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# Leak Inquiry Includes Iran Experts in Administration

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FBI counterintelligence investigators have in recent weeks questioned current and former U.S. officials about whether a small group of Iran specialists at the Pentagon and in Vice President Cheney's office may have been involved in passing classified information to an Iraqi politician or a U.S. lobbying group allied with Israel, according to sources familiar with or involved in the case.

In their interviews, the FBI agents have also named two Israeli diplomats stationed in Washington and asked whether they would be willing recipients of sensitive intelligence, the sources added.

The investigators have asked questions about personnel in the office of Pentagon Undersecretary for Policy Douglas J. Feith as well as members of the influential Defense Policy Board, an advisory panel for Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, according to former U.S. officials who have been questioned and others familiar with the case.

Investigators have specifically asked about a group of neoconservatives involved in defense issues, including Feith, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, Iraq and Iran specialist Harold Rhode and others at the Pentagon. FBI agents also have asked current and former officials about Richard Perle of the defense board and David Wurmser, an Iran specialist and principal deputy assistant for national security affairs in Cheney's office, according to sources familiar with or involved in the case.

"The initial interest was: Do you believe certain people would spy for Israel and pass secret information?" said one source interviewed by the FBI about the defense officials.

It remains unclear, however, how specific investigators' suspicions have become. And one official, a Feith ally, has said the investigation is an effort by some intelligence officials to discredit Pentagon hawks.

The sources interviewed for this article requested anonymity because it involves classified information or because of the ongoing investigation.

Perle, Rhode and Wolfowitz did not return telephone calls placed to their homes and offices late Friday. Reached at home, Feith declined comment, citing the ongoing investigation.

But Pentagon officials insisted yesterday that FBI questions about key policymakers did not mean they were the subjects of the intelligence leak investigation. Senior Pentagon officials have said they were told by the

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FBI that the investigation is focused on just one suspect in the Defense Department, Lawrence A. Franklin, an Iran specialist in Feith's office.

The FBI investigation first came to light last week with reports of a probe into whether Franklin passed a draft presidential directive on Iran to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and whether the directive was then passed to Israel, sources have said. AIPAC has strongly denied any involvement in espionage.

A federal grand jury in Alexandria may take up the Franklin case as early as next week, law enforcement sources said.

The questioning of Franklin is a recent part of an investigation that dates back more than two years and includes diverse threads, U.S. officials and people close to the case said. One aspect of the probe concerns AIPAC and another looks at whether intelligence on Iran ended up in the hands of Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi, a longtime Pentagon favorite once considered a possible replacement for Saddam Hussein.

Iran has been a particularly controversial issue within the Bush administration, which still does not have a formal policy more than 3 1/2 years after taking office. A small group of Pentagon neoconservatives opposed a draft directive because it did not support a change of governments in Tehran, which they advocated, current and former U.S. officials said.

The officials whose names came up during questioning have strong ties to Israel. They also share a long-standing position on Iran and other radical regimes. Wurmser, Feith and Perle were co-authors of a 1996 policy paper for then-Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu titled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm." It called for removing Hussein from power in Iraq as part of a broad strategy to transform the region and remove radical regimes.

But current and former U.S. officials, including some who were interviewed by the FBI, are still puzzled by the nature of the investigation involving Israel, because its profoundly close ties with the United States date back six decades and have involved sharing sensitive intelligence. Yet officials also concede that Israel is one of the three countries most active in spying on the United States. Israel denies conducting espionage in the United States.

Also yesterday, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee demanded that a new prosecutor be assigned to investigate the alleged leaks, questioning the "political leanings" of the U.S. attorney in Alexandria who is handling the criminal portion of the case.

In a letter to Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.) said the role of U.S. Attorney Paul J. McNulty in the case has "obvious political implications" in an election year, and Conyers cited anonymous allegations in a news report that McNulty had "put the brakes on" the probe.

"While I have no reason to question Mr. McNulty's integrity, he is not a career prosecutor, but instead is a political appointee whose previous employment was principally with Republican politicians," Conyers wrote.

Conyers suggested that either a special counsel or U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald of Chicago, who is overseeing a separate probe into the disclosure of CIA operative Valerie Plame, should take over the

Pentagon probe.

Justice Department spokesman Mark Corallo declined to comment on the specifics of Conyers's allegations. "We will review the congressman's letter and give it the attention it is due," Corallo said. A spokesman for McNulty also declined comment, referring a reporter to Corallo's statement.

Several law enforcement officials have said in recent days that the FBI had initially considered making rapid arrests in the Franklin probe when it became clear that news of the investigation was about to become public last week. But, these officials said, prosecutors urged caution, arguing that investigators needed more time to gather evidence and assess the case.

Franklin has been cooperating in the probe for several weeks, officials familiar with the investigation said. He has not responded to numerous requests for comment at his office and his home in West Virginia.

*Staff writers Josh White and Jerry Markon contributed to this report.*

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