

Pentagon analyst indicted for leaks to Israel: a subterranean power struggle in Washington

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Defense Department analyst Lawrence A. Franklin was indicted May 4 on four counts of disclosing classified information to persons not authorized to receive it. He is charged with passing documents to two pro-Israeli lobbyists, officials of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, who in turn transmitted the material to the Jewish state. A search of his West Virginia home uncovered 83 classified documents, most concerning US policy towards Iran.

According to court documents, Franklin also made unauthorized disclosures to unnamed media representatives and to an unidentified foreign official, believed to be Naor Gilon, head of the political department at the Israeli embassy in Washington. The Israeli press reported that Gilon is leaving his US post to return to Jerusalem. The Israeli embassy called this a “personal decision,” claiming it had nothing to do with the Franklin case. According to press reports, the FBI is also investigating whether highly classified NSA material “was also forwarded to Israel.”

The Franklin investigation was first made public last August, with the disclosure that the FBI was conducting a surveillance operation directed against AIPAC, one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington. Two AIPAC officials were targeted: Steve Rosen and Keith Weissman, the group’s director of foreign policy issues and senior Middle East analyst respectively.

This was followed by several FBI raids on the AIPAC office, in which agents carted off computers and files used by Rosen, Weissman and four other officials, including executive director Howard Kohr and managing director Richard Fishman. AIPAC initially denounced the charges as an anti-Semitic smear campaign. Last month, however, the group fired Rosen and Weissman, although it continues to pay their legal bills.

Franklin, 58, is the Pentagon’s top Iran specialist, and worked for undersecretary for policy Douglas Feith, a key member of the group of neo-conservative civilian officials who pushed the hardest for US military action against Iraq. Franklin is not himself a political appointee or activist, but his hard-line views on Iran dovetailed with the political agenda of the neo-conservatives. He also had close personal connections with Israel, having frequently worked two-week stints as a defense attaché at the US embassy in Tel Aviv as part of his service in the military reserve.

While it takes the form of an FBI investigation and a series of media leaks, what has erupted is a bitter conflict within the Washington political establishment. The foundation of the conflict is the recognition that the invasion of Iraq has become a strategic disaster for American imperialism. Initially launched on the premise that the United States would easily conquer the country and secure control of its immense oil resources—the world’s second largest—the Iraq war has become an albatross, tying down 140,000 troops, the bulk of the deployable US military, indefinitely.

Washington hoped to achieve a position of unchallengeable dominance in world oil markets and, with control of Iraq and Afghanistan and other military bases obtained after the 9/11 attacks, an impregnable strategic position in the Middle East and Central Asia. Instead, Iraq has become a

quagmire that restricts rather than enhances the ability of the United States to threaten further military aggression. General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admitted last week in congressional testimony that the Iraq deployment would make additional US military action more difficult and costly.

No section of the US ruling elite will countenance an abandonment of the Iraq adventure, which would be a defeat far more shattering than Vietnam. The divisions have emerged over the next steps after Iraq, with the hard-line neo-conservative faction, impelled by a quasi-messianic belief in US military power, calling for an aggressive campaign against Iran. Their opponents, characterized as “realists” in Washington parlance, call for a narrower focus on securing Iraq and relying, at least for the time being, on diplomatic methods to deal with Iran and other potential targets like North Korea.

The issues in the Iran dispute include US support for exile groups, the credibility of US intelligence about alleged nuclear weapons projects, and potential US military action—in other words, the same constellation of issues that emerged in relation to Iraq. The neo-conservative faction, however, is now on the defensive, given the current state of affairs in Iraq and the exposure of its lies in the runup to the war in Iraq: there were no weapons of mass destruction, no ties to Al Qaeda, no plans by Saddam Hussein for using terrorists as proxies to attack the United States.

The conflict was developing even before the US conquest of Iraq, but it began to emerge more openly in the period since Bush’s reelection, in a series of personnel shifts as well as leaks to the press. At the Pentagon, the two neo-conservatives most closely associated with the campaign for war against Iraq, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith, have been removed. Feith submitted his resignation in January, although he has not yet been replaced. In March, Wolfowitz was kicked upstairs to head the World Bank.

Another prominent neo-conservative, John Bolton, number three official in the State Department, has been nominated to the position of US Ambassador to the United Nations (after incoming Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declined to name him her deputy). Opposition to the nomination has been fueled by a series of leaks from current and former State Department officials with longstanding policy differences with Bolton, particularly over Iran and North Korea.

These conflicts have been accompanied by efforts to raise tensions with Iran through leaks to the media. Citing intelligence sources, Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker* that the US has carried out intelligence reconnaissance raids into Iran from bases in Afghanistan, seeking targeting information for future air attacks. Pentagon officials revealed that contingency plans for military action against Iran were being redrafted. And Vice President Richard Cheney openly suggested that Israel might stage a military strike against suspected Iranian nuclear sites.

It is in this political context that the Franklin investigation has unfolded. Pro-Israeli media pundits have openly stated that the CIA and FBI are

targeting neo-conservatives in the Pentagon with close ties to the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The *New York Sun*, which has close links to the neo-conservatives, claimed that the FBI investigation of Pentagon leaks was instigated by Rumsfeld himself.

The dispute over Iran policy reflects not only different strategic perspectives, but conflicting state interests, given the close ties between the neo-conservatives and the Sharon government in Israel. While Israel and the United States have long been the closest allies against the Arab states and the Palestinian people, their interests are not identical.

