

# Philip Giraldi: What FBI whistle-blower Sibel Edmonds found in translation

Why is her story being covered up?

Most Americans have never heard of Sibel Edmonds, and if the U.S. government has its way, they never will.

The former FBI translator turned whistle-blower tells a chilling story of corruption at Washington's highest levels – sale of nuclear secrets, shielding of terrorist suspects, illegal arms transfers, narcotics trafficking, money laundering, espionage. She may be a first-rate fabulist, but Ms. Edmonds' account is full of dates, places and names.

And if she is to be believed, a treasonous plot to embed moles in American military and nuclear installations and pass sensitive intelligence to Israeli, Pakistani and Turkish sources was facilitated by figures in the upper echelons of the State and Defense Departments. Her charges could be easily confirmed or dismissed if classified government documents were made available to investigators.

But Congress has refused to act, and the Justice Department has shrouded Ms. Edmonds' case in the state-secrets privilege, a rarely used measure so sweeping that it precludes even a closed hearing attended only by officials with top-secret security clearances. According to the Department of Justice, such an investigation "could reasonably be expected to cause serious damage to the foreign policy and national security of the United States."

After five years of thwarted legal challenges and fruitless attempts to launch a congressional investigation, Sibel Edmonds is telling her story, though her defiance could land her in jail. After reading its November piece about Louai al-Sakka, an al-Qaeda terrorist who trained 9/11 hijackers in Turkey, Ms. Edmonds approached the *Sunday Times* of London. On Jan. 6, the *Times*, a Rupert Murdoch-owned paper that does not normally encourage exposés damaging to the Bush administration, featured a long article. The news quickly spread around the world – but not in the United States.

Ms. Edmonds is an ethnic Azerbaijani, born in Iran. She lived there and in Turkey until 1988, when she immigrated to the United States. Nine days after 9/11, she took a job at the FBI as a Turkish and Farsi translator. She worked in the 400-person translations section of the Washington office, reviewing a backlog of material dating to 1997 and participating in operations directed against several Turkish front groups, most notably the American Turkish Council.

The ATC, founded in 1994 and modeled on the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, was intended to promote Turkish interests in Congress and in other public forums.

The FBI was interested in the ATC because it suspected that the group might be tangentially tied to drug trafficking and because of reports that it had given congressmen illegal contributions or bribes. Moreover, as Ms. Edmonds alleged in the *Times*, the Turks have "often acted as a conduit for the Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's spy agency, because they were less likely to attract attention."

(In 2005, a spokesperson for the ATC denied to *Vanity Fair* magazine that the organization has ever been involved in illegal payment or espionage activities.)

Over nearly six months, Ms. Edmonds listened with increasing unease to hundreds of intercepted phone calls between Turkish, Pakistani, Israeli and American officials. When she voiced concerns about the processing of this intelligence – among other irregularities, one of the other translators maintained a friendship with one of the FBI's "high value" targets – she was threatened.

After exhausting all appeals through her own chain of command, Ms. Edmonds approached the two Department of Justice agencies with oversight of the FBI and sent faxes to Sens. Chuck Grassley and Patrick Leahy on the Judiciary Committee. The next day, she was called in for a polygraph. According to a DOJ inspector general's report, the test found that "she was not deceptive in her answers."

But two weeks later, Ms. Edmonds was fired. Her home computer was seized. Her family in Turkey was visited by police and threatened with arrest if they did not submit to questioning about an unspecified "intelligence matter."

When Ms. Edmonds' attorney sued to obtain the documents related to her firing, Attorney General John Ashcroft imposed the state-secrets gag order. Since then, she has been subjected to another federal order, which not only silenced her but retroactively classified the statements she eventually made before the Senate Judiciary Committee and the 9/11 commission.

Passionate in her convictions, Ms. Edmonds has sometimes alienated her own supporters and ridden roughshod over critics who questioned her assumptions. But despite her shortcomings in making her case and the legitimate criticism that she may be overreaching in some of her conclusions, Ms. Edmonds comes across as credible. Her claims are specific and fact-based, and they can be documented in detail. There is presumably an existing FBI file that could demonstrate the accuracy of many of her charges.

