

**THE
ASSASSINATION
COMPLEX**
INSIDE THE
GOVERNMENT'S
SECRET DRONE
WARFARE
PROGRAM

JEREMY SCAHILL
AND THE STAFF OF
THE INTERCEPT



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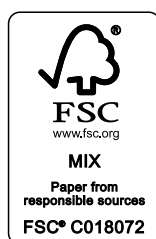
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From his first days as commander in chief, the drone has been President Barack Obama's weapon of choice, used by the military and the CIA to hunt down and kill the people his administration has deemed—through secretive processes, without indictment or trial—deserving of execution. There has been intense focus on the technology of remote killing, but that often serves as a surrogate for what should be a broader examination of the state's power over life and death.

Drones are a tool, not a policy. The policy is assassination. While every president since Gerald Ford has upheld an executive order banning assassinations by U.S. personnel, Congress has avoided legislating the issue or even defining the word "assassination."¹ This has allowed proponents of the drone wars to rebrand assassinations with more palatable characterizations, such as the term *du jour*, "targeted killings."

When the Obama administration has discussed drone strikes publicly, it has offered assurances that such operations are a more precise alternative to boots on the ground and are authorized only when an "imminent" threat is present and there is "near certainty" that the intended target will be eliminated. Those terms, however, appear to have been bluntly redefined to bear almost no resemblance to their commonly understood meanings.²

The first drone strike outside of a declared war zone was conducted in 2002, yet it was not until May 2013 that the White House

released a set of standards and procedures for conducting such strikes.³ Those guidelines offered little specificity, asserting that the United States would conduct a lethal strike outside an “area of active hostilities” only if a target represents a “continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons,” without providing any sense of the internal process used to determine whether a suspect should be killed without being indicted or tried.⁴ The implicit message on drone strikes from the Obama administration has been *Trust, but don't verify*.⁵

On October 15, 2015, *The Intercept* published a cache of secret slides that provide a window into the inner workings of the U.S. military's kill/capture operations during a key period in the evolution of the



drone wars: between 2011 and 2013. The documents, which also outline the internal views of special operations forces on the shortcomings and flaws of the drone program, were provided by a source within the intelligence community who worked on the types of operations and programs described in the slides. We granted the source's request for anonymity

because the materials are classified and because the U.S. government has engaged in aggressive prosecution of whistleblowers. Throughout this book, we will refer to this person simply as “the source.”

The source said he decided to disclose these documents because he believes the public has a right to understand the process by which people are placed on kill lists and ultimately assassinated on orders from the highest echelons of the U.S. government: “This outrageous explosion of watchlisting, of monitoring people and racking and stacking them on lists, assigning them numbers, assigning them ‘baseball cards,’ assigning them death sentences without notice, on a worldwide battlefield, was, from the very first instance, wrong.

“We’re allowing this to happen. And by ‘we,’ I mean every American citizen who has access to this information now, but continues to do nothing about it.”

The Pentagon, White House, and Special Operations Command declined to comment on the documents. A Defense Department spokesperson said, “We don’t comment on the details of classified reports.”

The CIA and the U.S. military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) operate parallel drone-based assassination programs, and the secret documents should be viewed in the context of an intense turf war over which entity should have supremacy in those operations. Two sets of slides focus on the military's high-value targeting campaign in Somalia and Yemen as it existed between 2011 and 2013, specifically the operations of a secretive unit, Task Force 48-4.⁶ Additional documents on high-value kill/capture operations in Afghanistan buttress previous accounts of how the Obama administration masks the true number of civilians killed in drone strikes by categorizing unidentified people killed in a strike as enemies, even if they were not the intended targets.⁷ The slides also paint a picture of a campaign in Afghanistan aimed at eliminating not only al Qaeda and Taliban operatives but also members of other local armed groups. One slide, marked "Top Secret," shows how the terror "watch-list" appears on the terminals of personnel conducting drone operations, linking unique codes associated with cell phone SIM cards and handsets to specific individuals in order to geolocate them.⁸

The costs to intelligence gathering when suspected terrorists are killed rather than captured are outlined in the slides pertaining to Yemen and Somalia, which are part of a 2013 study conducted by a Pentagon entity, the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Task Force. The ISR study lamented the limitations of the drone program, arguing for more advanced drones and other surveillance aircraft and the expanded use of naval vessels to extend the reach of surveillance operations necessary for targeted strikes. It also contemplated the establishment of new "politically challenging" airfields and recommended capturing and interrogating more suspected terrorists rather than killing them in drone strikes.

