



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Persistent Staffing and Foreign Language Gaps Compromise Diplomatic Readiness

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss U.S. diplomatic readiness, and in particular the staffing and foreign language challenges facing the Foreign Service. The Department of State (State) faces an ongoing challenge of ensuring it has the right people, with the right skills, in the right places overseas to carry out the department's priorities. In particular, State has long had difficulty staffing its hardship posts¹ overseas, which are places like Beirut and Lagos, where conditions are difficult and sometimes dangerous due to harsh environmental and extreme living conditions that often entail pervasive crime or war, but are nonetheless integral to foreign policy priorities and need a full complement of qualified staff. State has also faced persistent shortages of staff with critical language skills, despite the importance of foreign language proficiency in advancing U.S. foreign policy and economic interests overseas.

In recent years GAO has issued a number of reports on human capital issues that have hampered State's ability to carry out the President's foreign policy objectives (see appendix I for a complete list of related GAO products). My statement today is based on two GAO reports that were released on September 22.² I will discuss (1) State's progress in addressing staffing gaps at hardship posts, and (2) State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements.

To address these objectives in our two reports, we analyzed key planning documents and other data provided by State; reviewed relevant reports by GAO and other agencies and organizations; and met with a number of State officials from various bureaus in Washington and overseas. We also conducted fieldwork in China, Egypt, India, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia,

¹State defines hardship posts as those locations where the U.S. government provides differential pay incentives—an additional 5 to 35 percent of basic salary, depending on the severity or difficulty of the conditions—to encourage employees to bid on assignments to these posts and to compensate them for the hardships they encounter. For the purposes of this statement, we refer to these differential pay incentives as hardship differentials. We define posts with no differentials as those where the hardship differential is 0 percent. We define posts with low differentials as those where the hardship differential is 5 or 10 percent. We define hardship posts as those posts where the hardship differential is at least 15 percent. We define posts of greatest hardship as those where the hardship differential is at least 25 percent.

²GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, [GAO-09-874](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009); and GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, [GAO-09-955](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

and Turkey, and convened an expert roundtable of several retired senior State officials, all of whom previously served as ambassadors to hardship posts. We conducted these performance audits in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit 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. See our reports for a complete scope and methodology.

In brief, Mr. Chairman, we found that, despite a number of steps taken over a number of years, the State Department continues to face persistent staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts, as well as notable shortfalls in foreign language capabilities. A common element of these problems has been a longstanding staffing and experience deficit, which has both contributed to the gaps at hardship posts and fueled the language shortfall by limiting the number of staff available for language training. State has undertaken several initiatives to address these shortages, including multiple staffing increases intended to fill the gaps. However, the department has not undertaken these initiatives in a comprehensive and strategic manner. As a result, it is unclear when the staffing and skill gaps that put diplomatic readiness at risk will close.

State Faces Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts

Despite some progress in addressing staffing shortfalls since 2006, State's diplomatic readiness remains at risk for two reasons: persistent staffing vacancies and experience gaps at key hardship posts that are often on the forefront of U.S. policy interests. First, as of September 2008, State had a 17 percent average vacancy rate at the posts of greatest hardship (which are posts where staff receive the highest possible hardship pay). Posts in this category include such places as Peshawar, Pakistan, and Shenyang, China. This 17 percent vacancy rate was nearly double the average vacancy rate of 9 percent at posts with no hardship differentials.³ Second, many key hardship posts face experience gaps due to a higher rate of staff filling positions above their own grades (see table 1).⁴ As of September 2008, about 34 percent of mid-level generalist positions at posts of greatest

³As of the same date, the average vacancy rate for all hardship posts was 15 percent, as compared to an average rate of 10 percent for all posts with no or low differentials.

⁴We used data from State's GEMS database to calculate rates of staff filling positions above their own grades. Due to limitations in the GEMS data on positions in Iraq, we do not include Iraq in these calculations of staff filling positions above their own grades or in Table 1.

hardship were filled by officers in such above-grade assignments—15 percentage points higher than the rate for comparable positions at posts with no or low differentials. At posts we visited during our review, we observed numerous officers working in positions above their rank. For example, in Abuja, Nigeria,⁵ more than 4 in every 10 positions were staffed by officers in assignments above grade, including several employees working in positions two grades above their own. Further, to fill positions in Iraq and Afghanistan, State has frequently assigned officers to positions above their grade. As of September 2008, over 40 percent of officers in Iraq and Afghanistan were serving in above-grade assignments.

