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Agent sues FBI for discrimination

WASHINGTON (CNN) --A high-ranking Arab-American FBI agent has filed a suit against the bureau, the Department of Justice, and two top officials, alleging discrimination and reprisal based on his national origin.

The suit was filed Friday in a U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia by Bassem Youssef, an FBI agent for 15 years. A U.S. citizen born in Cairo, Egypt, Youssef seeks compensatory damages as well as other relief.

Youssef's suit gives evidence of a highly respectable career as an FBI agent who, familiar with the culture and customs of the Arab world, helped bridge the gap between U.S. intelligence and its Middle Eastern counterparts, establishing important relationships in the years leading up to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

But in 2000, when Youssef returned from several years as the FBI's legal attaché in Saudi Arabia, Youssef said he hit a "glass ceiling." FBI officials excluded him from counterterrorism work and limited his work assignments, despite his experience and expertise, because of discrimination, he says, based on his national origin.

In addition to the FBI and the Justice Department, Youssef is suing Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller.

The FBI and Justice Department did not respond to calls seeking comment Saturday. Youssef's attorney was unavailable for comment.

Youssef said he worked extensively in counterterrorism and counterintelligence prior to the September 11 attacks, and played major roles in high-profile terrorism investigations like the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing; the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing in Nairobi, Kenya; the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; and the Osama bin Laden investigation.

In 1993, he received praise for his "professionalism" during a meeting with Egyptian officials which led to better relations between the FBI and Egyptian police in investigating Egyptian terrorists in the United States, he said.

Youssef helped foster a similar relationship with Saudi Arabian officials when he served in Riyadh starting in early 1997, he said. He repaired what had been strained relations between the FBI and the Mabathith, Saudi Arabia's intelligence agency, and built strong liaisons with other key law enforcement officials in the Gulf region, he said.

But Youssef said that because of discrimination against him, the FBI failed to follow up properly on counterterrorism leads.

In one instance, two months before the September 11 attacks, Youssef said a "walk-in" entered an FBI field office purporting to have significant information about bin Laden. The field office asked Youssef to debrief the man because of his familiarity with the issues and command of Arabic, but the FBI's counterterrorism unit then told the field office not to use Youssef's services.

The walk-in then left the field office, and whatever information he had, Youssef said, was lost.

After September 11, Youssef said, the FBI promoted a number of people to work in counterterrorism, but none of them was of Middle Eastern origin. Youssef's experience justifying a promotion was so broad that the assistant director of the Mabathith phoned him shortly after the attacks to ask about his involvement in the investigation, only to be told that Youssef had none.

Youssef said he is the only polygraph examiner in the entire intelligence community qualified to conduct tests in Arabic, but he has not administered one exam since the terrorist attacks.

"Upon information and belief, no other non-Arab FBI employee with similar background and experience in counterterrorism was willfully

blocked from working 9/11-related matters," Youssef wrote in his suit.

In February 2002, the FBI attempted to move Youssef to its budget office. When he complained, he said, the FBI sent him on an assignment to tag and process evidence at an off-site facility.

Youssef filed a complaint of discrimination with the FBI July 10, 2002. Sixteen days later, he said, the FBI surprised him by announcing at a multi-agency meeting that another person would be taking over his job.

After that, he said, his responsibilities continued to decrease, and meetings were held without him.

"The FBI has a culture which fosters retaliation against employees who file EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] cases or who otherwise publicly criticize the FBI," Youssef wrote.

The post-September 11 exclusion from counterterrorism assignments, Youssef said, has prevented him from being promoted within the FBI or getting a job with foreign companies who employ FBI agents as security experts.

In addition to compensatory damages, Youssef wants the FBI to set affirmative action goals for the recruitment and promotion of people of Middle Eastern descent, and an annual report on how the bureau is meeting those goals.

Youssef wants the FBI to reinstate him immediately at his former high-level position, or at an even higher role within counterterrorism.

He also wants Mueller to prohibit any FBI employee from using derogatory terms to describe those of Middle Eastern descent.

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