

August 2, 2004

An Open Letter to the 9/11 Panel

by Sibel Edmonds

Thomas Kean, Chairman
National Committee on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States
301 7th Street, SW
Room 5125
Washington, D.C. 20407

Dear Chairman Kean:

It has been almost three years since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, during which time we have been placed under a constant threat of terror and asked to exercise vigilance in our daily lives. Your commission was created by law to investigate "facts and circumstances related to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001" and to "provide recommendations to safeguard against future acts of terrorism," and has now issued its "9/11 Commission Report" [[pdf](#)]. You are now asking us to pledge our support for this report and its recommendations with our tax money, our security and our lives. Unfortunately, I find your report seriously flawed in its failure to address serious intelligence issues that I, as a witness to the commission, made you aware of. Thus, I must assume that other serious issues I am not aware of were also omitted from your report. These omissions cast doubt on the validity of your report and therefore on its conclusions and recommendations. Considering what is at stake – our national security – we are entitled to demand answers to unanswered questions, and to ask for clarification of issues that were ignored and omitted from the report. I, Sibel Edmonds, a concerned American citizen, a former FBI translator, a whistleblower, a witness for a United States Congressional investigation, a witness and a plaintiff for the Department of Justice Inspector General investigation and a witness for your own 9/11 Commission, request your response to the following questions and issues.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, we, the translators at the FBI's largest and most important translation unit, were told to slow down or even stop translation of critical information related to terrorist activities so that the FBI could present the United States Congress with a record of an "extensive backlog of untranslated documents" and justify its request for budget and staff increases. While FBI agents from various field offices were desperately seeking leads and suspects, and completely depending on FBI HQ and its language units to provide them with needed translations, hundreds of translators were being told by their administrative supervisors not to translate and to let the work pile up (please refer to the CBS *60 Minutes* transcript from October 2002 provided to your investigators in January-February 2004). This issue has been confirmed by the Senate Judiciary Committee (please refer to Sen. Grassley's and Sen. Leahy's letters during the summer of 2002, provided to your investigators in January-February 2004). Apparently, this confirmed report has been substantiated by the Department of Justice Inspector General Report (please refer to DOJ-IG report "Re: Sibel Edmonds and FBI Translation," provided to you prior to the completion of your report). I provided your investigators with a detailed account of this issue and the names of other witnesses willing to corroborate this (please refer to tape-recorded 3.5 hours testimony by Sibel Edmonds, provided to your investigators on Feb. 11, 2004).

Today, almost three years after 9/11, and more than two years since this information has been

confirmed and made available to our government, the administrators in charge of language departments of the FBI remain in their positions and in charge of the information front lines of the FBI's counterterrorism and counterintelligence efforts. Your report omits any reference to this most serious issue, foregoing any accountability whatsoever, and your recommendations refrain from addressing this issue, which will have even more serious consequences. This issue is systemic and departmental. Why does your report exclude this information despite the evidence and briefings you received? How can budget increases address and resolve this misconduct by mid-level bureaucratic management? How can the addition of a new bureaucrat, the "intelligence czar," in a cocoon away from the action, address and resolve this problem?

Melek Can Dickerson, a Turkish translator, was hired by the FBI after Sept. 11 and placed in charge of translating the most sensitive information related to terrorists and criminals under the Bureau's investigation. Dickerson was granted top secret clearance, which can be granted only after conducting a thorough background investigation. Dickerson used to work for semi-legit organizations that were FBI targets of investigation. She had ongoing relationships with two individuals who were FBI targets of investigation. For months, Dickerson blocked all-important information related to these semi-legit organizations and the individuals she and her husband associated with. She stamped hundreds, if not thousands, of documents related to these targets as "not pertinent." Dickerson attempted to prevent others from translating these documents important to the FBI's investigations and our fight against terrorism. With the assistance of her direct supervisor, Mike Feghali, she took hundreds of pages of top-secret intelligence documents outside the FBI to unknown recipients. With Feghali's assistance, she forged signatures on top-secret documents related to 9/11 detainees. After all these incidents were confirmed and reported to FBI management, Melek Can Dickerson was allowed to remain in her position, to continue the translation of sensitive intelligence received by the FBI, and to maintain her top-secret clearance. Apparently bureaucratic mid-level FBI management and administrators decided that it would not look good for the Bureau to have this security breach and espionage case investigated and publicized, especially after the **Robert Hanssen** scandal. The Melek Can Dickerson case was confirmed by the Senate Judiciary Committee. It received major coverage by the press. According to Director Robert Mueller, the inspector general criticized the FBI for failing to adequately pursue the espionage report on Melek Can Dickerson. I provided your investigators with a detailed and specific account of this issue, the names of other witnesses willing to corroborate this, and additional documents.

