

Lauren Woods | Security Assistance Monitor



*U.S. and Saudi Arabian forces conduct a closing ceremony. Source: N.Y. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Harley Jelis via Flickr*

## U.S. FOREIGN MILITARY TRAINING TO SAUDI ARABIA IN CONTEXT

Four Saudis who participated in the killing of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi reportedly received paramilitary training in the United States in 2017<sup>1</sup>. This case has highlighted the ongoing training the U.S. government and defense contractors provide for members of Saudi Arabia's military and raised questions about the vetting of participants. Under Leahy Laws, the U.S. government is prohibited from providing funding to train units of foreign security forces where there is credible information tying them to a gross violation of human rights<sup>2</sup>. But because Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Gulf countries frequently purchase their own security training through commercial processes, they are exempt from Leahy laws vetting. This is a significant loophole that means members of the Saudi military who undergo U.S. training are not subject to the same human rights scrutiny that members of most other militaries would face. However, members of the Saudi military still undergo other vetting, including checks for ties to terrorism, drug trafficking, corruption, and other criminal conduct<sup>3</sup>. Members of the team implicated in the killing of Khashoggi, the Saudi Rapid Intervention Group, are tied to at least a dozen operations since 2017, including forcibly repatriating Saudis from other countries and detaining and abusing prisoners<sup>4</sup>.

1 Mark Mazzetti, Julian E. Barnes, and Michael LaForgia, "Saudi Operatives Who Killed Khashoggi Received Paramilitary Training in U.S.," *The New York Times* (June 22, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/us/politics/khashoggi-saudi-kill-team-us-training.html>.

2 "Leahy Law Fact Sheet - United States Department of State," U.S. Department of State (January 19, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/human-rights/leahy-law-fact-sheet/>.

3 Miriam Berger, "Saudis Have Come for U.S. Military Training for Decades. Here's Why and How," *The Washington Post* (December 8, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/12/07/saudis-have-come-us-military-training-decades-heres-why-how/>.

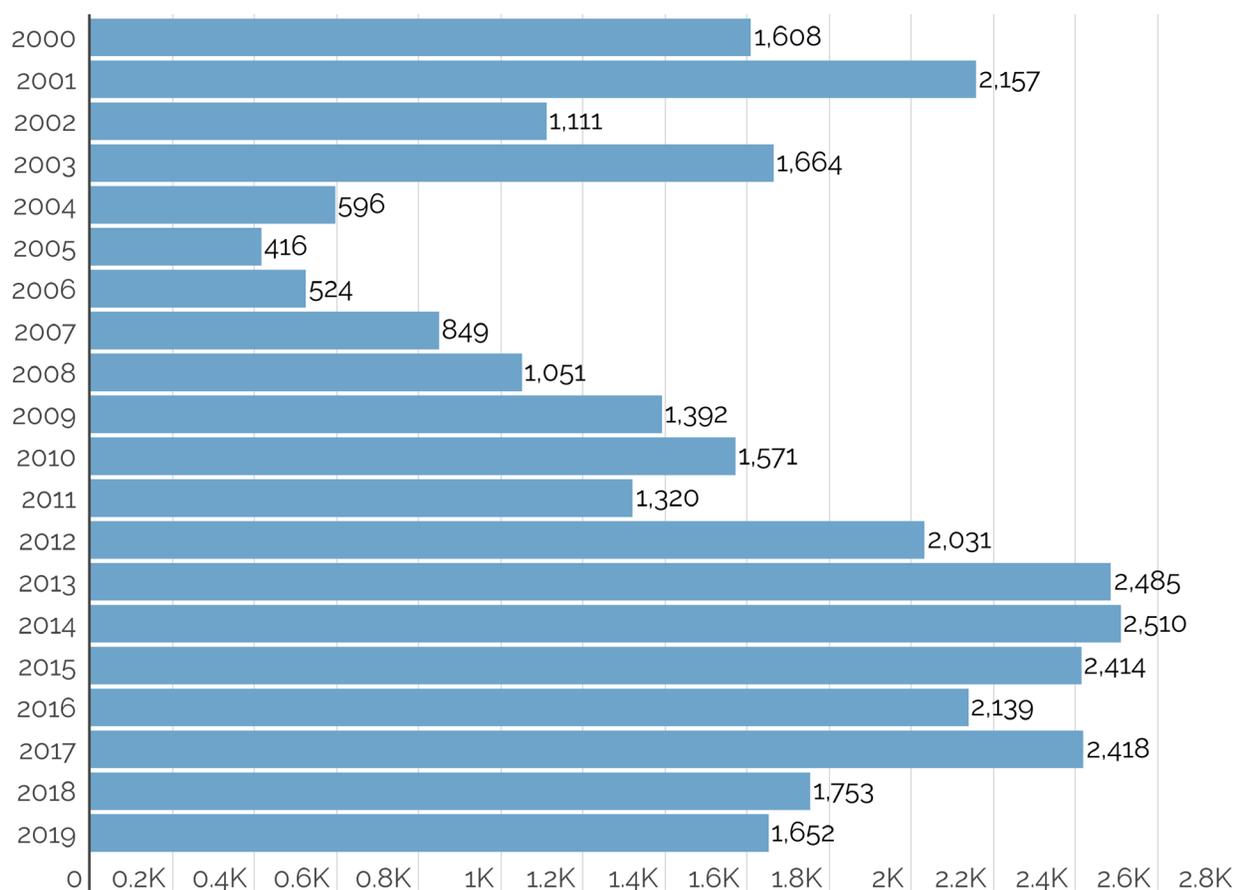
4 Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, "It Wasn't Just Khashoggi: A Saudi Prince's Brutal Drive to Crush Dissent," *The New York Times* (March 17, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/world/middleeast/khashoggi-crown-prince-saudi.html>.

