5 Things We Just Learned About How the U.S. Does Drone Strikes

Last week The Intercept leaked documents outlining how the Obama Administration plans and approves deadly drone attacks.

By Eric Tegler   Oct 19, 2015 @ 10:40 AM **Flight   Drones**

Last week, The Intercept, a website led by investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald released its analysis of leaked classified documents detailing America's drone strike intelligence and targeting program. Greenwald, a former lawyer and columnist for the UK newspaper *The Guardian* who is well-known for his reporting of leaked documents from NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, sifted through and interpreted documents obtained from a whistleblower. He and colleagues Laura Poitras and Jeremy Scahill compiled a picture of how the Obama Administration uses drone strikes to meet its security policy objectives—often by killing people.

"The Drone Papers" outline the process of targeted assassination via UAVs between 2011 and 2013 based on documents including an internal assessment by special operations forces of the shortcomings and flaws of the drone program. According to The Intercept, the whistleblower in question leaked the 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."

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If you don't have time to read through the pages upon pages of documents, we've pulled out the five key facts you need to know.

1. Two programs

The CIA and the U.S. military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) operate parallel drone-based assassination programs. These have operated in war zones like Afghanistan but also outside recognized conflict areas in Somalia and Yemen. Operations in the latter were carried out by a clandestine military unit, Task Force 48-4.

2. "Baseball cards"

President Obama directly approves high-value targets for inclusion on a kill list. Those people

are drawn from government watch lists and the work of intelligence, military, and law enforcement agencies. According to a classified 2013 study, intelligence analysts would create a portrait of a suspect destined for the kill list that outlines the threat that person posed, pulling it together "in a condensed format known as a 'baseball card'". Using the baseball card and other information, it took only 58 days on average for the president to sign off on a target. American forces subsequently had 60 days to carry out the strike.

3. Bad intel?

The methodology for creating baseball cards and targeting packages depends largely on Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) intercepts and a multi-layered system of fallible, human interpretation of that data. Metadata from phones and computers, as well as communications intercepts, account for more than half the intelligence used to track potential kills in Yemen and Somalia. A significant portion of the collection is provided by foreign partners. The Intercept's source alleges that reliance on incomplete/faulty SIGINT has led to the killing of innocent people, including U.S. citizens, in drone strikes.

4. Collateral damage

During one five-month period of the operation, according to the documents, nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets. Despite White House/Pentagon claims that targeted killing program is precise and civilian deaths minimal, between January 2012 and February 2013 U.S. special operations airstrikes killed more than 200 people, and of those, only 35 were the intended targets. Due to more limited intel in Somalia and Yemen, the source claims the equivalent ratios may well be significantly worse.

5. EKIA

The number of people targeted for drone strikes varies a lot by location. As of June 2012, there were 16 people in Yemen whom President Obama had authorized U.S. special ops forces to assassinate. In Somalia, there were four. According to data from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, The Intercept concludes that in 2012 there were more than 200 people killed in operations in Yemen and between four and eight in Somalia.

One more thing: 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.

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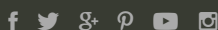
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