

Iran 'hoodwinked' CIA over nuclear plans

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British spy chiefs have grave doubts that Iran has mothballed its nuclear weapons programme, as a US intelligence report claimed last week, and believe the CIA has been hoodwinked by Teheran.

The timing of the CIA report has also provoked fury in the British Government, where officials believe it has undermined efforts to impose tough new sanctions on Iran and made an Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities more likely.

The security services in London want concrete evidence to allay concerns that the Islamic state has fed disinformation to the CIA.

The report used new evidence - including human sources, wireless intercepts and evidence from an Iranian defector

- to conclude that Teheran suspended the bomb-making side of its nuclear programme in 2003. But British intelligence is concerned that US spy chiefs were so determined to avoid giving President Bush a reason to go to war

- as their reports on Saddam Hussein's weapons programmes did in Iraq - that they got it wrong this time.

A senior British official delivered a withering assessment of US intelligence-gathering abilities in the Middle East and revealed that British spies shared the concerns of Israeli defence chiefs that Iran was still pursuing nuclear weapons.

The source said British analysts believed that Iranian nuclear staff, knowing their phones were tapped, deliberately gave misinformation. "We are sceptical. We want to know what the basis of it is, where did it come from? Was it on the basis of the defector? Was it on the basis of the intercept material? They say things on the phone because they know we are up on the phones. They say black is white. They will say anything to throw us off.

"It's not as if the American intelligence agencies are regarded as brilliant performers in that region. They got badly burned over Iraq."

A US intelligence source has revealed that some American spies share the concerns of the British and the Israelis. "Many middle- ranking CIA veterans believe Iran is still committed to producing nuclear weapons and are concerned that the agency lost a number of its best sources in Iran in 2004," the official said.

The Foreign Office is studying a new text of a third United Nations Security Council resolution that would impose tough travel bans on regime figures and penalise banks that do business with Iran.

But diplomats say the chances of winning Chinese and Russian support for the move are in freefall. A Western diplomat said: "It's created a lot of difficulties because of the timing, just as we were about to go for a third resolution."

Bruce Reidel, who spent 25 years on the Middle East desks at the CIA and the National Security Council, said: "By going public they have embarrassed our friends, particularly the British and the Israelis. They have given our foes insights into our most secret intelligence and taken most of the options off the table."

Ephraim Sneh, until recently Israel's deputy minister of defence, warned that military action would be the only option if the world community did not institute robust sanctions. "No one can rule out with high confidence that somewhere in Iran, 70 times the size of Israel, there is one lab working on the weapons programme," Mr Sneh told The Sunday Telegraph.

"[Military action] is not a desired option; it is a last resort. That's why sanctions are so important. We have to urge the international community to be serious about sanctions and to take necessary measures to defend the civilian population."

By Tim Shipman in Washington, Philip Sherwell and Carolynne Wheeler
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