

British Intelligence Chiefs Say Leaks by Snowden Hurt Security

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By [STEVEN ERLANGER](#)

LONDON — Britain’s intelligence chiefs, in unprecedented public testimony before Parliament, said on Thursday that the published leaks of secret documents stolen by Edward J. Snowden, the former American intelligence analyst, had damaged their ability to keep Britain safe.

“The leaks from Snowden have been very damaging, and they’ve put our operations at risk,” said John Sawers, the head of the foreign intelligence service, MI6. “It’s clear that our adversaries are rubbing their hands with glee. Al Qaeda is lapping it up.”

Iain Lobban, the director of the eavesdropping agency, the [Government Communications Headquarters](#), said terrorist groups in Afghanistan, South Asia and the Middle East “and closer to home” have discussed the Snowden revelations. They have assessed “the communications packages they use now and the communication packages they wish to move to,” he said, “to avoid what they now perceive to be vulnerable communications methods.”

Mr. Lobban called that “a direct consequence” of the leaks, adding: “Yes, I can say that explicitly. The cumulative effect of global media coverage will make our job far, far harder for years to come.”

Mr. Sawers, a former British ambassador to Egypt and the United Nations, said he was not sure that “the journalists managing this very sensitive information are particularly well placed, actually, to make those judgments,” an assertion that top editors have rejected, arguing that they are using care in deciding what to publish.

Andrew Parker, the head of the domestic security agency, MI5, was less explicit on Thursday. But in a speech last month, he said the Snowden leaks had caused “enormous damage” to British security, “handing the advantage to the terrorists.”

The officials’ reactions are hardly a surprise, given their responsibilities and the varied nature of the global threats that face Britain and the West. But they were also at pains to try to reassure the British public that all three agencies followed British law, sought authorization from appropriate cabinet ministers, did not condone torture and had learned from their mistakes, both foreign and domestic.

Mr. Lobban insisted that “secret does not mean sinister” or “unaccountable,” and that there was no mass surveillance of ordinary citizens despite the gathering of huge amounts of Internet and telephone data.

Mr. Parker insisted that his agency was committed to protecting “the sort of country we live in against threats to it,” saying Britons “don’t want to live in a surveillance society, or North Korea — they want to live in a country like this, and our job is to keep it that way.”

He added: “The suggestion that somehow what we do is somehow compromising freedom and democracy. Of course, we believe the opposite to be the case.”

The public appearance before the Intelligence and Security Committee was a drastic change from the usual private testimony. It was only in 1992 that the name of the head of MI5 was made public, and it was not until 1994 that the government officially admitted that MI6 even existed.

The timing of this first public hearing was not dictated by the controversies surrounding Mr. Snowden, who has been [given temporary asylum](#) in Russia. But the questioning, led by Malcolm Rifkind, the committee chairman and a former foreign secretary, was dominated by the Snowden revelations, which have been made through publications like The Guardian, The Washington Post, The New York Times and Der Spiegel.

The committee of nine was friendly in its questioning and did little to challenge the assumptions of the three intelligence chiefs. Mr. Rifkind, to whom MI6 once reported, tried to press for more public disclosure and more debate about the proper balance between secrecy and a democracy’s right to know, especially given the 2 billion pounds spent annually on the three agencies. But in general, the committee allowed the chiefs to avoid specifics, although they promised to talk to the legislators more openly in private session.

Nor was there a serious discussion of the damage done to relations among allies by revelations that the United States and Britain have been spying on their friends as well as their enemies.

The parliamentary hearing lasted 90 minutes and touched on the war in Syria, Northern Ireland, Iran, the role of the eavesdropping agency in tracking down child abusers who used the Internet, and industrial espionage.

The three chiefs underlined concerns about the radicalization of those fighting in Syria. Mr. Parker estimated that the number of Britons who had traveled to Syria to fight was in the “low hundreds,” saying a number had already returned to Britain. While most would not engage in jihadist activity at home, Mr. Parker said, he made it clear that they were important targets of surveillance.

Mr. Parker repeated that the agencies had disrupted 34 plots to cause domestic harm since the bomb attacks on London in July 2005, with one or two each year intending to cause mass casualties.

French officials have cited similar numbers of French citizens who have traveled to Syria and northern Africa to join jihadists, often attracted or radicalized by material on the Internet.

Mr. Parker has run MI5 since April. Mr. Sawers has run MI6 since 2009, and in 2010 he gave the first public speech by a head of MI6. Mr. Lobban has run the eavesdropping agency since 2008.

The lore around Britain's intelligence services originates from the World War II and the Cold War, both because of its traitors, like Kim Philby, and its heroes, whose names are largely unknown. Mr. Parker is still known as "M," and Mr. Sawers as "C."

Mr. Sawers, when asked, said his agents did not operate as James Bond might have done, conducting missions on their own. He said his agents were in constant contact with headquarters and were told to seek guidance if they were in doubt about the legality or appropriateness of an action. If necessary, he said, "we will wake the foreign secretary up and ask him for a view one way or the other." A similar system operates with MI5 and the home secretary.