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Questions arise over FBI leadership in war on terror

By [David Johnston](#) The New York Times

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WASHINGTON A lawyer who interviewed a number of top current and former counterterrorism officials at the FBI in connection with a lawsuit against the bureau has written to three senators saying that the officials lacked a detailed understanding of terrorism and were promoted to top jobs despite having little experience in the field.

In a 15-page letter, the lawyer, Stephen Kohn, wrote that the FBI's top counterterrorism officials said in sworn depositions that they did not know the relationship between Al Qaeda and Jamal Islamia, a South Asia offshoot of the terror network. Nor were they aware of the linkage between Osama bin Laden and Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, a spiritual adviser to bin Laden with whom he had been closely associated since the 1980s.

Kohn said that the FBI director, Robert Mueller 3rd, in his deposition, seemed unsure of bin Laden's relationship to Rahman, who is better known as the blind sheik and was convicted in 1996 on terrorism charges. Asked if he was aware of their relationship, Mueller is quoted in Kohn's letter as saying he was not.

Kohn's letter of June 17 was written to two Republicans, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Charles Grassley of Iowa, and one Democrat, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, each of whom has long had an interest in FBI matters. Kohn said in the letter that he was disclosing the information from the depositions at Grassley's request.

"Since 9/11 and up to today, the FBI has been led by managers without counterterrorism experience or background especially in Middle Eastern terrorism, and their testimony under oath is that they are learning about counterterrorism on the job," Kohn wrote.

Kohn's complaints, although clearly advocacy statements by a lawyer pressing his client's legal claims, are likely to be taken more seriously because they are similar to the findings of recent reports by recent independent review panels that have criticized the bureau's progress in correcting the flaws exposed by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Those complaints have complicated the FBI's own efforts to reorganize its counterterrorism operations without outside intervention and have renewed a discussion in government intelligence circles about whether the bureau is moving fast enough to make needed improvements.

FBI officials have long said that the bureau did not have a large pool of trained counterterrorism managers to draw on after the attacks in its effort to expand and reorganize its counterterrorism operations.

Instead, they said, the FBI had sought to fill its managerial ranks with senior agents who were regarded as strong leaders and reserved specialized counterterrorism training primarily for agents and analysts further down the career ladder. Some agents have extensive knowledge of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

One senior manager, Gary Bald, who heads the bureau's counterterrorism division, is best known for his leading role in the investigation of the serial sniper killings in the Washington area in 2002 when he headed the FBI's Baltimore office. In his deposition, he said his training in counterterrorism had been learned on the job.

In an effort to rebut the statements of FBI officials who said that no expertise in counterterrorism was needed to be a senior manager in the field, Kohn quoted another deposition by a former FBI counterintelligence agent, Edward Curran.

"I don't know how you could be a leader with no expertise," Curran is quoted as saying. "The people you are supervising and coming in contact with would know within 24 hours that you don't know what the hell you're talking about. So how are you going to lead and address people and have them follow you if you don't have a clue what's going on?"

In his deposition, Mueller was asked whether he knew that Bald lacked counterterrorism experience when he took the job as head of the counterterrorism division. Mueller is quoted in the letter as replying, "I don't think that's accurate."

Kohn, who has had several well-known FBI whistleblowers as clients, represents Bassem Youssef, the FBI's most senior Arab-American agent who once ran the bureau's Riyadh office and who now works at the FBI's headquarters. Youssef, an Egyptian born American citizen, has filed a lawsuit complaining that after the Sept. 11 attacks, he was unfairly kept out of counterterrorism matters because of his origin. He speaks fluent Arabic and has extensive knowledge of the Middle East and terrorist organizations.

The Riyadh office was sometimes troubled. FBI officials have said that Youssef was effective in building relationships with the Saudis, but was less efficient as a manager. As the workload grew heavier, with more leads to run down and more frequent requests for information, the office sometimes seemed overwhelmed, officials have said.



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