

Open Admissions:

U.S. Policy toward Students from Terrorism-Supporting Countries in the Middle East

Sep 1, 1997



In-Depth Reports

Note: In December 1999, the Institute published a [Research Note \(templateC04.php?CID=217\)](#) updating this Policy Focus.

Six years after revelations emerged that Saddam Hussein sent hundreds of Iraqi students abroad to study subjects that would help Baghdad develop its nuclear weapons program, the U.S. government continues to issue visas to students from Iraq and the other Middle Eastern countries on the State Department's list of "state sponsors of terrorism" -- Iran, Libya, Sudan and Syria -- to study in the United States, mostly in science-related fields and probably with funding from their governments.

Current U.S. visa procedures, which are intended to exclude students from terrorism-supporting states who may be involved in terrorist activity or who come to the United States to study "dual use" subjects (i.e., those that could contribute to their countries' efforts to develop missiles and/or nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons), are weak and ambiguous. Syrian and Sudanese students are generally not subject to any special clearance procedures; Iranian undergraduates (and graduate students in all disciplines except nuclear physics and related subjects) receive only an intermediate security check, not the more extensive background check required for Iranian graduate students in the nuclear field and nearly all Iraqi and Libyan students. Only a very small number of visas have actually been denied to students from terrorism-supporting states in the Middle East.

In addition, once these students enter the United States they are not subject to any effective monitoring or tracking procedure, which means that students can declare that they are studying benign subjects such as social sciences and then concentrate on nuclear physics, chemistry, biology, and engineering without anyone in the U.S. government becoming aware of the change. Syrian and Sudanese students are also allowed to travel repeatedly outside the United States -- back to their countries, to other terrorist-sponsoring states in the Middle East, or anywhere else -- without having to obtain a new visa or submit to an updated security check.

Finally, the data on students from terrorism-supporting states in the Middle East is incomplete, making it difficult to determine whether they present a threat to Washington's interest in preventing international terrorism and the transfer of technology to terrorism-supporting states in the Middle East.

To respond to these deficiencies, the United States should tighten its screening procedures to require a Security Advisory Opinion (SAO), its most in-depth background check, for all students from states that sponsor terrorism, and deny entry to such students seeking to study "dual use" subjects that could contribute to their countries' development of missiles and nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

Second, Washington should prohibit Iran, Sudan, and Syria from transferring funds to finance their students' studies in the United States, as is already done with students from Libya. Third, the U.S. government should quickly and fully implement Immigration and Naturalization Service recommendations for better monitoring and tracking of foreign

students once they are in the country.

Finally, Washington should coordinate with other nations that give student visas to applicants from terrorism-sponsoring countries in order to impede their access to weapons-related technologies as well as lessen the likelihood that potential terrorists will use a student visa to enter a third country such as Canada, as an easier route to eventual entry into the United States.

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