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Profile: Mark Flessner

Positions that Mark Flessner has held:

Mark Flessner actively participated in the following events:

1996: Vulgar Betrayal Investigation Launched

Vulgar Betrayal, the most significant US government investigation into terrorist financing before 9/11, is launched. This investigation grows out of investigations Chicago FBI agent Robert Wright had begun in 1993 (see After January 1993), and Wright appears to be the driving force behind Vulgar Betrayal. He later will say, "I named the case Vulgar Betrayal because of the many gross betrayals many Arab terrorists and their supporters" committed against the US, but the name will later prove to be bitterly ironic for him. Over a dozen FBI agents are assigned it and a grand jury is empanelled to hear evidence. Wright will be removed from the investigation in late 1999 (see August 3, 1999), and it will be completely shut down in early 2000 (see August 2000). [LA Weekly, 8/25/2004; Judicial Watch, 12/15/2004; Chicago Tribune, 8/22/2004; Federal News Service, 6/2/2003] The investigation will first identify suspected terrorism financier Yassin al-Qadi as a target in 1997, but it will run into many obstacles in investigating him and others. Assistant US attorney Mark Flessner, the lead prosecutor for Vulgar Betrayal, will later claim that supervisors at the Justice Department's headquarters obstructed the investigation because it appeared to trace terrorism financing to important figures in Saudi Arabia, a key US ally. Wright will later state that had the leads into al-Qadi and others been fully investigated, "I believe the FBI could have identified other significant links to Osama bin Laden, links which may have been addressed to prevent future attacks against the United States by bin Laden and his terrorist trainees." [Federal News Service, 6/2/2003; Chicago Tribune, 8/22/2004]

Entity Tags: Mark Flessner, Robert Wright, Federal Bureau of Investigation, US Department of Justice, Vulgar Betrayal

October 1998: Vulgar Betrayal Investigation Nearly Shut Down

Two months after the US embassy bombings in Africa (see August 7, 1998), FBI agent Robert Wright and his Vulgar Betrayal investigation discover evidence they think ties Saudi multimillionaire Yassin al-Qadi to the bombings. Since 1997, Wright had been investigating a suspected terrorist cell in Chicago that was connected to fundraising for Hamas. They discovered what they considered to be clear proof that al-Qadi and other people they were already investigating had helped fund the embassy

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bombings. Wright asks FBI headquarters for permission to open an investigation into this money trail at this time, but the permission is not granted. Wright will later recall, "The supervisor who was there from headquarters was right straight across from me and started yelling at me: 'You will not open criminal investigations. I forbid any of you. You will not open criminal investigations against any of these intelligence subjects.'" Instead, they are told to merely follow the suspects and file reports, but make no arrests. Federal prosecutor Mark Flessner, working with the Vulgar Betrayal investigation, later will claim that a strong criminal case was building against al-Qadi and his associates. "There were powers bigger than I was in the Justice Department and within the FBI that simply were not going to let [the building of a criminal case] happen. And it didn't happen. ... I think there were very serious mistakes made. And I think, it perhaps cost, it cost people their lives ultimately." [ABC News, 12/19/2002] Flessner later will speculate that Saudi influence may have played a role. ABC News will report in 2002, "According to US officials, al-Qadi [has] close personal and business connections with the Saudi royal family." [ABC News, 11/26/2002] Wright later will allege that FBI headquarters even attempted to shut down the Vulgar Betrayal investigation altogether at this time. He says, "They wanted to kill it." [ABC News, 12/19/2002] However, he will claim, "Fortunately an assistant special agent in Chicago interceded to prevent FBI headquarters from closing Operation Vulgar Betrayal." [Federal News Service, 6/2/2003] He claims that a new supervisor will write in late 1998, "Agent Wright has spearheaded this effort despite embarrassing lack of investigative resources available to the case, such as computers, financial analysis software, and a team of financial analysts. Although far from being concluded, the success of this investigation so far has been entirely due to the foresight and perseverance of Agent Wright." [Federal News Service, 5/30/2002] When the story of this interference in the alleged al-Qadi-embassy bombings connection will be reported in late 2002, Wright will conclude, "September the 11th is a direct result of the incompetence of the FBI's International Terrorism Unit. No doubt about that. Absolutely no doubt about that. You can't know the things I know and not go public." He will remain prohibited from telling all he knows, merely hinting, "There's so much more. God, there's so much more. A lot more." [ABC News, 12/19/2002]



Mark Flessner. [Source: Sonnenschein publicity photo]

Entity Tags: Yassin al-Qadi, Hamas, US Department of Justice, International Terrorism Unit, Mark Flessner, Robert Wright, al-Qaeda, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Vulgar Betrayal

Early 1999-March 21, 2000: Muslim FBI Agent Refuses to Wear Wire in Meeting with BMI Head; FBI Infighting Follows

