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In the first exposé for their new venture, First Look Media's digital journal The Intercept, investigative journalists Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald reveal 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. The NSA identifies targets based on controversial metadata analysis and cellphone tracking technologies, an unreliable tactic that has resulted in the deaths of innocent and unidentified people. The United States has reportedly carried out drone strikes without knowing whether the individual in possession of a tracked cellphone or SIM card is in fact the intended target of the strike. Scahill and Greenwald join us in this exclusive interview to discuss their report and the launch of their media project.

TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: We turn now to a breaking news story about the National Security Agency and its secret role helping the military and CIA carry out assassinations overseas. According to journalists Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald, the NSA is using complex analysis of electronic surveillance, rather than human intelligence, as the primary method to locate targets for lethal drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

A former drone operator for JSOC, the military's Joint Special Operations Command, said the NSA identifies targets based on controversial metadata analysis and cellphone tracking technologies,

but it's proven to be an unreliable tactic that's resulted in the deaths of innocent or unidentified people. The U.S. has reportedly carried out strikes without knowing whether the individual in possession of a tracked cellphone or

SIM

card is in fact the intended target of the strike. The former drone operator, who was a source in the story, said, quote, "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 quote says.

Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald have also revealed the NSA has equipped drones and other aircraft with devices known as "virtual base-tower transceivers." These devices create, in effect, a fake cellphone tower that can force a targeted person's device to lock onto the NSA's receiver without their knowledge.

Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald's [article](#) appears in the new online publication, [The Intercept.org](#), published by First Look Media, the newly formed media venture started by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. Glenn and Jeremy co-founded *The Intercept* with filmmaker Laura Poitras.

Glenn Greenwald is the journalist who first broke the story about Edward Snowden. He was previously a columnist at *The Guardian* newspaper. He's joining us via *Democracy Now!* [video](#) stream from his home in Brazil.

Jeremy Scahill is producer and writer of the documentary film *Dirty Wars*, which has just been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary. He's also author of the book by the same name. Jeremy joins us from Los Angeles.

We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!* Jeremy, let's begin with you. Lay out the significance of this explosive story.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Well, Amy, we're living in the era of pre-crime, where President Obama is

continuing many of the same policies of his predecessor George Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. And there's this incredible reliance on technology to kill people who the United States thinks—doesn't necessarily know, but thinks—may one day pose some sort of a threat of committing an act of terrorism or of impacting U.S. interests. And the U.S. wants to shy away from having its own personnel on the ground in countries like Yemen or Pakistan or Somalia, eventually Afghanistan, and so what's happened is that there's this incredible reliance on the use of remotely piloted aircraft, i.e. drones.

What we discovered in the course of talking to sources, including this new source that we have who worked with both the Joint Special Operations Command and the National Security Agency, is that the NSA is providing satellite technology and communications intercept technology to the U.S. military special operations forces and the CIA that essentially mimics the activities of a cellphone tower and forces individual SIM cards or handsets of phones—there's two separate devices. When you have your telephone, your mobile phone, you have a SIM card in it, and that can be tracked, but also the device itself can be tracked. And what they do is they force the SIM card or the handset of individuals that they're tracking onto these cellphone networks, and the people don't know that their phones are being forced onto this cellphone tower that is literally put on the bottom of a drone and acts as a virtual transceiver. And so, when they are able to triangulate where this individual is, they can locate or track them to within about 30 feet or so of their location.

And what we understand is that under the current guidelines issued by the White House, President Obama gives a 60-day authorization to the CIA or the U.S. military to hunt down and kill these individuals who they've tracked with these SIM-card-tracking technologies or handset-tracking technologies, and that they only have to have two sources of intelligence to indicate that this is the individual that they're looking for. Those two sources cannot—can be signals intelligence, which is what I've just been describing, and they can also be what's called IMINT, or imagery intelligence, meaning just a satellite image of an individual that they think to be this suspected terrorist. They do not require an actual human confirmation that the individual SIM card or phone handset that they're tracking is in fact possessed by the person that they believe is a potential terrorist. And so, what we understand is that this is essentially death by metadata, where they think, or they hope, that the phone that they're blowing up is in the possession of a person that they've identified as a potential terrorist. But in the end, they don't actually really

know. And that's where the real danger with this program lies.

