

Official says FBI trying to silence him

Evan Perez | *Wall Street Journal* | 01.12.2008

A senior U.S. counterterrorism official who has been battling his superiors at the Federal Bureau of Investigation over alleged ethnic discrimination says the bureau is trying to silence him ahead of speech he planned to deliver on internal problems facing the agency.

Bassem Youssef, the highest-ranking Arab-American at the FBI, notified the American Library Association, which is holding a conference where he was scheduled to speak Saturday, that he couldn't deliver his planned presentation and instead will only respond to audience questions.

Mr. Youssef, chief of the FBI counterterrorism division's communications analysis unit, heads a section that deals with national security letters and other investigative tools that a Justice Department probe has found were abused by the FBI.

The ALA had billed the speech by Mr. Youssef as "Inside the FBI: A Whistleblower Speaks Out." Stephen Kohn, a Washington attorney representing Mr. Youssef, says the bureau recently warned Mr. Youssef that he needed advance clearance for his remarks and cited concerns about comments, published in an ALA press release, that stated that Mr. Youssef "is expected to discuss a number of critical failures within the FBI's counterterrorism program..."

Mr. Kohn says Mr. Youssef planned to explain how the FBI's abuse of national security letters stemmed from operational problems that he first cited years ago.

Mr. Youssef filed a lawsuit in 2003 against the FBI alleging that he was discriminated against because of his Arab ethnicity. He also claims he was denied career advancement in retaliation for complaining to senior officials about internal problems in his department. Mr. Youssef has been vocal about the lack of Arabic-speaking agents at the agency, and the need to hire personnel with expertise in the Middle East, which FBI officials have downplayed.

An investigation by the Justice Department's Office of Professional Regulation found "sufficient circumstantial evidence" that he was subject to retaliation by superiors at the bureau. The case remains under investigation.

In response to Mr. Youssef's allegation of being censored over his planned speech this weekend, the FBI issued a statement saying, "FBI policy seeks to balance the speech rights of employees with the need to protect classified and sensitive information.

All FBI employees, and employees throughout the intelligence community, have agreed to pre-publication review which is designed to protect both the agency and the employee from what oftentimes can be an inadvertent disclosure.