

Civilians Die in Reported Yemen Drone Strike as Weekend of Attacks Kills at Least 35

By [Alice K Ross](#)

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At least 35 people were reportedly killed over the weekend in Yemen, as a series of air strikes hit the country, including the biggest reported drone strike of the year so far.

Multiple sources including military officials and eyewitnesses [described](#) how a US drone attacked a truck that was carrying alleged members of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and also hit a vehicle carrying civilians. At least 10 – and possibly as many as 21 – were [reportedly killed](#) in the attack, including at least three civilians. They were described as [‘construction workers’](#) or ‘labourers’ by some reports.

This is the highest death toll of any confirmed drone strike in Yemen so far this year. The Bureau regards drone strikes as ‘confirmed’ if they are described as such by three independent sources, such as eyewitnesses, military officials and security sources.

Attacks continued on Sunday when air strikes – described by many reports as US drone strikes – targeted three suspected militant camps in the same province. Early reports suggested five people had been killed, but the reported death toll later rose. A tribal source told [Reuters](#) 25 bodies had been removed from the site, while other media reported a death toll in excess of 30.

But it remained unclear whether these attacks were indeed drone strikes – and indeed whether they were carried out by the US, or by the Yemeni air force. The Bureau currently classes these as ‘possible’ drone strikes.

In Pakistan, the hub of the covert drone campaign for the past decade, there has not been a drone strike since Christmas Day, as reportedly the attacks have been to allow peace negotiations between the Pakistan Taliban and the government to take place. Last year, for the first time, there were no confirmed reports of civilian casualties in Pakistan, despite 27 attacks taking place.

But reports of drone attacks – and civilian deaths – have continued in Yemen.

Last December, a drone attacked a wedding procession, again in al Bayda province, killing up to 12 reported civilians. Later investigations by organisations including [Human Rights Watch](#) raised concerns about multiple civilian deaths.

Unusually, soon after the wedding attack, US officials briefed reporters that the strike had been carried out by the US military. Both the CIA and special forces unit Joint Special

Operations Command (JSOC) have launched lethal operations in the country. The US does not routinely acknowledge the strikes, let alone indicate which force has carried out a particular strike.

The US has said it has investigated the claims but has found no evidence of civilian casualties. Yet earlier this month, New York Times reporter Mark Mazzetti, author of a book on drones, [wrote](#) that JSOC had been barred from carrying out drone strikes in the country because of 'botched' strikes.

'Officials said that the ban, not previously reported, came after a military drone strike in December killed a number of civilians who were part of a wedding procession in a desolate region south of Yemen's capital, Sana,' Mazzetti reported.

If the New York Times report is accurate, this indicates that Saturday's strike, which reportedly killed civilians, is likely to have been carried out by the CIA. The CIA declined to comment when contacted by the Bureau.

An unnamed source described as a 'high-level Yemeni government official' [told CNN](#): 'This was a joint U.S.-Yemeni operation. Intelligence on this was top-notch, and Intelligence gathering was going on for some time.'

The official added: 'Unfortunately, a civilian truck was also hit.'

Yemeni state media agency Saba was quoted by [Reuters](#) as saying the dead men were 'among the dangerous and leading elements of al Qaeda'. The attack was based on 'confirmed intelligence' that the men were 'planning to target vital civil and military institutions'.

Salem al Kushn, who said he was in the vehicle in which civilians were killed, described the attack: 'Our vehicle was 15 meters from the attacked pickup, and the shrapnel from the strike poured on our car. Minutes after the first attack a second attack took place killing three of my friends in process,' al Kushn told CNN. 'The drone then kept going in circles after the attack to ensure that none of the militants were able to escape.'

Less than a year ago, in May 2013, President Obama said in a [major policy speech](#) on targeted killings: 'Before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured.' He described this as 'the highest standard that we can set'.

Hina Shamsi of the American Civil Liberties Union, which has brought cases over US drone strikes in Yemen, told the Bureau: 'President Obama's "near-certainty" standard appears to be as malleable as his administration's novel definition of an "imminent" threat, which doesn't require evidence of an actual plot or threat that's about to take place.

'If the targets of the latest drone strike were lawful - and we don't know that for sure - it's hard to see why the strike couldn't take place after a car full of civilians was out of danger.'

Yemeni journalist Nasser Arabyee said the attacks 'confirmed the US [has] resumed its drone war' on AQAP in Yemen.

There were multiple reported US/Yemeni operations between April 19-21. An overview of these operations can be seen [here](#).

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