And the reason that our source came forward to talk about it is because he was a part of this program and was a participant in operations where he knew the identity of one individual that was being targeted, but other people were killed alongside of that person. And he also said that he just felt incredibly uncomfortable with the idea that they're killing people's phones in the effort to kill them and that they don't actually know who the people are that are holding those phones.

AMY GOODMAN: And the source then is in addition to the documents that Edward Snowden released.

JEREMY SCAHILL: That's correct. In fact, when we first started talking with this source, he was describing the architecture of this program, where the NSA is working closely with the CIA and with the Joint Special Operations Command, and then we were able to validate what he was saying through the documents that were previously provided by the NSA whistleblower, Edward Snowden.

Amy, the platform that the CIA is using in Yemen and other countries is known as "SHENANIGANS." It's interesting because the NSA uses a lot of sort of Irish terminology, BLARNEY STONE and other—LIMERICK, other operations. This one is called SHENANIGANS. And the platform that's used by the U.S. military is called GILGAMESH, or GMESH, for short. And that's this technology where they're able to not only triangulate the position of SIM cards and cellphones, but the NSA also puts a device on the drones, that are flying in various countries around the world, known as

Air Handler, and the Air Handler device is literally just sucking up all of the data around the world. So it's sort of a secondary mission. In other words, in plain terms what I'm saying is that every time a drone goes out in an effort to track someone or to kill someone, the NSA has put a device on that that is not actually under the control of the CIA or the military, it is just sucking up data for the NSA. And as several former NSA people have told us, you know, the NSA just wants all the data. They want to suck it up on an industrial scale. So they're also piggybacking onto these targeted killing operations in an effort to just suck up data throughout the world.

AMY GOODMAN: Yet, I want to turn to President Obama, who was talking about drone strikes during that first major counterterrorism address of his second term. It was May 23rd, 2013.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: And before any strike is taken, there must be near certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured—the highest standard we can set. Yes, the conflict with al-Qaeda, like all armed conflict, invites tragedy. But 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.

AMY GOODMAN: Jeremy Scahill, respond.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Well, Amy, first of all, we saw very recently that the U.S. carried out a drone strike that killed many members of a wedding party in Yemen. The question should be asked: How is it that those individuals were selected on that day for that strike? And, you know, what the president is saying is very misleading, according to people who actually work on this program. And in fact, when we asked the White House for comment, we went to the National Security Council spokesperson, Caitlin Hayden, and asked directly, "Is it true that you're ordering strikes where you don't actually have any human intelligence?" And the White House refused to directly answer that. They just said, "Well, we don't select targets based on only one source of intelligence." Well, we knew that already, and we told them that we knew that. The point here is that they don't actually have a requirement to confirm the identity of the individuals

that they're targeting, and that's one of the reasons why we're seeing so many innocent people being killed in these strikes. It effectively amounts to pre-crime, where an acceptable level of civilian deaths is any civilians who die in the pursuit of a limited number of so-called bad guys.

AMY GOODMAN: Didn't the spokesperson also say, though, confirming that human intelligence was used—

JEREMY SCAHILL: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: —tried afterwards, but not before—after attack?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Right. I mean, I'm not sure that they're aware of the kind of twisted irony of the statement that they issued to us, because on the one hand they're refusing to acknowledge that they don't actually need to confirm the identity of people who they're trying to target for death; on the other hand they say, "Oh, well, when we kill someone, we do actually confirm whether or not civilians were killed by using human intelligence." So, it basically is—the standard is: We can kill you if we don't know your identity, but once we kill you, we want to figure out who we killed.

AMY GOODMAN: In Yemen, any human intelligence on the ground?

JEREMY SCAHILL: Well, yes. I mean, the U.S. does have a very limited presence. In fact, my understanding is that there are small teams of U.S. special operations forces, Navy SEALs and others, that are scattered in various remote locations around Yemen. Of course, the U.S. has long had a counterterrorism presence inside of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. The CIA also has its own personnel.

But I want to underscore something that's a little bit of a nuanced point, and that is that inside of Yemen, the U.S. has largely outsourced its human intelligence to the Saudi government. And the Saudis have been playing their own dirty games, that have their own dirty wars inside of Yemen. And many times the Saudis will feed intelligence to the U.S. that is intended to benefit

the regime in Saudi Arabia and not necessarily the stated aims of the U.S. counterterrorism program. They also rely on notoriously corrupt units within the Yemeni military and security forces that receive a tremendous amount of U.S. military and intelligence support and oftentimes will use that U.S. aid to target Yemeni dissidents or to be used in defense of various factions within the Yemeni state.