Table 1: Number and Percentage of Mid-Level Generalist Positions Filled by Officers Working above Grade, as of September 2008

Posts with no or low differentials	Hardship posts	Posts of greatest hardship
210 of 1,093 (19 percent)	328 of 1,053 (31 percent)	189 of 551 (34 percent)

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

Several Factors Contribute to Staffing Gaps

Several factors contribute to gaps at hardship posts. First, State continues to have fewer officers than positions, a shortage compounded by the personnel demands of Iraq and Afghanistan, which have resulted in staff cutting their tours short to serve in these countries. As of April 2009, State had about 1,650 vacant Foreign Service positions in total. Second, State faces a persistent mid-level staffing deficit that is exacerbated by continued low bidding on hardship posts. Third, although State’s assignment system has prioritized the staffing of hardship posts, it does not explicitly address the continuing experience gap at such posts, many of which are strategically important, yet are often staffed with less experienced officers. Staffing and experience gaps can diminish diplomatic readiness in several ways, according to State officials. For example, gaps can lead to decreased reporting coverage and loss of institutional knowledge. In addition, gaps can lead to increased supervisory requirements for senior staff, detracting from other critical diplomatic responsibilities. During the course of our review we found a number of examples of the effect of these staffing gaps on diplomatic readiness, including the following.

⁵At the time of our visit, Abuja had a 25 percent hardship differential.

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- The economic officer position in Lagos, whose responsibility is solely focused on energy, oil, and natural gas, was not filled in the 2009 cycle. The incumbent explained that, following his departure, his reporting responsibilities will be split up between officers in Abuja and Lagos. He said this division of responsibilities would diminish the position's focus on the oil industry and potentially lead to the loss of important contacts within both the government ministries and the oil industry.
 - An official told us that a political/military officer position in Russia was vacant because of the departure of the incumbent for a tour in Afghanistan, and the position's portfolio of responsibilities was divided among other officers in the embassy. According to the official, this vacancy slowed negotiation of an agreement with Russia regarding military transit to Afghanistan.
 - The consular chief in Shenyang, China, told us he spends too much time helping entry-level officers adjudicate visas and, therefore, less time managing the section.
 - The ambassador to Nigeria told us spending time helping officers working above grade is a burden and interferes with policy planning and implementation.
 - A 2008 OIG inspection of N'Djamena, Chad, reported that the entire front office was involved in mentoring entry-level officers, which was an unfair burden on the ambassador and deputy chief of mission, given the challenging nature of the post.⁶

State Has Not Systematically Evaluated Incentive Programs for Hardship Post Assignments

State uses a range of incentives to staff hardship posts at a cost of millions of dollars a year, but their effectiveness remains unclear due to a lack of evaluation. Incentives to serve in hardship posts range from monetary benefits to changes in service and bidding requirements, such as reduced tour lengths at posts where dangerous conditions prevent some family members from accompanying officers. In a 2006 report on staffing gaps, GAO recommended that State evaluate the effectiveness of its incentive programs for hardship post assignments. In response, State added a question about hardship incentives to a recent employee survey. However, the survey does not fully meet GAO's recommendation for several reasons,

⁶Department of State, OIG, *Report of Inspection: Embassy N'Djamena, Chad*, ISP-I-09-02A (Washington, D.C., December 2008). As of December 2008, N'Djamena had a 30 percent hardship differential.

including that State did not include several incentives in the survey and did not establish specific indicators of progress against which to measure the survey responses over time. State also did not comply with a 2005 legal requirement to assess and report to Congress on the effectiveness of increasing hardship and danger pay from 25 percent to 35 percent in filling “hard to fill” positions. The lack of an assessment of the effectiveness of the danger and hardship pay increases in filling positions at these posts, coupled with the continuing staffing challenges in these locations, make it difficult to determine whether these resources are properly targeted. Recent legislation increasing Foreign Service officers’ basic pay will increase the cost of existing incentives, thereby heightening the importance that State evaluate its incentives for hardship post assignments to ensure resources are effectively targeted and not wasted.

