

**WHAT WE KNOW** | UPDATED 6:18 P.M.

# What Secrets Are in the Leaked Pentagon Documents — and Who Leaked Them?

*By Chas Danner, associate editor at Intelligencer*



Photo: Daniel Slim/AFP via Getty Images

**A** stunning leak of a cache of classified Pentagon documents appears to be one of the most significant breaches of U.S. intelligence in decades, purportedly revealing national security secrets regarding Ukraine, Russia, Asia, and the Middle East, as well as details about U.S. espionage methods and the country's spying on adversaries and allies. The Pentagon has confirmed the leak's authenticity, and while the documents have been circulating online for months, U.S. officials figured this out only after the leaked documents were reported by the New York Times on April 6. The Justice Department has since opened a criminal investigation into what happened. Below is what we know about the leak thus far, including what the documents reveal and who may be responsible for it.

## Who leaked them and why?

Federal agents have arrested the suspected leaker, Jack Teixeira, a 21-year-old technology staffer with the Massachusetts Air National Guard's Intelligence Wing, for "unauthorized removal, retention and transmission of classified national defense information," according to Attorney General Merrick Garland.

A pic of Jack Teixeira he posted on social media - released by the NYT [pic.twitter.com/IGZGUnN2Wb](https://pic.twitter.com/IGZGUnN2Wb)

— Michael A. Horowitz (@michaelh992) April 13, 2023

The Washington Post reported Wednesday night that according to members of the small invitation-only Discord chat community where the leaked intel first appeared, the person who posted them was a 'charismatic gun enthusiast' in his early 20s who created the group and apparently worked on a U.S. military base and somehow had access the documents. Neither the Discord group members nor the *Post* confirmed the name of the person, but the New York Times later reported that the Discord user who founded the group was Teixeira.

Teixeira reportedly serves in the U.S. Air Force's 102nd Intelligence Wing, of the Massachusetts Air National Guard, which is based out of Otis Air National Guard Base on Cape Cod. He was arrested Thursday afternoon without incident outside his mother's home in North Dighton, Massachusetts.

The Associated Press has more on why Teixeira may have had access to the documents:

Teixeira was a “cyber transport systems specialist,” essentially an IT specialist responsible for military communications networks, including their cabling and hubs. In that role Teixeira would have had a higher level of security clearance because he would have also been tasked with responsibility for ensuring protection for the networks, a defense official told the Associated Press, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

The Post adds that that Teixeira had access to the Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communications System, an internal Defense Department hub for top secret information, according a U.S. official.

Members of the private Discord group told the Post the leaker, who they referred to as “OG,” shared hundreds of posts revealing government secrets over a period of months, initially transcriptions of classified intel he’d read and retyped, and then eventually photographs of the original documents:

OG told the group he toiled for hours writing up the classified documents to share with his companions in the Discord server he controlled. The gathering spot had been a pandemic refuge, particularly for teen gamers locked in their houses and cut off from their real-world friends. The members swapped memes, offensive jokes and idle chitchat. They watched movies together, joked around and prayed. But OG also lectured them about world affairs and secretive government operations. He wanted to “keep us in the loop,” the member said, and seemed to think that his insider knowledge would offer the others protection from the troubled world around them. ...

OG had a dark view of the government. The young member said he spoke of the United States, and particularly law enforcement and the intelligence community, as a sinister force that sought to suppress its citizens and keep them in the dark. He ranted about “government overreach.”

But Group members have also told reporters that the leak seemed more motivated by bravado than anything else. One of Teixeira’s handles in the group was “jackthedripper.”

## What are the documents, and how many were leaked?

The *Post*, in its report on the source of the leaks, said it “reviewed approximately 300 photos of classified documents” as well as text posts which apparently transcribe other intelligence reports.

Most analysts and news organizations have been referring to more than 100 pages of documents in the leak. From the *Post*'s reporting, it appears much more material than that was originally leaked, though only a portion has since been made public more widely.

The surfaced files are photographs of briefing documents and slides, mostly prepared in February and March, based on intel collected by the NSA, CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, DEA, and National Reconnaissance Office (which manages U.S. spy satellites). Markings on the documents indicate that some were cleared for sharing with allies, while others were designated for U.S. eyes only — suggesting they originated from an American source.

Many of the documents appear to have been prepared for Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, though anyone with a high enough security clearance would have had access to them. It appears the documents in the first tranche of images are likely part of a classified briefing that was folded and removed to somewhere where the pages could be photographed. The *New York Times* has been able to match up details in the margins of the images with details in photos of the suspected leaker's family home.