The most notorious incident of US-Israeli conflict emerged in the Jonathan Pollard case, when a Navy analyst was caught spying for Israel in 1986 and sentenced to life imprisonment. He remains in jail today, despite repeated appeals from a succession of Israeli governments, because of the adamant opposition to his release on the part of the US military-intelligence apparatus.

While Israeli officials routinely declare that after Pollard they halted all spy operations against the US government, there are few in official Washington who believe such disclaimers. (One of the many unexplained facets of the Monica Lewinsky affair was President Clinton's warning that she should be careful what she said in her phone calls to the White House because the lines were monitored—a remark that almost surely was a reference to Israeli surveillance).

The liberal journal *American Prospect* reported last November: "Since the Pollard case ... at least six sealed indictments have been issued against individuals for espionage on Israel's behalf." None of these cases has ever been prosecuted; they were all handled discreetly through diplomatic channels.

The Franklin case does not appear to involve espionage. There is no indication Franklin had access to secret information about technology, communications codes or US covert operations. He was an analyst in the Office of Special Policy, charged with helping develop US policy towards the Iranian regime, and he supplied AIPAC and Israel with documents on this subject.

The United States has a long history of manipulating the politics of Iran, and for a quarter century, during the reign of Shah Reza Pahlavi, relied on Iran as its principal policeman in the Persian Gulf region. Despite the present tensions with the fundamentalist regime in Tehran, Washington regards Iran, the largest and most populous country in southwest Asia, with huge oil reserves, as a desirable ally and potential strategic asset.

For Israel, however, Iran's perceived nuclear ambitions are the number one strategic threat to the Zionist regime's existence: in part, because one atomic bomb, no matter how primitive, could destroy the state of Israel; in part, because Israel relies on the deterrent effect of its massive nuclear stockpile to offset the enormous manpower advantage of the Arab and Muslim states. If any of these states were to become a nuclear power, it would radically alter the strategic balance in the region.

These concerns were evidently shared by Franklin. He initially approached the two AIPAC officials with information about alleged Iranian sponsorship of attacks on US forces in Iraq, as well as threats to Israeli spies operating in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, in June 2003. The criminal charges against Franklin relate to this transfer of information.

Franklin's relations with AIPAC reportedly came to the attention of the FBI as part of its investigation into the activities of Ahmed Chalabi, the Iraqi exile who played a major role in supplying the US government with bogus evidence to support its claims that Saddam Hussein was building "weapons of mass destruction"—the central accusation in the Bush administration's campaign for war against Iraq.

Chalabi served in the US-appointed provisional government in Baghdad, before ostensibly breaking with Washington a year ago, after US-backed police raids on the offices of his Iraqi National Council. US intelligence officials claimed at the time that they suspected Chalabi of having leaked

secret intelligence information to Iran. Among other things, they said he had revealed that the US had broken Iranian communications codes. Since Chalabi could only have learned this from his contacts at the Pentagon, where he was a favorite of the neo-conservatives, the FBI investigation into this alleged breach of security led them to Franklin.

The nature of Franklin's relationship with Chalabi has not been made public. But Franklin was apparently induced by the FBI to turn against his AIPAC contacts. He participated in a sting operation in July 2004, directed against the same two officials he had met the previous year. This time, he supplied them with documents about US policy towards Iran, while FBI agents recorded the meeting.

According to *Time* magazine, Franklin also made phone calls under FBI direction to help get evidence against allies of Chalabi. At this stage, further "stings" were forestalled by a leak to CBS News, which reported on August 27, 2004 that the FBI was investigating an "Israeli mole" in the Pentagon. Subsequent reports named Franklin, he was suspended from his Pentagon position, and his usefulness as an FBI collaborator was ended—a fact that suggests that the leak to CBS came from the Israeli/neo-conservative side, to alert potential targets of the investigation of Franklin's role.

Since then, Franklin has apparently had a change of heart. In October he retained a high-priced defense lawyer, Plato Cacheris, and refused further cooperation with the FBI. In January 2005, he was inexplicably put back on the Pentagon payroll, although in a "less sensitive" position. The FBI is now said to be investigating Franklin's relations with Manucher Ghorbanifar, an Iranian businessman and go-between for the Tehran regime during the Iran-contra scandal of the 1980s.

The timing of Franklin's indictment underscores its political character. He is charged with unauthorized leaks to AIPAC barely two weeks before the group's annual conference, set for May 22-24 in Washington. Secretary of State Rice, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, and every single congressional leader, Democrat and Republican alike, are scheduled to attend. The main exhibit erected in the Washington convention center for the occasion is a scale-model replica of Iran's uranium enrichment apparatus, and the focus of the conference is whipping up support for a more aggressive US posture towards that country.

The relationships between Chalabi, the Israelis, Iran and the US military and intelligence apparatus are extremely murky, and characterized by mutual double-crossing and the leaking of false information to the media. Despite the public accusation that he is an Iranian spy, for example, the Iraqi politician has since resurfaced as deputy prime minister and acting oil minister in the new US-backed stooge government of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari.

But one thing seems clear: the Franklin case is the product of a raging political conflict in official Washington, whose roots lie in the failure of the US aggression in Iraq. His indictment, on the eve of the pro-Zionist lobby's annual meeting, must be seen as a shot across the bow, not only to the neo-conservatives, but to the Israeli regime itself.



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