

NEWS

The NSA's Secret Role in the U.S. Assassination Program

By [Jeremy Scahill](#) and [Glenn Greenwald](#)

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*Credit: Kirsty Wigglesworth/Associated Press.*

The National Security Agency is using complex analysis of electronic surveillance, rather than human intelligence, as the primary method to locate targets for lethal drone strikes – an unreliable tactic that results in the deaths of innocent or unidentified people.

According to a former drone operator for the military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) who also worked with the NSA, the agency often identifies targets based on controversial metadata analysis and cell-phone tracking technologies. Rather than confirming a target's identity with operatives or informants on the ground, the CIA or the U.S. military then orders a strike based on the activity and location of the mobile phone a person is believed to be using.

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The drone operator, who agreed to discuss the top-secret programs on the condition of anonymity, was a member of JSOC's High Value Targeting task force, which is charged with identifying, capturing or killing terrorist suspects in Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

His account is bolstered by top-secret NSA documents previously provided by whistleblower Edward Snowden. It is also supported by a former drone sensor operator with the U.S. Air Force, Brandon Bryant, who has become an outspoken critic of the lethal operations in which he was directly involved in Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen.

In one tactic, the NSA "geolocates" the SIM card or handset of a suspected terrorist's mobile phone, enabling the CIA and U.S. military to conduct night raids and drone strikes to kill or capture the individual in possession of the device.

The former JSOC drone operator is adamant that the technology has been responsible for taking out terrorists and networks of people facilitating improvised explosive device attacks against U.S. forces in Afghanistan. But he also states that innocent people have "absolutely" been killed as a result of the NSA's increasing reliance on the surveillance tactic.

One problem, he explains, is that targets are increasingly aware of the NSA's reliance on geolocating, and have moved to thwart the tactic. Some have as many as 16 different SIM cards associated with their identity within the High Value Target system. Others, unaware that their mobile phone is being targeted, lend their phone, with the SIM card in it, to friends, children, spouses and family members.

Some top Taliban leaders, knowing of the NSA's targeting method, have purposely and randomly distributed SIM cards among their units in order to elude their trackers. "They would do things like go to meetings, take all their SIM cards out, put them in a bag, mix them up, and everybody gets a different SIM card when they leave," the former drone operator says. "That's how they confuse us."

As a result, even when the agency correctly identifies and targets a SIM card belonging to a terror suspect, the phone may actually be carried by someone else, who is then killed in a strike. According to the former drone operator, the geolocation cells at the NSA that run the tracking program – known as Geo Cell –sometimes facilitate strikes without knowing whether the individual in possession of a tracked cell phone or SIM card is in fact the intended target of the strike.

“Once the bomb lands or a night raid happens, you know that phone is there,” he says. “But we don’t know who’s behind it, who’s holding it. It’s of course assumed that the phone belongs to a human being who is nefarious and considered an ‘unlawful enemy combatant.’ This is where it gets very shady.”

The former drone operator also says that he personally participated in drone strikes where the identity of the target was known, but other unknown people nearby were also killed.

“They might have been terrorists,” he says. “Or they could have been family members who have nothing to do with the target’s activities.”

What’s more, he adds, the NSA often locates drone targets by analyzing the activity of a SIM card, rather than the actual content of the calls. Based on his experience, he has come to believe that the drone program amounts to little more than death by unreliable metadata.

“People get hung up that there’s a targeted list of people,” he says. “It’s really like we’re targeting a cell phone. We’re not going after people – we’re going after their phones, in the hopes that the person on the other end of that missile is the bad guy.”

The Obama administration has repeatedly insisted that its operations kill terrorists with the utmost precision.

In his speech at the National Defense University last May, President Obama declared that “before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured – the highest standard we can set.” He added that, “by narrowly targeting our action against those who want to kill us and not the people they hide among, we are choosing the course of action least likely to result in the loss of innocent life.”

But the increased reliance on phone tracking and other fallible surveillance tactics suggests that the opposite is true. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which uses a conservative methodology to track drone strikes, **estimates** that at least 273 civilians in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia have been killed by unmanned aerial assaults under the Obama administration. A recent study conducted by a U.S. military adviser found that, during a single year in Afghanistan – where the majority of drone strikes have taken place – unmanned vehicles were 10 times more likely than

conventional aircraft to cause civilian casualties.

