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

By Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald

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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.

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.