

Britain's intelligence agencies were wrong-footed by the spread of unrest during the Arab Spring and failed to predict the dramatic uprisings that swept the region, Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee said today. The country's intelligence watchdog, said in its annual report that the crisis had exposed Britain's decision to scale back intelligence assets in much of the Middle East.

By David Stringer, Associated Press

In private evidence sessions with the committee - which does not meet in public, and is appointed by the Government rather than being elected by the House of Commons - the heads of the country's overseas intelligence agency MI6 and global eavesdropping service GCHQ acknowledged that a focus on al-Qaida linked terrorism and Iran's nuclear programme meant their coverage across some parts of the Arab world had dwindled.

"When the upheavals took place around the Arab world ... our coverage of individual Arab countries had been falling for some time," John Sawers, head of MI6, told the panel in a closed door hearing in December. Iain Lobban, head of the Government Communications Headquarters GCHQ said that ahead of the uprisings the "Arab nations were one of the few areas where we were planning to draw down our effort pretty well comprehensively."

Defense Intelligence - the military's dedicated spy service - said it had "little resource" directed at the countries involved as the revolts began. "We can't cover everything all the time in the modern world," the agency told the committee.

In its report, the panel said that events following Tunisia's uprising in Dec. 2010, had taken "many by surprise and presented a significant challenge to the U.K. intelligence community in terms of reprioritizing its resources." Though it offered praise for their eventual response, the watchdog committee said there was a question as to whether "the agencies should have anticipated the possibility that the unrest would spread quickly across the region."

Sawers acknowledged that MI6 had been "unable to provide detailed reporting on (the) Tunisia and Egypt crises," because of its lack of assets there. He defended, however, the performance of his spies and insisted that no-one - in any part of the world - had an inkling that the revolts would spread so quickly. While defense analysts had picked out Egypt as likely to feel an impact from the effect of the Arab world's younger population and economic struggles, it was unable "to predict the spark which would cause it all," the military spy service told committee members.

Foreign Secretary William Hague, who has ministerial oversight of both MI6 and GCHQ, told the committee that by the time Britain joined the military intervention in Libya in March 2011 the agencies were producing a "colossal" amount of intelligence.

The report also warned that domestic spy service MI5 had come under "significant pressure" ahead of the London Olympics. MI5 told the legislators it had planned to handle at least double the usual amount of terrorist chatter - and was prepared for a deluge of four times the usual amount of intelligence to assess. It had identified the likely key threats as al-Qaida-linked attempts to attack Olympic athletes or visitors - particularly from the United States or Israel - as well as efforts by Irish Republican dissidents to mount actual or hoax attacks, and potential clashes between rival ethnic groups in London.

MI5 director-general Jonathan Evans said staff had been reassigned from other tasks and been asked to work longer, or different hours - making it difficult for some security officials to find childcare.