

DOES MOSSAD TAKE REQUESTS?

Yesterday, WSJ caused a stink by reporting that the Obama Administration was pissed because Israel had shared intelligence it gathered about the Iran negotiations and shared it with Congress.

Soon after the U.S. and other major powers entered negotiations last year to curtail Iran's nuclear program, senior White House officials learned Israel was spying on the closed-door talks.

The spying operation was part of a broader campaign by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to penetrate the negotiations and then help build a case against the emerging terms of the deal, current and former U.S. officials said. In addition to eavesdropping, Israel acquired information from confidential U.S. briefings, informants and diplomatic contacts in Europe, the officials said.

The espionage didn't upset the White House as much as Israel's sharing of inside information with U.S. lawmakers and others to drain support from a high-stakes deal intended to limit Iran's nuclear program, current and former officials said.

"It is one thing for the U.S. and Israel to spy on each other. It is another thing for Israel to steal U.S. secrets and play them back to U.S. legislators to undermine U.S. diplomacy," said a senior U.S. official briefed on the matter.

The story is not new. Earlier in the month, there were complaints in the conservative press the US had cut intelligence sharing with

Israel because of its cherry picking of intelligence. And Bibi himself got caught trying to withhold an intelligence briefing from Senators on a code.

Obviously, I'm not the least bit sympathetic to Bibi's disinformation campaign.

But the Administration has brought this on itself. As I noted last year, the Committees have had to go begging for the intelligence they need to do their job (in this case, to craft an AUMF to fight ISIL).

As I noted in my Salon piece last week, former Associate Counsel to the White House Andy Wright noted, and today Jack Goldsmith and Marty Lederman note, Tom Udall suggested before Congress funds overt training of Syrian opposition groups, maybe they should learn details about how the covert funding of Syrian opposition groups worked out.

Everybody's well aware there's been a covert operation, operating in the region to train forces, moderate forces, to go into Syria and to be out there, that we've been doing this the last two years. And probably the most true measure of the effectiveness of moderate forces would be, what has been the effectiveness over that last two years of this covert operation, of training 2,000 to 3,000 of these moderates? Are they a growing force? Have they gained ground? How effective are they? What can you tell us about this effort that's gone on, and has it been a part of the success that you see that you're presenting this new plan on?

Kerry, who had been sitting right next

to Hagel when the Defense Secretary confirmed this covert op a year ago, said he couldn't provide any details.

I know it's been written about, in the public domain that there is, quote, a covert operation. But I can't confirm, deny, whatever.

(At the end of the hearing he suggested he has been pushing to share more information, and that he might be able to arrange for the Chair and Ranking Member to be briefed.)

Shortly thereafter, SFRC Bob Menendez confirmed that his committee was being asked to legislate about a war with no details about the covert op that had laid the groundwork for – and created the urgency behind – that war.

To the core question that you raise, this is a problem that both the Administration, as well as the Senate leadership must be willing to deal with. Because when it comes to questions of being briefed on covert operations this committee does not have access to that information. Yet it is charged with a responsibility of determining whether or not the people of the United States should – through their Representatives – support an Authorization for the Use of Military Force. It is unfathomable to me to understand how this committee is going to get to those conclusions without understanding all of the elements of military engagement both overtly and covertly. ... I'll call it, for lack of a

better term, a procedural hurdle we're going to have to overcome if we want the information to make an informed judgment and get members on board.

That's only going to increase the thirst for intelligence wherever members of Congress can get it (though interestingly, Bob Corker, currently the Senate Foreign Relations Chair, says he hasn't been getting Bibi's special briefings).

Information may be power, and the Obama Administration may like hoarding that power. But the vacuum that it leaves can itself exert a lot of power.

Update: I hadn't seen this Yahoo interview with Bob Corker. But he complains that he's not getting intelligence. Instead, they bring Senators to a SCIF so we citizens can't hear the questions.

Yahoo News: A bombshell Wall Street Journal story says the Israelis penetrated the Iranian talks and shared the information with Congress. Are you in a position to confirm any of that? And if the Israelis did what the Journal says they did, did they act appropriately?

Bob Corker: I have never found them actually to be sharing anything different than was in public sources. As I met with Netanyahu the last time, he said, "You know, all this is Google-able – Yahoo-able!" For what it's worth, I get more information about what's happening from foreign ministers than I do from anyone. Not from Israel – foreign ministers that are part of the negotiating teams.

The White House is upset that foreign governments may be giving information to

senators because they're not? Every time they meet with us and give us information down in the classified SCIF (Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility) – they really do that so that none of you can hear questions that are asked – I never learn anything that I haven't read about on Yahoo or New York Times or some other place.