

WILL AL-LIBI KILLING BE USED TO JUSTIFY DRONE STRIKES ON MOURNERS, FIRST RESPONDERS?

Back in early February, a report from Chris Woods and Christina Lamb at The Bureau of Investigative Journalism delivered the shocking news that CIA targeting practices for drone attacks include the intentional targeting of mourners at funerals and first responders to initial attacks:

The CIA's drone campaign in Pakistan has killed dozens of civilians who had gone to help rescue victims or were attending funerals, an investigation by the Bureau for the Sunday Times has revealed.

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But research by the Bureau has found that since Obama took office three years ago, between 282 and 535 civilians have been credibly reported as killed including more than 60 children. A three month investigation including eye witness reports has found evidence that at least 50 civilians were killed in follow-up strikes when they had gone to help victims. More than 20 civilians have also been attacked in deliberate strikes on funerals and mourners. The tactics have been condemned by leading legal experts.

As Woods and Lamb point out, targeting mourners and first responders is a practice that is both heinous and likely to include civilian deaths along with those who are military targets. However, it now appears that the strikes that took out Abu Yahya al-Libi included both a strike on mourners and possibly a strike on first responders, so it seems likely now that

there will be a push from Obama administration figures to provide a patina of glory derived from taking out al-Qaeda's number two in command to a practice that Woods and Lamb pointed out amounts to "little more than extra-judicial executions".

Before it was known that al-Libi had likely been killed, Glenn Greenwald pointed out yesterday that Monday's strikes had been aimed at mourners and I pointed out that locals in the vicinity feared a follow-on strike hitting first responders. Greenwald cited and quoted from a Guardian article pointing out the mourner aspect of the strike. More details come from this article in Pakistan Today:

A US drone targeted a compound believed to be used by militant commanders Mullah Nazir and Commander Malang in the Wocha Dana Beermal area of South Waziristan.

While officials in various intelligence agencies have confirmed al-Libi's death, officials in the United States endorsed that al-Libi was the target of Monday's drone strike. There has not been any confirmation or rejection of the report by al Qaeda yet. According to reports, the militants had gathered in the compound to condole the death of Malang's brother who was killed the previous day in a drone attack in the same area.

Multiple reports indicate that two missiles were used in the attack that killed al-Libi. The Los Angeles Times indicates that both a house and a vehicle were destroyed, adding to the possibility raised in the Express Tribune article I quoted on Monday that the second missile may have been aimed at rescuers responding to the first. The Times article says that all three drone attacks Saturday, Sunday and Monday were targeted at al-Libi:

The CIA had targeted Libi with three

separate drone-launched missile attacks over three days, finally succeeding early Monday in strikes that destroyed a house and a vehicle, U.S. and Pakistani officials said.

Death tolls from the weekend of attacks vary widely depending on sources. The LA Times article cited above quotes a "US official":

Reports from Pakistan said as many as 15 people were killed in the drone strikes. The U.S. official said that figure was "wildly inaccurate" and insisted that the death toll was "less than a handful."

Similarly, the New York Times reports:

American officials said that Mr. Libi was the only person who died in the attack, although others were present in the compound. A tribesman from the area, speaking by phone and citing Taliban sources, said that three to five militants had been killed. But he agreed that no civilians had died because there had been no public funerals in the area.

Were there no funerals because no civilians were killed or were there no funerals because the local civilians know that funerals are considered to be appropriate targets by the CIA?

At any rate, even if the death toll from Monday's strikes is in dispute, it appears that the strikes on Saturday and Sunday, presumably in the hunt for al-Libi, killed a number of other people. It will be interesting to see whether the US begins to challenge the death toll numbers for those strikes as well. By moving the Saturday and Sunday strikes into the chase for al-Libi, though, the strikes are likely to be classed as targeted rather than as signature strikes. Even though strikes on mourners and on first responders are the worst

kind of signature strikes, the “victory” of killing al-Libi almost certainly will be pointed to as a reason to continue this practice.

The ruse of a vaccine program to gather intelligence on Osama bin Laden’s compound seriously undermined third world vaccine work, but has resulted in conservatives in the US promoting citizenship and other rewards for Dr. Shakeel Afridia. Once again, with the death of al-Libi, we have a long-desired result likely to be trotted out as justification of a process that is deeply flawed.