

27 Deemed to Be Threats Held Aviation Licenses

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WASHINGTON

The Transportation Security Administration cannot determine the real identities of thousands of the people to whom the Federal Aviation Administration has issued licenses as pilots and aircraft mechanics, but has located an additional 27 who should not have held them because of terrorist connections, according to an internal report by the Department of Homeland Security.

The report was requested two years ago by four senators after a private data analysis company in New York determined that the man convicted of bombing Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 still held an F.A.A. license, as did a man caught trying to smuggle military equipment to Hezbollah in Lebanon, a man convicted of trying to make an airborne poison in his basement and a self-described eco-terrorist who fled the country after he was indicted on a charge of arson.

The F.A.A. and the Department of Homeland Security were supposed to scour the list of licensed pilots, mechanics and flight dispatchers for terrorists under a law approved by Congress after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, but they have had difficulties doing so despite having access to much more information than the private company.

The new report, by the inspector general of the Department of Homeland Security, found that the F.A.A. had Social Security numbers of only about 750,000

people out of the 1.3 million names in its Airmen Registry, and that among those for whom it had numbers, more than 15,000 of them did not match the Social Security database for name, sex or date of birth. By law, the F.A.A. cannot require a Social Security number, the report noted, and as a result, "T.S.A. may not identify U.S. citizens who have provided false biographic information to receive an airman certificate."

Not all of the discrepancies represent a potential security threat; the report said that more extensive study over the past few years found that 8,000 of the license holders were dead.

The report offers no details about the 27 individuals whose certificates were canceled, but does indicate the poor state of federal records, almost a decade after the Sept. 11 attacks. An initial computer scan found about 29,000 certificates that matched names on the government's Terrorist Screening Database, but further study found that 28,500 of the matches were invalid; 506 were turned over for closer scrutiny, yielding the 27 names.

The report does not mention any technique other than matching names. The New York company, Safe Banking Systems in Mineola, found some of the suspect individuals by matching names. But it contends that names are a poor identifier; they can be misspelled or, if they originate in a non-Roman alphabet, they can be spelled inconsistently when rendered in English. The Libyan convicted in the Lockerbie bombing was listed in F.A.A. records as Abdelbaset Elmegrahi; on the

F.B.I.'s 10 Most Wanted list, he was Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi. Safe Banking Systems, using only publicly available data, found some suspect individuals by matching addresses or other data.

The company's main line of business is to work for banks, matching their lists of depositors with Commerce Department lists of individuals whom banks are not supposed to transact business with because they are connected to terrorists, drug dealers or corrupt foreign officials. While doing those matches, it found some suspect pilots. But the new Homeland Security report does not indicate that the government made use of any of its lists of those suspected of being drug dealers or gun runners and of other individuals except for the Terrorist Screening Database.

Marta R. Metelko, a spokeswoman for the Homeland Security inspector general, said the agency could not answer these questions "without divulging sensitive information."

John D. Rockefeller IV, one of the senators who requested the investigation, said Thursday that the report "shows that almost 10 years after the 9/11 attacks, the F.A.A. is still not doing enough to verify the identity of airman's certificate holders and that some certificate holders have connections to terrorism." Mr. Rockefeller, who is a West Virginia Democrat and chairman of an aviation subcommittee, said that the F.A.A. and Homeland Security were making progress, but that "issuing certificates to people who pose a threat to our aviation system is simply unacceptable."

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