

FALLOUT FROM WEDDING PARTY DRONE STRIKE IN YEMEN CONTINUES

As more details emerge on the drone strike Thursday in Yemen that hit a wedding party, it is becoming clear that the New York Times got it wrong, and those killed were mostly civilians rather than mostly suspected al Qaeda militants. A follow-up story in the Los Angeles Times on Friday put the death toll at 17, with only five of the dead having suspected al Qaeda connections. But CNN's follow-up on Friday is even worse: they put the death toll at only 14, but they carried this statement from a Yemeni official:

"This was a tragic mistake and comes at a very critical time. None of the killed was a wanted suspect by the Yemeni government," said a top Yemeni national security official who asked not to be named because he is not authorized to talk to media.

If we read between the lines, then, it would seem that although a few of those killed may have had al Qaeda connections, they were not of sufficiently high profile to merit being wanted by Yemen's government.

The CNN story only gets worse:

The convoy consisted of 11 vehicles, and the officials said that four of the vehicles were targeted in the strikes. Two of the vehicles were completely damaged. Among the killed were two prominent tribal leaders within the province.

This piece of information alone seems to embody

all of the moral depravity of the US drone program as it now stands. Despite all the bleating about the effort put into assuring that only militants are targeted and that every effort is made to prevent civilian casualties, there simply is no justification for proceeding with an attack that intends to target fewer than half the vehicles in a large convoy. Such an attack is virtually guaranteed to kill more than just those targeted, and as discussed above, it seems very likely that even those targeted in this strike were low level operatives instead of high level al Qaeda leaders.

Sunday saw a strong response to the attacks by Yemen's Parliament. They voted to end drone strikes in the country. From CNN:

Yemen's parliament Sunday called for an end to drone strikes on its territory after a U.S. missile attack mistakenly struck a wedding convoy, killing more than a dozen people.

The nearly unanimous but non-binding vote was "a strong warning" to both the United States and the government of Yemeni President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, a Yemeni government official told CNN.

"The Yemeni public is angered by the drone strikes," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he's not authorized to talk to reporters. "The people's representatives reflected on the tone of the streets."

The official statement carried in the Reuters story on the vote strikes a similar position to what we have been hearing from Pakistan regarding US drone strikes there:

"Members of parliament voted to stop what drones are doing in Yemeni airspace, stressing the importance of preserving innocent civilian lives against any attack and maintaining

Yemeni sovereignty,” the state news agency SABA said.

There’s that pesky issue of sovereignty again. Recall that it is a huge driver for the demonstrations by Imran Khan’s PTI party that have shut down NATO convoys on Pakistan’s northern supply route. And Khan appears to be gearing up for his protests to stage major events in Lahore and even Islamabad next week.

Writing in *The Atlantic* this morning, Conor Friedersdorf poses some interesting questions regarding the strike:

On my wedding day, my wife and I hired a couple of shuttle vans to ferry guests between a San Clemente hotel and the nearby site where we held our ceremony and reception. I thought of our friends and family members packed into those vehicles when I read about the latest nightmarish consequence of America’s drone war: “A U.S. drone mistakenly targeted a wedding convoy in Yemen’s al-Baitha province after intelligence reports identified the vehicles as carrying al Qaeda militants,” CNN reported, citing government sources in Yemen. “The officials said that 14 people were killed and 22 others injured, nine in critical condition. The vehicles were traveling near the town of Radda when they were attacked.”

Can you imagine the wall-to-wall press coverage, the outrage, and the empathy for the victims that would follow if an American wedding were attacked in this fashion? Or how you’d feel about a foreign power that attacked your wedding in this fashion?

The vote in Parliament wasn’t the only fallout from the drone strike. Pakistan Today has more of what happened in response:

Relatives of the dead staged protests to denounce the killings and demanded an official apology as well as compensation. Hundreds of people also blocked the road between Rada and Sanaa at Friday's funeral of 13 people but reopened a day later after reaching agreement on compensation with local military authorities. "If the government fails to stop American planes from... bombing the people of Yemen, then it has no rule over us," tribal chief Ahmad al-Salmani told AFP on Saturday.

The Pakistan Today article goes on to say that two of those killed were previously on the list of wanted al Qaeda suspects (when coupled with the observation above, does this mean they had been on the list previously but weren't when they were actually hit?), but most of those killed came from prominent families:

Two of the dead whose names were released – Saleh al-Tays and Abdullah al-Tays – had figured in the past on Yemeni government lists of wanted Al-Qaeda suspects. But most of those killed were civilians of the Al-Tays and Al-Ameri – which are part of the large and heavily armed Qayfah tribe.

So the US has killed a large number of innocent people from a large and heavily armed tribe. What could go wrong with that? The CNN article on Yemen's Parliament vote gives us a preview:

But the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch reported in October that at least 57 civilians had also been killed by missiles fired from the unmanned aircraft. And some Yemeni security experts argue that drone strikes have aided al Qaeda by turning peaceful tribal communities into vengeful killers.

That's the ticket! Let's turn a large and heavily armed tribe into vengeful killers working with al Qaeda. Then we'll need even more drone strikes and then...