yes, this, this incident is part of a report that we published with support of PAX for Peace. The report highlights 27 incidents in which Mwatana was able to find remnants of the weapon used. Speaking of finding the remnants, it's really not an easy thing to find remnants of the weapon used. And we always say that what we have documented is not everything. Within our capacities, we can't document everything, we're just local Yemeni NGO, we can't document everything. But what we have found until now, evidence for is the US the UK, Italy.

Annie: And we've been talking now, of course, about the use of 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: Supporting the countries involved in Yemen is really critical in keeping the war moving forward or stopping the war. I have been in a panel last year with a researcher from Spain who was speaking about how important is technical support for, for the coalition to continue their airstrikes. And 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 stopping the transfers of weapons to Yemen.

Annie: And that's 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's a very clear signal that despite what you have done in Yemen, you still can do further. There is other signals that that happens. So now we have like warring parties in the moment, they have a signal to continue the war, because there are still countries that support them with weapons that are countries that support them with military technical support. And also last year, we lost the only independent UN mechanism investigating on human rights violations in Yemen, the GEE.

Annie: Ali is referring to the UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, an international mechanism mandated to investigate violations and abuses committed by all parties to the Yemen conflict, which ended last year after political pressure from Saudi Arabia and other coalition members.

Ali: 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.

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

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

Annie: I'm 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, weapon transfers to warring parties in Yemen, to all warring parties in Yemen. And our asks, even goes beyond that. We're expecting from them to be more active on establishing a mechanism criminally, criminally focused mechanism to investigate on war crimes in Yemen, and also to push for peace in Yemen. Countries like US, UK, France, they have very strong relationships with with countries that are involved in the world in Yemen and they can have leverage to push for peace in Yemen. I don't think this is something impossible for them. I think it's something very easy to reach.

Marc: The question we asked at the top of the episode was, how does this happen? Not just in Yemen, but in so many places around the world? What is the process by which so many US weapons end up being used in civilian harm and human rights violations around the world? I know CIVIC has done a lot of work on this – how do we start to understand this issue?

Annie: Well I think you have to start by understanding the role the US plays in the global arms trade. The US is by far the top exporter of weapons worldwide, totaling approximately 161 billion dollars in arms exports last year. That's over one third of the global market, and more than the next three countries – Russia, China, and France – combined.

And the US has really treated these arms transfers both as an economic export in many cases but also as a tool of foreign policy, as security assistance to security partners, which includes not just weapons but also other equipment, maintenance contracts for that equipment – like the refueling and repairs for Saudi aircrafts that Ali mentioned – and training and advising. And through this approach, US assistance has repeatedly gone to countries committing human rights violations and civilian harm, including war crimes, and has helped to fuel conflict and violence. And even when a US weapon isn't used directly in an airstrike, as in the case Ali described, US weapons transfers and other assistance to governments committing harm also sends a really clear political signal that the US is okay with what those states are doing.

Marc: This is a known issue; so what are US policymakers doing about it?

Annie: CIVIC and other organizations have long advocated for better policies around both how the US decides to move forward - or not move forward - with a sale or transfer, as well as how they monitor how those US-origin items are being used after a weapon is transferred.

When the US is considering a sale, for example, human rights and civilian protection concerns are rarely prioritized, especially compared to industry & economic incentives, and other foreign policy concerns, like garnering goodwill with what the US sees as an important security partner. Under the Trump administration, for example, the Conventional Arms Transfer policy, referred to as the CAT policy, really elevated the importance of supporting the US industrial base in arms and de-emphasized the importance of human rights. And we're still waiting for the Biden administration's replacement policy. The State Department also doesn't apply Leahy vetting, which is legally required human rights vetting for recipients of US security assistance, to most arms transfers, which is another big gap.

Marc: And what about after a sale? What about end-use monitoring?

Annie: So, end-use monitoring is meant to refer to how the US tracks the ways that its weapons are used after they're transferred, to make sure they're used in accordance with their purpose.

But it's actually really terribly named, because current end-use monitoring programs don't actually track USE – they are designed to make sure US-origin items aren't diverted to third parties, and to keep US proprietary technology safe. But they don't currently monitor use in human rights violations, or in the conduct of conflict, including civilian harm, which is a big gap.

Marc: In light of all those challenges, what tools do we have to understand this system and stop problematic sales? What about congressional and public oversight?

