# US collecting all cell phone calls in Afghanistan

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**24 May 2014**

WikiLeaks on Friday revealed that the US has been surveilling all cell phone conversations in Afghanistan as part of its SOMALGET mass data collection program. SOMALGET is one component of a broader NSA effort, including a program called MYSTIC, which collect communications data in Mexico, Kenya, the Philippines, Iraq and elsewhere.

Millions of voice clips and reams of telephone metadata are collected and stored as part of the SOMALGET/MYSTIC program, which taps into entire national cellular networks. Three days ago, Glenn Greenwald's *The Intercept*, revealed that SOMALGET was being used to collect phone calls made from the Bahamas and an unknown country, now revealed to be Afghanistan.

Greenwald said at the time that revealing the second country would "lead to deaths," and complied with demands from top US security officials that he not publicize the information. The *Washington Post* also chose to preserve the secrecy of the surveillance against Afghanistan.

In a "statement on the mass recording of Afghan telephone calls by the NSA" published Friday, WikiLeaks rejected the "national security" rationale for concealing the country's identity. A statement from WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange stated, "*The Intercept* stated that the US government asserted that the publication of this name might lead to a 'rise in violence'. Such claims were also used by the administration of Barack Obama to refuse to release further photos of torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq… WikiLeaks has years of experience with such false or overstated claims made by US officials in their attempts to delay or deny publication."

"WikiLeaks has confirmed that the identity of the victim state is Afghanistan. This can also be independently verified through forensic scrutiny of imperfectly applied censorship on related documents released to date and correlations with other NSA programs," the statement said.

The mass spying against Afghanistan underscores that a primary function of the spying apparatus is to identify and target opponents of the neocolonial agenda being pursued by the US ruling elite, while terrorizing the civilian population into submission. As noted by the WikiLeaks statement, the US government's targeted drone program relies heavily on information gathered from NSA surveillance operations.

"We know from previous reporting that the National Security Agency's mass interception system is a key component in the United States' drone targeting program. The US drone targeting program has killed thousands of people and hundreds of women and children in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia in violation of international law. The censorship of a victim state's identity directly assists the killing of innocent people," the WikiLeaks statement said.

Previous reports have provided ample documentation that data gleaned from the surveillance programs is used for tracking individuals selected by the US command structure for death by drone. As the NSA documents published by *The Intercept* enthusiastically note, SOMALGET and related programs "make possible remarkable new ways of performing both target development and target discovery."

NSA analysts work alongside CIA agents at US embassies and military bases worldwide to facilitate the targeted killings. According to a former drone operator at the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) High Value Targeting task force, who spoke to *The Intercept* anonymously, targets are selected using cell phone tracking and data analysis technologies.

Strikes are ordered based on the activity pattern of the target as assessed by these surveillance methods, without visual confirmation from agents in the area. Using "geolocation" technology codenamed GILGAMESH, the NSA's "Geo Cell" section enables drones to carry out strikes against a particular SIM card believed to be held by a target. The JSOC operator acknowledged that targets sometimes lend their SIM card to a friend or relative, resulting in strikes against unintended targets.

"People get hung up that there's a targeted list of people. 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 JSOC member said.

Within the NSA's Geo Cell section, this practice was summarized by the motto, "We Track 'Em, You Whack 'Em."

Once they are given the go-ahead, drones launch Hellfire missiles, originally designed for strikes against Soviet armor, as well as GBU laser-guided bombs. These devastating weapons are typically deployed against mud-brick homes in small villages and other unarmored structures.

A report published by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) found that at least 555 victims of US drone strikes have been civilians. The BIJ found that at least 8 drone strikes have targeted mosques and madrasas, killing an average of 2.7 civilians per strike.

Together, the US and Britain carried out at least 1,000 drone strikes in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2012, according to the BIJ. A report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) found that drone strikes account for a third of all civilian deaths from air strikes, and that civilians deaths from drone bombings increased threefold from 2012 to 2013. NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces occupying Afghanistan killed at least 3,000 Afghan non-combatants in 2013, UNAMA found.

The US drone war against the population of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which has killed at least 3,000 people, has also been enabled by extensive NSA surveillance of northwest Pakistan. A *Washington Post* report last October reported that the NSA has "draped a surveillance blanket over dozens of square miles of northwest Pakistan," adding that "NSA threw the kitchen sink at FATA."

A report issued by Pakistan's government confirmed that at least 94 children have been killed by US drone strikes in the FATA. The BIJ found that drone strikes ordered by the Obama administration have killed at least 273 civilians in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

A top-secret NSA document leaked by Snowden revealed that NSA surveillance "played a key supporting role" in the 2011 assassinations of US citizens Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan.

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