

SENIOR OFFICIALS WAVE THEIR SIGINT AROUND

You've probably already read this story detailing how Hosni Mubarak used his 18 day delay in resigning to rob the Egyptian people. While the whole thing is worth a read, I wanted to point out how a senior Western intelligence official makes a point of revealing that we've been aware of conversations among Mubarak's thieving family members.

But a senior Western intelligence source claimed that Mubarak had begun moving his fortune in recent weeks.

"We're aware of some urgent conversations within the Mubarak family about how to save these assets," said the source, "And we think their financial advisers have moved some of the money around. If he had real money in Zurich, it may be gone by now." [my emphasis]

The reference to "urgent conversations" seems to suggest they were actually listening in on them. (It also raises the question of why we didn't try to stop Mubarak from stealing the money, but I think we know the answer to that question.)

That's similar to the way another senior official—this one identified as American—brags to CNN about the satellites we're using to collect intelligence in Egypt. (h/t Tim Shorrock)

As the Obama administration reacted, Washington was using a variety of intelligence assets to see what was happening in Cairo and other Egyptian cities, CNN has learned.

The U.S. military and intelligence community are using "national technical means" in the sky over Egypt to gather

information about the demonstrations and the deployment of Egyptian security forces.

The phrase “national technical means” is used by the U.S. government to generally refer to the use of reconnaissance satellites to gather imagery or signals intelligence.

A senior U.S. official with direct knowledge of the operation confirmed the intelligence-gathering but declined to be identified because of the sensitive nature of the matter.

The official declined to say to what extent the Egyptian government is aware of the activity. The official would not say specifically which intelligence-gathering elements were being used but indicated that operations were being conducted in a manner that would not be visible to the Egyptian populace.

The official said the decision to use intelligence-gathering assets came in part after violence erupted in the early days of the Cairo demonstrations. [my emphasis]

Now, it should surprise no one to know that the US has been collecting signals intelligence from Egypt. We would be focusing on Egypt anyway because of our Israeli and counterterrorism interests. And SIGINT will undoubtedly be more important as our relationship with Omar Suleiman shifts along with his position in the government. But normally it's considered polite not to admit to using SIGINT so blatantly.

What seems to be a key intent of these public admissions of our spying is to disclose to whom we were listening—Mubarak's family (and presumably other top officials)—and why we shifted our normal focus away from counterterrorism targets—because of Egyptian security forces had used violence against

protesters.

In other words, this seems to be a message to top officials in Egypt—both Mubarak and our partners in Egypt's military—that we've shifted our gaze away from counterterrorism and onto the government itself.

I thought we weren't supposed to tell the people we were eavesdropping on that we were doing so?