

FBI Agents Still Lacking Arabic Skills

33 of 12,000 Have Some Proficiency

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Five years after Arab terrorists attacked the United States, only 33 FBI agents have even a limited proficiency in Arabic, and none of them work in the sections of the bureau that coordinate investigations of international terrorism, according to new FBI statistics.

Counting agents who know only a handful of Arabic words -- including those who scored zero on a standard proficiency test -- just 1 percent of the FBI's 12,000 agents have any familiarity with the language, the statistics show.

The numbers reflect the FBI's continued struggle to attract employees who speak Arabic, Urdu, Farsi and other languages of the Middle East and South Asia, even as the bureau leads a fight against terrorist groups primarily centered in those parts of the world. The same challenge is facing the CIA and other agencies as the government competes with the private sector for a limited number of applicants with foreign-language proficiency, according to U.S. officials and experts.

The shortage of agents with foreign-language skills also shows the extent to which the FBI has focused on translators since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, in part because officials believe it is more valuable to have specially trained linguists.

In a recent deposition filed in an employee lawsuit, a senior FBI official testified that the bureau's two International Terrorism Operations Sections (ITOS) do not require any agents to know Arabic, even though the sections coordinate all foreign terrorism investigations. Only four agents in ITOS have any familiarity with Arabic, and none of them are ranked above elementary proficiency, documents show.

"There are no agent positions, at any level, in either ITOS I or II that utilize the Arabic language as part of their ITOS duties or responsibilities," Michael J. Heimbach, head of ITOS I, testified in his deposition. ". . . As such, knowledge of the Arabic language is not a skill set utilized by either ITOS I or II."

FBI officials said it is not crucial for agents working in the ITOS sections to know Arabic or other foreign languages, because they rely primarily on documents or interviews already translated by FBI linguists. As for agents in the field in the United States or overseas, FBI officials say translators are readily available when needed by investigators, usually within 24 hours.

But Daniel Byman, a Georgetown University associate professor who heads the school's Security Studies Program, said the FBI's continuing failure to attract Arabic-speaking agents is "a serious problem" that hurts the bureau's relations with immigrant communities and makes it more difficult to gather intelligence on extremist groups.

"With any new immigrant communities, they need these language skills, whether it's Vietnamese or

Pakistani or Arabic," Byman said. "It also often gives you extra cultural knowledge and sensitivity. It makes you more sensitive to nuance, which is what investigations are often all about."

Margaret Gulotta, chief of the FBI's language services section, said in an interview that the bureau has made significant progress since 9/11 in increasing the number of translators who speak Arabic and other foreign languages. The number of translators proficient in Arabic has grown from 70 in September 2001 to 269 as of July -- an increase of nearly 300 percent -- while the overall number of linguists has nearly doubled.

The FBI also has a "very aggressive training program" of foreign-language instruction for agents and other programs that make it easier to hire candidates with foreign-language ability, Gulotta said. In fiscal 2005, she said, more than 1,600 agents took classes.

"Do we need more Arabic-speaking agents? By all means we want more Arabic-speaking agents," Gulotta said. "But admittedly it's a very difficult group of people to recruit and hire. . . . We've been a lot more successful in recruiting and hiring contract linguists and language specialists."

More than 1,400 agents have at least a limited working proficiency in a foreign language, including nearly 900 who speak Spanish. Other languages include Russian, Farsi, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin and Cantonese, the FBI said.

Gulotta and other officials said several factors limit the number of foreign speakers who can become agents at the FBI. Special agents, for example, must be U.S. citizens. They also must undergo background checks that are much more difficult to pass if the candidate has relatives or friends overseas.

"It is easier to get a security clearance if you don't have any interaction with foreigners, which is not what you want if you want better interaction with foreigners," Byman said.

Some of the new information about language abilities at the FBI has emerged in connection with a lawsuit by one of the FBI's highest-ranking Arabic speakers, Special Agent Bassem Youssef, who sued the Justice Department and the bureau alleging retaliation after he complained that he was cut out of terrorism cases after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Youssef, a naturalized U.S. citizen who was born in Egypt, is one of only six FBI agents who scored a 4 for "advanced professional proficiency" in Arabic on standardized speaking tests administered by the Interagency Language Roundtable for federal agencies.

Youssef's attorney, Stephen M. Kohn, said the statistics indicate that most FBI agents have no way to gauge the accuracy of translated materials and must rely on linguists or other third parties for their information.

"How do you fight a war with that kind of disadvantage?" Kohn asked.

Gulotta and other experts note that the FBI is not alone in its struggle to attract qualified job candidates who speak Arabic or other foreign languages.

A study released last week, for example, found that three terrorists housed at a federal prison in Colorado were able to send more than 90 letters to fellow extremists overseas, in part because the prison did not have enough qualified language translators to understand what was happening.

The Bush administration early this year unveiled a "National Security Language Initiative" aimed at encouraging more instruction in "critical" languages in elementary schools, secondary schools and universities.

The lack of such programs hurts "national security, diplomacy, law enforcement [and] intelligence communities," said a fact sheet accompanying the initiative's launch.

Steve Ackley, director of communications for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in Alexandria, said the FBI and other agencies are faced with a serious challenge, because language instruction is so undervalued in U.S. schools.

"American society in general does not put a huge premium or value on multilingualism," Ackley said. "Until the general public . . . recognizes that this is an area that the government in general and agencies like the FBI and CIA have to invest in, this is not a problem that's going to get better."

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