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## Retaliation Case Of Arab Specialist At FBI Advances

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Tuesday, July 18, 2006; A03

The Justice Department has concluded there is "reasonable cause" to believe that senior FBI officials retaliated against the bureau's highest-ranking Arabic speaker for complaining that he was cut out of terrorism cases despite his expertise.

An internal investigation by the department's Office of Professional Responsibility found "sufficient circumstantial evidence" that Special Agent Bassem Youssef was blocked from a counterterrorism assignment in 2002 after he and U.S. [Rep. Frank R. Wolf](#) (R-Va.) met with FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III to discuss Youssef's complaints.

Mueller had approved a transfer for Youssef just days before the meeting, but it never occurred and Youssef was never informed of Mueller's decision, according to the report. Investigators also said the FBI "has provided no rationale" for its failure to promote Youssef, although one former senior FBI manager said Mueller was "appalled" that Youssef had complained to a congressman about his treatment.

"We found both the awareness of senior management and the timing of the failure to implement the placement to be circumstantial evidence of retaliation," the report said.

The FBI declined to comment, citing an ongoing lawsuit by Youssef alleging discrimination based on national origin.

The 12-page report, dated last month and provided to The Washington Post yesterday by the office of [Sen. Charles E. Grassley](#) (R-Iowa), represents a rare endorsement of a whistle-blower's allegations by the Justice Department's internal review office. It also represents another setback for the FBI as it struggles to attract Arabic speakers and informants in its fight against Islamic extremists.

"Because of this retaliation, we lost four years of expertise for the war on terror from a highly qualified Arab-American agent," Grassley said in a statement.

Youssef, who served as FBI legal attaché in Saudi Arabia for four years, earned raves for his work on the Khobar Towers bombing and other investigations, including praise for his "very, very high performance" by former FBI director Louis J. Freeh, according to court testimony and the report.

Youssef, a naturalized U.S. citizen who was born in Egypt, says his expertise in Arabic, terrorism and Middle Eastern issues was ignored after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. He began making formal complaints after being assigned to a budget unit in February 2002. He was later transferred to a unit that processed documents taken from Afghanistan and other overseas locations.

Youssef's attorney, Stephen M. Kohn, said his client has remained in the documents section ever since. Kohn said the OPR report is troubling because it indicates "the FBI is playing games with national security after 9/11."

"What is wrong with the FBI that it would take four years of litigation and an investigation by the Justice Department just because one of their leading experts on counterterrorism wants to do operational counterterrorism work?" he asked.

A spokesman for Wolf declined to comment on the case yesterday. The Justice Department's Office of Attorney Recruitment and Management will make a final determination on whether Youssef suffered retaliation.

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