

The Pentagon Spy Investigation: FBI Talks to Feith

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The FBI has broadened its investigation of a Pentagon official suspected of giving a top-secret presidential policy directive on Iran to two lobbyists working for AIPAC, who then turned the information over to Israel.

The focus of the investigation is an Iran specialist at the Pentagon named Lawrence Franklin, who works in an office overseen by Douglas J. Feith, the Defense undersecretary for policy. Feith is an influential aide to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld whose previous work included prewar intelligence on Iraq, including purported ties between Saddam Hussein's regime and the Al-Qaeda terror network.

The fact that the alleged spy is associated with Feith and Wolfowitz may prove embarrassing for the White House. Both officials, actively involved in planning the invasion of Iraq, have been accused of promoting the war to serve Israeli interests.

Early in the Bush administration, Franklin worked at the Defense Intelligence Agency before moving to the Pentagon's policy branch under Feith three years ago. He is now nearing retirement.

The Washington Post reported yesterday that Franklin had traveled to Israel, including during duty in the Air Force Reserve, where he rose to the rank of colonel and served as a specialist in foreign political-military affairs. He may have been based at the US Embassy in Tel Aviv on those tours, a former co-worker at the DIA told reporters, but was never permanently assigned there.

The FBI spent more than a year covertly investigating Franklin, and even obtained a warrant from a federal court to use electronic surveillance. It is not known whether such surveillance was conducted inside the Pentagon itself, although it has involved at least one of Franklin's computers.

High-ranking officials at the Defense and State Departments have been interviewed or briefed by FBI agents investigating the case. Among those briefed by the FBI was Feith, said government officials familiar with the sessions. The officials spoke yesterday on condition of anonymity because the probe is continuing.

Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation briefed Feith on Sunday in his office at the Pentagon and also asked questions, the officials said. Also recently briefed by the FBI was Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, they said.

Others at State and Defense have been interviewed or briefed over the course of the probe, but the officials declined to provide any other names.

Prosecutors are said to be weighing whether to charge Franklin with the most serious charge of espionage, but the FBI believes Franklin's spying went well beyond the extensive information-sharing relations that exists between the United States and Israel.

Newsweek magazine reported Sunday the FBI first learned of Franklin's unusual contacts when agents observed him at a Washington lunch more than a year ago with a lobbyist for AIPAC, and Naor Gilon, a specialist on Iran's nuclear weapons program and head of the political affairs department at the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

AIPAC is the powerful pro-Israel American Israel Public Affairs Committee based in Washington.

Citing US intelligence officials, Newsweek said Franklin on one occasion allegedly tried to hand over a classified US policy document on Iran, but that the Israeli diplomat refused to take it.

It is here the AIPAC lobbyists could have proved useful as middlemen.

The New York Times reported in its Monday edition that government officials say Franklin had been cooperating with federal agents for several weeks and was preparing to lead them to contacts inside the Israeli government when work of the investigation was leaked by CBS News late last week.

To many this makes the timing of the leak curious.

Several experts in Washington told journalists Israel does present a problem for the United States in certain aspects of intelligence, such as sensitive defense technologies and Iran policy.

Israel sees Iran as the single biggest threat to its existence, and so closely monitors all possible moves in Washington's Iranian policy — especially regarding Iran's nuclear program.

One former State Department officer told a journalist that that US government experts considered Israel as a country whose spying most threatened the United States. "I know from my time in Jerusalem that official US visitors to Israel were warned about the counterintelligence threat from Israel," he said.

Israeli officials confirmed yesterday that Gilon met with Franklin. However, Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said meetings between Israeli Embassy employees and US government officials are commonplace, and that the two governments routinely share secrets.

The Israeli daily Maariv quoted Gilon as saying that he did nothing wrong. "My hands are clean. I have nothing to hide. I acted according to the regulations," Gilon said.

The diplomat told Maariv he was concerned that as a result of the reports, he would not be able to continue working in Washington. "Now, people will be scared to talk to me," the newspaper quoted him as saying.

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