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## If a Drone Strike Hit an American Wedding, We'd Ground Our Fleet

**But after a dozen or more deaths at a Yemeni wedding, don't expect anything to change.**

CONOR FRIEDERSDORFDEC

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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 *L.A. Times* followed up on the story and found slightly different casualty figures: "The death toll reached 17 overnight, hospital officials in central Bayda province said Friday. Five of those killed were suspected of involvement with Al Qaeda, but the remainder were unconnected with the militancy, Yemeni security officials said."

More than a dozen dead, many more injured, and an unknown number of survivors whose lives have suddenly taken a nightmarish turn the likes of which we cannot imagine, and all for the sake of five people *suspected* of ties to al-Qaeda. How many actual al-Qaeda terrorists would we have to kill with drones in Yemen to make the benefits of our drone war there outweigh the costs of this single catastrophic strike? If U.S. drone strikes put American wedding parties similarly at risk would we tolerate our targeted-killing program for a single day more? Our policy persists because we put little value on the lives of foreign innocents. Even putting them through the most horrific scene imaginable on their wedding day is but a blip on our media radar, easily eclipsed by a new Beyonce album.

The Obama Administration dishonestly talks of "surgical" drone strikes, as if surgeries ever result in double digit casualties. "Before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured—the highest standard we can set," President Obama promised back in May. The CNN story about this latest strike says, "The convoy consisted of 11 vehicles, and the officials said that four of the vehicles were targeted in the strikes." Is attempting to pick off alleged militants while in a wedding convoy with innocents the highest standard we can set to avoid civilian deaths? If so, the results speak for themselves.

In that same May speech, Obama said:

Remember that the terrorists we are after target civilians, and the death toll from their acts of terrorism against Muslims dwarfs any estimate of civilian casualties from drone strikes. So doing nothing is not an option. Where foreign governments cannot or will not effectively stop terrorism in their territory, the primary alternative to targeted lethal action would be the use of conventional military options. As I've already said, even small special operations carry enormous risks. Conventional airpower or missiles are far less precise than drones, and are likely to cause more civilian casualties and more local outrage.

And invasions of these territories lead us to be viewed as occupying armies, unleash a torrent of unintended consequences, are difficult to contain, result in large numbers of civilian casualties and ultimately empower those who thrive on violent conflict.

Does anyone believe that, if not for our lethal drone program, the United States would've sent the Air Force or ground troops to fire on this wedding party? The thousands of drone strikes we've carried out in recent years suggest that drones decrease the cost of lethal action so much that the U.S. takes it more often now than we would if we didn't have a drone fleet at the ready—and not, as their defenders sometimes argue, that drones are saving us from air strikes and ground invasions.

Finally, Obama says that drone strikes are ordered only against targets who pose "a continuing, imminent threat to Americans." Is anyone else skeptical that the targets in this wedding convoy would be imminently attacking us right now if not for those Hellfire missiles? (For more on how Obama uses the word imminent in a misleading way see here.)

Even if you disagree with the growing global opposition to America's targeted-killing program, and believe that the frequent use of lethal drone strikes is necessary, reflect on the U.S. reaction to killing more than a dozen people in this wedding convoy, including many innocents. The moral course, if we must have a drone program that puts civilians at risk, would be to apologize for any terrible mistakes that we make, pay reparations to the wronged survivors, and explain what steps will be taken to insure nothing like this will ever happen again. Instead, according to CNN, "U.S. officials declined to comment on the report."