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Agent Alleges FBI Ignored Hamas Activities

Chicagoan Sues, Saying Bureau Refused to File Charges, Disrupt Pre-Sept. 11 Crimes

By James V. Grimaldi and John Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writers
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An FBI agent in Chicago has accused his superiors of ignoring the pre-Sept. 11 criminal activities of alleged U.S. associates of the Islamic Resistance Movement, the terrorist organization also known as Hamas. The agent also alleged that the bureau steered agents away from filing criminal cases that he believes could have disrupted Hamas's operations in this country.

Agent Robert G. Wright Jr. made the accusations last fall in a complaint filed with the Justice Department's inspector general -- an internal watchdog -- and the FBI's Office of Professional Responsibility, the internal affairs unit that investigates the conduct of agents, said sources familiar with the matter.

On Thursday, Wright, a 12-year FBI veteran, filed a lawsuit against the bureau in U.S. District Court in Washington. He accused the FBI of violating his First Amendment rights by prohibiting him from making his complaints public. He also has written a 500-page manuscript he wants to publish as a book titled "Fatal Betrayals of the Intelligence Mission."

"FBI management failed to take seriously the threat of terrorism in the United States," Wright's lawsuit claims. "FBI management intentionally and repeatedly thwarted and obstructed Wright's attempts to launch a more comprehensive investigation that would identify terrorists, their sources and methods of funding before they attacked additional U.S. interests, killing more U.S. citizens."

FBI officials strenuously denied Wright's assertions and some of the officials, speaking anonymously, said he is disgruntled about being marginalized after intense struggles with supervisors over his investigations. They added that he had only limited understanding about superiors' reasons for rejecting some of his recommendations. Wright was taken off the Hamas investigation in August 1999.

"The collective Chicago efforts are part of a much larger, national counterterrorism effort, which is ongoing," FBI spokesman Mike Kortan said.

Wright's lawsuit was filed a day after the FBI was chastised by Congress for failing to more aggressively look into a July 2001 recommendation from its Phoenix field office that U.S. aviation schools should be canvassed for Middle Eastern men seeking flight training.

Wright is represented by David Schippers, the Chicago attorney who was the House

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Republicans' counsel during President Bill Clinton's impeachment, and Judicial Watch, a Washington activist group that frequently sues the government.

Schippers was unavailable for comment last week. Judicial Watch Chairman Larry Klayman and Wright both declined to comment.

Wright's complaint to the inspector general has not been made public, but elements of it appear in his lawsuit. According to sources, Wright has alleged that his immediate supervisors directed him not to open criminal investigations of people and groups allegedly affiliated with the Islamic Resistance Movement, which claims responsibility for suicide bombings against Israeli civilians. The U.S. government has declared Hamas a terrorist group.

The FBI, according to Wright's complaints, spent too much time on intelligence investigations of alleged terrorist associates. Intelligence investigations are designed primarily to gather information and rarely result in indictments.

Criminal investigations could have broken up the operations of the Hamas affiliates Wright was investigating, and could have disrupted the financing of the groups by Saudi interests that also funded Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terror network, the lawsuit contends.

Current and former FBI officials said Wright's denunciation of intelligence operations is ill-founded. The investigations often yield valuable leads about sensitive foreign groups, while Wright's favored tactic of filing criminal charges can shut off such streams of information, they said.

Because Wright did not investigate al Qaeda, he does not directly or indirectly allege that the FBI ignored evidence regarding the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington, according to sources.

But he does contend in his lawsuit that the FBI routinely gathers evidence about terrorist operatives -- "such as the perpetrators of the Sept. 11 attacks" -- to be used to solve the crimes only after they occur, but not to prevent them.

The FBI denied the suggestion. "No information has been uncovered, either before or after Sept. 11th, that tied any of the 19 hijackers to the subjects and activities" Wright was investigating, the FBI's Kortan said.

Wright cites a positive job review in his lawsuit and notes that his work resulted in the seizure in 1998 of \$1.4 million that the government said was being used by Hamas. But he has also run into trouble himself: he was investigated recently for allegedly harassing an Arab American agent and for alleged sexual harassment of a female agent. The status of the harassment complaints is not known.

In the case of the Arab American agent, sources said, Wright had asked the agent to wear a clandestine listening device to record his conversation with the president of a company suspected of having ties to Hamas. According to Wright's account, the agent allegedly refused, leading to bad blood between them.

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