

DANGER ROOM

WHAT'S NEXT IN NATIONAL SECURITY

CSI bin Laden: Commandos Use Thumb, Eye Scans to Track Terrorists

By [Spencer Ackerman](#)

The U.S. forces who killed Osama bin Laden in his Abbottabad compound were more than expert marksmen. Some of them were forensics experts as well, using sophisticated tools to ensure that they got the right man.

Speaking at a White House briefing, counterterrorism adviser John Brennan said he had “99 percent” certainty the commando team killed bin Laden, thanks to “facial recognition, [his] height, [and] an initial DNA analysis.”

The initial DNA analysis appears to have been done far from the scene, by “[CIA and other specialists in the intelligence community](#)” on Monday, according to an intelligence official who briefed Pentagon reporters, and it returned a “virtually 100 percent DNA match.”

Press reports say the DNA used to identify bin Laden may have come from one of his sisters, who allegedly [died at Boston’s Massachusetts General Hospital](#). (However, hospital spokeswoman Katie Marquedant wouldn’t confirm this, telling Danger Room, “We have no information at all.”)

But according to a senior Defense Department official, chances are they used the tool pictured above to verify his biometric information. The device is called a Secure Electronic Enrollment Kit, or SEEK, a handheld biometrics recorder that takes iris scans, fingerprints and facial scans and ports them back to an FBI database in West Virginia in seconds.

“We’ve always said this is about more than finding people in a crowd,” said the senior defense official, who requested anonymity to talk about the CSI-like gear that Special Operations Forces carry. The latest version, developed by a company called [Crossmatch](#), is known as SEEK II, and it came out last year. It weighs less than 4 pounds, and its ability to send information back to the FBI database is “wham-bam,” even from low-connectivity areas.

To pull that off, SEEK II has built-in wireless capability and optional 3G to push or pull biometric info from the database. If that doesn’t work, USB ports connect SEEK to other computers. The device runs on Windows XP.

SEEK II doesn’t have a touchscreen, so troops or their FBI partners will still need to key in information the old fashioned way. But its fingerprint sensors are more sensitive, allowing troops to scan in both pressed and rolled prints for a fuller scope of whom they’re targeting. According to the defense official, it took “probably a million, 2 million” dollars to develop.

The U.S. military has [other biometric tools](#) that it’s put to work in Iraq and Afghanistan to identify insurgents and distinguish them from civilians. One’s called the Biometrics Automated Toolset, or BATS. Another’s called the Handheld Interagency Identification Detection System, or HIIDE.

Those don’t appear to be state-of-the-art anymore. “This is better than BATS or HIIDE. We did that early,” the defense official said. “It’s faster, it can pick up more information, better than the iris scan, and get it into the system.”

For one thing, the connection speed with SEEK II is a lot better, the official said. And it syncs up with a much bigger database.

BATS and HIIDE feed into a military database called the [Automated Biometric Information System](#). ABIS contains detainee information only from the country in which U.S. forces are operating.

SEEK II, on the other hand, feeds into an FBI database with far more fingerprint and biometric data than the military possesses, the defense official said. Plus, the machine has its own “local database,” allowing operators to store specific biometric data on the device if they know who they’re looking for.

But for all you’re hearing now about facial recognition, the official said, the old-fashioned fingerprint remains more reliable. SEEK has facial-recognition capability, but it’s still pretty weak. “We’ve evolved face recognition very significantly, but it’s still not as good as people would like you to believe,” the official said. Several factors still mess up positive identification: “different angles, different lighting, a lot of false pieces.”

It wasn’t long ago that Special Operations Forces didn’t have access to much biometric data of any kind. “Matthew Alexander” is a pseudonym for one of the members of a special mission unit that hunted and ultimately killed the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, in 2006.

“I’m working for an elite task force,” Alexander recalled. “We’re supposed to have the best of everything. But we had just then started entering people’s biometric data. We were basically creating this database in ‘06, three years into the war.”

Facial recognition was a far-off dream. All of this had real consequences for the manhunt.

“One guy fooled us,” he remembered. “He gave us a fake name. It was not till an analyst found a picture of him on old slides [that we learned] he was an operations commander for northern Iraq.”

But before the SEALs can verify the data they find during their raids, they’ve got to finish the raids first. The scene of a firefight like the one that killed bin Laden isn’t the place for checking information, given the insecurity of the locations where troops are fighting. To prepare them for what they’re getting into, elite troops also have a tool called [Forward Looking Infrared](#), or FLIR.

A more mature technology than SEEK, the optic-mounted FLIR system gives troops a sense of where their enemies are inside a compound by tracking their heat sensors. It’s not that sensitive — “it can’t see through a wall,” the defense official said — but it provides a glimpse of where in an open space someone might be, using his heat signature. (The Army’s currently working on a device called [Sense Through The Wall](#), which, as its name suggests, has a sophisticated sensor to learn where people are on the other side of structures that are too dense for heat scanning.)

If all of this seems like the Joint Special Operations Command is acting like a federal SWAT team, that’s not by accident. These days, special operations teams “have FBI representation on them,” said Ali Soufan, a former FBI counterterrorism agent who hunted al-Qaida before and after 9/11. The FBI might not go on raids with the commandos, but back at the base, “they do the fingerprints, they can do the DNA [analysis] and collect the evidence.”

That was something Alexander saw firsthand. “It’s definitely moving more toward police work,” he said, because law enforcement has more experience painstakingly collecting, analyzing and tracing evidence to get the right man.

SEEK II represents an unlikely mindmeld — or, at least, fingerprintmeld — between the door-kickers at JSOC and the FBI. But the apotheosis of this new influence now has global prestige, as the commandos just took down the FBI’s most-wanted terrorist.

Photo: Crossmatch