Some of the circulating leaked documents appear to have been doctored but apparently by pro-Russia propagandists *after* they were leaked.

## How did they come out?

Per what has been reported thus far, the leak began months ago in a small Discord community called “Thug Shakers Central,” where the creator of the group began revealing classified intelligence last year. The images of the classified documents began appearing there in mid January, and then more widely on other Discord servers in March. They then spread to other social media sites in April — at which point they gained the attention of the *New York Times* and the Pentagon.

## Are there more?

It's not clear if all of the leaked intelligence reports have been shared beyond the original Discord group, but many of them clearly have. The documents revealed thus far seem to have been prepared no later than early March.

## What about the doctored documents?

Some of the documents circulated on social media have been doctored — for instance, to reduce the number of estimated Russian casualties in Ukraine and inflate Ukraine's estimated losses. But that disinformation effort appears to have been made after the documents were leaked.

## How has the Pentagon responded to the breach, and what damage could the leak do?

After becoming aware of the leaked documents, the Pentagon launched an investigation and reportedly imposed a strict clampdown on access to U.S. intelligence. Politico reports that Pentagon officials were greatly distressed by the leak, adding that “experts said the disclosure could be even more damaging than the leak by Edward Snowden ten years ago, particularly because the information is so recent.”

That potential damage is manifold. It might have compromised various intelligence-collection methods and sources, allowing adversaries like Russia and China to evade future U.S. espionage efforts. Information in the documents regarding Ukraine's military weaknesses may also prove valuable to Russia if the country was not previously aware of that information. But the documents also contain numerous assessments based on U.S. signals intelligence (the spy term for intercepted communications) that targeted friends and foes alike. In addition to the diplomatic fallout, this could prompt allies to shore up their defenses against U.S. surveillance. And as Politico national security reporter Erin Banco points out, “the leak of such highly classified intelligence raises serious questions about whether the U.S. can be trusted to share and disseminate the intel within the government in a safe and secure way.”

President Biden on Thursday seemed to brush off the significance of the breach, explaining that “I'm concerned that it happened but there is nothing contemporaneous that I'm aware of that is of great consequence.”

**➔ The leak has offered an unparalleled look at U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts**



The Washington Post highlights how the leaked documents have shed new light on the ways the U.S. conducts espionage:

Among other secrets, they appear to reveal where the CIA has recruited human agents privy to the closed-door conversations of world leaders; eavesdropping that shows a Russian mercenary outfit tried to acquire weapons from a NATO ally to use against Ukraine; and what kinds of satellite imagery the United States uses to track Russian forces, including an advanced technology that appears barely, if ever, to have been publicly identified.

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## Revelations So Far

Although no news organization or government source has confirmed the accuracy of the information contained in the leaked documents, there is at this point little reason to doubt the documents themselves are authentic. Below are some of the key purported revelations from the cache.

### ➔ The U.S. has achieved deep penetration of most Russian security and intelligence services

The New York Times and Washington Post report that the documents indicate the U.S. has gained access to most of Russia's security and intelligence services and high levels of Russian military command. It has intercepted communications within Russia's defense ministry; gained insight into the internal planning of Russia's military-intelligence agency, GRU; and obtained actionable intelligence on Russia's military capabilities and war plans in Ukraine — many of which the U.S. likely passed along to Kyiv.

### ➔ The FSB accused Russia's Defense Ministry "of obfuscating Russian casualties in Ukraine"

Per the New York Times, the documents capture "infighting and finger-pointing among Russian agencies responsible for different aspects of the war," including one report noting a dispute over the actual human cost of the conflict:

In one document, American intelligence officials say that Russia's main domestic intelligence agency, the Federal Security Service, or F.S.B., has "accused" the country's Defense Ministry "of obfuscating Russian casualties in Ukraine." The finding highlights "the continuing reluctance of military officials to convey bad news up the chain of command," they say.

The entry, dated Feb. 28 in a document with a series of updates about the war in Ukraine and other global hot spots, appears to be based on electronic intercepts collected by American intelligence agencies. ... F.S.B. officials, the document says, contend that the ministry's toll did not include the dead and wounded among the Russian National Guard, the Wagner mercenary force or fighters fielded by Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman leader of the southern Russian republic of Chechnya.

## ➔ The U.S. is spying on top allies, including Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy

One of the leaked documents indicates the U.S. has been surveilling Zelenskyy's communications, [CNN reports](#):

The U.S. intelligence report, which is sourced to signals intelligence, says that Zelensky in late February "suggested striking Russian deployment locations in Russia's Rostov Oblast" using unmanned aerial vehicles, since Ukraine does not have long-range weapons capable of reaching that far.