The NSA declined to respond to questions for this article. Caitlin Hayden, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, also refused to discuss “the type of operational detail that, in our view, should not be published.”

In describing the administration’s policy on targeted killings, Hayden would not say whether strikes are ever ordered without the use of human intelligence. She emphasized that “our assessments are not based on a single piece of information. We gather and scrutinize information from a variety of sources and methods before we draw conclusions.”

Hayden felt free, however, to note the role that human intelligence plays *after* a deadly strike occurs. “After any use of targeted lethal force, when there are indications that civilian deaths may have occurred, intelligence analysts draw on a large body of information – including human intelligence, signals intelligence, media reports, and surveillance footage – to help us make informed determinations about whether civilians were in fact killed or injured.”

The government does not appear to apply the same standard of care in selecting whom to target for assassination. The former JSOC drone operator estimates that the overwhelming majority of high-value target operations he worked on in Afghanistan relied on signals intelligence, known as SIGINT, based on the NSA’s phone-tracking technology.

“Everything they turned into a kinetic strike or a night raid was almost 90 percent that,” he says. “You could tell, because you’d go back to the mission reports and it will say ‘this mission was triggered by SIGINT,’ which means it was triggered by a geolocation cell.”

In July, the *Washington Post* relied exclusively on former senior U.S. intelligence officials and anonymous sources to herald the NSA’s claims about its effectiveness at geolocating terror suspects.

Within the NSA, the paper **reported**, “A motto quickly caught on at Geo Cell: ‘We Track ’Em, You Whack ’Em.’”

But the *Post* article included virtually no skepticism about the NSA’s claims, and no discussion at all about how the unreliability of the agency’s targeting methods results in the killing of innocents.

In fact, as the former JSOC drone operator recounts, tracking people by metadata and then killing them by SIM card is inherently flawed. The NSA “will develop a pattern,” he says, “where they understand that this is what this person’s voice sounds like, this is who his friends are, this is who his commander is, this is who his subordinates are. And they put them into a matrix. But it’s not always correct. There’s a lot of human error in that.”

The JSOC operator’s account is supported by another insider who was directly involved in the drone program. Brandon Bryant spent six years as a “stick monkey” – a drone sensor operator who controls the “eyes” of the U.S. military’s unmanned aerial vehicles. By the time he left the Air Force in 2011, Bryant’s squadron, which included a small crew of veteran drone operators, had been credited with killing 1,626 “enemies” in action.

Bryant says he has come forward because he is tormented by the loss of civilian life he believes that he and his squadron may have caused. Today he is committed to informing the public about lethal flaws in the U.S. drone program.

Bryant describes the program as highly compartmentalized: Drone operators taking shots at targets on the ground have little idea where the intelligence is coming from.

“I don’t know who we worked with,” Bryant says. “We were never privy to that sort of information. If the NSA did work with us, like, I have no clue.”

During the course of his career, Bryant says, many targets of U.S. drone strikes evolved their tactics, particularly in the handling of cell phones. “They’ve gotten really smart now and they don’t make the same mistakes as they used to,” he says. “They’d get rid of the SIM card and they’d get a new phone, or they’d put the SIM card in the new phone.”

As the former JSOC drone operator describes – and as classified documents obtained from Snowden confirm – the NSA doesn’t just locate the cell phones of terror suspects by intercepting communications from cell phone towers and Internet service providers. The agency also equips drones and other aircraft with devices known as “virtual base-tower transceivers” – creating, in effect, a fake cell phone tower that can force a targeted person’s device to lock onto the NSA’s receiver without their knowledge.

That, in turn, allows the military to track the cell phone to within 30 feet of its actual location, feeding the real-time

data to teams of drone operators who conduct missile strikes or facilitate night raids.

The NSA geolocation system used by JSOC is known by the code name GILGAMESH. Under the program, a specially constructed device is attached to the drone. As the drone circles, the device locates the SIM card or handset that the military believes is used by the target.

(S//SI//REL) Testing the New Technique on a UAV

(TS//SI//REL) As part of the GILGAMESH (PREDATOR-based active geolocation) effort, this team used some advanced mathematics to develop a new geolocation algorithm intended for operational use on unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) flights.

