



Zalmai Azmi | From New York City to Afghanistan to the FBI

Azmi is CIO of the FBI

- By Wilson P. Dizard III
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Intelligence IT leaders concentrate on information sharing because they all know that's probably ... the ultimate weapon to win this war on terrorism.' Zal Azmi, FBI CIO

Rick Steele

The terrorist attacks in 2001 put many federal CIOs into the role of managing new systems developed for homeland security and law enforcement.

Zalmai Azmi, now CIO of the FBI, is one of them.

But soon after the New York and Washington attacks, he was inserted into Afghanistan as a member of a special operations unit reporting to the intelligence community's National Counterterrorism Center.

Azmi was CIO of the Justice Department's Executive Office of the U.S. Attorneys on the day of the attacks. He was in his office at 600 E St. N.W. in Washington at the time.

The Justice Department agency launched its continuity-of-operations plan within hours, he said in a recent interview in his office at FBI headquarters.

'On 9/12, I was at Ground Zero with my staff, bringing up offices,' Azmi said. 'I spent about a week in New York bringing up offices.' The Justice Department quickly deployed new desktops and other systems to revive its New York operations.

'At the same time, while I was there, I got a call from some of my friends in the Marine Corps, and they asked me if I would be interested in inserting in Afghanistan with a special ops group. I said, fine, so I was detailed to the counterterrorism center at the [CIA], and I spent the next year working there,' Azmi said.

Azmi, who emigrated from Afghanistan with his family as a teenager, brought his fluency in five languages'Dari, Farsi, Pashtu, German and English'as an asset to the special operations work. He carried out two tours in Afghanistan during the year after the 9/11 attacks and also worked with NCTC in the capital region.

He returned to his previous Justice Department CIO job in 2002, but within months was plucked again for a counterterrorism assignment. Donna Bucella, director of the Terrorist Screening Center, asked him to help build the center's

At that point, FBI director Robert Mueller III tapped Azmi for the job of evaluating the bureau's computer systems.

He was a special assistant to Mueller for two months and acting CIO for six months. Azmi rose to permanent CIO in May 2004.

'When I became acting CIO, I started in-house evaluation of the Virtual Case File program,' Azmi said. Later, he hired contractor Aerospace Corp. of Columbia, Md. to size up the troubled case management system.

In March 2005, the FBI walked away from the VCF program at a cost of \$104 million [GCN.com/675].

Subsequently, the bureau launched the Sentinel case management project in May 2005.

Azmi noted that the anti-terrorist mission the FBI now has adopted has changed the face of the bureau's IT, even if some projects have carried over from before 9/11.

The FBI needed an infrastructure, a case management system, and a communications and collaboration platform before the terror attacks, he said. 'In that sense, we are working on the same projects.'

'But 9/11 has put every one of these activities on a fast track.' He added, 'The sense of urgency is the biggest driver for IT transformation within the bureau since 9/11.'

Amid the urgency of standing up the new case management system, Azmi and his staff have reshaped the bureau's IT acquisition process.

The Sentinel project is progressing through a series of design approval stages, and Azmi has established several other controls on the activities of the team led by systems integrator Lockheed Martin Corp. of Bethesda, Md.

'The biggest challenge we had with VCF was 'accountability,' Azmi said. 'We had runaway requirements, we didn't have good oversight of our contract management.' He cited VCF's problems with lifecycle methodology, meeting milestones, passing review gates, providing deliverables and assuring the quality of deliverables.

'Those are the mistakes that we are not going to repeat,' Azmi said. 'We have a program management office, we have the policies and procedures in place. We have the independent validation and verification process overseeing this program [as well].' The bureau is on track to roll out Sentinel's first phase next April, he said.

As for Sentinel contractor Lockheed, Azmi said, 'The control gate for them is to pass the final design review that is scheduled for October.'

Intelligence technology programs now are focused on improving information both horizontally across agencies and vertically within organizations, he said.

'When we are talking about challenges the government has to deal with, we are dealing with challenges such as standards,' Azmi said. 'We are dealing with challenges such as policy. We are dealing with challenges such as [whether] we have the infrastructure in place to seamlessly connect all these different organizations.

'Do we have the will and the desire and the support of the senior managers to change the culture in an organization?' Azmi asked rhetorically.

At the same time, intelligence agencies are working to maintain the privacy of the information they hold about U.S. persons and to simplify the federal classification system to foster information sharing.

Intelligence IT leaders 'concentrate on information sharing, because they all know that's probably the best weapon and the ultimate weapon to win this war on terrorism,' Azmi said.



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