

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES**  
**UNITED STATES SENATE**  
**“International Military Student Vetting and Security Review”**

**Garry Reid**  
**Director for Defense Intelligence**  
**(Counterintelligence, Law Enforcement, and Security)**

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Chairman Ernst, Ranking Member Peters, distinguished members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today and address your questions regarding the Department of Defense Review of International Military Student Vetting and Screening procedures.

The tragic loss of life that occurred at the Pensacola Naval Air Station on December 6, 2019, will never fade from our memory. Three U.S. Navy service members perished on that day, and eight more were wounded, gunned down by a classmate in what was later determined by the U.S. Department of Justice to be an act of terrorism. This deadly attack shook the foundations of our military partnerships – through which we derive strategic advantages over our adversaries. The Pensacola military-civilian community grieved over the senseless loss of three young sailors eager to serve their country. The Department of Defense implemented a safety and security stand-down to take full stock of the situation. The Secretary of Defense ordered a full security review. New policies were put in place. Slowly our military departments took steps to resume training – realizing however that things will never get “back to normal.”

The mission continues. Every day, around the globe, US and foreign military personnel train and fight side-by-side to counter aggression and preserve freedom. As we mourn our fallen comrades, we cannot allow the actions of one person to unravel decades of security cooperation. Instead, we must take careful account of the policies, processes, and procedures we use to select

more than 20,000 International Military Students for training alongside our forces here in the United States each year. Four days after the Pensacola attack, the Deputy Secretary of Defense directed the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security to take immediate steps to 1) strengthen vetting for International Military Students (IMS); and 2) to complete a 10-day review of policies and procedures for screening foreign students and granting access to our bases. I would like to give you the unclassified highlights of this work, and offer a classified briefing to discuss some of the details.

With regard to the first task, the Department of Defense screened all current Saudi International Military Students using “Expedited Screening Protocol” procedures that were already developed within the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) as part of our Personnel Vetting transformation initiative. The term “expedited” refers to the application of automated checks of multiple data sets –including government data, commercial data, and publicly available data. The results of these automated data checks are reviewed and validated by trained security analysts. The intent of this process was to determine if there was any information that could be an indicator of elevated risk that was not previously identified as part of the International Military Student applicant screening and approval process.

This review produced a small number of returns that required additional analysis within the Department of Defense , but none that triggered any remedial action or further investigation by Federal authorities. It should be noted that the perpetrator of the Pensacola attack, and several Saudi Arabian officers that were associated with the shooter, were not subjected to this internal Department of Defense review. Separately, however, the Department of Defense worked closely with the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation in support of their investigation into the attack. On January 13<sup>th</sup>, the Attorney General announced the results of this investigation, concluding that the shooter was motivated by jihadist ideology, and that this was an act of terrorism.

While there was no evidence of assistance or pre-knowledge of the attack by other members of the Saudi military (or any other foreign nationals) who were training in the United States, during the investigation of the shooter we learned of derogatory material possessed by twenty-one members of the Saudi military who were training in the United States. The relevant U.S. Attorneys offices independently reviewed each of the 21 cases involving derogatory information and determined that none of the cases would, in the course of a normal federal investigation, result in federal prosecution. Nonetheless, our Service Secretaries and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency determined that these international military students failed to meet the professional standards expected of students participating in our foreign military training programs. The Department of Defense worked with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to withdraw the students from training and return them to Saudi Arabia.

Regarding the 10-day review of policies and procedures, the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security established a Vetting and Security Review (VSR) team, led by a Senior Defense security policy official. A primary goal for this review team was to more closely align screening and security procedures for foreign students with those for U.S. personnel. The review team included representatives from across the DoD, including all four Military Services, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, and others. Participants brought expertise in physical security, vetting, international affairs and security cooperation, counterintelligence and law enforcement, and many other disciplines. The Department of State and the United States Customs and Border Protection also participated in this review team and provided valuable insight. We focused this initial review on International Military Students from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – with whom we have an outstanding history of security cooperation. Follow on reviews will examine all International Military Students and sending nations.

The review included an assessment of information obtained and processed prior to the Saudi International Military Student traveling for training to the United States, an assessment of vetting procedures occurring prior to the Saudi International Military Student departing for the United States, an assessment of vetting procedures at the Saudi International Military Student's

point of arrival, and an assessment of vetting procedures ongoing while the Saudi International Military Student is in the US. We analyzed what information on the Saudi International Military Student was available for screening, which data holdings were checked, and how any derogatory information identified in those checks was handled. We analyzed the training requirements and credentialing procedures for Saudi International Military Students. And we looked at firearms and physical security policy and procedures for Saudi International Military Students.

After the team completed their review, they generated a 12-page classified report that made six recommendations to address their 21 findings. We found that for issues from security to suitability, the Department of Defense is overly reliant on the vetting conducted by the Department of State as part of the assessment of eligibility for A-2 visas, and that there is insufficient information sharing within Department of Defense and between Department of Defense and the Department of State. We also found that Department of Defense programs meant to detect and mitigate events such as the Pensacola attack did not cover International Military Students. We learned that Department of Defense policies for International Military Students' possession of firearms varied at the installation level, and at the Federal level there are ways to bypass firearms restrictions for non-immigrant visa holders.

We are well underway to implement the recommendations in the report. Additional screening and vetting measures are in effect for all current and future International Military Students. The Secretary of Defense has issued new policies related to access credentials and possession of privately owned firearms and ammunition for International Military Students. We will build on this with additional changes that reach across the entire International Military Student and foreign affiliate landscape in the Department of Defense. In my role as the Defense Security Executive, I established a Vetting and Security Review Improvement Integration Group, co-chaired by my office and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, to oversee and coordinate these efforts. Four subordinate working groups are working to implement the full set of recommendations. I would be happy to provide further details on the report and our efforts to implement the recommendations in a classified setting.

In closing, it's important to note that this work is not singularly focused on the tragic events that occurred at the Pensacola Naval Air Station. Protecting our personnel and our military bases is a top priority for the Secretary of Defense. Across the Department of Defense we are actively reinforcing our Insider Threat programs, improving base security, and strengthening our counterintelligence posture. Within the Federal Government, we are in the midst of the most significant reform of the Background Investigation process in decades, adopting new technologies and improving our awareness of personnel security threats. We appreciate all of the Congressional support we have received over the past several years to provide resources and authorities for the full range of Department of Defense security, counterintelligence, law enforcement, and insider threat programs. It was this ongoing work that enabled us to quickly adapt the International Military Student vetting process. We will continue to modernize our vetting and security enterprises for all trusted personnel that live, work, and do business on Department of Defense installations around the world.

Thank you again for your interest in these important matters. I look forward to your questions.