Gamal Abdel-Hafiz, the only Muslim FBI agent in the years just prior to 9/11, becomes involved in FBI agent Robert Wright's Vulgar Betrayal investigation in early 1999. An accountant working for BMI Inc., an investment firm with connections to many suspected terrorism financiers (see 1986-October 1999), tells Abdel-Hafiz that he is worried that BMI funds had helped fund the 1998 US embassy bombings in Africa (see August 7, 1998). BMI president Soliman Biheiri hears that Abdel-Hafiz had been told about this, and wants to meet with him to discuss it (apparently without realizing that Abdel-Hafiz is an undercover FBI

agent). Wright asks Abdel-Hafiz to wear a wire to the meeting, but Abdel-Hafiz refuses to do so. This leads to infighting within the FBI. On July 6, 1999, Abdel-Hafiz files a religious discrimination complaint, accusing Wright of making derogatory comments to fellow agents. [Frontline, 10/16/2003] On March 21, 2000, Wright makes a formal internal complaint about Abdel-Hafiz. FBI agent Barry Carmody seconds Wright's complaint. Wright and Carmody accuse Abdel-Hafiz of hindering investigations by openly refusing to record other Muslims. In an affidavit, Wright claims that Abdel-Hafiz refused to wear the wire "based on religious reasons saying, 'A Muslim doesn't record another Muslim.'" Abdel-Hafiz does not deny the quote, but claims it was taken out of context. [Wall Street Journal, 11/26/2002; ABC News, 12/19/2002; Frontline, 10/16/2003] Federal prosecutor Mark Flessner and other FBI agents back up the allegations against Abdel-Hafiz. [ABC News, 12/19/2002] Carmody will also claim that, in a different investigation, Abdel-Hafiz hindered an inquiry into the possible ties to Islamic militants of fired University of South Florida Professor Sami Al-Arian by refusing to record a conversation with the professor in 1998. [Tampa Tribune, 3/4/2003] Complaints to superiors and headquarters about Abdel-Hafiz never get a response. [Fox News, 3/6/2003] "Far from being reprimanded, in February 2001 Abdel-Hafiz [is] promoted to one of the FBI's most important anti-terrorism posts, the American Embassy in Saudi Arabia, to handle investigations for the FBI in that Muslim country." [ABC News, 12/19/2002; Frontline, 10/16/2003] In 2003, FBI agent John Vincent will complain, "Five different FBI field divisions complained of this agent's activities, and the FBI headquarters response was to promote him to a sensitive position in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia." [Federal News Service, 6/2/2003] Abdel-Hafiz will be suspended in February 2003 over charges that he faked a break-in of his own house in order to collect \$25,000 in insurance benefits and then failed an FBI polygraph test when asked about it. In January 2004, the FBI's Disciplinary Review Board will reinstate him after deciding there was insufficient evidence in the case. [Tampa Tribune, 3/4/2003; Frontline, 10/16/2003]

Entity Tags: Vulgar Betrayal, Robert Wright, Gamal Abdel-Hafiz, John Vincent, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Sami Al-Arian, Mark Flessner, Barry Carmody

August 2000: Vulgar Betrayal Investigation Shut Down

Vulgar Betrayal, the most significant US government investigation into terrorist financing before 9/11, shuts down. FBI agent Robert Wright launched the investigation in 1996 (see 1996) and was removed from the investigation in late 1999 (see August 3, 1999).

Apparently the investigation accomplished little after Wright's departure. [LA Weekly, 8/25/2004; Judicial Watch, 12/15/2004; US District Court for the District of Columbia, 5/16/2005] A March 2000 affidavit named Yassin al-Qadi as a source of terrorist funds in Chicago, but no charges are brought against him. [ABC News, 12/19/2002] Mark Flessner, an assistant US attorney assigned to Vulgar Betrayal in 1996, later will recall, "Vulgar Betrayal was a case where the FBI's intelligence

agents would not cooperate with the criminal agents trying to put these guys in jail. They refused to let us arrest them. They only wanted to watch them conduct their business." He will also claim that Frances Fragos Townsend, a Justice Department official working a variety of posts, helps close down the



Frances Fragos Townsend.
[Source: White House]

investigation. He will say Townsend did not share information but “deliberately obstructed it. And I found that very disconcerting.” He will claim that she completely supports FBI intelligence agents and refuses to share their information with the Vulgar Betrayal investigation. A federal grand jury was impaneled in 1996 to support Vulgar Betrayal, but without the information from FBI intelligence, Flessner did not have enough evidence to return indictments. “I couldn’t even get permission to do the basic things you do, such as collecting phone numbers from their targets’ incoming and outgoing calls, and addresses from their mail.” With the shut down of the investigation in 2000, Flessner will resign from the Justice Department in frustration. After 9/11, Townsend will be appointed President Bush’s Homeland Security Adviser and counterterrorism director for the National Security Council. [LA Weekly, 8/25/2004]

Entity Tags: Vulgar Betrayal, US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, International Terrorism Unit, Fran Townsend, Mark Flessner

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