

**GAO**

**Testimony**  
**Before the House Committee on**  
**Foreign Affairs**

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**STATE DEPARTMENT**

**Diplomatic Security**  
**Challenges**

Statement of Michael J. Courts, Acting Director  
International Affairs and Trade



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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Berman, and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss diplomatic security challenges at U.S. embassies and consulates overseas. The U.S. government maintains more than 270 diplomatic posts, including embassies, consulates, and other diplomatic offices, in about 180 countries worldwide. More than 80,000 U.S. government employees work overseas under Chief of Mission authority, representing more than 30 agencies and government entities.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1998 embassy attacks in East Africa, U.S. civilian officials posted overseas have faced increasing threats to their safety and security, and facilities in high threat locations have faced numerous attacks. In September, the U.S. consulate compound in Benghazi, Libya, was breached and sustained mortar fire. Tragically, the U.S. Ambassador and three other U.S. officials were killed.

My testimony today is primarily based on a GAO report that was issued in November 2009, examining the Department of State's (State) Bureau of Diplomatic Security (Diplomatic Security).<sup>2</sup> The Bureau's mission, to ensure a safe environment for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, involves activities such as the protection of people, information, and property overseas, and dignitary protection and passport and visa fraud investigations domestically. My testimony also includes work we have subsequently performed to follow up on the implementation of the report's recommendations. I will discuss (1) the growth of Diplomatic Security's missions and resources, (2) the challenges Diplomatic Security faces in conducting its work, and (3) the status of GAO's recommendation concerning Diplomatic Security.

Detailed information on our scope and methodology can be found in the reports cited in appendix I. We conducted the underlying performance audits in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audits

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<sup>1</sup>Agencies represented overseas include the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State, and Treasury, and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

<sup>2</sup>GAO, *State Department: Diplomatic Security's Recent Growth Warrants Strategic Review*, [GAO-10-156](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 12, 2009).

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to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

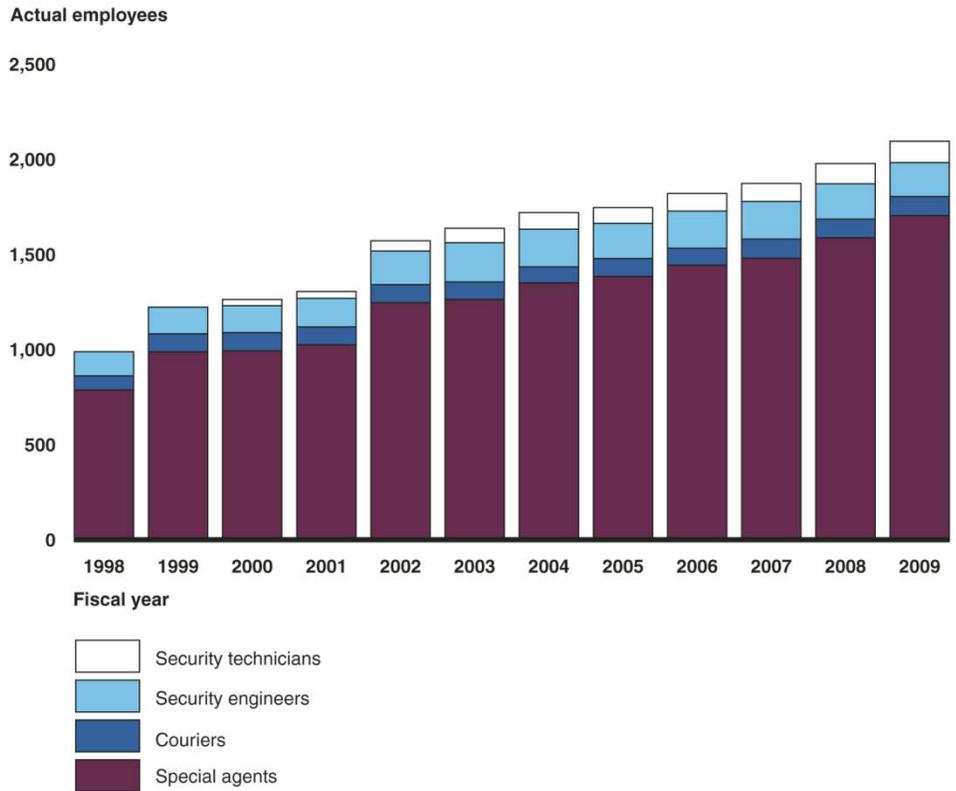
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## Diplomatic Security's Mission and Resources Have Grown Considerably Since 1998

