



Report Credits F.B.I. With Progress Since 9/11, but Says More Is Needed

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WASHINGTON — The F.B.I. has made great strides since the Sept. 11 attacks but urgently needs to improve its intelligence capabilities, hire more linguists and elevate the stature of its analysts to counter the rapidly evolving threats to the United States, according to a report released on Wednesday.

The report by the F.B.I. 9/11 Review Commission said the bureau had prevented catastrophic terrorist attacks but needed to improve its ability to collect information from people and to efficiently analyze it, contending that the bureau lags “behind marked advances in law enforcement capabilities.”

“This imbalance needs urgently to be addressed to meet growing and increasingly complex national security threats, from adaptive and increasingly tech-savvy terrorists, more brazen computer hackers and more technically capable, global cyber syndicates,” the report said.

The 2004 report of the national Sept. 11 Commission and subsequent

reviews called for major changes to the F.B.I., but the report released Wednesday was far less critical. Rather than a rebuke, it amounts to a status-check on the F.B.I. transformation that began in 2001.

Today's bureau bears little resemblance to that organization, and some of the areas cited for improvement are markedly better than they were years ago. For instance, the 2004 report said that two-thirds of the bureau's analysts were qualified to perform their jobs. The latest report, by contrast, said, "The training and professional status of analysts has improved in recent years."

And while the report said the F.B.I. needed more translators, it was much less critical of the bureau's foreign language ability than previous reports were.

Many of the report's recommendations related to issues that the F.B.I.'s director, James B. Comey, has raised since he took over the bureau in September 2013.

For instance, Mr. Comey has said that one of his biggest priorities is continuing the F.B.I.'s transformation from a law enforcement agency to an intelligence operation. Last year, he created a high-level executive position to oversee a branch division meant to expand the use of intelligence across all investigations. He has also said that raising the profile of analysts, and strengthening their relationships with agents, are among his chief priorities.

"I think this is a moment of pride for the F.B.I.," Mr. Comey said Wednesday at a news conference in Washington. "An outside group of some of our nation's most important leaders and thinkers has stared hard at us and

said, ‘You have done a great job at transforming yourself.’ They’ve also said what I’ve said around the country: ‘It’s not good enough.’”

He added, “There are a lot of ways you can be even better.”

The review commission was created by Congress in 2014 to assess the bureau’s progress since the attacks. In particular, the panel examined the extent to which the F.B.I. had put into effect the recommendations of the Sept. 11 Commission.

“Many of the findings and recommendations in this report will not be new to the F.B.I.,” the latest report said. “The bureau is already taking steps to address them. In 2015, however, the F.B.I. faces an increasingly complicated and dangerous global threat environment that will demand an accelerated commitment to reform. Everything is moving faster.”

The principal authors of the report were Bruce Hoffman, a professor of security studies at Georgetown University; Edwin Meese III, the former attorney general; and Timothy J. Roemer, a former House member from Indiana and former ambassador to India.

The report said that to improve its intelligence gathering and analysis, the F.B.I. needed to have more informants. The panel examined the details of five F.B.I. counterterrorism investigations. In none of those cases did a confidential source “provide actionable intelligence to help prevent or respond to a terrorist operation,” the report said.

It did not put all of the blame on the F.B.I., though, saying that budget cuts had “severely hindered the F.B.I.’s intelligence and national security programs.”

Rick Nelson, a former counterterrorism official on the National Security

Council, said that reports like the one released Wednesday were highly effective in keeping the pressure on the F.B.I. to continue to evolve.

“The transformation after 9/11 will go on for decades,” Mr. Nelson said.

“There are antibodies at the F.B.I., like any agency, that stand in the way of change. These reports keep the pressure on the agency to say, ‘We’re tracking you.’

“It also provides internal support for the agency to say, ‘We have a mandate for change.’ And that helps with getting more money from Congress. The F.B.I. can point to this report and say if you want us to do more human intelligence, we will need the money.”

The report said that the F.B.I. had enough linguists in its large offices but that they were in “short supply” in the rest of the country. Often, linguists use a virtual system to communicate remotely with agents and analysts working on cases.

“Hiring additional linguists and integrating them should be a high priority,” the report said.

The panel was particularly critical of how the F.B.I. treats its analysts. It said that “despite its stated intentions to address concerns from its analysts,” the bureau did not regard them as a “professional work force” that needed to be continually trained and educated. It said analysts needed to “be empowered to question special agent’s operational assumptions.”

The F.B.I. is far better at sharing information with other government agencies than it was before the Sept. 11 attacks, the report said. But it needs to improve how it communicates with local law enforcement authorities and the private sector.

“Looking ahead, the F.B.I. will be increasingly dependent upon all domestic and foreign partnerships to succeed in its critical and growing national security missions — including against the rapidly evolving cyber and terrorist threats,” the report said.

The report highlighted a simmering issue between the F.B.I. and the Justice Department’s national security division. Many in the F.B.I. believe the national security division “was too slow in reviewing” applications for wiretaps, the report said.

Matt Apuzzo contributed reporting.

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