Today, more than two years since the Dickerson incident was reported to the FBI, and more than two years since this information was confirmed by the United States Congress and reported by the press, the same people remain in charge of translation quality and security. Dickerson and several FBI targets of investigation hastily left the United States in 2002, and no criminal investigation has been opened. Not only does the supervisor who facilitated this criminal conduct remain in a supervisory position, he has been promoted to supervising Arabic language units of the FBI's counterterrorism and counterintelligence investigations. Your report omits these significant incidents, and your recommendations do not address this serious security breach and likely espionage issue. This issue needs to be investigated and prosecuted. The translation of our intelligence is being entrusted to individuals with loyalties to our enemies. Important "chit-chats" and "chatters" are being intentionally blocked from translation. Why does your report exclude this information and these serious issues despite the evidence and briefings you received? How can budget increases address and resolve this misconduct by mid-level bureaucratic management? How can the addition of an "intelligence czar" solve this problem?

More than four months prior to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, in April 2001, a long-term FBI informant/asset who had been providing the bureau with information since 1990, provided two FBI agents and a translator with specific information regarding a terrorist attack being planned by Osama bin Laden. This asset/informant was previously a high-level intelligence officer in Iran in charge of intelligence from Afghanistan. Through his contacts in Afghanistan, he received information that: 1) Osama bin Laden was planning a major terrorist attack in the United States targeting four or five major cities; 2) the attack was going to involve airplanes; 3) some of the individuals in charge of carrying out this attack were already in place in the United States; 4) the attack was going to be carried out soon, in a few months. The agents who received this information reported it to their

superior, Special Agent in Charge of Counterterrorism Thomas Frields at the FBI Washington Field Office, by filing 302 forms, and the translator translated and documented this information. No action was taken by the special agent in charge, and after 9/11 the agents and the translators were told to "keep quiet" regarding this issue. The translator who was present during the session with the FBI informant, Mr. Behrooz Sarshar, reported this incident to Director Mueller in writing, and later to the Department of Justice Inspector General. The press reported this incident, and a report in the *Chicago Tribune* on July 21, 2004, stated that FBI officials had confirmed that this information was received in April 2001. Furthermore, the *Chicago Tribune* quoted an aide to Director Mueller saying that Mueller was surprised that the Commission never raised this particular issue with him during the hearing. Mr. Sarshar reported this issue to your investigators on Feb. 12, 2004, and provided them with specific dates, locations, witness names, and contact information for that particular Iranian asset and the two special agents who received the information (please refer to the tape-recorded testimony provided by Mr. Sarshar on February 12, 2004 and given to your investigators). I provided your investigators with a detailed and specific account of this issue, the names of other witnesses, and documents I had seen. Mr. Sarshar also provided the Department of Justice Inspector General with specific information regarding this issue (please refer to DOJ-IG report "Re: Sibel Edmonds and FBI Translation," provided to you prior to the completion of your report).

Almost three years after Sept. 11, many officials still refuse to admit to having specific information regarding the terrorists' plans to attack the United States. The Phoenix Memo, received months prior to the 9/11 attacks, specifically warned FBI HQ of pilot training and its possible link to terrorist activities against the United States. Four months prior to the terrorist attacks, the Iranian asset provided the FBI with specific information regarding the "use of airplanes," "major U.S. cities as targets," and "Osama bin Laden issuing the order." **Coleen Rowley** likewise reported that specific information had been provided to FBI HQ. All this information went to the same place: FBI Headquarters in Washington, D.C., and the FBI Washington Field Office in Washington, D.C. Yet your report claims that not having a central place where all intelligence could be gathered was one of the main factors in our intelligence failure. Why does your report exclude the information regarding the Iranian asset and Behrooz Sarshar from its timeline of missed opportunities? Why was this significant incident not mentioned, despite the public confirmation by the FBI, witnesses provided to your investigators, and briefings you received directly? Why did you surprise even Director Mueller by not asking him questions regarding this significant incident? (Please remember that you ran out of questions to ask during your hearings with Director Mueller and AG John Ashcroft, so please do not cite a "time limit.") How can budget increases remedy the failures of mid-level bureaucrats at FBI Headquarters? How can the addition of an "intelligence czar" fix this problem?