Although State plans to address staffing gaps by hiring more officers, the department acknowledges it will take years for these new employees to gain the experience they need to be effective mid-level officers. In the meantime, this experience gap will persist, since State’s staffing system does not explicitly prioritize the assignment of at-grade officers to hardship posts. Moreover, despite State’s continued difficulty attracting qualified staff to hardship posts, the department has not systematically evaluated the effectiveness of its incentives for hardship service. Without a full evaluation of State’s hardship incentives, the department cannot obtain valuable insights that could help guide resource decisions to ensure it is most efficiently and effectively addressing gaps at these important posts.

State Faces Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls

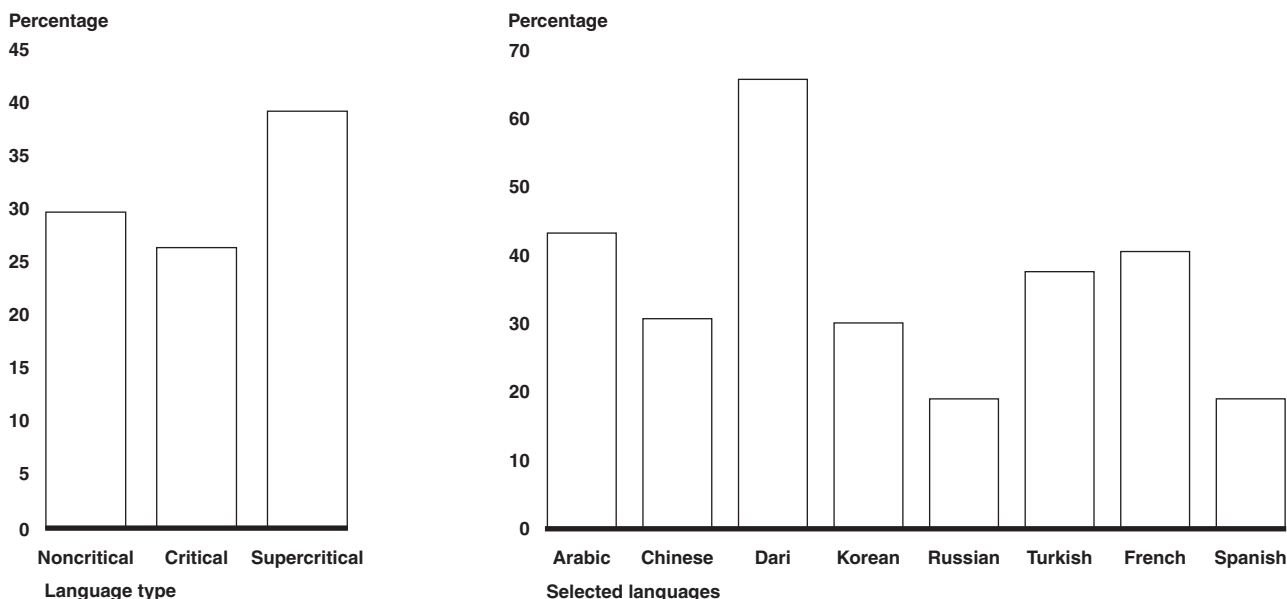
State continues to have notable gaps in its foreign language capabilities, which could hinder U.S. overseas operations. As of October 31, 2008, 31 percent of officers in all worldwide language-designated positions did not meet both the foreign language speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions, up slightly from 29 percent in 2005. In particular, State continues to face foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest—such as the Near East and South and Central Asia, where about 40 percent of officers in language-designated positions did not meet requirements. Gaps were notably high in Afghanistan, where 33 of 45 officers in language-designated positions (73 percent) did not meet the requirement, and in Iraq, with 8 of 14 officers (57 percent) lacking sufficient language skills. State has defined its need for staff proficient in

some languages as “supercritical” or “critical,” based on criteria such as the difficulty of the language and the number of language-designated positions in that language, particularly at hard-to-staff posts.⁷ Shortfalls in supercritical needs languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, remain at 39 percent, despite efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in these languages (see figure 1). In addition, more than half of the 739 Foreign Service specialists—staff who perform security, technical, and other support functions—in language-designated positions do not meet the requirements. For example, 53 percent of regional security officers⁸ do not speak and read at the level required by their positions. When a post fills a position with an officer who does not meet the requirements, it must request a language waiver for the position. In 2008, the department granted 282 such waivers, covering about 8 percent of all language-designated positions.

