

# Language Log

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## October 14, 2006

### Arabic at the FBI

Ah, the FBI now has, hold on to your hats, a total of 33 agents with even a limited proficiency in Arabic, reports Dan Eggen in a [Washington Post article](#) on October 11, 2006,

"...and none of them work in the sections of the bureau that coordinate investigations of international terrorism, according to new FBI statistics."

Pumping this number up to include "agents who know only a handful of Arabic words--including those who scored zero on a standard proficiency test," yields a minuscule percentage of Arabic users among their 12,000 agents. The article reports that only four agents in the government's two International Terrorism Sections (ITOS) have even elementary proficiency in Arabic.

Should we worry about national security? Maybe not. Our agents don't really need Arabic skills, according to the head of ITOS. Get this from him:

"There are no agent positions, at any level, in either ITOS I or II that utilize the Arabic language as part of their duties or responsibilities."

As John Stewart might comment, "maybe they don't utilize Arabic because they don't have any."

The FBI says we're in no danger because they can make use of translators who are available within 24 hours. Whew! That's good news. Despite this distinct advantage, they say they're trying to hire some Arabists (well, maybe not gay ones). But there just aren't many of them around to hire and those that are have the misfortune to have Arabic families, friends and acquaintances -- and some of them were even born in foreign countries. Trying to hire Arabists seems like an odd thing to do, however, if, as the head of ITOS says, there are no positions at any level that utilize the language. Maybe someone should look into that one.

Who is to blame for this confusing (sorry?) situation? It's American society, says the director of communications at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, because language instruction is "undervalued in the US schools." He's partly right, of course. But since when has the American society been the "Decider?"

Imagine the following scenario at an FBI office:

FBI boss: We just intercepted this email in Arabic. Does anyone here know Arabic?

Underling: No, language instruction is undervalued in the schools but we have translators on call 24 hours a day.

FBI boss: Get one quick!

Underling (on the telephone): We're also getting a phone call from a terrorist on a commercial airplane and we're afraid he might be planning to crash it into a city building. Somebody better

talk to him.

FBI boss: Get that damn translator in here right now!

Posted by Roger Shuy at October 14, 2006 01:22 PM