Though it's not unexpected that the U.S. would be monitoring Ukraine's leadership, Ukraine has publicly attempted to discredit the disclosures, and Ukrainian officials are reportedly furious about the leaked intel, which has forced Kyiv to make changes to its spring-offensive plans.

The leaked documents also reveal that the U.S. had intercepted recent discussions with South Korean leadership on whether to break policy and provide military aid to Ukraine via an intermediary country. South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol has since attempted to downplay the breach and the subsequent scandal it has caused in his country.

## ➔ The U.S. doubts Ukraine's spring offensive will make significant gains

U.S. intelligence assessments from early February expressed serious doubt about Ukraine's ability to take back a great deal of Russian-occupied territory this spring, according to a review of one of the leaked documents by the Washington Post. The upcoming offensive is likely to produce only "modest territorial gains" owing to Ukraine's lack of equipment, ammunition, and troops, the document said. It also noted that "enduring Ukrainian deficiencies in training and munitions supplies probably will strain progress and exacerbate casualties during the offensive."

## ➔ Russia's Wagner Group tried to purchase weapons from Turkey through Mali

According to the Washington Post, one of the reports in the leaked documents indicates that, in early February, the Kremlin-backed mercenary force "met with Turkish contacts to purchase weapons and equipment from Turkey for [Wagner's] efforts in Mali and Ukraine," and that Mali's interim president confirmed it could get the arms from Turkey on the group's behalf. Turkey declined to comment on the allegation when contacted by the *Post*, but if the assessment is accurate, it could mean the NATO member was covertly supplying weapons to both sides of the Ukraine conflict.

## ➔ Egypt's president secretly planned to send rockets to Russia

According to a leaked top-secret document from mid-February, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi secretly ordered the production and shipment of as many as 40,000 rockets to Russia, the Washington Post reports. Egypt, a longtime key U.S. ally in the Middle East, has publicly maintained a policy of noninvolvement toward the war in Ukraine, and in a statement to the *Post*, the foreign ministry suggested that policy has not changed. Regarding the rocket plan, an anonymous U.S. official also told the *Post*, "We are not aware of any execution of that plan." It's not clear how far the plan has progressed, assuming the leaked intel is accurate, nor is it clear how such a move would have impacted the relationship between the U.S. and Egypt.

## ➔ Russia almost shot down a U.K. surveillance plane near Ukraine

According to one leaked U.S. military document, British defense minister Ben Wallace told U.K. lawmakers last October that on September 29, two Russian Su-27 fighter jets intercepted and harassed a British RC-135 reconnaissance plane flying in international



airspace over the Black Sea. Wallace said one Russian jet had flown within 15 feet of the U.K. plane and another had released a missile from a distance, but Russian defense officials had told him the missile launch was due to a “technical malfunction.” The U.S. military document referred to the incident as a “near shoot down.” British officials have pushed back on the leaked U.S. assessment.

## ➔ Russian intelligence officers claimed the United Arab Emirates wanted to help work against the U.S. and U.K.

The Associated Press reports that one document, dated March 9, reported that “In mid-January, FSB officials claimed UAE security service officials and Russia had agreed to work together against US and UK Intelligence agencies, according to newly acquired signals intelligence.” The AP adds that “It’s not clear if there was any such agreement as described in the UAE-Russia document, or whether the alleged FSB claims were intentionally or unintentionally misleading,” and that the UAE has called the claim “categorically false.”

## ➔ Russian hackers working with Moscow claimed to have accessed Canada’s natural-gas infrastructure

Another of the leaked documents reveals that, earlier this year, the U.S. intercepted electronic communications between the pro-Russian hacking group Zarya and officers with Russia’s FSB security service in which the hackers said they had breached a Canadian gas-pipeline company and gained access to its control systems. The hackers purportedly shared screenshots of their access with the officers and claimed the breach gave them the ability to “increase valve pressure, disable alarms, and initiate an emergency shutdown of the facility.” The leaked briefing did not identify the Canadian company or the facility. It said the hackers claimed that they did unspecified damage, causing “profit loss” for the company, and that FSB officers told the hackers to maintain their access and await further instructions.