Diplomatic Security's mission and the resources needed to carry it out have grown substantially since 1998. Following the 1998 embassy bombings in Africa, Diplomatic Security determined that many U.S. diplomatic facilities did not meet its security standards and were vulnerable to terrorist attack. Diplomatic Security added many of the physical security measures currently in place at most U.S. missions worldwide, such as additional barriers, alarms, public address systems, and enhanced access procedures. From 1998 to 2009, there were 39 attacks aimed at U.S. Embassies, Consulates, or Chief of Mission personnel (not including regular attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad since 2004). The nature of some of these attacks led Diplomatic Security to further adapt its security measures. Moreover, the attacks of September 11, 2001, underscored the importance of upgrading Diplomatic Security's domestic security programs and enhancing its investigative capacity. Furthermore, following the onset of U.S. operations in Iraq in 2003, Diplomatic Security has had to provide security in the Iraq and other hostile environments such as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Diplomatic Security funding and personnel increased considerably in conjunction with its expanding mission. Diplomatic Security reports that its budget increased from about \$200 million in 1998 to \$1.8 billion in 2008. In addition, the size of Diplomatic Security's workforce doubled between 1998 and 2009. For example, the number of security specialists (special agents, engineers, technicians, and couriers) increased from under 1,000 in 1998 to over 2,000 in 2009, (see fig. 1). At the same time, Diplomatic Security has increased its use of contractors to support its security operations worldwide, specifically through increases in the Diplomatic Security guard force (with over 35,000 guards in Fiscal Year 2011) and the use of contractors to provide protective details for American diplomats in high-threat environments.

**Figure 1: Growth of Security Specialist Workforce: 1998-2009**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

**Dangerous Environments, Staffing Shortages, Other Operational Limitations, and Reactive Planning Challenge Diplomatic Security**

Diplomatic Security faces several policy and operational challenges. First, State is maintaining missions in increasingly dangerous locations, necessitating the use of more security resources and making it more difficult to provide security in these locations. Second, although Diplomatic Security has grown considerably in staff, staffing shortages, as well as other operational challenges, further tax Diplomatic Security's ability to implement its mission. Finally, State has expanded Diplomatic Security without the benefit of adequate strategic planning.

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## Maintaining Missions in Dangerous Environments Significantly Affects Diplomatic Security's Work

Keeping staff secure, yet productive, in Iraq has been one of Diplomatic Security's greatest challenges in recent years. The U.S. mission in Baghdad is the largest in the world. As of May 2012, the United States was planning for a presence of 11,500 personnel at 11 diplomatic sites. Between fiscal years 2004 and 2008, Diplomatic Security operations in Iraq required approximately 36 percent of Diplomatic Security's entire budget. To support security operations in Iraq, Diplomatic Security had to draw staff and resources away from other programs. In 2009, we reported that Diplomatic Security's workload—and thus its resource requirements—would likely increase as the U.S. military transitioned out of Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. policymakers' focus on Afghanistan poses another significant challenge for Diplomatic Security. The security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated between 2005 and 2010 and has remained relatively dangerous since.

In addition to operating in the Iraq and Afghanistan, State is maintaining missions in an increasing number of other dangerous posts—such as Peshawar, Pakistan, and Sana'a, Yemen—some of which State would have previously evacuated. The policy to maintain a presence in dangerous areas began with State's 2006 transformational diplomacy initiative, which required a shift of human resources to increasingly critical regions such as Africa, East Asia, and the Middle East. According to Diplomatic Security officials, maintaining missions in these dangerous environments requires more resources.

