

EXCLUSIVE

NATIONAL SECURITY

# Pentagon raised threat of Israeli spying on U.S. to highest level, sources say

The counterintelligence threat level was raised by the Defense Intelligence Agency in recent weeks after growing concerns that Israeli espionage had become more aggressive than usual, sources say.



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— President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speak after Netanyahu addressed the Knesset, Israel's parliament, in October.

Chip Somodevilla / Pool via AP file

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**By Gordon Lubold, Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce**

WASHINGTON – The Pentagon is increasingly concerned about Israel ramping up its spying on the U.S., recently raising the counterintelligence threat level from America’s top ally in the Middle East to the highest level, according to two U.S. officials and one former U.S. official.



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The Pentagon’s Defense Intelligence Agency in recent weeks issued the new counterintelligence threat assessment amid rising tensions between Israel and the U.S. over the way forward in [the war with Iran](#), the officials said. They said the DIA posted an internal message, viewed by one of the current officials, that raised the level for Israel to “critical.”

The designation stems from concerns within the Pentagon that Israel is making a particular effort to surveil top U.S. officials to get information on the Trump administration’s internal deliberations and decision-making on the conflicts in the Middle East, the officials said.

The DIA assessment includes a seven-page document and features a chart, according to one of the current U.S. officials. The document says the assessment of Israel is that its ability to conduct human espionage and technical collection is at a “critical level,” according to the official.

It also identifies a series of specific incidents that heightened U.S. concerns, the official said.

A spokesperson for the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., said in a statement that it is “completely false” that Israel spies on the U.S. “Israel does not gather intelligence on American entities, let alone US government officials,” the spokesperson said. “Israel intelligence collection efforts are aimed at its enemies, not its allies. Any claims to the contrary are either misinformed or politically motivated.”

The Pentagon declined to comment.

A White House official said in a statement, “This entire story is false and sourced to someone who doesn’t have any knowledge of what’s going on.”

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees all the U.S. intelligence agencies including the DIA, did not respond to a request for comment.

While it is commonplace for allies and adversaries across the globe to spy on each other, the current and former U.S. officials said Israel’s recent efforts have gone well beyond what is typical and expected espionage. The officials did not know if a specific incident triggered the DIA’s decision to raise the counterintelligence threat level.

The heightened alert comes as President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have clashed over the war with Iran and Israel’s military operations in Lebanon, including in a [tense phone call](#) this past week, NBC News reported. Trump acknowledged afterward to reporters that he called Netanyahu “crazy” during the call as questions mount about whether the two countries’ [objectives](#) in the Middle East are beginning to significantly diverge.

Since a ceasefire deal was reached in early April, Trump has been pursuing a diplomatic deal with Iran to end the war Israel and the U.S. launched on Feb.

28. Israel has publicly expressed [skepticism](#) that Iran would abide by any negotiated deal. Netanyahu has pushed for a resumption of bombing raids against Iran and disagreed with Trump, who has pressed him to [scale back](#) attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon, according to Western officials.

Israel is keenly interested in whether Trump decides to resume major combat operations against Iran or to end the conflict, the current and former U.S. officials and outside experts said.

The most practical outcome for the Pentagon is that U.S. officials will use extra caution when traveling to Israel or visiting with Israeli officials, the current and former U.S. officials said. They said there did not appear to be any impact on the high-level intelligence-sharing that occurs on a daily basis between the two countries, particularly associated with the Iran war.

“The U.S. already takes extra precautions when visiting Israel,” one of the current U.S. officials said. “They’re well-known to aggressively collect.”

The U.S., like other countries, maintains elaborate counterintelligence, or “spy catcher,” efforts to prevent and track espionage by foreign adversaries as well as by allies and partners, seeking to safeguard state secrets and monitor attempts to recruit or coerce U.S. officials. Under U.S. [law](#), the FBI has the leading role in counterintelligence efforts, but they also involve a range of government agencies and the military.

According to current and former diplomats and former national security officials, Israel for years has had a reputation for aggressive espionage even against the U.S., its closest ally. It’s a practice that has long raised concerns among national security and diplomatic officials, and U.S. intelligence officials closely monitor the issue, according to experts and the current and former U.S. officials.


Top U.S. officials often take extra care when traveling to Israel, sometimes using burner phones and computers and taking extreme caution when speaking in hotel rooms during official trips, the current and former U.S. officials and experts said.

Israel has “a hyper-aggressive intelligence service,” said Emily Harding, vice president of the Defense and Security Department and director of the intelligence, national security and technology program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Washington. “They are exceedingly interested in what we are up to,” Harding said of the Israelis.

In the 1980s, spying by Israel caused a rift with Washington, with U.S. Navy intelligence analyst Jonathan Pollard spending 30 years in prison after he was found to have sold suitcases of top-secret documents to Israel.

The U.S. also spies on its allies and seeks to gather intelligence on foreign partners, as evidenced in 2013 by leaks from intelligence contractor Edward Snowden.

Those leaks showed that the U.S. was eavesdropping on European leaders, including then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s mobile phone, sparking outrage in Berlin.

The U.S. and Israel remain close allies, and the two countries’ intelligence services have forged a close working relationship over decades. But concerns about possible Israeli espionage at such a sensitive moment – when the two governments are not in full agreement about the war with Iran – carry the risk of undermining trust between the two countries, two additional former U.S. officials said. 



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