Relying on this method, says the former JSOC drone operator, means that the “wrong people” could be killed due to metadata errors, particularly in Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia. “We don’t have people on the ground – we don’t have the same forces, informants, or information coming in from those areas – as we do where we have a strong foothold, like we do in Afghanistan. I would say that it’s even more likely that mistakes are made in places such as Yemen or Somalia, and especially Pakistan.”

As of May 2013, according to the former drone operator, President Obama had cleared 16 people in Yemen and five in Somalia for targeting in strikes. Before a strike is green-lit, he says, there must be at least two sources of intelligence. The problem is that both of those sources often involve NSA-supplied data, rather than human intelligence (HUMINT).

As the former drone operator explains, the process of tracking and ultimately killing a targeted person is known within the military as F3: Find, Fix, Finish. “Since there’s almost zero HUMINT operations in Yemen – at least involving JSOC – every one of their strikes relies on signals and imagery for confirmation: signals being the cell phone lock, which is the ‘find’ and imagery being the ‘unblinking eye’ which is the ‘fix.’” The “finish” is the strike itself.

“JSOC acknowledges that it would be completely helpless without the NSA conducting mass surveillance on an industrial level,” the former drone operator says. “That is what creates those baseball cards you hear about,” featuring potential targets for drone strikes or raids.

President Obama signs authorizations for “hits” that remain valid for 60 days. If a target cannot be located within that period, it must be reviewed and renewed. According to the

former drone operator, it can take 18 months or longer to move from intelligence gathering to getting approval to actually carrying out a strike in Yemen. “What that tells me,” he says, “is that commanders, once given the authorization needed to strike, are more likely to strike when they see an opportunity – even if there’s a high chance of civilians being killed, too – because in their mind they might never get the chance to strike that target again.”

While drones are not the only method used to kill targets, they have become so prolific that they are now a standard part of U.S. military culture. Remotely piloted Reaper and Predator vehicles are often given nicknames. Among those used in Afghanistan, says the former JSOC drone operator, were “Lightning” and “Sky Raider.”

The latter drone, he adds, was also referred to as “Sky Raper,” for a simple reason – “because it killed a lot of people.” When operators were assigned to “Sky Raper,” he adds, it meant that “somebody was going to die. It was always set to the most high-priority missions.”

In addition to the GILGAMESH system used by JSOC, the CIA uses a similar NSA platform known as SHENANIGANS. The operation – previously undisclosed – utilizes a pod on aircraft that vacuums up massive amounts of data from any wireless routers, computers, smart phones or other electronic devices that are within range.

One top-secret NSA document provided by Snowden is written by a SHENANIGANS operator who documents his March 2012 deployment to Oman, where the CIA has established a drone base. The operator describes how, from almost four miles in the air, he searched for communications devices believed to be used by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in neighboring Yemen. The mission was code named VICTORYDANCE.

“The VICTORYDANCE mission was a great experience,” the operator writes. “It was truly a joint interagency effort between CIA and NSA. Flights and targets were coordinated with both CIAers and NSAers. The mission lasted 6 months, during which 43 flights were flown.”

VICTORYDANCE, he adds, “mapped the Wi-Fi fingerprint of nearly every major town in Yemen.”

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The NSA has played an increasingly central role in drone killings over the past five years. In one top-secret NSA document from 2010, the head of the agency's Strategic Planning and Policy Division of the Counterterrorism Mission Management Center recounts the history of the NSA's involvement in Yemen. Shortly before President Obama took office, the document reveals, the agency began to "shift analytic resources to focus on Yemen."

In 2008, the NSA had only three analysts dedicated to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. By the fall of 2009, it had 45 analysts, and the agency was producing "high quality" signal intelligence for the CIA and JSOC.

In December 2009, utilizing the NSA's metadata collection programs, the Obama administration dramatically escalated U.S. drone and cruise missile strikes in Yemen.

The first strike in the country known to be authorized by Obama targeted an alleged Al Qaeda camp in the southern village of al-Majala.

The strike, which included the use of cluster bombs, **resulted in the deaths** of 14 women and 21 children. It is not clear whether the strike was based on metadata collection; the White House has never publicly explained the strike or the source of the faulty intelligence that led to the civilian fatalities.