The ISR Task Force at the time was under the control of Michael Vickers, the undersecretary of defense for intelligence. A fierce proponent of drone strikes and a legendary paramilitary figure, Vickers had long pushed for a significant increase in the military's use of special operations forces. Key lawmakers viewed the ISR Task Force as an advocate for more surveillance platforms, like drones.⁹

The ISR study also reveals new details about the case of a British citizen, Bilal el-Berjawi, who was stripped of his citizenship before being killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2012. British and American intelligence had Berjawi under surveillance for several years as he

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Example Watchlist from 28APR2010.txt - Notepad

File	Edit	Format	View	Help
IMSI=418055457	IMEI=35196003	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=05187-	(TFN-M)(TFT)(NFN-N)
IMSI=418201060	IMEI=35426803	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=58302-	(BFC)
IMSI=418300100	IMEI=35684202	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=00400-	(TFB)
IMSI=418054707	IMEI=35885002	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=25710-	(TFB)
IMSI=418300600	IMEI=35344602	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=09402-	(SOTF-W)
IMSI=418300100	IMEI=35918000	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=18283-	(OGA/CTTAC)(TF7-48)
IMSI=418054510	IMEI=35681502	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=18807-	(LNU) (OGA/CTTAC)
IMSI=418056118	IMEI=35603303	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=20449-	(TFB)(OGA/CTTAC)
IMSI=418300300	IMEI=35805102	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=85407-	(SOTF-W)
IMSI=41820313	IMEI=35312602	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=74370-03	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418203190	IMEI=35312602	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=14055-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418055475	IMEI=35685702	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=06372-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418054700	IMEI=35576402	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=74754-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418202020	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=31057-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418055455	IMEI=35322102	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=88998-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418055400	IMEI=35950702	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=42037-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418054700	IMEI=35364402	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=39028-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418055454	IMEI=35436503	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=04103-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418055457	IMEI=35571802	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=13958-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418054510	IMEI=35359603	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=13465-	(TF7-48)
IMSI=418201160	IMEI=35193203	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=70173-	(KNOXVILLE) (TFB)
IMSI=418053216	IMEI=35797903	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=04312-	(TFB)
IMSI=418053405	IMEI=35688702	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=66026-	(TFB)(DO NOT STRIKE)
IMSI=418055458	IMEI=35423003	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=08690-	(TFB)
IMSI=418300400	IMEI=35933502	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=10681-	(TFB)
IMSI=418056102	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=46932-	(AOB)
IMSI=418053303	IMEI=35936502	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=90966-	(NFN)(AOB)
IMSI=418055902	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=47397-	(NFN)(N)
IMSI=418053600	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=22594-	(AOB) (NFN)
IMSI=418056102	IMEI=35191003	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=84739-	(NFN)
IMSI=418054210	IMEI=35797903	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=72125-	(NFN)
IMSI=418056101	IMEI=3526503	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=8166-	(NFN)
IMSI=418054820	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=73832-	(OGA/CCU)
IMSI=418054103	IMEI=35041302	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=29983-	(TFE)
IMSI=418200600	IMEI=35644702	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=97834-	(TFE)
IMSI=418053107	IMEI=35160402	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=26286-	(TFE)
IMSI=418820100	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=52249-	KIDNAPPING SUSPECT (TFE)
IMSI=418054101	IMEI=35955902	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=15420-	(KIDNAP VICTIM) (TFE)
IMSI=418054160	IMEI=35799303	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=13365-	(TFE)
IMSI=418053106	IMEI=35935503	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=67265-	(TFE)
IMSI=418053600	IMEI=35664803	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=84776-	(TFE)
IMSI=418054160	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=02794-	(TFE)
IMSI=418054601	IMEI=	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=65020-	POSS ASSISTANT TO (TFE)
IMSI=418055501	IMEI=35229802	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=72919-	(TFE)
IMSI=418050124	IMEI=35799403	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=63603-	(TFE)
IMSI=418053104	IMEI=35790000	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=10547-	(TFE)
IMSI=418054629	IMEI=35670189	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=26273-	(TFE)
IMSI=418054160	IMEI=35885503	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=73346-	(TFE)
IMSI=418055300	IMEI=35883702	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=93131-	(TFE)
IMSI=418055300	IMEI=35694502	ACTION=WARN	COMMENT=28968-	(TFE)

TOP SECRET SCI

A top-secret document shows how the watchlist looks on internal systems used by drone operators.

traveled back and forth between the U.K. and East Africa yet did not capture him. Instead the United States hunted him down and killed him in Somalia.

Taken together, the secret documents lead to the conclusion that Washington's fourteen-year-long high-value targeting campaign suffers from an overreliance on signals intelligence, an apparently incalculable civilian toll, and, due to a preference for assassination rather than capture, an inability to extract potentially valuable intelligence from terror suspects. The documents also highlight the futility of the war in Afghanistan by showing that the United States has poured vast resources into killing local insurgents, in the process exacerbating the very threat the United States is seeking to confront.

