

سازمان اسناد و کتابخانه ملی جمهوری اسلامی ایران

[illegible]

ثامن و ناسی و ناسی شش اسم و دنیا عقدی رسم للعب
ثامن الحما ناسه ارباب از و ناسه نقل کلک اسماء لتقدم لقرآن

ما بينك وبين راجل ولا لحيات بسبب مره بل نبت الحياه اى
 سنه و بعد من و لم يزد و لم ينقص جسم او نسل و مفا
 خاف لا فانه عليه الموت و حسد (كان يحب افعالى امره كله)
 او رقتى ابتدا و كيف شغرت و كيف نشد و تسترهم و قتلهم
 به ليعبيل و انه قد استند به امره و دل و دل به و در صحنه و انكر
 ذنوبه شيا و حسد كنه ما زنا و جرا لعظمه به به فادى الى
 اسم الله الذى به الواحد و شكتم و عليم و صلا و سبه
 لقد كنت ممنون بكونك منى الى الله فله و قد رايتوه و انتم

LOST IN TRANSL

War on Terror



TALKING THE TALK: U.S. soldiers take classes in Arabic at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif. (left); in a Baghdad courtroom, an American soldier, J.

Middle Eastern-born counterparts of making disparaging or unpatriotic remarks, or of making "mistranslations"—failing to translate comments that might reflect poorly on their fellow Muslims, such as references to sexual deviancy. The tensions erupt in arguments and angry finger-pointing from time to time. "It's a good thing the translators are not allowed to carry guns," says Sibel Edmonds, a Farsi translator who formerly worked in the unit.

To fight the war on terror, the FBI desperately needs translators. Every day, wiretaps and bugs installed under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) record hundreds of hours of conversations conducted in Arabic or other Middle Eastern languages like Farsi. Those conversations must all be translated into English—and only if investigators are to head off budding Qaeda plots against the United States.

Today, more than two years after the 9/11 attacks, the FBI is still woefully short of translators. FBI Director Robert Mueller has declared that he wants a 12-hour rule: all significant electronic intercepts of suspected terrorist conversations must be translated within 12 hours. Asked if the bureau was living up to its own rule, a senior FBI official quietly chuckled. He was being mordant: he and every top gumshoe are well aware that the consequences could be tragic.

Since 9/11, goaded by the dire warnings of Attorney General John Ashcroft, Congress has poured billions of dollars into the war on terror to beef up manpower, including hiring foreign-language translators. (CALLING ALL LINGUISTS ... TO SERVE YOUR COUNTRY, reads the latest help-wanted ad posted on the FBI's Web site.) The bureau has made some headway: before 9/11, the FBI had only 40 Arabic and 25 Farsi speakers to listen to national-security intercepts. Today, officials claim, there are 200 Arabic and 75 Farsi speakers on the job (about two thirds are contract employees).

Still, that's not nearly enough: every week, say informed sources, hundreds of hours of tapes from wiretaps and bugs pile up in secure lockers, waiting, sometimes for months on end, to be deciphered. The bureau's slow progress is not for lack of money. Rather, the FBI's understandable but obsessive concern with security, its sometimes cumbersome bureaucracy and, critics say, the remnants of its nativist culture make it a difficult place for Muslims and foreign-born linguists to get jobs and work.

#5 A shortage of Arabic speakers has plagued the entire intelligence community. Though U.S. intelligence was using all the best technology—spy satellites, high-tech listening posts and other devices—to listen in on the conversations of possible terrorists, far too often it had no idea what they were saying. A congressional inquiry after 9/11 found enormous backlogs. Millions of hours of talk by suspected terrorists—including 35 percent of all Arabic-language national-security wiretaps by the FBI—had gone untranslated and untranscribed. Some of the overseas inter-



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Idier, Juan Arevalo, attempts to calm an irate Iraqi man with the help of translator Alyaa Abdul Hassan Abboud

“If a bomb goes off ... because we missed an intercept that was sitting untranslated in a cardboard box,” says an agent, “the bureau would be taken apart brick by brick”

#5 Continued

cepts contained chillingly precise warnings. On Sept. 10, 2001, the National Security Agency picked up suggestive comments by Qaeda operatives, including “Tomorrow is zero hour.” The tape of the conversation was not translated until after 9/11.

The FBI is still overwhelmed. Because of a threefold increase in FISA wiretaps to monitor the terror threat, the bureau has struggled to keep up. Mueller has been adamant about trying to monitor conversations—in real time—in the dozen or so truly urgent terrorism investigations. But he has been disappointed again and again. One FBI official described an oft-repeated awkward scene in the director’s office: a top investigator comes to brief Mueller on a high-priority case, the kind that appears in the threat Matrix shown to President George W. Bush every morning. During the course

of the presentation, it becomes obvious that there are significant gaps in the case. The sheepish agent finally admits that hours of wiretaps have yet to be translated. Mueller, a no-nonsense ex-Marine, swallows his exasperation and tersely instructs his subordinates to “do better.”

In theory, there are rules for prioritizing which conversations are to be translated first. Can the information be obtained elsewhere? Is the speaker a known Qaeda member? Is there other intelligence suggesting urgency? In practice, says one street agent, “it all depends on how loud you scream on the phone to headquarters.”

