

Found in Translation

FBI whistleblower Sibel Edmonds spills her secrets.

By Philip Giraldi

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 whistleblower 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 Edmonds's 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 Edmonds's 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, Edmonds approached the *Sunday Times* of London. On Jan. 6, the *Times*, a 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, with follow-ups appearing in Israel, Europe, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Japan—but not in the United States.

Edmonds is an ethnic Azerbaijani, born in Iran. She lived there and in Turkey until 1988, when she emigrated to the United States, where she received degrees in criminal justice and psychology from George Washington University. Nine days after 9/11, Edmonds 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 back 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. Edmonds refers to ATC and AIPAC as "sister organizations." The group's founders include a number of prominent Americans involved in the Israel-Turkey relationship, notably Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, and former congressman Stephen Solarz. Perle and Feith had earlier been registered lobbyists for Turkey through Feith's company, International Advisors Inc. The FBI was interested in ATC

because it suspected that the group derived at least some of its income from drug trafficking, Turkey being the source of 90 percent of the heroin that reaches Europe, and because of reports that it had given congressmen illegal contributions or bribes. Moreover, as Edmonds told 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."

Over nearly six months, 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, 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, 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 Edmonds's attorney filed suit to obtain the documents related to her

firing, Atty. Gen. 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.

Charismatic and articulate, the 37-year-old Edmonds has deftly worked the system to get as much of her story out as possible, on one occasion turning to French television to produce a documentary entitled "Kill the Messenger." Passionate in her convictions, she 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, Edmonds comes across as credible. Her claims are specific, fact-based, and 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. Edmonds claims that Marc Grossman—ambassador to Turkey from 1994-97 and undersecretary of state for political affairs from 2001-05—was a person of interest to the FBI and had his phone tapped by the Bureau in 2001 and 2002. In the third-highest position at State, Grossman wielded considerable power personally and within the Washington bureaucracy. He had access to classified information of the highest sensitivity from the CIA, NSA, and Pentagon, in addition to his own State Department. On one occasion, Grossman was reportedly recorded making arrangements to pick up a cash bribe of \$15,000 from an ATC contact. The FBI also intercepted related phone conversations between the Turkish Embassy and the Pakistani Embassy that revealed sensitive U.S. government information was being sold

to the highest bidder. Grossman, who emphatically denies Edmonds's charges, is currently vice chairman of the Cohen Group, founded by Clinton defense secretary William Cohen, where he reportedly earns a seven-figure salary, much of it coming from representing Turkey.

After 9/11, Grossman reportedly intervened with the FBI to halt the interrogation of four Turkish and Pakistani operatives. According to Edmonds, Grossman was called by a Turkish contact who told him that the men had to be released before they told what they knew. Grossman said that he would take care of it and, per Edmonds, the men were released and allowed to leave the country.

Edmonds states that FBI phone taps from late 2001 reveal that Grossman tipped off his Turkish contact regarding the CIA weapons proliferation cover unit Brewster Jennings, which was being used by Valerie Plame, and that the Turk then informed the Pakistani intelligence service representative in Washington. It is to be assumed that the information was then passed on to the A.Q. Khan nuclear proliferation network.

Edmonds also claims that Grossman was instrumental in seeding Turkish and Israeli Ph.D. students into major American research labs by godfathering visas and enabling security clearances. She says that she reviewed transcripts in which the moles in the U.S. military and academic community involved in nuclear technology reportedly carried out several "transactions" involving the sale of nuclear material or information relating to nuclear programs every month, with Pakistan being a primary buyer. In the summer of 2000, the FBI recorded a meeting between a Turkish official and two Saudi businessmen in Detroit in which nuclear information stolen from an Air Force base in Alabama was offered: "We have a package and we're going to sell it for \$250,000," the wiretap allegedly recorded. "The network

appeared to be obtaining information from every nuclear agency in the United States," Edmonds told the *Times*.

She further reports that beginning in 1999, the FBI was investigating senior Pentagon officials who were assisting agents of foreign governments, including Turkey and Israel. Edmonds has not publicly named names at the Pentagon, but a website linked to her appears to be a non-incriminating instrument for identifying suspects without doing so directly. Its "rogues gallery" includes photos of Richard Perle and Douglas Feith. Perle was chief of the Pentagon's prestigious Defense Policy Board when Edmonds was working at the FBI, and Feith was undersecretary of defense for policy. If either were being investigated, it would be a matter of record, as would any reasons for dropping the investigation. "If you made public all the information that the FBI have on this case, you will see very high-level people going through criminal trials," Edmonds told the *Times*.

She claims to have also learned that corrupt officials in the Turkish and Israeli Ministries of Defense falsified end-user certificates on weapons purchased in the United States to enable sales to third countries not allowed access to the technology. Principal recipients include the five "Stans" in central Asia—Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, Edmonds says that former House speaker Dennis Hastert and at least two other congressmen were investigated as suspected recipients of illegal political contributions or even bribes from Turkish sources. Her website gallery includes photos of Congressmen Roy Blount, Dan Burton, and Tom Lantos, though she has not otherwise implicated any of the three directly.