Her allegations are not insignificant. Among them: Ms. Edmonds claims that a former top State Department official was a person of interest to the FBI and had his phone tapped by the bureau in 2001 and 2002. Because of his senior-level position, this man had access to classified information of the highest sensitivity from the CIA, NSA and Pentagon, in addition to his own State Department.

Ms. Edmonds alleges to have heard evidence linking him to bribery from an ATC contact, to his intervening with the FBI to halt the interrogation of four Turkish and Pakistani intelligence operatives, and helping seed U.S. nuclear facilities with Turkish and Israeli Ph.D. students who in turn sold nuclear secrets abroad, primarily to Pakistan. The accused, who emphatically denies Ms. Edmonds' charges, is now a senior executive at a Washington lobbying firm.

A low-level contractor might seem poorly positioned to expose major breaches of national security, but the FBI translators' pool, riddled with corruption and nepotism, was key to keeping these secrets from surfacing. Ms. Edmonds' claims that the section was infiltrated by translators who should never have received security clearances and who were deliberately failing to translate incriminating material are supported by the Justice Department inspector general investigation and by an FBI internal investigation, which concluded that she had been fired after making "valid complaints."

Ms. Edmonds' revelations have attracted corroboration in the form of anonymous letters apparently written by FBI employees. There have been frequent reports of FBI field agents being frustrated by the premature closure of cases dealing with foreign spying, particularly when those cases involve Israel, and the State Department has frequently intervened to shut down investigations based on "sensitive foreign diplomatic relations."

Curiously, the state-secrets gag order binding Ms. Edmonds, while put in place by DOJ in 2002, was not requested by the FBI but by the State Department and Pentagon – which employed individuals she identified as being involved in criminal activities. If her allegations are frivolous, that

order would scarcely seem necessary. Under the Bush administration, the security gag order has been invoked to cover up incompetence or illegality, not to protect national security.

Both Mr. Grassley and Mr. Leahy – a Republican and a Democrat, who interviewed her at length in 2002 – attest to Ms. Edmonds' believability. The Department of Justice inspector general investigation into her claims about the translations unit and an internal FBI review confirmed most of her allegations. Former FBI senior counterintelligence officer John Cole has independently confirmed her report of the presence of Pakistani intelligence service penetrations within the FBI translators' pool.

Ms. Edmonds wasn't angling to become a media darling. She would have preferred to testify under oath before a congressional committee that could offer legal protection and subpoena documents and witnesses to support her case. She claims that a number of FBI agents would be willing to testify, though she has not named them.

Prior to 2006, Rep. Henry Waxman of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee allegedly promised Ms. Edmonds that if the Democrats gained control of Congress, he would order hearings into her charges. But following the Democratic sweep, he has been less forthcoming. It is suspected that Mr. Waxman fears that the revelations might open a Pandora's box, damaging Republicans and Democrats alike.

Ms. Edmonds' critics maintain that she saw only a small part of the picture in a highly compartmentalized working environment, that she was privy to only a fragment of a large operation to penetrate and disrupt the groups that have been stealing U.S. weapons technology. She could not have known operational details of what the FBI was doing and why.

That criticism is serious and must be addressed. If Ms. Edmonds was indeed seeing only part of a counterintelligence sting operation to entrap a nuclear network like that of A.Q. Khan, the government could now reveal as much in general terms, since any operation that might have been running in 2002 has long since wound down.

Regarding her access to operational information, Ms. Edmonds' critics clearly do not understand the intimate relationship that develops between FBI and CIA officers and their translators. Operations run against a foreign target in languages other than English require an intensive collaboration between field officers and translators. The translators are invariably brought into the loop because it is up to them to guide the officers seeking to understand what the target, who frequently is double talking or attempting to conceal his meaning, is actually saying.

That said, it should be conceded that Ms. Edmonds might sometimes have seen only a piece of the story, and those claims based on her own interpretation should be regarded with caution.

Still, Sibel Edmonds makes a number of accusations about specific criminal behavior that appear to be extraordinary but are credible enough to warrant official investigation. Her allegations are documentable; an existing FBI file should determine whether they are accurate.

It's true that she probably knows only part of the story, but if that part is correct, Congress and the Justice Department should have no higher priority. Nothing deserves more attention than the possibility of ongoing national-security failures and the proliferation of nuclear weapons with the connivance of corrupt senior government officials.

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