Over two years ago, and after two unclassified sessions with FBI officials, the Senate Judiciary Committee sent letters to Director Mueller, Attorney General Ashcroft, and Inspector General Glenn Fine regarding the existence of unqualified translators in charge of translating high-level sensitive intelligence. The FBI confirmed at least one case: Kevin Taskesen, a Turkish translator, had been given a job as an FBI translator, despite the fact that he had failed all FBI language proficiency tests. In fact, Kevin could not understand or speak even elementary-level English. He had failed English proficiency tests and did not even score sufficiently in the target language. Still, Kevin Taskesen was hired, not due to a lack of other qualified translator candidates, but because his wife worked at FBI HQ as a language proficiency exam administrator. Almost everyone at FBI HQ and the FBI Washington Field Office knew about Kevin. Yet, Kevin was given the task of translating the most sensitive terrorist-related information, and he was sent to Guantanamo Bay to translate the interrogation of and information for all Turkic language detainees (Turks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, etc.). The FBI was supposed to be trying to obtain information regarding possible future attack plans from these detainees, yet the FBI knowingly sent unqualified translators to gather and translate this information. Furthermore, these detainees were either released, detained or prosecuted based on translations by unqualified translators knowingly sent there by the FBI. Sen. Grassley and Sen. Leahy publicly confirmed Kevin Taskesen's case (please refer to Senate letters and documents provided to your investigators in January-February 2004). The program *60 Minutes* showed Kevin's picture and listed him as one of the unqualified translators sent to Guantanamo Bay, as confirmed by the FBI. The Department of Justice Inspector General provided a detailed account of these problems. I provided your investigators with a specific account of this issue and the names of other witnesses willing to

corroborate this.

After over two years since Kevin Taskesen's case was publicly confirmed, and after almost two years since *60 Minutes* broadcast Taskesen's case, Kevin Taskesen remains in his position as sole Turkish and Turkic language translator for the FBI Washington Field Office. After admitting that Kevin Taskesen was not qualified to translate sensitive intelligence and investigation of terrorist activities, the FBI still keeps him in charge of translating highly sensitive documents and leads. Those individuals in the FBI hiring department who facilitated the hiring of unqualified translators due to nepotism/cronyism remain in their positions. Yet your report does not mention this case or the chronic problems within the FBI translation, hiring and screening departments. Accountability for those responsible for these practices that endanger our national security is not brought up even once in your report. Why does your report exclude these serious issues despite the evidence and briefings you received?

In October 2001, approximately one month after the Sept. 11 attack, an agent returned a certain document to the FBI Washington Field Office to have it re-translated. This special agent rightfully believed that, considering the suspect under surveillance and the issues involved, the original translation might have missed information that could prove valuable in the investigation of terrorist activities. After this document was received by the FBI Washington Field Office and re-translated verbatim, the field agent's hunch appeared to be correct. The new translation revealed certain information regarding blueprints, pictures and building material for skyscrapers being sent overseas. It also revealed illegal activities in obtaining visas from certain embassies in the Middle East through network contacts and bribery. However, after the re-translation was completed and the new significant information revealed, the unit supervisor in charge of certain Middle Eastern languages, Mike Feghali, decided NOT to send the re-translated information to the special agent who had requested it. Instead, Feghali sent the agent a note stating that the translation was reviewed and that the original translation was accurate. Feghali argued that sending the accurate translation would hurt the original translator and would cause problems for the FBI language department. The special agent never received an accurate translation of that document. I provided your investigators with a detailed and specific account of this issue, the name and date of this particular investigation, and the names of other witnesses willing to corroborate this. This information was also provided to the Department of Justice Inspector General.

Only one month after the catastrophic events of Sept. 11, while many agents were working around the clock to obtain leads and information, the bureaucratic administrators in the FBI's largest and most important translation unit were covering up their past failures, blocking important leads and information, and jeopardizing ongoing terrorist investigations. The supervisor involved in this incident, Mike Feghali, was in charge of important Middle Eastern languages within the FBI Washington Field Office, and had a record of previous misconduct. After this supervisor's prior misconduct was reported to the FBI's higher-level management, the Inspector General's Office, the United States Congress, and the 9/11 Commission, he was promoted to supervisor of the FBI's Arabic language unit. Today, Mike Feghali remains in the FBI Washington Field Office and is in charge of a language unit receiving the chit-chat that our color-coded threat system is based upon. Yet your report contains zero information regarding these systemic problems that led us to our failure in preventing the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In your report, there are no references to individuals responsible for hindering past and current investigations, or those who are willing to compromise our security and our lives for their career advancement and security. Why does your report exclude this information despite all the evidence and briefings you received?

