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By Bill Van Auken
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Saudi airman kills four at US Naval Base in Florida

An attack carried out by a Saudi air force pilot early Friday morning at the US Navy's sprawling Pensacola, Florida Naval Air Station left at least four dead, including the shooter, and another eight wounded. Police and naval authorities reported that the attack was carried out with a handgun.



Aerial view of Naval Air Station Pensacola [Source: Wikimedia Commons]

The carnage spread across two floors of a classroom building at the base, which trains tens of thousands of pilots and airmen each year. Deputies from the Escambia County Sheriff's Department were the first to respond to the incident, shooting and killing the Saudi officer.

He was identified by NBC News as Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani. The US Navy and police authorities were withholding the names of the victims pending notification of their families.

The mass shooting at the base in Pensacola was the second such incident at a US Navy facility in the space of barely 48 hours. On Wednesday, a 22-year-old sailor from Texas, identified as Gabriel Antonio Romero, opened fire at Pearl Harbor's naval shipyard in Hawaii, killing two civilian workers and wounding a third, before shooting himself to death.

At a press conference held Friday afternoon at the Pensacola base, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis suggested that the killings there may have been linked to terrorism. "There is obviously going to be a lot of questions about this individual being a foreign national, being a part of the Saudi Air Force and then to be here training on our soil," DeSantis said, adding that the Saudi monarchy needed "to make things better for these victims" as "this was one of their individuals."

At the same press conference, Escambia County Sheriff David Morgan told the assembled media not to expect "quick answers" about the shooting, and that there were "aspects of the case that will never be public." The government, he said, would "tell you what you need to know to keep our [communities] safe."

Republican Congressman Matt Gaetz, who represents the Pensacola area, tweeted Friday that "This was not a murder. This was an act of terrorism."

US President Donald Trump struck a decidedly different tone, declining to answer if the attack was linked to terrorism. Instead, he cited a condolence call from Saudi Arabia's King Salman. "The King said that the Saudi people are greatly angered by the barbaric actions of the shooter, and that this person in no way shape or form represents the feelings of the Saudi people who love the American people," Trump tweeted.

Given Trump's demonization of Muslims, it is hard to imagine such a response if the shooter had come from any other country in the Middle East than Saudi Arabia, whose monarchical dictatorship serves a lynchpin for US imperialist policy in the region and, in particular, for its drive for regime change in Iran.

With its vast oil wealth, the Saudi monarchy has also acted in US interest in stabilizing the global oil market, while its military contracts have been the source of multi-billion-dollar profits for Raytheon, Lockheed Martin and other US arms manufacturers. The shooting in

Pensacola also came just one day after Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil monopoly ARAMCO staged the biggest initial public offering ever, with some \$25.6 billion going for shares in the company.

Trump's reaction to the Pensacola shooting was in line with his response to the grisly October 2018 assassination of dissident journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. Then he cited \$450 billion in arms contracts, Saudi collaboration against Iran and its having been "very responsive to my requests to keep oil prices at reasonable levels" as justification for turning a blind eye to the international crime.

At the press conference on Friday, the Pensacola base commander, Capt. Timothy Kinsella, estimated that "a "couple hundred foreign students" were training there at the time of the shooting. Saudis make up a significant portion of these trainees.

According to US Defense Department reports, some 1,753 Saudi military personnel were trained at US military facilities in 2018 at a cost of \$120,903,786. For fiscal year 2019, it was projected that 3,150 Saudi military personnel would receive training in the US.

Friday's shooting is not the first time that an act of terrorism by a Saudi national has been linked to the Pensacola Naval Air Base.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington, in which 15 of the 19 men involved in the hijacking of three passenger planes were Saudis, a report in *Newsweek* magazine stated that Saeed Alghamdi was one of three hijackers who had taken flight training at the Pensacola Navy Air Station. It was also reported that three of the hijackers had listed Pensacola Naval Air Station as their address on their Florida driver's licenses.

The Pentagon responded by stating that, while the hijackers had "similar names to foreign alumni of US military courses," discrepancies in birth dates and other biographical information indicated that they were not the same people. A public affairs officer at Pensacola said that the base had trained more than 1,600 people with the first name Saeed, spelled in various ways, and more than 200 with the surname Alghamdi.

The Saudi pilots being trained at Pensacola and other US bases have been deployed for the most part in the near-genocidal, four-year-old Saudi war against Yemen. The US-backed war has created the worst humanitarian crisis on the planet in what was already the poorest country in the Arab world. Air strikes and other combat operations carried out by Saudi-led coalition forces with US support have caused the deaths of some 80,000 people.