

THE PROBLEM WITH UNIDENTIFIED DRONE VICTIMS: NSA NEVER LEARNS WHO THE JOURNALISTS WERE

Al Jazeera Islamabad bureau chief Ahmad Muaffaq Zaidan is lucky.

Thus far, the CIA has not drone-killed him because the NSA has identified him as a terrorist courier, which the Intercept explains at length today.

The U.S. government labeled a prominent journalist as a member of Al Qaeda and placed him on a watch list of suspected terrorists, according to a top-secret document that details U.S. intelligence efforts to track Al Qaeda couriers by analyzing metadata.

The briefing singles out Ahmad Muaffaq Zaidan, Al Jazeera's longtime Islamabad bureau chief, as a member of the terrorist group. A Syrian national, Zaidan has focused his reporting throughout his career on the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and has conducted several high-profile interviews with senior Al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden.

A slide dated June 2012 from a National Security Agency PowerPoint presentation bears his photo, name, and a terror watch list identification number, and labels him a "member of Al-Qa'ida" as well as the Muslim Brotherhood. It also notes that he "works for Al Jazeera."

As Michael Hayden says (and the article repeats) the US government kills people based on

metadata, and NSA's metadata has erroneously concluded that Zaidan is a terrorist.

As I said, Zaidan is lucky that the system that starts with phone metadata and ends in dead "military aged males" hasn't killed him yet.

But that's why it's a problem that the Intelligence Community is not forced to do better accountability of all the unknown military aged males it kills with drones.

As the Intercept makes clear, the metadata system that (reidentified – he was already targeted) Zaidan as a terrorist courier is based on machine learning.

As the two slide shows they included in the story make clear, the process of using cell data to find "couriers" (or Al Jazeera journalists) is an iterative learning process. That is, it's important for them to understand if their matches are correct.

But we know that one outcome of this process – drone killing – doesn't include a very robust feedback mechanism on that front. Partly because the CIA wants to fluff its numbers and partly because they're often drone-killing without good access to HUMINT that tells them exactly who they kill and partly because they write off large numbers of targets as "military aged males" who therefore must be legitimate targets, they almost certainly don't input what they learn after they've drone-killed someone back into the NSA's process to teach the computers that they've just killed an innocent American hostage.

And so dumb computers can go on identifying journalists as terrorist couriers.