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## Some Diplomatic Security Offices Operated with Severe Staff Shortages

Despite Diplomatic Security's staff growth since 1998, some offices were operating with severe staffing shortages. In 2008, approximately one-third of Diplomatic Security's domestic suboffices operated with a vacancy rate of 25 percent or higher. Several offices reported that this shortage of staff affected their ability to conduct their work, leading to backlogged cases and training gaps.

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<sup>3</sup>GAO, *Iraq: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight*, [GAO-09-294SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 24, 2009). Further in June 2012, we reported that Iraq continued to require extraordinary funding to provide additional security capabilities. See GAO, *Mission Iraq: State and DOD Face Challenges in Finalizing Support and Security Capabilities*, [GAO-12-856T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 28, 2012).

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State officials attributed these shortages to three factors:

- *Staffing the Iraq mission:* In order to provide enough Diplomatic Security special agents in Iraq, we reported that Diplomatic Security had to move agents from other programs, and those moves affected the agency's ability to perform other missions, including providing security for visiting dignitaries and visa, passport, and identity fraud investigations.
- *Protection details:* Diplomatic Security draws agents from field offices, headquarters, and overseas posts to participate in protective details and special events, such as the Olympics. Diplomatic Security's role in providing protection at such major events has grown and will require more staff.
- *Normal rotations:* Staff take home leave between overseas postings and are sometimes required to take training before starting their next assignment. This rotation process regularly creates periodic staffing gaps, which affects Diplomatic Security's ability to meet its increased security demands.

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**Other Operational Challenges Impeded Diplomatic Security's Ability to Fully Implement Its Mission and Activities**

Diplomatic Security faced a number of other operational challenges that impeded it from fully implementing its mission and activities, including:

- *Inadequate buildings:* State is in the process of updating and building many new facilities. However, we have previously identified many posts that did not meet all security standards delineated by the Overseas Security Policy Board and the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999.
- *Foreign language deficiencies:* In 2009, we found that 53 percent of Regional Security Officers do not speak and read foreign languages at the level required by their positions, and we concluded that these language shortfalls could be negatively affecting several aspects of U.S. diplomacy, including security operations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>For GAO's review of language training at State, see GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, [GAO-09-955](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

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- *Experience gaps:* Thirty-four percent of Diplomatic Security’s positions (not including those in Baghdad) were filled with officers below the position’s grade. For example, several Assistant Regional Security Officers with whom we met were in their first overseas positions and stated that they did not feel adequately prepared for their job, particularly their responsibility to manage large security contracts.
  - *Host country laws:* At times, host country laws prohibit Diplomatic Security from taking all the security precautions it would like outside an embassy. For example, Diplomatic Security officials said that they prefer to arm their local guard forces and their special agents; however, several countries prohibit this. In cases of attack, this prohibition limits Diplomatic Security’s ability to protect an embassy or consulate.
  - *Balancing security with the diplomatic mission:* Diplomatic Security’s desire to provide the best security possible for State’s diplomatic corps has, at times, been in tension with State’s diplomatic mission. For example, Diplomatic Security has established strict policies concerning access to U.S. facilities that usually include both personal and vehicle screening. Some public affairs officials—whose job it is to foster relations with host country nationals—have expressed concerns that these security measures discourage visitors from attending U.S. Embassy events or exhibits. In addition, the new embassies and consulates, with their high walls, deep setbacks, and strict screening procedures, have evoked the nickname “Fortress America.”

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### Although Some Planning Initiatives Have Been Undertaken, Diplomatic Security’s Growth Has Been More Reactive than Strategic

We found in 2009 that neither State’s departmental strategic plan nor Diplomatic Security’s bureau strategic plan specifically addresses its resource needs or its management challenges. Diplomatic Security’s substantial growth since 1998 has been reactive and has not benefited from adequate strategic guidance. For example, State’s strategic plan does not specifically address Diplomatic Security’s resource needs or management challenges. While State’s strategic plan for 2007-2012 has a section identifying security priorities and goals, we found it did not identify the resources needed to meet these goals or address all of the management challenges we identified in this report. Diplomatic Security had undertaken some planning efforts at the bureau and office level, but we found that these efforts also had limitations.