Annie: The system of congressional oversight over US arms transfers is pretty broken. Right now, in order to successfully oppose an arms sale Congress disagrees with, they essentially need a two-thirds supermajority in both chambers in order to overcome a likely presidential veto. For example, in 2019, Congress voted overwhelmingly, across party lines, to stop US arms transfers to Saudi Arabia in response to the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi as well as the kinds of Saudi actions in the Yemen conflict that Ali talked about. Trump vetoed that resolution and the sale went forward. So many organizations, CIVIC included, have pressed for a change to Congressional procedures to “flip the script”, so to speak, meaning that for some of the riskiest sales, Congress would have to affirmatively vote to approve them.

The last hurdle I'll mention here is transparency. There are a lot of sales – especially commercial sales, those sold from private US companies to purchasers around the world – that are not reported publicly and are very hard to track. That makes it really hard for researchers, members of the public, and even Congress to understand the scope of US arms transfers around the world and influence decisions for the better.

But – it's not impossible. Which brings me to our last two guests, who really set out to do what US policymakers somehow seemed to be failing to do in Yemen: understand the recipients and impact of US assistance to the Saudi- and United Arab Emirates- led coalition in Yemen.

Joyce: Hi, my name is Joyce Sohyun Lee, I work for the visual forensics team at the Washington Post. And our team really focuses on visually driven investigations.

Tony: And I'm Tony Wilson, I'm the founder and director of the Security Force Monitor, which is a project of the Human Rights Institute at Columbia Law School. And our project, the Security Force Monitor, focuses on using publicly available information to understand the structure, the commanders, and operations of police and military forces around the world with a goal of having that information be useful to journalists, human rights researchers, and others concerned with the conduct of these forces.

Annie: Before we dive into your research, I want to start by putting this research in context. Can you describe what the war has looked like in the last few years? What we know about civilian harm trends in Yemen, and what the US role has been?

Tony: So just as a way of background, on March 26 2015, a coalition of nine countries led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched an airstrike campaign and later a ground invasion campaign in Yemen, with the goal of defeating the armed group, Ansar Allah also called the Houthis, which at the time controlled northern Yemen and had proceeded into the south and had seized control of southern Yemen as well. Since the beginning, I mean, since day one, human rights groups have been raising concern about the conduct of coalition operations, in particular, the air strike campaign. Actually, the first recorded air strike that human rights groups raised concerns about was on day one was on March 26 2015. And that continued going forward as human rights groups recorded strikes on other things that they classified as civilian objects, be it residential homes, factories that produce beverages like milk and other things, funeral halls, schools and other things that, according to the groups, as they documented them should not have been struck by the coalition that they were not military targets, um, are not appropriate targets to be struck by the coalition. At the same time, these countries are a huge recipients of US security assistance from training, sales of weapons, planes and other equipment. And that trend continued through the war as well.

Joyce: The only thing I would add is that the conflict has led to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, hundreds of 1000s of people have died from fighting or indirect consequences like hunger, and conservative estimates put that civilian deaths from the air campaign alone is somewhere around 9000. And again, I would emphasize that that is a conservative estimate. So the toll of this Saudi-led coalition intervention in Yemen and the civil war has just been devastating.

Annie: And what made you undertake this particular investigation? You know, how did you start? What did the research look like?

Tony: Yeah. Really, the research started from where we were able to support human rights groups like Mwatana, and others who were doing really critical on the ground investigations of the airstrikes and their consequences. Obviously, we're not going to be able to do on the ground research. I mean, there's so many constraints for groups even based in the country and threats and other things that they have to overcome. But what quickly became clear as a question that we could really tackle was this uncertainty around what the coalition was? And so what we did is we started with what the coalition said about itself. And when the war started, on March 26 2015, there was a lot of announcements about this country sent this, Bahrain sent F16s, Saudi sent F15s, other countries sent other types of planes. And that gave us a hook of where to start the research. So what we did is, I went in, documented, okay, what are the air forces of these countries, the entire Air Force? What are all the units? What do they fly? And then from there to take those first kind of glimpses into the air campaign to say like, okay, well, if this source is saying Bahrain sent F16s, if I know everything about the Air Force from public sources, what units fly F16s, and conversely, what units don't fly F16s, which units we don't have any evidence of them serving in Yemen, and kind of went down the line, country by country. And the key there for Air Forces is this term that we'll use again, and again, again, is squadrons, which are the

main fighting unit of an Air Force, that's from eight to 24 planes, it's kind of a range, but they generally have one role or a main role. And so having all that information together, allowed us to understand okay, not only these are the squadrons that we should be concerned about, that these are the squadrons we should be concerned about modeling for their planes, but because they can conduct airstrikes.

