

January 18, 2022

The Hon. Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Hon. Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20528

Secretaries Blinken and Mayorkas,

I write with alarm over reports that the Islamic terrorist who took hostages at a Jewish synagogue in Texas this past weekend was granted a travel visa, despite his long criminal record and a series of red flags. This failure comes in the wake of the Biden Administration's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan and failure to vet the tens of thousands who were evacuated to our country. I have repeatedly called on this Administration to require in-person vetting to avoid precisely the sort of terrorist incident we witnessed this weekend. Yet the Biden Administration has moved in the opposite direction, waving in-person vetting for new classes of visa holders. It is time to reverse this trend and begin enforcing our immigration laws. A key step in this effort is understanding how your agencies allowed the terrorist who took hostages in Texas into this country despite his known background.

The hostage crisis this weekend was an anti-Semitic attack on the Jewish community in a house of worship. It was perpetrated by an Islamic terrorist who had a criminal history and yet was able to obtain a travel visa to the United States during the pandemic. On December 27, 2021, he traveled from the United Kingdom to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City, where he was welcomed into this country just weeks before the terrorist attack. But this all could have been averted if your Departments had adequately vetted his visa application and stopped him at the airport.

According to reports,¹ the Islamic terrorist had a lengthy criminal history. He was a 44-year British citizen with a number of red flags:

¹ Martin Evans et al., *Texas synagogue terrorist was able to enter US from Britain despite 'series of red flags' US officials accused of 'dropping ball', as they claim there was no intelligence to suggest Malik Faisal Akram should have been denied entry*, Telegraph (Jan. 17, 2022), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/01/17/texas-synagogue-terrorist-imprisoned-three-times-gave->

- In 1996, he served a 6-month jail sentence for violent disorder following a baseball bat attack on a member of his extended family.
- In 1997, he served another jail term for destruction of private property.
- In 1999, he was jailed for harassment and, after release, jailed again for violating the terms of his release.
- In September 2001, he was banned from a local courthouse for threatening staff on multiple occasions, including on days when he was not due in court. According to reports, he would rant about the September 11 attacks.
- In 2012, he was arrested for stealing a phone and robbing a man of £5,000.
- While serving time in prison, he was reported by the prison Imam for “concerning and disruptive behavior” at Friday prayers.
- He regularly visited Pakistan and was reportedly a member of Tablighi Jamaat—an Islamic organization banned in several countries and known for its ties to terrorism.
- He regularly participated in anti-Semitic demonstrations and marched for the release of terrorist prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay.

According to reports, he was also known to British intelligence and was recently a “subject of interest.”² How is anyone with this background allowed to enter our country? Indeed, that was the same reaction that the terrorist’s brother and neighbors had. Either your Departments knowingly allowed entry to someone with demonstrated sympathies for terrorist organizations and predilection toward violence, or they failed to conduct even a cursory background check.

Even during the standoff with the terrorist while he was still alive, the Biden Administration was in denial that an anti-Semitic terrorist attack was underway. The FBI’s Special Agent in Charge said, “We do believe from our engaging with this subject that he was singularly focused on one issue, and it was not specifically related to the Jewish community.”³ An Islamic terrorist had a rabbi and other members of the congregation at gunpoint, held as hostages, in the Jewish synagogue, and yet the Biden Administration could not bring itself to recognize this abhorrent anti-Semitic attack.

The failure to adequately vet those entering our country is nothing new. The Biden Administration’s botched withdrawal from Afghanistan led to the evacuation of tens of thousands of Afghans into the United States. We now know that these individuals were not adequately vetted and did not undergo in-person vetting, as recommended by the 9/11 Commission.

[fake-address/](#); Lizzie Dearden, *Texas synagogue siege: British hostage-taker Faisal Akram ‘ranted about 9/11 attacks’*, Independent (Jan. 17, 2022), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/texas-synagogue-faisal-akram-911-b1994525.html>.

² Frank Gardner et al., *Texas synagogue hostage-taker was known to MI5*, BBC (Jan. 18, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-60038207>.

³ Alaa Elassar et al., *FBI identifies hostage-taker at Texas synagogue*, CNN (Jan. 17, 2022), https://lite.cnn.com/en/article/h_3671eb9d44a1bc4530e074fd9dcdb851.

I have repeatedly called on the Biden Administration to address this issue and conduct in-person vetting.

- In October 2021, I criticized the Department of Defense over revelations that the Biden Administration was more focused on packing exit planes with evacuees than conducting proper vetting.⁴
- On November 16, 2021, I questioned Secretary Mayorkas at a Judiciary Committee hearing over his failure to vet tens of thousands of evacuees.⁵
- On December 16, 2021, I wrote to Secretary Blinken with two of my Republican colleagues requesting further information regarding the vetting of Afghan refugees.⁶

Yet at the same time, your Departments have moved in the opposite direction, going to so far as to waive the use of in-person interviews for entire classes of visa applicants—policies that I demanded you rescind in my January 5, 2022 letter addressed to you both.⁷

It is past time to begin conducting in-person vetting of immigrants to this country. That is what the 9/11 Commission report strongly recommended. It should now be clear that this is necessary to protect U.S. citizens from terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

So that Congress can consider remedial legislation, please provide the following information by January 21, 2022:

1. Did the Islamic terrorist receive an in-person interview before he was permitted entry into the United States?
2. Were federal agencies aware of the Islamic terrorist's criminal record when it granted his travel visa to the United States?
3. Was the intelligence community aware of any derogatory information on the Islamic terrorist at the time that he entered the United States?
4. On what basis did your Departments grant the Islamic terrorist his travel visa?

⁴ See, e.g., Jordan Boyd, *Hawley Presses Pentagon Official on Why Administration Prioritize Packing Planes Over Vetting Afghan Evacuees*, *The Federalist* (Oct. 26, 2021), <https://thefederalist.com/2021/10/26/hawley-presses-pentagon-official-on-why-administration-prioritized-packing-planes-over-vetting-afghan-evacuees/>.

⁵ *Hawley Grills Mayorkas on Failure to Fully Vet Afghan Refugees, Biden Border Crisis*, Hawley Press Office (Nov. 16, 2021), <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/hawley-grills-mayorkas-failure-fully-vet-afghan-refugees-biden-border-crisis>.

⁶ Letter from Senators Johnson, Hawley, Scott, to Secretary Mayorkas and Secretary Blinken (Dec. 16, 2021), available at <https://www.ronjohnson.senate.gov/services/files/AB9408DB-23C5-461C-ACA2-4F1B902D06FA>.

⁷ Letter from Sen. Hawley to Secretary Blinken and Secretary Mayorkas (Jan. 5, 2022), available at <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/hawley-demands-dos-and-dhs-rescind-new-policies-eliminating-person-interviews-visa-applicants>.

5. What plans do your Departments have to implement in-person vetting and other measures in the wake of this terrorist attack?
6. Do you acknowledge that this was an anti-Semitic attack by an Islamic terrorist in a religious house of worship?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, trailing flourish at the end.

Josh Hawley
United States Senator