

THREE DAYS IN DECEMBER 2016: SANCTIONS, NUKES, SYRIA, AND RUSSIA

In [this post](#), I described how badly much of the press had misrepresented the [unmasking report](#) released by Ric Grenell yesterday. The transcripts of the calls Mike Flynn had with Sergey Kislyak were identified by the FBI, FBI never put them into a finalized intelligence product, and Jim Comey told James Clapper about them.

The unmaskings described on the list released yesterday, by contrast, were finalized NSA products, not unfinished FBI ones, and none of the dates correlate with the discovery of Flynn's calls.

In other words, the masking report released yesterday does not include the calls in question. These aren't the droids you're looking for.

Indeed, there is no evidence in the public record that any of these calls reflected any suspicion of wrong-doing.

That said, there were a flurry of requests to unmask Flynn's name around mid-December 2016 that experts have highlighted both publicly and privately. While we can't speak to the content of the intercepts in question, it is certain that Flynn was involved *or mentioned in* some communications in the days before December 14, 2016 that attracted an interesting set of people around the US government.

I'd like to look at what that flurry looks like. Before I start, let me lay out some assumptions. First, there may be a delay between the time NSA obtained communications themselves and the time it finalized a report on them, so the December 14 start date for this flurry may have happened

days or more later after the communications were collected (though given how some of the most senior people in government reviewed these, that's not necessarily true). Second, while there's reason to believe this flurry is all related, we can't be certain. Finally, remember that Flynn may not be the only American on this list; there could be any number of others, and their names might have gotten unmasked as well. To reiterate: Flynn wouldn't necessarily have been a party to these communications; rather, he could have been discussed in them.

On the first day of this flurry, a significant group of people at Treasury – up to and including Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew – asked to unmask Flynn's identity. This would suggest sanctions might be involved. Note, by that time Adam Szubin [had moved](#) to head Terrorism and Financial Crimes, so the issue might have more directly concerned money laundering than sanctions (though he appears to have still been in charge of OFAC as well).

In addition, John Brennan unmasked his identity, which suggests the intelligence immediately got briefed to the top of CIA.

Also that day, UN Ambassador Samantha Power unmasked Flynn's identity twice that day, which (if this is part of the flurry) suggests someone in New York may have been involved.

The next day, December 15, Jim Comey got this intelligence and unmasked Flynn's identity. Importantly, given the [draft EC](#) closing the Flynn investigation on January 4, 2017, nothing about this seems to have triggered notice to the Crossfire Hurricane team, which either suggests it involved an entirely different topic or proves that the FBI didn't have it in for Flynn and treated some communications involving Flynn and Russia as routine.

John Brennan got something – either the same or a follow-on report, or something else entirely different – on December 15. That seems to have filtered down to CIA officials working on the

Middle East, including Syria. But there's not evidence that counterterrorism experts got it or were very interested, which is interesting given that Flynn always pitched cooperation with Russia in terms of cooperating against ISIS.

The same day, a whole bunch of people at NATO got it, including the Policy Advisor for Russia (Scott Parrish, too, seems to focus on Russia or Eastern Europe).

In addition, a senior person at Department of Energy and someone on the intelligence side there got it. This suggests nuclear power or proliferation is involved.

Finally, on December 16, four people at CIA whose location and portfolio are unknown got it, as well as the Ambassador to Russia (it would be unsurprising if those CIA people were also in Russia).

December 14, 2016

CIA Director John Brennan

UN Ambassador Samantha Power (twice)

Treasury

Secretary of Treasury Jacob Lew

Deputy Secretary of Treasury Sarah Raskin

Under Secretary of Treasury Nathan Sheets

Acting Under Secretary of Treasury Adam Szubin

Acting Assistant Secretary of Treasury, Office of Intelligence & Analysis Danny McGlynn

Acting Assistant Secretary of Treasury, Office of Intelligence & Analysis Mike Neufeld

Office of Intelligence & Analysis Patrick Conlan

December 15, 2016

FBI Director Jim Comey

CIA

CIA Director John Brennan

Deputy Assistant Director of Near East Mission
Center [redacted]

Chief Syria Group [Redacted]

NATO

US Ambassador to NATO Douglas Lute

US Deputy Chief of US Mission to NATO Lee
Litzenberger

US NATO [CIA?] Advisor to Ambassador Douglas
Lute

US NATO Defense Advisor (DEFAD) Robert Bell

US NATO Deputy DEFAD James Hursh

US Representative to NATO Military Vice Admiral
John Christenson

US NATO Office of the Defense Advisor (ODA)
Policy Advisor for Russia Lieutenant Colonel
Paul Geehreng

US NATO Political Officer [redacted] Scott
Parrish

US NATO Political Advisor [POLAD] Tamir Waser

Department of Energy

US Department of Energy Deputy Secretary
Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall

US Department of Energy Intelligence and
Analysis, Executive Briefer

December 16

State

US Ambassador to Russia John Tefft

CIA

Chief of Station [Redacted]

Deputy Chief of Station [Redacted]

Collection Management Officer [Redacted]

Collection Management Officer [Redacted]

The most credible explanation I've seen for this flurry is that it relates to Flynn's [scheme](#) to sell nuclear energy to Saudi Arabia (because it would involve sanctions, so Treasury, and proliferation, so Energy, and partnership with Russia), but that explanation doesn't account for some of these readers, most notably someone with a Syria portfolio (the entire nuclear plan was a scheme to lure Russia away from Iran). Plus, unless those CIA people are tied to Saudi Arabia, these readers don't include the key target of this scheme.

Moreover, it's unclear why so many people at NATO would focus on this so quickly.

Whatever this flurry (or flurries), what Ric Grenell has done by releasing the list is given whatever adversary is involved, along with Mike Flynn, a picture of how this information flowed within the federal government.

Maybe that – and not any disclosure about who unmasked Flynn's call with Sergey Kislyak – was the point.

Update: Here's the [first story](#) on Jared Kushner's request for a back channel, which Kislyak reported back to Moscow. It would have triggered Power (the meeting was in NY), Russia, Syria (Kushner said he wanted to cooperate on Syria). But it's not clear why Treasury got this first, unless the message included set-up to [the meeting with Sergei Gorkov](#), which took place on December 13. This being a report on Gorkov would explain the response at Treasury, but not other elements, such as the involvement of Energy (unless the Gorkov meeting was significantly different than has been reported).