



Highlights of [GAO-05-994T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In adjudicating a visa application, Department of State (State) consular officers are on the front line of defense against those whose entry would likely be harmful to U.S. national interests. In October 2002, we identified shortcomings and made recommendations on the role of national security in the visa process. This testimony discusses our report issued today on actions taken since our 2002 report to strengthen the visa process, as well as areas that deserve additional management actions. It also discusses our July 2005 report on the status of the assignment of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) personnel to U.S. consular posts overseas.

What GAO Recommends

In our report issued today and our July report, we recommended further improvements to the visa process and the management of DHS's Visa Security Program. In addition, we recommended that Congress consider requiring State and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to report on the options for and feasibility of providing visa adjudicators with more detailed information from the FBI's criminal history records, and to allow DHS personnel in Saudi Arabia the flexibility to determine the extent of their application reviews.

State and DHS agreed with most of our conclusions. Both agencies indicated that they were taking

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

BORDER SECURITY

Strengthened Visa Process Would Benefit from Additional Management Actions by State and DHS

What GAO Found

State and DHS have taken many steps to strengthen the visa process as an antiterrorism tool. Consular officers are receiving clear guidance on the importance of addressing national security concerns through the visa process, and State has established clear procedures on visa operations worldwide. State has also increased its hiring of consular officers and language proficient Foreign Service officers, and has enhanced training and fraud prevention efforts. Further, consular officers have access to more information from intelligence and law enforcement agencies. However, some areas require additional attention. For example, officers we spoke with said that guidance is needed on DHS staff's roles and responsibilities overseas. In addition, while State has hired more consular officers, it continues to experience shortages in supervisory staff. As of April 30, 2005, 26 percent of midlevel positions were either vacant or filled by entry-level staff. During our February 2005 visits to three consular posts in Saudi Arabia and Egypt—all of which are of interest to U.S. antiterrorism efforts—the visa sections were staffed with first-tour officers and no permanent midlevel visa chiefs to provide direct oversight. Further improvements are also needed in training and fraud prevention, as well as information sharing with the FBI.

In September 2003, DHS assigned visa security personnel to consular posts in Saudi Arabia. According to DHS, State's consular officials, and the deputy chief of mission in Saudi Arabia, the DHS officers in Saudi Arabia strengthen visa security. However, DHS does not maintain comprehensive data on their activities and thus is unable to fully demonstrate the program's impact. Further, DHS has not developed a strategic plan for visa security operations in Saudi Arabia or for the planned future expansion of the program.

Improvements and Remaining Challenges to the Visa Process

Issue	Improvements	Issues requiring attention
Policy	Clarified policies on national security concerns	Guidance needed on DHS roles overseas, and <i>Foreign Affairs Manual</i> should be updated
Staffing	Increased hiring and focused recruitment	Shortages of midlevel and language proficient officers and unreliable data on wait times for applicant interviews
Training	Expanded consular training with an emphasis on counterterrorism	Courses needed on terrorism travel trends and fraud prevention, among others
Fraud Prevention	Increased fraud awareness	Standard criteria needed to identify high-fraud posts
Information sharing	More information available from other agencies for name checks	Additional information from FBI criminal history files would facilitate visa processing
DHS Visa Security Program	Stationing of officers in Saudi Arabia with plans for expansion	Comprehensive data and strategic plan needed

Source: GAO.