

Larry Franklin Case: AIPAC Leaders Snared

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On Aug. 4, the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, Paul McNulty, announced the indictment of two former top officials of AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), on charges of “conspiracy to communicate national defense information to persons not entitled to receive it.” The same indictment included new espionage charges against Pentagon desk officer and Air Force Reserve Colonel Lawrence Franklin, who has already been indicted in the Eastern District, as well as in West Virginia.

The two “ex”-AIPAC officials are Steven Rosen and Keith Weissman. Since 1982, Rosen has been AIPAC’s Director of Foreign Policy Issues. Since 1993, Weissman has been Senior Middle East Analyst at AIPAC.

Before coming to work for AIPAC, Rosen had been employed from 1978-82 at the RAND Corporation. During that period, he worked on contract projects for the Central Intelligence Agency, and had top-level security clearances. Thus, Rosen signed written secrecy agreements with the U.S. government that remained binding after he went to work for AIPAC.

Far-Flung Espionage Network

The new indictments, which have been anticipated for several months, unveil an Israeli espionage network that has been functioning since at least April 1999, involving a number of Pentagon officials beyond Franklin, as well as at least three officials of the Israeli Embassy and a former senior Mossad officer, Uzi Arad, who now heads Israel’s premier national security think-tank, the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center.

U.S. intelligence officials have told *EIR* that the AIPAC/Franklin case reveals a new modus operandi, adopted by Israel intelligence, in the aftermath of the disastrous Jonathan Pollard spy scandal of the mid-1980s. Pollard, a Naval intelligence analyst, was caught pilfering thousands of classified Pentagon and CIA documents and passing them on to an Israeli intelligence unit headed by former Mossad European operations director Rafi Eytan, a close ally of current Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

As the result of the blowback from the Pollard affair, according to the U.S. intelligence sources, Israel shifted its espionage operations targetted at the United States to think-tanks and lobbying organizations like AIPAC, which have ongoing “legitimate” contacts with American government officials.

What the Israelis and the AIPAC spooks did not anticipate was that their operations would be closely scrutinized by the FBI and other U.S. agencies, for at least the past six years, revealing numerous instances where the “legitimate” contacts crossed over into hard espionage.

The 26-page indictment is, in fact, a catalogue of scores of instances of classified information being passed from Pentagon officials to the two AIPAC men, on to Israeli Embassy personnel.

Franklin apparently walked into an ongoing FBI counter-intelligence surveillance of Rosen and Weissman, when he held his first meeting with the two men on Feb. 12, 2003. According to the indictment, phone conversations that Rosen had en route to the first meeting with Franklin, were monitored by the FBI. From Feb. 12, 2003 until July 9, 2004, Franklin had dozens of phone discussions and meetings with the two AIPAC officials, and on at least one occasion, faxed a document from his Pentagon office to Rosen’s home.

In June 2004, FBI agents confronted Franklin with evidence of his espionage activities, and Franklin agreed to cooperate with the government. His subsequent meetings with the two AIPAC officials were all controlled by the FBI, until Aug. 3, when the FBI visited both Rosen and Weissman. According to the indictment, even after the FBI visits, Rosen and Weissman continued to pass classified data provided by Franklin to select U.S. journalists and even to Israeli embassy officials.

Franklin’s Connections

Lawrence Franklin had his own problems with his dealings with Israeli intelligence officials, even before his assignment to the Pentagon in early 2001 as Iran desk officer at the Near East South Asia policy office, under Assistant Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith and Deputy Assistant Secretary William Luti, a transplant from the Office of Vice President Dick Cheney.

Back in the late 1990s, as an Air Force Reserve officer, Franklin had done two tours of duty at the U.S. Embassy in Israel, in the Air Attaché’s Office. On his second tour, Franklin was kicked out of the country by the Air Attaché after a few months, after repeated incidents in which he held unauthorized meetings with Israeli intelligence officials.

It may have been these Israeli connections that landed Franklin his job at NES—or perhaps his ties to then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who was Dean of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. when Franklin was a graduate student there.

Whatever his pathway to the Pentagon, Franklin, according to eyewitness sources, became a fixture at regular “brown bag lunches” at the private office of Doug Feith attended by leading Pentagon neo-cons, including Harold Rhode, Luti, Abraham Shulsky, Richard Perle, and occasionally Wolfowitz. Franklin’s NES boss, Luti, boasted frequently that

he was working for “Scooter,” a reference to Dick Cheney’s Chief of Staff, Lewis Libby. (Libby, when he was not working for the government, was the personal attorney for Mossad frontman and international swindler Marc Rich. Well-informed U.S. intelligence officials believe that Rich, a Zug, Switzerland-based metal trader, was set up in business with Mossad funds.)

Franklin was also a traveling companion of Iran-Contra figure and self-professed “universal fascist” Michael Ledeen, in December 2001. Ledeen, Franklin, and Harold Rhode travelled to Rome for secret meetings with Iranian con-artist Manucher Ghorbanifar, another prominent Iran-Contra scandal figure who brokered Israeli missile sales to Iran in exchange for efforts to free American hostages in Lebanon. The scheme led to criminal indictments against a number of Reagan-Bush Administration officials and CIA officers, including Elliott Abrams and Duane Claridge.

The latest Franklin indictment threatens to snare some of these other leading neo-cons. The court papers filed in the Eastern District of Virginia identify several other Pentagon officials, along with at least three Israeli Embassy officials and Uzi Arad, as players in the extended Franklin spy operation.

The indictment of “Mr. AIPAC,” Steven Rosen, also raises serious questions about the future of “America’s Pro-Israel Lobby,” as AIPAC’s website describes the group. According to sources close to the Franklin probe, AIPAC may be forced, as a result of the Franklin case, to register as a foreign agent organization, thus losing its tax-exempt status and forcing much closer accounting of its finances and activities.

The Franklin case has not even come close to fully unraveling. And many leading Pentagon neo-cons are losing sleep over where this case will go next.

What makes matters even worse, the same basic cast of characters is tied up in the Valerie Plame Wilson leak probe, headed by independent counsel Patrick Fitzgerald, and a separate probe, headed by U.S. Attorney McNulty, into who was behind the forging of Niger government documents which purported to show that Iraq sought to buy “yellowcake” uranium from the African state to build nuclear weapons. The forged documents were used by Vice President Cheney and other Administration war hawks to win Congressional and public support for the invasion of Iraq. Plame’s husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, was dispatched to Niger in 2002 to assess the validity of the Niger yellowcake charge, and returned to report that it was a hoax. His report was covered up, and the train of events was set into motion which led to his wife’s “outing” as a covert CIA operative, by top Administration officials—a criminal offense.

There are allegations that the Ledeen-Rhode-Franklin trip to Rome in 2001 may have played a role in the circulation of the forged documents.