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One of the most secretive military campaigns in U.S. history is under the microscope like never before. In a major exposé based on leaked government documents, *The Intercept* has published the most in-depth look at the U.S. drone assassination program to date. "The Drone Papers" exposes the inner workings of the U.S. military's assassination program in Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia, revealing a number of flaws and far more casualties than the intended targets. The documents were leaked to *The Intercept* by an unnamed U.S. intelligence source who says he wanted to alert Americans to wrongdoing. We are joined by *The Intercept*'s Jeremy Scahill, lead author of the exposé, "The Drone Papers."

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: One of the most secretive military campaigns in U.S. history is under the microscope like never before. In a major [exposé](#) based on leaked government documents, *he Intercept*

has published the most in-depth look at the U.S. drone assassination program to date. "The Drone Papers" exposed the inner workings of how the drone war is waged, from how targets are identified to who decides to kill. They reveal a number of flaws, including that strikes have resulted in large part from electronic communications data, or "signals intelligence," that officials acknowledge is unreliable. The documents also undermine government claims that the drone strikes have been precise. During one five-month period of an operation in Afghanistan, nine out of 10 casualties were not the intended target. And among other revelations, the documents also corroborate previous reports that all foreign males in a target zone have been treated as militants—unless they are proven innocent after death.

AMY GOODMAN: The documents were leaked to *The Intercept* by an unnamed U.S. intelligence source who says he wanted to alert Americans to wrongdoing. With obvious comparisons to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, Snowden himself weighed in, tweeting, quote, "When we look back on today, we will find the most important national security story of the year." In a statement, Amnesty International said the leaks should spark an independent congressional inquiry over, quote, "whether the USA has systematically violated international law, including by classifying unidentified people as 'combatants' to justify their killings." The leaks include detailed files on the drone war in Afghanistan, just as President Obama has announced his plan to again delay the withdrawal of U.S. troops and extend the occupation of Afghanistan indefinitely.

For more, we begin with Jeremy Scahill, co-founder of the *The Intercept*, one of the lead reporters on the new "Drone Papers" series. His contributions to the series include the articles ["The Assassination Complex"](#)

and

["Find, Fix, Finish."](#)

His latest book,

Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield

, is out in paperback. His Oscar-nominated film,

Dirty Wars

, was done with Rick Rowley. He's also the author of the best-selling book,

Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army

. In our next segment, we'll be joined by Jeremy's co-authors on the series, Ryan Devereaux and Cora Currier.

Jeremy, welcome back to *Democracy Now!*.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Thanks.

AMY GOODMAN: Astounding revelations. Why don't you first summarize what you have learned?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Well, you know, the first drone strike outside of a declared war zone happened in November of 2002 in Yemen. And in that strike, it was a CIA operation, with the military, and the whole thing was coordinated out of a command center in Washington, D.C. And in that strike, actually, six people were killed, including an American citizen. And at the time, Condoleezza Rice, you know, senior official in the Bush administration, was defending the right of the president of the United States to assassinate individuals, including U.S. citizens, based on intelligence that they never had to make public. There wasn't another drone strike in Yemen until 2011. 2011, 2012, the Obama administration really starts to intensify drone operations in Yemen.

Despite the fact that at times Pakistan was being bombed once every three days by drones, you had an active drone program in Afghanistan, it wasn't until May of 2013 that a sitting U.S. president gave an official address where he acknowledged that drones were being used by the

United States. I mean, it was sort of a farcical scenario, where you'd have the president making jokes about killing the Jonas Brothers at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, he would talk about it on a Google hangout in response to questions from people talking to the president, but they never really fully owned this thing in public.

What we've published is an extensive look into how this program has operated historically, but specifically under President Obama. One of the most significant findings of this—and my colleague, Cora Currier, really dug deep into this—is we published for the first time the kill chain, what the bureaucracy of assassination looks like. And what you see is that all of these officials, including people like the treasury secretary, are part of signing off on all of this, where they have these secret meetings and they discuss who's going to live and die around the world. And at the end of that process, it is the president of the United States who signs what amounts to a death warrant for whoever they've decided should die, based on what amounts to a parallel, secret judicial system in the United States that is not really subjected to any kind of judicial review, where the president acts sort of as emperor—issues an edict that you die.

And what we show—and this is the first time that there's documentary evidence of this—is that the president gives the military a 60-day window to hunt down and kill these individuals. Ken Roth from Human Rights Watch pointed out today, if the standard is that the people who are being targeted for assassination is that they represent an imminent threat, which is what the president says the U.S. policy is, then why do they have 60 days to do it? Why don't they need to do it now, if it's imminent? Well, that's because they've redefined the term "imminent" to be so vague as to not even resemble its actual commonly understood definition.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, Jeremy, one of the things that struck me is your finding that so much of the information upon which they base these attacks is based on signals intelligence, not real live intelligence or stuff that they glean from other people they've interrogated, and the unreliability of it.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Oh, yeah. I mean, look, and this—you know, really, we know so much more about this because of the Edward Snowden leaks, but so much of the entire intelligence-industrial complex in the—you know, sort of in the U.S. empire is dependent upon intercepting people's emails, their text messages, their phone calls. And, you know, signals intelligence can be reliable. I mean, if I'm talking to you, Juan, they can do our voice recognition. They can say, "OK, we know that Jeremy Scahill is talking to Juan González." But when you talk to people who really worked in that world—Cora Currier and I interviewed Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, who was the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the top official running all of the Pentagon spy operations around the world, and he

was Stanley McChrystal's top intelligence guy at JSOC, the Joint Special Operations Command. When Cora and I spoke to him, he said, "Look, I can record my voice on a phone and give it to a courier. The courier can go somewhere else, then call a number, and they can play that, and someone's going to die over there, and they'll think that they've eliminated this target, but they didn't." And so, you know, it's—and he said, signals intelligence is very easy to fool.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to go back to a quote from the article. Speaking about the issue of working with bad intelligence, your source said, quote, "It requires an enormous amount of faith in the technology that you're using. There's countless instances where I've come across intelligence that was faulty. 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."

