State Department Has Not Fully Implemented Key Measures to Protect U.S. Officials from Terrorist Attacks Outside of Embassies

What GAO Found

State has a number of programs and activities designed to protect U.S. officials and their families outside the embassy, including security briefings, protection at schools and residences, and surveillance detection. However, State has not developed a comprehensive strategy that clearly identifies safety and security requirements and resources needed to protect U.S. officials and their families abroad from terrorist threats outside the embassy. State officials raised a number of challenges related to developing and implementing such a strategy. They also indicated that they have recently initiated an effort to develop a soft targets strategy. As part of this effort, State officials said they will need to address and resolve a number of legal and financial issues.

Three State initiated investigations into terrorist attacks against U.S. officials outside of embassies found that the officials lacked the necessary hands-on training to help counter the attack. The investigations recommended that State provide hands-on counterterrorism training and implement accountability measures to ensure compliance with personal security procedures. After each of these investigations, State reported to Congress that it planned to implement the recommendations, yet we found that State’s hands-on training course is not required, the accountability procedures have not been effectively implemented, and key embassy officials are not trained to implement State’s counterterrorism procedures.

State instituted a program in 2003 to improve security at schools, but its scope has not yet been fully determined. In fiscal years 2003 and 2004, Congress earmarked $29.8 million for State to address security vulnerabilities against soft targets, particularly at overseas schools. The multiphase program provides basic security hardware to protect U.S. officials and their families at schools and some off-compound employee association facilities from terrorist threats. However, during our visits to posts, regional security officers were unclear about which schools could qualify for security assistance under phase three of the program.

State’s program to protect U.S. officials and their families at their residences is primarily designed to deter crime, not terrorism. The Residential Security program includes basic security hardware and local guards, which State officials said provide effective deterrence against crime, though only limited deterrence against a terrorist attack. To minimize the risk and consequences of a residential terrorist attack, some posts we visited limited the number of U.S. officials living in specific apartment buildings. To provide greater protection against terrorist attacks, some posts we visited used surveillance detection teams in residential areas.