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. Edmonds's 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." One translator, Melek Can Dickerson, who had worked for three Turkish front organizations under investigation—she failed to reveal this when applying for employment—allegedly stamped many documents of interest "not pertinent," removed classified documents from FBI premises, and forged signatures on classified documents relating to 9/11 detainees. An Urdu translator was the daughter of a Pakistani Embassy employee who worked for Gen. Mahmoud Ahmad, the head of the Pakistani intelligence service who is accused of authorizing a \$100,000 wire transfer to Mohammed Atta's Dubai bank account immediately before 9/11. The Justice Department IG report confirmed Edmonds's charge that translators' section managers issued a go-slow order shortly after the terrorist attacks to create an artificial backlog that would justify an increase in budget and manpower. Those managers are reportedly still in place. Some have been promoted.

Edmonds's 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 for-

eign diplomatic relations." One such anonymous letter, the veracity of which cannot be determined, cites transcripts of wiretaps involving Marc Grossman and a Turkish Embassy official between August and December 2001, described above, in which Grossman warned the Turk that Brewster Jennings was a CIA cover company. If the allegation can be documented from FBI files, the exposure of the Agency cover mechanism took place long before journalist Robert Novak outed the company in his column on Valerie Plame in 2003. The anonymous informant conveniently provides the FBI file number containing the transcripts of the recorded conversations: FBI Washington Field Office, Counterintelligence Division, Turkish Unit File 203A-WF-210023. According to the source, the FBI also recorded a subsequent conversation in which a Turkish official contacted the Pakistani Embassy to inform an ISI officer of Grossman's warning. The FBI also reportedly informed the CIA of the Grossman conversations to determine if there was any "conflict of interest," presumably to determine if the CIA was running its own operation that might be compromised as a result of the phone tap.

Curiously, the states-secrets gag order binding 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. It would have been much simpler for the government to marginalize her by demonstrating that she was poorly informed or speculating about matters outside her competency. Under the Bush administration, the security gag order has been invoked to cover up incompetence or illegality, not to protect national security. It has recently been used to conceal the illegal wiretaps of

the warrantless surveillance program, the allegations of torture and the CIA's rendition program, and to shield the telecom industry for its collaboration in illegal eavesdropping.

Both Senators Grassley and Leahy, a Republican and a Democrat, who interviewed her at length in 2002, attest to Edmonds's 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.

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, Congressman Henry Waxman of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee promised 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, failing to schedule hearings, refusing to take Edmonds's calls, and recently stonewalling all inquiries into the matter. It is generally believed that Waxman, a strong supporter of Israel, is nervous about exposing an Israeli lobby role in the corruption that Edmonds describes. It is also suspected that Waxman fears that the revelations might open a Pandora's box, damaging Republicans and Democrats alike.

Edmonds's 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 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, Edmonds's criticisms 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 Edmonds might sometimes have seen only a piece of the story, and those claims based on her own interpretation should be regarded with caution.

Another objection is that Edmonds would only have seen "raw intelligence" that does not provide nuance and does not really indicate whether someone is guilty. That argument has merit, and it is undeniable that many intercepted communications lack context. But it ignores the fact that someone recorded in the act of taking a bribe or interceding to have a suspect in a criminal investigation released is behaving with a certain transparency. One either takes money or does not. There is very little interpretation that can change that reality.

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 pri-

ority. 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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After Bhutto

Did Pakistan's democratic prospects die with her?

By Jason Motlagh

IN THE BITTER DAYS since Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, commentators around the world have cried martyrdom. The lofty narrative can trace its arc back to the beginning of last year, when the possibility of a return from exile was first floated. She knew all along it might be a fatal decision. Yet on the apparent eve of the country's self-destruction, the great hope of secular democracy flew back to save Pakistan.

Fate seemed to be in gear. On Oct. 18, just days after her return, Bhutto barely escaped a suicide attack that killed more than 140 supporters of her Pakistan People's Party and gave President Pervez Musharraf pretext to declare a state of emergency. She dug in, emerging from house arrest to wage a robust campaign. "Bhutto is alive!" she proclaimed at rallies. But the specter of her father Zulifkar's untimely death never strayed, and late last month she was shot dead at a park in Rawalpindi where Pakistan's first prime minister met the same end. Tryst with destiny or not, Benazir Bhutto showed guts.

For millions of liberal Pakistanis, and U.S. strategic interests in the region, the prospect of a stable Pakistan has never

looked more distant. Bhutto's killing animates the Islamic radicals who control lawless tribal areas and terrorize cities. The military is up to its usual heavy-handed antics, and the U.S. has no more tricks up its sleeve. Elections are postponed amid rolling bouts of violence. The PPP, the country's largest party, has lost its defining symbol.

But has democracy? Peel back the Bhutto hagiography, and her record is hardly that of a secular savior. She may have looked the part and recited the slogans, but Bhutto's years in power were tainted by an autocratic streak. Rampant corruption, mismanagement, idleness—these were the signposts of her regimes. Her party's failure to challenge the military rule, confront the burgeoning extremist groups, or champion the underclass among whom they have steadily gained purchase helped shape Pakistan into the geopolitical time bomb it is today.

The pressures did not build up overnight. They are a function of decades of lackluster governance, and Bhutto's time in power amounted to more of the same. During her first stint as prime minister, from 1988-90, she was unable to pass any significant legislation before