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DOJ OIG Releases Report on the Audit of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' Controls Over Personnel-Related Risks Associated with Operating Internationally

The Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) announced today the release of a report examining the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' (ATF) policies and procedures to identify and mitigate critical personnel-related risks associated with operating internationally.

ATF's International Affairs Division (IAD) collaborates with foreign law enforcement partners around the world to disrupt transnational firearms trafficking and reduce violent gun crime through information sharing, intelligence gathering, and providing training and technical assistance to government partners. ATF utilizes local staff, or "Foreign Service Nationals" (FSNs), to provide investigative and operational assistance to support ATF's mission abroad. Since ATF's largest international footprint is in Mexico, we focused this audit on ATF's Mexico operations, to include the use of FSNs and its Firearms Trafficking Investigative Unit (FTIU).

We found that ATF did not have adequate policies and procedures in place to identify and mitigate critical personnel-related risks associated with operating internationally. Our findings included the following:

- **ATF should mitigate critical FSN personnel risks abroad through improved supervision.** Based on our review of the information maintained for 3 of the 14 FSNs working under ATF supervision in Mexico, we found that ATF was not appropriately supervising its FSNs in accordance with Department of State and ATF policies. For example, we identified one instance in which serious misconduct by an FSN was not adequately documented and ATF paid \$137,109 in severance and other benefits to the individual upon termination from employment.
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- **ATF needs to address the risks associated with the use of personal devices and messaging platforms for ATF-related communications by IAD personnel.** We found FSNs and Special Agents used unapproved messaging applications on ATF-issued devices to make calls and send text messages. While IAD noted that the use of an unapproved messaging application was necessary during operations in Mexico, ATF did not have a process for determining when, and if, an exception should be made to the general prohibition against using unapproved applications.
- **ATF needs stronger vetting for the FTIU.** Through the FTIU, ATF partners with Mexico's Federal Attorney General's Office to support firearms trafficking investigations and help combat gun trafficking across the U.S.-Mexico border. We identified gaps in how ATF vets foreign law enforcement officials operating on the FTIU, including a lack of guidance on conducting foreign screening polygraph exams and team members who did not pass ATF's required polygraph examination.
- **ATF needs a secure information sharing system.** ATF did not have a secure system for the exchange of critical information and intelligence sharing between ATF and the FTIU, inhibiting performance tracking and securely sharing law enforcement sensitive data. In response to the recommendation, ATF stated that it has a plan to implement a secure database to support information sharing protocols and facilitate information sharing but has not secured funding for the project.
- **ATF needs to establish division-wide performance metrics for IAD.** We found that IAD does not have standardized performance measures across its country offices, and that year-end reporting lacked standardized data and metrics tied to IAD's goals and objectives, including supporting domestic ATF offices, establishing liaison relationships with foreign partners, and providing training and technical assistance.

The OIG made nine recommendations to improve ATF's management and oversight of its international operations, including strengthening supervision and documentation of FSN performance and conduct, enhancing controls over electronic communications and agent cashier funds, formalizing international partnerships through appropriate agreements, improving vetting and information security for vetted foreign units, and developing performance metrics and data systems to assess IAD's effectiveness. ATF agreed with all nine recommendations.

Report: Today's report is available on [the OIG's website](#).

Please contact us at OIG.Media@usdoj.gov if you have any questions.

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