So, the short answer, Amy, is, yes, there is a very limited U.S. military human intelligence presence on the ground, but most of it, the overwhelming majority, is outsourced to the notoriously sort of corrupt Saudi regime and its operations and operatives and informants inside of Yemen.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to break, and when we come back after a minute, we'll continue with Jeremy Scahill, as well as Glenn Greenwald. They have just co-authored their first [piece](#) for their new online publication called *The Intercept*. We will link to it at democracynow.org. This is *Democracy Now!* Back in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. We are broadcasting our exclusive first interview with Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald upon the publication just hours ago of their new [piece](#), "The NSA's Secret Role in the U.S. Assassination Program." The article appears at TheIntercept.org, a new digital magazine launched today by First Look Media. Glenn and Jeremy co-founded *The Intercept* with filmmaker Laura Poitras. Glenn is with us from his home in Brazil, and we're going to talk about whether he plans to come into the United States. And Jeremy Scahill joins us from Los Angeles. Jeremy's film, *Dirty Wars*, has been nominated for an Academy Award.

Glenn, can you talk about the legality of publishing this information, the way it's been challenged by the administration? In your piece, you have Caitlin Hayden, spokesperson for the National Security Agency, saying, "the type of operational detail that, in our view, should not be published," she said, referring to the questions that you both were asking her. You are a former constitutional lawyer, Glenn.

GLENN GREENWALD: Right. The position of the U.S. government is that it's illegal to publish any kind of classified information that you are not authorized to receive. It's of course illegal, in their view, for a government employee or contractor to leak it without authorization. But their view, as well, is that it's actually illegal, even if you're a journalist, to publish it. And they believe that's especially the case if the information pertains to what they call signals intelligence. And if you look at the Espionage Act of 1917 and other relevant statutes, it does seem to say that it is illegal in the United States to publish that kind of information.

The problem for that view is that there's a superseding law called the Constitution, the First Amendment to which guarantees that there shall be a free press and that Congress and no other part of the government has the right to interfere with it. And one of the reasons why the government has been so reluctant about prosecuting journalists for publishing classified information, at least up until now, is because they're afraid that courts will say that application of this statute, or the statutes that I've described, to journalists is unconstitutional in violation of the First Amendment, and they want to keep that weapon to be able to threaten or bully or intimidate journalists out of doing the kind of reporting that they're doing.

So, every media lawyer will tell you that before you publish top-secret information, it's a good practice, for legal protection, to ask the government if they want to tell you anything they think you should know about the implications of publishing this material. They always say, "If you publish it, it will harm national security." But if you're a minimally decent journalist, that isn't good enough. You need specific information about what innocent people will really be harmed if you publish. They virtually never provide any such information. They didn't in this case. And so, it was very—it was an easy call to make, as journalists, to tell the American people about the methods that their government are using that result in the death of innocent people in ways that are easily preventable.

AMY GOODMAN: Glenn, you have been publishing many pieces all over the world since you first broke the story of Edward Snowden with the documents that he has released, downloading 1.7 million documents. What makes this story, "The NSA's Secret Role in the U.S. Assassination Program," different?

GLENN GREENWALD: Most of the stories that we published thus far have been about the way in which the NSA collects signals intelligence, tries to intercept the electronic communications of hundreds of millions, probably billions, of people around the world, hundreds of millions inside the United States. And that's what the U.S. government has told the American people is the role of the NSA, is to listen in on the communications of people who are threatening the United States in some manner.

This story has very little to do with those prior stories, in the case—in the sense that this is not a case of the NSA trying to collect people's communications to find who is plotting with whom or what kinds of plots they're engaged in. This is the NSA using a form of signals intelligence to, first, determine who should be targeted for assassination based on an analysis of their metadata—has this person called what we think are bad people enough times for us to decide that they should die—and then, secondly, trying to help the

CIA

and

JSOC

find those individuals who have been put on a list of, basically, assassination, but not by finding where they are, but by finding where their telephone is—a very obviously unreliable way of trying to kill people that is certain to result in the death of innocent people. And obviously, the source who came forward has said that that's exactly what has happened. So it's really an incredibly expanded role that we're revealing that the

NSA

engages in, far beyond what traditionally the American people are told about why this agency exists.