⁷Currently, supercritical needs languages are Arabic (Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Chinese (Mandarin), Dari, Farsi, Hindi, and Urdu. Critical needs languages are Arabic (forms other than Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese (Cantonese), Kazakh, Korean, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Nepali, Pashto, Punjabi, Russian, Tajik, Turkish, Turkmen, and Uzbek.

⁸Regional security officers are special agents operating out of State’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security assigned to U.S. diplomatic missions overseas, responsible for the protection of personnel and their families, facilities, and classified information.

Figure 1: Percentage of Foreign Service Officers Who Do Not Meet the Language Requirements for Their Positions, by Language Type and Selected Languages



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

Foreign Language Shortfalls Could Compromise Diplomatic Readiness

Past reports by GAO, State’s Office of the Inspector General, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks have concluded that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting U.S. national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, and intelligence-gathering efforts. Foreign Service officers we spoke to provided a number of examples of the effects of not having the required language skills, including the following.

- Consular officers at a post we visited said that because of a lack of language skills, they make adjudication decisions based on what they “hope” they heard in visa interviews.
- A security officer in Cairo said that without language skills, officers do not have any “juice”—that is, the ability to influence people they are trying to elicit information from.
- According to another regional security officer, the lack of foreign language skills may hinder intelligence gathering because local informants are reluctant to speak through locally hired interpreters.

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- One ambassador we spoke to said that without language proficiency—which helps officers gain insight into a country—the officers are not invited to certain events and cannot reach out to broader, deeper audiences.
 - A public affairs officer at another post said that the local media does not always translate embassy statements accurately, complicating efforts to communicate with audiences in the host country. For example, he said the local press translated a statement by the ambassador in a more pejorative sense than was intended, which damaged the ambassador’s reputation and took several weeks to correct.
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State’s Approach to Meeting Foreign Language Requirements Faces Several Challenges

State’s current approach for meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements involves an annual review process to determine language-designated positions, training, recruitment, and incentives; however, the department faces several challenges to these efforts, particularly staffing shortages. State’s annual language designation process results in a list of positions requiring language skills. However, the views expressed by the headquarters and overseas officials we met with suggest State’s designated language proficiency requirements do not necessarily reflect the actual language needs of the posts. For example, because of budgetary and staffing issues, some overseas posts tend to request only the positions they think they will receive rather than the positions they actually need. Moreover, officers at the posts we visited questioned the validity of the relatively low proficiency level required for certain positions, citing the need for a higher proficiency level. For example, an economics officer at one of the posts we visited, who met the posts’ required proficiency level, said her level of proficiency did not provide her with language skills needed to discuss technical issues, and the officers in the public affairs section of the same post said that proficiency level was not sufficient to effectively explain U.S. positions in the local media. State primarily uses language training to meet its foreign language requirements, and does so mostly at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington, Virginia, but also at field schools and post language training overseas. In 2008, the department reported a training success rate of 86 percent. In addition, the department recruits personnel with foreign language skills through special incentives offered under its critical needs language program and pays bonuses to encourage staff to study and maintain a level of proficiency in certain languages. The department has hired 445 officers under this program since 2004.