The research was really aided by a researcher at Mwatana, who I worked with extensively over the course of more than a year, training them in Security Force Monitor's methodology, but then really relying on them to dig through Arabic language sources, to find material related to this question about the coalition. And that was really instrumental to the success of this project and the ultimate kind of outcomes.

From there, it was a question of, okay, we have a good sense of the air forces and what units could have served. We know more about them. How do we track US security assistance to these forces? And the good news is the US is comparatively fairly transparent and makes a lot of announcements of things.

Annie: And what Tony's referring to are announcements of government-to-government sales that meet a certain dollar threshold and therefore have to be notified to Congress. This unfortunately doesn't include commercial sales, for example.

Tony: The bad news is to understand it, you've got to go through every daily announcement of the DoD web site, read through it and say, okay, well, what what are they selling today? What's been approved? Could this go to one of the countries we're concerned about, and if it does, could it go to one of the units we're concerned about? And so that's what we did is just dug through all of those reports.

And finally, the last thing we looked at was what are the allegations actually been made against the coalition against the air campaign. And so reading through the various human rights reports to pull together a list of over 300 airstrikes that they had raised concerns about that they allege either were potential violations, were violations of international humanitarian law, or potentially were war crimes.

Annie: And this is so interesting, because you know, the Pentagon has often said that it's difficult to pinpoint which units in foreign militaries are actually receiving US equipment, because US equipment, you know, can be moved around. But what you're saying is that the research that both of you have done, has found that this specific squadrons receiving US support is actually completely knowable information. And with open source information, no less.

Tony: That's exactly right. That even with all of the concerns being raised, and all the potentials for all these airstrikes at the end of the day, we found if you only know, the types of planes that countries sent, that's 39 squadrons that could have done the airstrikes in Yemen. That's it. And

from there, we were able to find publicly available information to confirm 19 of those squadrons did serve in Yemen. And it's ultimately, very, very knowable.

Annie: How did your findings line up with what we know about civilian casualties in Yemen, including possible war crimes? In other words, did you find that US support was linked to airstrikes that may have been war crimes?

Joyce: Yeah, so we weren't able to do this being able to link a specific squadron to an air strike. You know, it's not something that we were able to do, ultimately, and it's not for lack of trying, I think that there's you know as we discussed before, usually, when an airstrike occurs, even when the coalition says that they're going to investigate their own airstrikes, they'll still say, this was carried out by the coalition, and without any kind of specifics about the squadron that was involved. And, you know, I think that we found that detail to be exceedingly difficult to know. But what we do know is that the Saudi-led Coalition maintains a master database of each airstrike. And they also in that database, detail, the squadron and the type of munition that was used. And we also know, according to US officials, that both American and British personnel that were stationed in Riyadh, at the coalition headquarters, had access to this database at some point during the war. Meaning that, you know, Tony and I might not know, but in theory, you know, American and British officials should have known or at one point, knew, like, at a certain point, which squadron carried out which air strike, and potentially might have known which squadron carried out airstrikes that violated or appear to violate the rules of war.

Annie: So what I'm hearing from you is that, you know, you, your research wasn't able to make that exact connection because of the information available. But and I was struck by actually a quote from Tony, in your piece, that, you know, there's virtually based on what you found virtually no way for the US or other countries to support these squadrons, without supporting squadrons that may be linked to war crimes and other violations.

Tony: That's correct. That's correct. There's really no way to be supporting these squadrons and not run that risk of supporting a squadron that's potentially committed a war crime.

Joyce: Overwhelmingly, so much of the coalition, they're flying American equipment, and using American weaponry. And it's, it's really, I think it's worth keeping in mind that, you know, at the end of the day, we've gotten really into the specifics, but the top line is that, like, the majority of these squadrons couldn't fly or even exist without American fighter jets, and planes and American personnel on the ground helping these planes get off the ground.

Annie: And, you know, given that reality, the US has faced quite a bit of pressure around its role in civilian harm in Yemen. What do we know about how the US government has addressed these concerns over the last few years? Or tried to?

Joyce: Yeah, that's a, you know, that's a great question. Um, so we know from, and Tony nodded to this as well, that pretty much from day one, there were significant concerns about

whether coalition airstrikes may have violated the rules of law. And we know that, you know, there are these internal State Department discussions around it as well, because of documents of emails that were released as part of a Freedom of Information Act request by Reuters. And the United States sort of took a couple of steps to mitigate these civilian harm risks. The first is that they sent advisors to the coalition headquarters to advise on civilian harm reduction tactics. Additionally, for the Saudi Air Force, they provided civilian casualties, law of armed conflict, and human rights trainings as part of like, their foreign military sales package to the Saudi Air Force. And in 2019, the US also adopted a policy that required that precision guided missiles have to be sold with appropriate targeting infrastructure. And I think, you know, one concern that, you know, really piqued our interest in the topic is concerns about whether any US officials might be vulnerable to charges of aiding and abetting war crimes under international law. I am not a lawyer, but having spoken with a couple of really, you know, a few brilliant lawyers for the story, you know, we learned that in war crimes, aiding and abetting have different standards and different courts, including domestic ones. But one standard that we came to again and again is that individuals or state might be found guilty of aiding and abetting if they continue to provide the systems to a problematic actor with knowledge that their support would contribute to future crimes and despite assurances, and, you know, that is sort of important to keep in mind. And moreover, the GAO –

