



One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 21, 2020

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

The Honorable Michael Pompeo
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf and Secretary Pompeo:

This week, Attorney General William Barr and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray made a disturbing announcement that the gunman in last December's deadly attack on a U.S. military base was in regular contact with Al Qaeda for years leading up to the attack. The gunman was a Saudi Air Force cadet receiving aviation training from the U.S. military, and his attack—which Attorney General Barr has described as an “act of terrorism”—killed three sailors and wounded eight others at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida.¹ According to the FBI, he had joined the Saudi military to carry out a “special operation.”² This development raises serious questions regarding the ability of both the U.S. and Saudi governments to appropriately vet Saudi nationals participating in joint U.S.-Saudi security programs.

In March 2019, *CNN* reported that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) was planning to carry out two training and advisory projects with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA): one on enhancing airport security and one on developing a Saudi air marshal program.³ These projects are much more involved than TSA's standard international training initiatives, as the KSA will reportedly reimburse TSA for the costs incurred in providing technical assistance and training,

¹ Mallin, Alexander and Barr, Luke, “Attorney General Barr announces expulsion of 21 Saudi trainees following probe of Pensacola shooter” (Jan. 14, 2020) *ABC News*, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-announce-expulsion-20-saudi-trainees-amid-probe/story?id=68247439>.

² Benner, Katie and Goldman, Adam, “F.B.I. Finds Links Between Pensacola Gunman and Al Qaeda” (May 19, 2020), *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/us/politics/justice-department-al-qaeda-florida-naval-base-shooting.html>.

³ Atwood, Kylie, and Geneva Sands, “US government training Saudis to build their own air marshal program,” *CNN*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/27/politics/tsa-agents-saudis-air-marshals/index.html>.

including the salaries of multiple full-time employees dedicated to the projects. The Committee hosted a briefing from TSA officials on these initiatives on April 4, 2019, and other Members and I expressed concern that an appropriate risk analysis had not been conducted. TSA officials reassured the Committee that they had not yet provided any training and that it was unclear whether the projects would move forward.

I am a strong proponent of international security cooperation and joint training efforts. I have long supported the continued efforts of TSA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the State Department to raise global aviation security standards. These agencies have worked diligently and collaboratively within international institutions and with allies and partners around the world to provide security training, exchange intelligence and information, and thwart multiple attempted terrorist attacks. I have endeavored throughout my tenure on the Committee on Homeland Security to support and enable such efforts as much as possible and will continue to do so.

Nonetheless, security agencies must conduct comprehensive risk assessments before entering into agreements to provide security training and assistance to foreign governments—especially governments with security records as questionable as that of the KSA. The Committee is not aware of any such risk assessment informing TSA’s proposed initiatives. If any assessment were conducted, it would make clear that the KSA is simply not the right partner for an unprecedented level of collaboration and aviation security training.

As I trust you are aware, fifteen of the nineteen hijackers in the September 11, 2001, attacks were Saudi nationals, and their potential ties to Saudi government actors remain the subject of ongoing litigation. More recently, the Saudi regime ordered the brutal murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which was reportedly carried out by a special operations group that received special operations training in the U.S. prior to the killing.⁴ These events were followed by the shooting in Pensacola, which displayed the risks posed by providing security training to inadequately vetted individuals.

I was encouraged when, after the Pensacola shooting, Attorney General Barr announced the expulsion of 21 Saudi trainees at military facilities across the U.S.⁵ Barr reported that 17 of the trainees “had social media containing jihadi or anti-American content,” while 15 “had had some kind of contact with child pornography.”⁶ Secretary of Defense Mark Esper also ordered a stop to all international military student training at U.S. installations.⁷ The Administration seemed to have learned the tragic lesson of the shooting and concluded that these sorts of training programs with the Saudis are unwise under current circumstances and given current vetting processes.

I was therefore surprised and disturbed when TSA notified Committee staff on April 21, 2020, that the U.S. Ambassador to the KSA had signed two Project Specific Agreements with the KSA,

⁴ Ignatius, David, “How the mysteries of Khashoggi’s murder have rocked the U.S.-Saudi partnership,” *Washington Post*, March 29, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-the-mysteries-of-khashoggis-murder-have-rocked-the-us-saudi-partnership/2019/03/29/cf060472-50af-11e9-a3f7-78b7525a8d5f_story.html.

⁵ Mallin.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Benner.

committing TSA to carrying out the two previously planned aviation security training and advisory projects. This news came in the middle of a pandemic that has infected nearly 600 TSA employees and, tragically, claimed 6 of their lives. TSA should be focusing its full attention on its existing programs, responding to the pandemic, and protecting the health of its employees and the traveling public—not on advancing plans to train Saudi agents to fly armed on planes. The timing of the announcement also raises questions about whether the Administration is using the cover of the pandemic to push through controversial plans while Congress is appropriately focused on responding to a crisis.

Further, the announcement that TSA and the State Department are moving forward with these projects came while the investigation into the Pensacola shooting was ongoing. There is no apparent urgency to advance these projects while the aviation industry is at a near standstill, and it would have been prudent to wait for the full results of the investigation at a minimum. In the time since the State Department signed these agreements with the KSA, we have learned that the U.S. government failed to notice continuous engagements between the Pensacola gunman and Al Qaeda operatives since 2015, which included collaborating on meticulous planning for the attack and communicating the night before it was carried out.

Moving forward with those plans in light of this week's discovery of gaping security vulnerabilities would be unconscionable. If the U.S. government, with all its intelligence and vetting capabilities, is unable to identify a Saudi student studying aviation at a U.S. military base and communicating regularly with Al Qaeda leaders to plan and carry out an attack on U.S. soil, then it should not train Saudi air marshals about whom it would have much less information.

I request that the Departments of Homeland Security and State immediately halt the implementation of these training and advisory projects until an adequate risk assessment has been conducted and the results have been briefed to Congress.

Thank you for your prompt attention to these critical issues.

Sincerely,



BENNIE G. THOMPSON
Chairman