Agents who live in fear of missing the smoking gun that might prevent a catastrophic terror attack are at a loss to explain the bureau’s inability to fix the problem. “We keep getting these signals that they need a

full-court press and no stone unturned,” says one agent. “But the jewels might be on a diskette in a secure locker in Washington. It keeps some of us awake at night.” G-men tell horror stories of blown opportunities, like the one about a Qaeda suspect whose phone was tapped right up to the moment he left the United States. Only after he had surfaced in Yemen did the translators in CI-19 get around to listening to a CD-ROM of his conversations sent to a field office. The suspect had been talking about leaving the country for some time. (FBI officials declined to comment on the matter, except to say that the facts are more complicated than the story suggests, and to note that without evidence of a crime the suspect could not have been detained anyway.)

The grumbles of street agents are not just the usual grouching about the “suits” back at Washington headquarters. In the weeks before the Iraq war, *NEWSWEEK* has learned, agents in a field office on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States were closely watching a radical imam with disturbing ties to Qaeda elements in northern Iraq. The FBI feared that the imam might try to launch a terror attack in the United States in retaliation for a U.S. invasion of Iraq. Agents put the imam under round-the-clock surveillance. But, lacking a translator who could listen to

his conversations in real time, the agents loaded FedEx boxes with CD-ROMs and sent them to Washington to be translated. The recordings languished there for weeks and even months before transcripts were made. Desperate for faster action, the FBI field office hired a translator—but had to settle for one who had trouble understanding the imam’s particular dialect.

The FBI has no shortage of applicants who want to be translators. In the month after 9/11, some 2,000 queued up. But three of four applicants drop out when they learn the stiff requirements. Security has been a touchy issue ever since the bureau discovered in 2001 that one of its top counter-intelligence officials, Robert Hanssen, had been a Russian mole for almost two decades. So the loyalty test is tough. Dozens of Arabic-speaking Sephardic Jews from

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Brooklyn, N.Y., failed to qualify when they declined to renounce their Israeli citizenship. Applicants must submit to polygraph tests. Background checks on translators who have lived abroad for many years are difficult and time-consuming. Easier just to nix the well-traveled, foreign-born candidate. In the end, more than 90 percent of applicants fail to make the grade.

#1 Government bureaucracies rarely move quickly, and the FBI is no exception, especially when technology is involved. The bureau has been slow to install an online system, called Spider Net, that would allow wiretaps to be quickly digitalized and sent to headquarters in real time. (The FBI claims that Spider Net will be in all field offices by the end of the year.) But the bureau's problems go deeper. The CIA and State Department school their officers in foreign cultures, but FBI agents are not known for their worldliness or cultural sensitivities. Until recently the FBI had two Arabic-speaking hostage negotiators. One of them, Gamal Abdel-Hafiz, recently fired over an old allegation of insurance fraud, claims that he was "hit in the back" by fellow agents who distrusted his Muslim faith. The other, Bassem Youssef, has filed a lawsuit against the bureau, accusing it of discriminating against Arab-Americans. Some FBI agents are wholly unsympathetic. "We don't need Muslim agents in the FBI," says John Vincent, a now retired agent who had complained about Abdel-Hafiz. (When pressed, Vincent said he'd meant the FBI didn't need Muslims like Abdel-Hafiz.)

#2 Another agent had a more nuanced view: "There is a predisposition among many agents at the FBI to believe that in some parts of the world blood is thicker than a citizenship certificate. There's a general perception that family relationships and tribal loyalties mean more to an Arab-American than an American whose ties to the Old World are many generations removed." Mike Mason, the assistant director in charge of the FBI's Washington Field Office, disputed charges of bigotry in the bureau: "It doesn't matter where people come from, it doesn't matter what their ethnicities are, what their religions are," he told NEWSWEEK. "When they become FBI employees they're in the FBI family."

The answer is not to open the door to just any Arabic speaker. At the U.S. prison for



THE ACCUSED: The Guantánamo camp (above), where James Yee (below, left) and Ahmed Fathy Mehalba (below, right) worked. The U.S. says they had classified material.



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terror suspects in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, three translators were recently arrested amid what one counterterrorism official calls a "complete meltdown" of security at the base. Officials charged last week that one of the arrested translators, an Arabic linguist named Ahmed Fathy Mehalba, had been caught at Boston's Logan airport carrying 132 computer disks with secret documents about Qaeda prisoners. (An Army chaplain who worked at Guantánamo, Capt. James Yee, was detained in September for allegedly possessing classified documents.) A top Defense Department official admitted that after 9/11 the military had hired many translators without a full background check. The FBI can rightly point out that its attention to security has so far avoided any comparable flaps. "We haven't loosened our standards one bit," said Margaret Galotta, chief of the FBI's Language Service Division.

Nor are FBI agents the only ones in government with a deaf ear to Arab sensitivities.

Last week news organizations disclosed that Gen. William Boykin, a much-decorated Special Operations veteran who is now the top intelligence official at the Pentagon, had made public statements that appeared to pit Christians against Muslims in the war on terror. "We're a Christian nation," Boykin, in full uniform, told church audiences. "Our spiritual enemy will only be defeated if we come against them in the name of Jesus." (Boykin later apologized for his remarks.)

But it's the FBI—along with the American people—who stand to lose the most if they can't do a better job of knowing their enemies and the language they speak. At least one gumshoe interviewed by NEWSWEEK understands the stakes: "If a nuclear suitcase bomb goes off in the hold of a ship in the Port of Long Beach because we missed an intercept that was sitting untranslated in a cardboard box," he says, "the bureau would be taken apart brick by brick." And that would be by far the least of the damage. ■