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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

KEITH B. ASHDOWN, STAFF DIRECTOR
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February 25, 2015

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is examining the events surrounding the recent evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a, Yemen. The Committee wants to ensure the State Department is following proper procedures for evacuating diplomatic facilities, while ensuring that Department personnel take necessary steps to protect sensitive information housed within these facilities. I request your assistance with this matter.

For months, tensions between rebel factions in Yemen have been on the rise, with violence reaching a high in recent weeks. Rebel groups have continued to make advancements throughout Yemen, with factions seizing control of large portions of the country within the past few months.¹ During this period, the Department deliberated on when it would ultimately order the evacuation of U.S. diplomatic personnel serving in Sana'a, Yemen—weighing how long personnel could continue to work safely in the country. Facing a deteriorating security situation in Yemen's capital city, the Department confirmed the closing and evacuation of the U.S. Embassy facility in Sana'a on February 10, 2015.² Following the Department's decision to close the facility, U.S. military assets assisted with the evacuation of diplomatic personnel from the country.

Shortly after the evacuation, reports surfaced of internal Department e-mails, which revealed panic among diplomatic personnel as the security situation worsened in Yemen.³ In the days leading up to the impending evacuation, communications indicated that Department

¹ *Here is what's happening in Yemen*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Jan. 22, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/01/20/whats-happening-in-yemens-potential-coup/> (last visited Feb. 25, 2015)

² Mohammed Ghobari, *United States Closes Its Embassy in Conflict-Hit Yemen*, REUTERS, Feb. 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/10/us-yemen-security-usa-idUSKBN0LE25720150210> (last visited Feb. 20, 2015).

³ Catherine Herridge, *Emails Reveal Sensitive Info Left Exposed After U.S. Pullout from Yemen*, FOX NEWS, Feb. 18, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/02/18/emails-show-sensitive-info-left-exposed-after-us-pullout-from-yemen/> (last visited Feb. 20, 2015).

personnel debated how to handle sensitive information stored in the facility.⁴ Shortly before the Department announced the evacuation of the facility, diplomatic personnel were concerned about the plan for handling OpenNet data—the main communication link with Department officials in Washington, D.C.⁵

According to reports, several days before the evacuation, the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, Matthew Tueller, with the approval of Department headquarters in Washington, ordered personnel to leave OpenNet in place in the event that personnel could not get out of the country.⁶ Department officials were not confident the evacuation would be a success and opted to leave the communication link in place, despite potential risks that sensitive information could be compromised.⁷ Shortly after their exit, U.S. officials worked to organize a plan to destroy sensitive information left behind during the evacuation.⁸ According to reports, it took three days to access and ultimately destroy the sensitive data.⁹

Reports following the closure of the U.S. Embassy also indicate that amid the confusion surrounding the evacuation, armed rebels located in Sana'a seized control of several embassy vehicles, as well as weapons belonging to U.S. Marines.¹⁰ After exiting the country, rebel fighters reportedly took control of more than 20 vehicles at the airport in Sana'a and numerous Marines' weapons.¹¹ The rebels' apparent seizure of a significant number of Department vehicles and U.S. military weapons raises concerns about what precautions U.S. diplomatic personnel and other U.S. government officials assisting with the evacuation undertook to ensure the protection of U.S. assets.

The confusion surrounding the closure of the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a raises questions about the extent to which Department personnel followed procedures in place to ensure that they secured U.S. Embassy assets. Additionally, the decision to leave a main communication system in place raises questions about whether Department personnel followed standard procedures to protect sensitive information stored in the facility. While the safety and security of U.S. personnel overseas is of paramount importance, the Committee seeks to ensure that sensitive information is not susceptible to potential exposure in future such scenarios.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Mohammed Ghobari, *Yemen Houthi Rebels Seize U.S. Embassy Vehicles After Diplomats Leave: Staff*, REUTERS, Feb. 11, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/11/us-yemen-security-usa-idUSKBN0LF1SC20150211> (last visited Feb. 20, 2015); Greg Botelho & Hakim Almasari, *Official: Houthis Take U.S. Vehicles, Weapons in Yemen*, CNN, Feb. 11, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/11/middleeast/yemen-unrest/> (last visited Feb. 20, 2015).

¹¹ *Id.*; Kim Hjelmgaard & Jane Onyanga-Omara, *Yemen Rebels Seize U.S. Embassy Vehicles as Diplomats Flee*, USA TODAY, Feb. 11, 2015, available at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/02/11/yemen-embassy-closures/23220185/> (last visited Feb. 20, 2015).

In order to assist the Committee's oversight obligations, I request that you provide the following information for the period January 1, 2015, to the present:

1. Please explain the nature of sensitive information remaining in the Embassy facility following the evacuation of U.S. diplomatic personnel.
2. Please explain when Department officials ultimately shut down OpenNet, when the data stored on the servers was deleted, and whether servers are now appropriately secured.
3. Please explain whether any sensitive information still remains at the U.S. Embassy facility in Sana'a, Yemen, including any information related to financial management records or passport and visa application information.
4. Please explain any steps the Department has taken to ensure that all sensitive information stored at the U.S. Embassy facility in Sana'a, Yemen is now appropriately secured.
5. Please explain the procedures that the Department has in place for securing sensitive information in the event of a rapid evacuation or closure of a diplomatic facility.
6. Please provide an estimate of how many U.S. Embassy vehicles were seized by rebels following the evacuation and whether any U.S. weapons were left behind.
7. Please explain the steps taken by Department personnel or other U.S. government officials assisting in the evacuation to secure U.S. Embassy vehicles.
8. Please provide all communications between U.S. Embassy personnel in Sana'a, Yemen and Department officials located in Washington, D.C., referring or relating to the decision to leave open the communication link OpenNet despite the Department's decision to close the U.S. Embassy facility in Sana'a and evacuate diplomatic personnel.
9. Please provide all communications between U.S. Embassy personnel in Sana'a, Yemen and Department officials located in Washington, D.C., referring or relating to the decision to close the Embassy facility in Sana'a and evacuate diplomatic personnel.

Please produce this material as soon as possible, but by no later than 5:00 p.m. on March 11, 2015. To the extent possible, please provide unclassified responses to these questions. Should a complete response require transmission of classified information, please send such information under separate cover, via the Office of Senate Security.

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate to investigate "the efficiency and economy of operations of all branches of the Government."¹² Additionally, S. Res. 253 (113th Congress) authorizes the Committee to examine "the efficiency and economy of all branches of

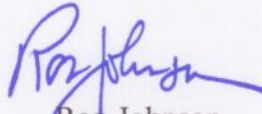
¹² S. Rule XXV(k); *see also* S. Res. 445, 108th Cong. (2004).

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Government including the possible existence of fraud, misfeasance, malfeasance, collusion, mismanagement, incompetence, corruption, or unethical practices”¹³

For purposes of this request, please refer to the definitions and instructions in the enclosure to this letter. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Deborah Weigel of Senator Johnson’s staff at (202) 224-5323 or Caroline Ingram of the Committee staff at (202) 224-4751. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Ranking Minority Member

Enclosure

¹³ S. Res. 253 § 12, 113th Cong. (2013).