

US releases Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard after 30 years in prison

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Jonathan Pollard, the 61-year old former US naval intelligence officer who was sentenced to life in prison in 1987 for spying for Israel, is to be released today.

The Justice Department did not oppose Pollard's release on parole at a hearing during the summer. He is to be discharged 30 years after his arrest. The Obama administration has denied that it is freeing Pollard as a sop to the Israeli government for the Iran nuclear deal, and the conditions of his release reflect the ongoing hostility of the US intelligence apparatus.

Under the terms of his parole, Pollard must report regularly to his parole officer and seek prior approval for any long-distance travel within the US. He must remain in the US for at least five years unless President Obama, or his successor, allows him to leave the country. His supporters have apparently given him a job and a place to live in the New York City area.

His family has said that he wants to move to Israel, whose citizenship he adopted in 1995, to live with his second wife, Esther Zeitz, a Canadian Jew involved in campaigning for his release and whom he married in prison. The White House has refused to support his move to Israel, saying he has committed "very serious crimes."

Between 1984 and 1985, Pollard, an intelligence employee in the Naval Anti-terrorist Alert Center in Washington, passed on thousands of pages of classified US intelligence information to Israel. The most important was a 10-volume guide on how Washington interprets signal intelligence. This was the National Security Agency's top-secret manual for understanding data collected by the global US electronic surveillance network, and its direction, mission and purpose.

A colleague spotted him carrying documents without authorisation, prompting his arrest for questioning. Pollard and his first wife sought asylum at the Israeli Embassy in Washington but were turned away by guards. He was sentenced to life imprisonment—the longest-ever

sentence for a US citizen caught spying for an ally—and his wife to three years.

At the time, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said it was hard to imagine "a greater harm to national security than that caused by" Pollard. But precisely what he did has never been revealed, since he agreed to a plea bargain, admitting to one charge of spying, with the result that there was only very limited release of details of the prosecution's case and the supporting evidence.

The Israeli right wing has lionized Pollard as an Israeli patriot and transformed him into something of an icon, with successive governments demanding his release. Far from being recruited by Israel or even being an ardent Zionist, however, Pollard simply sold himself to the highest bidder.

He was an inveterate liar, who repeatedly falsified his resume for employment in the intelligence services. This and his expensive drug habit led the CIA to consider him a risk and recommend that he not be used in any intelligence collection operation—a recommendation that was not acted upon by Naval Intelligence when it hired him.

While Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has claimed that Pollard only worked for Israel, Pollard himself admitted to trying to market his access to classified documents—for financial reward or for free in some cases—to South Africa, Taiwan, Pakistan, Argentina, Australia and China, in addition to Israel. Tel Aviv in turn passed the information on to China and other states. Pollard also passed on classified documents containing economic and political analysis to his business associates and professional investment advisers, which he hoped would yield results in the form of future lucrative employment.

Israel—a small state entirely dependent on Washington's protection and support for its existence—was to prove by far the most profitable customer. Pollard made contact

with Aviem Sella, a former combat pilot in the Israeli Air Force who had been involved in the 1981 Israeli airstrike on Iraq's nuclear facilities at Osirek, and who was studying in New York.

Although at first Sella thought Pollard was part of an FBI sting operation to recruit an Israeli, the Israeli air-force chief of staff ordered him to develop contact with Pollard but to watch him carefully in case he was a US plant to root out foreign intelligence operations.

Long before the Pollard affair, John Davitt, head of internal security at the Justice Department between 1950 and 1980, declared that Israel came second only to the Soviet Union in having an active spy network in the US.

Pollard was soon passing classified information to Sella, for which he was amply rewarded with salary, cash and jewelry. His controller was Rafi Eitan, a long time spy who headed Lekem, a scientific-intelligence agency in Israel established in 1957 to collect scientific and technical intelligence abroad from both open and covert sources for Israel's nuclear program.

Lekem also established front companies for obtaining sensitive equipment, technologies and materials for Israel's secret defence-related programs, and in particular its nuclear program. One of these companies was indicted in 1986 for smuggling over 800 switches used in nuclear weapons to Israel.

Pollard passed on tens of thousands of documents, including details of the troop movements of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces and satellite photos of the Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunisia that Israel bombed in October 1985, killing 36 people and destroying the compound.

At first Israel refused to cooperate with the investigation into Pollard, only agreeing in exchange for immunity for the Israelis involved. It refused to allow Sella to be extradited and acknowledged only a minor role in the Pollard affair—although it was forced to make a formal apology. However, Lekem's head Rafi Eitan was forced to resign and the agency was disbanded in 1986. For nearly ten years, Tel Aviv maintained it had received the classified documents from an unknown source, before admitting that it had received the material directly from Pollard. It was 1998 before it admitted to paying Pollard.

While Washington has funded and supported Tel Aviv for more than 50 years as one of its chief policemen in the oil-rich region, both regimes face insoluble political and economic contradictions at home and abroad that they seek to counter by military means. While their strategic interests in the region are broadly similar, their immediate

timetables, agendas and tactics are significantly at odds. It is this that lies behind the tensions that have repeatedly surfaced over the last few years. The Pollard affair emerged as one of the most notorious incidents of US-Israeli conflict.

While Israeli officials routinely declare that they have halted all spy operations against the US government, there are few in Washington who place any credence in such pronouncements. Daniel Halper is the author of a book on the Clinton family's political enterprises, *Clinton Inc: The Audacious Rebuilding of a Political Machine*, which uses on-the-record interviews with former officials and the documents known as "the Monica Files."

He states that Israel attempted to use its tape recordings of former US president Bill Clinton's telephone calls with intern Monica Lewinsky as blackmail to gain the release of Pollard. Following talks at Wye Valley in 1998, Clinton appeared to favour Pollard's release, but his military and intelligence chiefs refused.

Halper cites an *Insight* article published in 2000 claiming that Israel had "penetrated four White House telephone lines and was able to relay real-time conversations on those lines from a remote site outside the White House directly to Israel for listening and recording."

In 2004, the liberal journal *American Prospect* reported, "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. Earlier this year, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Israeli intelligence services spied on the Iran nuclear talks and leaked details to congressional Republicans and Democrats in an effort to block a prospective deal.



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