

TRUMP'S MUSLIM BAN IGNORED THE MOST DANGEROUS

The NYT has a long piece describing how Saudi Lieutenant Mohammed Alshamrani managed to get recruited into an elite flight training program, accepted into training in the US, granted a diplomatic visa and then the hunting license that allowed him to murder three sailors on a base in Pensacola last year, all with social media and call records making it clear he had ties to al Qaeda.

The entire thing is worth reading, both for the seeming Saudi indifference to their own vetting and for the discussion about ongoing tensions as DOD attempts to vet those it trains. The key problem, however, is that Alshamrani fell through the holes on both of the vetting programs purportedly set up to keep out people like him. Not only did Trump's Muslim ban not exclude Saudis (from where more terrorists have come to attack the US than any other country, with the possible exception of Pakistan), but the increased vetting he demanded did not apply to diplomatic visas like the one he came in on.

After passing through the hands of Saudi authorities, Lieutenant Alshamrani's application for a visa to the United States landed in the consular section of the American Embassy in Riyadh in the summer of 2017.

The lieutenant's information was first fed into a database kept by a special Department of Homeland Security vetting unit that has operated in Saudi Arabia after the Sept. 11 attacks. A consular officer used his passport and photograph to run still more checks – including facial recognition searches – on powerful databases fed by the American government's central repository of

information about terrorist identities.

It is not uncommon for the searches to turn up information that prevents military trainees from obtaining visas. But American Embassy officials, who are largely restricted from knocking on doors and taking other steps associated with deep background investigations, did not check the lieutenant's social media history because such checks were not required at the time. Lieutenant Alshamrani's application raised no suspicions.

One problem was that he was applying for a diplomatic visa as part of the elite training programs that are often important components of multibillion-dollar arms sales. In the last five years alone, Saudi Arabia has bought more than \$45 billion in American weapons and training.

Although the State Department had cabled all embassies at Mr. Trump's orders earlier in 2017 to step up screening of visas, the extra scrutiny was applied to immigrant visas and not to diplomatic applications, a senior American Embassy official in Riyadh said.

And the Insider Threat program set up in the wake of the Nidal Hassan killings focused exclusively on Americans, not foreign trainees.

The Pentagon system to monitor insider threats – created after the fatal shootings at Fort Hood and the Washington Navy Yard – was focused only on American service members, not on the 5,000 international military students who were training in the United States, including some 850 Saudis.

Normally, I'm of the mind that the national security dragnet will not catch every potential

terrorist. But in this case, Alshamrani succeeded precisely because Trump's racist ban was focused not on efficacy, but on bigotry, exempting precisely those who posed the most risk.

This should be a focus of bipartisan hearings – and it should draw more focus than whether or not Trump can drink a glass of water. Not because we need more dragnets, but because we need existing vetting programs to be focused on the most dangerous threats.