

KILLING DEMOCRACY WITH BAD INTELLIGENCE

Some of us have been having fun on Twitter discussing the reported power struggle in al Qaeda to replace Osama bin Laden in terms we'd use to discuss an American election. Which made this report—which Frontline linked as part of their Kill/Capture program that aired last night—all the more chilling. The author, Kate Clark, consulted “survivors, witnesses, police, senior Afghan officials – and, crucially, senior officers in the Special Forces unit which carried out” a September 2, 2010 bombing strike. She concluded that rather than killing a senior Taliban official, as JSOC still maintains, the airstrike killed a group of men campaigning for parliament.

Clark examines in depth the intelligence chain that led JSOC to kill a local campaign party, believing they were instead targeting the Taliban commander. That chain started with intelligence from a detainee.

The intelligence operation which ultimately led to the 2 September 2010 attack, started, according to the Special Forces unit, with information came from a detainee in US custody. This allowed them ultimately to identify a relative of the detainee as the shadow deputy governor of Takhar, one Muhammad Amin, and to map a Taleban- and IMU-related cluster through the monitoring of cell phones.

For some reason, the intelligence analysts tracking this cluster concluded that Amin had started using the SIM card of the guy they eventually targeted, Zabet Amanullah.

The intelligence analysts came to believe that the SIM card of one of the numbers that Muhammad Amin had been calling in Kabul was passed on to him.

They believed that he started to use this phone and to 'self-identify' as Zabet Amanullah.

And in spite of the fact that Amanullah and Amin spoke by phone two days before the attack, JSOC maintained they were the same person. Amin explained in an interview with another researcher,

About two days before his death Zabet Amanullah spoke to me on the phone and told me that he was determined to block Qazi Kabir from being elected to parliament. That is why he was supporting Abdul Wahid Khorasani, that and the fact that they are related.. After the incident, I saw my name in the media and realised the attack was intended for me... I did not discuss this with anyone..

At no time did the analysts investigate the biography of Zabet Amanullah, which would have alerted them that he was a prominent local figure (and, as Clark lays out in a poignant biography she includes, a former human rights worker who had survived three rounds of imprisonment and torture). Instead, JSOC insisted that the technical data targeting a phone was enough to justify the attack.

The Special Forces unit denied that the identities of two different men, Muhammad Amin and Zabet Amanullah, could have been conflated; they insisted the technical evidence that they were one person is irrefutable.

[snip]

When pressed about the existence – and death – of an actual Zabet Amanullah, they argued that they were not tracking a name, but targeting the telephones.

The report discusses the legal implications of this mistaken killing in depth—the failure to cross-check intelligence and the failure to protect others in the convoy who gave no sign of belligerence.

But the metaphor of it all—of the US using faulty intelligence to bomb an Afghan trying to practice democracy—captures what we're doing in Afghanistan so much more aptly.