

# Monitoring Students from Middle East State Sponsors of Terrorism in the United States:

## A Special Report

Oct 14, 1997



Brief Analysis

A significant loophole in U.S. immigration and national security policy allows students from terrorist-sponsoring countries in the Middle East-Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria-to enter the United States to study subjects that can potentially contribute to their countries' chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs. While the majority of foreign students are neither terrorists nor bombmakers, it would be foolhardy to ignore the risk that identified state sponsors of terrorism such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Syria may exploit the very openness of American society and weak U.S. student visa procedures to enter the United States and acquire technologies to build their chemical, nuclear, and biological weapons programs that would otherwise be prohibited to them by U.S. export control laws. Indeed, this has happened before. For example, after the Gulf War, UN weapons inspectors in Iraq uncovered documents that showed a purposeful Iraqi government strategy to send its students abroad, including to the United States, to study in weapons-related sciences in order to build Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Yet, thousands of students from Iran, Iraq and the other identified state supporters of terrorism in the Middle East are still coming to study in the United States, mostly in science-related fields and some apparently with funding from their governments.

Student Visa Application Process. Current U.S. procedures to screen out students who may be involved in terrorist activity or technology transfer are weak and ambiguous. Syrian and Sudanese students generally are not subject to any special clearance procedures. Iranian undergraduates and graduate students in all disciplines except nuclear-related science are only subject to an intermediate security check-not the more extensive background check required of Iranian graduate students in the nuclear field, as well as of most Iraqi and Libyan students. Only a very small number, if any, of student visas actually have been denied to students from terrorist-supporting countries; and a significant percentage of those initially denied entry due to concerns about terrorist activity and technology transfer have been allowed to appeal those decisions to the State Department and ultimately receive visas.

Monitoring Foreign Students. Until recently, the U.S. government did not attempt to keep track of what these students study, who finances them or any of their other activities once they enter the United States. The United States does not even have an effective way to keep track of these students' current addresses, let alone whether they are studying weapons-related sciences. Indeed, while they are about a half million foreign students in the United States, no one really knows how many foreign students-let alone students from terrorism-sponsoring countries-are in the United States at any given time. However, the State Department does keep figures for how many student visas have been issued annually showing that nearly 10,000 students from the state sponsors of terrorism in the Middle East were issued student visas to the United States over the past five years with about 80 percent of those visas issued to students from Iran and Syria.

While there is no available U.S. government data on what these students study or who funds their activities in the United States, a private educational organization, the Institute of International Education (IIE), does compile some of

this data. According to the IIE data, the vast majority of students from terrorism-sponsoring countries themselves report that they are studying in science-related fields, with a plurality studying some form of engineering. The IIE data also shows a significant percentage of these students themselves report that they receive funding from a non-U.S./non-family source, apparently the students' governments. However, because money is fungible and its ultimate source easily disguised, students who declared their source of funding as personal/family may, in fact, receive full or at least partial financing from their governments.

#### Policy Recommendations

- Require an in-depth security check for all students from the state sponsors of terrorism and deny visas to those seeking to study subjects that could enhance their countries' WMD programs;
- Prohibit state sponsors of terrorism from financing students in the United States;
- Develop an effective system to track the students, what they are studying and who is funding their activities in the United States; and
- Coordinate with U.S. allies because the United States is not the only country that attracts such students.

Pilot Program. Earlier this year, the INS took its first real step toward addressing the government's inability to monitor foreign students in the United States. This step was the formation of a pilot program to test the practicality of electronically collecting data on approximately 10,000 (about .02 percent) of the estimated 500,000 foreign students in the United States. Although this is not a comprehensive program, it is a valuable and focused testing experience which allows the government to monitor students through the university's own records. The results of this pilot program, however, remain to be seen as a report on the program is not due for submission to Congress until 2001.

#### GARY MILHOLLIN

The education and training of students in weapons-related sciences is a critical component in the development of WMD programs. Although the United States restricts the exportation of technology, equipment, and material that could be used to construct nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, the United States does not control the education, training and first-hand experiences that foreign students can gain from attending universities and other training sessions in the United States. For example, the National Air and Space Administration (NASA) has field-trained both Pakistani and Indian scientists in rocket technologies, and this training was instrumental in the development of nuclear programs in those nations. In addition, the United States was supplying Iraq with equipment immediately before Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Iraqi scientists-many who had been trained in the United States-used this U.S. technology to "reverse engineer" weapons that they could not have otherwise developed. The United States should not continue to engage and assist countries that do not comply with international treaties and policies to control the proliferation of WMDs. Engagement has never helped to change a nation, and it is often inimical to U.S. interests to appease hostile states by supplying them with WMD technologies.

Restricting Foreign Students. It is constitutionally and administratively possible to restrict both the students from state sponsors of terrorism and the study of technologies or sciences that could contribute to the establishment of WMD programs. First, the foreign students are not U.S. citizens and therefore are not entitled to the same rights. Additionally, the United States already has lists of technologies and dual use materials that cannot be exported to foreign countries. The specialization of university courses makes it feasible to forbid a student from specific countries with certified proliferation concerns from enrolling in specific classes or majors. Although there may be borderline courses (and lawyers will have to determine their availability to foreign students from terrorist sponsoring states) the prohibition of courses in WMD technologies will limit the potential national security risk posed by these students.

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

---

### Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

---

### Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

---

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

## TOPICS

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)