AMY GOODMAN: In addition, Jeremy, to the JSOC operator's account, you quote, in this first piece for TheIntercept.org, Brandon Bryant. Talk about the significance of his experience and who he is.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Right. First, just something to follow up on what Glenn says. You know, the teams from the NSA that are involved with this program are called geo cell, geolocation cells, and their motto is: "We track 'em, you whack 'em," meaning that the NSA

will find these individuals, and then the military or the

CIA

will actually conduct or carry out these hits.

And as to the other question that we were talking about, about the relevance for people in the United States, you know, what we've seen, particularly since 9/11, but really throughout U.S. history, is that the kind of technology and the kind of operations, the sorts of tactics that the U.S. uses on citizens of other nations around the world in its military operations or intelligence operations, end up coming home to the United States, as well. And we believe that what we're doing here is public service journalism and that the American people have a right to know what kind of technology their government is developing that could potentially be used on them. But also, when innocent people are killed in these operations, it impacts American national security, as well, and ultimately undermines our safety, because we're creating more new enemies than we are killing terrorists at this point in what's been called, you know, the so-called "war on terror."

Brandon Bryant is a very important figure right now in this discussion. He spent years as what he called a "stick monkey" for the U.S. Air Force. He was a drone sensor operator and was part of the—of over a thousand—his unit was part of over 1,500 kill operations around the world when he worked on the drone program. He also was working with the Joint Special Operations Command in the operation to target an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, who of course—we've talked about many times on this show—was an imam in Washington, D.C., who ended up becoming famous for his sermons denouncing U.S. around the world and calling for jihad against the United States, armed jihad against the United States. He was killed in September of 2011. And Brandon Bryant had worked on that operation until the spring of 2011, when the CIA took over and took the lead in that.

In fact, one of the documents that Glenn and I cite in our piece—and you can see an excerpt of it embedded in our story—reveals that the NSA actually played a role in the killing of Anwar Awlaki, and also it is revealed in this document that it was a joint operation by the U.S. military and the CIA. That is a new revelation on this case and could have an impact on the legal case that the family of Anwar Awlaki and another American citizen, Samir Khan, have filed against the Obama administration, because this actually shows the U.S. government acknowledging that the NSA, the CIA and the U.S. military were all involved in that operation.

And for Brandon Bryant, this former drone sensor operator, it was the killing of Anwar Awlaki, and then, two weeks later, his 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman, who was also an American citizen, that spurred him to speak out. And he, in fact, says, and we quote this in our piece, that he feels that he became an enemy of the American people by participating in those operations, because he denied due process to an American that should have had a right to a trial before

being sentenced to death by drone.

AMY GOODMAN: You're saying Brandon Bryant said that, that he himself became an—

JEREMY SCAHILL: Yes, Brandon Bryant said that. In fact, I mean, I don't have it in front of me, but you can read his own words in that piece, where he essentially says, you know, "I swore an oath to the Constitution, to uphold it and its values, and then I violated that by participating in the effort to kill this American citizen, who, albeit a very bad guy, deserved his day in court, rather than to just be sentenced to death by fiat from a president assuming emperor-like powers."

AMY GOODMAN: We interviewed [Brandon Bryant](#) on *Democracy Now!* in October. He described his first strike, which took place in Afghanistan in 2007 while he was sitting in a trailer at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada.

BRANDON BRYANT: We got confirmation to fire on these guys. And the way that they reacted really made me doubt their involvement, because the guys over there, the locals over there, have to protect themselves from the Taliban just as much as armed—us—we do, as U.S. military personnel. And so, I think that they were probably in the wrong place at the wrong time. And the way that—I've been accused of using poetic imagery to describe it, but I watched this guy bleed out, the guy in the back, and his right leg above the knee was severed in the strike. And his—he bled out through his femoral artery. And it—

AMY GOODMAN: You saw that on your computer screen?

BRANDON BRYANT: Right.

AMY GOODMAN: It's that detailed?

BRANDON BRYANT: Yeah, it's pixelated, but, I mean, you could—you could see that it was a human being, and you could see that—what he was doing, and you could see the crater from the drone—from the Hellfire missile, and you could see probably the body pieces that were around this guy.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And the other two that were in this strike?

