



Tenure is nice, expertise better

An employment discrimination lawsuit - for lack of a better term perhaps - has been filed against the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but not for the normal reasons.

Agent Bassem Youssef doesn't claim he was passed over for promotion because of his race, ethnicity or religion. Certainly not because of his gender. And age discrimination isn't the accusation.

No, Bassem Youssef's complaint is that he hasn't advanced in his career despite his notable expertise in what has become the FBI's most important, or at least most prominent, task - counterterrorism.

The postmortem on the 9/11 catastrophe has revealed much about how ill-prepared the FBI was to deal with terror plots on domestic soil. Lines of communication between the FBI, the CIA and other agencies were often strained or non-existent. Information that should've set off warning sirens in the minds of an FBI agents "clued-in" to actions of terrorists went unnoticed. Important leads were ignored, investigative priorities improperly set.

We all know the result.

FBI Director Robert Mueller, who succeeded Louis Freeh, promised a new and better agency. Mueller assured Congress he was creating an FBI stocked with experts able to stop terrorist attacks before they occur; not try to solve them after.

Testimony in Youssef's suit shows that's hardly the case.

"You need leadership. You don't need subject matter expertise," Executive Assistant Director Gary Bald recently testified in Youssef's case.

"A bombing case is a bombing case. A crime scene in a bank robbery case is the same as a crime scene, you know, across the board," said Dale Watson, the FBI's terrorism chief until 2003.

Asked if he could describe the difference between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, the religion's two major sects, Watson answered, "Not technically, no."

This testimony makes it sound like anti-terrorism efforts have not been prioritized. Rather, it seems that it's business - and bureaucracy - as usual. It is quite possible Youssef was passed over for promotion because of internal politics, or simply because it was somebody else's "turn."

Meanwhile, Youssef - who has received a special award for meritorious work and was singled out by his managers for "continuous creativity and perseverance" in pursuing terrorists - has not been promoted, but rather offered same-rank jobs in exploiting intelligence from terrorism-related documents, or even in budgeting.

The Bureau's utilization of Youssef was "inappropriate and a waste of a very important

human resource," testified a just-retired supervisor, Agent Paul Vick.

No doubt leadership is important in most high-ranking positions of any business or agency. But expertise is crucial.

Picture the following classified ad: "Assistant basketball coach needed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Athletic-type sought. Strong leader, good motivator required. Basketball knowledge optional."

That, in essence, is how the FBI has continued to seek out and promote agents - based on many factors, some of them important, but with one crucial element all-too-often ignored.

There are many leadership duties within the FBI - its organized crime division, for instance - where agents with extensive criminal justice backgrounds but lacking specific knowledge about terrorism and the Middle East can serve with distinction.

But America needs counterterrorism experts to lead counterterrorism efforts.

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