Why GAO Did This Study

Since the 1998 East Africa bombings, U.S. diplomatic personnel working overseas have faced increasing threats to their safety and security. State has built many new embassies and consulates since 1998 and enhanced security measures at others. Increased security at such facilities has raised concerns that residences, schools, and other places where U.S. diplomatic personnel and their families congregate may be viewed by terrorists as more attractive “soft targets.” GAO was asked to review the security of residences and other soft targets overseas. GAO evaluated (1) how State assesses risks to U.S. diplomatic residences overseas; (2) the timeliness, clarity, and consistency of residential security standards; (3) how State addresses security vulnerabilities at residences; and (4) how State manages risks to other soft targets. GAO reviewed agency documents; met with officials in Washington, D.C.; and conducted fieldwork at a judgmental sample of seven higher-threat, higher-risk posts in four of State’s six geographic regions. This is the public version of a sensitive but unclassified report issued in June 2015.

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) conducts a range of activities to assess risks to residences overseas. For instance, State tracks information on overseas residences in its property database, establishes threat levels at overseas posts, develops security standards for different types of residences and threat levels, and requires posts to periodically conduct residential security surveys. However, 17 of the 68 surveys for residences GAO reviewed were untimely or missing. Without up-to-date security surveys of all its overseas residences, State’s ability to identify and address vulnerabilities or make informed decisions about where to allocate resources for security upgrades is limited.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State, among other things, institute procedures to ensure residential security surveys are completed as required, clarify its standards and security-related guidance for residences, develop procedures to ensure residences either meet standards or have exceptions on file, and take steps to ensure posts are aware of existing guidance and tools regarding the security of schools and other soft targets. State concurred with all of GAO’s recommendations.

View GAO-15-700. For more information, contact Michael J. Courts at (202) 512-8980 or courtsmi@gao.gov.