After news of the alleged hack surfaced, the Globe and Mail reported that it was unable to verify the claims and noted that “there is no evidence to date that a natural-gas pipeline company in Canada suffered such an attack, which the Pentagon documents suggest occurred earlier this year.” According to cybersecurity reporter Kim Zetter, “a U.S. government source who closely follows critical infrastructure incidents in the U.S. said they heard chatter a while back that something had occurred at a Canadian gas facility, but was not aware of anyone confirming that any ‘physical impact’ had occurred.”

## ➔ Mossad leaders purportedly encouraged protests against Netanyahu's judicial overhaul in Israel

According to one of the leaked documents, a March 1 CIA assessment said that, according to intercepted communications, leaders of Israel's intelligence agency had backed protests against prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's controversial attempt to overhaul the country's judiciary. Mossad leaders "advocated for Mossad officials and Israeli citizens to protest against the new Israeli Government's proposed judicial reforms, including several explicit calls to action that decried the Israeli government," the assessment said.

Netanyahu's power play has triggered mass protests and strikes in Israel, and the backlash recently prompted him to at least temporarily abandon the effort. Israeli officials have denied the leaked assessment. Some Israeli pundits have also suggested that the assessment might have been referring to an open letter supporting the protests sent by former Mossad leaders and/or how the agency's leadership allowed employees to join the demonstrations, provided they did so only as private citizens.

## ➔ Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries looked into working in Haiti

One late-February report in the leaked documents said the Wagner Group, the notorious Kremlin-backed Russian mercenary force, "planned to discreetly travel to Haiti to assess the potential for contracts with the Haitian government to fight against local gangs."

It's not clear how far those plans progressed. The Miami Herald reports that a Haitian government official told the paper "that Prime Minister Ariel Henry has not had any discussions with the Wagner Group or any Russian officials, nor has he sought help from either as part of his request to international partners to deploy a rapid response force to Haiti to help the national police take on gangs."

## ➔ China held secret negotiations with Nicaragua over building a new port in the Caribbean

Another document said that, according to intercepted communications, Nicaragua has been deepening its ties with China since its primary security ally, Russia, became entangled in the Ukraine invasion. Nicaragua and China have conducted negotiations over building a deepwater port in Bluefields, and a Chinese engineering firm purportedly

began moving forward with initial plans in the middle of 2022. The U.S. assessment concludes that though Nicaragua still favors Russia, it “probably would consider offering Beijing naval access in exchange for economic investment.”

## ➔ As many as 50 British special forces were in Ukraine this year and U.S. and French special forces were there too

### **Intelligence**

Leaked Pentagon Documents: What We Know

that is among the

leaked documents listed the number of NATO special forces operating inside the country:

According to the files, U.S. officials assessed at the time that of the 97 special forces from Nato countries active in Ukraine, 50 were British. This is considerably higher than the number from the U.S. and France, which were said to have deployed 14 and 15 special forces, respectively. The documents appear to offer a partial snapshot of U.S. military assessments of the state of the war and allies’ support for Ukraine. They do not contain any information about the purpose of the deployments of U.K. or other contingents of special forces.

The U.K. Ministry of Defence declined to comment on the information, but has attempted to discredit the accuracy of the leak in a tweet. France has denied the assessment’s claim that there are French soldiers on the ground in Ukraine. ABC News reports that according to a current and former U.S. official, a team of U.S. special forces troops has been operating out of the American embassy in Kyiv:

Among several duties this team provides is security for VIPs and intelligence assistance to Ukrainian Special Operations Forces, according to the current U.S. official. The official stressed that they are not on the front lines and they are not accompanying Ukrainian troops in Ukraine.

## ➔ Serbia, a quasi-ally of Russia, agreed to arm Ukraine

“Serbia, one of the only countries in Europe that has refused to sanction Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, agreed to supply arms to Kyiv or has sent them already,” according to a classified Pentagon document reviewed by Reuters. A document dated March 2 for the Joint Chiefs of Staff included a chart showing Serbia either agreed to sending “lethal aid

or had supplied it already,” though it declined to train Kyiv’s forces. Serbia’s defense minister denied his government was deliberately supplying Ukraine.

*This post has been updated.*

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## THE **Intelligencer** FEED

**7:19 P.M.** WHAT WE KNOW

### **FBI Arrests 21-Year-Old National Guardsman in Pentagon Leak**



*By Intelligencer Staff*

Jack Teixeira was arrested for “unauthorized removal, retention and transmission of classified national defense information.”

**5:42 P.M.** EARLY AND OFTEN

### **The Haley-Scott Primary Within the Primary**



*By Ed Kilgore*

One of these two candidates from the same state needs to make a move sooner rather than later.

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