

BRENNAN BLOWS UP ANOTHER WEDDING PARTY, THIS TIME IN YEMEN

At least fifteen people were killed by a US drone strike in Yemen yesterday. It is particularly difficult to get accurate information in the immediate aftermath of strikes in Yemen, and the reports being generated now conflict in several regards, but what seems to be clear on all fronts is that the convoy of vehicles that was attacked was a wedding party.

Reuters reports the targeting of the wedding party as a mistake:

Fifteen people on their way to a wedding in Yemen were killed in an air strike after their party was mistaken for an al Qaeda convoy, local security officials said on Thursday.

The officials did not identify the plane in the strike in central al-Bayda province, but tribal and local media sources said that it was a drone.

“An air strike missed its target and hit a wedding car convoy, ten people were killed immediately and another five who were injured died after being admitted to the hospital,” one security official said.

But the New York Times seems quite willing to accept claims that there were al Qaeda militants present in the convoy:

Most of the dead appeared to be people suspected of being militants linked to Al Qaeda, according to tribal leaders in the area, but there were also reports that several civilians had been killed.

The Times opened their article, however by noting that the vehicles that were hit were indeed traveling to a wedding. Yemen reporter Adam Baron noted that he also was getting reports that those killed were mostly militants:

Possible twist? (staunchly anti-drone) Qayfa contact now saying those killed wedding convoy strike were mostly local AQ fighters. #yemen

– Adam Baron (@adammbaron) December 12, 2013

That Baron got that report from a drone critic is especially interesting. But Baron went on to pose a very important question:

What's worse: a drone strike hitting a wedding convoy by mistake or a drone strike hitting a wedding convoy on purpose? #yemen

– Adam Baron (@adammbaron) December 12, 2013

And just to make things even more interesting, Baron tweeted this morning that he now is hearing from “tribal sources” that a teenager with US citizenship was among those killed.

The AP story carried in the Washington Post reports on the multiple accounts that exist:

There were no immediate details on who was killed in the strike, and there were conflicting reports about whether there were militants traveling with the wedding convoy.

A military official said initial information indicated the drone mistook the wedding party for an al-Qaida convoy. He said tribesmen known to the villagers were among the dead.

One of the three security officials, however, said al-Qaida militants were

suspected to have been traveling with the wedding convoy.

Did you notice what AP reported the “military official” to have said? From that snippet, we see the claim that it was the drone that made the mistake in targeting, as if we already are employing drones that are capable of autonomous function. No, drones are still simply tools to deliver weapons and it was the operator flying the drone and firing the missiles who made the mistake, not the drone.

Once again, John Brennan has shown with this strike his amazing ability to carry out strikes that now and then are so depraved that they seem almost intentionally crafted to put the drone program in the worst possible light.

Spencer Ackerman gives us more on the ham-handedness of this latest strike:

Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemeni activist who testified to the US Senate about the impact of the drone strikes earlier this year predicted the strike would drain Yemeni citizens’ outrage over the recent attack on the defense ministry by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula that killed more than 50 people.

“The strike today literally saved AQAP’s image and shorted by months the PR work would have needed to do,” al-Muslimi said. “Nothing could have made Yemenis forget the horrible images of the attack in Sanaa more than the images of this current drone strike that targeted a wedding party.”

The USA executive director of Amnesty International, Steven W Hawkins, urged the Obama administration to ditch its policy of not commenting on drone strikes. “US silence is unacceptable. Instead of hiding behind secrecy, the US needs to acknowledge and immediately commit to investigating all credible

reports of potentially unlawful killings,” he said in a prepared statement.

The United Nations special rapporteur on extra-judicial executions, Christof Heyns, vowed an inquiry into the incident, building on a year in which the UN has taken a far more active interest than ever in civilian deaths linked to drone strikes.

“If proven to be correct, this is very serious,” Heyns said in a statement.

A quick accounting of civilian deaths from US drone strikes in Yemen comes from Bill Roggio:

The US has mistakenly killed civilians in drone strikes in the past. On Sept. 2, 2012, the US killed 13 civilians in a strike in Rada’a, according to Yemeni tribesmen. The exact target of that strike is not known. Seventeen civilians are reported to have been killed in Yemen in 2013, and an additional 25 were killed in 2012, according to data compiled by *The Long War Journal*. Two hundred and ninety jihadists are reported to have been killed in drone strikes in Yemen in 2012 and 2013.

So by Roggio’s accounting, 42 of the 332 deaths by drones in Yemen in the last two years have been civilians. That comes to one of every eight people killed in the last two years. It would appear that in Yemen, Brennan has a pretty high tolerance for collateral damage, even before we factor in this latest strike on a wedding party.