These secret slides help provide a historical context to Washington's ongoing wars and are especially relevant today, as the U.S. military intensifies its drone strikes and covert actions against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.¹⁰ Those campaigns, like the ones detailed in these documents, are unconventional wars that employ special operations forces at the tip of the spear. The "find, fix, finish" doctrine that has fueled a post-9/11 borderless war is being refined and institutionalized. These documents lay bare the normalization of assassination,

whether through the use of drones, night raids, or new platforms yet to be unleashed, as a central component of U.S. counterterrorism policy.

“The military is easily capable of adapting to change,” the source told me, “but they don’t like to stop anything they feel is making their lives easier or is to their benefit. And this certainly is, in their eyes, a very quick, clean way of doing things. It’s a very slick, efficient way to conduct the war, without having to have the massive ground invasion mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan. But at this point they have become so addicted to this machine, to this way of doing business, that it seems like it’s going to become harder and harder to pull them away from it the longer they’re allowed to continue operating in this way.”

This book, most of which was originally published by *The Intercept* as “The Drone Papers,”¹¹ was produced by a team of reporters and researchers that spent months analyzing the documents and is intended to serve as a long-overdue public examination of the methods and outcomes of America’s assassination program. That campaign, carried out by two presidents through four pres-



An MQ-1 Predator unmanned aircraft.

idential terms, has been conducted secretly. The public has a right to see these documents not only to engage in an informed debate about the future of U.S. wars, both overt and covert, but also to understand the circumstances under which the U.S. government arrogates to itself

the right to sentence individuals to death without the established checks and balances of arrest, trial, and appeal.

Among the key revelations uncovered by *The Intercept* are the following.

HOW THE PRESIDENT AUTHORIZES TARGETS FOR ASSASSINATION.

It has been widely reported that President Obama directly approves high-value targets for inclusion on the kill list. The secret ISR study provides new insight into the kill chain, including a detailed chart stretching from electronic and human intelligence gathering all the way to the president's desk. In the same month the ISR study was circulated, May 2013, Obama signed the policy guidance on the use of force in counterterrorism operations overseas. A senior administration official, who declined to comment on the classified documents, admitted that "those guidelines remain in effect today."

As we detail in chapter 2, U.S. intelligence personnel collect information on potential targets drawn from government watchlists and the work of intelligence, military, and law enforcement agencies. At the time of the ISR study, when someone was destined for the kill list, intelligence analysts created a portrait of the suspect and the threat that person posed, pulling it together "in a condensed format known as a 'baseball card.'" That information was then bundled with operational information in a "target information folder" to be "staffed up to higher echelons" for action. On average, one slide indicates, it took fifty-eight days for the president to sign off on a target. At that point U.S. forces had sixty days to carry out the strike. The documents include two case studies that are partially based on information detailed on baseball cards.

The system for creating baseball cards and targeting packages, according to the source, depends largely on intelligence intercepts and a multilayered system of fallible, human interpretation. “It isn’t a surefire method,” he said. “You’re relying on the fact that you do have all these very powerful machines, capable of collecting extraordinary amounts of data and information,” which can lead personnel involved in targeted killings to believe they have “godlike powers.”

ASSASSINATIONS DEPEND ON UNRELIABLE INTELLIGENCE AND DISRUPT INTELLIGENCE GATHERING .

In undeclared war zones the U.S. military has become overly reliant on signals intelligence, or SIGINT, to identify and ultimately hunt down and kill people. The documents acknowledge that using metadata from phones and computers, as well as communications intercepts, is an inferior method of finding and finishing targeted people. They describe SIGINT capabilities on these unconventional battlefields as “poor” and “limited.” Yet such collection, much of it provided by foreign partners, accounted for more than half the intelligence used to track potential kills in Yemen and Somalia. The ISR study characterized these failings as a technical hindrance to efficient operations, omitting the fact that faulty intelligence has led to the killing of innocent people, including U.S. citizens, in drone strikes.¹²

The source underscored the unreliability of metadata, most often from phone and computer communications intercepts. These sources of information, identified by so-called selectors, such as a phone number or email address, are the primary tools used by the military to find, fix, and finish its targets. “It requires an enormous amount of faith in the technology that you’re using,” the source said. “There’s countless instances where I’ve come across intelligence that was faulty.” This, he said, is a primary factor in the killing of civilians. “It’s stunning the number of instances when selectors are misattributed to certain people. And it isn’t until several months or years later that you all of a sudden realize that the entire time you thought you were going after this really hot target, you wind up realizing it was his mother’s phone the whole time.”