However, various challenges limit the effectiveness of these efforts. According to State, two main challenges are overall staffing shortages,

which limit the number of staff available for language training, and the recent increase in language-designated positions. The staffing shortages are exacerbated by officers curtailing their tours at posts, such as to staff the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has led to a decrease in the number of officers in the language training pipeline. For example, officials in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs told us of an officer who received nearly a year of language training in Vietnamese, yet cancelled her tour in Vietnam to serve in Iraq. These departures often force their successors to arrive at post early without having completed language training. As part of its effort to address these staffing shortfalls, in fiscal year 2009, State requested and received funding for 300 new positions to build a training capacity, intended to reduce gaps at posts while staff are in language training. State officials said that if the department's fiscal year 2010 request for 200 additional positions is approved, the department's language gaps will begin to close in 2011; however, State has not indicated when its foreign language staffing requirements will be completely met. Another challenge is the widely held perception among Foreign Service officers that State's promotion system does not consider time spent in language training when evaluating officers for promotion, which may discourage officers from investing the time required to achieve proficiency in certain languages. Although State Human Resources officials dispute this perception, the department has not conducted a statistically significant assessment of the impact of language training on promotions.

State Lacks a Comprehensive, Strategic Approach for Meeting Foreign Language Requirements

State's current approach to meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements has not closed the department's persistent language proficiency gaps and reflects, in part, a lack of a comprehensive strategic direction. Common elements of comprehensive workforce planning—described by GAO as part of a large body of work on human capital management—include setting strategic direction that includes measurable performance goals and objectives and funding priorities, determining critical skills and competencies that will be needed in the future, developing an action plan to address gaps, and monitoring and evaluating the success of the department's progress toward meeting goals.⁹ In the past, State officials have asserted that because language is such an integral part of the department's operations, a separate planning effort for foreign language skills was not needed. More recently, State officials have said the

⁹GAO *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is spread throughout a number of documents that address these requirements, including the department's Five-Year Workforce Plan. However, these documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, resource requirements, and milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. We believe that a more comprehensive strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide and assess progress in meeting its foreign language requirements.

Recommendations for Executive Action

In our recently-issued reports we made several recommendations to help State address its staffing gaps and language proficiency shortfalls.

- To ensure that hardship posts are staffed commensurate with their stated level of strategic importance and resources are properly targeted, GAO recommends the Secretary of State (1) take steps to minimize the experience gap at hardship posts by making the assignment of experienced officers to such posts an explicit priority consideration, and (2) develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments.
- To address State's long-standing foreign language proficiency shortfalls, we recommend that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements.

State generally agreed with our findings, conclusions, and recommendations and described several initiatives that address elements of the recommendations. In addition, State recently convened an inter-bureau language working group, which will focus on and develop an action plan to address GAO's recommendations.

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

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this testimony, please contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this statement include Godwin Agbara and Anthony Moran, Assistant Directors; Robert Ball; Joseph Carney; Aniruddha Dasgupta; Martin de Alteriis; Brian Hackney; Gloria Hernandez-Saunders; Richard Gifford Howland; Grace Lui; and La Verne Tharpes.

Appendix I: Related GAO Products

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

State Department: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps. [GAO-07-1154T](#). Washington, D.C.: August 1, 2007.

U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strategic Planning Efforts Have Improved, but Agencies Face Significant Implementation Challenges. [GAO-07-795T](#). Washington, D.C.: April 26, 2007.

Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps. [GAO-06-894](#). Washington, D.C.: August 4, 2006.

Overseas Staffing: Rightsizing Approaches Slowly Taking Hold but More Action Needed to Coordinate and Carry Out Efforts. [GAO-06-737](#). Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2006.

U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Efforts to Engage Muslim Audiences Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Significant Challenges. [GAO-06-535](#). Washington, D.C.: May 3, 2006.

Border Security: Strengthened Visa Process Would Benefit from Improvements in Staffing and Information Sharing. [GAO-05-859](#). Washington, D.C.: September 13, 2005.

State Department: Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages. [GAO-04-139](#). Washington, D.C.: November 19, 2003.

Foreign Affairs: Effective Stewardship of Resources Essential to Efficient Operations at State Department, USAID. [GAO-03-1009T](#). Washington, D.C.: September 4, 2003.

State Department: Staffing Shortfalls and Ineffective Assignment System Compromise Diplomatic Readiness at Hardship Posts. [GAO-02-626](#). Washington, D.C.: June 18, 2002.

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