



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on March 2, 2014

New Disturbing Details of Yemeni Wedding Hit by U.S. Drone

A new report on the December 12 U.S. drone strike that killed 12 guests at a Yemeni wedding calls on President Obama to come clean on the standards it uses to decide who lives and who dies and when drones are an appropriate weapon in the so-called “War on Terror.”

Human Rights Watch published a 28-page report ([“A Wedding That Became a Funeral”](#)) in February highlighting various versions of the events that tore families apart about two weeks before Christmas 2013. One of the most relevant revelations in the study is that, as reported by *The Intercept*, “some, if not all, of the victims may have been civilians.”



An Associated Press story on the Human Rights Watch study reported a few additional details:

“We asked both the Yemeni and the U.S. authorities to tell us which of the dead and wounded were members of militant groups and which if any were civilians,” report author Letta Tayler, a senior terrorism and counterterrorism researcher at Human Rights Watch, told The Associated Press. “They did not reply to this question.”

She added: “While we do not rule out the possibility that AQAP fighters were killed and wounded in this strike, we also do not rule out the possibility that all of those killed and wounded were civilians.”

Naturally, the Obama administration tells a different story. Again, from the AP:

A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Rear Adm. John Kirby, said he would not comment on specific operational details. He noted that the Yemeni government has stated that the targets were “dangerous senior al-Qaida militants.”

U.S. and Yemeni officials said the target of the attack, Shawqi Ali Ahmad al-Badani, a midlevel al-Qaida leader, was wounded and had escaped.

Al-Badani is on Yemen’s most wanted list and is accused of masterminding a plan for a major attack last summer. When an intercepted message revealed the plot, the U.S. temporarily closed 19 of its diplomatic posts across Africa and the Mideast. Some European missions were closed as well.

Three U.S. officials said the U.S. government did investigate the strike against al-Badani — twice — and concluded that only members of al-Qaida were killed in the three vehicles that were hit.

The story of the strike is unconscionable and would be unbelievable, were it not for the president’s penchant for adding names to a kill list and then erasing them with Hellfire missiles fired from a remote



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control aircraft.

Citing “local security authorities,” Reuters reports that the families celebrating the wedding “were killed in an air strike after their party was mistaken for an al-Qaida convoy.”

Another unnamed official told Reuters that 10 people were killed immediately by the missiles, while five died later of injuries they sustained in the attack. Five more members of the wedding party were wounded, but survived the strike.

The AP, citing the Human Rights Watch report, puts the body count a little higher:

The report said four Hellfire missiles were fired at a wedding procession of 11 vehicles on Dec. 12, 2013, in Radda in southern Yemen, killing at least 12 men and wounding at least 15 others, six of them seriously.

While the people at the wedding may have been “accidentally” killed by the United States, thousands of so-called “militants” have been purposefully assassinated by our government.

For President Obama and those pulling the triggers on the joysticks guiding the missiles toward their human targets, “suspected militants” are officially defined as “all military-age males in a strike zone.”

For those of us concerned with the Constitution, due process, and the rule of law, however, “suspected militant” is just a euphemism for a person not charged with any crime, not afforded even the most perfunctory due process protections, but executed by presidential decree anyway. In this way, we are no better than those we kill in the name of safety.

The drone war began in Yemen in 2002. There have reportedly been 84 such strikes since that year. The number of dead is not verifiable, but LongWarJournal reports that 395 “al-Qaeda commanders” and 99 “civilians” have been killed during the duration of the program.

Regardless of the body count, however, Americans can expect the growth of anti-American sentiment to increase proportionally to the number of missiles fired from the powerful Predator and Reaper drones used to carry out the culling of the president’s kill list.

That sentiment is already being channeled by al-Qaeda leadership as its primary recruitment message.

Testimony from victims and eyewitnesses of the drone-delivered devastation in Yemen reveals that the attacks are serving better to recruit al-Qaeda than defeat them.

Since the inauguration of Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the number of sorties sent to Yemen has spiked.

Although U.S. officials typically do not comment on this or any other drone strike in Yemen or elsewhere, Hadi isn’t quite so close-mouthed about the arrangement between the two “allies.”

In a statement made to the *Washington Post* in an interview published September 29, 2012, President Hadi said he “personally approves every U.S. drone strike in his country.”

Hadi’s praise for the Predators continued during a speech delivered at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. “They [drones] pinpoint the target and have zero margin of error, if you know what target you’re aiming at,” Hadi said, according to the *New York Times*.

The problem with this arrangement is that there is no way to tell who is a “militant” and who isn’t.

More to the point, when did militancy become a crime? If it is a crime, where is it defined? How can anyone know if he is guilty of militancy if such a crime is not defined? Could one hypothetically be a



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militant without knowing it, given that the crime is nowhere defined?

Incidentally, it is this very vagueness that dilates the grey area and makes the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) such a fearsome weapon in the arsenal of the seemingly all-powerful president.

President Obama's nearly daily approval of drone-delivered assassinations is an effrontery to over 650 years of our Anglo-American law's protection from autocratic decrees of death without due process of law. When any president usurps the power to create a kill list, add names to that kill list, keep that kill list secret, and assassinate people on that kill list, he places our Republic on a trajectory toward tyranny and unbounded, unaccountable, unending government-sponsored terrorism.

Of course, it would be another matter if those targeted and executed by the president were armed enemy combatants. They were not. Were these suspected "militants" enemy soldiers captured during wartime they would be necessarily afforded certain rights granted to POWs.

Those slated for assassination are not allowed any rights — neither the due process rights given to those accused of crimes nor the rights of fair treatment given to enemies captured on the battlefield.

The White House has assumed all power over life and death — at home and abroad — and has created a brand-new category of individual — one who can be indiscriminately deprived of all rights altogether.

Regardless of the president's purported justification for disregarding due process and killing children, women, and men in untold numbers, the morality of the event makes the operation deplorable. As *The Intercept* rightly reports:

But at its core, the Human Rights Watch report makes the case that a swirling mix of competing accounts surrounding the strike demands a transparent investigation and publicly available findings. In an interview with *The Intercept* Wednesday, Letta Tayler, the author of the report, said the contradictory claims her team uncovered investigating the strike were "mind boggling."

"It would be comical if we were not talking about human beings who were killed and yet, that is what we're talking about," Tayler said. "And that's why the silence is unconscionable."

Such sickening operations will continue, however, until the American people stop being silent and demand that our elected leaders conform to the rule of law.

The "A Wedding That Became a Funeral" Human Rights Watch report includes the above photo (© 2013 Nasser al-San`a) showing a remnant of one of the U.S. Hellfire missiles that hit the

Yemini wedding, Dec. 12, 2013.

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