Another top-secret NSA document confirms that the agency "played a key supporting role" in the drone strike in September 2011 that killed U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, as well as another American, Samir Khan. According to the 2013 Congressional Budget Justification, "The CIA tracked [Awlaki] for three weeks before a joint operation with the U.S. military killed" the two Americans in Yemen, along with two other people.

When Brandon Bryant left his Air Force squadron in April 2011, the unit was aiding JSOC in its hunt for the American-born cleric. The CIA took the lead in the hunt for Awlaki after JSOC tried and failed to kill him in the spring of 2011.

(U) The Death of Anwar Nasser Aulaqi

(TS//NF) Anwar Nasser Aulaqi, a dual U.S./Yemeni citizen, regional commander for AQAP, and well-known extremist lecturer who preached at two U.S. mosques attended by some of the September 2001 hijackers, was killed in Yemen on 30 September 2011. The CIA tracked Aulaqi for three weeks before a joint operation with the U.S. military killed Aulaqi. The special operation killed four operatives, including Samir Khan, another American who played a key role in inspiring attacks against the U.S. Aulaqi's death represents another integrated CIA and military success in the counterterrorism fight.

According to Bryant, the NSA's expanded role in Yemen has only added to what he sees as the risk of fatal errors already evident in CIA operations. "They're very non-discriminate with how they do things, as far as you can see their actions over in Pakistan and the devastation that they've had there," Bryant says about the CIA. "It feels like they tried to bring those same tactics they used over in Pakistan down to Yemen. It's a repeat of tactical thinking, instead of intelligent thinking."

Those within the system understand that the government's targeting tactics are fundamentally flawed. According to the former JSOC drone operator, instructors who oversee GILGAMESH training emphasize: "This isn't a science. This is an art.' It's kind of a way of saying that it's not perfect."

Yet the tracking "pods" mounted on the bottom of drones have facilitated thousands of "capture or kill" operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan since September 11. One top-secret NSA document provided by Snowden notes that by 2009, "for the first time in the history of the U.S. Air Force, more pilots were trained to fly drones ... than conventional fighter aircraft," leading to a "'tipping point' in U.S. military combat behavior in resorting to air strikes in areas of undeclared wars," such as Yemen and Pakistan.

The document continues: "Did you ever think you would see the day when the U.S. would be conducting combat operations in a country equipped with nuclear weapons without a boot on the ground or a pilot in the air?"

Even NSA operatives seem to recognize how profoundly the agency's tracking technology deviates from standard operating methods of war.

One NSA document from 2005 poses this question: "What resembles 'LITTLE BOY' (one of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan during World War II) and as LITTLE BOY did, represents the dawn of a new era (at least in SIGINT and precision geolocation)?"

Its reply: “If you answered a pod mounted on an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) that is currently flying in support of the Global War on Terrorism, you would be correct.”

(S) New Tactical Collection System Joins the War on Terrorism (repost)

FROM: **name redacted**

Technical Advisor, Target Reconnaissance and Survey (S316)

Run Date: 03/03/2005

DISTANTFOCUS pod is new system for tactical SIGINT and precision geolocation... first deployed in December (S)

(U//FOUO) What resembles "LITTLE BOY" (one of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan during World War II) and as LITTLE BOY did, represents the dawn of a new era (at least in SIGINT and precision geolocation)?

(S) If you answered a pod mounted on an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) that is currently flying missions in support of the Global War on Terrorism, you would be correct.

Another document boasts that geolocation technology has “cued and compressed numerous ‘kill chains’ (i.e. all of the steps taken to find, track, target, and engage the enemy), resulting in untold numbers of enemy killed and captured in Afghanistan as well as the saving of U.S. and Coalition lives.”

The former JSOC drone operator, however, remains highly disturbed by the unreliability of such methods. Like other whistleblowers, including Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, he says that his efforts to alert his superiors to the problems were brushed off. “The system continues to work because, like most things in the military, the people who use it trust it unconditionally,” he says.

When he would raise objections about intelligence that was “rushed” or “inaccurate” or “outright wrong,” he adds, “the most common response I would get was ‘JSOC wouldn’t spend millions and millions of dollars, and man hours, to go after someone if they weren’t certain that they were the right person.’ There is a saying at the NSA: ‘SIGINT never lies.’ It may be true that SIGINT never lies, but it’s subject to human error.”

