

THE WIRETAP JURY ON THE IRAN WAR

At a moment when the Obama Administration is still aggressively pursuing James Risen's testimony on sources for an Iran story he wrote 7 years ago, on Saturday he published a new story summarizing the uncertainty surrounding intelligence on Iran right now.

In the story, Risen reveals that both the 2007 and the 2010 NIEs on Iran's nuke program got held up and rethought because of intercepts collected during the writing process.

The draft version [of the 2007 NIE] had concluded that the Iranians were still trying to build a bomb, the same finding of a 2005 assessment. But as they scrutinized the new intelligence from several sources, including **intercepted communications in which Iranian officials were heard complaining to one another about stopping the program**, the American intelligence officials decided they had to change course, officials said. While enrichment activities continued, the evidence that Iran had halted its weapons program in 2003 at the direction of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was too strong to ignore, they said.

[snip]

Intercepted communications of Iranian officials discussing their nuclear program raised concerns that the country's leaders had decided to revive efforts to develop a weapon, intelligence officials said.

That, along with a stream of other information, set off an intensive review and delayed publication of the 2010 National Intelligence Estimate, a classified report reflecting the

consensus of analysts from 16 agencies. But in the end, they deemed the intercepts and other evidence unpersuasive, and they stuck to their longstanding conclusion.

Risen goes on to lay out all the other intelligence we've got on Iran, as well as the significant failures that have set intelligence efforts back: we've got radar and satellite imagery of suspected nuke sites, clandestine electromagnetic and radiation sensors, and information from IAEA inspectors. We don't have much HUMINT, in part because of an email error in 2004 that exposed our assets, in part because of aborted defection of Shahram Amiri in 2009, and in part because we don't have an embassy to house people working under official cover. We're trying hard, Risen said, to avoid relying on information from MEK via the Israelis, having learned our lesson from Ahmed Chalabi in the Iraq war.

But our key tool, it seems, is the wiretapping. In particular, the eavesdropping on just 12 or so top officials who know the program.

American intelligence officials said that the conversations of only a dozen or so top Iranian officials and scientists would be worth monitoring in order to determine whether the weapons program had been restarted, because decision-making on nuclear matters is so highly compartmentalized in Iran.

I wonder how the assassination of at least 4 Iranian nuclear scientists has circumscribed the intelligence we can gather from wiretaps?

In any case, that seems to be what the decision to go to war or not comes down to: these 12 Iranians speaking into our wiretaps.