The latest buzz topic regarding intelligence is the problem of sharing information within and between intelligence agencies. The public has still not been told of the intentional obstruction of intelligence. The public has not been told that certain information, despite its relevance to terrorist activities, is not shared with counterterrorism units. This was true prior to 9/11, and it remains true today. If counterintelligence receives information about terrorism that implicates certain nations, semi-legit organizations or the politically powerful in this country, then that information is not shared with counterterrorism, regardless of the consequences. In certain cases, frustrated FBI agents have cited "direct pressure by the State Department." The Department of Justice Inspector General received detailed evidence regarding this issue. I provided your investigators with an account of this issue, the

names of other witnesses willing to corroborate this, and the names of U.S. officials involved in these transactions and activities.

After almost three years, the American people still do not know that thousands of lives are jeopardized under a policy of "protecting certain foreign business relations." The victims' family members still do not realize that answers they have sought relentlessly for over two years have been blocked in the interest of "safeguarding certain diplomatic relations." Your hearings and your report did not even attempt to address these unspoken, unwritten practices, although, unlike me, you were not placed under any gag. Despite your full awareness of criminal conduct by high-level government employees, you have not proposed criminal investigations, even though you are required to do so. How can budget increases resolve these problems when some of them are caused by unspoken practices and unwritten policies? How can an "intelligence czar" override these policies and practices?

I know for a fact that intelligence translation cannot be brushed off as a relatively insignificant issue. Translation units are the frontline in gathering, translating and disseminating intelligence. A warning in advance of the next terrorist attack will probably come in the form of a text in a foreign language that will have to be translated. That message may be given to a translation unit headed by someone like Mike Feghali, who slows down – even stops – translations for the purpose of receiving budget increases for his department, who has participated in criminal activities and security breaches, and who has covered up failures and criminal conduct within the department. That message may go to an unqualified translator such as Kevin Taskesen, so it may never be translated correctly and acted upon. That message may go to an agent of a foreign organization who works as an FBI translator. If an attack then occurs, one that could have been prevented by acting on information in that message, who will tell the families of the victims that nothing more could have been done? There will be no excuse that we did not know, because we do know.

I am writing this letter in light of my direct experience within the FBI's translation unit in the crucial months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and in light of my firsthand knowledge of certain cases within the Bureau's language units. As you are fully aware, the problems cited in this letter are by no means based upon personal opinion or unverified allegations. As you are fully aware, these issues and incidents have been confirmed by a senior Republican senator, Charles Grassley, and a senior Democrat senator, Patrick Leahy. As you know, according to officials with direct knowledge of the Department of Justice Inspector General's report on my allegations, "none of [my] allegations were disproved." As you are fully aware, even FBI officials "confirmed all [my] allegations and denied none" during their unclassified meetings with the Senate Judiciary staff over two years ago. However, your commission's hearings, 567-page report and recommendations do not include these serious issues, major incidents and systemic problems. Your report's coverage of FBI translation problems consists of a brief microscopic footnote (Footnote #25). Yet your commission is geared to start aggressively pressuring our government to hastily implement your measures and recommendations based upon an incomplete and deficient report.

In order to cure a problem, one must have an accurate diagnosis. In order to correctly diagnose a problem, one must consider and take into account all visible symptoms. Your Commission's investigations, hearings and report have disregarded many visible symptoms. I am emphasizing "visible" because these symptoms have been long recognized by experts from the intelligence community and have been written about in the press. I am emphasizing "visible" because the specific symptoms I provided you with in this letter have been confirmed and publicly acknowledged. During its many hearings your commission chose not to ask the questions necessary to unveil the true symptoms of our failed intelligence system. Your Commission intentionally bypassed these severe symptoms and chose not to include them in its 567-page report. Now, without a complete list of our failures pre-9/11, without a comprehensive examination of true symptoms that exist in our intelligence system, without assigning any accountability whatsoever and, therefore, without a sound and reliable diagnosis, your commission is attempting to divert attention from the real problems and to prescribe a cure through hasty and costly measures. It is like putting a gold-lined porcelain cap over a deeply decayed tooth without first treating the root.

Respectfully,

Sibel D. Edmonds

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