This is a labyrinth with 12 entrances and no exit. It is built on a cache of documents provided to *The Intercept* by a source.
within the intelligence community.

Click any arrow to enter a rabbit hole. Each serves as a back door into one of our stories.
BIRDS

The first bomb dropped from an airplane exploded in an oasis outside Tripoli on November 1, 1911.¹

While flying over Ain Zara, Libya, Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti leaned out of his airplane, which looked like a dragonfly, and dropped a Haasen hand grenade. It landed “in the camp of the enemy, with good results.”

One hundred years later, the bombing is done by pilotless planes. They are controlled remotely, often half a world away. We have come to call them “drones.”

On the inside, people call them “birds.”
Operators can watch their targets for hours, often from air-conditioned rooms, until they receive the order to fire. When the time is right, a room full of people watch as the shot is taken.

This is where they sit.
OBJECTIVES

Most of the time, drone operators are trying to kill someone specific. They call these people—the people being hunted—“objectives.”

What does an objective look like? Here’s an example.
This timeline was for a man named Bilal el-Berjawi. Intelligence agencies watched him for years, then the British government stripped him of his citizenship.

After calling his wife, who had just given birth in a London hospital, Berjawi was killed by an American drone strike. Some people thought the call might have given away his location, but the drones already knew where he was.

This was his car.
JACKPOT

When drone operators hit their target, killing the person they intend to kill, that person is called a “jackpot.”

When they miss their target and end up killing someone else, they label that person EKIA, or “enemy killed in action.”

EKIA

Over a five-month period, U.S. forces used drones and other aircraft to kill 155 people in northeastern Afghanistan. They achieved 19 jackpots. Along the way, they killed at least 136 other people, all of whom were classified as EKIA, or enemies killed in action.
Note the “%” column. It is the number of jackpots (JPs) divided by the number of operations. A 70 percent success rate. But it ignores well over a hundred other people killed along the way.

This means that almost 9 out of 10 people killed in these strikes were not the intended targets.

Hellfire missiles—the explosives fired from drones—are not always fired at people. In fact, most drone strikes are aimed at phones. The SIM card provides a person’s location—when turned on, a phone can become a deadly proxy for the individual being hunted.
When a night raid or drone strike successfully neutralizes a target's phone, operators call that a “touchdown.”

**BASEBALL CARD**

“Baseball cards” (BBCs) are the military's method for visualizing information—they are used to display data, map relationships between people, and identify an individual’s so-called pattern of life.

This isn't quite what a baseball card looks like, but they are said to include much of the following information.
A “blink” happens when a drone has to move and there isn’t another aircraft to continue watching a target. According to classified documents, this is a major challenge facing the military, which always wants to have a “persistent stare.”
The conceptual metaphor of surveillance is seeing. Perfect surveillance would be like having a lidless eye. Much of what is seen by a drone's camera, however, appears without context on the ground. Some drone operators describe watching targets as “looking through a soda straw.”

Drones are not magic. They have to take off from somewhere. Increasingly that somewhere is on the continent of Africa.
But where exactly?

As of 2012, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) had bases in Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia. They operated 11 Predators and five Reaper drones over the Horn of Africa and Yemen.

After crashing multiple Predator drones near Camp Lemonnier, the U.S. military moved operations to a more remote airstrip in Chabelley, Djibouti.
Here's a snapshot of how the U.S. views its surveillance capabilities on the continent of Africa more broadly.
ORBITS

The military worries about what it calls the “tyranny of distance.” Compared to the traditional battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. drones have to travel farther to reach their “named areas of interest,” or NAIs, in Yemen and Somalia.
Here's where the U.S. appears to have “finished” people in Yemen.
For many years, lawyers and human rights advocates have wondered about the chain of command. How are non-battlefield assassinations authorized? Does it fall within the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), or through some other authority?

The documents we have are not comprehensive, but they suggest a linear chain—all the way up to the president of the United States (POTUS).

In a condensed format, “ball card (BBC)”, is packaged information into a single and staffed up to higher levels to the President. (S/NF) Step 2 - “Approach”:
- If POTUS approves, enter a targeting:
  - Actionable intelligence provide windows
  - The targeting window suitability is relaxed
  - must be Low CDE, “near certain”

**WATCHLIST**
As we reported last year, U.S. intelligence agencies hunt people primarily on the basis of their cellphones. Equipped with a simulated cell tower called GILGAMESH, a drone can force a target's phone to lock onto it, and subsequently use the phone's signals to triangulate that person's location.

Here is what a watchlist looks like.

![Geolocodn - Watchlist (U)](image)

**FIND, FIX, FINISH →**

In the end, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) is about continuing a cycle: Find a person, Fix a person, Finish them. But there are two other steps in the process: Exploit and Analyze.
Colloquially referred to as “F3EA,” the cycle feeds back into itself. The whole process amounts to human hunting. As soon as a target is finished, the hunt for a new target begins.

1. With thanks to Sven Lindqvist’s A History of Bombing, which served as a template for this narrative. Additional design and illustration by Evan Bissell.

Additional reporting: Jeremy Scahill
**WAIT! BEFORE YOU GO** on about your day, ask yourself: How likely is it that the story you just read would have been produced by a different news outlet if The Intercept hadn’t done it?

As the pandemic worsens, it’s not just the virus itself that threatens human life. The corruption, cronyism, and incompetence of those in power is adding fuel to the fire. The public deserves to know more than just case counts and death tolls, which is why our reporters are digging deep to break stories on corporate profiteering and political jockeying that undermine public health.

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**01.**

THE ASSASSINATION COMPLEX

Jeremy Scahill

The whistleblower who leaked the drone papers believes the public is entitled to know how people are placed on kill lists
The Drone Papers: A Visual Glossary

02.

A VISUAL GLOSSARY

Josh Begley

Decoding the language of covert warfare.

03.

THE KILL CHAIN

Cora Currier

New details about the secret criteria for drone strikes and how the White House approves targets.

04.

FIND, FIX, FINISH

Jeremy Scahill

The tip of the spear in the Obama administration’s ramped up wars in Somalia and Yemen was a special operations task force called TF 48-4.
MANHUNTING IN THE HINDU KUSH

Ryan Devereaux

Leaked documents detailing a multi-year U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan reveal the strategic limits and startling human costs of drone warfare.

FIRING BLIND

Cora Currier, Peter Maass

A secret Pentagon study highlights the chronic flaws in intelligence used for drone strikes in Yemen and Somalia.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF OBJECTIVE PECKHAM

Ryan Gallagher

For years Bilal el-Berjawi traveled freely from the U.K. to Somalia under the watchful eyes of intelligence services. Then the U.S. killed him with a drone strike.
TARGET AFRICA
Nick Turse

To reduce the “tyranny of distance,” drones fly from bases in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Navy ships.

09. GLOSSARY

THE ALPHABET OF ASSASSINATION
A guide to the acronyms, abbreviations, and initialisms used in The Drone Papers.

10. DOCUMENTS

SMALL FOOTPRINT OPERATIONS 2/13
SMALL FOOTPRINT OPERATIONS 5/13
OPERATION HAYMAKER
GEOLOCATION WATCHLIST