The government’s assassination program is actually constructed, he adds, to avoid self-correction. “They make rushed decisions and are often wrong in their assessments. They jump to conclusions and there is no going back to correct mistakes.” Because there is an ever-increasing demand for more targets to be added to the kill list, he says, the mentality is “just keep feeding the beast.”

For Bryant, the killing of Awlaki – followed two weeks later by the killing of his 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman al Awlaki, also an American citizen – motivated him to speak out. Last

October, Bryant appeared before a panel of experts at the United Nations – including the UN’s special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism, Ben Emmerson, who is currently conducting an investigation into civilians killed by drone strikes.

Dressed in hiking boots and brown cargo pants, Bryant called for “independent investigations” into the Obama administration’s drone program. “At the end of our pledge of allegiance, we say ‘with liberty and justice for all,’” he told the panel. “I believe that should be applied to not only American citizens, but everyone that we interact with as well, to put them on an equal level and to treat them with respect.”

Unlike those who oversee the drone program, Bryant also took personal responsibility for his actions in the killing of Awlaki. “I was a drone operator for six years, active duty for six years in the U.S. Air Force, and I was party to the violations of constitutional rights of an American citizen who should have been tried under a jury,” he said. “And because I violated that constitutional right, I became an enemy of the American people.”

Bryant later told *The Intercept*, “I had to get out because we were told that the president wanted Awlaki dead. And I wanted him dead. I was told that he was a traitor to our country.... I didn’t really understand that our Constitution covers people, American citizens, who have betrayed our country. They still deserve a trial.”

The killing of Awlaki and his son still haunt Bryant. The younger Awlaki, Abdulrahman, had run away from home to try to find his dad, whom he had not seen in three years. But his father was killed before Abdulrahman could locate him. Abdulrahman was then killed in a separate strike two weeks later as he ate dinner with his teenage cousin and some friends. The White House has never explained the strike.

“I don’t think there’s any day that goes by when I don’t think about those two, to be honest,” Bryant says. “The kid doesn’t seem like someone who would be a suicide bomber or want to die or something like that. He honestly seems like a kid who missed his dad and went there to go see his dad.”

Last May, President Obama acknowledged that “the necessary secrecy” involved in lethal strikes “can end up shielding our government from the public scrutiny that a troop deployment invites. It can also lead a president and his team to view drone strikes as a cure-all for terrorism.”

But that, says the former JSOC operator, is precisely what has happened. Given how much the government now relies on drone strikes – and given how many of those strikes are now dependent on metadata rather than human intelligence – the operator warns that political officials may view the geolocation program as more dependable than it really is.

“I don’t know whether or not President Obama would be comfortable approving the drone strikes if he knew the potential for mistakes that are there,” he says. “All he knows is what he’s told.”

Whether or not Obama is fully aware of the errors built into the program of targeted assassination, he and his top advisors have repeatedly made clear that the president himself directly oversees the drone operation and takes full responsibility for it. Obama once **reportedly told his aides** that it “turns out I’m really good at killing people.”

The president added, “Didn’t know that was gonna be a strong suit of mine.”

Ryan Devereaux contributed to this article.

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Mike 10 Feb 2014 at 1:48 am
US gov is making the world more dangerous for everyone: “... see the day when the U.S. would be conducting combat operations in a country equipped with nuclear weapons without a boot on the ground or a pilot in the air?”

Reply

MyRA 10 Feb 2014 at 11:54 am
This has been out there for YEARS and long before the newest limited hangout “whistleblower” aka Snowden. If Snowy wants to ever release some new, genuine material? Let him begin with 911 and Michael Hayden’s NSA assistance to Mossad. No other agency was more indictable for 911 than NSA on that. Snowjob is stoically silent on that issue. In fact like his Act 1 predecessor A\$\$ange- he disses 911 Truthers. Wake up people. You are like slaves and children told where to look, what to think and focus on by the parent or big bro waving a shiny new toy of distraction. Demand Snowy put up some REAL docs and NEW info or tune him out like the fraud he is.

Reply

Just me 10 Feb 2014 at 2:03 pm