The source described how members of the special operations community view the people being hunted by the United States for possible death by drone strike: “They have no rights. They have no dignity. They have no humanity to themselves. They’re just a ‘selector’ to an analyst. You eventually get to a point in the target’s life cycle that you are following them, you don’t even refer to them by their actual name.” This practice, he said, contributes to “dehumanizing the people before you’ve even encountered the moral question ‘Is this a legitimate kill or not?’”

The authors of the ISR study admit that killing suspected terrorists, even if they are “legitimate” targets, further hampers intelligence gathering: “Kill operations significantly reduce the intelligence available.” A chart shows that special operations actions in the Horn of Africa resulted in captures just 25 percent of the time, indicating a heavy tilt toward lethal strikes.

STRIKES OFTEN KILL MANY MORE THAN THE INTENDED TARGET.

The White House and Pentagon boast that the targeted killing program is precise and that numbers of civilian deaths are minimal. However, documents detailing a special operations campaign in northeastern Afghanistan, Operation Haymaker, show that between January 2012 and February 2013, U.S. special operations airstrikes killed more than two hundred people. Of those, only thirty-five were the intended targets. During one four-and-a-half-month period of the operation, according to the documents, nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets. In Yemen and Somalia, where the United States has far more limited intelligence capabilities to confirm the people killed are the intended targets, the equivalent ratios may well be much worse.

“Anyone caught in the vicinity is guilty by association,” the source said. “[When] a drone strike kills more than one person, there is no guarantee that those persons deserved their fate. . . . So it’s a phenomenal gamble.”

THE MILITARY LABELS UNKNOWN PEOPLE IT KILLS “ENEMIES KILLED IN ACTION.”

The documents show that the military designated people it killed in targeted strikes as EKIA, “enemy killed in action,” even if they were not the intended targets of the strike. Unless evidence posthumously emerged to prove the males killed were not terrorists or “unlawful enemy combatants,” EKIA remained their designation, according to the source. That process, he said, “is insane. But we’ve made ourselves comfortable with that. The intelligence community, JSOC, the CIA, and everybody that helps support and prop up these programs, they’re comfortable with that idea.” The source described official U.S. government statements minimizing the number of civilian casualties inflicted by drone strikes as “exaggerating at best, if not outright lies.”

THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE TARGETED FOR DRONE STRIKES AND OTHER FINISHING OPERATIONS.

According to one secret slide, as of June 2012, there were sixteen people in Yemen whom President Obama had authorized U.S. special operations forces to assassinate. In Somalia there were four. The statistics contained in the documents appear to refer only to targets approved under the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, not CIA operations. In 2012 alone, according to data compiled by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there were more than two hundred people killed in operations in Yemen and between four and eight in Somalia.

HOW GEOGRAPHY SHAPES THE ASSASSINATION CAMPAIGN.

In Afghanistan and Iraq the pace of U.S. drone strikes was much quicker than in Yemen and Somalia. This appears due, in large part, to the fact that Afghanistan and Iraq were declared war zones, and in

Iraq the United States was able to launch attacks from bases closer to the targeted people. By contrast, in Somalia and Yemen, undeclared war zones where strikes were justified under tighter restrictions, U.S. attack planners described a serpentine bureaucracy for obtaining approval for assassination. The secret ISR study states that the number of high-value targeting operations in these countries was “significantly lower than previously seen in Iraq and Afghanistan” because of these “constraining factors.”

Even after the president approved a target in Yemen or Somalia, the great distance between drone bases and targets created significant challenges for U.S. forces, a problem referred to in the documents as the “tyranny of distance.” In Iraq more than 80 percent of “finishing operations” were conducted within 150 kilometers of an air base. In Yemen the average distance was about 450 kilometers, and in Somalia it was more than 1,000 kilometers. On average, one document states, it took the United States six years to develop a target in Somalia, but just 8.3 months to kill the target once the president had approved his addition to the kill list.

INCONSISTENCIES WITH WHITE HOUSE STATEMENTS ABOUT TARGETED KILLING.

The White House’s publicly available policy standards state that lethal force will be launched only against targets who pose a “continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons.” In the documents, however, there is only one explicit mention of a specific criterion: that a person “presents a threat to U.S. interest or personnel.” While such a criterion may make sense in the context of a declared war in which U.S. personnel are on the ground in large numbers, such as in Afghanistan, that standard is so vague as to be virtually meaningless in countries like Yemen and Somalia, where very few U.S. personnel operate.

While many of the documents provided to *The Intercept* contain explicit internal recommendations for improving unconventional U.S. warfare, the source said that what is implicit is even more significant: the mentality reflected in the documents on the assassination programs. “This process can work. We can work out the kinks. We can excuse the mistakes. And eventually we will get it down to