

YEMEN TRIES TO CLAIM US DRONE STRIKES AS YEMENI AIR FORCE STRIKES

As MadDog alerted us this morning, there were multiple strikes against alleged terrorist targets in southern Yemen Friday night. What stands out to me in scanning the various media reports about these attacks is that even though it is crystal clear that these attacks are carried out by US drones firing missiles, Yemeni defense officials try to claim that the attacks are carried out by the Yemeni air force. This is an interesting contrast to the approach taken by Pakistani officials, where even though the official position of Pakistan's government is that US missile strikes are not allowed, Pakistani officials make no efforts to claim the strikes as their own, allowing the assumption that the strikes are carried out by the US to go unchallenged.

The most recent report on the strikes in Yemen that I can find is this brief update from Reuters [Note: the Reuters article was revised and expanded significantly while this post was being written; the passage quoted is from the earlier version and no longer appears directly as quoted, but the drone death toll of 24 and government claim of responsibility survives.]:

The death toll from air strikes that killed a senior al Qaeda official in southern Yemen has risen to 24, local officials said on Saturday.

The Defense Ministry said Yemeni aircraft had carried out the attack on Friday night.

This report has the highest death toll I've seen on the story and includes the note that Yemeni officials claim they carried out the attacks.

By contrast, the CNN report on the attacks puts the death toll at only 7 and reports that there were three drone attacks. This report, although it quotes Yemeni officials, is silent on responsibility for this attack, although it does reference the earlier attack that killed Anwar al-Awlaki as having been carried out by the US [Note: this article also was updated, with the death toll up to 9 now.]:

The son of U.S.-born militant cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki was among those killed in a trio of drone attacks in southern Yemen on Friday night, a security official said.

The attacks, carried out in the Shabwa district, killed seven suspected militants, the defense ministry said. It would not confirm that Abdul Rahman Anwar Awlaki was among them.

The senior security official in Shabwa, who did not want to be named because he is not authorized to speak to the media, said the younger Awlaki had been hiding in the mountains of Shabwa for more than eight months. He had first-hand knowledge of the death, he said.

As also mentioned in a number of other reports, the CNN story goes on to mention that Ibrahim al-Banna, the head media officer for AQAP, was killed. They cite Yemeni defense officials as the source of this information.

The same AP article that MadDog cited also is carried by the Washington Post. Note that this article opens by flatly stating that the attacks were carried out by US drones and later actually cites confirmation by Yemeni "security officials", with no reference to Yemeni defense officials trying to claim responsibility, even though the Defense Ministry is cited in identifying the key figures killed:

An American drone strike in southern Yemen has killed seven al-Qaida-linked militants, including the media chief for the group's Yemeni branch and the son of a prominent U.S.-born cleric slain in a similar attack last month, government officials and tribal elders said Saturday.

/snip/

The Yemeni Defense Ministry identified the slain media chief as Egyptian-born Ibrahim al-Bana. Tribal elders in the area also said the dead included Abdul-Rahman al-Awlaki, the 21-year-old son of Anwar al-Awlaki, a gifted Muslim preacher and savvy Internet operator who became a powerful al-Qaida recruiting tool in the West. He, along with another propagandist, Pakistani-American Samir Khan, were killed in a Sept. 30 U.S. drone attack.

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Security officials said the strike that killed them was one of five carried out over night by an American drones on suspected al-Qaida positions in Shabwa and the neighboring province of Abyan in Yemen's largely lawless south.

Interestingly, this report indicates that there were five separate drone attacks Friday night, but reports only the death toll of seven from the most prominent single attack, rather than summing the toll from all five attacks to the higher level of 24 reported by Reuters.

Pakistan's Dawn.com carries AFP's report on the attacks in Yemen. This report is noteworthy both because the Dawn headline puts both "US air" and "Qaeda militants" in quotation marks and because it does the best job of any of the media reports I've seen in adding some perspective to Yemen trying to claim responsibility for the attacks:

Apparent US air strikes killed seven suspected al Qaeda militants in southern Yemen, one of them the media chief of the jihadist network's regional affiliate, a local official said on Saturday.

The Yemeni defence ministry confirmed the deaths but insisted that Friday evening's strikes in Shabwa province, a militant stronghold east of the main southern city of Aden, were carried out by its own forces.

"Three strikes, apparently American, which were launched against positions held by al Qaeda militants in Azzan, one of the group's bastions, killed seven of them, including the Egyptian, Ibrahim al-Banna'a," the local official said.

The article conclude with this helpful explanation:

Yemen routinely denies that the United States carries out offensive operations on its territory, insisting that it plays a purely logistic and intelligence role in support of Yemen's own counter-terror operations.

Accounts of drone attacks in Pakistan, by contrast, do not hesitate in noting that the drones are American, even though the official Pakistani position is that they do not approve of these actions. Here is Pakistan's Express Tribune carrying an AFP report on drone attacks there on Friday:

A US drone strike targeting a militant compound in a Pakistani tribal region killed four rebels in the fourth attack in two days near the Afghan border, security officials said Saturday.

The drones fired eight missiles Friday night at the compound in Baghar, 40

kilometres west of Wana, the main town of South Waziristan tribal district, where the military launched a ground offensive two years ago.

“The strike killed four militants and wounded three others,” a senior security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The delicate dance relating to attribution of the drone strikes does not stop here, however. Despite the report leading with identifying the drones as American and no claims to the contrary coming from either Pakistan government officials or local officials at the attack site, this article concludes by noting that the US doesn’t officially admit to the use of drones:

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has said for the first time that the United States was waging “war” in Pakistan against militants, referring to the covert CIA drone campaign that Washington refuses to discuss publicly.

And there we have the lovely circumstances regarding the US reliance on drones to carry out attacks that in some cases are described as amounting to illegal extrajudicial executions.

The US refuses to publicly acknowledge these actions, citing their “covert” nature in a convenient dodge from accepting responsibility for controversial (or possibly illegal) measures. Yemen is quick to falsely claim responsibility, perhaps to curry favor with the US and perhaps as an attempt to enhance the posture of a government facing a very popular citizen uprising that appears to be poised on ousting the President. By contrast, Pakistan does not fear public disagreements with the US.

Its government has a stronger grip on power.

That allows it to maintain its public position that Pakistani forces alone should be in charge of attacking militants in Waziristan, and allows the Pakistani government to object to US drone

strikes as a breach of sovereignty, especially when innocent civilians are killed.

Whatever the posturing by the host countries, however, the US drones on, determined to strike "enemies" wherever they are to be found.