Annie: That's the Government Accountability Office, which investigates how the federal government spends taxpayer dollars.

Joyce): – publicly released a report in June that, you know, that basically found that the DOD and state have not properly investigated which US support contributed to civilian harm, despite reports of extensive civilian harm in Yemen.

Tony: And I'll just add from the contracting side, even while these concerns are being raised over that seven year period, every US Administration approved contracts that probably benefited airstrikes squadrons serving in Yemen. Obama and Trump and the Biden administration all approved contracts that went to the various coalition countries into and had planes, equipment, or weapons that would go to that we only have sources that could have benefited airstrikes squadrons.

Annie: So then in 2021, the Biden administration announced that it would end US support for what they deemed offensive operations carried out by the Saudi led coalition in Yemen. And I'm curious, as you know, in terms of your research, did you find that that distinction held? Was there assistance continuing to support these squadrons?

Tony: Right. So I think the distinction that they're making is on offensive weapons. So let's say the bomb that you would actually use to carry out the airstrike, which they haven't sold. As, at least as far as the contracts that we looked at, however, the issue is, sure you're not selling the bomb that's being put on the plane. But if you're still selling the plane, or servicing the plane, or putting new equipment in the plane, that's then carrying out these strikes, that's not a very good

distinction. And that's not really that much of a limitation, it seems like you're still running the risk of supporting the plane supporting a squadron that is potentially linked to an airstrike that is a potential war crime.

Joyce: And I would just add that the State Department hasn't provided really clear, or, you know, a clear definition of what they mean by offensive versus defensive. And so, you know, when President Biden took office, and pretty much immediately after announced the end of offensive support, and paused sales to Saudi Arabia and the Emiratis pending review, despite this pause, the maintenance contracts that Tony just alluded to, weren't impacted, those are still ongoing. And, you know, we're helping keep these Air Force squadrons, you know, ready to fly. And the other side of this is that the US still has the US has moved forward under the Biden administration with arms sales to the Saudis and Emiratis. And what they call defensive weapons to Saudis, they've sold, you know the State Department has approved a sale of hundreds of millions of air to air missiles to Saudi Arabia. And then for the UAE, you know, tens of million dollars sale to booster the country's missile defense systems. So, all this to say the support continues. Whether it's defensive or offensive, you know it is a blurry line, and that was something that we sort of ran up against as we tried to ask the State Department, is, you know, what is offensive? What is defensive? What falls under which? And, you know, that's been a really difficult question, I think to answer.

Annie: And why do you think, you know, in light of these really well documented civilian harm and human rights risks, why do you think so much of the support that you investigated, continued? And some of it, as you just mentioned, has continued?

Joyce: So we, we came across two, I guess two points to that. The first is Leahy vetting, which the Leahy law is about the statute that essentially says, you know, the United States cannot provide security assistance to units of foreign militaries that are implicated in gross violation of human rights. But under the current interpretation, that the Leahy law vetting only kicks in when that security assistance is paid for by the United States. So countries like the Saudis, and the Emiratis, that pay for their own assistance are not subject to Leahy vetting. And then the other factor that we learned about is just that there is the sheer volume of contracts overwhelms human rights concerns in the vetting process. And I'm sure, Annie, you're well aware of this. But you know, we were sent, the House Democrats wrote a letter to a subcommittee back in April. And just to quote them, they said that staffing constraints, that meant that over the course of the year, the State Department was expected to complete an analysis on the human rights risks associated with a weapons export license every five minutes, which is an impossible task, really. But it really brings to mind it's not just you know, the the sales that we hear about for military sales, that are over a certain threshold, there's also direct commercial sales, and this whole other universe of sales that the public doesn't really have any insight to, and that the sheer volume of contracts is really much larger, than, you know, we know and that we were able to review for this project, not because we didn't want to, but because that information isn't public.

Annie: And I want to close by asking you, you know, I'm curious about what was most surprising to you in doing this investigation? And also, you know, what are your biggest kind of takeaways, or what do you see as the biggest implications moving forward?

