

IS OUR WAR-MONGERING ON IRAN MAKING SYRIA GO DARK?

Greg Miller has a story describing how little decent intelligence we've got on Syria. Now, Jeff Stein suggests that denials in the story of any CIA covert actions in the story are just an effort to knock down fairly widespread allegations that we are already intervening.

According to the Al-Manar news agency, a mouthpiece for Hezbollah, Homs has been crawling with U.S. and allied spies.

It said "a coordination office was established in Qatar under American-Gulf sponsorship. The office includes American, French, and Gulf – specifically from Qatar and Saudi Arabia – intelligence agents, as well as CIA, Mossad, and Blackwater agents and members of the Syrian Transitional Council."

Not us, protested Israeli intelligence, through its unofficial mouthpiece, **Debka File**. "Recent reports confirm that British and Qatari Special forces are on the ground in the city of Homs, involved in training rebel forces as well as organizing the supply of weapons in liaison with the Turkish military." The Russians, meanwhile, were giving reports of Western intervention the full **Phil Spector**.

"A general in the opposition militia known as the Free Syria Army has told journalists that the rebels have received French and American military assistance..."
Russia Today reported last

week. "We now have weapons and anti-aircraft missiles and, God willing, with all of that we will defeat Bashar [President Assad]," it said.

Now, call me a cynic, but it seems entirely possible that the U.S. officials who talked with Miller were anxious to knock down such reports.

And the degree to which the article seems to deny we've managed things in Syria that we did in Libya—even while so many characteristics of our involvement in Syria do appear to be Libya 2.0, such as the cooperation with the UK and Qatar—makes me believe Stein is right.

But I'm just as interested in two of the main claims: that we're relying on watching murky financial transfers and don't have much HUMINT.

Consider, first, the article's focus on financial transfers.

Searching for any sign of splintering in Syria's ruling class, the United States has tracked what it suspects is the transfer of millions of dollars in foreign accounts by elites with ties to President Bashar al-Assad.

But the flow of money is murky. U.S. intelligence officials said they cannot estimate the total amount and are still trying to assess what the transfers mean: Is Assad's inner circle starting to fray, or are wealthy Syrians simply hedging their bets?

[snip]

U.S. officials said the money transfers, which probably involve accounts in such countries as Dubai and Lebanon, are seen as potential flares of trouble for Assad. But analysts at the Treasury Department and other agencies have only

shards of information on the flows and little ability to discern what they mean.

Treasury has had sanctions on Syria going back years, but it has slapped three new sets of sanctions on the country in the last year. As a money laundering suit against Lebanese businesses was announced last year, anonymous experts suggested Hezbollah was increasingly relying on money laundering to fund its activities. And, of course, we're in the process of evicting Iran from the international banking system altogether.

Has the fact that we've been pushing Syria's top leaders and its allies off the banking grid contributed to the fact that we're seeing only "shards of information" about what they're doing with their money now? Have we sanctioned Iran and its allies so deeply that we've also eliminated all the easiest ways to track their money?

And as to HUMINT, both Hezbollah and Iran have made a series of boasts about rolling up US-supported spies targeting them, reports anonymous officials confirmed with respect to Hezbollah late last year. Did this counterintelligence disaster extend into Syrian as well?

In any case, we're largely relying on the intelligence of our Sunni allies (and—Miller doesn't admit but Stein notes the obvious, Israel).

In Syria, where outgunned opposition elements have struggled to claim and hold territory, the CIA has been forced to rely on a network of sources concentrated in Damascus and assistance from the intelligence services of Arab allies.

Asked which partners are providing the most help, a former high-ranking CIA official said, "anybody who's Sunni"

and, therefore, likely to oppose the Shiite Assad regime. The former official pointed to Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan in particular.

The challenge for the CIA increased when the United States shut its embassy in Damascus last month. The facility had provided diplomatic cover for agency officers and a base for intelligence-gathering operations inside Syria's capital.

Admittedly, the problem here is in part that we lost our base of operations with the closing of the Embassy.

Clearly, one of the problems with our Syria intelligence stems from the disruptions within Syria itself (and our long history of distance from the country). But I wonder: as we inch closer and closer to war with Syrian and then Iran, are we burning up whatever intelligence we have on these countries?