BRANDON BRYANT: They were completely destroyed.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: Blown apart.

BRANDON BRYANT: Blown apart.

AMY GOODMAN: So, you watched this guy bleed out for how long?

BRANDON BRYANT: You know, it's the femoral artery, so he could have bled out really fast. It was cold outside, you know, wintertime. It seemed like forever to me, but we—as the Predator drone can stay in the air for like 18 to 32 hours, and so they just had us watch and do battle damage assessment to make sure that—to see if anyone would come and pick up the body parts or anyone really cared who these people were. And we watched long enough that the body cooled on the ground, and they called us off target.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Brandon Bryant, the former drone sensor operator with the U.S.

Air Force who is quoted in this first article by Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald for their new publication, TheIntercept.org. And, Jeremy, just to follow up, that's the description of what happened in Afghanistan. And the quote you're referring to, on the killing of Awlaki, this quite remarkable quote of Brandon Bryant, saying, "I was a drone operator for six years, active duty for six years in the U.S. Air Force, [and I was] party to the violations of constitutional rights of an American citizen who should have been tried under a jury. And because I violated that constitutional right, I became an enemy of the American people."

JEREMY SCAHILL: Yeah. And, you know, I mean, one thing that I know Glenn has experienced and I certainly have experienced in recent months is that since Edward Snowden made this decision that he was going to forever alter his life by going to Hong Kong and meeting with Glenn and Laura and taking the position that he's taken, he's inspiring other people within these apparatuses to speak out. And I think, you know, courage is indeed contagious. And I think we're going to hear more and more people from within the national security apparatus saying, you know, "I believe I'm a part of something that is violating our own Constitution and is violating my own morals and ethics." And I think we're going to see more and more people speaking out. And that's why on our site, at TheIntercept.org, we've created a secure drop center where people can give us tips anonymously, and we will protect their identities, and we encourage people to come forward and to speak about their experiences within the—what's called the national security apparatus.

AMY GOODMAN: The former JSOC drone—

GLENN GREENWALD: Amy, let me add just one thing?

AMY GOODMAN: Yes, Glenn.

GLENN GREENWALD: Yeah, sure, just as far as that incredibly moving clip that we just listened to, I just wanted to make two quick points about the significance of what we published this morning. You know, there's a lot of debates about journalism and how it should best be practiced, but I think everybody ought to agree that journalism is supposed to be about informing the public of the truth, and especially debunking official lies. And a big part of our story and why we wrote it and published it was because you have President Obama running around saying that we only kill or target people when there's a near certainty there won't be civilian deaths, and, of course, we know that to be completely false, because the methods that we reported on have almost a—I wouldn't say a near certainty, but a very high likelihood of killing

the wrong people, killing innocent people.

But the other thing about it is, back in July, the NSA, in order to propagandize the public, went to *The Washington Post* to boast about the role they play in the killing program and talked about some of these methods. And

The Washington Post

just uncritically published what it was they were told. It was just a propaganda piece talking about all the great things the

NSA

does in helping the

CIA

and

JSOC

target people, not a word of the unreliability of these methods or the NSA's role in targeting and killing innocent people. And so, part of what we did was to come forward as an antidote to that false propaganda from the president and from

The Washington Post

and correct the record and make it complete. And that is a big part of what we see as the purpose of our new media outlet, not just to protect and encourage sources, as Jeremy said, to know that they can come forward and have their material reported on aggressively—that's a huge part of what we're doing—but it's also to provide a corrective to the type of, quote-unquote, "journalism" that

The Washington Post

practiced here, where they just mindlessly repeated what government officials told them, with no investigation, no critical analyses, and therefore just misleading the public about what it is that is taking place.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to break, and when we come back, I want to ask you about *The Intercept*

and First Look Media, what your plans are—you've both, together with Laura Poitras, just launched

The Intercept

—and also talk about the second

[piece](#)

that has been launched on

The Intercept

, this series of photographs, the new photos of the

NSA

and other top intelligence agencies revealed for the first time. We're speaking with Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald in their first broadcast TV interview together upon the launch of

TheIntercept.org

at First Look Media. Their

[piece](#)

is "The NSA's Secret Role in the U.S. Assassination Program," and we'll link to it at democracynow.org. Stay with us.