Several senior Diplomatic Security officials noted that Diplomatic Security was reactive in nature, stating a number of reasons for its lack of long-

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term strategic planning. For example, Diplomatic Security provides a support function and must react to the needs of State; therefore, it cannot plan its own resources until State determines overall policy direction. Also, while State has a 5-year workforce plan that addresses all bureaus, officials stated that Diplomatic Security did not use this plan to determine its staffing needs.

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## Status of GAO's Recommendation for Executive Action

In our 2009 report, we recommended that the Secretary of State—as either part of a State management initiative, the Quadrennial Diplomatic and Development Review (QDDR) or as a separate initiative—conduct a strategic review of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security to ensure that its mission and activities address State's priority needs. We stated that this review should also address key human capital and operational challenges faced by Diplomatic Security. At the time, State agreed with our recommendation and noted that, although it was not planning to perform a strategic review of the full Diplomatic Security mission and capabilities in the QDDR, the Department was committed to ensuring that Diplomatic Security's mission would benefit from this initiative.

We have subsequently learned that State has not yet conducted the strategic review as recommended. Specifically, Diplomatic Security officials told GAO that the QDDR was not used to conduct such a review. However, Diplomatic Security officials did point to several steps they had taken, including the creation of a Strategic Planning Unit and other efforts to enhance performance management. Diplomatic Security officials also noted that they have undertaken a new effort in response to the rapidly changing security environment encountered over the past year by bringing together subject matter experts from across Diplomatic Security to support scenario planning for future security requirements. We appreciate the steps that the Bureau has taken on its own initiative; however we continue to believe that the Department, and not the Bureau, needs to take action in order to strategically assess the competing demands on Diplomatic Security and the resulting mission implications.

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Madam Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have at this time.

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## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgement

For questions regarding this testimony, please contact Michael Courts at (202) 512-8980 or [courtsm@gao.gov](mailto:courtsm@gao.gov). Individuals making key contributions to this testimony include Anthony Moran, Miriam Carroll Fenton, Thomas Costa, Karen Deans, Jon C. Fremont, Valérie Nowak, Kira Self, and Christina Werth.

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# Related GAO Reports

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*Overseas Rightsizing: State Has Improved the Consistency of Its Approach, but Does Not Follow Up on Its Recommendations.* [GAO-12-799](#). Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2012.

*Department of State: Foreign Service Midlevel Staffing Gaps Persist Despite Significant Increases in Hiring.* [GAO-12-721](#). Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2012.

*Diplomatic Security: Expanded Missions and Inadequate Facilities Pose Critical Challenges to Training Effort.* [GAO-11-780T](#). Washington, D.C.: June 29, 2011.

*Diplomatic Security: Expanded Missions and Inadequate Facilities Pose Critical Challenges to Training Efforts.* [GAO-11-460](#). Washington, D.C.: June 1, 2011.

*New Embassy Compounds: State Faces Challenges in Sizing Facilities and Providing for Operations and Maintenance Requirements.* [GAO-10-689](#). Washington, D.C.: July 20, 2010.

*State Department: Challenges Facing the Bureau of Diplomatic Security.* [GAO-10-290T](#). Washington, D.C.: December 9, 2009.

*State Department: Diplomatic Security's Recent Growth Warrants Strategic Review.* [GAO-10-156](#). Washington, D.C.: November 12, 2009.

*Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts.* [GAO-09-874](#). Washington, D.C.: September 17, 2009.

*Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls.* [GAO-09-955](#). Washington, D.C.: September 17, 2009.

*Combating Terrorism: State Department's Antiterrorism Program Needs Improved Guidance and More Systematic Assessments of Outcomes.* [GAO-08-336](#). Washington, D.C.: February 29, 2008.

*Diplomatic Security: Upgrades Have Enhanced Security, but Site Conditions Prevent Full Adherence to Standards.* [GAO-08-162](#). Washington, D.C.: January 18, 2008.

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*State Department: Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts Can Be Improved.* [GAO-08-23](#). Washington, D.C.: October 19, 2007.

*Overseas Security: State Department has Not Fully Implemented Key Measures to Protect U.S. Officials from Terrorist Attacks Outside of Embassies.* [GAO-05-642](#). Washington, D.C.: May 9, 2005.

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