

Highlights of [GAO-05-801](#), a report to congressional committees

BORDER SECURITY

Actions Needed to Strengthen Management of Department of Homeland Security's Visa Security Program

Why GAO Did This Study

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 required that the Department of Homeland Security's on-site personnel in Saudi Arabia review all visa applications. The act also authorized the expansion of the Visa Security Program to other embassies and consulates to provide expert advice and training to consular officers, among other things. Given the congressional interest in effective implementation of the Visa Security Program, we assessed (1) the Visa Security Officers' activities in Saudi Arabia, and (2) DHS's plans to expand its Visa Security Program to other consular posts overseas.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Homeland Security (1) develop a strategic plan to guide visa security operations and (2) develop and maintain performance data that demonstrate the impact of the Visa Security Program.

In addition, Congress may wish to consider amending section 428(i) of the Homeland Security Act to allow DHS the flexibility to determine the extent to which the VSOs in Saudi Arabia will review applications, based upon the development of a risk-assessment tool.

We received comments from DHS and State, both of which agreed with our report. DHS stated it was developing a strategic plan and a system to measure program impact, as we recommended.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-801.

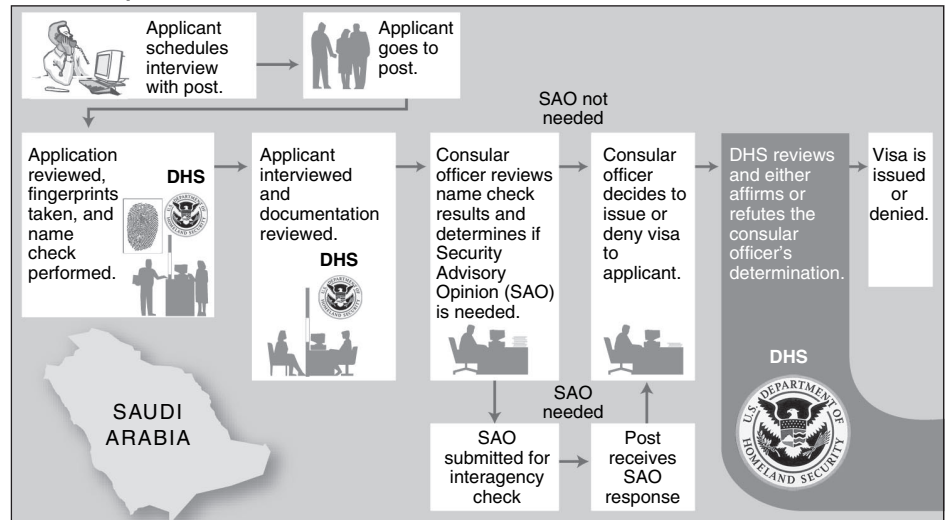
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Visa Security Officers (VSO) assigned to Saudi Arabia review all visa applications prior to final adjudication by consular officers, and assist consular officers with interviews and fraud prevention; however, no comprehensive data exists to demonstrate the VSOs' impact. According to State Department consular officers, the deputy chief of mission, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials in Saudi Arabia, the VSOs in Riyadh and Jeddah strengthen visa security because of their law enforcement and immigration experience, as well as their ability to access and use information from law enforcement databases not immediately available, by law, to consular officers. Furthermore, the requirement to review all visa applications in Saudi Arabia limits the VSOs' ability to provide additional training and other services to consular officers, such as assisting with interviews. Moreover, security concerns in Saudi Arabia limit staffing levels at these posts.

DHS has not developed a strategic plan outlining the Visa Security Program's mission, activities, program goals, and intended results for operations in Saudi Arabia or the planned expansion posts. Chiefs of mission at the five posts chosen for expansion in fiscal year 2005 delayed approving DHS's requests for the assignment of VSOs until DHS answered specific questions regarding the program's goals and objectives, staffing requirements, and plans to coordinate with existing staff and law enforcement and border security programs at post. DHS's development of a strategic plan may address outstanding questions from chiefs of mission and other embassy officials and help DHS expand the program.

DHS Participation in the Visa Process in Saudi Arabia



Sources: GAO; Nova Development (clip art), MapArt (map).