Joyce: I think the, the biggest challenge for us, unsurprisingly, is that this is such a complicated universe, to learn about complicated laws, myriad of government agencies, and offices within the Department of State defense, and the DOD. And not just, you know, a number of I guess, perhaps I don't want to say barriers, but challenges towards transparency and accountability. And that feels, you know, concerning given just the amount of money that's involved in this, the number of countries that the US is selling and supporting, and it raises important questions for us about how we can have accountability and transparency into really lucrative, I guess, industry that does have very real impact on and especially in Yemen.

Tony: Yeah, the biggest surprise, well, there's actually a couple, I would say, from from my side, one of the more depressing things actually was it took us a while to pull together all of the sources. That's not depressing, just took the time. But what was quite depressing was once we got them all together and understood what they were telling us and all that, by late 2015, you could have mapped out the coalition from open sources, you know, if that was literally the only things you had, you could have done it, you could have understood, and so that, that means the US government could have understood who was serving in the coalition and what the concerns were simply that they they did have access to the same sources we were looking at, with, obviously, vastly more resources. I think the second thing, thinking of, you know, civilian protection concerns, and the questions that this raises for US policy is, again, we only looked at contracts for that seven year period, but those contracts are still going, the last, the latest ones through, like 2029. So these questions are for this administration, but future administration's. And finally, the implications for any one sale can really reverberate through time. So the planes that we're raising concerns about that are attacking Yemen, or that may be potentially involved in war crimes. These were sold by the George HW Bush administration, the Clinton administration, the W. Bush administration. And so, when these sales happen, you know, what are the implications of it five years down the line, 10 years down the line, 15 years down the line, 20 years down the line? Like that's the real concern is, once they're sold, they're sold.

Marc: Once they're sold, they're sold.

Annie: Exactly. Sending weapons around the world – often with US tax dollars in this case – comes with extraordinary risks, not least to civilians, who too often find themselves on the receiving end of those weapons – as so much of Ali's and Mwatana's research in Yemen has documented.

Marc: And as Tony and Joyce's work really highlights, it's a really complex and opaque issue to untangle. I mean, if this universe is difficult for researchers, and journalists, and advocates to

understand – you know, people who are dedicated to understanding this issue – then it's going to be really hard for other members of the public to understand. What can people do?

Annie: I think exactly for the reasons you just pointed out, members of Congress don't often hear from their constituents about arms sales, and concerns that people have with how weapons made in the USA are being used around the world. And it's worth recognizing that there are factories building these weapons all over the US, in congressional districts all over the US, and that the arms industry gets a lot of power from lobbying specific members in those districts and states, and through campaign contributions. So for listeners in the United States, I'd start with making sure that elected officials and candidates know that this is an issue people care about, and push for legislation that adds more human rights and civilian protection requirements to arms transfer rules and improves transparency and congressional oversight.

Marc: So today we focused on the US, but of course at PAX we've seen this as an issue with other countries that export weapons, including many European countries. We've been pushing governments to make sure their arms exports comply with international norms that are enshrined in the Arms Trade Treaty. So listeners around the world can press their representatives and governments to join and abide by this Treaty. You can also find more resources in the written notes under this episode, wherever you get your podcasts.

That's it for this episode. Next up on the Civilian Protection Podcast, we'll explore conflict and the environment, looking at how the fighting in Ukraine is directly and indirectly harming the natural environment and why this matters.

Annie: The civilian protection podcast is brought to you by Center for Civilians in Conflict and PAX – two NGOs working to improve the lives of civilians caught in conflict. Today's episode was written by Annie Shiel with assistance from Marc Garlasco, Tate Musinahama, Ari Tolany, John Ramming Chappell, Selma van Oostwaard, Erin Bijl, and Frank Slijper. It was produced by the Podcast Guru. Hajer Naili and Tate Musinahama made sure we're online. We'd like to thank Ali Jameel, Tony Wilson, and Joyce Sohyun Lee for joining us as guests.

Marc: You can find us on Spotify or anywhere you get your podcasts. We want to hear from you: share your thoughts on this episode or topics you'd like us to cover by emailing civilianprotectionpod@gmail.com. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at ProtectionPod to stay up to date on our episodes and guest speakers, and get behind-the-scenes content. You can follow Ali Jameel and the work of Mwatana, and follow the Security Force Monitor and Joyce Sohyun Lee on Twitter. Find full interviews and upcoming episodes on our websites, civiliansinconflict.org/podcast and protectionofcivilians.org. Thanks for listening.