

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106372](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress established the ASD-SO/LIC in 1986 to oversee SOCOM's special operations activities. Section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 strengthened the ASD-SO/LIC's service secretary-like role in overseeing SOCOM's activities, such as budgeting and programming.

Senate Report 117-130 includes a provision for GAO to review DOD's implementation of section 922. GAO examined the extent to which the Secretariat for Special Operations has (1) hired the staff needed to oversee SOCOM, (2) reported on its implementation of section 922 reforms and documented its oversight policies, and (3) faced challenges related to obtaining administrative support services.

GAO analyzed fiscal years 2019–2023 Secretariat staffing levels. GAO also compared the Secretariat's staffing plan with strategic workforce planning principles, and ASD-SO/LIC's policies and practices with leading principles for interagency collaboration.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the (1) ASD-SO/LIC develop a staffing plan that incorporates workforce planning principles, (2) ASD-SO/LIC implement a systematic approach for identifying areas that require documented policies, and (3) ASD-SO/LIC and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy document an agreement that clarifies their respective administrative roles. DOD concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106372](#). For more information, contact Diana Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.

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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

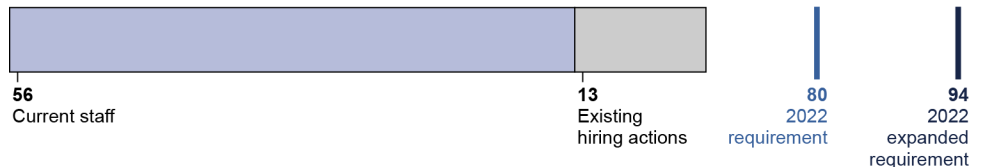
Documented Policies and Workforce Planning Needed to Strengthen Civilian Oversight

What GAO Found

Since 2019, the Department of Defense (DOD) has increased the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict's (ASD-SO/LIC) oversight responsibilities for U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM). DOD has also increased resources for the Secretariat for Special Operations, which assists the ASD-SO/LIC in conducting oversight. However, as of September 2023, the Secretariat's staffing levels remained below the 80–94 full-time equivalent levels the Secretariat identified as required to oversee SOCOM.

Comparison of Secretariat Staffing Levels with Required Levels, as of September 2023

Number of full-time equivalents



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information. | GAO-24-106372

Note: Per the 2022 staffing assessment, the expanded requirement includes a 20-percent adjustment for unanticipated workload and staff availability (e.g., leave and training) for some functions.

In November 2023, the Secretariat finalized a staffing plan required by statute, including milestones to reach 69 full-time equivalents by early 2024. However, the finalized plan does not fully incorporate some key principles for strategic workforce planning, such as aligning with long-term goals, identifying critical skill gaps, and developing strategies to address them. Developing a staffing plan that incorporates these principles would help ensure that the Secretariat hires the personnel required to meet its future needs for overseeing SOCOM.

Section 922 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 strengthened the ASD-SO/LIC's service secretary-like role for overseeing SOCOM's activities. The Secretariat developed 57 benchmarks for implementing section 922 and reported completing 49 of them as of January 2023. However, according to officials, the respective work process policies for the Secretariat and SOCOM are not always documented for two reasons. First DOD's Office of the Director of Administration and Management has concerns about ASD-SO/LIC's authority to issue guidance. However, the ASD-SO/LIC has broad statutory and regulatory authority under its charter to establish DOD-wide policy. Second, the Secretariat does not have a systematic approach for identifying and documenting its oversight policies. Implementing a systematic approach for documenting policies would help ensure consistent oversight.

The Secretariat has at times had limited input into how its hiring, office space, and IT needs are met because of confusion about ASD-SO/LIC's administrative role, given ASD-SO/LIC's unique position within DOD. Until the ASD-SO/LIC and the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy clarify that administrative role, the Secretariat will continue to have limited input into its administrative services— affecting its ability to effectively oversee SOCOM.