JEREMY SCAHILL: Right. And, you know, what the source is talking about there is that, for the most part, the assassination program is not targeting people, it's targeting their selectors, their cellphone number, the SIM card data that they have, you know, an email train that's littered with metadata that they've now determined is connected to someone. And so, I think a lot of the biggest civilian death cases that we have are because they've hit a phone that they think is in possession of a terrorist or a militant—you know, the vague term that they use—and "Oops, you know, well, we blew up the phone, but that person didn't happen to be there," because this subcommander of the Taliban happened to throw his SIM card into a bag with everybody else's, they shake it up, and—you know, and this is a tactic that the Taliban use—and then they all go somewhere else. They use it because they know that this is how the U.S. hunts them down and tracks them. It's death by metadata, basically.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And even in Afghanistan, where the United States has been occupying the country—it has troop boots on the ground in Afghanistan; we're not talking now Yemen, Somalia—

JEREMY SCAHILL: Right.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: —or some of these other places—your information found that as many as 90 percent of the intended targets were not—of the people killed were not the intended

targets?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Yeah. I mean, I think the piece that—you know, if people are sort of thinking about what the president said yesterday in sort of further extending the longest war in American history to a point where we don't actually see any end in sight, Ryan Devereaux's [piece](#)

on "Manhunting in the Hindu Kush" is incredible. It looks at a JSOC

campaign called Operation Haymaker. And one of the sort of among many sort of amazing revelations in it is that

JSOC

claims to be like meticulously, surgically hunting down and killing leaders of al-Qaeda, leaders of the Taliban, and in one five-month period in Afghanistan, where they have all the resources—they have the surveillance technology, they have informants on the ground, they have ability to do night raids, to do after-action investigations—that 88 percent of the people that they killed in mostly drone strikes, but some other strikes, as well, were not the intended target of the strikes.

Now, what does that mean? It could mean that they killed a Taliban subcommander and a bunch of other Taliban people, and so they say, "Well, OK, we were targeting this one guy, but these people also were bad." But it could also be that they were targeting someone because he had so-called Arab features. And we see that they describe—in the documents, they describe Arab features, that they're taller than everyone else. You know, Sean Naylor, who's a great investigative journalist with deep ties in the military, in his new book that he wrote, he details this story of how they struck a target because he was taller than the other people around him, and they thought that he—that that meant that he was sort of an Arab or a foreign fighter. And it turned out that he was of average size and that the people around him were children.

AMY GOODMAN: Finally, before we go to break—

JEREMY SCAHILL: And they killed them all, with the exception of, I think, one survivor.

AMY GOODMAN: Before we go to break, your source, this second Edward Snowden, who is this person?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Well, do you want to give me your pin to your ATM card? I mean, look, this is a very brave whistleblower. And this administration has been relentless in its war against whistleblowers. And, you know, I mean, Chelsea Manning is rotting right now in a prison cell for exposing U.S. war crimes. Edward Snowden is in exile. Thomas Drake and Bill Binney, you know, were smeared in public and had their reputations ruined. Jeffrey Sterling is in prison right now. Our source is an incredibly principled, brave individual. And, you know, I worry because the government is—this government has been relentless in its pursuit of people of conscience who blow the whistle, and has characterized them as traitors and spies, and, in the process, has criminalized the ability to do independent journalism that is meant to hold them accountable, the government accountable, without fear that your sources, or in some cases the journalists themselves, are going to be put in the crosshairs of the so-called justice system.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, your source for the article, the whistleblower, spoke out against the drone program, saying, quote, "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—it 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."

JEREMY SCAHILL: Yeah. I mean, this is—you know, the point, too, is that—where is Congress in all of this? Where are the—you know, if this is the most transparent administration in history, especially coming off of the abuses and the torture and everything that marked the Bush administration, I mean, wouldn't the most transparent administration in history actually be a whistleblowing administration? I mean, wouldn't they sort of say, "Hey, all of this is really messed up. It's against what we claim are our core values"? Instead, we see it's like Edward Snowden, an analyst; Chelsea Manning, a private. I mean, when are we going to have anyone of significant public importance and that's visible that actually is going to be about the business of transparency? Why does it have to come from whistleblowers?

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: You also quote some other former military people who talk about their criticism of why the Obama administration has chosen this route.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Right. Well, I mean, we spoke to—you know, Cora and I spoke to Mike Flynn, who is no one's liberal. I mean, he's one of the most significant figures in the kind of expansion of covert operations around the world. And, you know, he has his own view. I mean, these guys are agitators. There's a very powerful clique of people within the national security state that are advocating to a return to extraordinary rendition, enhanced interrogation

techniques, snatching people. And their criticism of Obama is, this guy doesn't want to stick these people in Guantánamo, so he just kills them, he doesn't even think about capturing them; and when he does that, we can't interrogate them, and that makes us less safe. So that's their tactical argument. But it's also part—we can talk about this later—part of a turf war between the CIA and the Pentagon.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Jeremy Scahill, co-founder of the *The Intercept*, co-author of the "Drone Papers"

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When we come back, Jeremy will be joined by his co-authors on this stunning, explosive series.

This is

Democracy Now!

Back in a minute.