## ISSUES IN TRANSPARENCY

The Departments of Defense and State are required by law to release an annual report on military training provided to foreign military personnel by the Departments of Defense and State during the previous year, as well as proposed training for the current year<sup>5</sup>. Although the reports are due by January 31 of each calendar year, the last publicly available Foreign Military Training report covers 2018 and 2019. This makes it difficult to track current foreign military training in a timely manner.

Even more significantly in the case of Saudi Arabia, the country often purchases foreign military training commercially from defense contractors. This was the case in 2017, when the Saudi Rapid Intervention Group trained with the Arkansas-based security company Tier 1 Group, owned by the private equity firm Cerberus Capital Management. Because U.S. legislation only requires reporting on military training provided “by the Department of Defense and the Department of State,” the purchase of commercial training by the Saudi government, licensed by the Department of State, creates another loophole that allows this training to proceed without public notice.

Number of Saudi Foreign Military Students Trained by the Departments of State and Defense, FY2000-2019

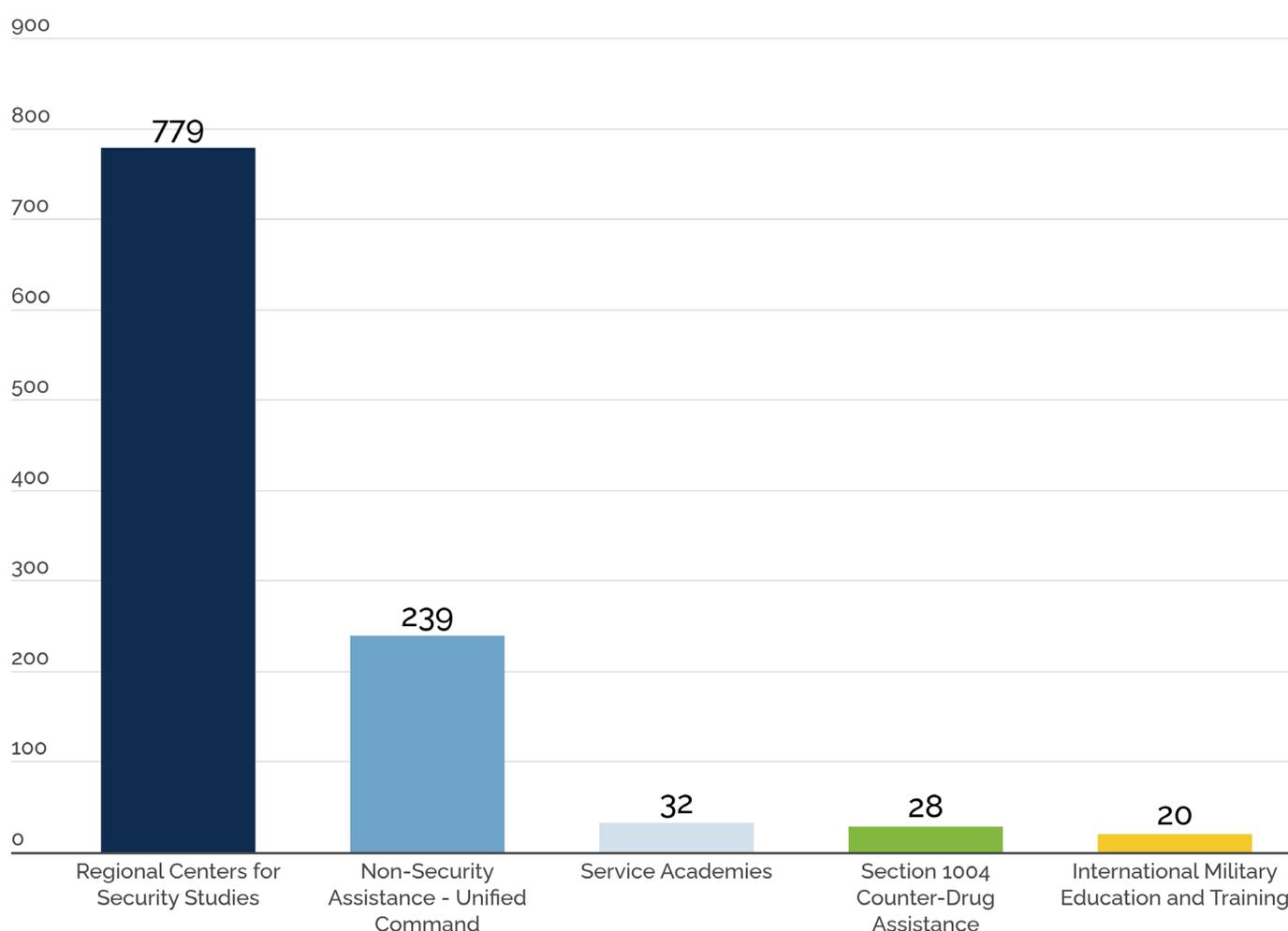


<sup>5</sup> “[USC05] 22 USC 2416: Annual Foreign Military Training Report,” (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2021), <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid%3AUSC-prelim-title22-section2416&num=0&edition=prelim>.

## RECENT SALES AND TRAININGS

Despite concerns over human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, including the Saudi coalition conducting air strikes in Yemen, in December 2020, the U.S. Department of State approved a possible Foreign Military Sale to Saudi Arabia of support services, including technical assistance and advisory support to Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Defense for an additional five years, through the U.S. Military Training Mission to Saudi Arabia, located in Riyadh, as well as related equipment, for an estimated cost of \$350 million<sup>6</sup>. The official notification from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency reads, “This proposed sale will support the foreign policy goals and national security objectives of the United States by improving the security of a friendly country that is a force for political stability and economic progress in the Middle East.” Despite severe human rights concerns in Saudi Arabia and the knowledge of Khashoggi’s death, the United States continues providing training to Saudi Arabia’s military.

Number of Saudi Foreign Military Students Trained in Programs Funded by U.S. Taxpayers, FY2000-2019



<sup>6</sup> “Saudi Arabia – Security Assistance Office (SAO) Support Services, U.S. Training Mission to Saudi Arabia (USMTM),” (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, December 1, 2020), <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/saudi-arabia-security-assistance-office-sao-support-services-us>.