

“DID ANYONE KNOW A FRUIT VENDOR IN TUNISIA WAS GOING TO LIGHT HIMSELF ON FIRE?”

That’s the question NSC spokesperson Tommy Vietor used yesterday to deflect Senate Intelligence Committee concerns that the Administration was taken by surprise by the events in Egypt.

Did anyone in the world know in advance that a fruit vendor in Tunisia was going to light himself on fire and start a revolution? No. But for decades, the intelligence community and diplomats have been reporting on unrest in the region that was a result of economic, demographic and political conditions.

That’s pretty much the answer Stephanie O’Sullivan gave to the committee as they grilled her yesterday (though without the snide reference to Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian whose self-immolation sparked the uprising there).

“We warned of instability,” said Stephanie O’Sullivan, who has been nominated to become the nation’s No. 2 intelligence official. The hearing was on her nomination to be principal deputy director of the Office of Director of National Intelligence. But, she added, “we didn’t know what the triggering mechanism would be.”

It’s also what Paul Pillar told Spencer about warnings of the Egyptian uprising.

“The ingredients of upheaval were there for a long time,” says Paul Pillar, who

was the intelligence community's top Mideast analyst from 2000 to 2005, "but it was impossible to predict in advance what particular catalyzing events would set stuff off."

But that response doesn't address three issues.

First, there's DiFi's complaint that the intelligence community was not monitoring open source resources to track the Egyptian opposition.

Feinstein set a skeptical tone at the opening of the hearing, saying Obama and other policymakers deserved timely intelligence on major world events. Referring to Egypt, she said, "I have doubts whether the intelligence community lived up to its obligations in this area."

After the hearing, Feinstein said she was particularly concerned that the CIA and other agencies had ignored open-source intelligence on the protests, a reference to posts on Facebook and other publicly accessible Web sites used by organizers of the protests against the Mubarak government.

Speaking more broadly about intelligence on turmoil in the Middle East, Feinstein said, "I've looked at some intelligence in this area." She described it as "lacking . . . on collection."

Our intelligence community makes a great deal of effort to track the public internet communications of Islamic extremists. But DiFi suggests they're not doing the same to track potential sources of instability around the world. In my next post, I'll show that she may have a point.

In addition, the response that the intelligence community can't predict when a fruit vendor will

self-immolate and with it light up the whole Middle East ignores a point that Pillar admitted.

At the same time, the CIA is really, really close to its Egyptian counterparts. It relied on Egypt's spymaster, now Mubarak's vice president, to carry out a torture program against terrorist suspects. But Pillar denies that closeness led the CIA to rely on rosy pictures of a stable country provided by Egypt's spies. "They take with grain of salt what [Egyptian spies] have to say," Pillar says. "Anybody in the State Department or intelligence community following a country like Egypt is highly conscious of that as an occupational hazard. That doesn't mean necessarily that they have great sources inside an opposition movement, but they're aware of this as a potential shortcoming." [my emphasis]

Pillar admits that we didn't necessarily have great sources within the opposition movement. And he may be suggesting that that is because of our particularly close ties to Egypt's intelligence services and thugs like Omar Suleiman. Particularly if DiFi's complaint about not tracking social media is correct, that's sort of going to make it hard to predict a revolution.

Finally (and this is a point as salient for the complaining Senators as for the intelligence community), what if we did know people were talking about a revolution? What would we have done?

Given the Administration's caution about dispensing of its ally Mubarak (something I'm not terribly surprised about), what do the Senators really think we would have done, as a country, had we thought Mubarak's rule was unstable? Egypt has been such a cornerstone of our foreign policy for so long, I highly doubt

it would have changed our policy of gently
trying to nudge Mubarak to reform without trying
to offend him.