

***Agent of Change: My Life Fighting Terrorists, Spies, and Institutional Racism***

Huda Mukbil (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023), 238 pages, photos, abbreviations, prologue, afterword, acknowledgments, notes.

**Reviewed by Joseph W. Gartin**

Huda Mukbil's *Agent of Change* is an affecting account of her experiences as—in her words—the first Black, Muslim, female intelligence officer in the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). The identifiers are important, not least as a multilingual immigrant whose family fled Ethiopia and eventually Egypt in search of safety before arriving in Montreal in November 1987. As the book's title suggests, Mukbil's background is also central to her story as a pathbreaking intelligence officer who found success but also formidable challenges trying to forge a career in the face of systemic discrimination.

Mukbil became a Canadian citizen in 1990 and graduated from Carleton University in June 2000. Encouraged by a professor, Mukbil applied to CSIS and entered on duty in February 2002. In those fraught months after 9/11, CSIS was grappling with how to fill its ranks with intelligence officers (IOs) who had the requisite language, cultural, and regional expertise needed to deal with the threat from Islamic extremism. CSIS had been formed in 1984 from elements of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and its ethos reflected a strong orientation toward law enforcement and a distinct lack of diversity. (66) Mukbil would find herself in a kind of no-woman's land: at once valued and distrusted because of her ethnicity, race, faith, and gender. The 9/11 attacks in her view had “racialized being Muslim,” forcing Mukbil to defend her “religious identity and to categorize [herself] as a moderate Muslim opposed to political violence.” (57–63)

This insider-outsider dichotomy would permeate Mukbil's experience in CSIS's IO Entry Training. In what she describes as the most diverse CSIS class since the service's formation in 1984, Mukbil would be commended for her, expertise and language skills, and yet continuously reminded of her otherness: “In our CSIS data search exercises, analysis, and findings, it was a racialized Muslim that we were trained to investigate. When given examples on how to conduct searches on the bulky computers of the nineties, names used during exercises were, more often than not, Middle Eastern names like

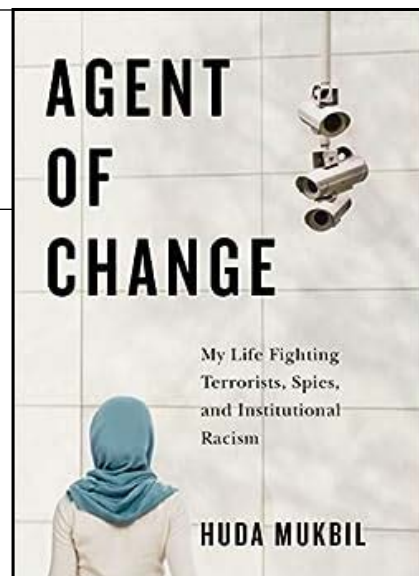
Mohammed and Ahmed.” (68)

Mukbil was assigned to CSIS's counterterrorism unit to work on Sunni extremism. Her sense of being both an insider and an outsider would be shaped by multiple factors, including her success working on CT issues, the US invasion of Iraq, the arrest in New York and rendition to Syria of Canadian-Syrian citizen Maher Arar, and her own faith journey as a Muslim woman in a distrusting organization. Her decision to begin wearing a hijab was personally important and professionally fateful: “The culture was deeply conformist and intolerant, and I was an unprepared fool.” (101)

In the years that followed, Mukbil served with distinction as a seconded officer in London after the terrorist bombings in July 2005 and was posted to Toronto as an investigator, but she would find herself repeatedly shunted aside, assigned to “backwater” projects, (154) passed over for desirable assignments, and confronted with pervasive prejudice. A colleague advised that to advance, Mukbil “needed to demonstrate [her] loyalty.” (186) By December 2016, overlooked once again for an important job, Mukbil reached a breaking point and initiated a lawsuit against CSIS—later joined by colleagues in a process that would last more than a year and play out in the courts and media. The final 20 pages of *Agent of Change* rush to a conclusion, thanks to nondisclosure agreements, (226) but the reader is left with little doubt about the challenges Mukbil experienced or her courage confronting them.



The reviewer: Joseph W. Gartin is the managing editor of *Studies*.



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