

Highlights of GAO-03-1013T, a testimony before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship

Why GAO Did This Study

Since September 11, 2001, visa operations have played an increasingly important role in ensuring the national security of the United States. The Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Justice, as well as other agencies, are involved in the visa process. Each plays an important role in making security decisions so that potential terrorists do not enter the country. In two GAO reports, we assessed the effectiveness of the visa process as an antiterrorism tool.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made numerous recommendations to strengthen the visa process as an antiterrorism tool. Among them, GAO recommended that the Department of Homeland Security, in conjunction with the Departments of State and Justice, develop specific policies and procedures for the interagency visa revocation process to ensure that when State revokes a visa because of terrorism concerns, the appropriate units within State, Homeland Security, and the FBI are notified immediately and that proper actions are taken. State said it is using our recommendations as a roadmap for making improvements in the visa process. Homeland Security agreed that the visa process should be strengthened as an antiterrorism tool.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-1013T.

To view the full testimony, 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

New Policies and Increased Interagency Coordination Needed to Improve Visa Process

What GAO Found

Our analysis of the visa process shows that the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Justice could more effectively manage the visa process if they had clear and comprehensive policies and procedures and increased agency coordination and information sharing. In our October 2002 report on the visa process as an antiterrorism tool, we found that

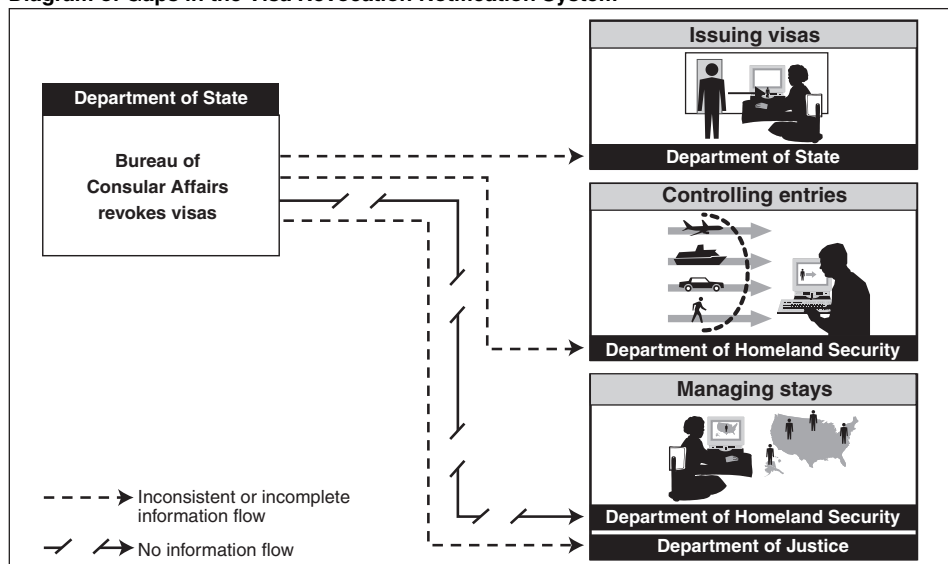
- State did not provide clear policies on how consular officers should balance national security concerns with the desire to facilitate legitimate travel when issuing visas; and
- State and Justice disagreed on the evidence needed to deny a visa on terrorism grounds.

In our June 2003 report, we found that State had revoked visas for terrorism concerns but that

- The revocation process was not being used aggressively to alert homeland security and law enforcement agencies that individuals who entered the country before their visas were revoked might be security risks; and
- The process broke down when information on revocations was not being shared between State and appropriate immigration and law enforcement officials.

These weaknesses diminish the effectiveness of the visa process in keeping potential terrorists out of the United States.

Diagram of Gaps in the Visa Revocation Notification System



Sources: GAO and Art Explosion.